

## Fortress Holds Out Against North Vietnamese

# 'Place of Angels' — Hell on Earth for Marines

By THOMAS CHEATHAM

CON THIEN, South Vietnam (UPI) — The "place of angels" — the name Vietnamese gave centuries ago to a hillock that is now the fortress of Con Thien — has become a hell on earth for U.S. Marines defending it from North Vietnamese attacks.

More than 50 Marines have been killed and more than 700 wounded since Sept. 1 in holding the fortress, the northernmost U.S. outpost on South Vietnam's northern border.

For the last four days, it has been under virtual around-the-clock heavy artillery and mortar fire. Thursday alone, 16 Marines were killed and more than 170 wounded. Friday, 6 died and 72 were wounded.

Ranking Marine officers say the situation will probably get worse before it gets better at the fortress that Vietnamese centuries ago regarded as fit for a junior Olympus.

CON THIEN is a bald little knoll, 518 feet high, lying two miles south of the six-mile-wide demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams. Because it is what the military calls "a commanding piece of terrain," over the flat land of the area, the Marines by necessity established an outpost here in April.

Day in and day out, rockets, mortars and artillery in and north of the buffer zone bombarded the outpost, sometimes with as many as 200 rounds in 10 minutes. The Marine casualty lists grow. So does the fear of an attempt to overrun the outpost.

Despite a concentrated U.S. bombing attempt at stopping the shelling and preventing a North Vietnamese troop buildup, Marine intelligence says the North Vietnamese have 100

artillery pieces in use against Con Thien and probably 35,000 men inside the DMZ.

What will happen to the Marines on the "place of angels," once the fall monsoon rains set in in a fortnight or so?

They got an inkling this week when more than 20 inches of

rain fell in three days.

North Vietnamese troops broke the perimeter almost nightly, feeling out the defense. American air support was nullified during heavy rainstorms. Supplies were short, and ammunition had priority over food and water on helicop-

ter resupply runs. Bunkers were flooded, and the men's feet ached from being wet for days.

The attacks continued.

"You know, your girl forgets to write, the paymaster forgets to pay you, the supply officer forgets to bring food, but Charlie — Charlie never forgets

you," one Marine told UPI photographer Dana Stone during an attack.

Marine commanders know the North Vietnamese are capable of attacking Con Thien on the ground with several hundred men, and to overrun the outpost would be a great propaganda victory.

But Col. Keith Houghton, the Marine intelligence commander, says the Communists would have to pay "a terrible price" in lives to take Con Thien — "and I don't think he's willing to pay that price."

THE LEATHERNECKS are working feverishly to complete an all-weather road between Cam Lo, seven miles south of Con Thien, to the outpost to alleviate helicopter supply limitations when the weather turns bad. But time is running short, and the mud is getting deeper.

The Marines seem to be banking their hopes on the theory that the monsoon will hurt the North Vietnamese more than it will hurt the Marines. The Leatherneck commanders say the heavy rains will drive the North Vietnamese to high ground and limit their movements through flooded lowlands.

Spotter pilots say, however, that most of the hostile artillery positions are already on high ground in the southern reaches of North Vietnam. Flooded rivers south of the DMZ are already limiting the Marines' movements.

Meantime, the young Marines at the "place of the angels" are digging their trenches deeper and waiting — waiting for the heavy rains and what they will bring. Every day, as the artillery shells, rockets and mortars come thumping in, they get a clue.



PHOTOGRAPHER WOUNDED — Henri Huet, prize-winning Associated Press photographer, grimaces as a friend dresses a leg wound Huet suffered when hit by shrapnel during a Com-

munist shelling of Con Thien. The Marine stronghold has been under almost constant shelling by the North Vietnamese. The outpost is two miles south of the demilitarized zone. —AP Photo