

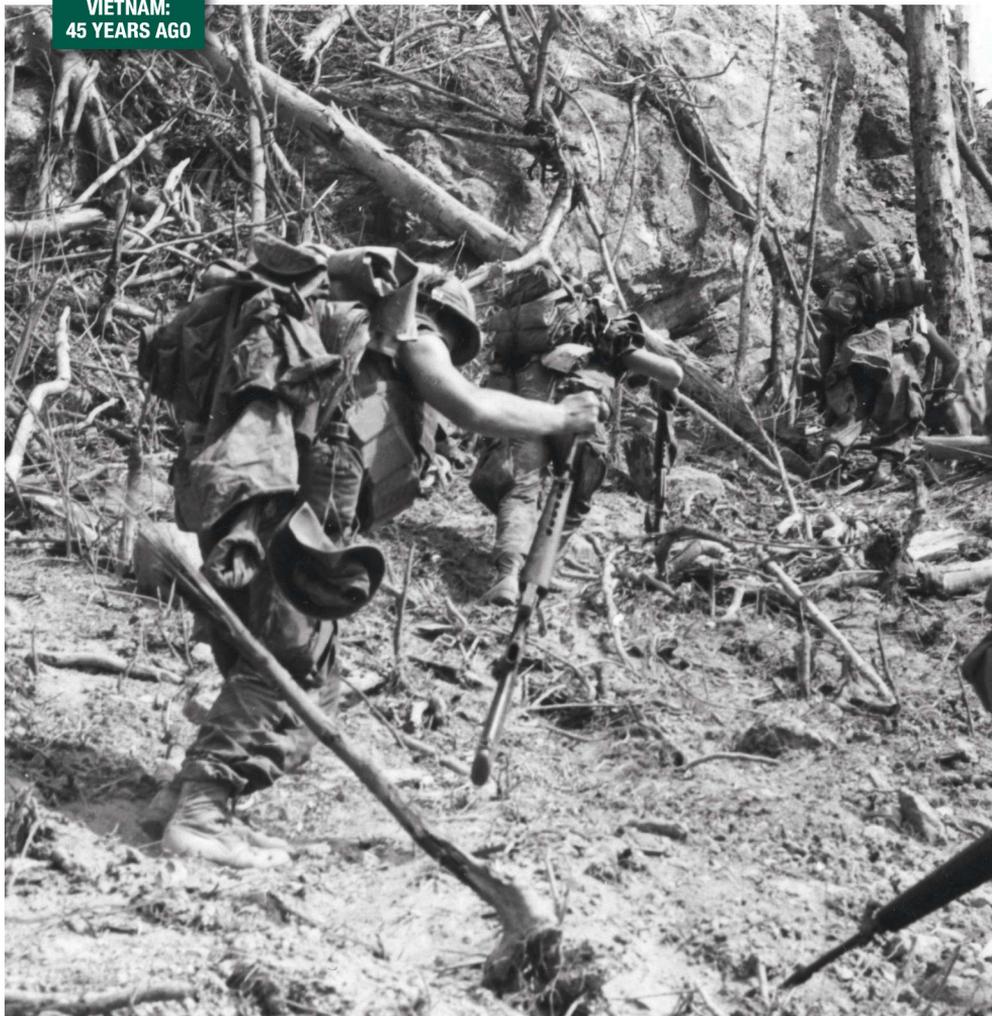
## Operation Dewey Canyon: Cleaning Up the A Shau Valley

Bevilacqua, Allan C. USMC

*Leatherneck*; Apr 2014; 97, 4; Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines

pg. 24

**VIETNAM:  
45 YEARS AGO**



# Operation Dewey Canyon

---

## Cleaning Up the A Shau Valley



Left: Leathernecks with 3d Bn, 9th Marines, 3dMarDiv move up the battle-scarred slope of Hill 1228, or "Tiger Mountain," in the northern A Shau Valley area on 20 Feb. 1969 during Operation Dewey Canyon.

Below: Leathernecks with 2/9 cross a stream on 20 Feb. 1969 during Operation Dewey Canyon. (Photo by LCpl Bill Carroll)



**T**he Marine division that Major General Raymond G. Davis assumed command of in May 1968 was scattered all over the landscape in a series of static positions called the McNamara Line, so named for its progenitor, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. MajGen Davis, known to his friends as "Ray" or "Razor Ray," already had two wars under his belt and wore the Medal of Honor for his valor and leadership as a battalion commander during the epic Chosin Reservoir campaign in Korea when he assumed command of Third Marine Division. A seasoned combat veteran and a man possessed of a soaring intellect, he was not the least bit pleased with the situation that greeted him when he took the helm.

MajGen Davis was quick to identify the fatal flaws of that situation, all of them stemming from the flaws in the McNamara Line itself. The intent of the McNamara Line was to block North Vietnamese infiltration through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), initiated to separate North Vietnam and South Vietnam following the withdrawal of French forces in 1954. But the DMZ and the McNamara Line both were little more than lines on a map, a map thousands of miles from the scene. Neither bore any relation to the facts of the military situation on the ground.

The practical effect of locking an entire

division of Marines in immobile static positions was to allow the enemy nearly unrestricted mobility and to cede the initiative to that enemy. The McNamara Line effectively allowed the North Vietnamese enemy free and unhindered use of three basic principles of war: the principles of the offensive, maneuver and surprise. While the enemy was free to initiate combat at a time and place of his choosing, the 3dMarDiv was shackled to what proved to be a series of useless fixed positions.

Underscoring the uselessness of those static positions was the fact that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) high command hadn't the slightest interest in slipping men through the DMZ in dribs and drabs. Why bother with anything that ineffectual when large units and massive amounts of supplies simply could skirt the line and be introduced into the key terrain feature of South Vietnam's five northern provinces—the A Shau Valley? The A Shau Valley was the geographic back door to South Vietnam's I Corps Tactical Zone (I Corps): the provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai.

Whoever owned the A Shau Valley could set the terms of battle. The old French road designated Route Provinciale 548 (RP 548), little more than an unimproved dirt road to begin with, wasn't much of a road at all after years of abandonment

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua,  
USMC (Ret)

Photos courtesy of Susan Strange

*"One of my first orders after I assumed command of the Third Marine Division was that the combat bases would be manned by company-sized units instead of battalions. Everyone else was expected to be in the field."*

—MajGen Raymond G. Davis, USMC  
CG, 3dMarDiv, 1968-69

CP1 G. MCCLOUD/PH



LPL E. HUBERT

Captured North Vietnamese weapons, including mortars and 12.7 mm antiaircraft machine guns, are inspected and inventoried by Marines with Co D, 1/9 on 27 Feb. 1969.

and disrepair. But it traversed the entire length of the valley, and to a 6x6 military vehicle and sufficient numbers of men with picks and shovels (and later with bulldozers and road graders), it wasn't an insurmountable challenge.

Another old French road (RP 547) led directly to the city of Hue. Americans would come to know those leftover roadways as simply Route 548 and Route 547. The NVA had used both to move division-size units to the attack on Hue during the Tet Offensive in January 1968.

At the south end of the valley, Route 548 spread tentaclelike to another network of old, long-out-of-use French roads that led to Quang Nam, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. Following the fall of the Special Forces post at the hamlet of A Shau village in 1966, the NVA had everything it needed to send large units of regular troops from the A Shau Valley into the coastal regions of I Corps where 90 percent of the population lived. From the A Shau Valley, the NVA could hit where it wanted when it wanted.

Still, ownership of the A Shau Valley, important as it was to the NVA, wasn't a guarantee of success. Even with control of key terrain and with soldiers who were first-class fighting men, the NVA had a nagging problem. That problem was the

NVA supply system. Once the battle began, the NVA could strike with pile-driver force. The logistics system, on the other hand, couldn't sustain that force. The NVA supply train could not follow the attack in the conventional manner. Once out in the open, that supply train was at the mercy of the punishment dished out by superior American firepower, a punishment it could not withstand.

The NVA response to that situation was to reverse the sequence of action. Rather than the supply system following the combat units in the conventional manner, the supply system would precede the combat units. The battlefield would be "seeded" with supplies built up surreptitiously in tactically important areas, base areas, from which combat units would strike with overwhelming force. While it was a highly unconventional tactic, it was a tactic that recognized the realities of the situation, designed by a leadership quick to analyze and deal with reality.

As the NVA leadership was able to identify the reversal of battlefield roles as a potentially decisive advantage, MajGen Davis, one of the keenest military minds of his or any other day, was quick to see the tactic as potentially crippling. The best fighting force in the world could not fight if its means of fighting were destroyed.

Deprive the enemy of the ability to fight by destroying his base areas. That, as MajGen Davis correctly saw it, was the key to the situation. It could be said that right about then Operation Dewey Canyon was born.

By late summer of 1968, MajGen Davis' concept of operations was paying off. Gone was the organizational jumble of units that had seen battalions of one infantry regiment assigned to the control of another regiment until the Division's Table of Organization looked like a Chinese crossword puzzle. Command-and-control relationships became clear, defined and direct. Companies, not battalions, manned the string of ineffective combat bases, while the bulk of the Division's combat power was out striking the enemy rather than sitting passively behind barbed wire waiting to be struck. For the NVA, the 3dMarDiv was no longer a passive target; it was a dangerous striking force. As events in Northern I Corps continued to develop, that would prove to be a fortunate bit of timing.

As summer gave way to autumn, and autumn in turn edged into the beginning of winter and the onset of the winter monsoon, a disturbing situation began to develop in the 3dMarDiv's zone of action. Increasing intelligence reports told of a

major NVA buildup in what had been designated Base Area 611. Located at the north end of the A Shau Valley in one of South Vietnam's most remote areas, a region of difficult and jungle-covered mountainous terrain, Base Area 611 sprawled over portions of far western Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces and into neighboring Laos.

The ever industrious NVA engineers had improved a series of trails into a major supply route designated by friendly intelligence as Route 922. Hard by the Vietnam/Laos border in the watershed of the Da Krong River, the roadway led directly from North Vietnam to a junction with Route 548 and access to the strategically important A Shau Valley. Every day and night, large truck convoys, as many as 1,000 vehicles a day, were using Route 922 to introduce massive amounts of supplies and numbers of men into Base Area 611. It required no great feat of mental gymnastics to conclude that the activity was in preparation for a major NVA offensive that would begin when the monsoon lifted.

MajGen Davis alerted his "mountain regiment," Colonel Robert H. "Bob" Barrow's Ninth Marine Regiment, to conduct what would be a spoiling attack to cut off that buildup before the NVA could stage its offensive. Originally designated Operation Dawson River South, the name shifted first to Operation Dewy Canyon, finally becoming Operation Dewey Canyon after that additional "e" somehow found its way into the spelling. Taking and holding ground was not to be Col Barrow's mission. The mission was to destroy the enemy's ability to fight. Stripped of the formal language of operation orders,

## Today in the A Shau

It's all very different now, 45 years later, along the Da Krong River and in the A Shau Valley. The route designated 922 that was hacked out of the jungle by NVA engineers, is a well-maintained all-weather, hard-surface highway. It crosses the Da Krong River on an impressive modern suspension bridge. There are guardrails where you would expect to find guardrails in North Carolina or Wyoming. Flanking the highway, there are electric power lines. What? Electricity in the Da Krong? Who could have imagined that in 1969?

And the old roads, Routes 548 and 547? Just like Route 922, those old roads are state-of-the-art paved highways. If you can read Vietnamese, the road signs along what was Route 548 will tell you that you are on Ho Chi Minh Road.

Along Route 547 from Hue, to where it ended at Route 548, there wasn't anything much beyond a long-abandoned French airstrip and a name: A Loui. There is no trace of the airstrip now. What there is is a fair-size town called A Loui. Most of the houses and stores are rather new and quite nice. Many of the houses have new cars in the driveways. There is a very smart-appearing store that carries a bright red sign advertising Coca-Cola. A convenience store?

People actually are living in the A Shau Valley, living in a place where in 1969 it might have cost you your life? They have electricity? They have running water? Who could have imagined that all those years ago?

It all makes 1969 seem like another lifetime. Maybe it was.

—Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

the mission of the 9th Marines could be expressed as "Go into Base Area 611 and tear the place apart."

Why not just bomb the place? That may have been a satisfactory option had the NVA command stacked those tons of supplies and thousands of men in one neat pile. The NVA had done no such convenient thing. All those supplies and all those men were dispersed in dozens of heavily camouflaged supply points and staging areas throughout the entirety of Base Area 611. If Base Area 611 were to be torn apart, it would be Marines on the ground who would have to do the tearing. That tearing would have to be done in an

area where no Americans ever had been.

Neither the terrain nor the weather would be nominal. Terrain in the objective area was mountainous, with elevations in excess of 1,600 meters commonplace. Vegetation ranged from areas of head-high elephant grass to more widespread triple-canopy jungle. Weather throughout the entire course of the operation was never good, with flying conditions varying between marginal and zero-zero. It was yet another situation, not uncommon to Marines over the years, where nature itself was as formidable an opponent as armed men in different uniforms.

In Col Bob Barrow, MajGen Davis had



Above: An NVA tracked prime mover, captured by infantrymen with 9th Marines in the A Shau Valley, helps provide temporary shelter for the leathernecks who stretched a poncho from its side.

Right: Capt Thomas F. Hinkel, upper left, examines a Russian-made artillery piece captured by leathernecks of 9th Marines during Operation Dewey Canyon.



just the right man to command the operation. A courtly Louisianan and a thorough gentleman, he was, as well, a two-fisted fighting man with few equals. Gentlemanly conduct and unflinching moral and physical courage were lifelong qualities. He had begun as an enlisted Marine, won a commission and learned his first lessons in war in China, fighting behind Japanese lines with Chinese guerrillas in World War II. His distinguished performance of duty and personal bravery as a company commander in Korea had brought him the Navy Cross. Barrow would later become 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps. Love of the Marine Corps, dedication to duty, and concern for the welfare of his Marines were permanent features of his personality.

Beyond those traits, Bob Barrow was possessed of a knife-sharp intellect and an uncommon measure of common sense. Under his guidance, the attack against Base Area 611 quickly took shape as a three-phase undertaking. In the first phase, the regiment and its direct support artillery battalion would move into position in the Area of Operations. During that phase, particular care would be given to establishing fire support bases (FSBs) that would ensure that the 9th Marines always would be under the fan of artillery support. Col Barrow's constant companion during that phase was his artillery com-

mander, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph "Joe" Scoppa, whose 2d Battalion, 12th Marines would provide artillery support.

Once the selected FSBs were manned and provisioned, the second phase of the operation, consisting of extensive and aggressive patrolling to develop the NVA positions, would begin. When the picture of the enemy posture had been developed fully, the third phase of the operation, a direct assault into Base Area 611 by all three of the regiment's infantry battalions, would be launched, and the "tearing apart" would begin. To be successful, the entire plan hinged upon constant close coordination of all supporting arms. That would be crucial.

Moving quickly, by mid-January three previously used FSBs—Henderson, Tun Tavern and Shiloh—were reopened, manned and operational. That set the stage for setting up three completely new FSBs—Razor, Erskine and Cunningham—that would have to be hacked out of virgin jungle-covered mountaintops, where trees measuring three or four feet in diameter were common. The job fell to inexperienced infantry Marines assisted by a sprinkling of combat engineers wielding chain saws and axes. Working under dismal conditions of near-constant rain, at elevations where nighttime temperatures dropped into the low 50s (it could get surprisingly cold in Vietnam), those inexper-

enced riflemen and experienced engineers, cold and soaking wet, got the job done.

Also getting the job done were Marine aviators, fixed-wing and helicopter, who flew close air support and resupply sorties in weather conditions that can only be described as atrocious. Day after day, aviation Marines put their own lives on the line for their brothers on the ground. More than one CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter had to "feel" its way into a mountaintop landing zone. The pilot barely could see through the enveloping clouds and rain almost until touchdown. One such "white knuckle" mission took a pre-fabricated, helicopter transportable forward aid station into FSB Cunningham almost before the chain saws had stopped buzzing.

By the end of January and early February 1969, the forward FSBs—Razor, Erskine and Cunningham—were operational, and extensive, aggressive patrolling was begun. The NVA, elements of the 5th and 6th regiments, the 65th Artillery Regt, and the 83d Engineer Regt, faced with a deadly threat to its means of fighting, struck back violently. Contact was frequent and ferocious. For the 9th Marines, it was proving productive as well.

On 25 Jan., a patrol from Company M, 3d Bn, 9th Marines uncovered a highly sophisticated four-strand telephone line mounted on up-to-date porcelain insulators affixed to trees and camouflaged against detection from ground or aerial observers. The line was left undisturbed. It was, however, tapped by Marine and Army communications intelligence personnel, who eavesdropped undetected on NVA communications throughout the operation.

Another heavily camouflaged installation, discovered close by the Da Krong River by Marines of Co F, 2/9, proved to be the site of the 88th NVA Field Hospital. Eight fully stocked permanent buildings, each capable of treating 150 casualties, yielded hundreds of pounds of medical supplies and equipment. That stock was evacuated by air to be turned over to South Vietnamese forces.

Through it all, weather conditions continued to be miserable. Vietnam is a place that hardly ever is thought of when the topic of cold weather arises. But it does get cold in Vietnam during the winter monsoon, wet and raw and bone-chilling cold. Constantly soaking wet from the incessant rain, mud covered and shivering, like other Marines before them in France, in the Pacific and in Korea, they tightened their belt buckles and "toughed it out."

LtCol George C. Fox, who commanded 2/9, talked of his Marines later: "I went out and talked to those young Marines as

**Marine aviation, including this CH-53 at FSB Razor, provided resupply, reinforcement and medical evacuation for the 9th Marines deep in the jungles during Operation Dewey Canyon.**



they came in, every last one of them. They were smiling and laughing. Their clothes were torn, in some cases completely torn off of them, but they were ready for a fight." France, the Pacific, Korea, Vietnam, wherever, Marines never seem to change all that much. It's just something that goes with being a Marine.

Intense as the fighting was, something was becoming apparent. More and more, the NVA was withdrawing into the privileged sanctuary of Laos. From the very beginning, the North Vietnamese leadership in Hanoi had considered the entirety of what had once been French Indochina, the states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, to be the battlefield. In Washington, D.C., thousands of miles away, for political reasons—good or bad—the decision had been made to confine American ground forces to South Vietnam. IncurSION into neighboring Laos or Cambodia was forbidden.

That was a situation made to order for the NVA. If pressed and hammered too hard, the NVA simply could step across the border into Laos and enjoy an undisturbed breathing spell. The Americans, in this case Bob Barrow's 9th Marines, only could sit, handcuffed on the Vietnamese side of the border.

There was an exception to the restriction. If American forces in Vietnam were taken under fire by NVA elements across the border in Laos, permission could be granted to cross into Laos for the purpose of eliminating the threat. By late February, elements of the 9th Marines were taking fire from NVA units in Laos. That was reason enough for Bob Barrow, who promptly requested permission to cross the border. The only American official with authority to grant such a request was General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., U.S. Army, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV). Before the request could work its way upward, events on the ground set their own faster pace.

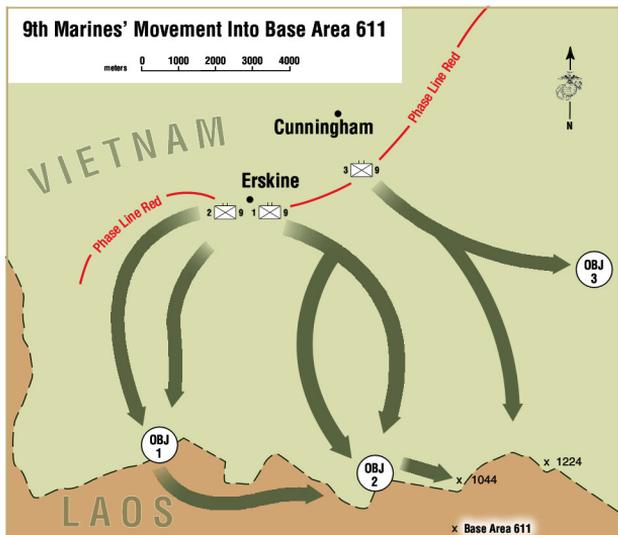
In an all-out delaying action to buy time for units withdrawing into Laos, the NVA launched a series of attacks against Marine bases and units in the field. In the middle and last weeks of February, a major NVA unit poised to attack FSB Erskine was beaten to the punch and left with heavy casualties after being surprised by LtCol Smith's 1/9. In a well-planned, well-coordinated attack on FSB Cunningham, NVA sappers penetrated the perimeter before being driven out, which did nothing to prevent the "cannoncookers" of 2d Bn, 12th Marines from laying almost 3,400 rounds of high-explosive rounds on targets of opportunity.

Some of the heaviest fighting of Opera-



UPI, L.E. HILBRETH

"Alpha" Co Marines dig up and destroy NVA weapons at the base of Hill 1044 on 27 Feb. 1969, as their company commander, then-1stLt Wesley L. Fox, reports in to higher headquarters.



JASON MONROE



**Now a retired colonel, Wesley L. Fox, commanding officer of Alpha Co, 1/9, earned the Medal of Honor during Operation Dewey Canyon. (Read more in his memoir, "Marine Rifleman," and his "Essential Elements of Leadership.")**

tion Dewey Canyon took place in the center of the 9th Marines' zone of action practically on the Vietnam/Laos border, when First Lieutenant Wesley L. "Wes" Fox's Co A, 1/9 tangled with what proved to be an entire NVA battalion. In an all-day slugfest, despite suffering heavy casualties, Wes Fox's Marines proved to be more than a match for everything thrown at them.

While all that was going on and by the time authority to enter Laos came back down the chain of command, 2d Bn, 9th Marines was, in fact, in Laos "tearing Base Area 611 apart." The NVA fought, but could not check the battalion from uncovering enough equipment and supplies "to fight a pretty good size revolution," as one Marine put it. The battalion had permission to enter Laos, but not permission to stay in Laos. In the short time the battalion was permitted to remain in the Laotian portions of Base Area 611, the haul of captured or destroyed material was staggering.

A round dozen 122 mm guns, Soviet models, along with an additional four 85 mm guns, tracked prime movers and ammunition carriers were seized. Hundreds of tons of ammunition of all calibers were uncovered and destroyed, along with thousands of gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel. More than 200,000 pounds

The President of the United States in the name of The Congress takes pleasure in presenting the MEDAL OF HONOR to

CAPTAIN WESLEY L. FOX  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as Commanding Officer of Company A, First Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division, in action against the enemy in the northern A Shau Valley, Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam, on 22 February 1969. Captain (then First Lieutenant) Fox's company came under intense fire from a large well-concealed enemy force. Captain Fox maneuvered to a position from which he could assess the situation and confer with his platoon leaders. As they departed to execute the plan he had devised, the enemy attacked and Captain Fox was wounded along with all of the other members of the command group, except the executive officer. Captain Fox continued to direct the activity of his company. Advancing through heavy enemy fire, he personally neutralized one enemy position and calmly ordered an assault against the hostile emplacements. He then moved through the hazardous area coordinating aircraft support with the activities of his men. When his executive officer was mortally wounded, Captain Fox reorganized the company and directed the fire of his men as they hurled grenades against the enemy and drove the hostile forces into retreat. Wounded again in the final assault, Captain Fox refused medical attention, established a defensive posture, and supervised the preparation of casualties for medical evacuation. His indomitable courage, inspiring initiative, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of grave personal danger inspired his Marines to such aggressive actions that they overcame all enemy resistance and destroyed a large bunker complex. Captain Fox's heroic actions reflect great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps, and uphold the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

of rice were evacuated for distribution to Vietnamese civilians. Among the haul were several dozen antiaircraft guns and an impressive number of new Soviet military trucks. Base Area 611 would be out of business for some time.

There would be no major NVA offensive through the A Shau Valley along Routes 548 and 547 to Hue, severing South Vietnam's two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien. The means were no longer there. As far as Base Area 611 was concerned, the cupboard was bare.

Four Marines would be awarded the Medal of Honor for courageous actions during Operation Dewey Canyon. Three of those Marines, Lance Corporal Thomas P. Noonan Jr., Corporal William D. Morgan and Private First Class Alfred M. Wilson, would die, unhesitatingly risking their own lives to protect their fellow Marines. Only 1stLt Wesley L. Fox, who continued to lead his company in spite of painful wounds, would live to wear the blue ribbon bearing the white stars and eventually retire as a colonel of Marines.

*Author's note: Thomas Noonan's lifelong friend, Robert E. O'Malley, was*

*the first Marine to earn the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War. Friends from childhood, Noonan and O'Malley went to school and church together and played sports together. Following Thomas Noonan's death, Robert O'Malley spent time every Memorial Day with his friend's mother for as long as she lived.*

*Editor's note: To learn more about the close friendship of Thomas Noonan and Robert E. O'Malley, read "Bobby and Tommy: Two Boyhood Friends—Two Medals of Honor" by LtCol Otto J. Lehrack, USMC (Ret) in the July 2008 Leatherneck. You can find it in our digitized, searchable archives at [www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck](http://www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck).*

*Susan Strange is a freelance researcher with a strong interest in Marine Corps history. She spends quite a bit of time at the National Archives and Records Administration. Should you need research assistance, contact Susan at P.O. Box 7165, McLean, VA 22106, or e-mail her at [susanstrange@mac.com](mailto:susanstrange@mac.com).*

*Author's bio: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*



**Leatherneck—On the Web**

See more Dewey Canyon photographs at [www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/deweycanyon](http://www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/deweycanyon)