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dmz 1 (normass/deeps)

(This is the first of a two-part series on developments along the demilitarized zone, Vietnam).

WITH THE U. S. THIRD MARINE DIVISION, ALONG THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE, VIETNAM, OCTOBER ¹⁵ ~~14~~—The relative balance of forces along the DMZ has turned dramatically in favor of the Allies more clearly than at any other time during the two-year history of American operations here.

At this time, there is no visible evidence nor verbal hints of any Allied withdrawal from the DMZ defense line nor of any large-scale replacement of U. S. Army units for the American Marines, who now hold two-thirds of the 40-mile-long hilly line.

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dmz 2 (normass/deepe)

The reasons for the shift in the ~~blan~~ balance of ~~farf~~ forces are obvious and two-fold. First, the Americans simply have more power along and immediately south of the DMZ than at any other time since ^{these} ~~operati~~ military operations began here in mid-1966. At the beginning of this year, there were two Allied divisions ~~here~~--one American Marine division and one Vietnamese Army division--in the two northernmost provinces; today there are four divisions--two U. S. Army airmobile divisions having been ^{in mid-June} ~~added~~ plus more armor, riverboats, logistical capabilities and helicopters.

Second, and perhaps more important, the ~~Communist~~ North Vietnamese / divisions have virtually disappeared from the area. American Marine commanders here believe they have inflicted such heavy losses on the Communist divisions they have against sought sanctuary out of South Vietnam "to lick their wounds." American Army commanders say the Marines may be exaggerating their victories--but even they concede the Communists have been substantially weakened in the two northern provinces and are now virtually on the run. One Army senior Army officer, with long-term experience in Vietnam, said, "I just can't believe how good things look up here for us. I'm almost afraid to talk about it--for fear something will happen to change it."

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dmz 3 (normass/deepe)

Since the beginning of 1968, the Communists have had five main-line divisions, or former divisional entities in the two northern provinces at one time or another--mostly all at the same time during Tet when they employed a two-pronged war as simultaneously against Hue and Khe Sanh. Now, the Communists maintain only one division--the 320th--along the DMZ, plus three independent regiments--the 27th, ~~303~~ 138th and 20 220th. The ~~remnant~~ remnants of the other four divisions--303th, 304th, 324B and 325C--have either retreated into North Vietnam, Laos, or, as in the case of 325C, ^{it} has pushed southwards into the Two Corps area, into the Pleiku-Dak To perimeter, after participating in the siege of Khe Sanh.

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dma 4 (normass/deepe)

How long will the Communists continue to fade away along the DMZ? No one is predicting. ~~But~~ high-placed sources say that within a week's time, North Vietnamese divisions could again ~~move above the DMZ~~ organize above the DMZ and begin moving southwards. "At this time, the enemy is nearly completely ineffective because we have kept him off-balance all the time," one senior ^{MARINE} officer explained. "But, the enemy has a tremendous replacement capability and this could change within a week's time. He could bring in other units from the North within a week."

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dmz 5 (normass/deepe)

Sources close to General Creighton W. Abrams, American commander in Saigon, say the Marines have in recent weeks been so successful in confiscating Communist arms, ~~weapon~~, ammunition and food caches inside and immediately south of the DMZ that they have prevented the North Vietnam's 320th Division from launching mass assaults at Allied positions further south--at such headquarters and supply complexes at Calu, the artillery base at Camp Carroll, the Rockpile area and the Cam Lo district ~~down~~ town and huge refugee center.

"Now the 320th Division has gone back across the Ben Hai (the river forming the middle boundary of the DMZ) and ~~just~~ before they come down again they have to set up their whole supply system again," an officer close to General Abrams said.

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dmz 6 (normass/deepe)

Sources close to General Abrams--as well as independent Western military ~~obv~~ observers in Saigon--believe it will take several months--sometime into 1969--before the Communists are able to "get back in shape" and initiate another mass march into South Vietnam.

Compared to the ~~grim, depar depressing~~ grimly depressing days and extremely tenuous existence of Allied forces ~~x~~ in the two northern provinces early this year, there is now a new sense of confidence, ~~p4~~ profound relief and even glimmers of levity along the DMZ. During the first six months of 1968, the Communists held both the strategic and tactical ~~initiate~~ initiative with their two-pronged pressure points on Khe Sanh and Hue; it wasn't until their last push ending June 5 with their Third-Phase, positional warfare thrust during the bloody battle of Dai Do, ~~thre~~ two miles north of Dong Ha, that the Marines and Vietnamese First Division hurled the Communists back across the DMZ and that the situation dramatically ~~imprived~~ improved for the Allies. During the Battle of Dai Do, all three regiments of the 320th Division hurled themselves at the Marines and the 1st Vietnamese 1st Division; at one time the Communists launched a series of counter-attacks against the Marines, several of them in broad daylight.

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dmz 7 (nozmass/deepe)

"And, during the battle of Dai Do, while the ~~NNNN~~ Marines were assaulting, the enemy stood up in their foxholes, left their holes and assaulted us," one Marine officer explained, "which is very, very significant. We moved from our assault about 150 meters in front of the enemy and as our assault echelon was moving towards the enemy position, this unit left their foxholes and trenches and counter-attacked our assault. They ran right at us and the Marines and the enemy met each other. This requires a unit with a great amount of esprit or else a great fear of their cadre. This is attrition warfare—the enemy attempted to take no repeat no objective; they were simply endeavoring to kill Americans."

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dmz 8 (normass/deepe)

In July, it appeared that the 320th Division was positioning itself to again come across the Ben Hai river—probably sometimes in August—but with a series of pre-emptive, spoiling operations, the Ma American and Vietnamese ^{units} ~~oper~~ ~~regaining the tactical~~ ~~their~~ ~~tat~~ tactical initiative by then, forestalled this.

"Now, we're destroying ~~his~~ his jumping off points, his caches, command and control ~~centrum~~ locations, hospitals, springboards and staging areas," a Marine officer explained. "We've also ~~dr~~ destroyed his training ~~or~~ bunkering systems and training areas. ~~One training area~~ ~~was~~ ~~the~~ ~~First~~ ~~Battalion~~ ~~of~~ ~~Fourth~~ ~~Marines~~ ~~came~~ ~~across~~ ~~and~~ ~~destroyed~~ ~~a~~ ~~training~~ ~~area~~ they just couldn't believe, complete with classrooms and lecturns and blackboards, ^{plus} safe conduct passes and letter of introduction for his students."

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dmz 9 (normass/deepe)

Expectations now are that only in 1969 will the North Vietnamese have replaced their these staging areas and weapons caches sufficiently to make another ^{major} push ~~is~~ into South Vietnam.

~~the~~ senior Marine staff officers ^{in early June} described the DMZ in ~~early June~~ as "the closest thing we've seen to conventional warfare with organized military formations facing each other, each supported by his own heavy artillery," ^{they} now say "~~on our side~~ the major problem is conveying to the American people we have this war won and we should stay around and negotiate from strength...Hanoi is in such sorry shape ~~they~~ ^{it is} begging for peace."

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dmz 10 (normass/deepe)

The story of the American involvement along the DMZ began in, ^{HAST} mid-1966, when the American Marines launched Operations, which later glided into Operations ^{Pr} Prairie. The Marine battalions were piecemealed into the operation--generally to confront North Vietnamese Division 324B. It was during this time that the famous names along the DMZ were added to the Marine--and American--vocabularies--^{names such as} the Rockpile, ^{FWD} Madder's Ridge. This phase culminated with the vicious battles of Hill 881 North and South. But mid-1967, the Marines--who had suffered severe casualties themselves--had succeeded in eliminating 324B as a "divisional entity" and it fragmented into the three independent regiments.

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dmz 11 (normass/deepe)

By late 1967, however, two more Communist divisions--304 and 325C-- moved into South Vietnam and later gained ~~world-~~ world-wide attention during the ~~the~~ siege of Khe Sanh. This began the darkest days in the history of the DMZ--and further south, in the battle of Hue. It may go down in history as one of the most ~~the~~ militarily mismanaged periods ~~in~~ of ~~in~~ the American involvement in Vietnam.

^{mid-}
~~But,~~ by ~~late~~ January one regiment from each of the two ~~divisio~~ Communist divisions around ~~the~~ Khe Sanh--the 24th Regiment of the 304th Division and the 29th Regiment of 325C Division--had already moved towards Hue, which ^{became} ~~was~~ ~~by that time~~ the scene of heavy fighting of the Third Phase, positional warfare variety. These two regiments joined with the ~~9th~~ 90th ~~indanum~~ regiment of the old 324B Division to stop ~~del~~ cold the U. S. Army 1st Air Cavalry as it sought--but failed--to reinforce the American Marines fighting inside Hue city. There was also heavy contact between the 1st Air Cavalry and ~~the~~ the two other regiments of the old 324B Division--the 812th Regiment, which was turned back from Quang Tri provincial capital and the 803rd Regiment, which strutted ~~string~~ straight down the "Street ~~Without~~ Without Joy" area to reinforce the North Vietnamese inside Hue.

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dmz 12 (normass/decpe)

Also, during the Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese 320th Division was targetted against the district town of Cam Lo in Quang Tri province-- where the Marines somehow held off their advance southwards.

It was during this hectic period that three Allied ~~division~~ divisions-- the Third Marine Division, 1 Vietnamese 1st Division, U. S. Army 1st Air Cavalry, aided somewhat by the U. S. Army 101st Airborne, which had been held as a $\frac{1}{2}$ general reserve--were in vicious contact with major elements of four North Vietnamese divisions--the 320th, 325C, the old 324B and the 304th.

It was not until the end of February that the Allies ~~even~~ even began to get on top of the situation--when they pushed out the six ~~mainforce~~ Communist ~~re~~ main-force regiments out of Hue, which were then reinforced with numerous autonomous battalions and troublesome rear guard snipers and assassination squads. These small groups continued to cause trouble and insecurity, and in some cases, executions ~~atrocities~~ in and near Hue until late March.

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DMZ 13 (normass/deepe)

By mid-March, in the Khe Sanh perimeter, the remnants remnants of 325C—which the Marines say had suffered heavy casualties from U. S. firepower during the siege—moved southwards towards tw into the Second Military Corps. The two remaining regiments of the 304th Division were severely routed as th the 1st Air Cavalry and the Marines broke up the siege of Khe Sanh, beginning March 29; these two regiments did not chose setpiece confrontations with the advancing Allies, but simply fled the battlefield, leaving behind more supplies and equipment "than I ever dreamed of," one Army officer explained.

But, as the two regiments of the 304th fled in April, the Communists reinforced in May with two new regiments of the 308th Division--supposedly to camouflage the withdrawal of the 304th. The Marines say they later knocked out the major effect effectiveness of these two regiments in June in "Operation Robin" where the Communists fought to protect a new roadnet network leading from Laos into South Vietnam, south of Khe Sanh. The two remaining regiments of the 308th have been confirmed much further south in Quang Ngai province, where ^{they have} is has been unusually disruptive in recent months.

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dmz 14 (normess/deepe)

The 308th North Vietnamese Army Division deserves special mention. Fourteen years ago, it gained fame as part of the Communist forces which forced ~~on the French~~ ^a ~~their~~ ^{on the front} military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. It was then known for its proficiency in night attacks and for the accuracy of its artillery regiment. Because of its outstanding performance at Dien Bien Phu, the 308th was honored by the ~~Communist~~ ^{Communist} regime by being assigned in Hanoi as the capital garrison. For the past several years, Allied intelligence officers have been watching this elite division, postulating that when the Communists committed their "palace guard" units, they were getting to the end of their military ropes.

In June, ~~with~~ the Marines' beating back the two regiments of the 308th in June, ~~they were~~ ^{plus} ~~and the Vietnamese~~ on the Laotian flank, while pushing back the attacks and counter-attacks of the 308th 320th Division in the battle of Dai Do along the DMZ. Since then, the 320th has by and large remained north of the DMZ Ben Hai river; their attempts to prepare their battlefield for August "third-wave" offensive seems to have been turned back by aggressive and mobile Allied tactics.

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dmz 15 (normass/deepe)

~~Against~~

~~Historical~~

~~Against~~ this ~~back-drop~~, the DMZ has been relatively free of

big-unit confrontations as the Marines and Vietnamese, and the newly-arrived U. S. Army 5th Mechanized Brigade, have sought to hold the tactical momentum.

There is a new air of confidence, but also one of apprehension as the shifting monsoon rains and rumors of cessation of the bombing of the North swirl along the DMZ. The Communist artillery, which has largely silent, still lurks in on two flanks. There are still ambushes on the most western side of Route 9, which ~~caused one~~ where MA Marine ~~the~~ truck and tank convoys push through with supplies. These caused one officer to groan, "Don't measure the war up here by who holds what terrain; we hold everything in the daytime, but at night the ~~Communists~~ NVA are all around us."

The Marines suspect the NVA divisions are now regrouping, refitting and ~~resupply~~ ^{will} to resupplying for another push into the South. They vow they'll ^{just like we did before.} push the ~~Communists~~ back again. ~~Barren political miracles in Paris,~~ the possibility looms of even bloodier fighting sometime; somewhere—perhaps everywhere—along the ~~demilitarized~~ supposedly demilitarized line.

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dmz 16 (normass/deepe)

(Hanks: I'll file the next piece tomorrow. Also, the Saigon press is being squeezed out of the Le May coverage by incoming press and Le May's desire not to have ~~journalists~~ ^{journalists} follow him. ~~And~~ ^{And} Anyhow, I'll try to do something on him, probably ~~after~~ ^{after} he departs. ~~Also~~ ^{Also}, if at all possible, I might try to do a coup aftermath piece. I gather ~~the news magazines~~ ^{Newsweek is} ~~are~~ ^{Or do you want} doing a recap on it this week. Also, ~~what do you think about the~~ ^{what do you think about the} political series for the last week in October? Regards Bev).

--end reuter