

## Operation Chinook:

# Three rugged days before truce began

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PHU BAI—Waves of Viet Cong soldiers moving behind barrages of enemy mortars pounded Marine lines from dusk to dawn marking the last day of fighting on Operation Chinook before the Christmas truce.

The 3rd Battalion, Twenty-Sixth Regiment, 3rd Division Marines killed more than 50 communist soldiers during the night-long battle. This brought the enemy dead total to 154 in three days of fighting.

Marine casualties were light.

More than 400 rounds of enemy mortar fire pounded the Marine positions during the action, starting at dusk on Dec. 23 and continuing through the early morning hours of Christmas Eve. The communists broke contact and fled at dawn.

Fighting from water-filled holes in torrential rains during the all-night engagement, the Marines drove back an estimated three companies of hard-core VC.

The communists came within 10 yards of the Marine lines at times in attempts to overrun the positions.

A flareship was on station in an attempt to illuminate the bat-

tlefield, but thick cloud cover hampered efforts. Marine artillery illumination was fired below the clouds and the battleground suddenly lit up catching enemy soldiers in the open. Rifles and machineguns caught them in a deadly cross-fire as they scurried for cover.

The grey light of dawn uncovered bodies, weapons, blood trails and blood-soaked rags littering the crater-pocked battlefield as the Marines moved through the area.

It ended the third such engagement in as many nights since the battalion took up positions in the rolling hills 12 miles north of Hue.

The battalion had been in Vietnam only two weeks when Operation Chinook began. They have become battle-tested veterans in a hurry.

At the end of three days of intense fighting the Marines have averaged more than 50 enemy kills a day. They captured five Viet Cong and seized more than 40 automatic weapons and light machineguns.

More than 200 Chinese communist-type grenades have been

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taken from enemy bodies and several rice caches have been seized and destroyed.

"I" Co. alone accounted for more than 50 of the total enemy kills during three hours of savage fighting on the second night of the operation.

As the Christmas truce brought a lull in the fighting, the Marines bailed out their fighting holes, reinforced their positions and tried to catch some needed sleep.