

OPERATION DEWEY CANYON:
SEARCH AND DESTROY IN THE AGE OF ABRAMS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The United States Marine Corps praises Operation Dewey Canyon, which occurred from 22 January-18 March 1969, as one of their most successful operations during the Vietnam War. This paper examines the planning of Operation Dewey Canyon and provides a narrative of the action with emphasis on the use of supporting arms. I use Operation Dewey Canyon as a case study to comment on historiographical debates about strategy during the Vietnam War. Some historians, most notably Lewis Sorley, have argued “a better war” after the Tet Offensive. Sorley argues that General Creighton Abrams shifted American strategy from search-and-destroy operations to pacification-centric operations with limited use of firepower. This study of Operation Dewey Canyon lends support to the arguments of Gregory Daddis and Andrew Birtle who maintain that this shift never occurred. I also argue that Operation Dewey Canyon was not as tactically innovative or successful as claimed by the Marine Corps and historians such as Allan R. Millett. In order to conduct this study, I examine After-Action reports at the battalion and regimental level, interviews with officers, the artillery report for Dewey Canyon, and command chronologies. These sources suggest a continuity of tactics and use of firepower (artillery and Close Air Support) between the strategies of General William C. Westmoreland and Abrams, reinforcing Daddis and Birtle’s assertion that the shift in strategy never occurred.

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INTRODUCTION

Operation Dewey Canyon, conducted from 22 January to 18 March 1969, was the high-water mark of Marine Corps action in the Vietnam War and the operation is still praised for its tactical innovation.¹ The Marine Corps regards Dewey Canyon so highly that it is included as a case study within its educational curriculum. The lessons taught by the Marine Corps emphasize Dewey Canyon's tactical innovation, planning, and use of supporting arms and services.² This article argues that Dewey Canyon was not as tactically innovative or as successful as the Marine Corps has claimed and taught. The lessons gleaned from Dewey Canyon by the Marine Corps are based on a skewed interpretation of the operation. Rather, this article emphasizes that the tactics utilized were merely an adaptation of army air assault and firebase techniques into the Marines' tactical repertoire.

Poor intelligence of the enemy presence in the area of operations (AO) plagued the Marines throughout the action. In addition, the logistics of the operation proved haphazard due to poor intelligence on weather conditions and the lack of helicopter resources for resupply. Dewey Canyon was not a triumph of logistic adaptation as claimed by the Marine Corps. Nor was it an

¹ After Action Report, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines [hereafter, AAR 1/9], 46-47, in Jim Ginther Collection, Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive, Lubbock, TX [hereafter, TTVA]; Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1991), 595; Charles R. Smith *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division Headquarters, 1988), 50-51. Charles Melson, "Dewey Canyon: Thirty Years Later," *Fortitudine* 28, no. 2, (1999); Dick Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon: The Heroic Saga of Company G," *Leatherneck* 98, no. 8 (August 2015): 36 Advanced Technologies & Aerospace Database [hereafter, ATAD]; Gordon M. Davis, "Dewey Canyon: All Weather Classic," *Marine Corps Gazette* 53, no. 7 (July 1969) ATAD; Allan C. Bevilacqua, "Operation Dewey Canyon: Cleaning Up the A Shau Valley," *Leatherneck* 97, no. 4 (April 2014) ATAD.

² Battle Studies: Dewey Canyon, Amphibious Warfare School Education Center [hereafter AWSEC], Marine Corps Development & Education Command, Academic Year AWC-1986, Marine Corps History Division Archives, Quantico, VA [hereafter, MCHDA]; Battle Studies: Dewey Canyon, AWSEC, Marine Corps Development Command, Academic Year AWC-1988, MCHDA; Combat Leadership Symposium "Dewey Canyon" Selected Readings and Advance Sheet, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, AY 1993-1994, MCHDA; Notes from Dewey Canyon Lecture-May 1990, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, MCHDA.

example of a conscious choice to limit logistic capabilities for enhanced versatility.³ The operation also did not inflict sufficient damage to the North Vietnamese because the Marines abandoned the area, necessitating American forces to return in the summer of 1969.

Furthermore, the operation's tactics and use of firepower suggests a continuity of strategy between the command eras of generals William C. Westmoreland (1964-1968) and Creighton W. Abrams (1968-1972). This raises questions about the viability of Lewis Sorley's "Better War" thesis. Sorley posits that Abrams employed a strategy that emphasized pacification over conventional operations, including more 'focused' use of firepower, characterized by less use of artillery, observed and unobserved, and air strikes in general, especially in populated areas.⁴ Other scholars, such as John Nagl and Guenter Lewy, assert that Abrams wanted a shift to pacification-centric strategy, but army organizational culture remained determined to fight a conventional war of attrition.⁵

Recently, historians Gregory Daddis and Andrew Birtle notably challenged the 'better war' thesis. Daddis argues that Creighton Abrams' strategy did not and could not salvage the conflict after 1968 and that his strategy was not a radical departure from Westmoreland's. Daddis maintains that Abrams' 'one war' concept represented more a change in rhetoric than a modification of strategy in practice. Additionally, Birtle demonstrated that Abrams' policies and strategy were rooted in Westmoreland's approach.⁶ This article intends to lend reinforcement to Daddis and Birtle's conclusions by using Operation Dewey Canyon as a case study. Dewey

³ Battle Studies: Dewey Canyon, AWC-1986, 14.

⁴ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), xiii, 219-21.

⁵ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 137-38.

⁶ Gregory Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9, 19; Andrew Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians, an Appraisal," *Journal for Military History* 72, no. 4 (October 2008): 1216.

Canyon was a search-and-destroy operation that did not show any characteristics of a new approach. Supporting arms, especially artillery, remained the primary tool for generating enemy casualties, and were not utilized in the focused manner suggested by Sorley.

PLANS

In early 1968, the 3rd Marine Division was stationed on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in Quang Tri Province tasked with improving the strongpoint defense of the McNamara Line along the border with North Vietnam.⁷ The 3rd was a part of III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF), and had just been involved in very heavy fighting during the Tet Offensive with places like Khe Sanh and Hue City becoming familiar names. On 22 May, Major General Raymond G. Davis assumed command of the 3rd Marine division and announced a new operational method he termed “high mobility.”⁸ Instead of what he dismissed as the mistaken policy of static defense on the McNamara Line, Davis advocated for aggressive sweeps using helicopters, firepower, and saturation of the AO.⁹ These ideas, however, were neither new nor radical. His senior officers had essentially frozen construction on the McNamara Line on 20 January.¹⁰ Moreover, Davis’s views on high mobility mirrored the operations the army had been conducting since 1965, involving sweeps dependent upon air mobility via helicopters, while searching for enemy troops and equipment to destroy.¹¹

⁷ Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, and David A. Dawson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*, (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), 29. The McNamara Line was a static defensive position implemented at the request of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration and invasion across the DMZ in the northern portion of Quang Tri Province in South Vietnam.

⁸ Raymond Gilbert Davis was born in Fitzgerald, Georgia in 1915. He attended the Georgia Institute of Technology, graduating with a degree in Chemical Engineering in 1938. Soon after, he resigned his commission in the U.S. Army Reserve for one as a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. He served in the Pacific theater during World War II, notably on Guadalcanal and Peleliu. He also participated in the breakout at Chosin Reservoir, winning the Medal of Honor and two Silver Stars. Davis was deputy commanding general for Provisional Corps, an Army Corps level organization under the command of III MAF, from March to May 1968. He succeeded Major General Rathvon M. Tompkins as 3rd Marine Division commander.

⁹ Ray G. Davis with Bill Davis, “Protector of Freedom: The Story of Ray Davis, M.O.H. Lessons Learned in Combat and Life,” MS, 1990, MCHDA.

¹⁰ Shulimson, *Defining Year*, 31.

¹¹ General Robert H. Barrow Interview Transcript, 266, Interviewed by Edwin H. Simmons, 27 January 1986, Oral History Collection [hereafter OHC], MCHDA.

Davis's new approach prescribed several changes to the way 3rd Marine Division operated. First, Davis directed that each forward position, which had previously been occupied by a battalion, would instead be manned by one company with the other three companies of the battalion searching for the enemy beyond the wire. Second, Davis later claimed he ended the practice of loaning out battalions or companies to other units. Upon his arrival, he described his regiments as only having half of their battalions while the rest were dispersed around Da Nang.¹² The last piece of Davis' reforms was the creation of a more mobile division, which the new generation of CH-46 helicopters made possible. The 'Sea Knight' had greater lift power and was better suited to the mobile warfare Davis wanted to wage. Operation Dewey Canyon would prove, however, that Davis relied too heavily on helicopter support that was just not available.

Once all of these factors came to fruition Davis remarked, "Soon we were knocking the tops off little mountain peaks, putting our forces up there to move down against the enemy."¹³ Never shy about self-promotion, Davis maintained his new approach was innovative and allowed the Marines to aggressively seek the North Vietnamese. If the static defense was designed to have the NVA attack American positions, then Davis seemed prepared to throw his Marines at the enemy, while using firepower to minimize casualties.

In addition, Davis stressed the usefulness of the firebase concept to 3rd Marine Division operations in I Corps.¹⁴ It is important to note that this concept did not originate with Davis or the Marine Corps. It was actually an army concept that the Marine Corps adopted and employed.¹⁵ This seriously injures the Marine Corps' contention that the operation was tactically

¹² Davis, "Protector of Freedom."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ This article will use the terms firebase and fire support base (FSB) in accordance with the Marines. It is also worth noting that the firebase concept consisted of the construction of multiple fire support bases.

¹⁵ Barrow Interview, 268.

innovative in the broader context of the war. It also indicates continuity in strategy between Westmoreland era operations and those during the age of Abrams.

Utilization of the firebase concept required intense planning and vast resources, notably helicopters. Prior to construction, the artillery unit's commander informed the engineer about the gun requirements and placements, and the infantry officer informed their unit's engineers of the operations that would take place in the vicinity of the firebase. After the planning phase, the landing zones (LZs) were established for helicopter lifts. Before any clearing happened atop the mountain or ridge, artillery applied preparation fire to the area to ensure there was no hostile resistance and to aid in the clearing process. Afterwards, engineers and infantrymen cleared foliage from atop the mountain; often the peak was blown off in order to provide a flat surface for the artillery to sit upon. Engineers then created the gun and ammunition pits for these artillery pieces with explosives. Once the clearing process was completed, helicopters delivered the artillery pieces to the hill.¹⁶ A firebase typically held six 105mm guns at minimum. The guns were arranged in a star pattern with the sixth placed in the center of the formation.¹⁷ This process was repeated over and over again to ensure that the Marines had adequate firepower, the ultimate producer of enemy casualties, wherever and whenever they operated. In the end, this process allowed for Davis' conception of highly mobile operations to come to fruition without foregoing the advantage of fire support.

At the time Davis took command, the 3rd sought the annihilation of the 320th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Division in the area of Dong Ha. Until early June, the 3rd Marine

¹⁶ Robert V. Nicoli, "Fire Support Base Development," in *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1975: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Edwin H. Simmons (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps), 39-43.

¹⁷ David Ott Ewing, *Vietnam Studies: Field Artillery, 1954-1973* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army), 59.

Division fought to eliminate the 320th and quell the offensives resulting from mini-Tet, a smaller scale offensive launched after the notorious Tet Offensive. During this period of operation, Davis' reforms accumulated high praise from other Marines such as Captain Matthew G. McTiernan, commanding officer of Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines who stated that "the decisive change in tactics initiated by General Davis' was the most important factor in the defeat of the North Vietnamese offensive."¹⁸ The Marines of the 3rd Division embraced Davis' reforms because it removed them from their static positions, giving the appearance of progress.

On 19 June, 3rd Marine Division was tasked with evacuating and razing Khe Sanh Combat Base. Operation Charlie required the removal of all supplies and destruction of all fortifications at the base. The operation ended on 5 July with the closing of Khe Sanh.

From June to December 1968, the 3rd Marine Division conducted Operations Thor, Lancaster II, and Napoleon/Saline with Davis' new approach.¹⁹ Operation Thor from 1-8 July was a search-and-destroy mission that yielded no great results, but utilized Davis' concepts of high mobility and firebases. Lancaster II began prior to Davis' command but during his tenure, from June until November, elements of the 3rd Marine Division conducted a search-and-destroy operation around the area known as the Rockpile, claiming to have killed 1,800 North Vietnamese. Ending in December 1968, Operation Napoleon/Saline mirrored Thor and Lancaster II once Davis took command. The Marines sought the destruction of the North Vietnamese and applied overwhelming firepower to do so.

In mid-January 1969, Davis desired to issue a significant blow to the North Vietnamese forces in the Da Krong Valley, the formal name for the Dewey Canyon AO. The valley was the

¹⁸ Shulimson, *Defining Year*, 311.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 326, 362, 445, 448.

northern approach to the infamous A Shau Valley which funneled all the way to the crucial coastal cities of Hue and Da Nang. The terrain in the area was rugged with vegetation ranging from head-high elephant grass to triple-canopy jungle. The area contained two razorback ridgelines that ran north and south that the 9th Marines later swept down during the operation, hunting for the North Vietnamese and their equipment. The area was also mountainous with rises in elevation from 200 to 1,200 meters. Though no significant rainfall was predicted for the operation, a light drizzle with occasional downpours continued throughout the operation. The failure of the planners of Dewey Canyon to carefully consider the unpredictability of the weather proved crucial. Resupply, fire support, and reinforcement were severely affected by the weather from start to finish.²⁰

Though intelligence proved scarce, Davis seemed to believe that there was a large North Vietnamese conventional threat in the Da Krong Valley to warrant a mission designed to scour the jungle in search of soldiers and equipment to destroy. The enemy presence in the area, however, was described as “obscure,” meaning that they did not have a clear picture of what enemy units were in the area and how many troops there were.²¹ Aerial observation provided the only concrete intelligence the division and 9th Marines had on the area. Aircraft reported heavy anti-aircraft (AA) fire over the area and increased traffic on Route 548/922 from Laos into the Dewey Canyon AO. The area was reportedly an enemy logistics and administrative base area and an infiltration route for troops from Laos. Lastly, there was information supporting the presence of a major engineering effort near Tiger Mountain.²²

²⁰ Colonel Robert H. Barrow, “Operation Order 2-69 (Operation Dawson River South),” 14 January 1969 4/9, B-1, MCHDA; Melson, “Dewey Canyon,” 5.

²¹ Barrow, “Operation Order 2-69,” B-2.

²² Ibid.

Initially conceived under the name Operation Dawson River South, Davis and his staff planned Dewey Canyon in five days, a rather quick conception considering the length of the operation, but not out of the ordinary for the Vietnam War. The quick planning of such a large operation most likely contributed to the scarcity of intelligence and the logistic problems encountered throughout the operation. Davis selected the 9th Marine Regiment to conduct the main thrust of the operation. The 9th Marines were one of four regiments under the command of the 3rd Marine Division.²³ The other regiments included the 3rd, 4th, and 26th Marines. Each regiment consisted of three combat battalions and a headquarters battalion. Each combat battalion consisted of almost 1,200 Marines, while the headquarters consisted of around 220 Marines.²⁴ The 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines (2/12) provided artillery support for 9th Marines, with batteries D, E, F, and mortar. Batteries D, E, and F consisted of six 105mm guns, while mortar battery consisted of six 107mm mortars. Additionally, the army loaned 1st and 3rd Provisional Howitzer Batteries with four 155mm guns each. For aviation, 1st Marine Air Wing provided helicopter and close air support, while the 7th Air Force supplied minimal tactical air support. Late in the operation, 2nd battalion, 3rd Marines assisted 9th Marines with firebase security. As a supplement to the operation, the 2nd Regiment of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) conducted operations in the vicinity of Fire Support Base (FSB) Davis and

²³ All Marine regiments, 9th Marines included, at the time consisted of three battalions designated the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. Each battalion had four rifle companies and one Headquarter and Service company (H&S). The 1st battalion contained companies A (Alpha), B (Bravo), C (Charlie), and D (Delta). The 2nd battalion consisted of companies E (Echo), F (Fox), G (Golf), and H (Hotel). While 3rd battalion was composed of companies I (India), K (Kilo), L (Lima), and M (Mike). H&S company provided a myriad of support functions such as medical, supply, communications, and organic fire support in the form of mortars.

²⁴ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 381. At the beginning of 1969, 9th Marines consisted of 3,727 Marines. 1st Battalion had 1,162 Marines, 2nd Battalion counted 1,171, 3rd Battalion numbered 1,174, while Headquarters contained 220 personnel.

Hill 1108, northeast of the 9th Marines AO and the 101st Airborne Division operated directly to the east of 9th Marines.²⁵

Colonel Robert H. Barrow, commander of the 9th Marines issued Operation Order 2-69 on 20 January 1969, two days before the operation actually commenced. The order planned four phases of operations. Phase I consisted of departure from FSB Henderson and the establishment FSBs Tun Tavern and Shiloh on days one and two of the operation.²⁶ Phase II consisted of an infantry battalion assault along with construction and occupation of a firebase in the eight-kilometer range of Shiloh, the maximum range of the 105mm howitzers atop the firebases was ten to eleven-kilometers. Eight kilometers allowed for the artillery to have a cushion of sorts when firing over engaged Marines. Phase III called for another infantry battalion assault in addition to the establishment of another firebase in the pre-existing eight-kilometer range of another base. It also required the displacement of the Regimental Command Post with its units and the artillery battalion headquarters (HQ). The original operation order called for a Phase IV requiring another infantry battalion assault, the creation of a new firebase and the extension of artillery coverage, but it was cancelled following the perceived success of Phase III. The coordinating instructions mandated infantry units to always operate within the eight-kilometer range of the various firebases to ensure the Marines were never outmatched.

Broadly defined, the mission was: “On order the 9th Marines (Rein) commences offensive operations in the southern DA KRONG VALLEY area in order to kill, capture and destroy the enemy, his supplies and facilities.”²⁷ The capture of equipment is often emphasized during assessments of Dewey Canyon, but “kill, capture and destroy the enemy” appear in the

²⁵Barrow, “Operation Order 2-69,” 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

statement of purpose before mentions of the destruction of enemy equipment or facilities. The mission statement above seems identical to the purpose of operations pre-Tet under Westmoreland's command. These operations sought to find, fix, and kill the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong above all else.²⁸

²⁸ 3rd Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division, "Operations Order 1-66" (Operation Masher) Jan. 1966, 1-2, TTVA; 3rd Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division, "Operation Plan Cay Da," (Operation Eagles Claw) Feb. 1965, 1, TTVA.

EARLY PHASES

Phase I required the reestablishment of firebases previously occupied by the Marines. These firebases provided artillery cover for the construction of new firebases in Phase II. Thus, on 17 January, FSB Henderson reopened and battery F/2/12 occupied the firebase.²⁹ Three days later, two companies reopened FSB Tun Tavern. The next day, 21 January, Marine air provided preparatory fire for Shiloh and A/1/9 reoccupied the position with battery E/2/12.³⁰ Establishment of these firebases allowed the Marines to move on to Phase II.

Phase II of the operation began on 22 January, with 2/9's establishment of FSB Razor and the securing of LZ Dallas. Clearing the land for Razor proved more demanding than planned, according to Captain David F. Winecoff, "We went in with enough power saws and axes to do the job if we had the experienced people to work these things. But I found out that there are very few people in Hotel Company, and we were the ax swingers, that knew how to swing an ax properly, and we immediately proceeded to bust about 50 to 60 percent of our axes..."³¹ Nevertheless, the trees were cleared by the Marines with the help of bulldozers that were eventually brought in by helicopters, suggesting that the necessary equipment to clear the firebase sites was not available even at the beginning of the operation.

²⁹ Gordon M. Davis' article "Dewey Canyon: All Weather Classic" contradicts the After-Action Report stating that FSB Henderson was reopened on 19 January; Artillery Report of Operation Dewey Canyon, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, 5, MCHDA 18 June 1969. F/2/12 indicates that the unit was Battery F of the 2nd Battalion of the 12th Marine Regiment. This abbreviation style will be used throughout the paper to indicate unit affiliation. Infantry companies will also be designated this way. For example, A/1/9 indicates Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment.

³⁰ AAR 1/9, TTVA, 12; Command Chronology [hereafter, CC], January 1969, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, 6, MCHDA; Colonel Robert H. Barrow Interview, Interviewed by Willis S. Bernard, 8 April 1969, OHC, MCHDA. Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 30. During this period, the operation was re-designated Operation Dewey Canyon from the previous Dawson River South.

³¹ AAR 1/9, 12; After Action Report, 9th Marine Regiment [hereafter, AAR 9th Marines], 12, MCHDA; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 31; Melson, "Dewey Canyon," 5.

Razor's construction continued into 23 January. Second Battalion also began patrolling around the site, while F/2/12's 105mm howitzers displaced to Razor. The following day at 1700, the Command Post for the 9th Marines flew from Vandegrift Combat Base (VCB) to Razor while 3rd Battalion assaulted the location for Cunningham some 6,500 yards ahead of Razor. In addition, 2/12's command and fire control groups also moved to Razor.³²

At 0935 on 25 January, 3/9 along with battery D/2/12 and mortar battery left VCB and lifted to Cunningham which officially opened later in the day. For the next three days, until 28 January, the 9th Marines began patrolling around the firebases, making sporadic contact that proved inconclusive: only one North Vietnamese killed while two Marines were killed and two wounded. The 1st and 3rd Provisional Batteries lifted to Cunningham, increasing the amount of available artillery firepower.³³ Additional artillery support allowed for Operation Dewey Canyon to build momentum for the Phase II objectives.

A week into Phase II, artillery and airstrikes began to show their value and provide the first major successes for the Marines. The most significant development was a count of eighteen North Vietnamese killed by artillery and sixteen by airstrikes on 29 January.³⁴ The sudden contributions of artillery demonstrated how central the firebase concept was to the operation, but also raises questions about the nature of the fire missions. The After-Action Reports for the operation do not indicate that any weapons were found with the bodies. This suggests the possibility that the casualty numbers were a rough estimate by an observer who did not have a clear view of the carnage. Alternatively, the numbers could be an estimation of North

³² AAR 1/9, 12; AAR 9th Marines, 12; CC 2/12, 6; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 31; Barrow Interview, 1969; Melson, "Dewey Canyon," 5; Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon," 36.

³³ AAR 1/9, 12; AAR 9th Marines, 12; Melson, "Dewey Canyon," 6; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 31.

³⁴ AAR 1/9, 13; AAR 9th Marines, 13.

Vietnamese dead for unobserved Harassment and Interdiction (H&I) fire missions throughout the day, or that the bodies were civilians, possibly Montagnards.

On 31 January, A/1/9 at Shiloh received their first detainees, five Montagnards that turned themselves over to American forces, indicating a possible unacknowledged civilian presence in the area. The most significant action of the day, however, was the commencement of the attack on Co Ka Leuye (Hill 1175) by company G/2/9 led by Captain Daniel A. Hitzelberger. The Marines lifted off from LZ Dallas, landing near Hill 1175. After crossing a tributary of the Da Krong, the company came upon the cliffs. Upon seeing the height of the cliffs Hitzelberger remarked to himself, "You've got to be joking." While Hitzelberger tried to comprehend the scale of his task, the unit received sniper fire with a round narrowly missing him. The unit eventually climbed 500 feet of Co Ka Leuye's slopes before making camp.³⁵ Hitzelberger's reaction to the heights and the overall objective of the action suggest problems with Marine Corps intelligence. The company commander seemed to be surprised by the heights. Likely because intelligence had not given him a sufficient picture of the terrain that lay ahead, a demonstration of the scarcity of information during the planning process. Additionally, the only reason G/2/9 was operating in the area was to search-and-destroy the enemy while securing the heights, a task neither new nor innovative.

Company G continued their climb of Co Ka Leuye the next morning, climbing the sheer faced cliffs while the weather gradually worsened. The rain pounded the Marines as they climbed, alternating between heavy and drizzling rain interspersed with periods of dense fog. Eventually, Hitzelberger and his men achieved the objective, but the bad weather had set in. As a

³⁵ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 34; AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 13; Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon," 54.

result, Barrow became concerned about the viability of his units' positions going forward.³⁶

Meanwhile, the other objectives for Phase II were achieved. F/2/9 gained control of the territory for FSB Erskine, but the weather prevented continued construction of the fire base. Four kilometers to the east of FSB Cunningham, K/3/9 commenced construction on FSB Lightning, but its completion was also stalled by the weather.³⁷

Dense fog and rain still presided over the region on the morning of 3 February, forcing Barrow to make a decision: keep his units in the field or order them to retreat and set up defensive positions near a firebase. The weather had halted the possibility of resupply to forward deployed units such as Hitzelberger's G Company at Co Ka Leuye. In addition, no medical evacuations could be carried out anywhere in the AO. Therefore, on 4 February, Barrow ordered the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to move to areas easily resupplied and for all units to set up defensive positions. Both battalions moved back towards Razor and Cunningham. The only issue was artillery ammunition. The lack of heavy lift helicopters for resupply ruined plans to compile a 5,000 artillery round reserve, highlighting a recurring issue with logistics that continued throughout the operation. Over the next ten days, they fired only 6,078 rounds with their only confirmed kills being six North Vietnamese.³⁸ Additionally, the lack of helicopters for resupply presents a reoccurring problematic aspect of Davis' adoption of airmobile tactics and the firebase concept. The Marine Corps still did not have enough helicopters to be fully airmobile when operating in remote locations such as the Da Krong Valley. Davis, in his attempts to bring a

³⁶ AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14; Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon," 54.

³⁷ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 34; Davis, "Dewey Canyon," 36-37.

³⁸ AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14; Barrow Interview, 1969; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 35; Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon," 56.

‘new’ strategy to the 3rd Marine Division, put his Marines in a tactical situation where they could not be sustained.

In response to the harsh weather, L/3/9 took position at FSB Cunningham. Companies I, K, and M set up nearby Cunningham. Company H resided at FSB Razor. F settled at FSB Erskine, and company E defended LZ Dallas. The only company left in the field was Hitzelberger’s G/2/9. They remained in position on 4 February atop Co Ka Leuye whilst making contact with twenty North Vietnamese at 0930, killing three. They were hit again at 1045 and 1240 suffered one wounded and killed four North Vietnamese. Despite the inclement weather that prevented resupply, American aircraft continued to provide support, reporting two North Vietnamese killed. Early in the morning on 5 February, G/2/9 finally began to pull back to a more practical position as ordered.

After several hours of descending from Co Ka Leuye, fifteen North Vietnamese ambushed the company.³⁹ Enemy soldiers embedded in low lying bunkers, and among rocks and brush, raked the point fire team with small arms fire, pinning them down. Hitzelberger brought up the rest of his 3rd Platoon, whose men composed the point fire team, and sent 2nd Platoon to sweep through the enemy position, but small arms and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) halted their advance. With his platoons halted, Hitzelberger made the decision to commit his 1st Platoon by swinging them even further left through a ravine to hit the enemy flank, allowing the 3rd Platoon to advance, leading to an enemy withdrawal.⁴⁰ G/2/9 suffered significant casualties with five Marines killed and seventeen wounded with only two North Vietnamese dead. The lack

³⁹ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 35; Camp, “Operation Dewey Canyon,” 56.

⁴⁰ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 35; AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14; Camp, “Operation Dewey Canyon,” 56.

of supporting arms proved deadly for the Marines.⁴¹ This particular action was one of several engagements that defies the narrative of Dewey Canyon as an overwhelming American victory. The lack of intelligence and ability to deliver supporting arms proved deadly for the men of G/2/9.

Following the ambush, G/2/9, after moving slowly all day finally set up camp at 0200 on the morning of 6 February. Later, as the company moved toward their rendezvous point, they were able to utilize artillery once again. Hitzelberger ordered his forward observer to set artillery concentrations along their route 100 to 150 meters behind their rear security squad in order to prevent enemy pursuit.⁴² Late on the evening of 6 February, the men of G/2/9 scaled the same sheer cliffs they had conquered on 1 February, linking up with E/2/9 at its base and received medical supplies and rations for the first time in three days. The two companies then embarked on their journey back toward the Da Krong River and LZ Dallas.⁴³

G/2/9 arrived at LZ Dallas on the morning of 8 February battered and bruised but seemingly in good spirits.⁴⁴ The same day, the North Vietnamese pounded the American positions with artillery, particularly 3/9 near FSB Cunningham. The battalion received 122mm artillery fire throughout the day resulting in seven wounded Marines.⁴⁵ Phase II proved less than decisive for the Marines, killing forty-nine NVA soldiers, not counting artillery and air contributions, while sustaining sixteen Marines killed and fifty-eight wounded. The North Vietnamese had maintained the initiative throughout the period and pounded Marine positions

⁴¹ AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14.

⁴² AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 36; Camp, "Operation Dewey Canyon," 56.

⁴³ AAR 1/9, 14; AAR 9th Marines, 14; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

⁴⁵ AAR 1/9, 15; AAR 9th Marines, 15.

with artillery. Though the Marines were not prevented from achieving their objectives, the costs were fairly high for the simple task of clearing an area where no substantial enemy presence was suspected. Artillery and air support provided the highest individual body counts during Phase II, accounting for forty-five additional deaths despite being severely limited by weather conditions and ammunition shortages. This means that despite being rendered ineffective for a large portion of the operational phase, artillery and air support still almost matched the results of Marine riflemen. In fact, when Marine riflemen and North Vietnamese troops were pitted directly against each other, the results were not overwhelmingly in favor of the Marines. The Americans suffered less personnel killed, but suffered a significant amount of wounded.

Between 9-11 February, the weather began to lighten and the Marines gradually increased their activity.⁴⁶ FSB Erskine was finally opened by Battery F/2/12. Phase II effectively ended on 10 February. The alignment of all the battalions side by side in a straight-line line meant the units were ready for their sweep in force south toward the A Shau Valley. The days of small sporadic combat were over. The heaviest resistance of the operation lay ahead. The true test of the Marines' firepower and aggression lurked just beyond Phase Line Red.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ AAR 1/9, 15; AAR 9th Marines, 15; Barrow Interview, 1969.

⁴⁷ Phase Line Red was the point past which the Marines expected to meet heavy enemy resistance.

DECISIVE PHASE

The 3rd Battalion crossed Phase Line Red in the early morning on 11 February, and immediately made contact with North Vietnamese soldiers. North Vietnamese and American artillery fire picked up significantly. 3/9 took 122mm artillery fire at 1020, wounding five Marines. 3/9 also took 60mm mortar fire at 1815 and 2030 resulting in thirteen Marines wounded. American air and artillery accumulated a body count of five killed by artillery and two killed by air. The most significant action of the day was the engagement of the bulk of 1st Battalion as they crossed Phase Line Red late on the night of 11 February at 2200. The results were overwhelmingly in the Marines' favor with twenty-five North Vietnamese killed to only two Marines killed and nine wounded. Well-coordinated and heavy artillery fire allowed the Marines to beat back the enemy forces that had massed just outside FSB Erskine past Phase Line Red. The consistent pattern of artillery and air support creating the most casualties continued.⁴⁸

Marine losses were high on 12 February, suffering one killed, but thirty-six wounded. Meanwhile, the units' Close Air Support (CAS) killed sixteen North Vietnamese, while the Marine patrols failed to inflict significant damage upon the units they encountered. No count in a single engagement yielded higher than two NVA killed with the total for the day being nineteen, which included the discovery of eight graves in the count.⁴⁹

Between 13-16 February, fighting became ferocious, especially for 1/9 and 3/9. The Marines' sweep southward encountered fierce resistance, but their advance was sustained by frequent use of supporting arms. On 13 February, C/1/9 encountered the stiffest resistance. The Marines made contact with a North Vietnamese platoon that was defending a hilltop with mortar

⁴⁸ AAR 1/9, 15-16; AAR 9th Marines, 15-16; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 38.

⁴⁹ AAR 1/9, 16; AAR 9th Marines, 16.

and machine gun support. This was one of few engagements during the three-day period that saw Marine riflemen inflicting significant casualties upon the North Vietnamese, rather than artillery or CAS. Company C assaulted the enemy position around 1425, suffering six Marine wounded and killing twelve North Vietnamese. Just before midnight, the enemy attempted to retake the hilltop the Marines seized earlier in the day. Company C repelled the assault at the cost of two Marines killed, fifteen wounded. The unit compiled twelve North Vietnamese killed. Artillery, however, still produced the most results over two days.⁵⁰ The artillery and air reported thirty-five killed for 14 February alone. Artillery killed seven in several cumulative fire missions on 15 February, and 16 February produced fourteen North Vietnamese killed by artillery and air support. The rifle companies of the 9th Marines struggled to fix and destroy the enemy, but supporting arms continued to produce high kill counts.⁵¹

At 1800 on 16 February, the 24-hour truce for the Tet holiday went into effect. North Vietnamese forces betrayed the truce in the Dewey Canyon area. At 0405 the morning of 17 February, FSB Cunningham was attacked from three sides. North Vietnamese sappers dressed in shorts and skull caps breached the defensive wire and ran toward the center of the fire support base while they tossed concussion grenades and satchel charges. The attack lasted nearly three hours. Once the attack was beaten back, the dead and wounded were counted: four Marines killed, thirty-eight wounded with thirty-seven North Vietnamese killed. The artillery atop Cunningham expended 3,270 rounds from 0430 to 0630 on areas of suspected enemy escape routes, columns, and assembly areas.⁵² There were thirty-two guns atop Cunningham, and

⁵⁰ AAR 1/9, 16; AAR 9th Marines, 16; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 38.

⁵¹ AAR 1/9, 17; AAR 9th Marines, 17; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 38.

⁵² AAR 1/9, 18; AAR 9th Marines, 18; Command Chronology [hereafter, CC], February 1969, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, 20, MCHDA; Artillery Report 2/12, 9. The artillery report notes that 3,270 rounds were fired between 0430 and 0730, while the fire mission log in the 2/12 Command Chronology places the figure at 2,513 rounds

averaged twenty rounds per minute, which puts the rate of fire at just below one round per minute. This was considered sustained fire for a gun. This does not indicate an abnormally high firing rate, but maintaining a pace of a round a minute for two hours while receiving fire was not an easy task. It is notable, however, that firing in the attack on Cunningham was close to the 4,054 round a day average fired in the fighting around Dak To in October 1967. The major difference was that Dak To was a thirty-seven day fight with seventy-seven guns deployed, while the battle for Cunningham was a two to three hour affair with only thirty-two guns.⁵³ This comparison indicates that during the heaviest fighting in Dewey Canyon, the thirty-two guns at Cunningham almost matched the daily total for a larger operation such as Dak To in just two to three hours. Furthering the observation that there was more continuity between the Westmoreland and Abrams command eras than proponents of the strategy shift would like to admit.

Throughout 18-20 February, heavy resistance continued. The Marines overran several positions of entrenched North Vietnamese hidden among thick vegetation nearby FSB Erskine. While clearing bunkers, the Marines killed 122 North Vietnamese, with seventy-one of those coming from napalm strikes within fifty meters of the Americans' positions. In contrast, the Marines suffered only one killed with twelve wounded. As far as the additional artillery and air effect for the three days, the Marines killed twenty-seven more North Vietnamese. Artillery and air support allowed the Marines to suffer minimal casualties while encountering significant

between 0430 and 0630. I have combined the two numbers in the text. It seems the 3,270 rounds most likely counted unobserved fires that were not logged in the Command Chronology.

⁵³ J.B.A Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press), 382; CC 2/12, Feb. 1969, MCHDA, 20.

amounts of entrenched North Vietnamese further emphasizing the importance of overwhelming firepower to the execution of the operation.

By the end of the day on 20 February, 1st and 2nd Battalions found themselves near the Laotian border. Throughout the operation, the Marines had received sporadic, yet accurate artillery fire from across the border. Headquarters also worried about the security of the flanks of the units but also saw Laos as containing many targets of opportunity such as enemy artillery and supply routes.⁵⁴ Companies E and H/2/9 arrived at a ridgeline that offered a view onto Route 922 just inside Laos. Route 922 was a major enemy road allowing the movement of men and material into South Vietnam. Perched upon the ridgeline, Company H observed an enemy convoy moving down the route, provoking the Marines to lobby for an incursion into Laos.

Discussion of an incursion into Laos had occurred as early as 2 February. Davis requested that Special Operations Group (SOG) activities expand into the Laotian panhandle, specifically, Base Area 611, an enemy sanctuary inside Laos. MACV approved the request. In addition to the expansion of SOG reconnaissance, Davis requested permission to allow the 9th Marines to enter Laos and destroy North Vietnamese artillery pieces that continually harassed the Marines early in Operation Dewey Canyon. MACV quickly denied this request due to limitations in the rules of engagement preventing large regular American units from entering neutral Laos. There was a loophole, however. American forces and their allies ‘could’ cross into Laos if they were engaged with enemy forces “as necessary for the preservation of the force.” They were also permitted to call in artillery and air strikes on targets in Laos. The Marines exploited these loopholes to justify their raid into Laos.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 39-41; AAR 1/9, 18-20; AAR 9th Marines, 18-20.

⁵⁵ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 41.

With information provided by Winecoff's H/2/9, SOG teams, and radio intercepts, the Marines observed the enemy utilizing Route 922 to move their artillery into safe havens in Laos away from the Marines sweeping through the area.

This is where matters become murky. There are conflicting reports as to who authorized the incursion and who knew about it. The Marine Corps official history asserts that Army Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell, commander of XXVI Corps, reinitiated Davis' request of 2 February, effectively authorizing the raid, whilst notifying Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, commander of III MAF and the senior ranking Marine officer in country that the raid was approved. Cushman then forwarded the request to Abrams, the MACV commander. The official history then asserts that Barrow did not wait for the permission of Abrams and simply sent a message to Winecoff at Company H, authorizing him to set up an ambush along Route 922 inside of Laos, but also to reenter South Vietnam by 0630 the next morning.⁵⁶

Davis presented two conflicting stories in two different sources. In his career interview, Davis maintained that he was on R&R in Hong Kong and that the raid was authorized by Stilwell, thus affirming the official history's interpretation.⁵⁷ But, in his memoir, Davis wrote:

The strongest vote of confidence received came from General Abrams himself. When apprised of the purpose of the ambush, Abe reversed his earlier position and authorized a full battalion of the 9th Marines to enter Laos for the purpose of destroying the threat posed by the 122s. Abe requested only that there be no public discussion of the foray across the border and informed American ambassador in Laos, William Sullivan, only after the operation was underway.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid, 41-42.

⁵⁷ General Raymond G. Davis Interview Transcript, 68-69, interviewed by Bemis M. Frank, 2 February 1977, OHC, MCHDA.

⁵⁸ Davis, "Protector of Freedom."

Davis's second version of events suggests that the command did not originate with just Stilwell, but from the highest levels of leadership, thus providing some commentary on the war that Abrams wanted to wage during his tenure as MACV commander. A war that looked similar to Westmoreland's, relying on search-and-destroy type operations that depended on supporting arms to generate enemy casualties.

Cushman's version of the events further confuses the situation. He remarked in his career interview when asked about the ambush, "No, nobody asked for permission. I'm glad they didn't, I'd had to say no."⁵⁹ This directly contradicts the official history and Davis.

Regardless of who authorized the raid, Winecoff received a coded message from 2/9 headquarters ordering an ambush of convoys on Route 922 in Laos on the afternoon of 21 February. By this point, Winecoff's men were exhausted. He had reservations about his men carrying out the ambush with so little preparation, and requested a twenty-four-hour postponement order. Around 1400, 2nd Battalion command denied Winecoff's request. Winecoff decided to utilize only his 1st and 2nd platoons in the ambush. By 1610, the 1st Platoon, company headquarters, a mortar team, and machine gun team were on their way to rendezvous with 2nd platoon, who had previously been on patrol.⁶⁰ The command's insistence Winecoff's men carrying out the ambush suggests that there were no reserve units that could be brought in to reinforce the Marines. It also indicates that the Marines' air mobility continued to be severely hampered by the remoteness of the area and a lack of helicopters.

⁵⁹ General Robert E. Cushman, Jr. Interview Transcript, 81, interviewed by Bemis M. Frank, 1 November 1982, OHC, MCHDA.

⁶⁰ Dave Winecoff, "Night Ambush!," *Marine Corps Gazette* 68, no. 1 (January 1984): 47-52, ATAD.

After a thirty-minute forward reconnaissance, the ambush order was issued orally by the company commander and relayed to the men by their team leaders. As the sounds of gunfire from other firefights barked in the distance, the platoons traveled the final 900 meters to the ambush site, maintaining physical contact with the man in front of them due to the pitch blackness as they traveled through a creek bed, traversed a ridgeline, reached the road at 2030 and then selected a specific kill zone. They were waiting on the Laotian side of the road so that their push through the ambush site would be back toward South Vietnam. Spotting a single soldier walking along the path, the Marines let him pass in hopes that more lucrative prey lay beyond. Around 0230, the Marines heard engines start in the distance. Ten anxious minutes later, the Marines spotted a convoy of eight trucks approaching their kill zone. After three trucks rolled past his position and the convoy stopped, Winecoff detonated a claymore initiating the ambush turning the second truck into an inferno with the chief scout firing a Light Anti-Tank Weapon (LAW) into the cabin of the truck soon after. The Marines poured fire into the trucks. In order to prevent any North Vietnamese soldiers from escaping and to protect themselves from any unknown forces, the Marines quickly called in artillery to bracket their position.⁶¹ After minutes of intense small arms fire, Winecoff called a halt to his men's fire amidst ammunition from the second truck cooking off simultaneously. He gave the order to advance and check the ambush site. The two platoons then proceeded back the way they entered Laos and rejoined their 3rd platoon on the ridgeline they previously occupied overlooking the border. The ambush netted three trucks destroyed and ten North Vietnamese killed.⁶² Members of 2/9 dubbed it the "night of the sweaty palms."⁶³

⁶¹ AAR 1/9, 21; AAR 9th Marines, 21; Winecoff, "Night Ambush!," 47-52.

⁶² AAR 1/9, 21; AAR, 9th Marines, 21.

⁶³ George C. Fox, "Recollections of Combat," *Marine Corps Gazette* 68, no. 6, (June 1984): 28, ATAD.

Later in the day, H/2/9 saw eight more North Vietnamese soldiers from their vantage point, called in artillery and killed two. Around the same time as the artillery strike, Abrams authorized the requests of Stilwell and Cushman to venture into Laos. Later, on 24 February, Abrams placed a restriction on discussion of the raid to the public. Barrow later utilized Abrams' authorization to the fullest extent in a return to Laos later in the operation.⁶⁴

Wincoff's ambush in Laos proved to be one of the few instances of clear success in the operation. Inside Laos, the North Vietnamese concentrated most of their forces and supplies, resulting in concrete results when the Marines finally crossed the border. Deviation from the original plan for Dewey Canyon and airmobile tactics produced tangible success. This suggests that the key to preventing North Vietnamese presence in I Corps lay not in areas such as the Da Krong Valley, but inside of Laos, which was restricted due to political constraints.

⁶⁴ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 45; Davis, "Dewey Canyon," 38.

FINAL PHASE

Back inside South Vietnam, in the center of the regimental push, A/1/9 made heavy contact throughout 22 February. Company A, after reconnaissance of areas of action from 21 February, proceeded to push down the AO, moving off the ridgeline they had previously occupied. After moving off the ridge, the company stopped to eat and refill their canteens. While a water detail was filling canteens for the Company, they received mortar fire with the sergeant leading the detail taking shrapnel in his face. A machine gun opened up on 1st Lieutenant Wesley Fox, commander of Company A, and his men, allowing him to locate the enemy positions. The Marines maneuvered through triple canopied jungles, intermingled with banana groves and underbrush until 1st Platoon encountered a reinforced North Vietnamese company entrenched in a bunker complex, complete with RPG and machine gun emplacements. Fox moved his 3rd platoon in line with the 1st and ordered his 2nd platoon to push through the gap between the 1st and 3rd platoons. The Marines' assault stalled, and they began taking heavy casualties, since they were not supplemented at the time by air and artillery support due to the weather, terrain, and vegetation. Fox could not withdraw for fear that his Marines might be wiped out. As the units pressed forward, the command group received a direct hit by a mortar round killing some and wounding almost everyone including Fox, while his executive officer escaped unscathed. As the fighting continued, the weather lifted. Sunlight filled the jungle and revealed two OV-10 Broncos in the sky. Fox radioed the flight leader and called in an impromptu strike on the machinegun nest that had his Marines pinned down. The Broncos hit the position with cannon and rocket fire and "the gun went silent, forever." Relief came in the form of D/1/9 who appeared through the banana groves in front of Company A. The Marines emerged victorious, with ten or eleven Marines killed, seventy-two wounded while killing 105 North

Vietnamese.⁶⁵ Fox was awarded the Medal of Honor for his leadership in the engagement. Once again, supporting arms proved decisive and allowed the Marines to win the day, even at a relatively high cost.

From 11 February to 23 February, the period of heaviest fighting, the artillery in support of the Marines fired approximately 5,000 rounds per day with a high of 6,187 rounds according to the artillery report. Additionally, the report notes that 63 percent of artillery fires were observed and fired on targets of opportunity.⁶⁶ An average of 5,000 shells a day is not indicative of a force that is utilizing focused or limited firepower. This figure indicates that firepower was central to Dewey Canyon's concept of operations and 9th Marines' ability to inflict casualties upon its enemy. But examination of the fire mission logs in the 2/12 command chronology reveal an average of 866 shells fired per day between 11 and 23 February, not the 5,000 suggested by the artillery report. Considering that each logged mission has a callsign for an aerial observer, it is safe to assume all the logged fire missions were observed fire. This suggests that the missing missions were most likely unobserved. If that is true, then, the percentage of observed fire for the period of heaviest fighting for Dewey Canyon is only 17 percent with 83 percent being unobserved fire. An astounding rate for an operation considering unobserved fire was, on average, 10 percent of all ammunition fired in Vietnam from just after Abrams took command until June 1970 when the practice became virtually nonexistent.⁶⁷ It is entirely possible, upon further examination that other operations during this period may misrepresent the amount of firepower used. It may also yield evidence for how much unobserved fire was utilized as well.

⁶⁵ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 46; AAR 1/9, 21; AAR 9th Marines, 21; Wesley L. Fox, "Moving to the Sound of the Enemy's Guns," *Marine Corps Gazette* 73, no. 11 (November 1989): 69-71, ATAD.

⁶⁶ Artillery Report 2/12, 9; AAR 1/9, 12.

⁶⁷ John Michael Hawkins, "The Cost of Artillery: Harassment and Interdiction Fire in the Vietnam War." (master's thesis, Texas A&M University, 2004), iv, 67; CC 2/12, Feb. 1969, MCHDA, 20.

Dependence on unobserved fire suggests a continuity between operations during the Westmoreland era rather than a sudden shift to more focused artillery fire under Abrams.

Despite the heaviest fighting being over, H, E, and F/2/9 spent the next three days inside Laos. Sweeping east on Route 922, the Marines blocked any traffic back toward the South Vietnamese border, captured twenty tons of food and ammunition, two 122mm and killed forty-eight North Vietnamese along the way. Notably, one Marine, Corporal William D. Morgan, posthumously earned the Medal of Honor by charging into the open, drawing fire from an enemy bunker, and allowing for two wounded Marines to be saved by his squad. Supporting arms contributed significantly throughout the search-and-destroy mission into Laos. The Marines reported thirty-eight North Vietnamese soldiers killed by artillery during the three-day sweep with an additional six killed by air.⁶⁸ Supporting arms contributed at least forty-four North Vietnamese killed during the three days, though it is unclear how many of these forty-four were killed inside Laos.

On 1 March, the companies were within 1,000 meters of South Vietnam and were lifted back to Vandegrift Combat Base on 3 March, ending Operation Dewey Canyon for them.⁶⁹ Once again, impromptu operations inside Laos proved most fruitful, especially late in the action when the North Vietnamese seem to have decided to abandon the base area inside South Vietnam and take refuge across the border. At this stage, the 9th Marines' objectives were considered largely accomplished, effectively ending Phase III with retraction being the next step.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ AAR 1/9, 22-23; AAR 9th Marines, 22-23; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 47.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 47; Melson, "Dewey Canyon," 8.

⁷⁰ AAR 1/9, 24; AAR 9th Marines, 24; Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 47; Artillery Report 2/12, 10.

A retraction was ordered, but it proved to be difficult. Originally the operation was supposed to end with a leapfrogging retraction that depended heavily on artillery protection. The problem with this concept by the time the Marines were ready to leave the area was it required many different displacements and heavy lifts, thus requiring helicopters. These helicopters could not be obtained, however, because of shortages and the bad weather that had repeatedly been a problem throughout the operation.⁷¹

After 2/9's lift back to Vandegrift on 3 March, the weather went from bad to worse and the remaining elements of 9th Marines had the additional mission of extracting the SOG teams that were working in Laos. The Marines also discovered more weapons and ammunitions caches in the eastern portion of the area of operations.⁷² On 8 March, 1st Battalion moved toward Tam Boi. The same day, F/2/12 abandoned FSB Erskine, displacing to Ca Lu and 1st Provisional Battery moving to Vandegrift. After 5 days of weather-related difficulties, Mortar Battery, the majority of 3/9, and all artillery closed FSB Cunningham. The 1st Battalion's lift started at 1120 on 18 March after finally linking up with the SOG teams from Laos concluding at 1630.

Operation Dewey Canyon terminated at 1820 on the 18 February, ending a long run for the Marines in the Da Krong Valley. The two-month sweep resulted in 130 Marines killed and 920 wounded. The Marines claimed to have killed 1,617 North Vietnamese killed but took only five prisoners. The equipment captured was fairly substantial: 1,223 individual weapons, 607,874 rounds of small arms ammunition, twelve 122mm guns, eighty-six anti-aircraft guns, barrels, or mounts and tripods. As far as perishable supplies, 220,800 pounds of rice and sixty-seven live chickens were seized amongst many other things.⁷³ Notably, the number of weapons

⁷¹ Smith, *High Mobility and Standdown*, 49.

⁷² AAR 1/9, 26; AAR 9th Marines, 26.

⁷³ AAR 1/9, 31; AAR 9th Marines, 31.

captured measured almost 400 less than the body count for the operation, suggesting the possibility that aerial observers could not account for the weapons of all the artillery strikes or the count contained a large number of civilians.

IMPLICATIONS OF OPERATION DEWEY CANYON

As far as the success of Operation Dewey Canyon within the context of the whole war, those who argue the campaign prevented the traditional spring offensive by the North Vietnamese appear mistaken. The action merely postponed it. The North Vietnamese returned to the region after the brief incursions of the Americans and ARVN, in fact, the U.S. Army returned to the area in June 1969 for Operation Apache Snow, with its most significant action being the Battle for Hamburger Hill. The fact is that the North Vietnamese were able to return to the area soon after Dewey Canyon because no American or South Vietnamese forces attempted to occupy the Dewey Canyon AO which was claimed to be crucial to the security of the A Shau Valley and I Corps itself.

The Marine Corps has since utilized Dewey Canyon in the education of their officers. The lessons based on Dewey Canyon, however, derive their wisdom from a biased interpretation of the operation's success. The lesson plan for a course taught at the Amphibious Warfare School admits that the tactics implemented were from the army, specifically the 1st Cavalry Division. It goes on to praise Dewey Canyon as an "overland" assault, not a mobile operation like the ones envisioned by Davis.⁷⁴ The fact that Dewey Canyon was to be an overland operation did not result from keen planning, but was borne out of necessity and poor prediction about weather conditions.

The lessons also praised the role of intelligence in the success of Dewey Canyon, but intelligence was poor prior to and throughout the operation. Much of the praise of intelligence could only be the product of hindsight. In reality, Marine Corps intelligence had no estimate of

⁷⁴ Battle Studies: Operation Dewey Canyon, AWC-1986, 3.

the size of the enemy presence in the Da Krong Valley or their specific location.⁷⁵ Intelligence was gathered during the operation, placing the Marines in the Da Krong Valley in a precarious situation. Fire support was meant to remedy the Marines' situation and save them from disaster. Its absence, such as the Company G's ambush on Co Ka Leuye, proved deadly for the Marines.

The number of North Vietnamese killed and the total of equipment captured gained Dewey Canyon a significant place in Marine Corps history, but what does Dewey Canyon tell us about the conduct of the Vietnam War and ongoing debates regarding strategy? Though Operation Dewey Canyon was a single operation occurring in 1969, it has implications regarding the overall conduct of the war and the historiographical debates surrounding the strategy of the Vietnam War. As noted in the introduction, several historians have posited that there was a drastic shift in strategy and tactics from the tenure of MACV commander Westmoreland to that of Abrams. The alleged shift relies on an emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification operations rather than search-and-destroy operations and reduced use of firepower.

As this article has revealed, several aspects of Dewey Canyon suggest there was no shift in strategy. First, it is instructive that Davis and other high-ranking Marine officers received no indication of a change in strategy or felt that anything was different when Abrams arrived. Davis claims that his new approach had the full approval of Abrams and that while flying over South Vietnam together at one point remarked, "General, don't you worry. We're not going to let them shit on us anymore."⁷⁶ His statement is indicative of his support for Davis' aggressive, search-and-destroy approach. III MAF Commander Cushman also did not think that there was a change at all in overall strategy between Westmoreland and Abrams. He expressed, "I don't recall any

⁷⁵ Battle Studies: Operation Dewey Canyon, AWC-88, 11-12.

⁷⁶ Davis, "Protector of Freedom."

great change with Abrams taking over. He had a much different style, but he also was aggressive. He also wanted offensive operations and there weren't any changes in the philosophy, as I recall. We never got into calling our operations "search and destroy" very much... We went after the enemy where we could find him."⁷⁷ Cushman's statement is perhaps the most revealing. It directly supports Daddis' claims that the supposed shift was simply a change in rhetoric. Not using the term search-and-destroy prevented any controversy about continuity between Westmoreland and Abrams, but it was simply the same tactics by another name. Cushman was also familiar with both Westmoreland and Abrams and would have noted a dramatic shift in their approaches.

A thorough study of Operation Dewey Canyon indicates that Daddis and Birtle are correct in their arguments. The conduct of Dewey Canyon and its foundational concepts show a continuity in strategy between Westmoreland and Abrams. The official Marine Corps History for 1968 acknowledges, "Davis had become impressed with the airmobile tactics of the 1st Air Cavalry Division during Operation Pegasus. As one Army officer remembered, the senior members of Rosson's Prov Corps staff would 'take turns having dinner with him every night in the headquarters mess, giving him our ideas on mobile warfare, and during the day we flew around with him.'"⁷⁸ Davis simply adopted the same approach that the army had been exercising for years at that point. Though it may have been a new approach for the 3rd Marine Division, the use of these tactics were not new in the broader context of the war and perpetuated the same style of operations that had been conducted during the Westmoreland era.

⁷⁷ Cushman Interview, 54.

⁷⁸ Shulimson, *The Defining Year*, 308.

The firebase concept that provided the 9th Marines with overwhelming fire support was also not an innovation by either Davis or the Marine Corps. According to Barrow, “We did not conceive the fire support base concept. As a matter of fact, the Army did.”⁷⁹ The tactics utilized during Operation Dewey Canyon were airmobile, search-and-destroy concepts, and firebase concepts were adapted from the army. Examination of Army and Marine Corps operations during this time period may show similar trends, further suggesting that tactics remained constant between Westmoreland and Abrams’ commands and pacification had not been given priority over conventional operations designed to find, fix, and kill the enemy.

A further continuity with earlier military methods is that the firebase concept remained central to the operation from planning until its end. Additionally, the largest amounts of casualties during the action stemmed from artillery and CAS, not from firefights between the Marines and North Vietnamese. Furthermore, the command chronology and artillery report for 2/12 indicate that the number of shells fired in an operation quite possibly could be doctored. Whether the statistic of 5,000 rounds a day during the heaviest period of fighting and 63 percent observed fire is true or not, the statistics point toward the possibility that firepower did not become focused during Abrams’ command. In fact, if the statistic of 17 percent observed fire during the heaviest period of fighting is true, it certainly suggests that the overall reduction in unobserved fire may be based upon false reports, further indicating continuity between Westmoreland and Abrams.

⁷⁹ Barrow Interview, 268.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the approach taken by the Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon suggests continuity of tactics and firepower use during Abrams' tenure as MACV commander. It also indicates that many of the lessons taught by the Marine Corps about Dewey Canyon are suspect, built upon misinterpretation of the operation. Dewey Canyon was conceived as a search-and-destroy operation, meant to clear the jungles of the Da Krong Valley of North Vietnamese soldiers. Throughout the action, the Marines utilized firepower as their main tool to inflict casualties upon the enemy, similar to its use during the Westmoreland era. These findings support arguments made by Daddis and Birtle that the proclaimed shift in strategy between Westmoreland and Abrams never occurred. Further investigation into later operations after Abrams took command of MACV may reach similar conclusions. Examinations of other operations during Abrams' command are essential going forward for understanding the complexities of I Corps, Marine Corps operations, overall strategy, and the Vietnam War itself.

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