

The War Along the DMZ

BLUF: The Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was an area of disarmament that divided North and South Vietnam from July 1954 to 1976. During the Vietnam War, 1955 to 1975, the zone became important as the battlefield demarcation separating the warring sides. Despite the DMZ's supposed status, 3rd Marine Division intelligence estimated that NVA and Viet Cong forces' combat strength in the DMZ area in January 1968 was 40,943 troops. The north was ultimately victorious in the war in 1975, and the DMZ ceased to exist following the reunification of Vietnam on 2 July 1976.

MAIN CHARACTERS: Võ Nguyên Giáp (NVA), Louis Metzger (USMC), Lew Walt (USMC), and William Westmoreland (USA).

SETTING THE STAGE: The DMZ in Vietnam, considered a combat-free area, lay near the 17th parallel separating the two Vietnams. The zone was created by an agreement known as the Geneva Accords in 1954. The boundary between North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam) and South Vietnam (the State and later the Republic of Vietnam) was established at the Ben Hai River. The river ran east to west, near the 17th parallel. The DMZ extended five kilometers on each side of the river.

The U.S. military and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) planned to build a series of bases surrounded by barbed wire, seismic and acoustic sensors, electrified fencing, and land mines along Route 9, about six miles south of and parallel to the DMZ. All this was in an attempt to stem the flow of soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam. This series of bases became known as the "McNamara Line," so named for Robert S. McNamara, then U.S. Secretary of Defense. In the spring of 1966, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) mounted their first incursion into South Vietnam directly through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), separating the two Vietnams. In response, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) ordered the 3d Marine Division north into the border province of Quang Tri. The 3rd Marine Division conducted a conventional campaign in thinly populated Quang Tri Province. A North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp predicted, *"The National Liberation Front will entice the Americans close to the North Vietnamese border and will bleed them without mercy . . . the pacification campaign will be destroyed."*

THE STORY: In April 1966, Gen. William Westmoreland (USA) directed III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) to build this barrier across the DMZ. Lieutenant General Lew Walt, III MAF commander, told Westmoreland that if he had the additional forces projected by the barrier planners, *"a far better job of sealing the DMZ could be accomplished without the barrier itself."* Walt observed, *"we are already too short of troops to divert any of them to a function of this nature."* Reflective of fluctuating command direction, construction proceeded fitfully. Brigadier General Louis Metzger, assistant 3rd Marine Division commander, remembered a constantly changing emphasis with high interest from April through June of 1967 and a drying up of materials and guidance from headquarters. By the end of 1967, most of the strong points were finished. The sensors, wire, and minefields along the barrier, however, were not installed.

Meanwhile, the Marine war had grown in intensity during 1967. For the 3rd Marine Division, conventional fighting against the NVA ranged from the hills around the former Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri to "Leatherneck Square" in eastern Quang Tri opposite the DMZ. By the end of 1967, III MAF had blunted the enemy push through the DMZ. Despite optimism in the American command about winning the war in Vietnam, U.S. intelligence received disturbing reports that the enemy planned yet another offensive. By mid-January 1968, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and III MAF identified elements of two enemy divisions near Khe Sanh and three in the eastern DMZ. With the Marines strung out along the DMZ in the north, Westmoreland sent the 1st Air Cavalry Division and a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division into southern Quang Tri to reinforce the 3rd Marine Division. MACV and III MAF believed that the Marines were most vulnerable at Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was valuable as a base to monitor enemy infiltration into Laos and as an eventual jump-off point for ground operations

to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Siege of Khe Sanh began on 20 January 1968 with 6,000 Marines dug into prepared positions protecting the base. From January through the end of 29 March, North Vietnamese gunners maintained steady pressure on the embattled combat base with as many as 1,000 shells and rockets a day. U.S. artillery and air bombardment, including massive B-52 "Arc Light" strikes, prevented a general assault. Marine and Air Force helicopter and fixed-wing transport pilots kept the base supplied under marginal flying conditions. With a break in the weather, the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division and a Marine regiment, the 1st Marines, on 1 April, moved to Khe Sanh's relief. While the Marines advanced along Route 9, the 1st Cavalry used leapfrog helicopter tactics to deploy east and south of the base. On 4 April, the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh attacked southeast from the base and joined the Army troopers two days later. Within a week, Route 9 was opened, and on 14 April, the Marines seized the last of the commanding terrain north of the base.

The 77-day siege was over. The 3rd Marine Division repulsed a division-size enemy attempt to cut Marine supply lines along the Cua Viet River in the DMZ's Dong Ha sector during May. By mid-1968, the U.S. command decided to vacate the Khe Sanh base and suspend further work on the "McNamara Line." These two decisions freed the 3rd Marine Division from the defense of fixed bases and permitted a more aggressive approach. In a series of mobile operations employing the firebase concept, the Marines repeatedly bested the NVA. The division operated with all its organic subordinate units for the first time, enhancing tactical integrity, command, and control. The most ambitious of these forays was Operation Dewey Canyon.

In early 1969, the 9th Marines entered an enemy base area in the southwestern corner of Quang Tri Province near the Laotian border. Making skillful use of helicopters and firebases, the Marines killed 1,600 of the enemy and captured over 1,400 weapons and hundreds of tons of ammunition, equipment, and supplies. At the beginning of 1969, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), became responsible for the coastal lowlands of Quang Tri Province while the 3rd Marine Division remained responsible for western highlands of Quang Tri Province. With the 3rd Marine Division departure from South Vietnam in late 1969, the U.S. Army expanded its operations along the DMZ until it was withdrawn in mid-late 1971, when responsibility fell entirely on the ARVN.

AFTERMATH: After nearly three years tied to fixed bases, the 3rd Marine Division was finally able to conduct aggressive mobile operations, with Operation Dewey Canyon being the best example. This success vindicated the Marine position. An offensive against key NVA positions in the DMZ provided the best defense against enemy infiltration and invasion. After Saigon's fall at the end of the Vietnam War, the DMZ has no further political or military significance. However, it has become a popular point of interest for tourists. Some of the war's fiercest fighting and bloodiest battles occurred along that line. Places like Khe Sanh, Camp Carroll, and the Rockpile are forever etched into the minds of the Marines who fought there and survived.

QUESTIONS

1. Which leadership skills did Marines display to defeat the NVA in the "War Along the DMZ"?
2. What lessons learned by the Marines in the "War Along the DMZ" can be applied to future Marine Corps battles?
3. What is the importance of studying the Marines' combat performance during the War Along the DMZ?

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, James. *Impact Zone: The Battle of the DMZ in Vietnam, 1967-1968*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Pike, Thomas F. "3rd Marine Division: The Tet Offensive." *Military Records*, February 1968, "The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography." Washington D.C.: History and Museum Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corp, 1985.
- Shulimson, Jack and Maj Edward F. Wells. "The Marine Experience in Vietnam, 1965-71: First In, First Out." *Marine Corps Gazette*, January. 1984.
- Simmons, Edwin. BGen. USMC. "Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1965-1966." U.S. Naval Institute, May 1970.
- Simmons, Edwin. BGen. USMC. "Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1969-1972." U.S. Naval Institute, July 1972.