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TET ATTACK at Cam Lo

During the fierce Tet battle for the district headquarters, the defending Marines mowed down the attackers in the wire.

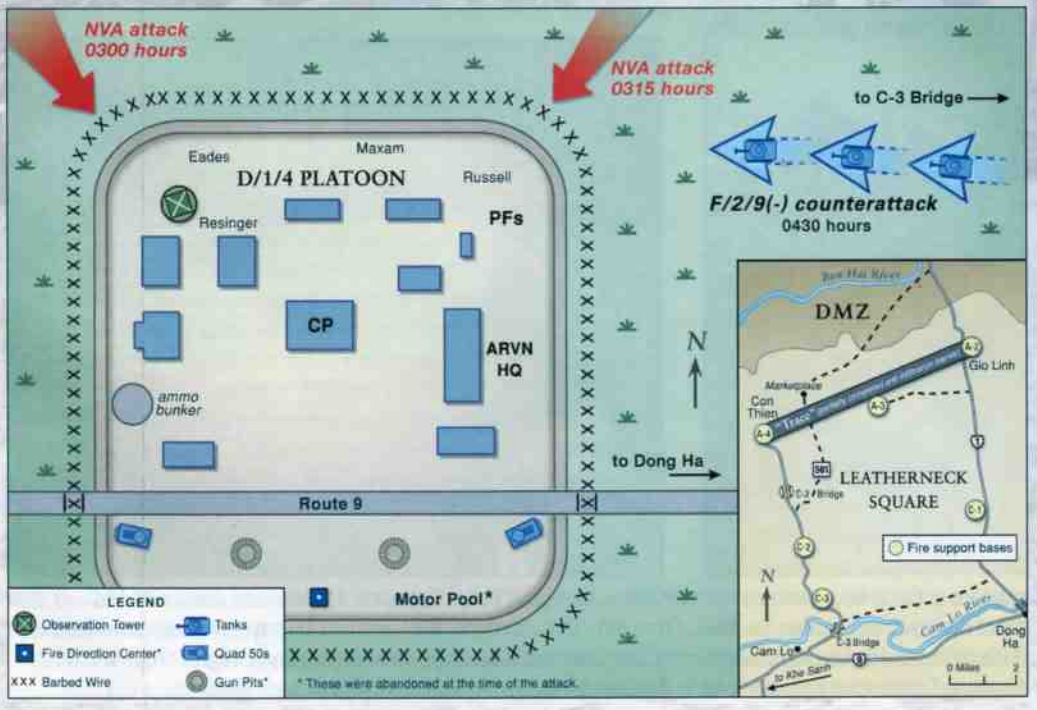
By James P. Coan

Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year holiday, fell on the last day of January in 1968. The VC had announced a countrywide Tet truce from January 27 until February 3, and in return the South Vietnamese had also offered a Tet cease-fire. But on the night of January 29, the truce was rudely shattered. First Da Nang was attacked, followed the next day by Hue, then Quang Tri City. By January 31 almost all major cities, provincial capitals and military installations throughout South Vietnam were being attacked by the NVA and the Viet Cong.

Since mid-January, U.S. Marine recon patrols had detected large numbers of enemy soldiers infiltrating into the vicinity of Cam Lo. A sprawling village 14 kilometers south of the DMZ, situated along the south bank of the Cam Lo River, Cam Lo was also where Route 9, the vital east–west artery from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh, intersected Route 561, the main supply route leading north to Marine fire support bases at C-3, C-2 and Con Thien. That intersection formed the southwest corner of the area the Marines in northern Quang Tri province called "Leatherneck Square."

The ground between the Cam Lo River and the DMZ, a scene of many bloody encounters between U.S. Marines and NVA the previous year, had been declared a free-fire zone after the removal of all civilians during Operation Hickory in May 1967. Many thousands of refugees, both voluntary and involuntary, had settled around Cam Lo in shabby South Vietnamese government refugee camps that the Marines called "Tin City" and "Camp Low."

In a major intelligence coup, South Vietnamese security forces captured Doan Cu, the Viet Cong district chief. He had documents detailing Communist plans for a major offensive in the Cam Lo



Above: From left, Corporal Gary Miller, Lance Corporal David E. Sullivan and Corporal Gail Culp of Company H, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, drop their C rations and dash to their bunker as Cam Lo comes under NVA attack. **Left:** In the early morning hours of February 2, 1968, two battalions and a sapper company of the 48th Regiment, 320th NVA Division, assaulted the Cam Lo compound, expecting it to be defended only by Popular Force militia and a few U.S. Army advisers. **Opposite:** The entrance to Cam Lo district headquarters (Above: National Archives; Map: Baker Vail; Opposite: Courtesy of Charles L. Pritchard).

district. Rumors of an imminent enemy attack ran rampant throughout the civilian populace, and some villagers built sandbagged shelters in their homes. Mining incidents along Route 9 began to increase. In response, the Marines doubled their night ambush efforts, meeting with frequent success.

The NVA's first effort to interdict Route 9 occurred on January 24, when an artillery ammunition convoy from Dong Ha to Camp Carroll was ambushed just as it was preparing to turn off Route 9 onto the access road leading to the camp. A reaction force from Camp Carroll broke up the ambush, and the NVA retreated into the hills. Three days later, a unit from the elite 320th NVA Division, which had been the principal victor over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, tangled with Lt. Col. Lee Bendell's 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines (3/4), in a fierce daylong fight for a hill (called "Mike's Hill") overlooking Route 9. Bendell's Marines prevailed, killing more than 150 of the enemy and capturing 90 weapons, but at a cost of 21 Marines killed in action.

Expecting the inevitable, the U.S. advisory staff at the Cam Lo district headquarters, in coordination with the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, at FSB C-3 and the U.S. Army artillery group at Dong Ha, set about plotting artillery and mortar defensive fires around the district headquarters compound. The Cam Lo district senior adviser, U.S. Army Major James C. Payne, requested Marine reinforcements. All he had available to fend off an attack—which intelligence reports indicated was imminent—were half a dozen members of the U.S. Army advisory team staff, a handful of marginally reliable Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) militia and a squad of combined action unit Marines.

The commander of the 2/9 Marines, Lt. Col. William M. Cryan, was ordered to reinforce the district headquarters. On January 30, Cryan assigned the understrength 1st Platoon (two squads) from Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, to the headquarters compound, along with a section of two U.S. Army M-42 Duster self-propelled anti-aircraft tanks.

Dusk fell early thanks to overcast skies on February 1, and an assortment of U.S. Marines and soldiers and Vietnamese PF troops found themselves spending the night together inside the Cam Lo headquarters compound. The Marine force consisted of the understrength platoon of Company D, 1/4, led by 2nd Lt. Michael O. Steck and Staff Sgt. Donald K. Sellers, and the headquarters element of the Combined Action Company (CAC), commanded by Captain Peter Haines. Making their home for the night in the compound's motor pool area was a mine sweep team from the 11th Engineers, consisting of some Marine combat engineers and their infantry security, along with two quad 50s (trucks mounted with four .50-caliber machine guns each), in this case using 2.5-ton Army trucks. In addition, an understrength squad from Company E, 2/9, had wandered into the compound at dusk, also seeking a safe haven for the night.

The U.S. Army advisory team housed inside the district compound consisted of senior adviser Payne; Captain Raymond E. McMaken, Payne's deputy; John Cleary, a U.S. Foreign Service officer serving as a civilian adviser to the Department of the Army; Warrant Officer Frank Branson of the Australian army; Sergeant 1st Class Robert Hidinger, the operations NCO; and Staff Sgt. "Doc" Bradley, the senior medic. A small detachment of South Vietnamese PF troops remained overnight rather than leave the compound to be with their families during Tet. The Cam Lo district chief was nowhere to be found. He had not been seen for days.

The Cam Lo main compound, surrounded by an earthen parapet and three belts of barbed wire, consisted of eight ancient French buildings and several bunkers and fighting positions. Across Route 9 from the main compound area was the motor pool, situated on the site of an abandoned Marine 155mm artillery position. Several vehicles from the earlier ambush on Route 9 were parked inside the wire along with the two Army quad 50s belonging to the mine sweep team from the 11th Engineers. The quad 50s were placed beside Route 9 at the east and west compound entrances so that they could command clear fields of fire down the road in both directions. The northwest sector

Left: Back at their regimental headquarters at Dong Ha, members of 1st Platoon, Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, pose with NVA weapons captured at the Cam Lo district headquarters during Tet 1968. From left: Sam Giordano, Bill Lavin, Art Dupont, two unknown Marines, Tim Mihalko, Gary Roberts, Marines indentified as Hoover, Kurtz and Smitty, Don Jakovac (kneeling), and Daniel Whyte. **Right:** From left, Gil McGuff, Bill Flannery and Ed Heser display a Communist flag captured in the Cam Lo battle (Photos: Courtesy of Tony Rizzutto).

Members of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4), search the grounds of an old Catholic church near Con Thien for NVA troops on February 9, 1968. The church had been badly damaged by NVA artillery fire long before the Tet Offensive (National Archives).

of the perimeter was defended by the combined action Marines, Army advisers and the lone squad from the 2/9 Marines. Steck and Sellers positioned their two squads from Company D, 1/4, along the northern and northeastern sector.

February 1 was the third night at Cam Lo for Company D's 1st Platoon. The unit had been reinforced with two M-60 machine guns and a 3.5-inch rocket launcher team. The wary, combat-experienced grunts on the line all shared the same premonition—big trouble was heading their way. The Marines prepared for the worst, digging deeper fighting holes, putting out Claymore mines, filling sandbags, and cleaning and oiling their machine guns and sometimes untrustworthy M-16 rifles. Some wrote loved ones a last letter home, not optimistic about making it out of this one alive.

Shortly before midnight, Marines from Company G, 2/9, guarding the Cam Lo River bridge spotted swimmers in the water through Starlight scopes. The Marines picked off two of the enemy, but a third escaped into the darkness. The leathernecks also recovered a 200-pound charge of waterproofed explosives that had been placed in the river by the enemy. Nguyen Thuong, a Kit Carson Scout (an ex-NVA or VC who was working for a U.S. combat unit) assigned to the 2/9 Marines at the bridge, had learned earlier from NVA soldiers disguised as civilians in Cam Lo village that the bridge would be hit by a sapper team that night. The Marines were ready.

At 0215 hours on the morning of February 2, the Cam Lo district headquarters compound was hit by hundreds of rounds of recoilless rifle, rocket and 82mm mortar fire. Major Payne ran to the TOC bunker in the center of the compound and called Dong Ha for artillery support. As he was calling, a recoilless-rifle round smashed into the heavily sandbagged bunker, mortally wounding Payne and two PF soldiers, and temporarily knocking out communications.

The deputy district adviser, Captain McMaken, took charge. A former enlisted paratrooper with 11 years of service prior to attending Officer Candidate School in 1965, McMaken was up to the task. Clawing his way through the rubble of the demolished TOC bunker, he found Army civilian adviser John Cleary calmly calling for continued artillery support over the only radio still functioning. Doc Bradley was working feverishly to save Major Payne's life. McMaken told Cleary to remain on the radio while he went out into the compound for a better view of the attack. He then relayed artillery fire adjustments inside to Cleary.

The first attacking force of NVA penetrated the southern portion of the compound, where vehicles were kept in the motor pool. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) flashed out of the darkness, knocking out several trucks. The two Army quad 50s were demolished before they could get off a single shot. Then a cry for

help came over the radio. Gladiator 3-2, one of the quad 50 gunners, was wounded and trapped in his burning vehicle. McMaken heard his agonized pleadings and knew he had to do something. The firestorm of American artillery ringing the compound had forced the NVA to break contact. During that momentary lull, McMaken led a force out toward the burning vehicles to attempt to rescue the wounded man, but they were driven back when the NVA mounted its main attack.

When McMaken returned to the main command bunker, he found that all communication with the outside world had been cut off. He could no longer raise any of the artillery units via radio. The compound and everyone in it would be doomed if they had no fire support. As he frantically tried to radio for help, a calm voice came up over the net loud and clear: "This is Early Flowers 7-3 Charlie. Can I be of assistance?"

An eastward view down Route 9 in the summer of 1967 shows the district compound building, which was accidentally holed by a Marine 155mm howitzer battery based to the right, off the road. The berm to the left of the M-48A3 tank encircled the entire compound (Courtesy of Charles L. Pritchard).

A countermortar radar unit at nearby Camp Carroll had fortunately just tuned into McMaken's frequency. For the remainder of the battle, Early Flowers 7-3 Charlie was Cam Lo's lifeline to the artillery units at C-3 and Dong Ha.

At 0300, more than 200 enemy troops launched a human wave assault against the northwest perimeter. Unaware of the Marine reinforcements, they apparently expected little resistance. The NVA and VC charged at the compound supported by a wall of fire from recoilless rifles, RPGs, B-40 rocket launchers and 12.7mm heavy machine guns. Positioned up in the compound's observation tower, Marine Pfc Marlin Resinger fired round after round from his M-79 grenade launcher down into the enemy attackers.

Private First Class Larry Herwig was asleep on the far end of the Marine line when the attack came. He ran into the closest building and found a dozen PF soldiers cowering, nearly in a state of panic. They ignored his shouts to return to the perimeter. One wide-eyed PF handed him a grenade and wished him good luck in Vietnamese. Herwig ran back to rejoin his Marine squad mates, who had unleashed a torrent of small-arms and automatic-weapons fire into the ranks of the attacking force attempting to breach the perimeter wire obstacles.

Lance Corporal Lawrence Eades from Portland, Ore., the company clerk of the CAC, saw that the PF troops had all abandoned their positions and fled to nearby bunkers. With the NVA about to breach the wire, Eades, a Navy corpsman and three other Marines from the combined action unit ran over to keep that from happening. Eades found a .30-caliber machine gun in a bunker opposite the breach site and put the gun into action. A steady stream of bullets tore into the enemy force, dropping two dozen in the wire in front of his position. An NVA soldier crept up close enough to throw a hand grenade, wounding Eades and the others. One Marine spotted the grenade thrower and shot him.

Several NVA troops began crawling up to the compound's parapet, using it for cover while throwing grenades and firing RPGs. Despite his wounds, Eades leaped onto the parapet and resumed firing his machine gun. Captain Haines, the CAC commander, watched Eades blasting away with his machine gun. "I thought sure he'd be hit," said Haines. "He was silhouetted against a burning building. He stood right out there in the open and stacked the enemy on the wires."

Eades and his fire team were later credited with 24 enemy killed. He had fired off 3,500 rounds of ammunition before dawn.

On the northern perimeter, Lance Cpl. Larry L. Maxam, a fire team leader with Company D, 1/4 Marines, left his assistant fire team leader in charge and ran to cover a potential breach in the wire where an M-60 machine-gun position had been abandoned. According to the citation for Maxam's posthumous Medal of Honor, he "sustained multiple fragmentation wounds from exploding grenades as he ran to an abandoned machine gun position....As the enemy directed maximum fire power against the determined Marine, Corporal Maxam's position received a direct hit from a rocket propelled grenade, knocking him backwards and inflicting severe fragmentation wounds to his face and right eye....Corporal Maxam courageously resumed his firing position and subsequently was struck again by small arms fire....In a desperate attempt to silence his weapon, the North Vietnamese threw hand grenades and directed recoilless rifle fire against him, inflicting two additional wounds....Too weak to reload his machine gun, Corporal Maxam fell to a prone position and valiantly continued to deliver effective fire with his rifle. After one and a half hours, during which he was hit repeatedly by fragments from exploding grenades,...he succumbed to his wounds, having successfully defended nearly one half of the perimeter single-handedly."

Corporal Timothy W. Russell, one of the two squad leaders from Company D, was knocked unconscious in the first moments of battle by an exploding rocket round. Bleeding heavily from multiple fragment wounds, he refused medical treatment after he came to, repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire, shouting encouragement and directing the fire of his squad against the attackers. When the enemy threatened to break through his portion of the northeastern perimeter, Russell led his men in a tenacious counterattack that forced the NVA to withdraw.

Still up in the tower, Pfc Resinger had fired several hundred M-79 rounds at the enemy when a bullet struck the barrel of his weapon, knocking it out of his hands. That was when he realized a bullet

Top: Marines of the 2/4 double-time across open ground on February 9, 1968, during Operation Kentucky, a search-and-destroy mission near Con Thien. **Above:** A 105mm howitzer crew attached to Company A, 1/4 Marines, carries out a fire mission at FSB C-2 on January 5, 1968 (Photos: National Archives).

had also struck him in the flak jacket but hadn't penetrated.

Despite suffering multiple fragment wounds, Captain McMaken moved fearlessly throughout the compound and continued to call in artillery through John Cleary, with the aid of Early Flowers 7-3 Charlie, bringing in rounds as close as possible to the inner perimeter wire. In the 2/9 Marines command post at FSB C-3, the artillery fire-support coordinator kept up a steady stream of fire from multiple batteries, blasting suspected assembly areas, weapons positions and withdrawal routes.

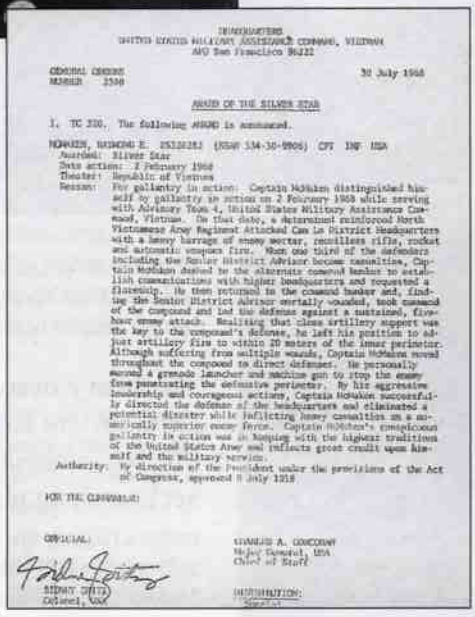
Northeast of the Cam Lo compound, a large force of NVA massed at an abandoned airstrip, awaiting the signal to follow in behind the sappers who were dying in the wire in front of the 1/4 Marines. A fortuitous barrage of Marine artillery clobbered the assembled NVA force, killing or wounding dozens and blunting any further attacks from that direction.

The heavy overcast began to clear, making it easier to see what was happening, but the Marines were running low on ammunition. McMaken overheard the leathernecks making plans for a helicopter resupply, even if it meant crashing the chopper inside the compound. A Marine pilot at Dong Ha had volunteered and was ready to take off when McMaken aborted the risky mission. His senior NCO, Sergeant Hidinger, had previously stashed all sorts of extra ammo around the compound. Hidinger and a Marine gunnery sergeant from the CAC gathered it up and sprinted from one position to another, distributing armloads of M-16 and machine gun rounds.

At 0430 the commander of the 9th Marines, Colonel R.B. Smith, ordered a relief force from FSB C-3 to go to the aid of the Cam Lo compound. Two platoons from Company F, 2/9 Marines, supported by two M-50 Ontos (self-propelled multiple recoilless rifles) and three tanks from the bridge position, moved over a predetermined and reconnoitered route through Cam Lo village, breaking out into open rice paddies northeast of the compound. Seeing the charging Marine armor–infantry force coming toward them, the NVA broke off their attack and abandoned the battlefield, first heading north across the Cam Lo River and then west toward the hills.

Three miles north of Cam Lo at FSB C-2, Company A of the 1/4 Marines formed up in the predawn blackness with a sense of urgency, knowing that another 1/4 unit was in danger of being overrun and needed help. The determined Marines, loaded down with all of their fighting gear and ammunition, commenced a forced march southward down Route 561, hoofing it toward the sounds

Right: For an hour and a half, Corporal Larry L. Maxam bore the brunt of defending half his section of the Cam Lo perimeter before dying of multiple wounds. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. **Below right:** Taking charge for the mortally wounded Major James C. Payne, Captain Raymond E. McMaken was subsequently cited for the Silver Star (Right: Congressional Medal of Honor Society; Below right: Courtesy of James P. Coan).



HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM
APO San Francisco 96222

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 2550

30 July 1968

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

1. TC 320. The following AWARD is announced.

MCMAKEN, RAYMOND E. 05320283 (ASN# 534-30-9906) CPT INF USA
Awarded: Silver Star
Date action: 2 February 1968
Theater: Republic of Vietnam
Reason: For gallantry in action: Captain McMaken distinguished himself by gallantry in action on 2 February 1968 while serving with Advisory Team 4, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. On that date, a determined reinforced North Vietnamese Army Regiment attacked Cam Lo District Headquarters with a heavy barrage of enemy mortar, recoilless rifle, rocket and automatic weapons fire. When one third of the defenders including the Senior District Advisor became casualties, Captain McMaken dashed to the alternate command bunker to establish communications with higher headquarters and requested a flareship. He then returned to the command bunker and, finding the Senior District Advisor mortally wounded, took command of the compound and led the defense against a sustained, five-hour enemy attack. Realizing that close artillery support was the key to the compound's defense, he left his position to adjust artillery fire to within 20 meters of the inner perimeter. Although suffering from multiple wounds, Captain McMaken moved throughout the compound to direct defenses. He personally manned a grenade launcher and machine gun to stop the enemy from penetrating the defensive perimeter. By his aggressive leadership and courageous actions, Captain McMaken successfully directed the defense of the headquarters and eliminated a potential disaster while inflicting heavy casualties on a numerically superior enemy force. Captain McMaken's conspicuous gallantry in action was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflects great credit upon himself and the military service.
Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 9 July 1918

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

SIDNEY [illegible]
Colonel, GSC

GRANVILLE A. CONCORWAY
Major General, USA
Chief of Staff

DISTRIBUTION:
Special

and flashes of battle at a near run. Veering west, they negotiated the rugged brush country above Cam Lo in time to set up a blocking position north of the district headquarters compound and intercept the enemy withdrawal. In coordination with the armor–infantry counterattack coming west from FSB C-3, Alpha Company overran an NVA heavy weapons complex, capturing eight 82mm mortars and large numbers of machine guns and small arms.

A third relief force of tanks and infantry departed the 9th Marines headquarters base in Dong Ha, arriving at the Cam Lo compound at dawn in time for some final mop-up work. The relief force's Marines were stunned by the carnage and devastation they found. Many of the compound's structures were demolished, and the ground was scarred by blackened shell craters and littered with the debris of battle. Dead NVA and VC lay everywhere, especially in the wire, where dozens of them had been riddled by Marine bullets and flying shrapnel from mortars and artillery.

Major Payne, who could not be medevaced during the battle, died of his wounds before dawn. Nine other U.S. Army soldiers and Marines had been killed inside the compound. Nearly all of the surviving Marines and Navy corpsman were wounded, 23 seriously enough to require medevac. An unknown number of PF militia were also killed defending their district headquarters, including members of a mortar crew who remained at their position, firing everything they had, until an NVA RPG team scored a direct hit on their mortar pit. Five Marines from the relief forces were killed during contact with the fleeing enemy.

The outnumbered defenders of Cam Lo had triumphed against seemingly impossible odds. Fewer than 50 Marine grunts and combat engineers, plus a handful of Army advisers, had held off and defeated at least two NVA battalions and a sapper company.

Interrogated prisoners revealed that they had come from the 48th Regiment of the 320th NVA Division and were unfamiliar with the area. Their uniforms and equipment looked nearly new, as if they had just been issued. They had been led to believe the attack would be a cakewalk—that they would just run right over the local PF defenders and their handful of U.S. Army advisers, then raise the Communist flag in triumph. That crumpled, blood-stained flag was later found on the battlefield, still in the clenched grip of a dead NVA soldier. Marines also found the dented bugle that had blown the signal to attack.

The official enemy body count was 111, with 34 POWs captured. But Captain McMaken, who supervised the collection of all the dead NVA and VC from around the compound, counted 156 enemy bodies as they were placed into a mass grave in the motor pool area. He also counted 53 enemy POWs, including one who stumbled into the compound two days later asking for Chieu Hoi ("open arms," a program of the Saigon government that granted amnesty to NVA–VC defectors, often recruiting them as Kit Carson Scouts). "The Marines just stacked them up on the wires," McMaken said later. "They were magnificent."

That heroic stand may not have been reported in the Stateside news, as major battles were raging all over South Vietnam during Tet, but many soldiers and Marines were officially recognized for their valor at Cam Lo that night. Besides the posthumous Medal of Honor awarded Corporal Larry L. Maxam, Lance Cpl. Lawrence M. Eades and Corporal Timothy W. Russell each received the Navy Cross. Marine Lieutenant Michael O. Steck received the Silver Star, as did Army Captain Raymond E. McMaken and Sgt. 1st Class Robert Hidinger. Meritorious Unit Commendations with bronze "V" were awarded to the 1st and 3rd squads, 1st Platoon, Company D, 1/4, and to the 1st squad, 3rd Platoon, Company E, 2/9.

Frank Branson, the Australian warrant officer in the district compound, reported later that during the peak of the battle a Marine sergeant had run past him with an armload of machine gun ammunition. "He offered me the can of beer he had in his free hand," the Aussie related. "You Marines surely know how to fight a war." ☆

James P. Coan served in Vietnam as a platoon leader with the 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, and was wounded at Con Thien in May 1968. He recently retired from the State of California Department of the Youth Authority. For additional reading, see: U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968, *by Shulimson, Blasiol, Smith and Dawson; and* The Navy Cross, Vietnam, 1964-1973, *by Paul D. Stevens.*

To learn about VC and NVA actions during Tet the following year, go to TheHistoryNet at www.thehistorynet.com/vn and read "Tet 1969 at Cu Chi," by Kevin Randle, which will appear beginning the week of December 22, 2003.