OPERATION PRAIRIE

2ND BATTALION, 5TH MARINES

1st Marine Division | Republic of Vietnam | 3 August 1966 – 31 January 1967

FIELD	DETAIL
Operation Name	Operation Prairie (retrospectively Prairie I, to distinguish it from Prairie II, III and IV in 1967)
Dates of Operation	3 August 1966 – 31 January 1967 (whole operation). Company H, 2/5 in the operation: 30 September – 23 November 1966
Mission Purpose / Objective	Prevent the North Vietnamese Army 324B Division from crossing the DMZ and establishing a major base area in northern Quang Tri Province. 2/5 was rushed north from Chu Lai when late-September intelligence predicted a multi-division NVA offensive across the DMZ.
Locations / Cities	Quang Tri Province, immediately south of the DMZ; Dong Ha; Con Thien; Cam Lo District; Gio Linh; Leatherneck Square (bounded by Con Thien, Gio Linh, Dong Ha and Cam Lo). Departure point: Hill 69, Chu Lai TAOR.
TAOR	Operation Prairie TAOR, eastern half (4th Marines), Quang Tri Province; 4th Marines AO extending about 5,000 metres east of Con Thien; Leatherneck Square. 2/5 remained OPCON 3d Marine Division, 4th Marines through October 1966.
UTM Coordinates	Hill 69 (departure, 30 Sep 1966): BT 466073. Battalion CP Group ambush, 17 Oct 1966: YD 117678. Company H sweep with tanks, 17 Oct 1966: YD 120666. Con Thien: 16°54′35″N 106°58′48″E (geographic).
USMC Units Involved	English; 1/4, 3/4, 3/7, 1/3, 2/9; 12th Marines artillery.
2/5 Companies Participated	Company F; Company G; Company H; H&S Company. 2/5 (-) with Companies F, G and H flew to Dong Ha.
Mission Results	30 Sep 1966: Company H and Bravo Command Group left Hill 69 at 0530H, were airlifted from Chu Lai and reached Dong Ha at 0900H to set up the battalion support base; the rest of 2/5 followed that night. 12–14 Oct: Company H in heavy contact with NVA units – 16 NVA confirmed killed and 6 weapons captured on 14 Oct. 17 Oct: Battalion CP Group ambushed; Company H swept southwest with tanks. Late Oct: 2/5 took over Con Thien from the ARVN. The NVA did not establish its base area south of the DMZ; the expected offensive never came.
USMC KIA	Whole operation: about 200 (Shulimson) to 226 Marines killed. Company H: 1 KIA (12 Oct) and 2 KIA (14 Oct) documented. 2/5 for October 1966: 22 KIA plus 2 died of wounds.
USMC Wounded	Whole operation: well over 1,000 (1,159 commonly cited). Company H: 3 WIA (12 Oct) and 5 WIA (14 Oct) documented. 2/5 for October 1966: 137 WIA.
Enemy KIA	Company H: 8 NVA confirmed, rising to 16 confirmed, on 14 Oct. 2/5 for October 1966: about 89 confirmed. Whole operation: 1,397 claimed.
Enemy Wounded	Unknown

NOTES & SOURCE REFERENCES

CONFIRMED H COMPANY ENGAGEMENT. The 2/5 Command Chronology for October 1966 (Texas Tech item 1201048074) records Company H as the advance party: “At 300530H Sept 1966 an advanced party consisting of Co. ‘H’ and Bravo Command Group departed Hill 69.” CORRECTION: the departure point was Hill 69, not Hill 65 (confirmed by 1stLt James J. Kirschke, who commanded Company H at the time). The official history (Shulimson, p. 198) mentions only “some probes in mid-October”; the battalion’s own record shows sustained fighting on 12–14 October. 2/5 COMPANIES THAT DID NOT TAKE PART: Company E. Company E remained at Hill 69.

COMMAND. Company H: 1stLt J. J. Kirschke, 1–8 October 1966; Capt J. A. Getchell, 9–31 October 1966; Capt Jerome J. Doherty returned in December 1966. 2/5: LtCol Walter Moore to 30 September; Maj Leonard E. Wood, 1–2 October; LtCol William C. Airheart, 3 October – 31 December 1966. 2/5 was a 1st Marine Division battalion fighting under 3d Marine Division control for this operation.

AFTER PRAIRIE. 2/5 came off the DMZ for An Hoa. The warning order for Operation Mississippi reached the battalion on 22 November 1966 while it was still deployed at Dong Ha, OPCON to the 4th Marines on Prairie; “At 230800H leading elements of the battalion commenced airlift to AN HOA and to 231100H 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (-) became OPCON 9th Marines Regiment.” The battalion was assigned operational control of the An Hoa TAOR on 27 November and took part in Operation Mississippi, 29 November – 7 December 1966 (2/5 Combat After Action Report, Operation Mississippi, in the December 1966 Command Chronology, item 1201048075; Kirschke's memoir dates the move to 22 November). 2/5 did not take part in Prairie II, III or IV. The November 1966 Command Chronology is missing from the digitised series.

Primary sources: 2/5 Command Chronologies, October and December 1966 (Texas Tech Vietnam Archive items 1201048074 and 1201048075; originals at National Archives, RG 127); Jack Shulimson, U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 (HQMC, 1982), ch. 11; James J. Kirschke, Not Going Home Alone (2001); hotel25vv.com. For full records contact: National Archives II, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park MD 20740 or Marine Corps History Division, Quantico VA 22134.