

The Battle of Dai Do and Marine Corps Force Design 2030

Looking at future operating concepts through the lens of past battles

by MajGen James Livingston (Ret) & Col Jay Vargas (Ret)

“For those who fight for it, life has a flavor the sheltered will never know.” This quote, often attributed

to Theodore Roosevelt, was reportedly posted on a handmade sign at the Khe Sanh Marine Base, Vietnam in 1968.

Battles may be shaped deep, but they are decided up close. The two Marine Corps operational concepts most touted today as visionary (*Force Design 2030* and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations) are almost exclusively focused on long-range, precision rockets and missiles to win future battles. Marine infantry and the close and rear battles are virtually ignored.

The neglect of the close and rear battles is baffling for anyone who knows and appreciates Marine Corps history. The dogma that long-range, precision rockets and missiles can win future battles by themselves is even more perplexing. The conviction that Marines need only watch computer screens and push buttons to dominate the enemy, while appealing to some, will not survive first contact. It is an illusion based on a fundamental misunderstanding of warfighting. It is dangerous.

The emphasis on long-range, precision rockets and missiles and new organizations, such as Marine Littoral Regiments and Stand-in Forces, to win future battles has stripped Marine infantry of the armor and cannon artillery needed to win the close and rear fight. *Force Design 2030 (FD 2030)* and the *FD 2030 Annual Update* of May 2022 are leaving Marine infantry dangerously

>MajGen Livingston is a career Infantry Officer. He was awarded the Medal of Honor while serving as the Commanding Officer, Company E, 2/4 Mar during the Battle of Dai Do.

>>Col Vargas is a career Infantry Officer. He was awarded the Medal of Honor while serving as the Commanding Officer, Company G, 2/4 Mar during the Battle of Dai Do.

exposed. With apparently little or no appreciation for close combat, Marine Corps leadership has jettisoned all tanks and emasculated direct support cannon artillery. Plans are also underway to deactivate two attack helicopter squadrons and two amphibious assault companies and cut the number of fixed wing aircraft. If this was not bad enough, three infantry battalions and an infantry regimental headquarters have already been deactivated and the number of Marines in the remaining infantry battalions are being reduced. The toolbox of Marine Corps capabilities needed to support Marine infantry in the close and rear battles is being dangerously emptied to self-fund new operational concepts that are experimental and lack proper validation.

Unless you have experienced prolonged close combat against a significantly larger and determined enemy, at times hand-to-hand and under almost constant artillery and mortar fire, you may wrongly assume that Marine infantry can fight and win without the help of robust and immediately available supporting arms. Long-range rockets and missiles are not substitutes for strong infantry battalions, sufficient

cannon artillery, attack helicopters, and armor, capabilities that are essential to enable and sustain the close and rear fight.

Those of us who have fought a determined, much larger, and superbly equipped enemy have a deep, special, and abiding appreciation for artillery, close air, naval gunfire, and armor. But more than anything else, we have the undying admiration and respect for Marine infantry, whose fighting spirit, bravery, and tenacity are a natural treasure. We know all this from experience.

For three days (30 April, 1 May, and 2 May) in 1968, 2/4 Mar, the “Magnificent Bastards,” fought one of the fiercest, hotly contested but little-known battles of the Vietnam War. The battle was fought to keep 3rd MarDiv headquarters in northern Quang Tri Province from being overrun. Outnumbered six-to-one or more at times, the Magnificent Bastards, fewer than 1,000 Marines, crippled three full regiments of the North Vietnamese 320th Division (estimated at 6,000-10,000 regular North Vietnamese [NVA] soldiers) during the Battle of Dai Do, sometimes known as the Battle of Dong Ha. The Marines ultimately prevailed, but after

suffering casualties so significant that most of the battalion's four companies (Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, and Hotel) were reduced to fewer than 50 men per company. Those of us fortunate enough to survive owe our lives to our fellow Marines and to supporting arms.

Fighting began on 30 April and would rage until the NVA were finally forced to withdraw across the Demilitarized Zone. The fighting on April 30 centered on the villages of Dai Do and Dong Xuan, during which the Marines of Capt James Butler's Foxtrot Company and Capt James Williams' Hotel Company were repeatedly exposed to heavy machinegun, rocket, mortar, and long-range artillery fire. Reinforced with Marine armor and strongly supported by Marine air and artillery, the Marines of Hotel Company, under the cover of white phosphorus and colored smoke fired by Marine artillery, crawled across 500 meters of open ground before attacking and securing Dong Xuan at 3 p.m. that afternoon.

The Marines of Foxtrot Company attacked to secure Dai Do but were stopped about 300 meters short of the hamlet when the company came under increasingly accurate recoilless rifle, mortar, and machinegun fire from NVA soldiers strongly entrenched in a well-fortified bunker complex and from enemy long-range artillery fire.

That night both companies consolidated their positions at Dong Xuan so they would have only one perimeter to defend. Earlier that day, Capt Jay Vargas' Golf Company had attempted to reinforce Butler outside Dai Do, but the operation had to be called off when the NVA attacked the landing zone. Later that afternoon, the Marines of Bravo Company of 1/3 Mar conducted a supporting attack into nearby and heavily defended An Lac/Xi hamlet. Encountering heavy recoilless rifle, machinegun, and mortar fire, the company was only able to secure about half the village before the attack stalled when the commanding officer was killed.

Throughout the day, the Marines made skillful use of air, artillery, and naval gunfire, keeping the enemy pinned down and preventing the NVA from gaining a decisive advantage.

Fighting resumed on 1 May when Golf Company, reinforced with two tanks, moved through An Lac/Xi and attacked Dai Do from the south. Fighting was fierce. As the Marines moved forward, they came under increasingly intense enemy mortar, rocket, and artillery fire. NVA soldiers were firmly entrenched and determined to stop the advance. At times, fighting was hand-to-hand. The Marines were forced to clear heavily defended and mutually supporting bunkers, destroying them one by one. The attack would have stalled numerous times had it not been for the courage and indomitable fighting spirit of Marine infantry and the close and continuous support of Marine artillery and naval gunfire.

By 2 p.m., after suffering heavy losses, Golf Company reached the northern end of Dai Do. Almost immediately, the NVA launched a series of fierce counterattacks from the north, south, and west, forcing Capt Vargas to move his seriously depleted company to just outside the eastern edge of the hamlet, where the Marines established a strong defensive perimeter. The enemy probed Vargas' lines all night, but the Marines, heavily supported by continuous artillery fires, held firm. Both Foxtrot Company at Dong Xuan and Bravo Company B in An Lac/Xi had attempted to reinforce Golf Company, but enemy fire was so overwhelming that the Marines were forced to return to their original positions.

Throughout the day, the Marines had repeatedly and skillfully used close air, artillery, and naval gunfire to support their attacks and to keep from being overrun.

Just prior to daylight on 2 May, Capt Jim Livingston ordered the Marines of his Echo Company to fix bayonets (as much to arouse their martial ardor as to give them an advantage in the expected hand-to-hand fighting), attack Dai Do, and relieve Golf Company. Livingston's men immediately came under heavy enemy machine gun and mortar fire but continued to push ahead. The fighting intensified. Supported by artillery, close air, and naval gunfire, Livingston's men destroyed over 100 mutually supporting bunkers, forcing the enemy to

begin evacuating that part of the hamlet. During the fighting, Marines used grenades, white phosphorus, light anti-armor weapons, satchel charges, and flamethrowers to destroy and demoralize the NVA soldiers. Bayonets, knives, and fists also played an important role.

Attacking simultaneously with Echo Company, the Marines of Golf Company encountered well entrenched and heavily defended enemy positions in southern Dai Do. Like Livingston's men, Vargas' Marines rooted the enemy from the mutually supporting bunkers, often in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. By 9:30 a.m. Livingston's and Vargas' Marines had secured Dai Do. The Magnificent Bastards now turned their attention to the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do.

At 1 p.m. 1stLt Scotty Prescott, who had earlier assumed command of Hotel Company when Capt Williams was severely wounded and medevaced, led his Marines around the left flank of Livingston and attacked toward Dinh To. Before reaching the village, Prescott's Marines came under heavy enemy fire which stalled the advance. The company was greatly outnumbered and pinned down by machinegun and mortar fire. Realizing their advantage, the NVA launched a battalion-size counterattack, resulting in furious fighting, at times hand-to-hand. 1stLt Prescott notified the battalion commander, LtCol Bill Weise, that he was surrounded and in danger of being overrun. Without waiting for orders, Capt Livingston, down to about 30 Marines, immediately moved his depleted company to Prescott's support. Fierce fighting erupted but the company pushed on until joining forces with the beleaguered men of Hotel Company. But before Livingston's men had arrived, 1stLt Prescott was severely wounded and 2ndLt Vic Taylor assumed command of the company.

The combined companies continued the attack, driving through the NVA forces to their front. Taylor later described the fighting: "It dwarfed the fighting that had gone before in intensity and volume. I recall seeing banana trees and the masonry walls of a hooch cut down by the NVA automatic weapons fire. The bushes to our front seemed

to be alive with heavily camouflaged NVA soldiers.” During the fighting, which at times involved bayonets, rifle butts, and bare hands, Capt Livingston was severely wounded. Unable to stand and realizing that his and Taylor’s companies were too depleted to continue the attack, Capt Livingston suggested to LtCol Weise that they pull back. Weise agreed and ordered them back to Dai Do. Marine air and artillery covered their withdrawal by laying down a solid wall of fire, preventing the NVA from encircling and isolating the Marines as they withdrew under fire.

At 4 p.m., Vargas’ Golf Company (now down to 40 men) and Butler’s Foxtrot Company (now down to 80 men) began a two-pronged attack to clear Dinh To and then Thuong Do. Encountering little resistance, Golf Company, in the lead, attacked through Dinh To and headed toward Thuong Do. Upon reaching the outskirts of the village, the company came under intense enemy fire from across a small stream.

Meanwhile, Butler’s men were advancing slightly farther east when they came under heavy machinegun, mortar, and artillery fire. The Marines, unable to advance, were widely separated from Vargas’ seriously depleted company. Taking advantage of the situation, a large force of NVA soldiers maneuvered between the two companies and fiercely counterattacked Vargas’ men at Thuong Do. Supported by an intense barrage of artillery fire, the Marines fought gallantly before eventually withdrawing to link up with Butler’s men. The remnants of both companies withdrew to Dinh To and then to Dai Do.

The overwhelming artillery support (which at times had been called in as “danger close” and at other times as fire missions almost on top of the Marines) had been crucial. Marine artillery had pounded the NVA continuously for much of the afternoon and late into the night, enabling Vargas’ and Butler’s men to survive and inflict devastating casualties on the NVA soldiers in their immediate front.

On the morning of 3 May, the Magnificent Bastards were relieved by the Marines of 1/3 Mar, who swept through

Dinh To and Thuong Do with no resistance. The NVA had moved out of the area.

Three days of almost continuous fighting had greatly depleted the battalion’s ranks. Casualties were high on both sides, especially for the NVA. No one will ever know the NVA’s exact losses, but Vic Taylor vividly remembers various conversations he had several years after the battle with now retired MajGen Dennis Murphy about enemy casualties. Murphy’s recollections probably provide the most accurate information about the number of NVA killed in action. According to Vic, Murphy (who was the S-3 Operations Officer for the 3rd Mar during the battle) told him several times that in the days after 3 May, the dead NVA soldiers left on the field were recovered, placed in groups of 25, and meticulously counted. The total was 2,653.

The Magnificent Bastards also paid a terrible price. We mourned the loss of 81 of our brothers-in-arms, who had been killed in action. An additional 297 had been medevaced due to the severity of their injuries; 176 more had been wounded but not severely enough to require evacuation.

Taylor also remembers the carnage and wreckage still on the battlefield after the fighting had stopped. Around noon on 3 May, he was among a group of Marines sent to recover any dead Marines or corpsmen not already recovered. Vic recalls finding one Marine “that had obviously been wounded, captured, bound with comm wire and later executed.” He also remembers finding another dead Marine “with the bayonet of his empty rifle buried to the hilt in the chest of a NVA gunner.” And he recollects walking past hundreds of enemy KIAs and seeing “many blood trails leading off in the direction of their retreat.”

The Marines of 2/4 Mar had kept the NVA from overrunning the 3rd Mar Div Division headquarters at Dong Ha and from taking control of the Bo Dieu and Cua Viet Rivers, which would have cut the supply routes to all Marine bases near the Demilitarized Zone. The battalion’s tactical victory had prevented a strategic defeat.

In 1989, LtGen Weise (then a retired brigadier general) interviewed retired LtGen Tran Van Quan, who had commanded the NVA forces at Dai Do. During the interview, Quan told Weise that artillery had done more damage to his forces than small arms or air.

None of us would have survived the fighting in and around Dai Do without the unshakable leadership of the officers, staff noncommissioned officers, and noncommissioned officers; or more importantly, without the magnificent courage, performance, and tenacity of the individual Marines, who were fighting against great odds; and finally, without the close, continuous, and accurate support provided by artillery, helicopter gunships, fixed wing aviation, and naval gunfire. Marine tanks, though limited in number, were also important. Additional tanks would have helped immensely.

Close combat is no less important to winning future battles than past battles. But Marine infantry cannot be expected to fight and win with one hand tied behind its back. The jettisoning of all tanks, the deactivation of three infantry battalions, the gutting of direct support cannon artillery, and the loss of two attack helicopter squadrons, all to self-fund new experimental capabilities, is unwise and dangerous. *FD 2030* and the *FD 2030 Annual Update* are leaving Marine infantry vulnerable and dangerously isolated, stripped of the support needed to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy. Battles won in the past, such as Dai Do, will likely be lost in the future. Simply stated, we do not believe the Magnificent Bastards could win the Battle of Dai Do today, given the significant cuts in essential force structure and supporting arms. Even more damaging is the fact that we are unnecessarily and foolishly risking the lives and limbs of our most precious asset, the individual Marine.

