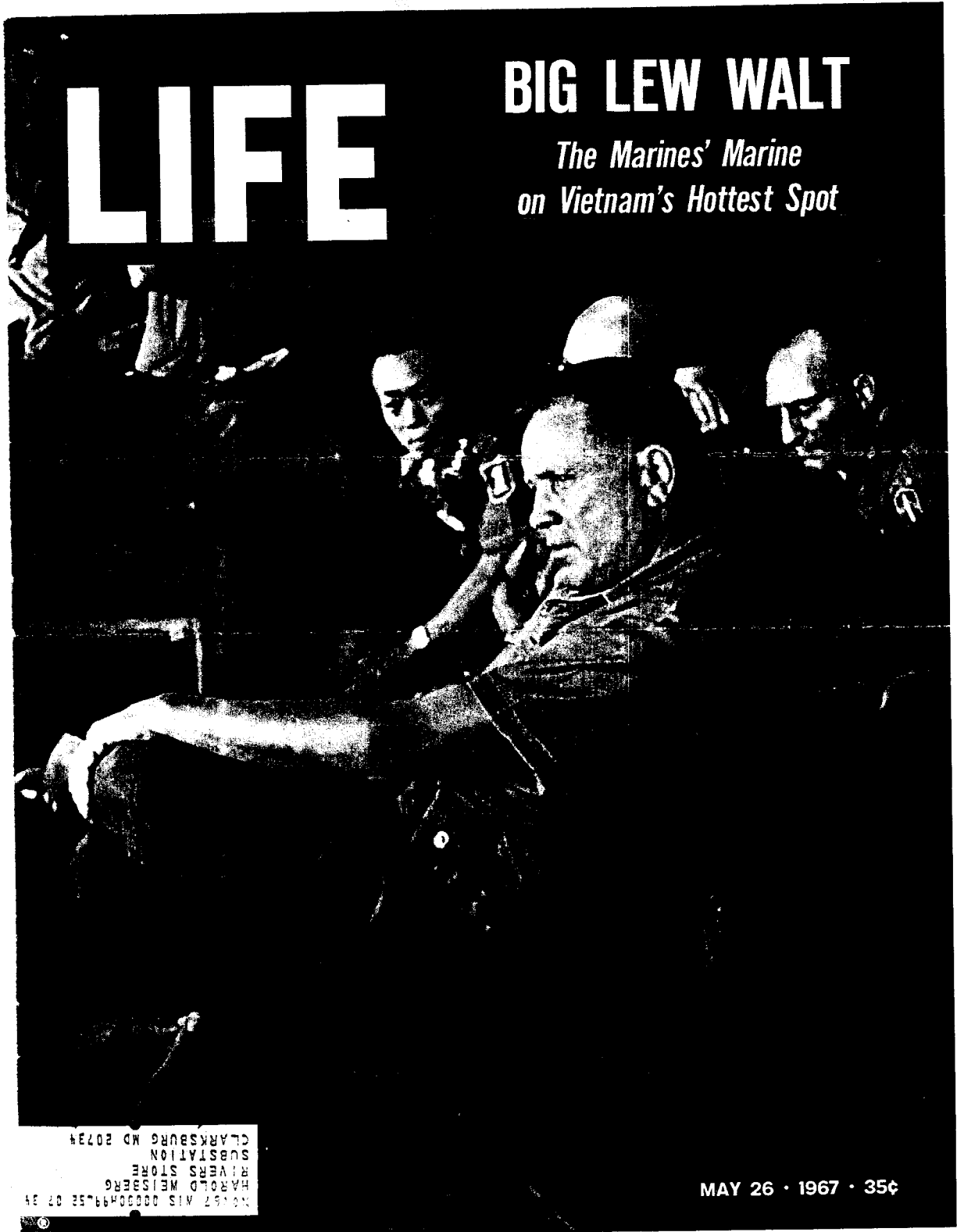


# LIFE

## BIG LEW WALT

*The Marines' Marine  
on Vietnam's Hottest Spot*



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by COLIN LEINSTER

During his two years of duty in South Vietnam, this burly three-star Marine general has been in the thick of the fiercest battles of the war. In the bloodied jungles below the Demilitarized Zone, at unnamed places like Hill 881, he leads thousands of individual heroes who are fortunate to have a Marine like Lt. General Lew Walt for their commander. As the head of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force's 80,000 leathernecks, plus

a division of the Army, Walt is "a Marine's Marine," tough in the old tradition. He is also a man of compassion—and well suited to fight the two wars that have to be fought in Vietnam. Almost from the day he arrived in Vietnam as a junior two-star general, he has insisted that the war had to be fought

as much to win the confidence of the people of South Vietnam as to beat down the enemy. Today the general is as proud of his Marines' pacification successes as of their battlefield victories.

Of an evening one can see the general sitting on the beach which fronts his home at Danang. He is

surrounded by 250 village kids, watching a Donald Duck movie. As befits his rank, size and 54 years, he has a chair. The children sit on their haunches on the white sand. Out to sea, some 50 yards away, a group of fishermen scull their sampan away from the shoals—"my neighbors," Walt calls them; some are fathers of kids on the sand.

Then, as Donald Duck's last cacophonous, indignant squawk sounds off across the water, the general picks his way through the

CONTINUED

## THE TWO WARS OF GENERAL LEW WALT

*The Marine commander's fight to win the people and destroy the enemy*



**LEW WALT** CONTINUED

kids and the freshly emptied soft-drink bottles scattered on the sand. He trudges to his beachside bungalow, goes indoors, sits down and starts going through the intelligence reports.

Lew Walt commands I (the first) Corps, the northernmost segment of four chunks into which South Vietnam has been chopped by the military. From the DMZ at the 17th Parallel, I Corps stretches southward over 10,000 square miles. The 168-mile coastline is spectacularly beautiful and fertile,

and the two million Vietnamese in this area are heavily sprinkled with active Vietcong. Here North Vietnamese regulars can mount operations with short supply lines and also reinforce local guerrillas. This is the first stop for reinforcements which infiltrate from the North along the latticework of paths and tracks known as the Ho Chi Minh trail.

This is also the place where in recent weeks Lew Walt's I Corps has been taking the heaviest casualties. Around the main sea and air base at Danang, at the forward Marine base at Dong Ha, at posts

along the DMZ and the Laotian border and at Army artillery positions like Camp J. J. Carroll and Gio Linh, Walt's men have been drummed with artillery, mortars and rockets, sniped at and scorched with flame throwers, stormed and even overrun. Artillery crews have duelled across the 17th Parallel, and Marines swap shots one day with enemies they hardly see and fight hand to hand with them the next.

**W**alt—every burly, football player inch of him—is the starched epitome of the U.S. Marine. His

"chewing outs" are in the best tradition of boot camp; even lesser-starred generals dread what they call Walt's "twin blues"—a pair of cornflower-blue eyes which, when they go frosty, can really cut a man down. Since Walt's temper is worst before noon, staff officers have been known to schedule whole days around the hours when "the blues" are most likely to be at their iciest.

Eight in the morning, or 0800 hours, is peak danger time; that is when overnight bad news is most likely to reach Walt. By 1000 hours explosions are less likely, but it is



still advisable not to push your luck. By 1200 hours those near Walt are relatively safe, but even so, officers who arrive to see Walt about unpleasant matters are advised to come back later—after, say, 1300. But, according to his aides, Walt's temper has beneficial fallout. After the explosion, after his clenched muscles have ceased to twist, Walt shifts into a mood of cunning and shrewdness and does his best strategic thinking.

This is a source of comfort to staff officers who, often through no fault of their own, get flayed when things go wrong. Moreover,

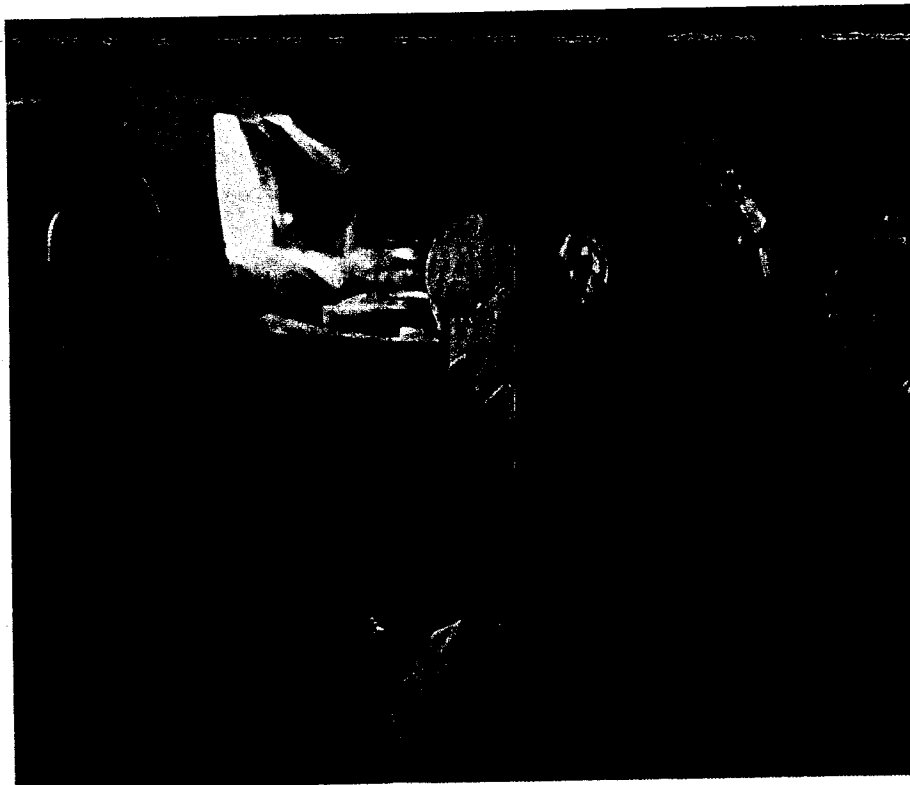
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*At Con Thien outpost a well-aimed mortar attack (below, left) sends Walt (left) and aides dashing for cover.*

*Walt covers his ears (above) as hill-top mortars, which guard a coal mine, open up on suspected enemy positions.*

*In a sandbag-reinforced bunker (below), he listens intently to a report on North Vietnamese troops near Hue.*



***At the outposts and in the bunkers  
when the mortar fire zeroes in***



*Surrounded by children, Walt stoops for a handshake and smile. This meeting was at the refugee hamlet of Trung Phuoc where Marines provide medicine, protection and also built a school.*

## ***A three-star handshake for friends***

## LEW WALT CONTINUED

when the flaying is over and a man's skin is back in place, Walt will make amends: "He'll call you in, put his arm on your shoulder and tell you something you just worked on was fine. Maybe he'll tell you he doesn't know what he'd do without you. Maybe he'll tell you to stop by in the evening for a swim and dinner at his house. You feel good then."

Officers in the field get the same "twin blues" treatment. One young major, who got back from rest and rehabilitation to find his command post had been badly hit by Vietcong, remarked miserably that the defense had been the responsibility of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), which had provided the bulk of men in the command. Walt, who was standing nearby, overheard. He whirled, froze the major with a stare and snapped, "Defense was not ARVN responsibility! When Marines defend, they defend all the way!" The major grew instant goose bumps.

Minutes later, Walt had his arm draped across the major's shoulder: "They may attack again. They know where your defenses are now, so you have to move them. It's like football. If you know the other team's position you can knock them over." They parted with Walt grinning broadly and the major puffed up as if he had won a medal.

A civilian might find Walt's changes of mood suspect, but Marines don't. "He's sincere all right," one said. "It wouldn't work if he were anything else." It is certainly true that Walt exudes charm and a kind of rustic graciousness. He makes daily sorties into the field, by helicopter. Marines wryly call him "our squad leader in the sky," and all of Walt's men spend their days half expecting to find his crisply starched figure beside them, prodding with questions about the enemy, about the new M-16 automatic rifles, about supplies, chow—and home. To the leathernecks he is not just a three-star general going through motions; he is a fellow Marine who *does* give a damn. Once, after Walt had visited a lonely outpost, his personal chopper returned the same day and showered the men with tubes of toothpaste. Again, after a visit to another camp, Walt wrote personally to thank a Marine cook who produced a nightly batch of fresh pastries for returning patrols.

Walt notches up to 10,000 helicopter miles a month, usually at 120 knots in the chopper numbered 13. He insists on flying so low that the pilot has to yo-yo over every bump in the ground and sidestep every tree as Walt turns

his twin blues downward, searching for the enemy.

Snipers take potshots at No. 13 and sometimes hit it. Once a ricochet struck Walt full in the throat, then dropped harmlessly into his lap. Another nicked his right cheek, but Walt paid no heed and went on to meet with people who later remarked that Big Lew had cut himself shaving.

Walt's passion for trouble spots sometimes gets him on the scene too soon. In May, on the 13th anniversary of the French defeat at Dienbienphu, he choppered into Con Thien, a small Marine camp just south of the DMZ. The camp had just beaten off 1,200 crack North Vietnamese troops who attacked with flame throwers and mortars. Walt and his aides were touring the camp when the mortars opened up once again.

"Incoming," somebody yelled, and shells started exploding.

Colonel James Barrett, who has served with Walt off and on for 25 years, was hit in the jaw by a fragment. Captain William Lee, who had extended his Vietnam tour to stay on as Walt's aide, was

knocked unconscious with both eardrums burst. Walt leaped into a bunker and was unhurt.

Luck seems always to have been at Walt's side, especially during World War II, when as a lieutenant colonel he took part in the Marine landings on the Pacific islands of Tulagi and Florida. He and four other Marines were swimming a 70-yard stretch of water when a Japanese machine gun opened up, killing the first and second Marines, wounding the third, missing the fourth (Walt) and wounding the fifth. Walt grabbed one of the wounded men and dragged him ashore farther along the coast. Exhausted, they fell asleep under a bush. Moments after they awoke and moved away, a mortar shell exploded on the spot where Walt had been lying. Still later, Walt was stretched out between two Marines, talking, when another mortar shell landed in front of them, killed the man on both sides of him and left Walt untouched. He says, "I figured I'd had my share of luck that day, so I went round to the sick bay where the man I'd rescued was. While I was talking a sniper killed him."

When Walt took over I Corps

in Vietnam in 1965, Marines were being shot down in and around Danang. Walt lived in day-to-day apprehension that enemy mortars would turn their attention to the Danang airfield. In the countryside, Vietcong guerrillas operated freely. For two months, Walt said, "I just fooled and floundered around."

The fooling and the floundering ceased with a visit Walt paid to the hamlet of Le My, just outside Danang. Long held by Vietcong, the hamlet had recently been liberated by U.S. Marines. Walt, as always, went to see for himself, and during the tour he stopped to exchange a few words with an elderly couple. He stayed to talk with them for three hours, nudging them with questions as they described what their lives had been like first under the French, then under the Vietcong. That conversation, Walt will tell you, was his introduction to what the war in Vietnam is about. Walt theorized that if the 18,000 Vietnamese living within mortar range around Danang could be turned into friends, they not only wouldn't help blast the airfield but they might also provide useful information about the enemy.

Making friends in the Danang area was relatively easy. In the countryside it was a different story until, in August 1965, Lew Walt launched his Combined Action Company (CAC) program. He sent out the first of his squads of carefully screened volunteers, none of them officers, to work closely with platoons of local Popular Forces protecting villages from the Vietcong—and to make friends. This order to work with local Popular Forces (PFs) met with some skepticism. The PFs are only part-time soldiers. They sandwich their fighting between farming and fishing, and they farm and fish better than they fight. Walt, however, reasoned that because the PFs were at the bottom of the military totem pole they were the best contacts Marines could have. His CAC units all had the same orders: help protect the villages, get to know the people, find the local Communist infrastructure and put it out of business. More often than not, the main Communist force depends on the support of teachers, nurses, tax collectors and laborers. If these people could be located and won over, Walt argued, the Communists would be hit where it hurts.

Walt has responded to the villages who fear Vietcong retribution by guaranteeing that he won't move any CAC unit until the fighting is over. He has kept his word; not one of the 70-odd units in the field has been shifted, and it may be significant that 50% of the Marines working in CAC units have

## Visits from the 'squad leader in the sky'

At Danang, Walt awards the Silver Star to Lance Cpl. Edmund Daley



## LEW WALT CONTINUED

extended their Vietnam tour of duty. Walt expects 114 units to be at work by the end of 1967. He suggests that the reason Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces keep hitting his pacification bases is that the program is beginning to have effect. There are statistics to back him up. In November 1965 there were 87 villages in I Corps that could be considered "secure"; today there are 197. At that time 413,000 Vietnamese civilians lived in "secure" areas controlled by I Corps; today the figure is 1.1 million.

These successes have had their price: the total of Marines killed in Vietnam has climbed to more than 2,600. After inspecting a mortared outpost Walt will go to a school, stand knee-deep in children and tell you: "You've got to keep perspective." Then he will talk of a Vietnam 10 or 15 years from now, when these children are educated and able to fend for themselves. Vietnam must wait that long, Walt says, because the current teen-agers are a generation lost to another cause. But he thinks it is a worthwhile wait: "This is a beautiful country and the people have great potential."

Walt makes an average of three trips a week to hospitals. If he finds a wounded man who doesn't have his Purple Heart, he gives him one on the spot. "We'll take care of the paperwork later," he says.

He talks awkwardly and shyly to the men, and he tells them how the action in which they were wounded turned out. "You did a great job there," he told one bandaged Marine. "You know how many Vietcong you got? Sixty-seven." Walt then pinned on the medal and made difficult small talk. As he turned to move on, the Marine grabbed his hand and said: "How many did you say we got, sir?" "Sixty-seven," said Walt. The Marine lay back, smiling.

Walt takes a photographer with him to record the medal-pinning on Polaroid so the pictures can be handed over then and there. In bed, in wheelchair or on crutches is the recipient; in the background, somehow always well in the background, stands Walt. "For your family," he says as he hands over the photograph. More often than not, the Marine will entrust the medal to the mails and keep the photograph for himself.

The hospital visits drain Walt. After a call at the naval support activity hospital in Danang, where he talked to seven wounded men, one of whom died that night (another died two days later), Walt's "blues" were shiny with tears. As he took his seat in the helicopter he said, "It makes me feel very

humble. It makes me realize how little I've done for my country." Next morning Walt pressured his aide to find a Silver Star citation. One of the wounded men, blinded by a shellburst, was being flown home and Walt wanted to make the presentation himself before the man left. "He can't see, Bill," he said. "We've got to have something to tell him." With minutes to spare, they knelt by the wounded man's stretcher at the airfield, Captain Lee reading the hurried-along citation while Walt pinned the medal to the sheet (page 83).

Walt was seriously wounded in 1944 at Cape Gloucester, New Guinea, where he won the Navy Cross. He ran through a hail of bullets and started to man, single-handed, a 37-mm gun toward the

top of a ridge where it could be used against the Japanese. Other Marines fired barrage after barrage to clear a path through the jungle. They made the peak and fought off five counterattacks. Later the ridge was named for Walt, who was shot in the shoulder and evacuated to Australia. Nine months later he was awarded a Gold Star in lieu of a second Navy Cross at Peleliu.

Walt has displayed the same kind of stubborn courage in Vietnam. During last year's political unrest, government troops decided to blow a bridge Walt wanted intact. The charges had already been placed when Walt stomped to the middle of the bridge and had a heated argument with a young Vietnamese officer. Finally the officer gave a signal to blow up the

bridge along with himself, Walt and other officers. Nothing happened. Moments earlier Walt's men had disconnected the charges.

On another occasion American planes accidentally bombed a Marine billet and wounded several Marines. Livid, Walt telephoned a senior Air Force officer and told him that if the airplanes weren't grounded he, Walt, would shoot them out of the sky. The threat was still hanging, uncalled and unwithdrawn, when Walt got a telephone call from Washington. Walt stood his ground and promised to take full responsibility. Washington hung up, and the planes were grounded.

In training days, Lew Walt was thought of as "a nice hick." He was a country boy, all right; by the time he was seven, he was riding a pony to herd the 1,000 head of cattle his father had on their Kansas ranch. The seventh of 13 children, he was orphaned young and he worked his way through high school and Colorado State College, where he got a degree in chemistry and captained the college football team. He was weighing a job with duPont against a professional football tryout when the Marine Corps—"I had hardly ever heard of them"—offered him the chance for a commission.

"I still remember reports on Lew Walt as a company commander. Outstanding!" says Major General Raymond G. Davis, now Marine Corps assistant chief of staff for manpower planning. "And I remember them on up through battalion, regiment, division—what level. He has a fine appreciation of how to get the most out of people, weapons and units. That's what tactics are all about."

General Walt has always been deeply concerned about the relationship between officers and their men. For it is a relationship on which esprit and combat success both depend. During an inspection at Camp Lejeune, N.C. in 1961, when Walt was the Second Division's assistant commander, he asked a private the kind of policy question a private could not possibly answer. The private thought hard. "The Lieutenant told me," he said apologetically, "but I just forgot."

After the inspection Walt spoke to the lieutenant. "You must take good care of your men," he said. "Why, sir?" asked the lieutenant. "Because they take good care of you," said Walt.

Every officer in Vietnam is there for a 13-month tour of duty. After Walt's was up, he asked to stay another year. The Pentagon was glad to agree. Next week, the Marine's Marine comes home.

## A country boy from a Kansas ranch



*Grinning, Walt holds two pups of a litter of eight from his pet dog, Lady. Below, pistol at his hip, he vigorously strides through an inspection tour of Marine defenses at the An Hoa industrial complex.*

