

ARVN Take Over An Hoa

AN HOA!

To the thousands of Leathernecks who have served their tours in Vietnam there, those two words evoke many memories.

Laughter and pain, rain and heat, dust and mud, rockets and land assaults, and the sense of pride in accomplishment, the name An Hoa Combat Base brings to the men who knew this orange scar of clay near the Arizona Territory, 20 miles southwest of here.

An Hoa, as far as Marines are concerned, is now another illustrious name to be added to the long list where Marines have fought. One of the first Marine units to help defend a vital industrial complex under construction there, the 2d Battalion, Fifth Marines, arrived on Dec. 30, 1966.

The battalion was the last Marine unit to leave the combat base as it was turned over to the 1st Battalion, 51st Regiment, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), on Sept. 20, 1970.

For years the scene of bustling activity, many datelines filled the newspapers of the world, starting, "AN HOA, Vietnam." Names like Go Noi Island, Liberty Bridge, the Phu Nhuan Region, Arizona Territory, Football Island, Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, Alligator Lake and many, many more come to mind when An Hoa is mentioned.

The vast An Hoa Basin was the stage for many major operations and large scale battles initiated not only by Free World Forces but also the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong.

Aside from the construction of the industrial complex there, the only source of soft coal in Vietnam is a mine nearby. An Hoa lies in the path of enemy infiltration from the mountains west and southwest of Danang to the country's second largest city. It

is one of the many keystones in the security of the Danang Vital Area.

From a helicopter high over the Arizona Territory, An Hoa is set off by the brilliant orange clay compound surrounded by verdant fields, lakes, rivers and scenic mountain terrain. On the ground it's quite different.

They even have a name for it: An Hoa Mud. In the monsoon season the An Hoa Basin seems to be the draining point for every drop of water that falls in the region. Vast quagmires stall machines and men alike. Still, the elements were overcome in the past and movement was always somehow possible.

When seasonal rains seemed to be at their peak everyone prayed the approaching summer would hasten the sun's return. When it did the mud turned to a fine dust that settled and worked its way into everything, making life miserably orange tinted. A huge dust cloud visible for miles marked the area and everyone prayed for rain again.

Just outside the multiple rows of concertina wire that rings the combat base lies one of the most dangerous regions in Vietnam —

the Arizona Territory. Named after an operation conducted by the Seventh Marine Regiment in June 1967, the area is pitted with deadly booby traps and land mines. An Hoa is the gateway to the territory and its deathtraps.

Yet the Marines there have tamed these one-time enemy strongholds and have moved about the area freely in search of contact with the enemy during recent months.

Major battles have raged across the area. In May 1969, an estimated battalion of NVA was caught on the banks of the Vu Gua River by units of the 2d Bn., 5th Marines. After the din of battle had ceased, 200 of the enemy lay dead on the battlefield.

Operation TAYLOR COMMON, one of the largest operations conducted in the area, ended with 1,266 of the enemy killed.

Units working out of An Hoa participated in many of the "grand scale" operations such as Union I and II, Pipestone Canyon, Allen Brook, Mameluke Thrust, Oklahoma Hills and others.

An Hoa Leathernecks in battalion and multi-battalion strength engaged similar sized Viet Cong and NVA units in the area. Enemy kills in the hundreds each month were common.

In the midst of this blooded ground, An Hoa bore the brunt of savage ground assaults that sometimes breached the defensive wires and had to be stopped inside the perimeter.

Rocket and mortar attacks made living in sandbagged bunkers a necessity. Daily rocket attacks, an enemy harassment tactic, brought life down to the bare essentials. Showered and shaved Leathernecks in fresh jungle utilities were not to be found on the combat base.

With the continued Marine success in the An Hoa Basin, life became relatively easier. The direction changed from pitched battles to small unit action. Pacification of the entire area advanced rapidly as combined Marine, Regional Force and Popular Force units secured former enemy sanctuaries. Whole villages were relocated, leaving entire areas devoid of civilian inhabitants and denying much needed food and shelter from prowling enemy units.

As the Vietnamization of the war progressed, soldiers from ARVN units began taking over more and more responsibilities in the field. Many of An Hoa's sister components changed hands.

An Hoa, once a respite and refuge for tired "bush" Marines, where a man could take a shower, eat a hot meal, see a movie, have a beer and relax in relative safety, was a home to many Leathernecks.

The 5th Marines have since departed; their colors fly elsewhere in the Republic of Vietnam, and the ARVN now hold this important bastion. But the memory of An Hoa remains and possibly, An Hoa also remembers its Marines.

Story by Cpl. "J" Richards, photos by USMC photographers

