

**Recollections of the Blue Dragons:
Those Incredible Young Men from the Land of the Morning Calm**

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1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, Republic of Vietnam, 1966-68

Abstract

The United States Marine Corps' 1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, (ANGLICO) supported the U.S. Army and allied units in the Republic of Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. In the summer of 1966, ten officers and 75 enlisted Marines were assigned to the 2nd Republic of Korea Marine Corps Brigade. This paper recounts my tour of duty as a tactical air controller with the brigade's 1st Battalion from 1966 to 1968. I rotated among the battalion's three companies and reconnaissance platoon, directing air strikes, coordinating helicopter resupply and arranging medical evacuations. My responsibilities allowed me to work alongside the company commander and fire support coordinator; my rank enabled me to interact with the company's noncommissioned officers and enlisted Marines. Together we fought the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in nameless rice paddies and jungle choked heights, forging a legend that would define the fighting spirit that has become synonymous with the reputation and respect earned by Korea's magnificent Marines. Throughout my association with the Blue Dragon Brigade, I have always been impressed with the leadership, training and discipline infused at every level of command. Employing two incidents of mortal combat as a vehicle to demonstrate these attributes, I attempt to convey the admiration and respect I hold for my brother Marines from the Land of the Morning Calm.

Keywords: Republic of Korea, Republic of Vietnam, United States, Marine Corps, 1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, 2nd ROK Marine Brigade, Blue Dragons, Brotherhood, Discipline, Leadership, Marines, Training

“For he today that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother.”

Henry V
William Shakespeare

Introduction

I served with the 1st Battalion, 2nd ROK Marine Corps Brigade from August 1966 to April 1968. This paper describes my arrival in Vietnam, observations of the Korean Marines, and the 3rd Battalion's actions during January and February 1967. Reinforced by the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) sought to destroy the ROK Marines defending the critical air and supply base at Chu Lai. In separate battles in a nondescript rice paddy and an outpost near Tra Binh Dong, the Korean Marines would turn back the assault. The Battle of Tra Binh was the most acclaimed battle fought by South Korean forces during the war.

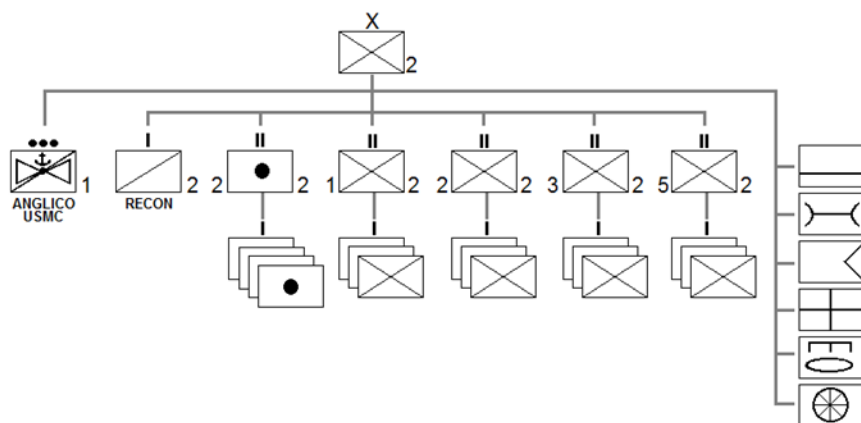
ANGLICO in Korea and Vietnam

ANGLICO Marines have a special relationship with Korea and the ROK Marines. Established in December 1949 as part of the Signals Battalions in 1st and 2nd U.S. Marine Divisions, ANGLICO teams quickly deployed to Korea where they supported U.S. Army and ROK Marine Corps units. ANGLICO Marines fought at war's most acclaimed battles, including the *Jangjin* (Chosin) Reservoir, Mount *Dosol*, the Punchbowl, and Heartbreak Ridge. In March 1951, 1st ANGLICO was established as the first of four "numbered" ANGLICOs. The company was under the operational control of the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific.¹

Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO was activated in May 1965 to coordinate close air and naval gunfire support to U.S. Army and allied units serving in the Republic of Vietnam. Operating in all tactical zones, Sub Unit One supported South Vietnamese Army and Marine units, South Korean Army and Marine units, the Australian Army, New Zealand Navy, as well as U.S. Army divisions.² The Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MAC-V) assumed control of Sub-Unit One in September 1966, making ANGLICO the only Marine Corps unit reporting directly to MAC-V.

ANGLICO had a special relationship with the 2nd ROK Marine Brigade. When the Blue Dragon Brigade arrived in Vietnam it was structured as reinforced infantry regiment with three infantry battalions supported by an artillery battalion. In 1968, the brigade added a fourth infantry battalion, further enhancing an already impressive field force. Strictly, an affair for mud Marines, the brigade had neither aircraft nor armored vehicles. Figure 1 depicts the brigade's organization from its arrival to 1968:

Figure 1: 2nd ROK Marine Brigade



Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.

Because the brigade lacked organic aviation assets, ANGLICO Marines were the critical link to coordinating close air support, medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), and resupply. The Brigade Air Naval Gunfire Platoon coordinated air support for the brigade headquarters and its three infantry battalions. Ten officers and 75 enlisted Marines were assigned to the platoon in the summer of 1966 and served with the ROK Marines until the brigade returned to Korea in February 1972.

The two enlisted Marine radio operators assigned to each company were the critical link between the supported and supporting units; i.e., the infantry company and helicopters or attack aircraft that supplied, transported, evacuated or provided fire support. One Marine operated the PRC-25 radio, while the second provided cover or marked the landing zone. Radio operators worked alongside the company commander and fire support coordinator. U.S. Marines typically rotated among the battalion's three companies or outposts, staying with each company for three to four weeks. During this time, ANGLICO Marines accompanied the ROK Marines on week-long patrols or remained within heavily fortified positions. While my responsibilities required me to work closely with the officers, my rank enabled me to interact with the company's noncommissioned officers (NCO) and enlisted Marines. Living, fighting, and dying alongside one another gave ANGLICO Marines a perspective

and respect for their ROK Marine brethren that is unique among the Americans who served in Vietnam.

Discipline and Training

Individually, the average ROK Marine walked onto the battlefield well prepared to carry out his assignment in whatever capacity he performed. South Korean Marines serving in Vietnam during the early years used World War II vintage M-1 rifles. Although a formidable weapon in its day, the venerable Garand proved a poor match for the firepower of Soviet-made AK-47 Kalashnikov automatic rifles. Training and discipline however, more than compensated for the deficiencies of issued weapons. Not only were Blue Dragons well led and trained to a razor's edge, the average ROK Marine was infused with discipline that I have never observed in any other military organization.

Living and serving next to a North Korean government determined to undermine and destroy South Korea's military no doubt the virtues of discipline and preparedness. In the ROK armed forces' culture of absolute discipline, the ROK Marines stood out nonetheless. Such discipline as established in the ROK Marine Corps might have fomented grounds for mass desertion in the armies of ancient Sparta.

Early one morning I observed a company personnel inspection unlike any other in my experience. As the company commander examined a Marine's weapon, he suddenly turned to his platoon leader noticeably irate, shoving the rifle in the junior officer's face. Screaming at the top of his voice, he pointed to a spot on the receiver, slapped the lieutenant, pointed back to the rifle, and slapped him again. After thrusting the rifle into the platoon commander's chest, the captain stormed away at a brisk pace, still screaming a steady tirade of impending consequences. The lieutenant stared intently at his commander's back, seeking refuge from this embarrassment. Enduring a dress down in front of the troops affronted his honor and injured his pride.

Once the captain cleared the formation, a squad leader ran up to the lieutenant, snapped to attention anticipating what he knew would not be a pleasant experience. Bringing his face within inches of the NCO, he raised rifle between them at eye level without a word spoken. The officer pointed to the rifle and waited for response while both men remained motionless, staring at the telltale aberration for several seconds. Just as the sergeant opened his mouth to suggest an explanation, the lieutenant flung the weapon high above the NCO's head, and when the sergeant extended his

arms to catch it, the officer drove a hard right fist forcefully into his gut. Without flinching, the sergeant caught the rifle in one hand smartly maneuvering the weapon to port arms. The silent staring contest resumed at full intensity until the officer walked away.

Dropping his right foot back one pace concurrently rising one inch on the balls of his feet, the sergeant executed a perfect about-face pivot. Snapping his left foot forward, the NCO completed the maneuver bringing both heels together with a distinct click. He was now face to face with the unfortunate Marine who owned the weapon still grasped in his hands. If looks could kill, there would have been no survivors within a thousand yards.

In all this time the rest of the Marines in the platoon remained standing at rigid attention. Every eyeball in the formation strained for a side-glance look at the drama unfolding. Once again, the ritual of reviewing the offending discrepancy was repeated, this time with a lot more animation. The NCO commanded, "*Kkolabaga!*" The private quickly placed his forehead on the ground, balancing his weight between his head and his feet. For minor misconduct, offenders would be required to remain in this uncomfortable position for several minutes.³ For this infraction, the NCO beat the private's legs with the offending rifle.

Exact standards and strict discipline defined the ROK Marine Corps. No Marine was immune from this rigorous code of ethics that existed across all ranks and solidified the chain of command. Every Marine knew the drill and carried out his orders without question or reservation, binding any ROK Marine unit together into an unbreakable chain void of weak links.

Absolute discipline paid dividends on the battlefield when combined with the bonds the South Korean Marines had for one another. In the course of any firefight, large or small, men would gravitate to the spot where fighting was fiercest. In several instances, injured or dead Marines lay beyond the front line. The ROK Marines would fight like demons to save a wounded comrade or retrieve a Marine's body. When the time looked right, several Marines, observing a time-honored tactic, laid down a blistering base of fire while one or two Marines darted into harm's way to drag, carry or manhandle a buddy to safety. It made no difference if one or two Marines was injured or killed in the attempt. The next man in line stepped up and, without hesitation, assumed the mission when it was his turn. In spite of understandable fear and trepidation, he remained still;

discipline and training would not allow him to shrink from the grim task at hand.

The Paddy Fight⁴

As determined and concerned as the ROK Marines were for the safety of their fellow Marines, the enemy is just as dedicated to their demise. These conflicting wills collided on January 10, 1967. The ROK Marines' training and discipline would be tested on a miserable rainy day in an isolated rice paddy in Quang Ngai Province.

Early that morning, the 3rd Battalion commander and his staff completed a week-long operation with the 9th Company. Lieutenant Colonel Cho Hyeong-nam, 30 headquarters staff, ANGLICO Marines and two security platoons departed the 9th Company's outpost near the village of Tra Binh Bac for the battalion headquarters. An hour into march, the Marines followed the contour of a large hill to an irregularly-shaped rice paddy bordered on three sides by thick tree lines. Two large hills on the east and west bracketed the paddy, creating a miniature valley that opened into a much larger rice field. The column entered the paddy from elevated ground, following a footpath sitting atop a wide dike that skirted around the western perimeter of an oval shaped knoll shielding a larger rice paddy on the other end.

When the point squad reached the midpoint of the paddy, a furious exchange of rifle fire exploded from the forward most fire team. Sergeant Gi Sae-chang's fire team came face to face with a dozen or so North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. The North Vietnamese, who had recently received AK-47 Kalishnikov assault rifles, easily outgunned the South Koreans, who were armed with the venerable M-1 Garand carbine. Thinking they were facing the Viet Cong, 2nd Lieutenant Kim Jin-chul ordered his platoon to pursue the attackers. Quiet returned to the landscape for a few seconds until the flanking squads moved into the paddy to cut off escape routes. In unison, both tree lines ignited in a calamitous roar of gunfire. Four Koreans in the forward most position became casualties within seconds, as NVA from entrenched positions engulfed the entire paddy in a rain of steel.

Other Marines along the column caught fell at random, as did members of the flanking squad in the paddy. Men on point and in the middle of the column returned fire, while rear elements hustled forward to close ranks with those further in the paddy; casualties mounted with every step.

As if the horrific volume of small arms fire was not enough, mortar detonations started churning up the paddies, flinging mud and rice stalks in every direction. Even the rain was now coming down harder than it had all morning, prompting millions of splashes of such infinite variety, that it was not possible to distinguish bullet strikes from raindrops.

Exposed in an open rice paddy completely void of cover, the Marines frantically sought the only available protection afforded by the wide dike. Once situated, they began firing at both tree lines while individual Marines rushed forward, pulling the dead and wounded out of the enemy's murderous fields of fire. Injured Marines drawn out of danger were left to care for themselves until a corpsman could reach them. Every rifle was needed to answer incoming bedlam.

Exposing himself for a better view, Captain Kang Shin-ho, the forward observer was cut down while adjusting artillery fire on the tree line. Because he was approximately 30 feet in front of the dike, his body was not visible above the water line. No one could locate the forward observer or the radio strapped on his back. The loss of the radio severed all communication links to the supporting artillery as no one alive in the rice paddy knew the battalion artillery's radio frequency. Not knowing Captain Kang's fate, the battalion commander was heard shouting over the din for artillery, but there was no one to answer.

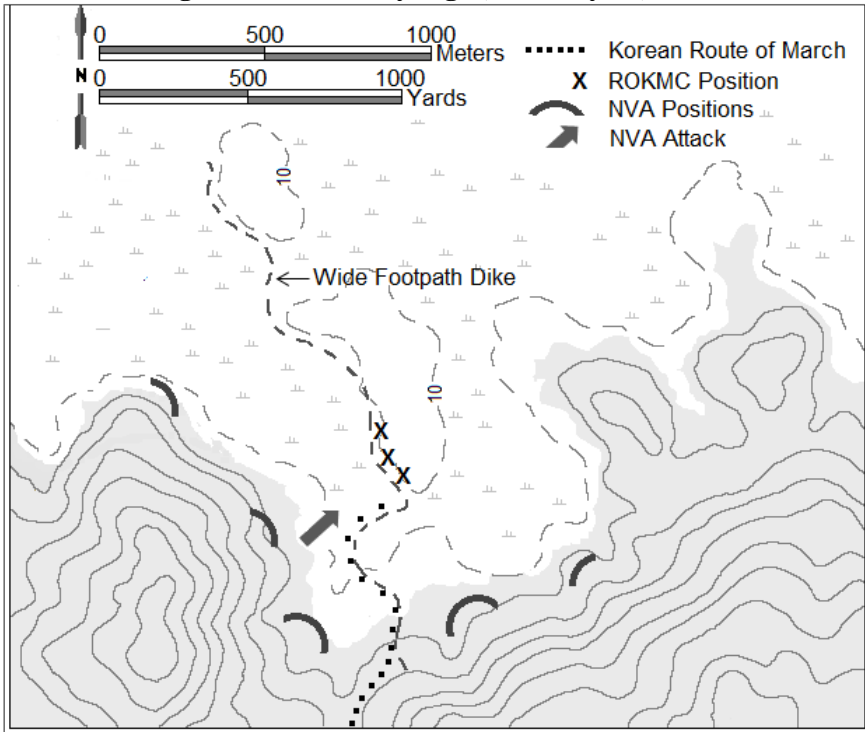
Mounting problems plagued the defenders as almost every other field radio in the column was quickly put out of action, submerged on the back of the man carrying it. Captain Cho Kyung-shik, the Assistant Operations Officer, killed enemy soldiers approaching the rear of the column with his pistol, the only weapon carried by most of the headquarters staff. Mortally wounded in both shoulders, he destroyed the classified orders and maps before expiring.⁵

When word of the disaster reached the 9th Company, a reinforced platoon assembled to mount a rescue mission for the beleaguered Marines desperately trapped in the crossfire ambush. Tracing the route of the headquarters party, the Koreans moved out downhill on an eastward heading toward the Marines trapped in the paddy. Mindful of the oft-used tactic of pinning down a small unit in hopes of drawing the rescue elements into an ambush, the reaction force proceeded as fast as it possible under the conditions.

Back at the paddy, seeing anything through blinding sheets of rain was almost impossible. With the deluge proving just as effective as a smoke screen, no one noticed exactly when, but an assault from the northwest

materialized as a platoon-sized group of NVA soldiers suddenly appeared at close range. The Korean Marines along the dike responded immediately, sending several North Vietnamese face first into the paddy, stalling the assault, and causing some confusion among the attackers. If there was any thought of celebration, it was soon thrown aside as determined attackers quickly recovered, pressing the frontal attack with renewed vigor. The entrenched NVA soldiers in both tree lines fired their AK-47s at a furious rate, overwhelming the Korean Marines firepower trapped behind the dike.

Figure 2: The Paddy Fight, January 10, 1967



Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.

Since the ambush began, no Marine received a moment's respite from the concentrated torrent of incoming fire. Not only were the South Koreans outmanned, they were outgunned as well. As reliable as the old relics were, the M1s could not keep pace with the magnitude of fire from the enemy AK-47s, eliminating any chance the ROK Marines would ever gain fire superiority. Discipline and training were the only weapons keeping the

NVA troops from overwhelming the outnumbered Marines. The only thing working in their favor was that the closest tree line was over 400 yards from the wide dike; the maximum effective range of the AK-47 was 300 yards. Although the M1 was a lighter weapon than the AK-47, its superior range kept reinforcements from augmenting the stalled attack.

The sole operable radio belonged to U.S. Marine Captain Larry Oswalt, the ANGLICO Air Liaison Officer attached to 3rd Battalion. After several abortive attempts through a jury-rigged radio relay, the ROK Marine artillery finally found its mark, forcing the advancing NVA assault troops to pull back. Despite bringing supporting arms into the fight, a heavy volume of fire continued to pour from the tree lines.

Taking advantage of a slightly improved tactical situation, Navy Lieutenant (junior grade) Kim Soo-hyun, the battalion surgeon, and the surviving corpsmen set up a makeshift triage in a shallow recess on slightly higher ground behind the dike. The overwhelmed medical staff was treating several wounded Marines, when a single well-aimed round from the tree line ended the valiant doctor's life.⁶

Once treated, Marines who were able made their way back to the dike. Even severely wounded Marines shouldered their rifles once more, keenly aware that every weapon was desperately needed. A third of the Marines in the paddy lay dead or severely wounded, allowing the North Vietnamese soldiers to maintain fire superiority. Ammunition was running low and medical supplies were nearly exhausted. Improved weather was the only good omen for the desperate defenders as rain showers gave way to a heavy mist, allowing somewhat better visibility.

Battalion officers devised a plan for every tube within range—mortars and howitzers—to concentrate fires on the area surrounding the trapped Marines. The objective was deliver overwhelming fire along the tree lines. For the next half hour, artillery shells fell on both tree lines at a rate of 20 to 25 per minute. Incoming fire from tree line quickly subsided, then stopped entirely.

The only avenue of escape lay to the north through a vast open rice paddy. Although the route offered no cover, a man running at full speed stood a very good chance of out distancing the enemy rifle range. However, carrying wounded Marines would slow the pace, thus rendering any escape attempt impossible. Not one man in the rice paddy, as cold, wet and miserable as he was, thought of leaving a casualty, embodying the Corps' maxim, "If one stays, everyone stays."

The improved weather conditions provided an opportunity to bring in reinforcements and evacuate the wounded. Captain Oswald established communications with Klondike, the call sign of the Marine Aerial Observer Squadron. Two MEDEVAC helicopters—loaded with a platoon of Korean Marines from the 10th Company—escorted by two helicopter gunships were waiting on station. Captain Oswald briefed the Koreans on the MEDEVAC and requested that they lift the artillery fire. Once the artillery ceased firing, Captain Oswald directed the gunships' fire into the tree line. The Korean Marines trapped on the dike cheered and shouted as the first helicopter began its firing run on the west tree line.

The two helicopter gunships continued to strafe the tree line, wreaking havoc on the NVA positions with massive amounts of ordnance. Smoke from white phosphorous rockets filled the valley, shielding the Marines behind a wall of synthetic smog. The enemy returned fire; several bullets pierced the skin of both war birds, narrowly missing crewmen. The attack continued for 40 minutes, forcing the NVA soldiers to pull back into the tree line. Despite superb airmanship and valiant performances by both aircrews, the two gunships—along with the MEDEVAC helicopters—had no other option to withdraw after expending all ordnance.

The elation that accompanied the arrival of the aircraft turned to despair as the helicopters departed. Looking skyward, Captain Oswald wondered if daylight would remain with them long enough to bring the air wing back. Some of the wounded had been suffering for nearly three hours; two Marines had succumbed to their wounds and several more were in peril due to the loss of blood. The artillery resumed firing and the Koreans assumed a mask of defiance, bracing for a night of uncertainty.

The sounds of the battle grew louder with step for the 70 Marines in the relief force. Anticipating imminent contact with the enemy, they left the trail and crossed over the western hill in order to approach the trapped headquarters party from an unexpected direction. Following 20 minutes of tediously crawling face down in the mud, the platoon closed on the valley entrance from elevated ground, then halted to organize formation. After a brief radio conference with command element holding the dike, the assault went forward. From about 100 yards inside the heavy jungle growth boarder, the platoon waited for an artillery barrage, and attacked downhill, targeting the northern most NVA position. Quickly overrunning the surprised defenders, the platoon continued forward, piercing the rice paddy in squad rushes about 500 yards in front of the trapped HQ party. Caught by complete surprise, approximately 20 NVA soldiers were

gunned down from behind as more Marines forced their way into the valley. Marines along the paddy dike laid down a heavy base of fire, expending nearly all of their remaining ammunition. The combined actions forced the NVA attackers to withdraw south deeper into the tree line, as the relief force crossed the open paddy to join the headquarters group. The dazed and exhausted defenders along the dike almost completely out of ammo became content to slink down in the ditch, turning the fight over to their rescuers.

Later that evening under cover of darkness, the U.S. Marine Corps aircraft returned to the paddy. Four helicopters evacuated the dead and the injured. Thirty-two Marines died and 54 were wounded., including Captain Oswald who was badly injured. NVA soldiers downed the fifth helicopter, seriously wounding the crew chief. A sixth helicopter evacuated the remaining casualties, the dead, and the last of the Marines initially trapped in the paddy. However, a small group of Marines from the reaction force guarded the downed aircraft throughout the night. They were evacuated the following day, having spent 22 hours under threat of enemy attack.⁷

The Battle of Tra Binh Dong⁸

The success of the ambush at Tra Binh Bac emboldened NVA commanders. During the truce that accompanied the Tet holiday, the 2nd NVA Division sent two battalions from the 1st and 21st Regiments and a battalion of Viet Cong guerillas to attack the U.S. Marine base at Chu Lai. The division used elephants to transport 120 mm mortars into the coastal lowlands to support the attack. The regimental-sized force also received Soviet flamethrowers, the first time the weapons had been fielded in the war. Like the soldiers who had ambushed the 9th Company, the assault force was composed of combat-hardened veterans.

The base at Chu Lai was a key aviation and logistics hub that supported allied forces operating across I Corps.⁹ U.S. Marine aviators assigned to Marine Aircraft Groups 12 and 13 flew A-4 Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms from the newly constructed 10,000 foot-runway.¹⁰ A helipad adjacent to the 1st Hospital Company supported MEDEVACs.¹¹ The 9th Engineer Support Battalion provided heavy engineer support. Because of the importance of the base, the Chu Lai Base Defense Command was established within the Chu Lai Tactical Area of Operations (TAOR).¹² The 2nd Marine Brigade operated within the TAOR, but were not under the

command of III Marine Amphibious Force. Rather, American and Korean Marines coordinated their actions to defend the base.

The 3rd ROK Marine Battalion's 11th Company defended an area near the village of Tra Binh Dong. When not only patrol, the company occupied a 200 by 300-yard oval-shaped fortification straddling a small knob below of a mass of low lying hills south of the Song Tra Bong River. Under the Command of Captain Jung Kyeong-jin, 294 Marines, including an attached 4.2-inch mortar detachment, defended the outpost.

At 2330 on February 14, 1967, a Marine at his listening post detected movement in front of his position. Captain Jung placed the entire company on alert, instructing his Marines to hold fire until ordered. Very quietly, Marines moved to their assigned positions and awaited orders. Every squad leader in the company supervised his charges, making certain that nothing would alert the unsuspecting scouting party. Each Marine waited in silence, every breath measured, every ear tuned behind sandbagged ramparts in anticipation of expected pandemonium. Keeping informed on the probe's progress, Captain Jung allowed the enemy reconnaissance team to close within five yards of his trench line, then gave the order: "*Fire!*"

Every Marine on line opened up, sending a shower of red tracers racing into the wire and beyond. Flares burst overhead while the volume of fire from Korean weapons increased as heartbeats quickened with each pull of the trigger. At that range even in the dark, marksmanship came easy. Bullets and grenades found their mark, tearing flesh and engulfing the advancing sappers in a shower of steel. Having lost the element of surprise, the Vietnamese were observed withdrawing into the tree line, dragging several comrades with them; one corpse remained, twisted in the concertina. As soon as the shadowy figures disappeared from view, the company's noncommissioned officers restored fire discipline and all was quite again. Disturbed by the strength of the probe, Captain Jung placed the company on alert, assigned additional Marines to listening posts, and reviewed fire support plans.

The probing attack confirmed the NVA commander's assumptions on the strength and disposition of the South Korean forces. In the month leading up to the attack, North Vietnamese operatives conducted detailed reconnaissance of the 9th Company's position. Two soldiers donned uniforms from the 2nd Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Presenting themselves as interpreters, the men inconspicuously sat atop a small ridge running through the center of the outpost, looking around,

spacing off and recording each destination within the compound. NVA commanders knew the location of every bunker within the compound, and which structures would be targeted in the opening salvo.

After waiting four hours, the NVA commander ordered his assault elements forward. At 0410 on the February 15, the North Vietnamese let loose a merciless recoilless rifle and mortar barrage on the 11th Company. Every ear in the compound became alert to a series of dull thuds some distance beyond the protective wire. Whispering whines quickly accelerated to shrill whistles. Shouts of “Incoming” from all over the compound sent men scurrying in chaotic scrambles for the nearest shelter. The incoming shells hit every bunker on the NVA commander’s list, collapsing roofs and damaging structures. Impact explosions dotted the compound, scattering torrents of shrapnel over every square foot of 11th Company real estate.

Even as the first shells fell to earth, a battalion from the 1st NVA Regiment began its attack on the 11th Company from the southwest. The 1st Platoon met the initial thrust by unleashing a terrible display of firepower, sending round after round through the wire. Flares illuminated the night sky and the NVA’s red tracers mixed with the Korean Marines’ green tracers, putting on a light show never before seen in Quang Ngai. The volume of fire volume from both sides of the wire was immense. Within five minutes, the remaining two battalions were committed to the attack, hitting the northwest sector of the company’s perimeter with a vengeance. The 3rd Platoon opened fire immediately, responding in a frenzy of fire.

First Lieutenant Kim Se-chang, the artillery battalion Forward Observer, began coordinating fire support from the Blue Dragon’s 105 mm and 155 mm howitzers. The company’s Weapons Platoon began firing its 60 mm mortars and the attached heavy mortar detachment added its 4.2-inch tubes to the rain of steel to stop the attack.

On the northwest perimeter, the 3rd Platoon had stopped two attacking waves; the bodies of NVA soldiers were stacked across their front. Despite the Marines’ intense volume of fire, NVA troops continued to attack in human waves and close on the defenders. As commanders continued to press soldiers into the fray, the North Vietnamese attack gained new momentum. They destroyed several sections of concertina blockade with Bangalore torpedoes and satchel charges. The attackers breached 3rd Platoon’s perimeter at 0422 as NVA soldiers, stepping on the backs of their dead comrades sprawled on the concertina and entering the trenches.

Under attack from two directions by three full-strength battalions, Captain Jung asserted his leadership by moving about the perimeter assessing the situation, shifting personnel, directing fire and taking charge. He was accompanied by two ANGLICO Marines, Lance Corporals Jim Porta and David Long. As the enemy attack destroyed all of the landlines, the PRC-25 radios carried by Lieutenant Kim and Lance Corporal Long became the company's only means of communication.

Yet the company commander was not the only leader that morning. The 3rd Platoon's 1st Squad bore the brunt of the incursion. Staff Sergeant Bae Jang-choon, the squad leader, refused to leave his position despite serious wounds to his shoulder. He rallied his squad, ordering his Marines to stand their ground. The squad unleashed a terrible torrent of fire. Unable to reload weapons their fast enough, the fighting devolved to clubs, entrenching tools, fists, boots, bayonets and teeth in an all-out brawl for survival as the enemy entered the trenches. Staff Sergeant Bae straddled the parapet and defiantly brandished an entrenching tool defiantly as he faced the oncoming attackers.

Faced with a relentless enemy in overwhelming numbers, the squad fought back with undaunted ferocity. Private First Class Kim Myong-deok killed 10 soldiers at point-blank range as they tried to storm his position before felled by grenade explosions. Leading by example, Staff Sergeant Bae quickly retrieved Kim's rifle and killed 10 or 12 more before feeling the sting of enemy fire. Bleeding profusely and out of ammo, Staff Sergeant Bae in his last mortal act, exchanged hand grenades with the wall of human flesh pressing in on him. Defiantly standing his ground, the unshakable Marine finally succumbed to a never-ending shower of shrapnel.

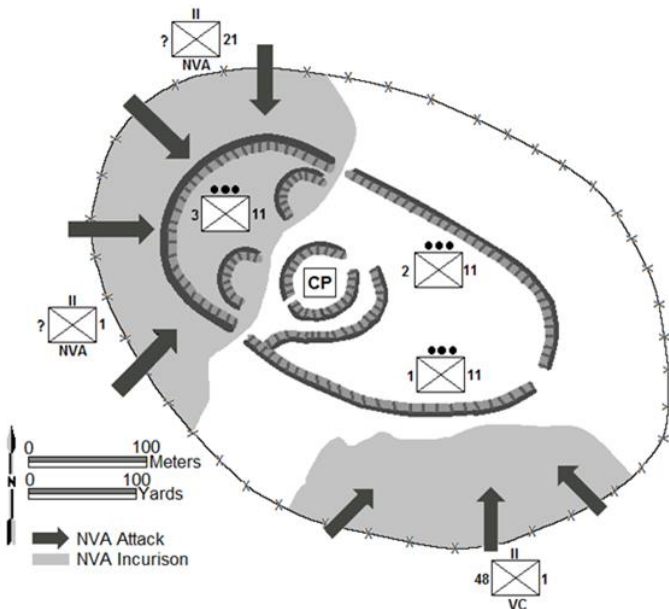
The rest of the squad followed Staff Sergeant Bae's example. Sergeant Lee Hak-won detonated two hand grenades as the enemy approached his position, killing himself and four NVA soldiers. Private First Class Lee Young-bok lured the infiltrators toward his position, disappeared into a spider hole, and threw several grenades at the enemy soldiers. He was the only Marine of the 13-man squad who hadn't been killed or injured. As determined as the 1st Squad was to hold their position, they were overwhelmed by NVA infantrymen.

Although an entire squad was lost in a matter of minutes, the Marines' steadfast resistance blunted the attack long enough for reinforcements to plug the hole. Marines from the 2nd Squad filled the void, savagely battling the attacking mob as it forced its way into the outpost. Despite the Marines'

fanatical resistance, the North Vietnamese breached the company's perimeter.

On the opposite side of the company's position, the Viet Cong brought up mortars and began firing on the 11th Company's command post. Second Lieutenant Shin Won-bae, the 1st Platoon Commander, spotted the tubes and formed an assault force with the Marines closest to him. Lieutenant Shin ordered his rifle squads to lay down a base of fire, then led the fire team 100 yards through their own artillery barrage. The Marines closed to within 20 yards of a rock formation that shielded the mortar tubes from the Marines rifle fire. Gunnery Sergeant Kim Yong-kil, the platoon sergeant who had accompanied the attackers, threw two hand grenades toward the enemy defenders. As soon as the grenades exploded, Lieutenant Shin and his fire team rushed toward the objective. They repeated this tactic until reaching the rocks and overwhelming the enemy mortar men in a hail of gunfire. Twenty dead soldiers lay about the three mortar tubes. The Marines seized the weapons and returned to the company's lines amidst friendly artillery explosions.

Figure 3: The Battle of Tra Binh Dong, February 14-15, 1967



Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.

As a lasting tribute to leadership exhibited through the ranks, corporals and sergeants took control of the battle over the next two hours. Employing basic infantry tactics, unit cohesion kept the NVA forces from overwhelming the determined defenders. Everywhere in the compound, squad and fire team-size units held their ground against a massive onslaught of enemy troops. The ROK Marines refused to buckle, more than matching overwhelming numbers. As in the paddy fight a few weeks earlier, leadership, training and discipline became intangible weapons of unrivaled value.

Exhausted and battered after an hour of continuous close combat, the embattled defenders faced a perilous situation. The North Vietnamese continued to press their advantage from two directions, penetrating the perimeter at both points of attack. After pushing the 3rd Platoon closer to the center of the compound, the NVA now possessed about one third of the outpost. Mortar fire was still making life hazardous above ground for Marines not engaged in perimeter fighting, as shells continued to fall within the company's perimeter.

At 0530, NVA troops began advancing further into the weakened 3rd Platoon's sector, pushing the outnumbered defenders back to the fallback trenches. Fighting with desperate determination, the depleted platoon refused to cave, making the attackers pay dearly for every inch.

Similarly, the 1st Platoon was forced to cede real estate to the swarming assault troops. Lieutenant Shin, as he had done on several occasions that night, rallied his platoon, forcing the NVA advance to a grinding halt.

Although the 2nd Platoon wasn't under direct attack, they continued to receive intense fire across their sector from North Vietnamese infantrymen outside the wire. By necessity, the platoon was frozen in position to defend against any attack. This limited Captain Jung's ability to shift Marines to hot spots around the perimeter. The weapons platoon and all headquarters personnel were knee-deep in death struggles that raged across the outpost. Despite the risk, Captain Jung decided to pull one squad from the 2nd Platoon to reinforce his hard-pressed 3rd Platoon. It seemed to work as the ferociousness of the attack began to weaken at that sector, allowing his Marines to take advantage of relaxed aggression. Over the next hour, the battle reverted pretty much to a stalemate as Marines refused to give any more real estate. Defending the specific square foot of ground each Marine occupied, the company stubbornly held NVA advances in check, putting up a furious resistance.

At 0630, the first faint rays of sunlight appeared through the fog that hung over the 11th Company's position. The faint light allowed Lieutenant Kim Se-chang to locate the regimental command post. Despite having sustained a bullet wound to the head a half hour earlier, the forward observer determined the grid coordinates of the command post, calculated the distance to the target, took an azimuth reading, then relayed the data to brigade artillery. Heatedly talking on his AN/PRC-10 field radio, he gave the order to "fire!" The artillery found its target, destroying the command post as white-hot shards of jagged metal shredded bodies, weapons, radios, and maps. Having completed his mission, Lieutenant Kim surrendered to unconsciousness.

Staff Sergeant Kim Hyun-chul took charge of coordinating the supporting fires. He caught sight of NVA mortar crews that had been making his life miserable all night. Staff Sergeant Kim plotted the map coordinates and once more called in the location data to the artillery battalion, repeating the adjustment and fire for effect process. Kim watched through binoculars as brigade's howitzers extracted a terrible toll on Vietnamese mortar crews, eliminating any further threats from these high-angle harbingers of whistling death. Relieved of a need to dodge mortar rounds allowed the Marines more freedom of movement, and they made the most of it.

Cut off from the command and lacking supporting fire, the North Vietnamese incursion started falling apart. Casualties escalated as their best ally, darkness, fled the field exposing them to relentless firing from the Korean Marines.

For the first time since the opening salvo, Captain Jung had a clear view of his besieged company. The arriving dawn allowed him to see his platoons engaged with the enemy and provided him with the tactical understanding of the gravity of the situation at hand. The 3rd Platoon Marines had been pushed further back into the compound in a running gunfight, making a stand immediately below the company's command post. The platoon had been in near constant contact with the NVA assault battalions for nearly three hours.

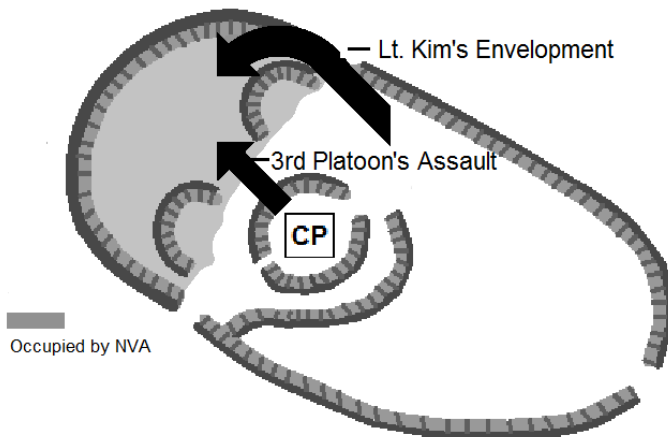
The 11th Company skipper now wrestled the fate of his command away from uncertainty, and took complete control of the conditions he could influence. Seeing how the enemy assault forces were positioned, he put in motion a plan that would trigger the most crucial event of the night. Assembling a makeshift force of a single squad from 1st and 2nd Platoons, Captain Jung ordered a counterattack designed to isolate North

Vietnamese soldiers within his perimeter. First Lieutenant Kim Ki-hong, the Weapons Platoon Commander, volunteered to lead this innovative but dangerous attack; Lance Corporal Porta joined the Korean Marine in the attack.

Lieutenant Kim began his assault at 0650, leading his squad on an envelopment maneuver against North Vietnamese. Catching the NVA soldiers completely off guard, violently assaulting the confused enemy troops, shooting, slashing and bludgeoning everything in their way. Kim personally killed five enemy soldiers with his .45 caliber pistol, while his impromptu unit gunned down dozens more. Bullets, rifle butts and bayonets took their toll as the squad aggressively pressed forward, forcing the Vietnamese back beyond the trenches.

Heartened by the maneuver, Staff Sergeant Kim Son-kwan, the 3rd Platoon Sergeant, rallied his Marines to join the attack. Shouting and using every weapon available, the 3rd Platoon fell violently upon the dazed enemy soldiers. Surrounded by Lieutenant Kim's assault force, the remaining North Vietnamese soldiers refused surrender; they were quickly killed by the Korean Marines., fighting like hell to find a way out. Those who were able to retreat linked up with NVA support units in the outer trenches. The NVA still had a company-sized unit within the 11th Company's perimeter.

Figure 4: The ROK Marines' Counterattack



Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.

Lieutenant Kim's enveloping force, now augmented by Staff Sergeant Kim's dauntless Marines, engaged the enemy support unit in a furious

firefight. However, they lacked the numbers to expel entrenched troops. At 0724, Captain Jung ordered Lieutenant Kim's assault force to retreat to the company observation post. His objective was to lure the North Vietnamese soldiers to attack, forcing them into the open area. Sensing an opportunity to salvage his mission to destroy the Marines at Tra Binh Dong, the NVA commander ordered his soldiers to advance.

Patiently allowing his adversary to advance toward the observation post, Captain Jung ordered his Marines to fire. Rifle and mortar fire felled the stunned attackers. As the skies cleared Lance Corporal Long coordinated air strikes from four U.S. Marine Corps A-4 Skyhawk aircraft. As the aircraft concluded their attack, he coordinated the landing of 16 helicopters carrying the Blue Dragon Brigade's 6th Company.

The NVA's attempt to capture Tra Binh Dong had been costly: 243 NVA and Viet Cong soldiers were killed; 60 additional soldiers are believed to have died in the four-hour battle. Some of the dead wore ROK Marine uniforms, presumably taken during the paddy fight. The two North Vietnamese prisoners captured included a battalion commander. Fifteen 11th Company Marines died in the fighting and 33 were injured.

The Battle of Tra Binh Dong would become the most acclaimed battle fought by South Korean Forces during the Vietnam War. The ROK Government awarded more medals for valor than any other action during the nine-year conflict. Captain Jung and 2nd Lieutenant Shin were awarded the *Tae Guk* Medal, Korea's highest award for valor. Gunnery Sergeant Kim and Staff Sergeant Bae were awarded the *Chung Mu* Medal, Korea's second highest military decoration. The *Ulchi* Medal, the nation's third highest award, was presented to 11 Marines. President Park Chung-hee ordered the promotion of all enlisted Marines, the first unit-wide promotion since the Korean War. The 11th Company was awarded the U.S. and ROK Presidential Unit Citations.

Epilogue:

Among all the countless acts of valor contributing to the victory at Tra Binh Dong, I have always been deeply touched by the selfless sacrifice of 1st Squad, 3rd Platoon at the outset of the battle. To a man, each Marine held his position and fought to his last breath. Although their heroic stand lasted only a few terrible minutes, the Marines of the squad bought enough time for the 3rd Platoon to slow the attack and prevent the company's destruction. Of the 13 Marines in the squad, only one wasn't killed or injured in the attack. Sergeant Lee Hak-won pulled the pins on two hand

grenades as the attackers drew near, killing four North Vietnamese soldiers and temporarily blocking the trench. His last mortal act leaves one to wonder what dynamic provided the motivation for such a powerful statement.

The Blue Dragons I was privileged to know were all forged in the same fire. Time and again, these incredible Marines dispelled any notion that they were not willing to die for one another or their beloved Marine Corps. At the paddy fight, Marines chose to remain with their wounded comrades rather than retreat to safer ground. Tra Binh Dong and the paddy fight were by no means the only incidents where solidarity dominated the course of events. The ROK Marines demonstrated resolute commitment to their profession and one another that continues to evoke tears of pride.

Though many miles now keep us apart, the Blue Dragons of my youth are never far from my mind. I remember them in their prime and still think of them as indestructible. They played no small role in shaping my life, and are still my brothers, and always will be.

Notes:

¹ 1st ANGLICO, Historic Diary, March 1951, United States Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia, Records Group: RG 127, Deposited with the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

² Lieutenant Colonel James F. Durand, U.S. Marine Corps, "ANGLICO at Tra Binh Dong," *Leatherneck*, February 2016, p. 24.

³ *Kkolabaga* and other forms of hazing were banned in the 1980s.

⁴ Unless otherwise cited, all descriptions of The Paddy Fight were obtained from interviews with the participants and detailed in the author's book, *Lightning from the Sky, Thunder from the Sea: The First ANGLICO Story*, (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2009), pp. 85-109.

⁵ 최용호, "고 조경식 소령," *국방일보*, 8.9.2006, Available online at http://kookband.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb20060809/1/BBSMSTR_00000010326/view.do

⁶ "故김수현 해군 대위 1 월 호국인물 선정," *중앙일보*, 12.31.2013, Available online at <https://news.joins.com/article/13527488>.

⁷ Silver Star Citation, Lance Corporal John Patrick Houghton, Available online at <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/40423>

⁸ Unless otherwise cited, all descriptions of The Battle of Tra Binh Dong were obtained from interviews of the participants and detailed in the author's book, pp. 110-130, Lieutenant Colonel James F. Durand, U.S. Marine Corps, "The Battle of Tra Binh Dong and the Origins of the U.S. Marine Corps Martial Arts Program," *Marine Corps Gazette* (online), March 2005 and "ANGLICO at Tra Binh Dong," *Leatherneck*, pp. 24-28.

⁹ Harry G. Summers, Colonel, U.S. Army, (Retired), *Vietnam War Almanac*, (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), p. 119.

¹⁰ Gary L. Teffler, Major, U.S. Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, U.S. Marine Corps, and V. Keith Fleming, Jr., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967*, (Washington: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1984), p. 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.