



“They Were Definitely Looking for Us”—Operation *Francis Marion* and the False Hope of 1967.

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Sergeant Lawrence Willey sat in the hot summer sun of Vietnam anxiously filling out the after action report (AAR) for a patrol during which he and his fellow soldiers of the 4th Infantry Division (4th ID) Long Range Recon Patrol (LRRP) were nearly overrun as they reconnoitered the Chu Pa mountain region in the central highlands. As part of Operation *Francis Marion*, the patrol was charged with searching an area for enemy activity. On the second day, they sighted and had to engage a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) scouting party. After several harrowing firefights, the small American team was emergency evacuated via helicopter while under fire. Three of the men had been seriously wounded. One sentence in Willey’s report captures the disturbing predicament of the men conducting the operation—“They were definitely looking for us...”¹

According to US commanders, however, Operation *Francis Marion* (Apr.–Oct. 1967) was a stirring success. A month after its conclusion, Gen. William Westmoreland announced: “I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing!”² American politicians and military officials spread the message across the United States that fall. Known collectively as the “Progress Offensive,” operations like *Francis Marion* were heralded as great successes.³ Drawing on the combined experience of two years of fighting, conventional US and South Vietnamese forces were aided by LRRP and Special Forces units and abundant air and artillery support in an effort to stem enemy infiltration into South Vietnam. Resultant body counts and kill ratios informed the false hopes of the fall of 1967.

Located in Pleiku province along the Cambodian border, the 4th ID had fought against NVA infiltration since September 1966.⁴ One of many entrance points into South Vietnam from the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail, the region remained a hotbed of NVA activity. Enemy commanders deployed six main-line infantry regiments in Cambodian base areas near the B3 Front and tried to lure American units into combat, all the while maintaining easy escape routes back into Cambo-

1. Willey’s patrol killed seven NVA soldiers, but three of its own were wounded and a planned five-day patrol had to be cut short on the second day (4th ID AAR [11 June 1967], with Annex, 2d Brigade LRRP). See also Shelby Stanton, *Rangers at War: LRRPs in Vietnam* (NY: Ivy Books, 1993) 90–91.

2. Address, Nat’l. Press Club, Washington (21 Nov 1967).

3. See, further, Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012) 143.

4. Its 1st and 2nd brigades operated in II Corps’s Tactical Area of Operations (TAOR) near Pleiku, while the 3rd brigade and armored units were stationed in Tay Ninh province to the south. The 1st and 2nd brigades eventually participated in the 1970 Cambodian Incursion. See Shelby Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to the U.S. Army and Allies Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1961–1973* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2003) 75–76, and Martin King, M. Collins, and J. Nulton, *To War with the 4th: A Century of Frontline Combat with the US 4th Infantry Division* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2016).

dia. The goal was to inflict as much damage on the American units as possible by constantly striking them at multiple points.⁵

Operation *Francis Marion* was conceived early in 1967, as (then) Maj. Gen. William Peers of the 4th ID sought to control the western reaches of Vietnam's central highlands in II Corps's TAOR. Following previous border actions like Operation *Sam Houston* (Apr. 1967),⁶ General Peers immediately began to revamp the defensive posture of his command. He deployed the 1st and 2nd brigades of his division to the area west of Pleiku City, including the Ia Drang Valley. The 4th ID's job was to detect NVA infiltrations into South Vietnam and carry out "spoiling attacks" to prevent an enemy buildup of force in the region. In addition, it was to provide security and support for highway construction projects, the South Vietnamese refugee resettlement program, and various nation-building projects. While one brigade held a screening position and sent out reconnaissance patrols, the other was to conduct search-and-destroy missions both behind the screen and to the south along the strategically important Highway 14.⁷ As always, the intent was to hit NVA and Viet Cong (VC) forces as hard as possible. Success was gauged by body counts and kill ratios.⁸

As *Francis Marion* was just commencing, Westmoreland purveyed a story of victory to the US government, national media, and civilian population. At a briefing on 27 April to President Lyndon Johnson and his executive staff, he asserted that US forces had reached a critical "crossover"—NVA and VC forces were being killed faster than they could be replaced. The next day, he received a standing ovation at a the joint session of the houses of Congress. Citing body counts and kill ratios, the general confidently claimed the American mission in Vietnam could begin winding down in two years.⁹ Many historians have shown that, as time would tell, such claims by the American brass worsened the impending crisis of 1968 by concealing the realities of the war, regardless of how well operations like *Francis Marion* seemed to go.

General Peers and the 4th ID did not have to wait long to find the enemy. During what historians have dubbed the "Nine Days in May" phase of *Francis Marion*, American and NVA forces engaged repeatedly in the Cambodian border zone. Early on (17–18 May) two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry, led by Lt. Col. Timothy Gannon, were investigating a recent B-52 strike in the Ia Tchar valley, sandwiched between a sharp mountain ridge and the Se San River, which de-

5. The B3 Front was held by the veteran 32nd, 66th, and 88th NVA regiments near the border; three other units, the 95th Brigade and the 33rd and 24th regiments operated independently to cause confusion and inflict heavier casualties. See George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington: Ctr Mil Hist, US Army, 1998) 287.

6. *Sam Houston*, which entailed mostly border fighting, was inconclusive, despite the impression given by body counts: 155 American killed in action (KIA), as against 733 NVA—*Sam Houston* AAR 4th ID (28 June 1967).

7. After Action Report—Operation *Francis Marion* (hereafter AAR-FM) 4th ID (25 Nov 1967).

8. The US War of Attrition strategy in Vietnam has long since been discredited. Inflated numbers and constant NVA replacements made body counts worthless for measuring anything other than the tactical realities after firefights. Even Westmoreland's staff doubted the value of body count statistics—see Sorley (note 3 above) 120–22.

9. Lewis Sorley (note 3 above) 146–47 argues forcefully that Westmoreland and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, worked to change the narrative concerning body count and kill ratios in the early months of 1967; see also John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2009) 218–21.

lined the Cambodian border. They were quickly lured into an ambush: while pursuing a lone NVA scout, a full American platoon was surrounded and cut off from its fellow soldiers. Despite a rescue attempt, including air support, the beleaguered platoon was quickly overrun and destroyed. The difficult jungle terrain badly hampered American air and artillery support. The 3rd Battalion returned the next morning to find only eight of the ambushed men still alive, most of them seriously wounded. These survivors spoke of a well nourished, determined enemy force of battalion strength. Twenty-nine Americans had been killed and thirty-one wounded, as against 119 NVA bodies recovered.¹⁰ The 3rd Battalion's initial encounter on the B3 Front revealed a determined enemy with a well conceived plan to make US forces' engagements with them costly and demoralizing.

After several days of fighting across General Peer's defensive screen, Lt. Col. Thomas Lynch and two companies of the 8th Infantry's 3rd Battalion's were moving across the lower Ia Tchar valley when one of them came under NVA sniper fire targeting officers. By the end of the skirmish, every officer in the company had been either killed or severely wounded. Now led by a 1st Sergeant, the company withheld a planned attack to await reinforcements from the other company. Intense close-quarter fighting (often less than ten meters) ensued. It required American artillery and air support to drive the NVA force back across the border. Colonel Lynch's engagements on 26 May marked the end of the expensive Nine Days campaign. Though Lynch claimed 275-300 enemies killed, only 96 NVA were confirmed dead; his own men suffered 79 casualties (10 KIA, 69 wounded). Once again the NVA had appeared well prepared and supplied: Lynch reported noticing the clean, fresh uniforms worn by the enemy's battalion-sized force.¹¹

These two Nine Days engagements typified the NVA tactic of deploying small scouting parties to discover and lure American units into actions against larger units along the border. After inflicting as much damage as they could, they retreated into the sanctuary of Cambodia before American air power and artillery could be brought to bear effectively. Simply put, the NVA chose the best moments and locations to confront its enemy.

The five major firefights of the Nine Days killed (a confirmed) 367 NVA soldiers and 61 Americans. The US Army expended over 30,000 artillery rounds and made 219 tactical airstrikes, including 14 by B-52s.¹² Though the 6:1 kill ratio favored the Americans, the calculus changes when the wounded are taken into consideration. Counting the nearly 200 American soldiers wounded in battle brings the overall casualty numbers much closer to even. Moreover, it was clear that previous operations, including *Francis Marion*, had not deterred enemy force buildup in the region; whatever American statistics might indicate, the initiative manifestly lay with the NVA and their VC compatriots.¹³

Francis Marion is emblematic of the American war effort in 1967 in its combination of a wide variety of American and allied unit types, technologies, and programs. A principal US asset was the fast evolving divisional LRRP teams. First implemented in 1965 by members of the 101st Airborne Division, these small, four-to-six-man teams conducted advanced reconnaissance for Amer-

10. Colonel Gannon stressed the difficulty of directing artillery volleys in the thick, smoke-filled jungle valley: see Combat Operations AAR (18-24 May) and AAR-FM; also MacGarrigle (note 5 above) 293-94.

11. Combat Operations AAR (26 May 1967) and AAR-FM.

12. MacGarrigle (note 5 above) 296.

13. See, further, Warren Wilkins, *Nine Days in May: The Battles of the 4th Infantry Division on the Cambodian Border, 1967* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2017).

ican divisions in the field. Eventually they were expanded to Field Force-level LRRP companies and the MACV Recondo¹⁴ School was established in 1966.¹⁵

General Peer's 4th ID was the most enthusiastic about LRRPs. They became operational during the previous Operation *Sam Houston* and figured prominently in the strategy for *Francis Marion*. Each brigade had its LRRP platoon, comprising fifty-six American and six indigenous personnel, organized into five-man teams that conducted extended patrols beyond enemy lines. Maximizing cover and using stealth tactics, they gathered intelligence on enemy troop movements, carried out ambushes, reconnoitered fresh artillery and air strikes for damage analysis, and prepped areas for incoming conventional missions. The LRRPs were Division's eyes and ears in the field, gathering actionable intelligence.¹⁶

During *Francis Marion*, the 1st Brigade's LRRP teams patrolled the mountain valleys near the Cambodian border. In their first encounter with an NVA patrol, one team decided to remain concealed and avoid small arms fire, instead calling in artillery support. Two NVA soldiers were killed in a strike powerful enough "to yank trees out of the ground."¹⁷ General Peers kept 35–40 percent of 4th ID's LRRP teams in the field at all times. Over the course of the operation, they conducted over five hundred patrols. Two-thirds of them resulted in enemy sightings and a full quarter involved firefights. LRRPs during *Francis Marion* killed eighty-eight of the enemy while suffering only a single loss of their own.¹⁸

Besides LRRPs, the 4th ID relied on Special Forces units for intelligence and reconnaissance gathering. Working with indigenous forces in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group¹⁹ program, these small units of highly trained soldiers lived in isolated camps with the civilian populations of the central highlands. The outposts drew constant NVA artillery, mortar, and rocket attacks as well as probing ground assaults. *Francis Marion* also involved helping with refugee and resettlement efforts. Notably, members of both the 1st and 2nd brigades Civic Affairs programs helped relocate some 8,700 Montagnard people from forty-seven hamlets to a more defensible position along Highway 19.²⁰

By summer 1967, the 4th ID realized that too many of its veteran soldiers were being rotated back home. The one-year tour of duty regimen sapped the readiness of combat units in the field, as fresh replacements arrived woefully unprepared. Colonel Wright learned the value of experienced soldiers in a July mission to investigate a B-52 strike, a risky business, given his under-strength companies and new noncommissioned and company-grade officers. The NVA loved to

14. Viz., US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Reconnaissance and Commando.

15. See James A. Sandy, "And on the Fourth Day They Spotted Us': The MACV Recondo School and the LRRPs in Vietnam," *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* 36.2 (2016) 141–65.

16. AAR-FM, 9–10.

17. AAR 4th ID (11 June 1967), Annex: 2d Brigade LRRP.

18. AAR-FM, 9–10.

19. The CIDG was formed in 1961 as a bulwark against the spread of communism to the ethnically diverse villages of the region. Transferred from CIA control to MACV in 1963, it worked with American advisors and Special Forces personnel in border reconnaissance and other counterinsurgency missions until 1970. See John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2005) 128–29.

20. AAR-FM, 37–40.

set booby traps and ambushes around recent B-52 strike zones and wait for the inspection force to show up. On 11 June, Wright's force found itself engaged on multiple fronts; the NVA rapidly encircled two of his companies. Errors by inexperienced men, poor artillery support, and awful weather conditions put the company in grave danger of being overrun. Only the arrival of reinforcements shifted the battle in their favor against the NVA, which evaporated back across the border. The American force sustained 72 casualties (31 KIA, 34 WIA, 7 MIA) while killing a reported 142 NVA soldiers.²¹ His men's inexperience and the poor weather had nullified US technological advantages. That the rotation and replacement system was a massive flaw in the American effort in Vietnam was glaringly proven during *Francis Marion*. Between August and October 1967, the 4th ID lost ten thousand experienced personnel to rotation, fully three-quarters of its organized strength.²²

Francis Marion symbolizes the whole American effort in Vietnam, exposing the false hopes for victory. The touted body count and kill ratio (1600 NVA vs. 300 Americans) were *deliberately* misleading. In fact, only 1,200 enemy bodies were ever counted. The standard protocol was to increase enemy body counts by 28 percent to adjust for those removed or not recovered. Adding in the wounded, US casualties surpassed 1,200,²³ and the true cost of *Francis Marion* comes into focus, as the adjusted ratio nears 1:1. General Peers and the 4th ID called the operation a success, like past operations of the same ilk. Official reports claimed the Nine Days battles halted enemy advances, but hinted that little enemy contact occurred after May. Peers noted that the enemy had changed his tactics and resorted to smaller infiltration units that the Americans could not effectively locate and engage.²⁴

In November 1967, the recently appointed US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, appeared on the CBS program *Face the Nation*. Notoriously pro-war, he boasted of the success and momentum of the year's operations: "I think we are beginning to see the light at the end of tunnel [in Vietnam] ...,"²⁵ parroting Westmoreland's glowing predictions of the previous April. Only a few short months later, the Battle of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive shattered such rosy assessments once and for all. During the latter, over eighty thousand NVA and VC troops simultaneously attacked every major city and military installation in South Vietnam. As the fiftieth anniversary of Operation *Francis Marion* has recently passed, its re-investigation continues to shed light on the abominable quagmire of the American War in Vietnam.

21. Combat Operations AAR (11–12 July 1967); AAR-FM.

22. MacGarrigle (note 5 above) 309.

23. Summary of Friendly Losses, AAR-FM, 44.

24. AAR-FM, 84.

25. Transcript: "Ambassador Bunker on *Face the Nation*," *Dept. of State Bulletin* 57 (2 Oct 1967) 416–21.