

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

VIETNAMIZATION AND REDEPLOYMENT

1970-1971



COVER: Marines from Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines emerge from a heavy-lift CH-53 helicopter in a search-and-destroy mission in a long-time enemy base area known to the Marines as Charlie Ridge, 12 miles southwest of the Da Nang Airbase.
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U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

VIETNAMIZATION AND REDEPLOYMENT

1970-1971

by

Graham A. Cosmas

and

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Edited by

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and

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Foreword

This is the eighth volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This particular volume details the gradual withdrawal in 1970-1971 of Marine combat forces from South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps, as part of an overall American strategy of turning the ground war against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong over to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam.

Marines in this period accomplished a number of difficult tasks. The III Marine Amphibious Force transferred most of its responsibilities in I Corps to the Army XXIV Corps, which became the senior U.S. command in that military region. III MAF continued a full range of military and pacification activities within Quang Nam Province, its remaining area of responsibility. Developing its combat and counterinsurgency techniques to their fullest extent, the force continued to protect the city of Da Nang, root out the enemy guerrillas and infrastructure from the country, and prevent enemy main forces from disrupting pacification. At the same time, its strength steadily diminished as Marines redeployed in a series of increments until, in April 1971, the III Marine Amphibious Force Headquarters itself departed and was replaced for the last month of Marine ground combat by the 3d Marine Amphibious Brigade. During the redeployments, Marine logisticians successfully withdrew huge quantities of equipment and dismantled installations or turned them over to the South Vietnamese. Yet this was also a time of troubles for Marines. The strains on the Armed Services of a lengthy, inconclusive war and the social and racial conflicts tormenting American society adversely affected Marine discipline and cohesion, posing complex, intractable problems of leadership and command. Marines departed Vietnam with a sense that they had done their duty, but also that they were leaving behind many problems unsolved and tasks not completed.

Although written from the perspective of III MAF and the ground war in I Corps, the volume treats the activities of Marine advisors to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, and Marines on the staff of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in Saigon. There are separate chapters on Marine air, artillery, and logistics. An attempt has been made to place the Marine role in relation to the overall effort.

Dr. Graham A. Cosmas was with the History and Museums Division from December 1973 through April 1979 and is now on the staff of the U.S. Army's Center of Military History. Previously, he had taught at the University of Texas and the University of Guam. He is a graduate of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, and received his doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1969. Dr. Cosmas has published several articles on military history and *An Army for Empire: The United States Army in the Spanish-American War* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1971) and is co-author of *Marines in the Dominican Republic, 1916-1924* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1975).

The co-author, Lieutenant Colonel Terrence P. Murray, served with the History and Museums Division from August 1983 until July 1984. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval

Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, and of the Armed Forces Staff College. Lieutenant Colonel Murray served a combat tour in Vietnam as an infantry officer during 1969 and 1970. He is now assigned to the Navy-Marine Corps Senate Liaison Office in Washington, D.C.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "E. H. Simmons". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "E".

E. H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971, is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit monthly command chronologies, Marine Corps messages and journal files, the Oral History and Personal Papers Collections of the History and Museums Division, and the reference files of the division.

The authors have supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 250 reviewers, most of whom participated in the events depicted in the history, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those held by the individual in 1970-1971.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. Dr. Graham A. Cosmas researched and wrote the first draft of the history with the exception of the last chapter. Lieutenant Colonel Terrence P. Murray completed the revision of the manuscript and incorporated the comments, assisted by Major William R. Melton. Mr. Jack Shulimson, Head, Histories Section and Senior Vietnam Historian, edited the final version and prepared the volume for publication. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, especially Mr. Shulimson and Mr. Charles R. Smith, and former members Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Parker, and Lieutenant Colonel David Buckner, reviewed the draft manuscript and provided invaluable comments and criticism.

Access to Marine Corps documents was facilitated by Mrs. Joyce Bonnett of the division's Archives Section. Miss Evelyn Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Pat Morgan, were most helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Danny J. Crawford, made its files available and answered numerous queries cheerfully and professionally. Mrs. Regina Strother of the Reference Section assisted in photographic research. The Head, Oral Histories Section, Mr. Benis M. Frank, was equally supportive in making his collection available.

Mr. Frank prepared the index with the assistance of Mr. Smith and Major Arthur F. Elzy, both of the Histories Section.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of Publications Production Section, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Maps were produced by Mr. W. Stephen Hill, who also contributed the design and makeup of the book. The manuscript was typeset first for the comment edition by Corporals Paul W. Gibson, Joseph J. Hynes, and Mark J. Zigante. Corporals Stanley W. Crowl and James W. Rodriguez II, with the guidance and substantial additional contribution of Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns, accomplished the final typesetting.

Special thanks are due Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, who established the guidelines for the Vietnam series and made available to the author his personal notebooks for 1970-1971, when he was assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division and assistant brigade commander of the 3d Marine Amphibious Brigade; Colonels John E. Greenwood, Jr., Oliver M. Whipple, Jr.,

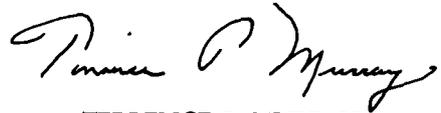
and John G. Miller, successively the History and Museum Division's Deputy Directors for History, who provided continuing support; and Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who provided the benefit of long experience in writing Marine Corps history, as well as encouragement, wise counsel, and general editorial direction.

The authors also are indebted to their colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, who freely exchanged information and made documents available for their examination.

They must express their gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and insight available only to those who took part in the events. In the end, however, the authors alone are responsible for the contents of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.



GRAHAM A. COSMAS



TERRENCE P. MURRAY

Table of Contents

Foreword	iii
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vii
Maps	xi
PART I A CONTRACTING WAR	1
Chapter 1 The War in I Corps, Early 1970	2
III MAF in January 1970	2
Allied and Enemy Strategy, 1969-1970	6
The III MAF/ICTZ Combined Plan for 1970	8
Troop Redeployment: Keystone Bluejay	11
The Change of Command in I Corps	15
Chapter 2 The War Continues	22
Overview and the Defense of Da Nang	22
The Inner Defenses: Northern Sector Defense Command and Southern Sector Defense Command	29
The 1st and 26th Marines: The Rocket Belt	31
The 5th Marines: Thuong Duc, An Hoa, and Arizona Territory	41
The 7th Marines: The Que Son Mountains	45
Results	55
Chapter 3 The Cambodia Invasion and Continued Redeployment Planning, April-July 1970	56
The War Spreads Into Cambodia	56
Redeployment Planning Accelerates: Keystone Robin Alpha	58
Plans for the 3d MAB	61
PART II SUMMER AND FALL-WINTER CAMPAIGNS, 1970	67
Chapter 4 The Summer Campaign in Quang Nam, July-September 1970	68
New Campaign Plans	68
Summer Offensive: The 7th Marines in Pickens Forest	69
The 1st and 5th Marines Continue the Small-Unit War	77
Combat Declines, But the Threat Continues	83
Deployment Plans Change: More Marines Stay Longer	86
Chapter 5 Offensives and Redeployments: Imperial Lake, Catawba Falls, and Keystone Robin Alpha, July-October 1970	89
Preliminaries to Imperial Lake	89
Operation Imperial Lake	91
Keystone Robin Alpha Redeployments Begin	95
Operation Catawba Falls	97
The Regiments Realign	100
Chapter 6 The Fall-Winter Campaign in Quang Nam, October-December 1970	103

New Campaign Plans and Changes in Tactics	103
The Course of the Fall-Winter Campaign	108
Operation Imperial Lake Continues	111
5th Marines in the Lowlands: Noble Canyon and Tulare Falls I and II	116
1st Marines Operations, October-December 1970	119
The War in Quang Nam at the End of the Year	124
 PART III PACIFICATION	 127
Chapter 7 Pacification 1970: Plans, Organization, and Problems	128
Pacification: The Nationwide Perspective	128
The 1970 GVN Pacification and Development Plan	129
Pacification Plans and Organization in Military Region 1	132
Pacification Situation in Quang Nam, Early 1970	134
Chapter 8 The Struggle for Security: Combined Action	139
Combined Action Platoons	139
Reducing the Combined Action Force	149
Building on Success: The Combined Unit Pacification Program	153
Chapter 9 The Spectrum of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1970	162
Line Units in Pacification	162
Kit Carson Scouts in 1970	165
Targeting the VCI	165
Civic Action, 1970	170
Communist Counter-Pacification Efforts	175
Vietnamization	179
Results, 1970	182
 PART IV WINDING UP AND WINDING DOWN	 185
Chapter 10 Allied Strategic and Redeployment Plans for 1971	186
Military and Pacification Plans for 1971	186
Final Plans for Redeployment and the MAB	187
A New Commander for III MAF	191
Military Situation in Quang Nam and Military Region 1, Early 1971	192
Chapter 11 Marines in Operation Lam Son 719	195
The Preemptive Strike: Lam Son 719	195
Marine Fixed Wing Air Support and the ASRT	199
Marine Helicopters Over Laos	202
Marine Trucks on Route 9	205
Diversion Off Vinh	207
Results of Lam Son 719	209
Chapter 12 Last Operations of III MAF, January-March 1971	211
Plans for the Army Takeover of Quang Nam	211
Operations in Quang Nam, January-February 1971	213
Keystone Robin Charlie Begins	220
The Pacification Effort Diminishes	225
The Enemy Grows Bolder	230
Chapter 13 The Marines Leave Da Nang	234
Operations in Southern Quang Nam, 1-13 April 1971	234
Activation and Operations of the 3d Marine Amphibious Brigade	236
The End of Keystone Robin Charlie	241

Keystone Oriole Alpha: The Final Stand-Down.....	242
Quang Nam after the Marines Left.....	247
Chapter 14 Continuing Operational Problems, 1970-1971.....	249
Protecting the Da Nang Vital Area.....	249
Base Defense.....	252
Intelligence: Collection and Use.....	254
The Boobytrap War.....	262
 PART V SUPPORTING THE TROOPS.....	 269
Chapter 15 Fixed-Wing Air Operations, 1970-1971.....	270
1st MAW Organization, Strength, and Deployment.....	270
Coming to Terms with Single Management.....	273
Attacking the Ho Chi Minh Trail.....	279
Air Support Trends in Military Region 1.....	284
Controlling Air Support.....	285
Chapter 16 Helicopter Operations and New Technology, 1970-1971.....	288
Improving Helicopter Support of the 1st Marine Division.....	288
Helicopter Operations.....	291
New Ordnance and Aircraft.....	297
Aviation Achievements and Costs.....	298
Chapter 17 Artillery and Reconnaissance.....	299
Artillery Operations, 1970-1971.....	299
Reconnaissance Operations, 1970-1971.....	307
Chapter 18 Logistics, 1970-1971.....	315
Supplying III MAF.....	315
FLC Phases Down.....	317
The End of Naval Support Activity Da Nang.....	319
Engineer Support.....	324
Motor Transport.....	327
Medical Services.....	328
Chapter 19 The Logistics of Redeployment.....	331
The 'Mixmaster' of Personnel.....	331
'Mixmastering' of Equipment and Real Estate.....	335
 PART VI THE CLOSE OF AN ERA.....	 343
Chapter 20 Morale and Discipline.....	344
A Time of Troubles.....	344
Atrocities, Rules of Engagement, and Personal Response.....	344
'Friendly on Friendly'.....	350
The Challenge to Authority: Race, Drugs, Indiscipline.....	352
'Fragging' and Operation Freeze.....	364
Training and Morale-Building.....	365
Cohesion or Disintegration?.....	369
Chapter 21 U.S. Marine Advisors and Other Activities.....	370
U.S. Marine Advisors and the Vietnamese Marine Corps.....	370
The Vietnamese Marine Corps in Lam Son 719.....	375
The Marine Advisory Unit and Solid Anchor.....	380
Sub-Unit 1, 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company.....	384
The Special Landing Force.....	386

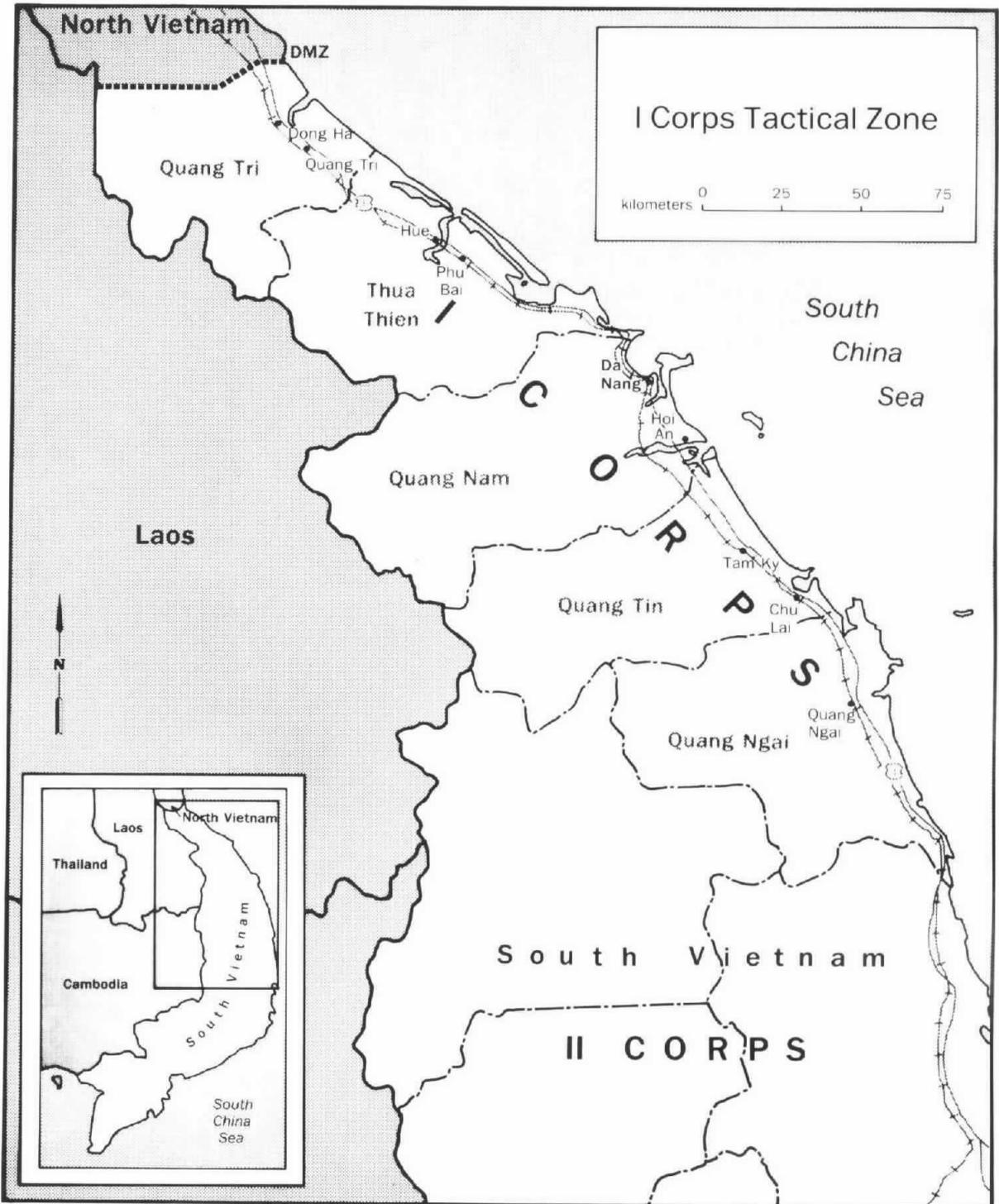
Marines on the MACV Staff.....	388
Embassy Marines.....	390
Conclusion	391
NOTES	393
APPENDICES	
A. Marine Command and Staff List, January 1970-June 1971.....	428
B. Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations.....	436
C. Chronology of Significant Events, January 1970-June 1971.....	442
D. Medal of Honor Citations, January 1970-June 1971.....	450
E. List of Reviewers.....	455
F. Distribution of Personnel, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (30 January 1970)...	457
G. Distribution of Personnel, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (21 April 1971).....	462
INDEX	471

Maps

I Corps Tactical Zone.....xii
Allied Commands in I Corps, January 1970..... 3
1st Marine Division TAOR, March 1970..... 25
Marine Operations, July-October 1970..... 90

Realignment of Regiments, September-October 1970..... 98
Marine Operations, October-December 1970.....104
Combined Action Force Locations, January 1970.....140
Combined Unit Pacification Program Locations, January 1970.....154

Combined Unit Pacification Program Locations, March 1970.....156
Operation Lam Son 719, 8 February 1971.....197
1st Marine Aircraft Wing Locations, 1970-1971.....272
Naval Support Activity Locations, 1970-1971.....318



PART I
A CONTRACTING WAR

CHAPTER 1

The War in I Corps, Early 1970

III MAF in January 1970—Allied and Enemy Strategy, 1969-1970
The III MAF/ICTZ Combined Plan for 1970—Troop Redeployment: Keystone Bluejay
The Change of Command in I Corps

III MAF in January 1970

In January 1970, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) was responsible for defense of the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Constituting I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ), these provinces were from north to south Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai. Marines had operated in these provinces since 1965 and had taken a valiant and costly part in some of the war's heaviest fighting, including the sieges of Con Thien and Khe Sanh and the house-to-house battle of Hue City. By early 1970, Marine operations were focused on the Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) where large-scale combat had become infrequent, although the enemy constantly engaged the troops of III MAF in an unspectacular but deadly war of ambushes, small skirmishes, rocket and mortar attacks and boobytraps. These latter devices inflicted the most ravaging toll upon Marines in terms of casualties.

At the beginning of 1970, Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., commanded III MAF, which included about 55,000 Marines. The previous January, before redeployment began, III MAF numbered over 79,000. Major General Edwin B. Wheeler's reinforced 1st Marine Division, 28,000 strong, had its headquarters just outside Da Nang and operated in Quang Nam Province. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW)—12,000 men with over 400 aircraft under Major General William G. Thrash—had fixed-wing squadrons flying from fields at Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai and helicopter squadrons stationed at Marble Mountain east of Da Nang and at Phu Bai. At Da Nang, the 7,600 officers and men of Brigadier General Mauro J. Padalino's Force Logistic Command (FLC) supplied the division and wing and kept their equipment operating. Scattered in platoon-size detachments throughout the villages of I CTZ, the 2,000 officers and men of the Combined Action Force (CAF) under Colonel Theodore E. Metzger continued the Marines' most ambitious experiment in pacification.¹

Besides the Marines, III MAF included about 50,000 United States Army troops. In Quang Tri Province, the

6,000 officers and men of Army Brigadier General William A. Burke's 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) helped guard the invasion and infiltration routes across the Demilitarized Zone. In Thua Thien just to the south, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), commanded by Major General John M. Wright, USA, deployed 20,800 men in three brigades to protect Hue. These two Army formations, which had moved into I Corps early in 1968 to counter the enemy's Tet offensive, constituted the XXIV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Melvin Zais, USA. Located at Phu Bai, Zais' headquarters was under the operational control of III MAF. In Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces in southern I Corps, the 23,800 troops of the 23d (Americal) Division, commanded by Major General Lloyd B. Ramsey, USA, operated under III MAF's direct control from their headquarters in Chu Lai. General Nickerson, in his capacity as senior U.S. advisor to I Corps, also commanded the 222 officers and 305 enlisted men of the U. S. Army Advisory Group (USAAG) in I Corps.²

A civilian deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) was also a member of the III MAF staff and was charged with coordinating through his province and district representatives U.S. civilian and military resources which directly supported the pacification program in I Corps. Formed under the single manager concept and directly controlled by MACV, CORDS was created in an effort to integrate totally country-wide pacification.

I Corps also had operating within it important allied contingents which were neither attached to nor controlled by III MAF. About 28,000 U. S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel were stationed in I Corps with the Naval Support Activity (NSA), Da Nang; the U. S. Army Support Command, Da Nang; the 45th Army Engineering Group; and the Air Force's 366th Tactical Fighter Wing. While these organizations cooperated closely with III MAF for many purposes, they were directed by their service component commanders. III MAF did not control but did supervise the operations of the 6,000-man 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade, which protected an enclave

south of Da Nang carved out of the 1st Marine Division's territory.³

In I CTZ, as elsewhere in South Vietnam, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and its local and regional militia were gradually assuming a larger share of the fighting. The Vietnamese commander of I Corps,* Lieutenant General Hoan Xuan Lam, controlled a force which included about 41,000 ARVN regulars. His corps included two divisions—the 1st stationed in Quang Tri and Thua Thien and the 2d in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai. An independent regiment, the 51st, and the 1st Armored Brigade operated in Quang Nam to protect Da Nang while the 1st Ranger Group, normally located near Da Nang, acted as corps reserve.

Reinforcing the regulars, 65,000 troops of the Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RFs and PFs) and about 80,000 members of the newly organized part-time People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) were available to combat small guerrilla bands and root out the Viet Cong political underground.** Some 5,300 men of the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs), recruited and trained by the South Vietnamese Special Forces and advised and assisted by the U. S. Army's Company C, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), occupied camps deep in the mountains. The CIDGs collected information about enemy activities and tried to block infiltration into the lowlands.⁴

From III MAF Headquarters at Da Nang, General Nickerson had to coordinate the activities of these

*The Republic of Vietnam was divided into four corps tactical zones, each of which was a political as well as military jurisdiction. Each corps commander thus acted as political and military chief of his region. Under him province chiefs conducted both civil and military administration, and under the province chiefs in turn were district chiefs. Villages and hamlets were beginning to elect their own local governments. Autonomous cities, including Hue and Da Nang in I Corps and Saigon and Cam Ranh elsewhere in the country, were administered by mayors who reported directly to the government in Saigon. MACV ComdHist 70, I, ch. V, p. 1.

**The RFs and PFs were full-time soldiers. They usually operated in company-sized or smaller units charged with the close-in defense of important government and military installations, bridges, villages, and hamlets. At this time they had a separate administration from the regular army, being under the Ministry of the Interior while the regulars were under the Ministry of Defense. In mid-1970, the RFs and PFs would be incorporated into the regular armed forces. The PSDF, established in 1969, had both the military purpose of organizing the people to protect themselves and the political mission of strengthening grass-roots support of the South Vietnamese Government. See Chapters 7 and 8 for more details on these forces.

diverse forces. Like his predecessors who headed III MAF, he functioned within a complex chain of command. His force was under the operational control of General Creighton W. Abrams, USA, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (ComUSMACV), but on administrative matters affecting the Marines under his command, Nickerson took orders from and reported to Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific (CGFMFPac). As commanding general of III MAF, Nickerson directed the operations of all United States combat units in I Corps. As senior U. S. advisor for I Corps, he was responsible for coordinating plans and activities with Lieutenant General Lam's ARVN forces but had no authority over them. Nickerson also provided "operational guidance" to the commander of the Korean Marine Brigade, which was under the authority of the commanding general of Korean Forces in Vietnam, headquartered in Saigon. With both the South Vietnamese and Koreans, Nickerson had to rely on negotiations and persuasion to secure concerted action.⁵

Nickerson's previous Marine Corps experience had helped to prepare him for his complex assignments. Born in Massachusetts in 1913, he took pride in his part-Indian ancestry and claimed descent from the tribe of Massasoit, the chief who helped the Pilgrims through their first hard winter at Plymouth. Nickerson joined the Marine Corps in 1935 as a second lieutenant after graduating from Boston University. He spent two and one-half years in China with the 4th Marines before World War II. After the war, in which he commanded a defense battalion, an antiaircraft group, and was executive officer of the 25th Marines, he returned to China as a staff officer of the III Marine Amphibious Corps and later of the 1st Marine Division during the occupation of Tientsin. With the United Nations peacekeeping mission to Palestine in 1949, he witnessed another area of international and cultural conflict. Combat command of the 7th Marines in Korea followed, where Nickerson, now a colonel, won both the Army Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star Medal.

Having briefly visited Da Nang in 1964, Nickerson began his first tour in Vietnam in October 1966. As a major general, he commanded the 1st Marine Division and then spent five months as deputy commanding general of III MAF. After a tour at Marine Corps Headquarters in Washington during which he received his third star, he returned to Vietnam in

March 1969 to succeed Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., in command of III MAF⁶

Nickerson was responsible for the defense of the 10,000 square miles of I CTZ. The location and terrain of this region made it both strategically important and hard to protect. In the north, I Corps bordered the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) which separated South Vietnam from its northern enemy and in fact was far from demilitarized. On the west, I Corps abutted Laos and the enemy bases supplied by the Ho Chi Minh Trail. North Vietnamese troops could easily invade the region from either direction, and their long-range artillery could shell northern Quang Tri from the relative safety of North Vietnam and Laos.

The terrain within I Corps favored the enemy. The rugged, jungle-blanketed mountains that cover the western part of the region hid Communist supply bases and the camps of main force units and facilitated the infiltration of North Vietnamese replacements and reinforcements. East of the mountains, a narrow rolling piedmont quickly gives way to a flat, wet coastal plain much of which is covered by rice paddies and beyond which lie beaches of the South China Sea. Most of the Vietnamese inhabitants of I Corps live in the flatlands, either in the thousands of villages and hamlets interspersed among the rice fields or in the large cities of Hue and Da Nang. Concealed among the civilians were the enemy's political agents and guerrillas, and from the populated areas the enemy drew recruits and supplies.⁷

An estimated 78,000 enemy troops operated in I Corps. According to allied intelligence, the Communist order of battle included about 49,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars, perhaps 6,000 main force Viet Cong (VC), over 12,000 VC guerrillas, and about 11,000 supply and administrative personnel. Almost half of these troops, some 42 infantry and 11 support battalions, were believed to be massed along or near the DMZ, while the second largest concentration—16 combat and 4 support battalions—threatened Da Nang in Quang Nam Province.

Three different headquarters directed enemy operations in ICTZ. The *B5 Front* controlled the troops along the DMZ; *Military Region (MR) Tri Thien Hue* had charge of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces; and *MR 5* oversaw the campaign in the rest of I Corps, assisted by a separate headquarters subordinated to it, *Front 4*, which was responsible for Quang Nam. American and South Vietnamese intelligence officers believed that all three of these commands received ord-

ers directly from Hanoi, rather than through the *Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)*,⁸ which commanded the enemy troops in the other three corps areas.

A year of heavy and constant allied pressure, guided by improved intelligence and by an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the enemy's methods and weaknesses, had left the NVA and VC in I Corps battered and exhausted at the end of 1969. Here, as elsewhere in South Vietnam, the allied war effort at last seemed to be moving forward steadily and systematically. Throughout the year, American, ARVN, and Korean troops had driven deep into well-established enemy base areas. They had inflicted heavy losses on main force units, seized or destroyed tons of supplies, and wrecked carefully constructed fortifications, bunkers, and tunnel complexes. At the same time, an intensified pacification campaign had reduced enemy guerrilla strength. By the end of the year, according to the statistical hamlet evaluation system then being used, about 90 percent of the civilians in I Corps lived in secure localities.

Especially impressive to American commanders in I Corps was the improvement of the South Vietnamese regular and militia forces. The ARVN, benefiting from intensive American efforts to improve its equipment, training, and leadership, had displayed increasing will- ingness and ability to seek out and engage the enemy. While still short of heavy artillery, aircraft, and good small-unit commanders, the ARVN divisions were steadily moving closer to assuming the burden of combat. The RFs and PFs, in the words of Major General Ormond R. Simpson, who finished a tour in command of the 1st Marine Division late in 1969, "are coming on strong. They have a long way to go, but they're coming . . ." ⁹ Rearmed with M16 rifles and often reinforced by combined action Marines,^{*} these once unreliable troops were fighting with increasing effectiveness against the small enemy units that prowled the populated lowlands.

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were still able to mount heavy attacks, especially in northern I Corps, but supply shortages and growing allied combat effectiveness were increasingly forcing them to revert to harassing tactics. During late 1969, the number of engagements with major enemy units steadily declined while the number of rocket and mortar attacks and sapper raids on allied installations and civilian targets

^{*}For details on the Combined Action Program, see Chapter 8.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

MajGen Edwin B. Wheeler, left, and MajGen Ormond R. Simpson take the salute from a Marine honor guard at Da Nang Airbase on 15 December 1969. Gen Wheeler relieved Gen Simpson as commanding general of the 1st Marine Division on this date.

increased. In many parts of I CTZ, intelligence reports indicated severe shortages of food and medicine among the enemy. General Simpson declared in December 1969 that in Quang Nam "The enemy . . . is in very bad shape at the moment. He is very hungry; he is ridden with malaria. Hunger is an over-riding thing with him; he is trying to find rice almost to the exclusion of anything else. He is moving to avoid contact rather than seek it."¹⁰ While the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in I Corps and throughout South Vietnam remained determined to carry on the fight, their capacity to do so effectively showed every sign of declining.

Allied and Enemy Strategy, 1969-1970

Since the first large United States commitment of infantry units to the war in 1965, American civilian and military leaders had realized that they faced two different but interrelated enemy threats. The first was that posed by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main forces—units of battalion or larger size that could engage and destroy allied troops in conventional battle. The second threat came from guerrillas who operated in small groups within the populated areas and sought to maintain and extend Communist control of the villagers. The guerrillas furnished the main

forces with recruits, supplies, and intelligence while the main forces protected the guerrillas by overrunning minor government garrisons and forcing larger government units to concentrate against them rather than against the guerrillas.

The Americans realized that to win the war they would have to defeat both enemy components at the same time—the main forces by large-scale attacks on the units and their bases and the guerrillas by a pacification campaign to root out the enemy's political and military underground while providing security and economic and social improvement for the people. Throughout the war, however, American commanders differed in the degree of emphasis they placed on each element of the strategy. Many, including General William C. Westmoreland, General Abram's predecessor as ComUSMACV, gave priority to the big-unit war and were willing to divert troops from pacification to mount multi-battalion sweeps into remote enemy base areas. Others, including most of the senior Marine commanders in Vietnam, preferred to concentrate on protecting population centers against attack, defeating the local guerrillas, and eradicating the VC political cadre. They urged that large-scale operations be undertaken only when they clearly supported pacification, for example, by driving enemy main forces away

from major cities or heavily populated areas. They contended that if the guerrillas were defeated, the main forces—deprived of information, replacements, and supplies—would be reduced to a minor and easily countered threat.¹¹ Still others, like Major General Lloyd B. Ramsey, commander of the Americal Division, saw no reason to draw the line between pacification and big-unit war, arguing that “the enemy situation and the terrain dictated the priorities.”¹²

In practice, the choice between these approaches involved variations in emphasis rather than an absolute rejection of one element in favor of the other. During 1967, especially, when military support of pacification had been largely turned over to the Vietnamese, the “big-unit war” had received priority in the American effort. Then the savage enemy Tet offensive of January-February 1968 dramatized the fact that pacification and population security could be neglected only at the risk of political and military disaster. At the same time, increasing opposition to the war in the United States, the opening of peace talks in Paris, and the commitment of the new Nixon administration to reduce the American combat role without abandoning the objective of a secure non-Communist South Vietnam created further pressure for a change in priorities.

In General Westmoreland’s view, the decisive victory in January-February 1968, which destroyed the enemy’s main force Tet offensive, “enabled MACV to concentrate a lot more on the guerrillas and local forces as opposed to the main force.”¹³ General Abrams, who took over as ComUSMACV after the Tet offensive in 1968, at once began moving toward a more evenly balanced strategy. Late in 1968 he promulgated what he called the “One War” concept as the guiding principle for Allied operations. The “One War” slogan expressed Abrams’ belief that the big-unit and pacification wars had to be waged as interdependent and mutually supporting parts of the same struggle. Large-unit attacks on enemy main forces and bases, improved hamlet and village defense, political and economic development, and improvement of the Vietnamese Armed Forces were to be combined into a balanced effort. This effort was aimed at protecting the civilian population, eliminating VC political and military influence, and expanding the authority of the South Vietnamese Government.¹⁴

Guided by the “One War” principle, the allies in 1969 pressed the war simultaneously on several fronts. United States troops continued their assaults on enemy main forces, but their operations were based on

more precise intelligence and were usually aimed at forestalling enemy attacks on populated areas. Instead of being relegated to static territorial defense as they had been in previous years, the ARVN regulars were assigned the same missions as the allied troops and increasingly joined with American units in major offensives. Accelerated efforts to improve their weapons, supply, training, and leadership helped equip them for this role. To replace the regular troops guarding cities, military installations, lines of communication, and villages and hamlets, the South Vietnamese Government, aided by MACV, added 72,000 more men to the RF and PF and rearmed these troops with the M16. Providing still another line of local defense, the government began organizing and arming the People’s Self-Defense Force. The Saigon Government also launched a more vigorous police action against the Viet Cong underground and introduced new programs of economic aid and social development. By the end of the year, in the words of the MACV command history, “In practically every phase of the ‘One War’ concept, the successes were on the allied side.”¹⁵

As the allies increased their emphasis on pacification in 1969, the enemy all but abandoned large-scale combat against American and ARVN regulars and reverted to small-unit hit-and-run attacks, terrorism, and political subversion. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese did this for several reasons. Repeated bloody defeats had evidently convinced them that they could not win a conventional war against American firepower and mobility. They feared and wanted to counter the allied pacification campaign, and they saw low-level warfare as the most economical way to maintain their military and political position until the United States withdrew her forces from Vietnam or the Paris talks produced an agreement.

The *Central Office for South Vietnam*, which directed enemy operations in most of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), formally proclaimed the new strategy in its Resolutions 9 and 14, adopted respectively in July and October 1969. Both resolutions stressed the same themes: that major conventional attacks had proven costly and unsuccessful and the VC and NVA must intensify guerrilla warfare in order to defeat pacification and weaken allied forces in preparation for a possible later resumption of the main force war. The resolutions ordered enemy main forces to avoid combat except under the most favorable conditions. Guerrilla and sapper units, reinforced when necessary by soldiers from regular battalions, were to increase

their attacks on Regional and Popular Force troops, the PSDF, and Vietnamese Government installations and personnel. By late 1969, enemy troops throughout South Vietnam were following these orders. Allied commanders reported a steady reduction in the number of large-unit contacts. The incidence of company and platoon or smaller-size engagements declined also, but more slowly, while acts of terrorism, sabotage, and assassination increased in frequency.¹⁶

The allies' Combined Campaign Plan for 1970, prepared by representatives of MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) late in October 1969, was designed to counter the enemy's tactics and to build upon the previous year's progress. The plan again emphasized pacification and protection of populated areas. It also declared that during the next year American forces in Vietnam would be reduced at a rate "consistent with progress of RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] improvement and modernization,

Typical of the counterinsurgency war, a Marine patrol from the 1st Marine Division searches a carefully concealed enemy position after a firefight in June 1970.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372848



pacification and development, and the level of enemy activity."

Under the plan United States and ARVN troops were to continue their mobile operations against enemy forces and bases, while screening the population against attack and infiltration. They were to push the enemy away from food-producing regions and deny them use of base areas closest to major cities, important roads and railroads, and centers of government and economic activity. The regulars were to maneuver outside the inhabited regions while the Regional and Popular Forces, the People's Self-Defense Force, and the national police combated guerrillas and eradicated the underground in villages and hamlets.

Two other plans supplemented the Combined Campaign Plan. MACV and the JCS in March 1970 adopted the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan (CRIMP). The latest in a series of such plans, this one emphasized improvement in the quality rather than increases in the size of the Vietnamese Army, Navy and Air Force. The plan called for continued effort to create a military system able to defend the country after the Americans left and included provisions for further modernization of equipment, improvement of living conditions for military men and their families, and simplification of the chain of command.

At about the same time, President Nguyen Van Thieu's government proclaimed adoption of its second annual Pacification and Development Plan. This plan, the government's authoritative statement of pacification policy, set the goal of providing at least a measure of security for 100 percent of the South Vietnamese population by the end of 1970. It also contained renewed commitments to strengthen local governments and self-defense forces, assist refugees, veterans, and war victims, combat terrorism, and promote economic development. Thus, as the allies envisioned it, the "One War" was to continue on all fronts in 1970, with the American share of responsibility gradually diminishing and the Vietnamese share increasing.^{17*}

The III MAF/CTZ Combined Plan for 1970

On 13 December 1969, the American, Korean, and South Vietnamese commanders in I CTZ issued their Combined Campaign Plan for 1970, designed to implement the principles of MACV's nationwide plan. This document would guide the operations of the Ma-

*The P&D Plan and allied efforts to carry it out are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

rines and other allied forces throughout the year.

The writers of the plan assumed that the NVA and VC in I Corps, while not directly commanded by *COSVN*, would continue to follow the strategy outlined in *COSVN* Resolutions 9 and 14. The planners declared that "The enemy no longer seeks a complete military victory. . . . The enemy's overall objective now is to repel or witness the withdrawal of friendly forces by waging limited warfare designed to demoralize friendly forces." In pursuit of this goal, the NVA and VC would try to "demoralize ARVN and FWMAF [Free World Military Assistance Forces] by attacks by fire, sapper attacks, and limited ground probes" to "inflict maximum casualties." The enemy would also increase political propaganda, subversion, and terrorism to discredit the Vietnamese government and disrupt pacification.

The planners defined the enemy threat in terms of the "One War" doctrine:

In his efforts to achieve political control of RVN, the enemy attempts to demonstrate that the GVN [Government of Vietnam] is not capable of governing the country or of providing credible security to the people. His offensive operations and the resultant reaction operations by friendly forces produce adverse effects on security of the people. The most effective way of assuring security . . . is to keep enemy forces away from [the people] and by neutralizing the VC infrastructure. Without the VCI, enemy main forces cannot obtain intelligence, manpower, or food, prepare the battlefield or move. . . . Providing security to the Vietnamese people is the major objective of RVNAF/FWMAF.^{18*}

The campaign plan divided the opposing forces into two categories: the VC/NVA main forces, "often located in remote areas, or entering RVN from safe havens across the border," and the VC guerrilla units, terrorist groups, and underground, "located closer to and often intermingled with the people." American, Korean, and ARVN regulars were to engage and destroy the main forces, neutralize their bases, and keep them away from populated areas. The Regional and Popular Forces, People's Self-Defense Force, and national police would concentrate on the guerrillas. They would "prevent enemy infiltration, attacks, and harassment of villages, hamlets, cities, province and district capitals, industrial centers, military bases, populated areas and vital LOC [lines of communication]."

For the regular forces, a major task under the plan would be destruction ("neutralization") of the enemy's

base areas—complexes of tunnels, caves, and bunkers, usually located deep in the mountain regions, which housed headquarters, communications centers, supply dumps, training and rest camps, and hospitals. Allied troops were to attack these areas on a priority system worked out by province chiefs and military commanders, concentrating most of their effort on "those bases which directly affect the areas undergoing pacification and consolidation, key population and economic centers, and vital communications arteries. More remote bases would receive continued unpatterned air strikes and harassment fire," while small allied units blocked the routes between them and the populated districts. The writers of the plan believed that:

Locating and isolating the enemy's command, control and logistics facilities will contribute to his eventual defeat. Restricting and constraining VC/NVA units in base areas will force a separation between the VCI and the enemy's main military forces. As this separation becomes more complete, and our air and artillery harassment continues, the enemy will be forced to leave his base area sanctuaries and expose himself to our superior firepower and mobility. The enemy will come to fight on our terms, either in locations of our choosing or at least not in areas of his choosing. . . . As long as the enemy is restricted to remote, relatively uninhabitable areas, under constant surveillance and harassment, he is defensive and a less serious threat to the achievement of our objectives.¹⁹

The Combined Campaign Plan repeatedly stressed "territorial security"—the separation of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese from the civilian population—as the central objective of all allied activity. Every type of allied unit was assigned security functions. American, Korean, and ARVN regulars, for example, when not engaged in mobile operations against bases and main force units, were to patrol constantly to block infiltration "into the fringes of cities, towns and areas adjacent to population centers." They would also reinforce RF and PF units against large-scale attacks, furnish air and artillery support to the militia, and cooperate with them in antiguerrilla operations. RF and PF patrols within and on the outskirts of inhabited areas would keep pressure on local guerrillas and infiltrators while the national police and PSDF maintained order and eradicated the VC underground inside the urban areas.

In an effort to fix precisely the pacification responsibilities of the many and sometimes conflicting allied and Vietnamese political and military authorities in I Corps, the campaign plan required classifying every locality in one of four security categories. Secure

*Free World Military Armed Forces (FWMAF) consisted of all allied nations providing military forces to South Vietnam.

Areas, the first category, were regions, usually heavily populated, where regular civil government was functioning, where people could move freely by day and night, and where enemy activity had been reduced to occasional acts of terrorism or rocket and mortar attacks.

In Consolidation Zones, the second category, enemy main forces had been expelled and the government was in the process of destroying guerrillas and underground cadre. Here terrorism and fire attacks would occur frequently, and the government would impose strict curfews and other population control measures. In both Secure Areas and Consolidation Zones, the Vietnamese province chiefs and under them sector and village authorities, had responsibility for defense and public order, using RF and PF, the PSDF, and the national police as their principal armed forces.

Beyond the Secure Areas and Consolidation Zones lay the Clearing Zone, consisting of thinly populated and Viet Cong-controlled territory, often containing enemy main forces and their bases. In these areas, ARVN division and regimental commanders, in

cooperation with their allied counterparts, controlled operations. Here allied regular forces would maneuver "to engage or drive the enemy therefrom and to prevent enemy forces from entering Consolidation Zones." As enemy bases in the Clearing Zone were isolated or abandoned and main force units pushed out, portions of the Clearing Zone could be incorporated into the Consolidation Zone, thus enlarging the range of government control.

Beyond the Clearing Zone, the Border Surveillance Zone encompassed the terrain just within the national frontiers. In this zone, regular units and CIDGs under the direction of tactical commanders sought to "detect, engage and deter" North Vietnamese forces trying to infiltrate South Vietnam.

Each province in I Corps contained a mixture of all four categories of territory in varying proportions. While the areas rarely grouped themselves into neat concentric belts, most of the Secure Areas and Consolidation Zones lay in the eastern piedmont and coastal plain while the Clearing and Border Surveillance Zones encompassed most of the mountainous

LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., left, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force talks with 1stSgt James L. Langford, Company G, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and with LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, I Corps as the battalion leaves Vietnam.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Collection



hinterland. The purpose of this elaborate division, as indeed of the whole Combined Campaign Plan, was to unify all allied military operations for successful prosecution of the "One War."

Troop Redeployment: Keystone Bluejay

Withdrawal of Marines from I Corps had begun in mid-1969. The I Corps Combined Campaign Plan for 1970 assumed that American forces in Vietnam "will be reduced to a level consistent with progress of RVNAF improvement and modernization, pacification and development, and the level of enemy activity."²⁰ The first months of 1970 witnessed a further major reduction in Marine strength followed by a fundamental change in III MAF's command role.

President Richard M. Nixon, who took office early in January 1969, almost immediately committed himself and his administration to reduction of American troop strength in Vietnam at a rate determined by periodic assessment of three variables—the level of North Vietnamese infiltration and enemy battlefield activity, the ability of the South Vietnamese to fight their own war, and progress in the Paris negotiations. In support of this policy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared a plan during the first half of 1969 for removing United States combat forces from Vietnam in six separate redeployments. At the end of this gradual withdrawal, about 280,000 Americans, most of them in aviation and support units, would remain in-country. These troops would depart as the Vietnamese technical services improved until only a military advisory group was left. The timing, size, and composition of each redeployment would depend on the variables defined by the President. Under the plan, removal of combat troops could be completed as early as December 1970 or as late as December 1972.²¹

Beginning in June 1969, the first two redeployments, codenamed Keystone Eagle and Keystone Cardinal, took out of Vietnam about 65,000 American military personnel including over 26,800 Marines. The entire 3d Marine Division redeployed, as did one attack squadron, one observation squadron, and two medium and one heavy helicopter squadrons from the 1st MAW and proportional contingents of support and service troops.²²

These first withdrawals brought with them changes in Marine organizations in the Western Pacific. On 7 November, a new headquarters, the I Marine Expedi-

tionary Force (I MEF),* began operations on Okinawa under Major General William K. Jones, who also commanded the 3d Division which was now based there. This headquarters would control all air and ground units of the Fleet Marine Force in the Western Pacific not committed to Vietnam. On the same date, a subordinate command, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (Rear) under Brigadier General William G. Johnson, was activated at Iwakuni, Japan, with the mission of overseeing Marine aviation units in Japan and Okinawa.²³

With Keystone Cardinal, the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet ended its long participation in the Vietnam War. Composed of one and later two Marine battalion landing teams (BLTs), each paired with a helicopter squadron, the SLFs had landed repeatedly up and down the coast of South Vietnam, sometimes in independent operations, at other times to reinforce heavily engaged ground forces. The last SLF operation in Vietnam, Operation Defiant Stand, took place south of Da Nang in September 1969. The SLF was then reconstituted from units of the 3d Marine Division and 1st MAW (Rear). While it often cruised offshore during the remaining years of the war, it could no longer land in Vietnam without special permission from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²⁴

In October and November 1969, planning began in Washington and Saigon for the third phase of the American withdrawal. It was expected that the size of this increment would be announced to the public after the scheduled completion of Keystone Cardinal on 15 December and that the actual troop movements would occur early in 1970. As in the other redeployment phases, determining how many troops would come out and how many of those would be Marines involved complex negotiations among the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MACV, III MAF, FMFPac, and Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC). Brigadier General Leo J. Dulacki, Chief of Staff of III MAF, later recalled the interweaving considerations:

There were numerous factors which came into play in the development of plans for each redeployment phase. Initial overall numerical goals would be established by MACV for

*"Marine Expeditionary Force" was the proper name for an air-ground command formed of a division and wing. III MAF should have been called III MEF, but the title was changed in deference to Vietnamese association of the word "expeditionary" with French colonialism. During 1970, in Marine Corps Order 3120.3A dtd 18 August 1970, the title was changed permanently to Marine Amphibious Force for all MEFs.

III MAF; those raw numerical goals would then have to be translated into coherent troop lists by III MAF planners in consultation with MACV planners and finite numbers then determined on the basis of the troop lists.²⁵

Many things were considered by III MAF in redeployment planning. Forces remaining in Vietnam had to maintain tactical integrity, especially when redistribution of forces expanded areas of responsibility. The possibility of the enemy exploiting an advantage caused by redeployment had to be anticipated. Ground combat forces remaining required proportionate combat support and logistic support. Units deploying to Western Pacific bases needed to retain organizational and tactical integrity in the event that they might be reintroduced into Vietnam. Recognizing that the redeployment of major ground combat units had an immediate impact on ARVN forces, the negative impacts of III MAF redeployments had to be kept to a minimum. As General Dulacki noted, "there had to be . . . a lot of give and take between not only III MAF, but the other corps commanders as well as MACV."²⁶

While redeployment deliberations were going on between MACV and the JCS and between MACV and III MAF, Colonel Floyd H. Waldrop, G-3 of the 1st Marine Division, was wrestling with the tactical questions of how to control the TAOR with fewer units and personnel while recognizing the need to have sufficient flexibility to respond to a serious enemy incursion. There were a host of considerations: what bridges will Marine units need to maintain security of and what bridges will need to be turned over to the ARVN? What fixed installations must be given up? What battalion and regimental boundaries will need to be realigned between Marine units and between Marines and the ARVN?²⁷

Planning for the early 1970 withdrawal, codenamed Keystone Bluejay, developed into a two-level dialogue. On the first level General Abrams, working in conjunction with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, had to settle with the JCS and the White House the total number of men to be pulled out. In this process MACV's concern for maintaining adequate forces on the battlefield had to be balanced against the administration's desire to ease domestic political tension by getting the troops out quickly. Second, a tug-of-war occurred between MACV and the Army on one side and III MAF and the Marine Corps on the other over the size of the Marine portion of the withdrawal. Although original III MAF plans called for the early

withdrawal of all Marine forces and III MAF proceeded accordingly, HQMC appeared to question the wisdom of the early withdrawal of all Marines from Vietnam.²⁸ This turned into an argument about how rapidly Marine participation in the war should come to an end.

During October and November, the JCS instructed MACV to consider the feasibility of withdrawing 100,000 men by the end of June 1970 or, as an alternative, 50,000 by late March or early April. General Abrams late in November advised against either of these withdrawals. He argued that both proposals would impose on the ARVN too sudden an increase of responsibility and that it would be militarily unwise in the face of many indications that the enemy planned another Tet offensive for early 1970. If more troops had to be withdrawn, he urged that no more than 35,000 be taken until after the period of maximum danger in late January and February.²⁹

If 100,000 men did have to come out in the first half of 1970, MACV preferred that about half of them be Marines. During October MACV developed two alternative compositions for an immediate 100,000-man withdrawal, called the "Marine Heavy" and the "Marine Light." Under the first plan all 55,000 Marines of III MAF would leave Vietnam in Phase Three, while in the second only one regimental landing team (RLT) would go.* Unable to slow the withdrawals directed by Washington, General Abrams initially favored the "Marine Heavy" plan because it would allow MACV to substitute Marine aviation units in the next deployment for Army ground combat units which he felt were more urgently needed in South Vietnam. MACV wanted to apply the "Marine Heavy" plan proportionally whatever the size of the redeployment.

Headquarters Marine Corps authorities in Washington strongly objected to this proposal, which departed radically from earlier JCS plans for a more gradual Marine redeployment. HQMC pointed out that so rapid a withdrawal would overload the Marines' bases and supply facilities in the Pacific and cause severe problems of personnel administration. HQMC also recognized that such a quick withdrawal would leave the Marine Corps, as the only Service not involved in Vietnam, a very vulnerable target for budget reduc-

*A regimental landing team normally consists of a Marine regiment with the attached support forces needed to conduct an amphibious landing. It includes about 6,000 officers and men.

tions.* Elaborating further on Marine Corps opposition to a rapid withdrawal, General Dulacki observed years later that “although there were several reasons for the HQMC position, the most compelling was the fact that the Marine Corps deemed it incongruous that, after some five years of combat in Vietnam, with the war still continuing, the Marines would no longer be participants.” In General Dulacki’s view as Chief of Staff, III MAF, MACV more so than the JCS was responsible for determining the size force respective Services would send home with each redeployment.³⁰

On 15 December, in an address to the nation, President Nixon resolved the question of the total size of the withdrawal. He announced that 50,000 more troops would leave Vietnam by 15 April 1970. However, to guard against a possible Communist Tet offensive, the troop movement would not begin until early February, and none of the combat units involved would cease active operations until mid-February.³¹

The composition of the 50,000-man reduction remained unresolved. MACV still wanted a large Marine contingent and ordered III MAF to plan to withdraw over 19,000 Marines. This would require the removal of two full RLTs under the Marine system of translating each increment into tactical units of the proper size. III MAF designated the 26th Marines (the only regiment of the war-activated 5th Marine Division still in Vietnam) and the 7th Marines for Keystone Bluejay, heading a long list of aviation and support units.

Plans were changing, however, even as III MAF finished this troop list. The Department of the Army discovered that it would lack the men to maintain the Army strength in Vietnam envisioned in the Marine-Heavy option. To assure what MACV considered adequate ground forces during the first half of 1970, more Marines would have to stay in Vietnam. This consideration and continuing Marine Corps opposition to a too-rapid pullout of III MAF led the Joint Chiefs of Staff late in December to reduce the Marine share of Keystone Bluejay to 12,900 men—one regimental landing team with aviation and support units.³²

“The slowdown of the Marines’ withdrawal created

a serious complication in ICTZ,” said General Dulacki. “The Naval Support Activity had drafted plans for withdrawal concurrent with the rapid and early redeployment of the Marines. Although the Marine withdrawal was slowed, the Navy continued with their original plans.” Thus the remaining Marines were faced with the prospect of losing support of the Naval Construction Battalion, the closure of the Naval Hospital at Da Nang, and the end of logistic support provided by NSA. For Marines these were all imminent concerns, but the most critical was the impending loss of the hospital ship from northern ICTZ to the Da Nang area. Urgent pleas of III MAF and FMFPac were to no avail and the hospital closed. Ultimately, General Abrams promised to provide Army hospital support if necessary, and the Army Support Command assumed logistic support functions of NSA. Redeployment moved inexorably forward.³³

III MAF selected Colonel James E. Harrell’s 26th Marines as the regiment to redeploy. The regiment’s supporting artillery, the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, would go out with it. Other artillery units designated for Keystone Bluejay included the 5th 175mm Gun Battery, a platoon of 8-inch howitzers, and Battery K, 4th Battalion, 13th Marines. Since operations around Da Nang required few tracked vehicles, III MAF designated for withdrawal all but one company of the 1st Tank Battalion and the 3d Amphibian Tractor (Am-Trac) Battalion. The 1st Anti-Tank Battalion would leave with the armor. The 1st Shore Party and the 7th Motor Transport Battalions headed the roster of support units, which included numerous engineer, military police, communications, reconnaissance, headquarters, and medical detachments.³⁴

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would relinquish one of its group headquarters—Colonel James R. Weaver’s Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 12, which would move from Chu Lai to the Marine air station at Iwakuni, Japan, with its housekeeping squadrons, Marine Air Base Squadron (MABS) 12 and Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron (H&MS) 12. Three jet squadrons—Marine Attack Squadrons (VMAs) 211 and 223 and Marine Fighter/Attack Squadron (VMFA) 542—and Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 361, with detachments from other units, rounded out the aviation component of Keystone Bluejay.

Late in January, these units began preparing to leave Vietnam. They did so under III MAF Operation Plan (OPlan) 183-69, issued in September 1969, which prescribed procedures for withdrawing units during

*Colonel Don H. Blanchard, who was Head, Joint and Special Plans, Joint Planning Group, HQMC was privy to much of the debate within HQMC and the Pentagon over this sensitive issue. He said he stressed this fear to the Commandant “in the initial go-around on this Inter-Service squabble really with a future roles and missions connotation!” Col Don H. Blanchard, Comments on draft ms, dtd 2Jun83 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374146

Marines from Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines brought into Elephant Valley by a CH-46 helicopter move out of the landing zone in one of the battalion's last operations. The battalion was scheduled to redeploy with the 26th Marines in Keystone Robin.

continuing hostilities. Under this plan, each redeploying organization ceased active operations or “stood down” well before its actual date of departure and moved to a designated base camp to prepare its men and equipment for sea or air transportation out of the country. Its mission and area of operations would immediately be assumed by other units according to prearranged plans. “There were tremendous logistic problems as well as the tactical ones in breaking contact with the enemy,” recalled Major General William K. Jones, who had redeployed his 3d Marine Division to Okinawa the previous November.* The Marines not only had to prepare “equipment and vehicles for shipping” but sort out “equipment to be left or turned over to RVN or Korean forces,” and also level bunkers, and clean up camp sites.³⁵

While preparing for embarkation, the redeploying organization was to “retain sufficient combat ability

for security and self-defense.” Marine units were to leave Vietnam as fully organized and equipped formations, but in fact they rarely left with the same men who had served in them in combat. Instead, with each redeployment, a system of personnel transfers went into operation appropriately nicknamed the “Mix-master.” In this process, the departing unit would be filled with Marines from all elements of III MAF who had spent the most time in Vietnam in their current one-year tours while those members of the redeploying unit who had the most time left to serve in-country would transfer to organizations not designated to redeploy. For the 26th Marines, this meant that members of the regiment with most of their tours still to serve were reassigned to the three infantry regiments left in the 1st Division while the battalions of the 26th Marines were filled with men from other units whose tours were nearing an end. Upon return to the United States, the regiment would be deactivated.*³⁶

*On redeployment of his division to Okinawa, Major General Jones also became Commanding General, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and Commander, TF 79 of the Seventh Fleet.

*For details on the procedures and policies for redeploying men and equipment, see Chapter 19.

The troop movements of Keystone Bluejay started on 28 January and continued until late March. Most of the combat units, in accordance with the President's announcement, left Vietnam near the end of the period. Between 28 and 31 January, the 3d AmTrac Battalion (-), the cadre of the 1st Anti-Tank Battalion, and numerous detachments of aviation, engineer, communications, headquarters, and Force Logistic Command personnel left Da Nang by ship and airplane. They were followed in middle and late February by the 7th Motor Transport Battalion and more headquarters and support detachments. Between 11 and 19 March units redeployed included: the 26th Marines; the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines; the 1st Shore Party Battalion (-); the 5th 175mm Gun Battery; a platoon of 8-inch howitzers; and the 1st Tank Battalion (-).³⁷

The aviation redeployments of Keystone Bluejay included what the FMFPac historian called "the largest tactical trans-Pacific . . . air movement yet recorded by Marine aviation units." In this operation, code-named Key Wallop, the 20 A-4E Skyhawks of VMA-223 and the 15 F-4B Phantoms of VMFA-542 took off late in January from their respective bases at Chu Lai and Da Nang and flew to the Naval Air Station (NAS), Cubi Point in the Philippines. From there the two squadrons headed out across the Pacific to their new base at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS), El Toro, California. They stopped over on the way at Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii and refueled in the air several times. By 11 February, they had completed their movement. Meanwhile, late in January, HMH-361 embarked its 14 CH-53 Sikorsky Sea Stallions for shipment to MCAS Santa Ana, California. In February, the 12 A-4Es of VMA-211 and MAG-12 with its headquarters and service squadrons moved to Iwakuni.³⁸

By the end of March, all the units of III MAF scheduled for Keystone Bluejay had left Vietnam. III MAF now consisted of 42,672 Marine officers and men, including the 23,186-man 1st Marine Division. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing now had 174 fixed-wing aircraft and 212 helicopters flown and maintained by 1,267 officers and 8,976 enlisted men. The strength of Force Logistic Command had fallen to 348 officers and 5,512 men. The Combined Action Force, which underwent no major reductions in Keystone Bluejay, contained 52 Marine officers and 1,885 enlisted men.³⁹

The Change of Command in I Corps

Since 1965, the Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force had commanded all United States

forces in I Corps Tactical Zone. Constituting a "separate command directly subordinate to ComUSMACV," III MAF directed all American military operations in I Corps and coordinated combined United States-South Vietnamese activities. The commanding general of III MAF represented ComUSMACV as United States area coordinator for I CTZ, and as Senior U.S. Advisor, he had operational control over the U.S. Army Advisory Group (USAAG) and U.S. Army Special Forces in the northern five provinces. He thus exercised the same authority as the Army field force commanders in the other three corps areas, and in addition he directed the operations of his own air wing.⁴⁰

With the entry of Army units into I CTZ, III MAF had grown into an Inter-Service headquarters. In January 1970, the III MAF staff included 219 Marines, 5 Navy, and 39 Army officers. The headquarters had attached to it the 1st Marine Radio Battalion and two Army units—the 29th Civil Affairs Company and the 7th Psychological Operations Company.⁴¹

Since the NVA/VC Tet offensive of 1968, a second major U.S. headquarters had existed in I Corps. This was the Army's XXIV Corps, which occupied the former 3d Marine Division Headquarters compound at Phu Bai, just south of Hue. Subordinate to III MAF and controlling American troops in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, XXIV Corps had evolved from the MACV Forward command post set up in January 1968 just after the start of the Tet offensive. At its peak strength in March 1968, XXIV Corps (then known as Provisional Corps, Vietnam) had consisted of the 3d Marine Division, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), and the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). At the end of 1969, the corps, then commanded by Lieutenant General Melvin Zais, USA, contained the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and the 101st Airborne Division. Its headquarters staff numbered over 500 Army and Marine personnel.⁴²

As troop withdrawals began, General Abrams on 3 August 1969 directed his commanders throughout South Vietnam to suggest ways to reduce manpower without redeploying more combat units. Elimination of superfluous headquarters, Abrams suggested, was a logical starting point in this process.⁴³ His words seemed to apply especially to I Corps with its two corps-level American headquarters. With Marine strength in the northern provinces dwindling more rapidly than Army strength and with Marine operations increasingly limited to Quang Nam Province, the

trend of events pointed toward amalgamation of III MAF and XXIV Corps with the Army gradually dominating the new headquarters.

Marines approached such a merger with caution. From their point of view, more was at stake than administrative efficiency; the proposed change of command could threaten the existence in Vietnam of an operating Marine air-ground team. III MAF, controlling both the 1st Marine Division and the 1st MAW under a single Marine headquarters, constituted such a team, although for some purposes III MAF had had to surrender a measure of command over the wing to the Seventh Air Force. Elimination of III MAF Headquarters or its absorption by XXIV Corps could result in the division passing under Army command while the wing would be taken over by the Air Force—an eventuality which Marines believed would reduce operational efficiency and set undesirable precedents. Thus throughout the discussions of command reorganization in I Corps, both Headquarters Marine Corps and III MAF insisted that as long as the Marine division and wing remained in Vietnam they must have a Marine headquarters over them.

In mid-August, General Nickerson proposed to General Abrams that the XXIV Corps Headquarters be eliminated and that additional Army officers and enlisted men be incorporated into the III MAF Headquarters. At the same time, the number of Marines on the III MAF staff would be reduced so that the new joint headquarters would contain 518 fewer people than the total of the old III MAF and XXIV Corps staffs. The Army-Marine headquarters thus formed would command all United States forces in I Corps and would take over all the duties now performed by III MAF and XXIV Corps. As Marine units redeployed, Nickerson pointed out, Marine strength in the new headquarters could be reduced and the Army representation increased. General Nickerson argued that this reorganization would achieve three goals at once: it would reduce headquarters manpower in I Corps; it would retain the Marine air-ground team as long as Marines remained in Vietnam; and it would provide the framework for a smooth Army takeover of I CTZ as the Marines left. On 25 August, General Abrams accepted this proposal in principle and instructed III MAF to submit detailed plans for its implementation.⁴⁴

By 30 October, III MAF had developed a plan for reducing the total headquarters personnel of III MAF and XXIV Corps by 518 officers and enlisted men,

closing down XXIV Corps Headquarters, and establishing a new joint Army-Marine headquarters under the suggested title of "Joint Field Force Vietnam." The proposed new staff would consist of 126 Marine and 99 Army officers and 465 Marine and 251 Army enlisted men. All general and most special staff sections would contain both Marine and Army personnel. The commanding general of the joint force would remain a Marine lieutenant general until most of the 1st Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing had redeployed, at which time an Army lieutenant general would replace him. A Marine major general would act as deputy commanding general until all Marines had left I CTZ. After 15 December, when the tour of duty of the current III MAF chief of staff ended, an Army brigadier general would assume that post in the new headquarters. Lieutenant General Zais, the XXIV Corps commander, expressed general approval of this plan but wanted an Army general put in command of the new headquarters on 15 December on grounds the Army already outnumbered the Marines in I Corps.⁴⁵

During November and December, the prospective acceleration of Marine redeployments, by shortening the time Marines would remain in Vietnam, eliminated the need for the planned joint headquarters. Instead, both MACV and III MAF began thinking in terms of a simple exchange of roles between III MAF and XXIV Corps. Under this arrangement, the Army headquarters would take over command of all United States forces in I Corps while a reduced III MAF under operational control of XXIV Corps commanded the Marine division and wing.

Early in February, Colonel George C. Fox, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3 for Plans/Operations of III MAF, drafted a set of proposed "Terms of Reference" defining the powers of a force headquarters subordinate to XXIV Corps. Approved by Lieutenant General Nickerson and by Lieutenant General Buse (Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific), the Terms of Reference declared that III MAF Headquarters was the command and control element of a solely Marine Corps force composed of ground, air, and service elements. Its mission was to "exercise command of Marine Corps forces assigned by higher authority to perform missions and tasks as directed by Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam." III MAF would continue to direct the operations of the 1st Division and the 1st Wing. It would remain in charge of Marine supply and administration, and it would

plan and conduct Marine redeployments. It would stay under the administrative control of FMFPac.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, independent of the III MAF planners, members of the MACV staff in Saigon had been working along parallel lines. In mid-February, General Abrams' headquarters sent to III MAF for comment a set of proposed changes in MACV's Directive 10-11, which defined the command relationships among American forces in Vietnam. The revised directive placed XXIV Corps in command of all United States troops in I Corps and appointed Commanding General, XXIV Corps as the Senior U.S. Advisor for the region. It defined III MAF as "a separate command subordinate to and under the operational control of CG, XXIV Corps," exercising control of all Marine units, both ground and air in I Corps, and conducting military operations within its area of responsibility.⁴⁷

Marines greeted MACV's proposed directive with approval and relief. Colonel Fox recalled that "I was dreading that when they brought up a draft copy [of the revised directive], I thought well, here we go for a real fight. . . . I couldn't believe my eyes when I found out that theirs was . . . completely acceptable to us."⁴⁸

On 19 February, General Abrams came to Da Nang for a final briefing on the plans for the change of command. The briefing produced a heated confrontation between General Nickerson and General Zais. It began when General Zais objected to having to pass orders to the Marine division and wing through III MAF Headquarters. General Nickerson replied with a vigorous defense of the Marine air-ground team. Then, as General Dulacki, the III MAF Chief of Staff recalled:

. . . You had two three-star generals going at it in the presence of General Abrams . . . rather vociferously. I mean both of them. I wouldn't say that each lost his temper, but you knew how they felt and it was emotional and vocal. . . . I remember General Abrams sitting back and smoking a cigar and listening to all of this. . . . I guess in time . . . he decided he'd heard enough of it. And his comments were to this effect: "I am not about to become involved in trying to disrupt or change Marine Corps doctrine. Marine Corps doctrine is that they have an air-ground team. The wing and the division are integral parts of a MAF headquarters. This is their concept of operations. This is the way they've operated. And as far as I'm concerned I'm not going to do anything to change it at this point in time. . . ."⁴⁹

Viewing the confrontation years later, Dulacki added that "General Zais' position [objecting to the interposition of III MAF Headquarters between XXIV

Corps and the 1st Marine Division] was somewhat ironic. At that point in time, he commanded the XXIV Corps which consisted of an Army division and a brigade; and his was a large headquarters interposed between III MAF and those two Army units, an arrangement quite comparable to what III MAF proposed upon transfer of command."⁵⁰

With the new command arrangement thus confirmed by ComUSMACV, Marine and Army staffs set 9 March 1970 as the date for the formal exchange of roles between III MAF and XXIV Corps. On 6 March, General Nickerson instructed all United States units in ICTZ except the Marines to submit operation reports to XXIV Corps Headquarters after 9 March. Marine units would continue to report to the commanding general of III MAF. At the same time, III MAF transferred operational control of the Americal Division and its attached aviation and support units to XXIV Corps. The Army headquarters also received operational control of the U.S. Army Advisory Group in ICTZ and of Company G, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), and took over the direction of naval gunfire support for units in I Corps.⁵¹

Control of the Combined Action Force constituted a special problem. Entirely composed of Marines with attached Navy personnel, the force operated under III MAF Headquarters and had platoons in hamlets scattered throughout I Corps. These units had to cooperate closely both with Vietnamese forces and with Army elements that soon would cease to be controlled by III MAF. On 26 March, III MAF resolved the problem by placing the CAF under the operational control of XXIV Corps while retaining administrative control. Later in the year, as the CAF's field of activity was reduced to Quang Nam Province, it would return to III MAF operational control.⁵²

Within III MAF itself, the change of command

*This change meant that Sub-Unit One, 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO), now coordinated naval gunfire support throughout the Republic of Vietnam. ANGLICO units rarely operate under Marine commands; their mission is to coordinate naval gunfire support for non-Marine forces. Hence until 9 March naval gunfire support in I Corps was controlled by the Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC) at III MAF Headquarters while the ANGLICO subunit, under operational control of MACV Headquarters, provided naval gunfire liaison teams for the other three corps areas. After 9 March, the ANGLICO team at XXIV Corps Headquarters took responsibility for calling in naval gunfire missions for both U.S. and ARVN forces in I Corps. Sub-Unit 1, 1st ANGLICO, ComdC, Mar 70. For further details of ANGLICO operations, see Chapter 21.

brought a few organizational rearrangements. The most important of these was the transfer early in March of the 1st and 3d Force Reconnaissance Companies from the direct operational control of III MAF to that of the 1st Marine Division. Like the platoons of the CAF, these units had ranged throughout I CTZ, and the change of their command relations reflected the reduction of their sphere of operations to Quang Nam and to support of the 1st Marine Division.⁵³

Besides reassigning control of many units, the change of command involved the movement of III MAF and XXIV Corps Headquarters, with their hundreds of personnel and tons of equipment, to new locations. Both Marine and Army planners agreed that XXIV Corps should take over the III MAF compound at Camp Horn just east of Da Nang City. There the Army headquarters would have the communications and other facilities needed to direct operations throughout I Corps, and there it would be able to maintain closer contact with Lieutenant General Lam, the ARVN I Corps commander, who had his headquarters in Da Nang. Thus the change of American command would require transfer of the XXIV Corps Headquarters from Phu Bai to Camp Horn and the simultaneous movement of III MAF Headquarters to a new site, in each case without interrupting for any length of time the continuing direction of operations.

Preparations for this movement, codenamed Operation Cavalier Beach, began on 30 January. On that date, III MAF and XXIV Corps organized a joint planning group representing the G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4, and G-6 sections of each staff.* The group, under the overall supervision of Brigadier General Dulacki, the III MAF Chief of Staff, was to plan, coordinate, and supervise the move. Throughout the complex preparations, which involved the interchange of facilities, equipment, and personnel along with the concurrent requirement for both Army and Marine headquarters to maintain operational continuity, the Services worked

*In February 1968 at the urging of Colonel Sanford B. Hunt, Communications-Electronics Officer (CEO), III MAF, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., Commanding General, III MAF redesignated the CEO Section, the G-6 Section. This was done in recognition of the increased coordination and technical control demanded of an expanded corps-level tactical situation brought on by the Tet offensive. This was the first time in Marine Corps history that communications-electronics was elevated to "G" section status, and it continued for the remainder of the war. Col Sanford B. Hunt and Maj James Connell, Comments on draft MS, 12Dec83 (Vietnam Comment File). See also III MAF Directories, Jan-Feb68 in III MAF ComdCs, Jan-Feb68.

harmoniously. As General Dulacki noted, "there were many opportunities for parochial bickering on the part of the various staff sections but, instead, like true professionals they worked together to make the transfer as efficient as possible." General Zais' guidance to the III MAF Chief of Staff was direct: "You've got a functioning headquarters here. You know what has to be done. You work it out as you see best, and we'll move down when you say you are ready to take us." General Zais gave similar guidance to his staff, and the shift of headquarters was begun.⁵⁴

III MAF first had to find a new headquarters location. Consideration was given to having III MAF and XXIV Corps remain in their present locations with a transfer of functions, but the idea was shelved because of the difficulties created for XXIV Corps in their new role as senior command in ICTZ. General Dulacki remembered commenting to General Abrams after both headquarters had been relocated that "it would have been so much simpler if we had stayed where we were and merely transferred the command functions." He was stunned by Abrams reply, ". . . I was somewhat surprised that was not what you recommended." The option of satelliting III MAF Headquarters on the 1st Marine Division or 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was considered but discounted in part because of Dulacki's recollection of the undesirable aspects of a similar arrangement he experienced on the III MAF staff in 1965, when that staff was satellited on the wing. The impracticality of constructing a new headquarters site was recognized from the outset.⁵⁵

Once again the Seabees came to the rescue, as they had so often in the past. "Since they were phasing down operations due to redeployment of their units, the Seabees volunteered to vacate their headquarters site at Camp Haskins," which was on Red Beach northwest of the city of Da Nang about five miles from Camp Horn. The Seabees moved to a smaller site in the same vicinity. Dulacki observed that it was somewhat ironic that Red Beach is where the Marines first landed in Vietnam in March 1965. Camp Haskins contained barracks and office buildings which could be adapted readily to III MAF's requirements, and it was close to the Force Logistic Command with its existing communications facilities. On 6 February, Marine engineers and Seabees of the 3d Naval Construction Battalion moved into Camp Haskins and began preparing for its new tenant.⁵⁶

Throughout February, at Phu Bai, Camp Horn, and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193462

Marine Commandant Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., obscured by another officer, greets LtGen Melvin Zais, USA, Commanding General, XXIV Corps, while medal-bedecked LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, I Corps Tactical Zone, looks on.

Camp Haskins, the preparations continued. III MAF prepared tables of organization for a much reduced headquarters establishment and drew up lists of functions to be transferred to XXIV Corps. Recognizing that III MAF's staff could aid XXIV Corps with their expanded staff responsibilities, III MAF also selected Marine officers and men for assignment to the XXIV Corps staff. According to General Dulacki, "when we were phasing down, we just let them go through the list of the people and decide what key billets or what key functions they wanted to fill with Marines, and that's exactly how we left the people there."⁵⁷ This assisted XXIV Corps greatly and enabled selected Marines to remain in their billets until end of tour, when they were replaced by Army officers. Advance parties of Army officers and men moved into Camp Horn to prepare for movement of the main body of XXIV Corps Headquarters from Phu Bai.⁵⁸

For the headquarters staff of III MAF, it was a time of hard work and some confusion. Colonel Herbert L. Wilkerson, Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, who joined the staff at this time summed up the situation:

The way I like to describe this is you cut your force into one-fourth, you reassign practically every person—enlisted and officer—to a new billet within that force, not necessarily doing what he was doing before, and displace the CP, all simultaneously Every officer in the 3 shop, practically, changed some responsibility one way or the other and assumed other people's responsibilities, and then displacement of the CP alone is a traumatic experience for a corps level function, and you try to do all this . . . while everybody changes jobs⁵⁹

In spite of the inevitable difficulties, Operation Cavalier Beach progressed more or less on schedule. On 5 March, III MAF began moving into Camp



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A700390
LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon is seen in a formal pose. Gen McCutcheon relieved LtGen Nickerson as Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force.

Haskins. The next day, XXIV Corps Headquarters with its aviation, artillery, military police, and other support detachments, started its journey to Camp Horn. By 9 March, the day set for the change of command, both headquarters were installed and operating in their new compounds.

The ceremony at Camp Horn on 9 March formally acknowledged two simultaneous transfers of command. Lieutenant General Nickerson turned over operational control of all United States forces in I Corps to Lieutenant General Zais. At the same time, Nickerson passed command of III MAF to his own successor, Lieutenant General Keith B. McCutcheon.⁶⁰

The new commanding general of III MAF was born in Ohio in 1915. An honor graduate of the Army ROTC course at Carnegie Institute of Technology, McCutcheon in 1937 resigned his Army Reserve commission to accept a second lieutenantancy in the Marine Corps. His reason for doing so forecast the focus of his Marine career: frustrated in efforts to enter Army aviation, he knew the Marines had airplanes, and he wanted to fly. McCutcheon received his naval aviator's wings in 1940. Thereafter his assignments and activi-

ties paralleled and contributed much to the growth of Marine aviation. In 1944, as operations officer of MAG-24 during the invasion of the Philippines, McCutcheon perfected a basic system for command and control of close air support. He also was awarded the Silver Star Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and six Air Medals for gallantry in action. During the 1950s, he played a leading part in Marine helicopter development, commanding HMR-161 in Korean combat. Later, as commander of MAG-26, he continued to improve helicopter tactics and organization.

McCutcheon's involvement with Vietnam began in 1963 where, as a brigadier general and assistant chief of staff for operations on the staff of the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), he spent two years helping to plan and direct the introduction of American forces into the war. From June 1965 to June 1966, he commanded the 1st MAW in Vietnam, receiving his promotion to major general in January 1966. Then, as deputy chief of staff for air at Headquarters Marine Corps, McCutcheon directed further expansion of the Marine aviation effort in Vietnam and supervised the introduction to combat of new and improved helicopters. He was promoted to lieutenant general in February 1970.⁶¹

A slightly-built, soft-spoken officer, General McCutcheon approached his new task with the same confidence and determination he had expressed long ago as a young man writing to a prospective employer:

I particularly pride myself in the fact that I can carefully and meticulously plan and organize my work in a most efficient manner; and not only plan the work, but to execute it with rapidity and accuracy.

The ability to do these things lies in my will-power and conscience. Anything I have been made responsible for, or anything I have undertaken, I have always endeavored to complete.

It also seems that my capacity increases with the pressure; that is, the more work there is for me to do, the more efficiently I perform it.⁶²

General McCutcheon took over a III MAF whose headquarters was about half the size of the one Nickerson had commanded at the beginning of the year. In contrast to 219 Marine, 5 Navy, and 39 Army officers and 509 Marine, 12 Navy, 19 Army, and 2 Air Force enlisted men in January, the force staff in April consisted of 105 Marine and 6 Navy officers and 204 Marine and 6 Navy enlisted men.⁶³ The total size of III MAF following initial redeployments was approaching 40,000 Marines, down close to 15,000 from the start of 1970.

During and after the move to Camp Haskins, III MAF Headquarters was plagued with communications difficulties. Just before 9 March, the automated teletype machines at Camp Horn stopped working, creating a pileup of paper and tape. The staff hauled bags of this material with them to Camp Haskins. On 9 and 10 March, the teletypes at Force Logistic Command Headquarters, which were to serve III MAF at Camp Haskins, also broke down. Compounding the problem, the ditto machines which reproduced messages for distribution failed at the same time. Hurried repairs restored all the machines to operation by 12 March, and personnel from III MAF, FLC, and the 5th Communications Battalion cleared up the message backlog and established normal communications. Even then, the system proved cumbersome, with couriers running back and forth between FLC and Camp Haskins every 30 minutes or so. General Dulacki, recalling the experience, hoped that "next time we're a little bit closer to communications."⁶⁴

The reduction in the size of the III MAF staff was a reflection of its reduced role. The difficult question was, how lean a staff could be organized to satisfactorily perform the mission? III MAF realized that the old "Marine Corps Schools concept," in which a skeleton III MAF staff would parasite off division and wing staffs, just wouldn't work. On the other hand, the argument made by some to keep the large existing III MAF staff intact was equally impactful.⁶⁵

The decision was ultimately made to develop an austere T/O with no fat. "It was to be a lean organization, adequate to perform the new III MAF mission with no frills, and one which recognized the inexorably continuing redeployment. Although, at times, seemingly draconian measures were necessary to achieve that goal, in the end it was accomplished and accomplished successfully."⁶⁶ When General Chapman visited III MAF in early 1970, he was pleasantly surprised to see the realistic approach that III MAF had taken in sizing the staff.

The reduced III MAF staff had barely enough personnel to carry out its command functions. Colonel Wilkerson commented in July that III MAF Headquarters ". . . strictly maintains a command center for monitoring what's going on. . . . The command center . . . has a watch of one staff officer and one staff NCO and one general clerk, and that's the extent of our par-

ticipation. . . . [CG, III MAF] can't really participate other than to advise people and try to keep up to date on what's going on. . . ."⁶⁷

XXIV Corps Headquarters had its problems, also. From concentrating primarily on tactical control of troops, General Zais and his staff had to assume the many logistic, administrative, and political responsibilities formerly discharged by III MAF. They had to adjust their thinking to deal with all of I Corps rather than only the two northern provinces, and they had to establish a relationship of trust and cooperation with General Lam, who had worked closely with III MAF. XXIV Corps Headquarters, like III MAF, discovered that it had underestimated the number of men required for its job. The Army staff expanded to meet its new responsibilities and by June was overflowing the old Marine compound at Camp Horn.⁶⁸

By mid-1970, both XXIV Corps and III MAF had recovered from the confusion of their alteration of roles. The small-unit war being waged required no large transfers of troops between division TAORs, and XXIV Corps usually left direction of day-to-day operations in Quang Nam Province to the 1st Marine Division. In June, General Dulacki said:

In general I think the relationship between III MAF and XXIV Corps is very good. There are no serious problems. . . . I think a lot of the staff sections in XXIV Corps couldn't quite understand that III MAF was the senior headquarters insofar as the division and wing was concerned. It took them a little while to understand that if they have any orders and directions for the wing or the division they had to come through us, and in general there are no problems in this regard.⁶⁹

Although he initially had objected to III MAF's continued control of the division and wing, Lieutenant General Zais proved "very understanding, very considerate" in his dealings with the Marines. "At the lower staff levels, occasionally, Service parochialism or jealousy (on both sides) would rear its ugly head, due to a failure to understand the other Services' normal modus operandi. But the longer the two headquarters worked together, the trust, confidence and respect between the two grew and solidified." As General Dulacki observed more than a decade later, "Neither General Zais nor General McCutcheon would have had it otherwise."⁷⁰

CHAPTER 2

The War Continues

Overview and the Defense of Da Nang

*The Inner Defenses: Northern Sector Defense Command and Southern Sector Defense Command
The 1st and 26th Marines: The Rocket Belt—The 5th Marines: Thuong Duc, An Hoa, and Arizona Territory
The 7th Marines: The Que Son Mountains—Results*

Overview and the Defense of Da Nang

For the American, ARVN, and Korean infantrymen patrolling the hamlets, rice paddies, and mountains, and for the aviators, artillerymen, and others who supported them, command changes brought little variation to the daily routine of war. Throughout the first half of 1970, both sides in I Corps adhered to the patterns of operation established during the previous year. The NVA and VC continued their small-unit attacks, terrorism, and infiltration. Seeming to threaten a resumption of large-unit warfare, they massed troops and supplies along the DMZ in the first months of the year and opened new bases along the Laotian border in northwestern Quang Tri. They also appeared to be building new bases and reopening or enlarging old ones in Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai.¹

Throughout I Corps, allied troops took the offensive to protect the population and disrupt the enemy buildup. In northern Quang Tri, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), in cooperation with regiments of the 1st ARVN Division, launched Operation Greene River on 19 January. Greene River covered a long series of large and small-scale operations which lasted until 22 July, accounting for almost 400 enemy dead at a cost to the allies of 68 killed and 967 wounded.

To the south, in Thua Thien, the 101st Airborne Division began the year with Operation Randolph Glen. Like Greene River, and like most named operations in this period, Randolph Glen was the title for a mixture of pacification and search and clear activities. In Randolph Glen, pacification predominated. The 101st Airborne Division committed all three of its brigades to protection of the coastal lowlands. On 1 April, the division began Operation Texas Star, in which one of its brigades continued to patrol the populated areas while the other two kept in constant motion in the piedmont, pursuing enemy main force units and seeking out and destroying base areas. Continued until 5 September, Operation Texas Star resulted in over 1,700 NVA and VC killed while costing the 101st Airborne and the ARVN units working with it

over 350 killed in action (KIA), many from boobytraps and small ambushes.²

In southern I Corps, the Americal Division was engaged in Operations Pennsylvania Square, Iron Mountain, Geneva Park, Frederick Hill, and Nantucket Beach. As was true elsewhere, these operations were, in reality, an unbroken series of patrols on the fringes of populated areas and forays into back-country sanctuaries. Month after month, the Americal troops whittled away at the enemy in unspectacular but deadly contacts.³

In the first months of 1970, the ARVN regulars of I Corps concentrated on forestalling enemy incursions into towns and villages. Both in conjunction with American units and on their own, the ARVN troops supplemented constant small-unit patrolling with larger sweeps against major Communist formations. One of the most successful independent ARVN operations, Operation Duong Son 3/70, began on 11 February when elements of the 1st Armored Brigade and the 37th and 39th Ranger Battalions attacked into an area near the coast south of the Korean enclave at Hoi An. On the fourth day of this operation, they engaged two VC main force units, the *V-25th Infantry Battalion* and the *T-89th Sapper Battalion*. The ARVN troops, assisted by artillery and helicopter gunships, killed over 140 of the enemy, including a battalion commander, and drove the survivors into blocking positions established by two Regional Force companies, which took a further toll of the fleeing Communists.⁴

While the regular units sought out enemy main force formations, the Regional and Popular Forces intensified their patrolling around villages, hamlets, and government installations. Displaying increased confidence and aggressiveness as a result of improved training and weapons, the RFs and PFs set increasingly more night ambushes. In the first two months of 1970, the territorial troops claimed to have killed over 1,300 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong while taking 77 prisoners and capturing over 600 weapons.⁵

Both regulars and militia paid for their successes. In the first three months of 1970, the ARVN in I Corps lost 303 men KIA and 984 wounded, while the RFs and PFs lost 195 killed and over 700 wounded. In

return, they accounted for over 4,400 enemy killed, took over 1,100 prisoners, and captured almost 2,000 weapons.⁶

The remaining Marines in I Corps contributed their share to the ongoing effort. The jets and helicopters of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew missions throughout the five northern provinces, and the fixed-wing attack and reconnaissance aircraft ranged into Laos and Cambodia. On the ground in Quang Nam Province, the 1st Marine Division continued to aggressively seek out the VC and NVA.

After the redeployment of the 3d Marine Division late in 1969, Marine ground operations were limited largely to Quang Nam Province, where the 1st Marine Division conducted continuous small-scale combat in defense of Da Nang. During the first half of 1970, the 1st Marine Division, unlike the U.S. Army divisions operating in I Corps, did not name its operations, but its complex activities were typical of the way the war was being waged there.

Major General Edwin B. Wheeler commanded the 1st Marine Division at the beginning of the year. Born in New York State in 1918, Wheeler entered the Marine Corps in 1941 and served in the Pacific with the 1st Marine Raider Battalion. In 1943, while commanding a rifle company, he won the Silver Star Medal during the New Georgia campaign. Wheeler again led Marines in combat in Korea. Commanding the 3d Marines in 1965, he spent his first Vietnam tour in the Da Nang area. After duty as commanding officer of the Basic School and Assistant Division Commander, 2d Marine Division, Wheeler, who had been promoted to brigadier general in 1966 and major general two years later, returned to Vietnam in June 1969 as deputy commanding general of XXIV Corps. He took over the 1st Marine Division from Major General Ormond R. Simpson on 15 December 1969.⁷

An accident cut short General Wheeler's tenure as

division commander. On 18 April, the helicopter carrying Wheeler, members of his staff, and Colonel Edward A. Wilcox of the 1st Marines on an inspection of a search and destroy operation crashed on approach to a jungle landing zone southwest of Da Nang. Wheeler suffered a broken leg and had to relinquish command.⁸

Wheeler's replacement, Major General Charles F. Widdecke, arrived on 27 April. A year younger than Wheeler, Widdecke had entered the Marine Corps after graduating from the University of Texas at Austin. He fought in the Pacific with the 22d Marines, winning the Silver Star Medal at Eniwetok and the Navy Cross at Guam, where he was severely wounded. Like Wheeler, Widdecke had served in Vietnam before. He entered the country early in 1966 as commanding officer of the 5th Marines. Later, while still commanding his regiment, he also served as chief of staff of Task Force X-Ray at Chu Lai. Promoted to brigadier general while in Vietnam, he went from there to a tour as Chief of Staff, FMFPac. He came to the 1st Division from a two-year assignment in Washington as Director, Marine Corps Reserve, during which he had received his second star. He would command the division until its redeployment in April 1971.⁹

Under both Wheeler and Widdecke, the division performed the missions specified in its operation order during late 1969. Under this order, the division, in coordination with South Vietnamese and other allied forces, "locates, interdicts, and destroys enemy forces, bases, logistical installations, infiltration routes and LOC [lines of communication] within the assigned TAOR/RZ."** The division was to provide security for the city of Da Nang and assist Vietnamese forces "as requested" in support of pacification, while continuing surveillance, reconnaissance, and psychological warfare within its TAOR "and such other areas as may be assigned." The order also required the division to

*After his return from Vietnam, Major General Widdecke commanded the I MAF at Camp Pendleton until his retirement on 1 July 1971. He died on 13 May 1973.

**The various terms used in delineating the territorial responsibility of units were defined at this time as follows:

Division TAOR: "The area assigned to the 1st Marine Division in which the responsibility and authority for the development and maintenance of installations, control of movement and the control of tactical operations involving troops under division control is vested in the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division. All fire and maneuver conducted within the TAOR, or the effects of which im-

pinge upon the TAOR, must be coordinated with the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division."

Reconnaissance Zone (RZ): "The land area adjacent to the 1st Marine Division TAOR, over which the Division Commander has the responsibility for surveillance and reconnaissance operations. All fire and maneuver within this area must be coordinated with the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division"

Area of Operation (AO): "An area where forces conduct operations during a specific period of time. These operations are coordinated with, and advance agreement obtained from, appropriate GVN/FWMAF representatives. An AO is normally assigned for a specific operation which may be within or outside of a TAOR." 1st MarDiv OpO 301A-YR, Annex C, dtd 10 Dec 69.

furnish relief and support for combined action platoons (CAPs), Special Forces camps, and GVN district headquarters within its area of responsibility. Finally, the division was to be ready to send up to three reinforced battalions with a command group to assist allied forces anywhere in South Vietnam.¹⁰

In conformity with countrywide allied strategy, the division concentrated its efforts on keeping the enemy away from the city of Da Nang and its heavily populated environs. Division infantry units and supporting arms were "disposed to provide maximum security for the Da Nang vital area, installations and LOCs of greatest political, economic, and military importance in the division TAOR."¹¹ The division directed its offensives against enemy forces and base areas which posed the most immediate threat to the centers of government, population, and economic activity or to allied military installations.

A collection of Vietnamese forces was loosely formed into a roughly division-level organization also tasked to defend the Da Nang TAOR. Known as Quang Da Special Zone (QDSZ), this headquarters, while not staffed sufficiently to perform division-level command and control, did exercise command by the summer of 1970 over 12 infantry battalions with attendant artillery and armor support.* Originally formed to coordinate security of the city of Da Nang, QDSZ in the spring of 1970 established a field command post southwest of Da Nang on Hill 34. Weekly conferences were held between commanders of QDSZ, 1st Marine Division, and the 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade from which combined staff action originated. While QDSZ never matured to the level desired by the Marines, under the guidance of the 1st Marine Division the South Vietnamese headquarters was able to provide a measurable contribution to the defense of the Da Nang TAOR.¹²

The 1st Marine Division's TAOR encompassed about 1,050 square miles of territory. Beginning above the vital Hai Van Pass in the north, it extended into the Que Son Valley in the south and included all of Quang Nam Province and portions of Thua Thien and Quang Tin. Almost 1,000,000 Vietnamese lived in this region,

over 400,000 of them in Da Nang and most of the rest in the coastal lowlands and river valleys south and southwest of the city.¹³

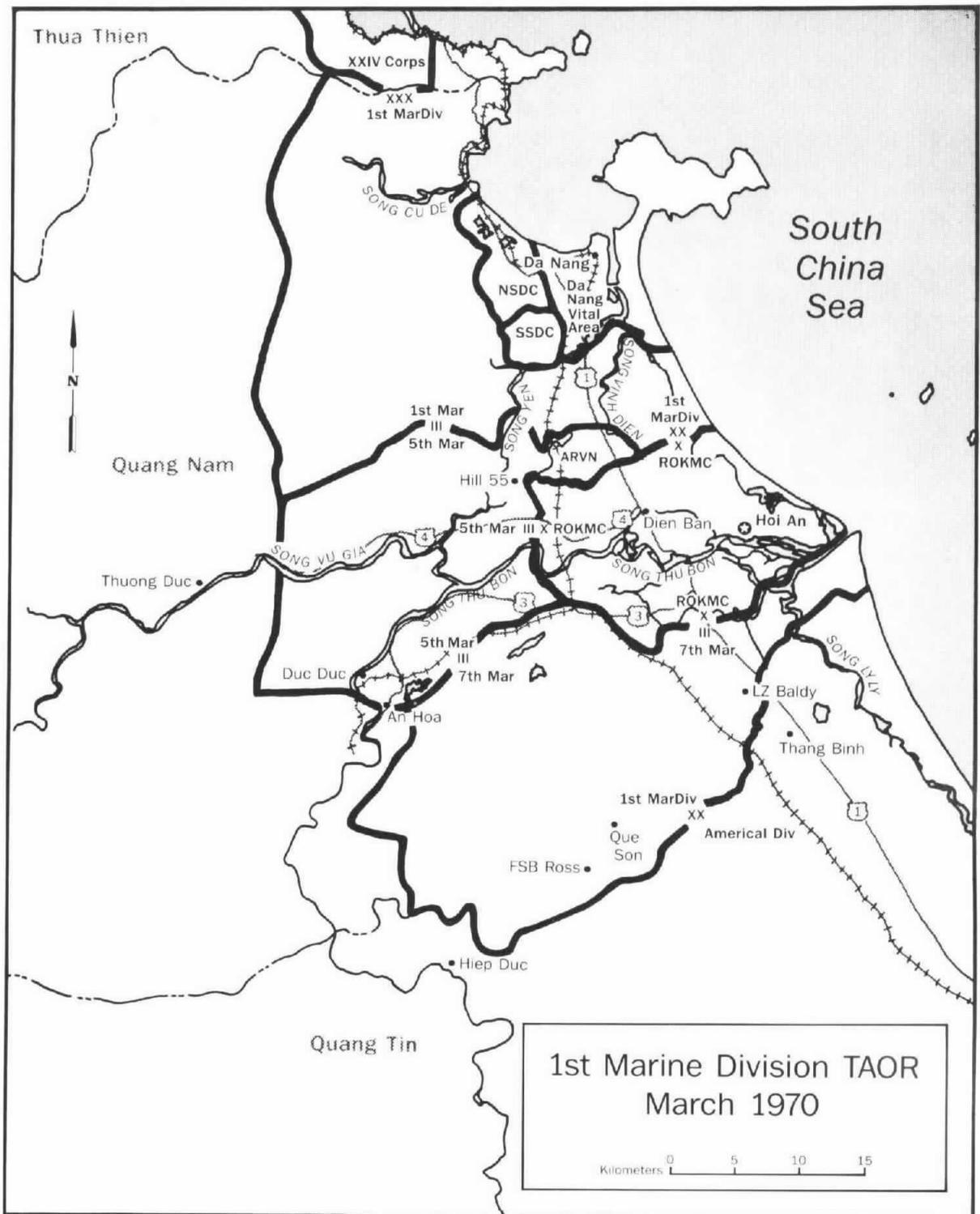
During five years of bitter warfare, Marines had become familiar with the terrain of Quang Nam. In the northern portion of the TAOR, rugged mountains of the Annamite Chain thrust down into the South China Sea to form the Hai Van Peninsula, restricting overland movement northward from Da Nang through the Hai Van Pass to the old imperial city of Hue. Extending westward and southward, these mountains form an arc around the rolling hills and lowlands of Da Nang. The eastern boundary of the Da Nang TAOR is the South China Sea.

Just south of Da Nang's wide bay in the heart of Da Nang was the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's facility from which military installations sprawled westward about four miles to the hill mass of Division Ridge. To the immediate south and southwest of Da Nang, rice paddies dominate the landscape, broken only by intermittent hills with thick treelines and patches of brush dotted with hamlets and villages. Throughout the lowlands thousands of grave mounds furnished the enemy cover and concealment, and numerous low hills provided sites for cantonments, outposts, and defensive positions.

Innumerable streams and waterways intersect the coastal lowlands. They include several major rivers which flow out of the mountains to the west and run into the South China Sea. The Cu De River empties into the bay of Da Nang north of the city. The Cau Do River and the Han River encircle the city on the south and east and separate it from Tien Sha Peninsula (called Da Nang East by Marines) and the helicopter base at Marble Mountain which is actually located on the flat seashore just north of the rock outcroppings that gave it its name. Still farther south the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers run through broad valleys which cut deep into the mountains.

On the western edge of the TAOR, the heights of the Annamite Chain wall in the coastal plain, extending the entire length of the western boundary from north to south. Steep, jungle-covered, their peaks hanging with mist and fog during the monsoon season, these mountains are penetrable on foot or by helicopter. In the far southern part of the 1st Marine Division's TAOR, a spur of the Annamites projects northeastward toward the coast. Known as the Que Son Mountains, the range overlooks the Que Son Valley to the south of it, and its hills, ravines, jungles,

*At the end of July 1970, QDSZ had operational control of the 257th Vietnamese Marine Corps Brigade (2d, 5th, and 6th Battalions and a battalion of light artillery), the 1st Ranger Group (21st, 37th, and 39th Battalions), the 5th Mobile Strike Group, and the 44th and 64th Artillery Battalions. FMFPac, MarOps, Jul70, p.22; *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973, An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1974), p. 141.



and many caves offered the enemy a ready-made stronghold close to the populated regions.

From the outskirts of Da Nang to the remote mountain valleys, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops infested the 1st Marine Division's TAOR. According to allied intelligence, a North Vietnamese general, Major General Nguyen Chanh Binh, commanded these enemy forces. His headquarters, the identity of which was obscured by the enemy's use of multiple names, was known to allied intelligence as *Front 4*, *Group 44*, and *Quang Da Special Zone Unit*. As senior military commander, General Binh apparently controlled *Front 4*'s NVA regulars and VC main force and local force units. The hamlet and village guerrillas took their orders from the local VCI, who in turn were directed by the provincial party committee which worked closely with General Binh. Under *Front 4*, three tactical wings directed field operations—a *Northern Wing* in the Hai Van area, a *Central Wing* west of Da Nang, and a *Southern Wing* believed headquartered in the Que Sons.

In early 1970, allied intelligence estimated that *Front 4* had 12,000-13,000 troops under its command, including a possible 16 NVA and VC infantry battalions, two NVA rocket artillery battalions, and an indeterminate number of VC local force and guerrilla units. The enemy in Quang Nam, as elsewhere in South Vietnam, was using North Vietnamese replacements to rebuild VC main force and even local force units which had suffered heavy losses in the fighting of the last two years. Thus the enemy's *Southern Wing*, according to allied intelligence reports, had disbanded one of its NVA infantry regiments, the *36th*, to reinforce hard-hit VC elements in the lowlands.

In accordance with their nationwide strategy, the enemy in Quang Nam had reverted to low-intensity guerrilla warfare. *Front 4*'s NVA regiments rarely engaged in combat. They spent most of their time training and refitting in their mountain base camps while VC main and local forces and guerrillas, assisted by small NVA detachments, kept limited but constant pressure on the allies. Against allied regular troops, the enemy usually relied on ambushes, rocket and mortar attacks, and occasional sapper assaults on bases to inflict as much damage as possible with minimal forces. During the year, these small-scale attacks were made against Regional and Popular Force units in an effort to disrupt the pacification program. To the same end, the VC and NVA kept up a continuing campaign of terrorism against civilians, ranging from kidnap-

pings and assassinations of individual anti-Communists to full-scale mortar and ground assaults on pro-government hamlets. To further terrorize the population, the enemy fired rockets into built-up areas, concentrating on Da Nang where their inaccurate missiles could inflict the most casualties and damage.

Against both civilian and military targets, most rocket, mortar, and sapper attacks came during periodic offensive surges or "high points," interspersed with weeks of relative inactivity during which the enemy repositioned troops and replenished supplies. High points in 1970 occurred in January, April-May, and August-October. At all times throughout the division's TAOR, the enemy's mines and boobytraps took their daily toll of Marine, ARVN, and civilian lives and limbs.¹⁴

Small detachments of NVA and VC regulars moved continually throughout the 1st Marine Division's TAOR, enemy rocket and mortar teams positioned themselves for attacks, and local VC planted mines and boobytraps. While these combat actions were carried on, replacements, medical units, and supply parties upon whom depended the enemy's elaborate and flexible logistics system, operated continuously. According to allied estimates, about 90 percent of the enemy's arms and ammunition in Quang Nam Province, 30 percent of his food, and about 25 percent of his other supplies in early 1970 were trucked down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam and then moved by porters into mountain base areas 20-30 miles south and southwest of Da Nang. These base areas also harbored camps, training installations, and headquarters. The rest of the enemy's supplies, including most of the food and the material for boobytraps, came from the populated lowlands, where it was procured by the VCI through purchase, contribution, or forced requisition and then cached for movement to the base areas.

Within Quang Nam Province, most enemy supplies travelled on the backs of porters. These porters were members of transport battalions and sometimes regular frontline troops, reinforced when necessary with civilians conscripted in VC-controlled hamlets. They customarily operated in teams of three to 10 persons each carrying a 30- to 70-pound pack. Usually protected by armed escorts and moving by night or through covering terrain, the supply parties often followed rivers or streams in and out of the mountains. The waterways also allowed them to move rockets and other heavy equipment by sampan. The porter, mov-

ing ahead of attacking units instead of behind them as do the supply troops of conventional armies, prepositioned ammunition and weapons for assaults and collected cached rice and other stores for movement back to their mountain bases. By the beginning of 1970, American and Vietnamese intelligence agencies had traced most of the enemy's principal infiltration routes, located the major base areas, and developed a detailed picture of the Communist supply system. Many of the 1st Division's operations during the year were aimed at the disruption of that system.¹⁵

The 1st Marine Division had to coordinate its operations continuously with South Vietnamese and Korean forces. The four battalions of the Republic of Korea 2d Marine Brigade, containing about 6,000 officers and men, were based at Hoi An, about 15 miles south-southeast of Da Nang. They defended a roughly semi-circular TAOR which extended from the South China Sea inland to a point just northeast of the coastward end of the Que Son Range. Under their special command relationship with MACV, the Koreans were supposed to receive "operational guidance" but not orders from III MAF and in fact possessed almost complete autonomy within their TAOR.¹⁶

Quang Nam contained substantial South Vietnamese regular and territorial forces. The ARVN contingent consisted of the four-battalion 51st Regiment, a veteran unit highly regarded by American advisors; the 1st Ranger Group of three battalions; the 1st Armored Brigade; the 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron; and units of artillery and support troops. Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) based at Thuong Duc deep in the mountains along the Song Thu Bon blocked important enemy infiltration routes. Protecting the populated areas were 52 Regional Force companies (now being organized into RF groups of four to seven companies), 177 Popular Force platoons, and 3,000 men of the national police force.

At the beginning of 1970, the effectiveness of these forces continued to be reduced by a complicated chain of command. The 51st Regiment operated under Quang Da Special Zone while the other ARVN regular formations in Quang Nam remained under direct control of General Lam, the I Corps commander. Lam occasionally placed one or more of them under QDSZ for a particular operation. General Lam also commanded the CIDGs and through the province chief controlled the RFs and PFs. Since the creation of QDSZ, the commanders and staffs of III MAF and the 1st Ma-

rine Division had worked to build it into a full-fledged tactical headquarters with a balanced combat force of all arms under its permanent control, capable of directing the defense of the province. Progress had been slow, retarded by the labyrinthine complexities of ARVN internal politics and by the Vietnamese shortage of qualified divisional staff officers.¹⁷

In conformity with overall allied strategy, the ARVN regulars in Quang Nam Province had as their primary mission attacks on enemy main forces, base camps, and lines of communication while the RF/PF and police units concentrated on local defense and the eradication of the VC infrastructure. At the beginning of 1970, Marine commanders were discussing with General Lam the deployment of the province's ARVN units. The Marines, anticipating the redeployment of one of their own regiments, wanted the Vietnamese troops to take charge of their own area of operations within the 1st Marine Division's TAOR, while General Lam preferred to have each of his units share an area of operations with one of the Marine regiments. Early in March, the 51st Regiment established such a joint TAOR with the 5th Marines, but the other ARVN units continued to operate throughout the 1st Marine Division area.¹⁸

The 1st Marine Division deployed its own four infantry regiments—the 1st, 5th, 7th, and 26th Marines—in a series of concentric belts centering on Da Nang. A reinforced artillery regiment, the 11th Marines, provided fire support for the infantry. The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and the 1st Tank Battalion supplemented and reinforced the efforts of the infantry regiments, as did strong contingents of engineers, transportation, and service troops.

With the division as its defensive shield, the city of Da Nang, the airfield to the west of it, and Tien Sha Peninsula and Marble Mountain Air Facility to the east of it constituted the Da Nang Vital Area. This area was not included in the 1st Marine Division's TAOR. Instead, III MAF in conjunction with South Vietnamese authorities supervised its defense. The division's responsibility began just outside the Da Nang Vital Area with the Northern and Southern Sector Defense Commands (NSDC and SSSDC). These commands consisted of various headquarters and support units organized for mutual defense. Between them they guarded Division Ridge, the high ground west of the Da Nang Airbase.

Beyond the defense commands lay the Rocket Belt, its main defensive purpose implicit in its name, guarded by the 26th Marines with its battalions spread out



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373930

Marines from Headquarters Battalion, 1st Marine Division patrol valley just three miles west of Da Nang. The incongruity of war and peace is vividly demonstrated as the seemingly unconcerned farmer employs both a crude plow and a water buffalo to work his plot.

north and west of Da Nang and the 1st Marines deployed to the southwest, south, and southeast. Southwest of the 1st Marines, the 5th Marines operated in a TAOR which encompassed the An Hoa Combat Base and industrial area and the infiltration routes along the Song Thu Bon and Song Vu Gia. Still further south, the 7th Marines' TAOR stretched from the coastal plain westward to include the Que Son Mountains and about half of the Que Son Valley. The southern boundary of the 7th Marines' TAOR also constituted the boundary between the TAORs of the 1st Marine Division and the Army's Americal Division.¹⁹

As part of the Keystone Bluejay redeployment, the 26th Marines stood down for deactivation during late February and early March, and the division realigned its regimental TAORs to fill the resulting gap. Early in March, the 1st Marines extended its TAOR to the northward and took over most of the 26th Marines' portion of the Rocket Belt. At the same time, it turned over the southwestern portion of its TAOR, including Hills 37 and 55, to the 51st ARVN Regiment. The 5th Marines redeployed its 1st Battalion to the SSDC to assume the function of division reserve while continuing to cover its TAOR with its remaining battalions.

The 7th Marines slightly enlarged the boundaries of its existing TAOR. This deployment remained in effect throughout the first half of 1970.²⁰

With the 3d Marine Division withdrawn from Vietnam, Marines no longer stood guard along the DMZ, but the 1st Marine Division retained responsibility for reinforcing northern I Corps with a regiment if a new escalation of the war there required it. To meet this responsibility with the reduced forces left by Keystone Bluejay, the division staff during March and April drafted Operation Plan 2-70. Under this plan, a reinforced regiment was to deploy to northern I CTZ within 36 hours of the order being given. The 7th Marines was to provide two infantry battalions and the command group, leaving one battalion to protect a reduced TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in division reserve, less one company, would constitute the third battalion of the regiment, which would have attached to it an artillery battalion and companies of engineers and other support troops. The plan charged the responsible commands with being ready to move one battalion northward within eight hours' notice, the second battalion with the command group within

18 hours, and the third battalion and the balance of the force within 36 hours.²¹

Operation Plan 2-70 never had to be executed, as the war continued at low intensity throughout I CTZ during the first six months of 1970. Month after month, III MAF summed up the 1st Division's activities in the same words: "In Quang Nam Province, the 1st Marine Division emphasized security and pacification operations. . . ." ²²

To deal with the varied and pervasive enemy activities, Marine operations were divided into three categories. Category I focused on populated areas where the VC and NVA had direct contact with the populace, often on a daily basis. Here cordon and search operations were executed to seal the enemy in the hamlets and villages where he conducted his business, then to root him out and kill or capture him. The activities of the Combined Action Program and Combined Unit Pacification Program (CUPP)* were also included in this category.

Category II covered small-unit day patrols and night ambushes on the edges of the villages and hamlets. In these operations, the Marines tried to engage and destroy NVA/VC main force detachments maneuvering in the lowlands or at least to sever the contact between these enemy forces and the guerrillas and political cadres among the people. Category II included reconnaissance in force operations of generally company scale designed to disrupt enemy supply movement and prevent the launching of sustained rocket and mortar attacks. The largest percentage of 1st Marine Division activities fell into Category II.

Category III applied to multi-company and occasionally multi-battalion operations against NVA and VC main force units and their headquarters and bases. These were not aimed at permanent occupation or pacification, but instead sought to inflict casualties, destroy or capture stores and equipment, and prevent the enemy from reinforcing units operating in inhabited areas. Category III operations usually took place in thinly populated mountain and jungle regions.²³

In each regiment's TAOR, the size of combat activities varied, with mostly fireteam and squad operations in the Rocket Belt and platoon-, company-, or battalion-size maneuvers in the 5th and 7th Marines' areas, which were closer to enemy bases. The daily routine of Category I and II activities was altered occasionally by regiments and battalions to execute a

Category III operation. Periodically, in response to intelligence forecasts of intensified enemy pressure, the division would direct increased day and night activities, inspection and improvement of fortifications, and often temporary reassignments or redeployments of platoons, companies, or battalions to reinforce vital areas. While the broad tactical features of the war were similar throughout the division's TAOR, each regiment conducted combat operations with relative independence, tailoring small-unit and larger scale maneuvers to meet the varying threat of local guerrillas, NVA, or VC main force units.

The Inner Defenses: Northern Sector Defense Command and Southern Sector Defense Command

The Da Nang Vital Area extended south from the city to the Cau Do River and to a point on the seashore just below MAG-16's base at the Marble Mountain Air Facility. On the west, the Vital Area's border lay just beyond the edge of the Da Nang airfield complex.* To the south, the Vital Area bordered the TAOR of the 1st Marines, and on the west it adjoined the NSDC and the SSDC.

Each of these sector defense commands coordinated the security activities of the American units and installations and Vietnamese local forces within its boundaries. Each was under the command of the senior officer of a tenant American unit, who carried out this assignment in addition to his regular duties.

Colonel Don D. Ezell, commanding officer of the 1st Marine Division's artillery regiment, the 11th Marines, also commanded the NSDC, until 25 March, when he was relieved by Colonel Ernest R. Reid, Jr. The TAOR of the NSDC, a 35,000 grid square** stretch of hills, scrub, and rice paddies, extended north almost to the Cu De River and included the sand flats of Red Beach where elements of the 9th MEB had come ashore in 1965. In April 1970, NSDC included 17 Marine, Army, and Navy units and facilities, among them the 1st Marine Division Command Post, the Northern Artillery Cantonment, and Force Logistic Command, along with 31 Vietnamese villages and hamlets. Also among the tenant units responsible for providing personnel to man the lines of NSDC was Headquarters Battalion, 1st Marine Division. Colonel

*For details of the defense of the Da Nang Vital Area, see Chapter 14.

**A grid square is 1,000 meters square on a standard tactical map.

*For details on the CAP and CUPP programs, see Chapter 8.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A194077
Two Marines, part of a provisional rifle company from the Force Logistic Command, search a stream eight miles west of Da Nang for Viet Cong hiding places.

William C. Patton, who commanded the battalion during the first few months of 1970, recalled the security role of his command which numbered over 3,200 men:

The personnel of HQBN accomplished their normal workday requirements and then manned almost two miles of division perimeter at night. The band members, for example, toured the division on a daily basis playing for troop ceremonies and morale, and at night did an exceptional job of perimeter security. Several were wounded during the period. The security for division headquarters was maintained with no breaches of the lines during the period August 1969 to March 1970.²⁴

The commander of NSDC supervised the maintenance and improvement of the fixed defenses of NSDC units. Using personnel from the tenant organizations, he sent out daily and nightly patrols and ambushes to find and eliminate enemy infiltrators who worked their way past the 1st and 26th Marines. Troops of each sector defense command regularly cooperated with local Vietnamese forces in pacification activities and in cordon and search operations which targeted specific hamlets and villages. During March, a moderately active month, NSDC units conducted 526 patrols and ambushes, 361 of them at night. NSDC forces reported nine enemy sightings, engaging the enemy four times, while killing one and taking three detainees*, and capturing two AK-47s.²⁵

*A person suspected of being a Viet Cong soldier or agent but not yet positively identified as such.

From its border with NSDC, the TAOR of the SSDC extended south to the Cau Do River and lapped around the western side of NSDC's TAOR. Containing the Hill 34 complex and two important highway bridges, the Cobb Bridge and the Cau Do Bridge, the SSDC covered the southern and southwestern approaches to Da Nang. In January 1970, the commanding officer of the 1st Tank Battalion, Major Joseph J. Louder, commanded SSDC, using troops from his battalion and from the 26th Marines as his principal patrol and reaction forces.

Louder's units conducted daily and nightly patrols and ambushes, averaging between 1,300 and 1,400 per month during early 1970. SSDC patrols had sporadic contact with small groups of enemy, and occasional larger clashes occurred. On the night of 3-4 January, for example, Outpost Piranha, some one and one-half miles south-southwest of the 1st Marine Division CP, repelled an attack by seven grenade-throwing VC who rushed the defenses under cover of mortar and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire. The Marines on the outpost killed one of the attackers but had four of their own men seriously wounded. To better meet such attacks, in February Major Louder constituted a mobile reaction force of 2 officers and 75 enlisted Marines drawn from the 1st Tank Battalion and the 26th Marines.²⁶

When both the 1st Tank Battalion and the 26th Marines redeployed in Keystone Bluejay, the new division reserve, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, assumed primary responsibility for the security of SSDC. To assure a smooth turnover, Major Louder worked closely with the 1st Battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Cornelius F. ("Doc") Savage, Jr. On 28 February, Company C of Savage's battalion, under operational control of the tank battalion, took over perimeter defense of Hill 34. Company B joined Company C in sector defense during the first days of March, and, after 3 March these two companies took over patrolling responsibilities from the tank battalion. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Savage and his S-3 visited all SSDC units with Major Louder. On 5 March, as all but one company of the 1st Tank Battalion stood down for redeployment, Savage's battalion assumed full responsibility for the SSDC. From that time through the end of June, the battalion, with its CP at Hill 34, kept two companies in rotation in the northern and central sectors of the SSDC to block infiltration while two more platoons guarded the Cobb and Cau Do Bridges.²⁷

The 1st and 26th Marines: The Rocket Belt

Beyond the NSDC and the SSDC lay the Rocket Belt, a block of territory roughly delimited by a semi-circle with a 12,000 meter radius centered on the Da Nang airfield. This area, its radius determined by the range of the enemy's 122mm and 140mm rockets, contained most of the sites from which the NVA/VC could launch rockets to harass American military forces and further terrorize Vietnamese civilians in American occupied areas.

Since June 1968, the 1st Marine Division, at the direction of III MAF, had been building a physical barrier along the outer edges of the Rocket Belt. Called the Da Nang Barrier and later the Da Nang Anti-Infiltration System (DAIS), the project would, when completed, consist of a cleared belt of land 500 meters wide running the entire length of the Rocket Belt. Within the cleared strip, two parallel barbed wire fences, wire entanglements, and minefields were designed to halt or at least delay infiltrators. An elaborate array of sensors and observation devices (many of them leftovers from the ill-fated "McNamara Line" along the DMZ), installed in or just behind the barrier, would alert allied troops and artillery to counter enemy probes. Under a plan prepared by General Simpson in March 1969, the barrier would be guarded by fire of Marine rifle companies and a supporting artillery group of two 105mm howitzer batteries, the entire force under direct operational control of the 1st Marine Division. According to General Simpson's estimate, the system would ultimately require no more than 1,800 Marines to keep the enemy out of the Rocket Belt, freeing about 5,000 Marines for offensive operations.²⁸

In January 1970, the DAIS existed largely on paper. Marine, ARVN, and Korean engineers had cleared most of the land, erected the barbed wire fences and 23 wooden watchtowers, and laid a few minefields. Unfortunately, divided responsibility, adverse weather and terrain (much of the barrier ran at right angles to the natural drainage system of the Da Nang area, causing washouts during the monsoon season), and lack of manpower and materials had prevented completion of the system. Most of the sensors had never been emplaced, and the forces to monitor them and guard the barrier had not been assembled or positioned. Those portions of the system that had been built were now deteriorating. Brush, in places up to 18 feet high, had covered parts of the cleared strip, and both VC infiltrators and civilian farmers bound for their rice paddies

had cut passages through the unguarded wire. At the end of his tour in command of the 26th Marines in mid-December 1969, Colonel Ralph A. Heywood said: "The wire that was constructed on both sides of the barrier . . . [has] been breached in a thousand places. This is going to take—a conservative estimate would take—about 200 people one month given the necessary equipment to get that wire back in shape."²⁹

The worth of the DAIS was the subject of much debate within the 1st Marine Division in 1970. Lieutenant Colonel Pieter L. Hogaboom, then operations officer of the 26th Marines, said that the officers and men of the 26th Marines from the regimental commander (Colonel James E. Harrell) on down lacked any enthusiasm for the efficacy of the system. Nevertheless, they tried to make it work. Their efforts fell into two areas, said Hogaboom, "an attempt to evaluate the reliability of the sensor readings as indicators of enemy activity, and an attempt to improve tactical response to the readings, assuming that they actually indicated movement across or along the trace of the DAIS."

To test and improve the system, Hogaboom said that the regiment "even went to the extent of having fire teams, squads and entire platoons from Captain George [V.] Best's [Jr.] Company G crawl, walk, and run across and along the line of sensors, only to get readings that were inconsistent with the size and relative stealth or activity of the the crossing unit" At other times units got readings "from points on the trace that were under observation in good visibility conditions," where monitoring units were pretty certain there wasn't any activity. 26th Marines concluded that at best the sensors were right only part of the time.

"To improve response time," explained Hogaboom, "26th Marines saturated both sides of the trace of the DAIS with patrols and ambushes and covered as much of the trace as possible with direct fire weapons. Crews prepared range cards for their segments of the trace, using sensor locations as targets." To increase the possibility of making contact with the enemy "patrols, primarily of fire team and squad size, were routed to cover points on the trace of sensors with a history of frequent activations. The patrols were in contact with readout stations in the company CPs . . . and were tasked to respond to activations."

Direct fire weapons, including M60 and .50 caliber machine guns, 106mm recoilless rifles, and tank main guns, were brought to bear on targeted sections of the

DAIS when readout stations radioed sensor numbers to gun crews. "For the 106s and main guns, fleshette rounds with fuses cut in advance for each target on a specific range card . . . were used. Claymores were employed to augment direct fire weapons." Incorporating live fire training into these elaborate procedures, the response time between sensor activation and getting well-aimed fire on target was compressed to a few seconds, but as the 26th Marines' operations officer observed, "Rarely was the enemy, his remains, or his equipment found."³⁰

Because of the inadequacies of the DAIS, protection of the Rocket Belt continued to require the constant efforts of large numbers of Marine infantrymen, and in January 1970 the 1st and 26th Marines shared this task. The 26th Marines, under Colonel Harrell, Heywood's replacement, already designated for Keystone Bluejay redeployment, held the northern half of the Rocket Belt and guarded Hai Van Pass, through which Route 1, South Vietnam's only north-south highway, and the railroad paralleling it run to connect Da Nang with Hue. The regiment's 2d Battalion, in the northernmost TAOR of the Division, had companies positioned at the Lien Chieu Esso Depot, Hai Van Pass, and Lang Co Bridge and Hill 88 north of the pass. The Marines of this battalion operated mostly in the steep, jungled mountains and left close-in protection of the road and railroad largely to the Vietnamese RFs.

Next in line to the south and southwest of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, the companies of the 3d Battalion protected Nam O Bridge, where Route 1 crosses the Cu De River, and held positions on Hills 190 and 124 and Outpost Reno. From these points, they could observe and block enemy infiltration routes along the Cu De, through the villages and rice paddies just south of it, and in the rolling, brush-covered country still further south. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, with its CP on Hill 10 southwest of Da Nang, patrolled a TAOR of rice paddies, hamlets, and patches of woods that lay directly below Charlie Ridge, a hill mass that projected from the Annamite Mountains and constituted a much-used enemy harboring place close to Da Nang.³¹

Throughout January and February, each battalion conducted patrols and ambushes around-the-clock. Marines of the battalions also manned observation posts and sensor readout stations and launched occasional company-size reconnaissance in force operations along known infiltration routes or cooperated with Regional and Popular Forces to cordon and search villages. In January, for example, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, conducted 2 company operations, 26 platoon combat patrols, and 180 squad combat patrols. Marines of the battalion set up 61 listening and observation posts and 338 night ambushes.³²

South and east of the 26th Marines, the battalions of Colonel Herbert L. Wilkerson's 1st Marines, which

Enemy 122mm rockets uncovered by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines after an attack on the Da Nang Airbase are lined up for display. Members of a Marine engineer demolition team seen in the background were assigned the dangerous task of disarming the rockets.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373105





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374149

Men of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines rush to board a waiting CH-46 from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 364. Responsible for the protection of the northern half of the Da Nang Rocket Belt, the Marines are responding to a possible enemy sighting.

had its headquarters at Hill 55, controlled the portion of the Rocket Belt extending from the foot of Charlie Ridge to the coastal flats south of Marble Mountain. This area of operations contained a larger civilian population than did that of the 26th Marines, and in its villages and hamlets the Marines had learned some of their first hard lessons about the difficulties of pacification. The countryside was infested with local guerrillas, as well as with small groups of main force VC/NVA.

Adjacent to the TAOR of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, operated from Hills 22 and 37 in an area of flooded paddies and scattered treelines to cover its portion of the Rocket Belt, defend several important bridges, and halt infiltration eastward from Charlie Ridge and northward from enemy refuges in the heavily populated country south of the Cau Do River. The battalion had one company on CUPP duty and during January had temporary operational control of Company G from the 2d Battalion to cover the base of Charlie Ridge. Further to

the east, the 1st Battalion protected another segment of the Rocket Belt, helped guard the railroad and highway bridges over the Cau Do, and acted as regimental mobile reserve. Guarding from the Rocket Belt to the beaches of the South China Sea, the 2d Battalion contested the coastal infiltration routes to Marble Mountain. During January and most of February, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines took over the southern portion of the battalion's TAOR to reinforce the area against an expected enemy Tet offensive.

The 1st Marines saturated its TAOR with fire team and squad-size patrols and ambushes just like 26th Marines did. With Vietnamese RFs and PFs and police, they cordoned and searched villages for guerrillas and conducted occasional company-size sweeps. During January, the 2d Battalion cooperated with the Korean Marines to the south to support a land-clearing operation. In this heavily populated region, with its many VC and VC sympathizers, mines and boobytraps constantly plagued the Marines, causing casualties almost daily. During two months of operations around Hills

22 and 37, for instance, Marines of the 3d Battalion found 99 boobytraps and detonated 22. In contrast, after they moved north into the former 26th Marines TAOR in March, in four months they found only eight boobytraps and set off none.³³

In January, to supplement the usual ground patrols and ambushes, both the 1st and 26th Marines participated in a new system of heliborne combat patrols codenamed Kingfisher.* This was the latest variant in a long series of quick-reaction heliborne assaults which the Marines had experimented with since 1965. Kingfisher differed from earlier efforts since it was an offensive patrol, intended to seek out the enemy and initiate contact rather than exploit engagements begun by ground units. As Colonel Wilkerson put it, "This is an offensive weapon that goes out and hunt[s] them They actually invite trouble."³⁴

The ground component of the Kingfisher patrol was a reinforced rifle platoon embarked on board three Boeing CH-46D Sea Knight helicopters. Accompanied by four Bell UH-1G Huey Cobra gunships, a North American OV-10 Bronco carrying an aerial observer, and with fixed-wing air support on call, the Marines would patrol the regimental TAOR by air. Usually airborne at first light, when night activities were ending and daytime patrols were preparing to depart, the Kingfisher patrol would search the area of operation for signs of the enemy. The platoon would be landed if the enemy were sighted or if an area bore some signs of enemy presence. When contact was made, the Cobras would provide close air support and the aerial observer would call in fixed-wing air strikes and artillery fire if necessary. While one platoon flew the day's mission, the rest of the Kingfisher company was equipped and ready to move by air to reinforce it, often with extra ammunition placed on the landing pad for quick loading. When the Kingfisher platoon was inserted, the CH-46s would immediately return to the company area, pick up a second platoon, and take off to assist the first platoon or exploit a new contact.³⁵

Kingfisher operations required careful coordination. In the 1st Marines, for example, the company assigned to Kingfisher came under direct operational control of the regiment. Each patrol flight included a UH-1E

Huey command helicopter. This aircraft carried the company commander, a regimental staff officer in radio contact with the 1st Marines' CP, and the air commander. These officers together would decide when and where to land the troops. Once the platoon was on the ground, the company commander, who remained aloft, directed its movements. Each time a Kingfisher patrol went out, regimental headquarters informed the battalions of the areas within their TAORs that were likely to be investigated, so that the battalions' own patrols could avoid them. The regiment also informed the artillery, which would then suspend all fire at those coordinates unless called upon to support the Kingfisher platoon.³⁶

While both the 1st and 26th Marines flew Kingfisher patrols, the first and most spectacularly successful use of the tactic was made by the 1st Marines. Late in December 1969, First Lieutenant William R. Purdy received orders to prepare his Company A of Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey S. Delcuze's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, for "a special mission . . . doing something entirely different from the normal day-to-day walking through rice paddies, seeing no enemy," and hitting boobytraps, an activity to which they had grown too accustomed. The new mission was Kingfisher. Lieutenant Purdy carefully prepared his Marines. He refreshed their training in squad and platoon assault tactics, including squad and fire team rushes, which few of the men had employed since coming to Vietnam. He also drilled them in quick loading and unloading from helicopters, first with chalk outlines of the CH-46D on the company's landing pad and then at Marble Mountain with actual CH-46Ds of Lieutenant Colonel Walter R. Ledbetter, Jr.'s HMM-263, which would furnish the air transport.³⁷

Company A ran its first Kingfisher on 2 January. Its assault platoon landed twice, encountering no enemy while experiencing problems with communications and coordination which it and the helicopter crews quickly solved. Lieutenant Purdy also learned anew that terrain seen from the air often was not what it appeared to be. "On our first landing," he recalled, "we landed in what we thought was a large green field; it turned out to be a large green rice paddy with water up to waist deep."³⁸

The company launched its second Kingfisher on 6 January. About 0730, five miles or so south of Marble Mountain in a flat, sandy portion of the 2d Battalion's TAOR, the airborne patrol saw some men sitting next to a hut. The smoke that was also observed turned out

*On 26 December 1969, the 1st Marines conducted its first Kingfisher patrol of the regimental TAOR. The platoon was landed on a target in the Ngan Cau area but no contact was made. A debrief was conducted and notes were taken on lessons learned in preparation for future patrols which began in January 1970.

to be from cooking fires. The men reacted with apprehension when the Huey in which Lieutenant Purdy was riding came down for a closer look. After talking the situation over, Purdy and the air commander, Lieutenant Colonel Kermit W. Andrus, S-3 of MAG-16, decided to land the platoon and check the suspects' identities.

As the three CH-46Ds came into the hastily marked landing zone, a heavy volume of small arms fire from the ground removed all questions about who the men were. In fact, the Marines were landing almost in the middle of a sizeable group of armed VC. As Corporal James D. Dalton, a squad leader, put it, "We dropped right down in on 'em — actually we dropped right down on their breakfast table."³⁹ The VC seemed to be completely surprised, the platoon commander observed:

. . . We landed right directly on top of people, and . . . they were running right beside the windows of the choppers, and we got a couple of kills right out of the choppers. We were almost within distance to bayonet them as they were running along the windows of the choppers.⁴⁰

Under fire which damaged the hydraulic system of

the CH-46D piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Ledbetter, the Marines, benefiting from their many rehearsals, deplaned, quickly organized, and attacked by fire team and squad rushes. Caught completely off balance, the VC began running in all directions. They had strong defenses against a conventional ground attack, but in the words of one Marine "we had dropped inside their perimeter, and they were having to sky [flee] and we were fighting from their positions, every berm we came to all we had to do was drop our rifles on it and start firing."⁴¹ As they scattered across the flats to escape the infantry's grenade and rifle assault, the VC came under fire from the Cobra gunships which, as Corporal Dalton put it, "were tearing them up."⁴² When the fight ended about 0855, Company A had counted 15 enemy killed by its own and the Cobras' fire, and the Cobra crews claimed nine more in an area that the infantry did not sweep because of enemy mine and boobytrap markers. The Marines, who had suffered no casualties, also took one prisoner and captured 2 weapons, 17 grenades, and assorted documents and equipment.⁴³

By mid-February, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, had

Infantrymen of Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines are seen waiting for a helicopter to pick them up. The Marines are taking part in the Kingfisher operations, which began in January 1970 as heliborne combat patrols to seek out dispersed enemy units.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372554



launched 18 Kingfisher patrols, 13 by Company A and 5 by Company D. The first three or four Kingfishers produced contacts comparable to that of 6 January, but as time went on the patrols found fewer and fewer targets. The same proved true of the 26th Marines' Kingfishers. Evidently the enemy, after suffering heavily a few times, had reduced his early morning movement and learned to take cover at the sight of helicopters aloft at that time of day. Kingfishers, other than at first light, proved ineffective because the number of civilians in the fields prevented ready identification of and rapid attack upon enemy groups. Nevertheless, Lieutenant Colonel Delcuze, Lieutenant Purdy, and most other officers and men involved in Kingfisher believed it a valuable tactic, especially against the small enemy detachments that operated in the Rocket Belt. Kingfisher had demonstrated that it could inflict significant enemy losses, and even patrols that found no contact reduced the VC's freedom of movement and produced useful intelligence.⁴⁴

While the Kingfisher concept enjoyed much success in the early months of 1970, Lieutenant Colonel William V. H. White, commanding officer of 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, said that too much emphasis was placed on the Kingfisher operation. He felt that since it tied up a dedicated rifle company, which could have been used more constructively, Kingfisher "should have been dropped much sooner than it was or conducted periodically from within one of the battalion combat bases." He said it was an excellent tactical innovation, but the enemy quickly diagnosed the concept of employment and adjusted his activities accordingly.⁴⁵

In mid-February the 1st Marines began the complex process of relieving the 26th Marines so that the latter could stand down from combat for redeployment and deactivation. The operation began on 15 February when the companies of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, stationed at Hill 88 and Lang Co Bridge, returned to the battalion rear area on Division Ridge. Elements of the Army's 101st Airborne Division assumed control of that part of the Marines' area of operations. On 1 March, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, temporarily under the operational control of the 26th Marines, relieved the 3d Battalion and elements of the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines in their arc of positions ranging from Outpost Reno in the south to the Esso Depot and Hai Van Pass in the north. On 6 March, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, extended itself to cover the TAOR of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, includ-

ing Hills 10 and 41 and the outpost on Hill 270. Meanwhile, the 1st Marines gave up much of the far southwestern portion of its old TAOR, turning over security of the Cau Do Bridge to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and its former headquarters cantonment on Hill 55 to the 51st ARVN Regiment.⁴⁶

The replacement of elements of one regiment with elements of another without major interruption of the continuous combat operations needed to protect the Rocket Belt required careful planning and coordination at both regimental and battalion levels. An example of this process was the relief of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, by the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. Planning began on 10 February with an orientation visit by Lieutenant Colonel Frank M. Boyd, commanding officer of the 1st Marines battalion, to Lieutenant Colonel John J. Unterkofler of the 26th Marines unit. The visit included a tour of the departing battalion's fixed positions. Three days later, the executive officers of the two battalions together surveyed the positions and began detailed planning of the relief. On 21 February, the S-3 of Boyd's battalion arrived with an advance party of 46 Marines, some of whom began familiarizing themselves with defenses and terrain while others went for an orientation to the sensor readout sites on Nam O Bridge, Hill 190, and OP Reno. Key staff officers of the relieving battalion established themselves during the same period at Unterkofler's CP and began a round of visits to the Vietnamese district headquarters in the TAOR. Beginning on 24 February, staff officers of the two battalions held daily meetings to hammer out final arrangements, while the Headquarters and Service Company of the 26th Marines battalion prepared to move that unit's CP and redeploying personnel to the 1st Shore Party Battalion camp. That movement took place during the last two days of February. On 1 March, riflemen of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines occupied their new forward positions without incident and quickly resumed the routine of patrols and ambushes.⁴⁷

As the 26th Marines stood down, its battalions transferred most of their men to other units of the 1st Marine Division. Many Marines of the 3d battalion, for example, went by truck or helicopter to units of the 1st Marines the day the battalion was relieved. The 26th Marines conducted its last combat patrol in Vietnam on 6 March. On 18 March, after almost two weeks spent tying up administrative and logistic loose ends, representatives of the regiment, which had arrived in

Vietnam in 1967 and received a Presidential Unit Citation for its defense of Khe Sanh in 1968, participated in a farewell ceremony at Da Nang airfield. The following day, 350 remaining personnel, including Colonel Harrell with the regimental colors, boarded aircraft for the flight to El Toro, where they were welcomed home by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr.⁴⁸

The departure of the 26th Marines left the 1st Marines in charge of the entire Rocket Belt, an area of about 534 square kilometers. The 1st Marines moved its headquarters from Hill 55 to Camp Perdue behind Division Ridge near the center of its enlarged TAOR. The regiment had undergone a change of command in February, when Colonel Edward A. Wilcox, who had served in Korea with the 7th Marines and had just completed a tour as G-2 on the staff of the 1st Marine Division, replaced Colonel Wilkerson. Wilkerson joined the staff of III MAF as Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3.

After the redeployment, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines held the northern portion of the arc around Da Nang, with one company on CUPP duty and the others on Hill 190, at the Esso Depot, and at Nam O Bridge. The battalion stationed a reinforced platoon at the top of Hai Van Pass. The 1st Battalion held the central sector from Outpost Reno—taken over from the 3d Battalion on 28 March—to a boundary line southeast of Hill 41. The eastern TAOR, now nearly doubled in area, remained the responsibility of the 2d Battalion. These dispositions would continue unchanged for the rest of the year.

The 1st Marines kept tight security of the Rocket Belt, conducting patrols and ambushes and manning lines 24 hours a day. Companies protected command posts, firebases, cantonments, bridges, and observation posts; patrols probed infiltration routes and potential rocket launching sites; and ambushes were set in during the hours of darkness. Battalions occasionally rotated company positions within their TAORs, conducted company-size sweeps, or cordoned off hamlets for searches by PFs and police. High threat periods brought shifts of companies between battalions to strengthen key positions and increased numbers of night patrols and ambushes.⁴⁹

At times, battalions varied their tactics. In June, for instance, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, operating in heavily boobytrapped country, reduced the number of its daytime patrols and instead began setting up observation posts at strategic points manned by rifle

squads and sniper teams. According to the battalion's report, "This change not only increased cognizance of many densely vegetated areas but also decreased the number of Marine boobytrap casualties."*⁵⁰

In brief fire fights, the Marines inflicted losses on small enemy units infiltrating the populated areas and the VC's political and administrative cadre. On 10 February, for example, a patrol from Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, on its way to a night ambush site about three miles south of Marble Mountain, collided unexpectedly with a "large . . . VC/NVA force." The point man, Corporal Ronald J. Schiattone, immediately opened fire and the rest of the unit deployed and attacked. A short fire fight followed, with the enemy trying to break contact while another patrol from Company E moved into blocking positions. The firing died down, and a sweep of the area disclosed four VC/NVA bodies, three AK-47 assault rifles, three M16s, and assorted other weapons and equipment. Drag marks and blood trails indicated that the enemy had suffered more casualties than they had left behind.⁵¹

A few weeks later, a squad from Company K, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, while patrolling in brushwood country west of Da Nang, "heard movement in thick vegetation and assaulted with grenades and small arms fire." Searching the area, they found a dead enemy with a pistol, grenades, medical gear, rice, and documents. When translated, the documents identified the dead man as a VC district paymaster.⁵²

Not all patrol encounters were with the enemy, as a squad of Company B of the 1st Battalion found out. Returning from a patrol west of Hill 10 on the morning of 23 March, the Marines came upon three bull water buffaloes attended by a Vietnamese child. Something about the Marines irritated the animals and, in the words of the battalion spot report:

All 3 bulls started to charge the point man at a slow pace. VN child was able to retain 2 of the bulls and the 3rd bull kept charging the squad. Sqd leader gave orders to back up

*The tactics that were employed to best control activity in areas of operation often varied based on the judgments of commanders. Colonel William V. H. White, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines from January to May 1970, challenged the view that increased cognizance could be maintained over the battalion's TAOR from strategically placed observation posts. In his opinion the size and nature of the terrain and the thousands of people in it—civilians, VC, RFs, PFs, ARVNs—made it necessary to get out among them to know what was going on." Col William V. H. White, Comments on draft ms, 6Jul83 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373245

Marines from Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines emerge from a heavy-lift CH-53 helicopter in a search and destroy mission in a long-time enemy base area known to the Marines as Charlie Ridge, located 12 miles southwest of the Da Nang Airbase.

and not shoot unless necessary. Bull kept charging and was shot 4 times by a member of the squad. Checked bull out and [it] was found dead. Brought VN child in charge of bull in. S-5 [civic action officer] will fill out reports on the incident and file VN request for payment.⁵³

In the many small, violent clashes with the enemy, the young Marines often demonstrated exceptional valor. On 11 April, for instance, a squad of Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, was returning from a night ambush about four miles south of Da Nang when it spotted two enemy soldiers carrying an RPG rocket launcher. The Marines fired at them, killing one who fell into a flooded rice paddy. His companion dived into the water and hid in the reeds and brush while the Marines threw grenades into the paddy to flush him out. Lance Corporal Emilio A. De la Garza, Jr., a 20-year-old machine gunner from East Chicago, Indiana, who had enlisted in 1969 and transferred into the battalion from Marine Corps Exchange duty in Da Nang only the previous December, spotted the fugitive. With the aid of his platoon commander and another Marine, De la Garza started to drag the struggling soldier from the paddy. The enemy soldier reached for a grenade and pulled the pin. De la Garza saw the movement and shouted a warning. He pushed the platoon leader and the other Marine aside

and himself took the full force of the explosion, suffering mortal wounds. The second VC/NVA was killed and the RPG launcher with two rounds was captured. Lance Corporal De la Garza, the only Marine casualty, received a posthumous Medal of Honor.⁵⁴

The 1st Marines launched an occasional Category III operation. Typical of these and relatively successful was the reconnaissance in force on Charlie Ridge conducted by the 1st Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles G. Little, from 15 to 27 April. The operation took place in conjunction with the 51st ARVN's Operation Hung Quang 1/32, a two-battalion sweep in an adjacent area, and was based on intelligence reports which located the headquarters of the *Q-84th Main Force Battalion* and other significant enemy units in the jungled hills and ravines of the Charlie Ridge area.

Charlie Ridge was the name given by allied forces to a complex of brush-covered foothills and jungle-blanketed mountains which overlooked the coastal plain some 12-15 miles southwest of Da Nang. Its large area, rough and broken terrain, and thick vegetation made Charlie Ridge an ideal enemy base camp location, and from it infiltrators could easily enter populated areas to the northeast, east, and south or move to convenient rocket launching sites. Since Operation

Oklahoma Hills in early 1969, major allied units had left Charlie Ridge alone except for air strikes, artillery harassment and interdiction, and the insertion of reconnaissance teams which confirmed continued heavy enemy use of the area. The NVA and VC had honeycombed the hills with headquarters, supply caches, and base camps protected by bunkers, tunnels, and natural caves. In fact, they had developed a surplus of camps so that if Marine or ARVN units invaded one base complex, the enemy easily could move his men and materiel to another. In the words of a defector:

The people in the base camp do not worry about allied operations. Forewarning of an attack is obvious at the base camp when FWMAF [Free World Military Armed Forces] conduct air strikes, artillery fire, aerial reconnaissance, and when helicopters fly in the area. When an operation takes place in the vicinity of the base camp, the people simply go further back into the mountains and return when the operation is over.⁵⁵

The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, which normally operated along the Vu Gia River just south of Charlie Ridge, had conducted a multi-company reconnaissance in force there in February with meager results. Now Little's battalion, aided by a Hoi Chanh* who promised to lead them to the base camp of the *Q-84th*, would test the enemy's defenses again.

The operation began on 14 April when Company C accompanied by the Hoi Chanh left Hill 41 and marched westward into the hills along a known VC trail. Two days later, a provisional battery of four 4.2-inch mortars drawn from the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 11th Marines, with a security detachment from Company C, landed by helicopter on Hill 502, about 14 miles southwest of Da Nang and established Fire Support Base Crawford. On 17 April, three companies—A and B of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and L of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines (temporarily attached to the 1st Battalion for this operation)—were lifted by helicopters into three separate landing zones south and west of the firebase. The Marines began a careful meter-by-meter search of previously assigned areas for base camps and supply caches.**

*A VC who voluntarily surrendered and agreed to aid the GVN, actively or passively. The enemy were encouraged to surrender under the "Chieu Hoi" program. English translation is "Open Arms." The program guaranteed enemy soldiers fair treatment and a place in South Vietnamese society.

**On the 18th, while observing the opening phases of this operation, General Wheeler was injured in the crash of his helicopter in one of the 1st Battalion's LZs.

As the Marines had expected, the enemy chose not to fight for the area. Although they took several casualties from booby traps, the patrols met only light opposition from snipers and two- or three-man groups of enemy soldiers. The enemy mortared Company B's CP on the night of the 18th with no effect and four days later made a ground probe of Company A's night position. This ended after an exchange of grenades with no casualties on either side. Company C joined the main body around noon on the 22d, after a march during which it caught and killed several individual VC/NVA.

Soon after landing, the Marine patrols began uncovering the bunkers, huts, tunnels, and weapon caches of several extensive base camps, including one which the Hoi Chanh claimed was the headquarters of the *Q-84th Battalion*. On 24 April, a patrol of Company B, following an enemy communications wire unearthed the previous day, walked into the largest camp yet uncovered in the operation and came under fire from about 30 NVA, evidently the rear guard of a sizeable force trying to evade the Marines. The rest of the company reinforced the patrol and assaulted the camp. One Marine was killed as were two NVA, one of whom was identified from papers on his body as the executive officer of the *102d Battalion, 31st NVA Regiment*.

After the fight on the 24th, the operation continued without major incident. On 27 April, the infantry companies left the area by helicopter, and the following day the mortar detachment razed and abandoned FSB Crawford. During the operation, the 1st Battalion had uncovered 10 base camp sites with large quantities of equipment, including 91 individual and 17 crew-served weapons. It had also found significant caches of documents, including a file from the enemy's *Hoa Vang District Headquarters* which contained lists of members of the VC infrastructure in that district. In 11 contacts with an estimated total of 48 VC and NVA, the Marines had killed 13 while losing two of their own men killed and five wounded, mostly by boobytraps. They had been unable to exploit fully their potentially most significant discovery, the base camp entered by Company B on the 24th, because it lay within the AO of the 51st ARVN Regiment. This frustration was experienced all too often in this complex war with its delicate problems of command and control of allied but independent forces.⁵⁶

Each battalion of the 1st Marines regularly called on the fixed-wing and helicopter squadrons of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing for the full range of support

available to a Marine unit. During April 1970, for example, Marine fixed-wing squadrons flew 71 missions at request of the 3d Battalion, including 16 close air support strikes. Attack aircraft supporting the battalion expended 197 tons of bombs and napalm during the month. Helicopters of MAG-16 flew 26 medical evacuations for the battalion and 21 visual reconnaissance missions, besides transporting a total of 526 passengers.⁵⁷ The other battalions called for comparable quantities of air support, although the 2d Battalion, operating in a densely populated TAOR, requested few fixed-wing strikes. Instead, during April, it began using a night helicopter patrol, codenamed Night Hawk, which performed a function similar to the daytime Kingfisher. Consisting of a CH-46D equipped with a night observation device and two .50-caliber machine guns and accompanied by two Cobras, the Night Hawk patrolled the TAOR during the hours of darkness hunting targets of opportunity. Unlike Kingfisher the Night Hawk did not include air assault infantry.⁵⁸

The 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, provided direct artillery support for the 1st Marines, with one or more batteries usually assigned in direct support of each battalion. When necessary, other Marine batteries could add their fire, as could warships stationed off the coast. Since the enemy in the 1st Marines' TAOR rarely massed in large groups or maintained contact with the Marines for any length of time, the batteries supporting the regiment delivered mostly harassing and interdiction fire or shelled pre-selected and pre-cleared grids in response to sensor activations or sighting reports from observation posts. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines whose TAOR consisted mostly of unpopulated mountains and foothills, made the most use of artillery. In April, for instance, artillery supporting this battalion fired 15,914 rounds at harassing and interdiction targets. In addition, naval gunfire provided 2,440 supporting rounds. The 2d Battalion, on the other hand, could use artillery in only a few portions of its heavily populated TAOR.⁵⁹

For the artillery batteries supporting the 1st Marines, and indeed for the regiment itself, a primary mission was the prevention of or quick reaction to VC/NVA rocket attacks on Da Nang. Since 1967, when the rocket attacks began, the Marines had gradually developed a system of prevention and response in which infantry and artillery worked in close coordination and mutual support. To prevent launchings, the regiments guarding the Rocket Belt saturated it with patrols and

ambushes; most of the day and night small-unit activities of the 1st and 26th Marines had this as a major objective. The infantry manned or furnished security for observation posts which tried to spot infiltrators coming into the area or, failing that, the flashes of rockets being fired. By carefully plotting the sites of past firings, the Marines had pinpointed many of the enemy's most likely launching positions. They interdicted these each night, either by infantry patrols or by artillery bombardment, sometimes using both against the same area at different times. In the words of Colonel Ralph A. Heywood, Colonel Harrell's predecessor in command of the 26th Marines:

We protected the Rocket Belt with artillery. We fired . . . some 1100 to 2100 rounds a night, at known . . . rocket launching sites, and every time we'd get a piece of intelligence that would tell us that 100 people are carrying rockets over the hill, why we'd shoot at that also When we get a sensor reading, we shoot it.⁶⁰

In spite of patrols and artillery fire, the enemy still managed to slip in from the mountains, set up their rockets, and fire, but they did so at their increasing peril. As soon as installations reported impacts or patrols or outposts reported rocket flashes, fire direction centers would order counterbattery fire against previously designated launch sites. The batteries kept their guns aimed at these coordinates when not assigned other targets. Observation posts would then plot from the flashes the estimated firing position, clearance would be requested for the area from Vietnamese authorities, and usually within two to four minutes of the first launching, rounds would begin falling on the launch site and likely enemy escape routes from it. If infantry patrols or ambushes were too close to the plotted position for safe artillery engagement, the nearest patrol would attack at once toward the site.

As soon as possible after the attack, infantry would secure the launching site while a rocket investigating team from the 11th Marines examined it and reported on every aspect of the incident — rocket positions and launching devices, evidence of advance preparation of the site, estimated number of missiles fired, equipment left on the scene, enemy casualties found, and any other information which might help the Marines prevent future attacks. By mid-1970, this program substantially had reduced both the number of rocket incidents and the number of missiles discharged. At times, quick reaction forced the enemy to leave unfired rockets behind as they fled a site under infantry

or artillery counterattack. Nevertheless, in the first six months of 1970, the VC/NVA still managed to fire 85 rockets into the Da Nang area in 12 separate attacks. These missiles caused allied civilian and military casualties of 28 killed and 60 wounded.⁶¹

The 5th Marines: Thuong Duc, An Hoa, and Arizona Territory

South of the 1st Marines' TAOR and west of that of the Korean Marines, the 5th Marines defended a TAOR dominated by the confluence of two major rivers. The first of these, the Vu Gia, flows out of the mountains in a generally west-to-east direction through a valley dotted with villages and rice paddies, and overlooked to the north by Charlie Ridge. The major east-west highway, Route 4 (also known as Route 14), runs from Route 1 in the east to the western extremity of the Thuong Duc corridor, which was named after the town and Vietnamese Special Forces camp which guarded its western approaches.

In the flatlands about 10 miles east of Thuong Duc, the Vu Gia River flows into the second major river, the Thu Bon. This river is formed in the western Que Son Valley by the convergence of several smaller streams and bends northwestward and then northeast-

Weary Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines patrol boobytrap-infested Go Noi Island. The Marine wearing the cross carries an M60 machine gun.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374037



ward to meet the Vu Gia. East of their confluence, the two rivers take on a new name, the Ky Lam. Continuing eastward, the name of the river changes a few more times until it finally meanders past Hoi An through a maze of channels and islets into the South China Sea.

The Vu Gia and Thu Bon come together in the midst of a broad plain bounded on the northwest by the foothills of Charlie Ridge, on the west by the mountains of the enemy's Base Area 112, and on the southeast by hills rising into the Que Son Range. Marines called the portion of the plain between the Vu Gia and the Thu Bon the Arizona Territory. South and east of the Thu Bon lies the An Hoa Basin, site of a once-promising industrial project and in 1970 of the 5th Marines' combat base. Northeast of the An Hoa Basin and just south of the Ky Lam River, Go Noi Island, a fertile but enemy infested stretch of hamlets and paddies girdled and cut up by streams, extended from the 5th Marines' TAOR into that of the Korean Marines. From late May to early November 1969, in Operation Pipestone Canyon, the Koreans, along with elements of the 1st Marines and the 51st ARVN Regiment, had scoured Go Noi Island. They rooted the VC and NVA out of tunnels, caves, and trenches from which they had operated for years, killing some 800. Marine engineers and an Army land-clearing platoon then bulldozed the vegetation and crushed bunkers and fortifications. In spite of this and other allied pacification efforts, the VC guerrillas and political infrastructure remained strong in villages throughout the 5th Marines' TAOR, and parties of infiltrators crossed and recrossed it constantly.

The 5th Marines, commanded by Colonel Noble L. Beck until 11 February, then by Colonel Ralph F. Estey, began the year with the 1st Battalion covering the Thuong Duc corridor, the 2d Battalion protecting Liberty Road and Bridge* and conducting reconnaissance in force operations of western Go Noi Island, and the 3d Battalion operating in the Arizona Territory. Late in January, the 3d Battalion exchanged areas

*Liberty Road and Liberty Bridge had been worked on for several years by Marines and Seabees. They provided a direct road link between An Hoa and Hill 55 and Da Nang, vital both for military purposes and for the eventual and still hoped for development of the An Hoa industrial complex. Liberty Bridge, an 825-foot monsoon-proof span across the Thu Bon had been built by the Seabees to replace an earlier bridge washed away by a flood in 1967. It had been open to traffic since 30 March 1969. Simmons, "Marine Operations in Vietnam, 1969-72," p. 129.

of operation with the 1st Battalion, taking over the defense of the Thuong Duc corridor, while the 1st Battalion moved to the Arizona.

The pattern of battalion activities varied in the different areas of operation. In the Thuong Duc corridor, the 1st and then the 3d Battalion guarded the valley and Route 4 from strongpoints on Hills 65, 25, and 52. They saturated the countryside with patrols and ambushes, supported the CUPPs and CAPs working in the hamlets along the highway, and occasionally conducted a Category III operation on Charlie Ridge. The companies of the 2d Battalion manned an outpost at Liberty Bridge and cooperated with Vietnamese RFs, to guard the highway, while launching company-size sweeps into western Go Noi Island. In the Arizona Territory, the battalions defended no fixed positions, since this was and long had been hard-core enemy country. Instead, companies moved continually from place to place, patrolling, setting up night ambushes, and searching for food and supply caches. They conducted frequent multi-company sweeps and set up blocking forces for sweeps by battalions of the 51st ARVN.⁶²

In January, the 5th Marines began using Kingfisher patrols, and, as was the case with the 1st Marines, the first few of these operations caught the enemy off balance and produced significant contact. On 13 January, for example, an OV-10 and a ground outpost on the hills west of the Arizona Territory sighted armed enemy near the south bank of the Vu Gia River. An airborne platoon from Captain William M. Kay's Company I, 3d Battalion, landed under fire and engaged them. Captain Kay decided to reinforce the platoon, which seemed to have encountered a large force. Helicopters of Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Dunbaugh's HMM-364 picked up a second platoon of the Kingfisher company and landed it about two kilometers west of the engaged element. The two platoons then swept toward each other while the OV-10 directed fixed-wing air strikes and the Cobras hunted targets of opportunity. A CH-46D pilot reported that "the enemy on the ground had been caught completely off guard and completely unprepared, and they were . . . just running in every direction."⁶³ The two-platoon action lasted over two hours. At the end of it, at a cost of two wounded, the Marines had killed 10 enemy and taken one prisoner. They had captured two AK-47s and assorted equipment.⁶⁴

In March, the regiment realigned its battalions in response to the Keysone Bluejay withdrawals. Lieu-

tenant Colonel Johan S. Gestson's 3d Battalion extended its TAOR to the northeast to a point east of Route 1. It defended this enlarged TAOR, which included the strongpoints at Hills 37 and 55, as a combined area of operations with the 51st ARVN Regiment which placed its command post on Hill 55 and occupied Hill 37 with its 3d Battalion. On 6 March, Gestson's battalion also took command of the 1st Marines' CUPP company, Company M, the platoons of which operated in hamlets around Hills 37 and 55. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Savage's 1st Battalion, moved its companies by helicopter to positions in the SSDC where the battalion, now directly responsible to 1st Marine Division Headquarters, assumed the function of division reserve. To compensate for its departure, the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Frederick D. Leder, enlarged its area of operations to cover the Arizona Territory as well as western Go Noi Island, Liberty Bridge, and the An Hoa Basin. These deployments continued in effect until the next troop withdrawal in late August and September.⁶⁵

From its new positions at Hill 34 and Dai La Pass, the 1st Battalion for the next several months protected the SSDC while providing one or two of its companies in rotation for the division's Pacifier operation. Officially defined as "a swift striking, highly mobile heliborne task force which is able to react to any situation on very short notice," Pacifier consisted of an infantry company and four flights of aircraft each capable of lifting a platoon and almost identical in composition to the Kingfisher package.*⁶⁶ Instituted in March, the Pacifier infantry force could go into action on 10 minutes' notice at any time. Its aircraft were kept on standby for takeoff within 15 minutes of the order being given.

While it used a similar aircraft package, the Pacifier differed from Kingfisher in several important respects. The Pacifier functioned more as a reaction force than as a patrol, either striking predetermined targets or responding to ground contacts. Usually a longer time elapsed between the selection of the objective and the actual launching of the mission. Most important, in contrast to Kingfisher, which almost always went into unprepared landing zones, Pacifier missions generally started with air and artillery preparation

*Each Pacifier flight was composed of one UH1E command and control ship, two OV-10s carrying forward air controllers (airborne), three CH-46s for troop transport, two F-4Hs for LZ preparation, two F-4Hs for combat air patrol, and four Cobra gunships.

of the landing site a minimum of 5-10 minutes before the troop carriers arrived. This reduced the danger of ambushes in the landing zone, but, in the opinion of some Marine participants, sacrificed the element of surprise that Kingfisher often gained.*⁶⁷

Between 15 March and 21 June, the 1st Battalion conducted 51 Pacifier operations, usually against pre-planned objectives but sometimes to reinforce ground units in contact with the enemy. For example, on 31 May, elements of Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, operating northeast of An Hoa, sighted 18 enemy moving southward. The company at once established a blocking position and called for a Pacifier. Company A of the 1st Battalion, on Pacifier duty that day, responded. With Cobra gunfire and a ground assault, the Pacifier company and Company H killed five VC/NVA, took one prisoner, and captured an AK-47.⁶⁸

On 12 June, the division enlarged Pacifier by adding to it a second rifle company from the reserve battalion with the same aviation support as the first. Later in the month, the battalion began experimenting with multi-company operations in which Pacifier companies and companies from other battalions worked together, directed by a skeleton battalion command post. The first of these took place on 20-21 June in the northern Arizona Territory. Companies B and C of the 1st Battalion cooperated with Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, in a foray which killed several enemy and uncovered caches of corn and weapons. From 23-26 June, the same units launched a second sweep northeast of Liberty Bridge along the Thu Bon River in an area where intelligence indicated the enemy might be massing to attack Hill 55. Although hampered by heat casualties and boobytraps, the companies, supported by four tanks, saturated the area

*Lieutenant General Bernard E. Trainor, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines in the late summer and fall of 1970, observed, however, that the "Pacifier operations were sufficiently successful in keeping the VC/NVA off balance . . ." Based on the best available intelligence, a Pacifier element would swoop down upon a selected target: "If a target turned out to be unproductive (a 'dry-hole' in the parlance of the time), little time was wasted beating the bush. The troops would be picked up and a strike would be made on a pre-briefed lower priority alternate target from the list of such targets maintained by the Pacifier." General Trainor concluded that "Over time, the air/ground Pacifier team operated like a well-oiled machine. Detailed orders were never necessary. All hands knew what they were to do—even with the sketchiest intelligence. Common sense proved more useful than the five-paragraph combat order." LtGen Bernard E. Trainor, Comments on draft ms, 22Nov85 (Vietnam Comment File).

with night ambushes and daylight helicopter operations. Their efforts netted only one NVA/VC killed and one detainee.⁶⁹

While Pacifiers never matched the dramatic surprise contacts of the early Kingfishers, they did reduce the enemy's ability to mass forces within the division TAOR and inflicted substantial casualties. In the period from March to June, Pacifier operations killed 156 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong and captured 18 prisoners and 39 weapons, as well as large quantities of food, ordnance, and documents. Marine casualties in these operations totaled two killed and 21 wounded.⁷⁰

While the 5th Marines' 1st Battalion ran its Pacifiers, Lieutenant Colonel Leder's 2d Battalion pursued the enemy from the Arizona Territory to Go Noi Island. The battalion rotated its companies between relatively static security operations at Liberty Bridge and reconnaissance in force and search and destroy missions. In April, for instance, Company E began the month guarding Liberty Bridge while Company H protected Liberty Road; Company F conducted a reconnaissance in force in the Arizona Territory and Company G acted as regimental reserve with one of its squads positioned at the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion's observation post on Hill 119 northeast of An Hoa. On 8 April, Company G took over protection of Liberty Bridge while Company E switched to guarding Liberty Road. Four days later, Company H began a reconnaissance in force in the Arizona Territory. From 16-20 April, Companies F and H and a battalion command group, supported by an RF platoon from Duc Duc District and four Marine tanks, conducted a search and clear operation in the Arizona area. After the end of this operation, Company F continued patrolling the Arizona until the 27th, when it moved to An Hoa to act as regimental reserve. During the month, some of the companies in turn were helicoptered to Da Nang for 48 hours of rest and recreation.⁷¹

On 8 May at 0145, Company G while guarding Liberty Bridge came under fire from 60mm and 80mm mortars, B-40 rockets, and small arms, followed by a ground assault by an enemy force of undetermined size. The company drove off the attackers, who wounded 21 Marines and RFs. Anticipating that the enemy would retreat southward from the bridge toward the foothills of the Que Sons, the battalion moved a platoon from Company E to block the route and called in a Pacifier platoon. The Marine units located the withdrawing enemy, engaged them, and killed 10.⁷²

During the weeks following the fight at Liberty

Bridge, the 2d Battalion conducted a series of multi-company cordon and search operations. In cooperation with RF/PF elements and units of the National Police Field Force, the battalion tried to move suddenly on hamlets or villages known to be occupied by VC/NVA or enemy sympathizers. On 13 May at first light, the battalion command post with Companies H and F, a RF reconnaissance platoon, and four Marine tanks (often used by the 2d Battalion in these operations to break down vegetation and explode enemy mines in heavily boobytrapped hamlets) cordoned Le Nam (1), a hamlet about two miles southeast of Liberty Bridge. After the Marines surrounded the hamlet, a Marine platoon and the RF platoon together conducted a systematic search. In the words of the battalion report, "The VC/NVA were routed from numerous well concealed spider holes which laced the village." In sporadic fighting, the Marines and RFs killed two enemy and captured 24, three of them NVA doctors, while detaining 65 suspects. They also captured weapons, documents, and large amounts of hospital equipment. As the VC/NVA fled the hamlet, a Pacifier platoon called in by the battalion killed eight more of them.

Four days later, acting on information gained from interrogation of prisoners taken at Le Nam (1), the battalion cordoned and searched the neighboring hamlet of Le Nam (2), again using two of its own companies and this time a PF platoon. Again, they achieved surprise, routing the enemy from his holes and tunnels, killing six and capturing 18 along with rifles, grenades, a radio, documents, and medical gear.⁷³

In June, the battalion shifted its cordon and search activities to the Arizona Territory. In an operation lasting from 14-16 June, the battalion command post, with Companies E and G and a National Police Field Force unit, cordoned and searched My Hiep (1) in the northwestern Arizona while a company of the 3d Battalion blocked enemy escape routes north across the Vu Gia River. Lifting into their cordon positions by helicopter just after dawn, the Marines started a careful search of the hedgerows and dense bamboo thickets. In 48 hours, they flushed out and killed three VC/NVA and captured 22, along with a haul of rifles, grenades, and documents. The prisoners taken included four soldiers of the *Q-83d Main Force Battalion* and a number of ranking members of the VC.

On 30 June, the same two companies with an Armed Propaganda Team from Duc Duc District

moved in by helicopter to search Football Island, a favorite enemy harboring and food storage area on the west bank of the Thu Bon River about three miles north of An Hoa. After air strikes to prepare the landing area, the command helicopter and the gunships supporting the operation sighted about 20 enemy troops trying to escape across the Thu Bon, some swimming and the rest in a boat. According to the battalion report, "The command and control helicopter immediately took them under fire and then directed the gunships to the target area. In echelons the Cobras directed devastating fire from miniguns and automatic grenade launchers on the helpless and floundering enemy," killing an estimated 15.⁷⁴

In the Thuong Duc corridor and south of Hill 55, Lieutenant Colonel Gestson's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines carried on an unspectacular but steady campaign to keep enemy infiltrators out of the villages and protect Route 4. From fortified positions on Hills 52, 25, 65, and 37, the companies of the battalion saturated the valley daily with squad- and platoon-size ambushes and patrols. They supported daily minesweeps by the engineers along Route 540 (Liberty Road) where it ran southward through the battalion's TAOR past Hill 37, and periodically covered engineer road sweeps westward along Route 4, opening the highway for ARVN truck convoys resupplying the Thuong Duc CIDG camp. In cooperation with CUPP units of both the 1st and 5th Marines, the battalion conducted frequent company-size cordon and search operations of targeted hamlets and villages.

The battalion's contact with the enemy consisted largely of brief, inconclusive exchanges of fire and the discovery or detonation of boobytraps. The boobytrap plague reached such proportions that on 19 April battalion headquarters designated four areas within the TAOR, all of them located east of Hill 65, as too heavily mined for penetration by routine small-unit activities. Operations in these areas were to be conducted only in daylight and with specific authorization from the battalion or a higher headquarters.⁷⁵

The steady routine of small operations inflicted cumulative losses, both friendly and enemy, which over time added up to significant figures. During April, for example, a month typical of the first half of 1970, the battalion claimed a total of 15 VC and NVA killed by its own fire and five more killed by supporting arms. The battalion also captured five AK-47s, eight pounds of documents, and 720 pounds of rice, along with other enemy ordnance and equipment. Its patrols

found 11 boobytraps and detonated seven. During the same period, the battalion lost two Marines killed in action, one dead of wounds, and 37 wounded.⁷⁶

The 3d Battalion shared its area of operations with the ARVN 51st Regiment. The battalions of this regiment were in the field constantly, conducting cordon and search operations, sweeping the hills around the Thuong Duc CIDG camp, and supporting American and ARVN engineer units in clearing and improving the highways. Elements of the 3d Battalion regularly worked in cooperation with the ARVN units. On 7 June, in an unusually successful example of such cooperation, a reinforced Company K took up blocking positions in the Chau Son area about a mile southwest of Hill 55 while three companies of the 51st, supported by armored personnel carriers, swept toward them. At about 1000, the South Vietnamese collided with an estimated platoon of VC. In the ensuing firefight, the ARVN claimed 15 enemy killed and 9 captured along with 5 weapons. Marines of Company K accounted for three more VC trying to escape the ARVN sweep.⁷⁷

Aviation and artillery played important roles in the 5th Marines' operations. Maneuvering in the Arizona Territory in February, the 1st Battalion had attached to it forward air controllers from both fixed wing and helicopter squadrons so that they could "enlighten each other and more readily advise the Battalion about all phases of air support."⁷⁸ The battalions employed artillery fire, mostly from the batteries of the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, primarily for harassment and interdiction. In the Thuong Duc corridor, the 1st and later the 3d Battalion coordinated steady shelling of infiltration trails and rocket launching sites on Charlie Ridge, selecting targets from sensor readings and from daily analysis of intelligence reports. Patrols on Charlie Ridge often discovered fresh enemy graves along the trails—mute testimony to the effectiveness of this fire.⁷⁹

Even in this period of low-intensity warfare, the Marines made extensive use of their supporting arms. In April 1970, for example, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, had 17 close air support missions flown for it, which dropped 76 tons of ordnance and called upon aerial observers and gunships on "numerous" occasions. In the same period, artillery expended 3,051 rounds in fire missions in support of the battalion and 8,927 rounds for harassment and interdiction. In the same month, the 3d Battalion employed 19 tactical air strikes, while the artillery fired over 2,800 rounds

in its area of operations. Most artillery missions were fired in response to intelligence reports concerning enemy locations or to interdict movement on trails habitually used by the enemy.⁸⁰

The 7th Marines: The Que Son Mountains

Southeast of the An Hoa Basin, the land rises into the Que Son Mountains. In 1970, this rugged, jungle-covered range began the southwestern portion of the 1st Marine Division TAOR and extended northeastward toward Hoi An. To the south it overlooks the villages and fertile farm land of the Que Son Valley, also known as the Nui Loc Son Basin. From its beginnings at Hiep Duc in the southwest, this valley opens northeastward into the coastal plain. Running through the valley in an easterly and then northeasterly direction, a small river, the Ly Ly, marked the boundary between Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces and also between the TAORs of the 1st Marine Division and the Americal Division.

This region had experienced much warfare. The ravines, gorges, and caves of the Que Son Mountains hid extensive enemy base camps and headquarters complexes within easy striking range of the coast. The Que Son Valley, with many of its villages and hamlets controlled by the VC, constituted a major enemy food source. Detachments of VC/NVA combat and supply troops infested the area, and, particularly in its far southwestern reaches, Communist main force elements were to be encountered in substantial strength and willing to fight.

Marines had fought their first battle in the Que Son Valley back in December 1965 in Operation Harvest Moon. They returned in 1966 in Operation Double Eagle and Colorado and again in 1967 in Operation Union, but the area was not part of the 1st Division's TAOR at this time. As North Vietnamese pressure along the DMZ pulled the Marines northward, the Army took over responsibility for it. In August 1969 the Army handed defense of the northern portion of the Que Son Valley back to the Marines, with the Ly Ly River as the new boundary between the 7th Marines and the Americal Division.

Before the boundary between the 7th Marines and Americal Division was moved south from the foothills of the Que Sons to the Ly Ly River, the Marines and Army units encountered many problems controlling enemy movement through the foothills. Major General Lloyd B. Ramsey, who commanded the Americal at the time, recalled why the change was made:



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374051

Marine SSgt J. W. Sedberry from Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines examines a primitive handcrafted enemy explosive device in a village in "Happy Valley," some 20 miles from Da Nang. Since 1965, Marines found the valley anything but happy.

Because of the problems we were having due to the boundary being in the hills, I made a recommendation to General Nickerson that either I move north and control the mountains and the valley or the Marines move south. General Nickerson made the decision to move the Marines south. Based on what he told me I believe he was concerned about giving me any more area because I was already overextended—it was just a matter of degree.⁸¹

The 7th Marines moved into the valley. In January of the following year, the regiment's TAOR included the Que Son Mountains, the northern Que Son Valley, and a portion of the coastal plain sandwiched between the Korean Marines on the north and the Americal Division to the south.⁸²

The 7th Marines had inherited three combat bases from the Army, all located on or near Route 535, a highway which runs westward from Route 1 to Que Son District Headquarters. There the road branches, with Route 535 continuing southward into the Americal sector while the northern fork, Route 536, actually little more than a foot path, climbs over a pass

through the Que Son Mountains into Antenna Valley* which in turn opens out northwestward into the valley of the Thu Bon River. LZ Baldy, the easternmost of the three bases, located at the intersection of Route 535 with Route 1 about 20 miles south of Da Nang, could accommodate a brigade and was the 7th Marines' Headquarters. Firebase Ross, just west of Que Son District Town, commanded the Que Son Valley while beyond it, FSB Ryder, on its hilltop in the Que Sons, covered both the Que Son Valley and Antenna Valley.

The 7th Marines began the year under the command of Colonel Gildo S. Codispoti. A combat veteran of World War II and Korea who had taken over the regiment early in July 1969, Colonel Codispoti

*How the valley, an ordinary stretch of hamlets and paddies, received this name is not definitely known. According to one story, Marine units operating there had to extend the antennas of their radios in order to communicate with their bases across the high ridges.

continued in command until 1 March 1970. His replacement, Colonel Edmund G. Dering, Jr., a World War II Marine Raider, came to the regiment after tours as Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4, of III MAF and Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, of the 1st Marine Division.

Throughout the first half of 1970, the regiment deployed its battalions to block the enemy's infiltration routes, deny access to the sources of food in the Que Son Valley, engage and destroy combat forces, and find and neutralize base camps. Unlike the 1st and 5th Marines, which assigned each of their battalions a permanent area of operations, each containing a number of fixed installations to be protected, the 7th Marines permanently garrisoned only its three main bases—LZ Baldy and FSBs Ross and Ryder. It divided its TAOR into three large areas of operation. The first of these consisted of the flatlands around LZ Baldy. The Que Son Valley with Firebases Ross and Ryder constituted the second while the third encompassed the Que Son Mountains and the Phu Loc Valley along their northern slope. Operations varied in the three areas of operations dependent upon the terrain and nature of the threat. The 7th Marines rotated battalions between areas, while periodically moving individual companies to the rear for 48 hours' rehabilitation before returning them to the field.

Thus the 2d Battalion protected LZ Baldy and the hamlets around it until the end of January when the 3d Battalion replaced it. In early April, the 1st Battalion took over the area, staying until the end of June. In the Que Son Valley, the 1st Battalion guarded Ross and Ryder until early March when the 2d Battalion came in to remain through June. The Que Son Mountains and the Phu Loc Valley received repeated attention from all three battalions, culminating in late May and early June in a major search and destroy operation by the 3d Battalion.

Under orders from the division, the 7th Marines twice sent units to reinforce the Rocket Belt against predicted enemy offensives. On 24 January, the 2d Battalion redeployed from the Phu Loc Valley to the southern part of the TAOR of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. It remained there until the end of February. On 27 April, two companies of the 3d Battalion went to the same area, staying for about a month.⁸³

In the eastern flats around Baldy and in the Que Son Valley, the battalions concentrated on Category II operations, small-unit patrols and ambushes, to keep the enemy out of the villages and hamlets and

to thwart mortar, rocket, and sapper attacks on allied bases. In the Que Son Mountains, the battalions conducted Category III searches for base camps and supply caches to prevent the VC and NVA from massing men and equipment for offensives. In each of these areas of operation, elements of the 7th Marines had frequent and sometimes costly contact with the enemy.

Significant actions occurred quite close to LZ Baldy. About noon on 14 January, for example, a squad from Company F, 2d Battalion, sighted 15 enemy soldiers in an area of rice paddies and treelines two and one-half miles northwest of the base. The Communists were about 100 meters away from the patrol, moving toward the northwest. They wore green uniforms and carried weapons. The Marines fired at them, killing three, and pursued the rest as they fled. Then other enemy opened up on the patrol from three sides with automatic weapons. The fight rapidly expanded. Two other Marine patrols maneuvered to join the action, and came under fire from automatic rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers. They replied with their own weapons. Company F's commander, First Lieutenant Charles M. Lohman, brought the rest of his company into the fight and called in artillery and air support. Before the action ended, three OV-10s, four helicopter gunships, two F-4 jets, and a Shadow AC-119 gunship had blasted the enemy with machine guns, high explosive and white phosphorous rockets, and napalm. Late in the afternoon, the enemy broke contact and dispersed, leaving behind 10 dead and two AK-47s. Company F had two Marines killed and three wounded.⁸⁴

Smaller contacts around Baldy also took their toll of Marines. In a single day, 26 June, the 1st Battalion had five men killed in supposedly routine patrols and ambushes. One died in a grenade explosion while wrestling with an enemy he was trying to capture; three more were lost in a grenade and machine gun attack on their squad's night position, and another was killed when enemy sappers made a grenade attack on a platoon command post.⁸⁵

In the Que Son Valley, the enemy kept even heavier pressure on the 7th Marines. Here terrain and military/political boundaries favored the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. About three and one-half miles south of Firebase Ross, a range of hills marks the lower edge of the Que Son Valley. The range includes Nui Loc Son, the ridge that gives the valley its alternate name. Although the boundary between the 7th Marines and the Americal Division had been moved south

to the Ly Ly River, the enemy continued to use foothills along the boundary and areas between Marine and Army operating units to assemble men and supplies for attacks on Firebase Ross and Marines operating in the Que Son Valley.

On 6 January, sappers of the *409th Local Force VC Battalion*, supported by a mortar detachment from an unidentified VC or NVA unit, came out of the southern hills to attack Firebase Ross.⁸⁶ American and South Vietnamese intelligence agencies had tracked the sappers' movement northward from their usual area of operation in Quang Tin Province and had warned Ross that an attack might be imminent. On the night of 6 January, the defenders of the base numbered about 560 Marines: Headquarters and Service Company and Companies A and B of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines; Battery K, 4th Battalion, 13th Ma-

rines; elements of Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines; the 2d Platoon, 1st 8-Inch Howitzer Battery, and small detachments of support troops. Although rifle companies normally were not stationed at Ross, Company A had come in from the field to prepare for CUPP duty, and two platoons of Company B had been called in on 5 January in response to the reported enemy threat. The Marines of Company B were to attack southward with two platoons of PFs from Que Son District on the morning of the 6th in an effort to forestall the enemy's anticipated blow.⁸⁷

The enemy struck first. During heavy monsoon rains which masked their approach, between 20 and 30 NVA and VC regulars in five-man teams crept up to the outer perimeter wire and quietly cut their way through at several points. Dressed in black or green shorts and bandannas, barefooted, and laden with grenades and

LCpl Ron J. Barrett rests his feet on a sandbag at Firebase Ross. Barrett, a member of a helicopter support team, is waiting for the resupply helicopter to appear. Marine humor is reflected on the signs above. One reads "LZ Ross, The House of the Rising Sun."

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A372976



satchel charges, they entered the perimeter without alerting the defenders. At 0130, the first rounds of a supporting mortar barrage* exploded on the base and sappers outside the perimeter opened fire with RPGs and small arms. The infiltrators went into action, hurling explosives into bunkers, Southeast Asia huts, offices, and vehicles. They concentrated on the countermortar radar, the battalion combat operations center, and the artillery positions.

The first mortar shells, grenades, and satchel charges caught many Marines asleep in their tents and huts. Some first learned of the attack when explosions hurled them from their bunks or brought roofs and walls down on top of them. Scrambling to collect weapons, helmets, and flak jackets, the Marines—officers, headquarters clerks, radar technicians, artillerymen, and riflemen alike—bolted for bunkers and fighting holes. They began trying to collect and care for their wounded while firing rifles and throwing grenades at sappers who seemed to be everywhere. In the initial confusion, the attackers put the countermortar radar out of action with a grenade in the generator. Perhaps five of them penetrated into the battalion headquarters area. One, spotted near the S-4 hut, shot a Marine sergeant and fled into the showers where other Marines cut him down. Two more walked in the front entrance of the Company A office as the company commander and his chief clerk went out the back door. Immediately thereafter, the office blew up taking the sappers with it, either hit by a mortar shell or destroyed by a charge planted by the sappers.

The defenders rallied rapidly. After clearing out infiltrators of their own living areas, the rifle companies deployed around the perimeter to block further penetrations. Captain Edward T. Clark III, commanding the 1st Battalion's Headquarters and Service Company, ordered his telephone operators and runners to check the perimeter positions and locate any breakthroughs. Then he requested authority from the battalion to send infantry to close the gaps. First Lieutenant Louis R. Ambort, commander of Company B which furnished most of the reaction forces, recalled: "We reacted by pulling squads off the more secure part of our sector of the perimeter and pushing them down head-on into the penetration area and

getting it secured and then pursuing with small teams out into the wire to actually kill the enemy as he was running."⁸⁸ The quick reaction of the infantry and other units stopped the enemy short of the artillery positions.

Within minutes of the first mortar burst, Marine supporting arms had joined in the action. The gun and mortar batteries at Ross, assisted by batteries at FSB Ryder and LZ Baldy, opened fire on pre-cleared and pre-selected countermortar and other defensive targets, firing hundreds of high explosive, white phosphorous, and illumination rounds. Responding to a report from the PFs at Que Son District Headquarters that enemy reinforcements were massing about 150 meters north of the firebase, Captain Clark "requested a fire mission—81 fire mission—on this position and worked it up and down . . . adjusting it."⁸⁹ Preemptive fires of this sort kept the enemy from following up the sappers' initial penetration of the American lines. The low ceiling and the close proximity of friendly villages prevented the defenders from calling in air strikes, but a flareship circled overhead to supplement the artillery in illuminating the battlefield.

After 0330, the fighting diminished. By this time, most of the sappers who had infiltrated the base had been killed and the enemy had not reinforced them. Marines began combing the firebase for hidden survivors while helicopters landed to pick up the wounded. Throughout the rest of the night, Marines in bunkers on the perimeter continued to spot and fire at movement, but the attack was over. Shortly after dawn, around 0700, two platoons of Company B swept the outer defenses, finding a total of 38 enemy bodies and bringing in three prisoners. The enemy had left behind large amounts of weapons and ordnance, including 11 AK-47s, 5 RPG launchers and 6 rockets, 30 satchel charges, over 200 grenades (most of them homemade from soft drink and fruit juice cans), and 4 bangalore torpedoes. The Marines also counted their own losses—13 killed, 40 wounded and evacuated, and 23 slightly wounded. Material losses included the countermortar radar disabled, two trucks heavily damaged, a 106mm recoilless rifle put out of action, and a number of tents, huts, and other structures demolished. The poor quality of the enemy's ordnance, much of which had failed to explode, and confusion among the attackers after the initial penetration had prevented worse destruction.⁹⁰

The day after the attack, the Marines at Ross began

*According to prisoners interrogated after the action, the sappers had not been told a mortar barrage was planned and were thrown into confusion when it began. Marines saw several enemy inside the perimeter killed by shells from their own mortars. Peters Intvw.

strengthening their defenses, their efforts spurred by intelligence reports that the enemy planned to attack again. They strung more wire, installed new sensors and radars, and set up a 40-foot tower equipped with a night observation device and a 106mm recoilless rifle. Although the enemy did not repeat the attack, it had left a vivid impression on many Marines at the base. A crewman on the countermortar radar summed up the lesson learned: "that no matter where you are and no matter how secure you may feel, . . . you have to retain the capability of actually fighting hand-to-hand right in front of you."⁹¹

This lesson was reemphasized a little over a month later, on 12 February, when one of the units that had repelled the attack on FSB Ross again encountered enemy troops in the southern Que Son Valley. On that day, Lieutenant Ambort's Company B, 1st Battalion, was conducting a sweep along the Ly Ly River south-southeast of Ross in a temporary extension of the Marine TAOR into the Americal area, searching for the sites from which enemy .50-caliber machine guns had been firing at allied aircraft. The Marines of Company B were also trying to verify intelligence reports that located the the *31st NVA Regiment* in the region.

At 0935 on the 12th, about five miles from the fire-base, Company B's 2d Platoon was moving in column toward the east along a trail close to the south bank of the Ly Ly. The Marines came under fire from an enemy light machine gun to their front.⁹² The gun crew fired a couple of bursts which hit no Marines but knocked out the lead squad's radio, then picked up their weapon and disappeared into the brush. Then the Marines began receiving automatic weapon fire from their right. Four or five men pushed through the bushes beside the trail in an effort to locate and silence the new attackers. Coming out into a small paddy no more than 25 meters square and bordered by treelines, these Marines met deadly accurate small arms fire which quickly killed two of them and wounded another. The survivors, flat on the ground, could not move and could not see where the fire was coming from. Other members of the platoon, including a staff sergeant and two Navy corpsmen, ran into the paddy to aid the first group and were themselves cut down. The rest of the Marines took cover at the edge of the trail and tried to bring rifle, M60 machine gun, and an M79 grenade launcher fire to bear on the attackers.

Company B had collided with an estimated platoon of 20-40 NVA regulars in carefully prepared and con-



Marine Corps Historical Collection
A Marine resupply helicopter is about to land at Fire Support Base Ryder. A member of the helicopter support team is in communication with the aircraft.

cealed positions. The NVA had caught the company in flat ground with the Ly Ly River to the Marines' left (north) and a brush-covered hill mass to their right (south). A light machine gun north of the river with perhaps a squad of riflemen blocked flanking maneuvers to that side while snipers on the slopes of the southern hill mass closed off another line of advance. The enemy's main fighting position consisted of a series of deep, well-hidden holes in the treelines bordering the small paddy, many of which were no more than 20 feet from the Marines. The holes were connected underground by tunnels through which the NVA could shift position or flee the area as they chose. They were arranged in the form of a "T" with the crossbar perpendicular to the company's line of march and with the vertical bar so placed that NVA could fire from it either into the small paddy where the Marines ini-

tially were caught or into other paddies to the south between their position and the hills. The 2d Platoon had entered the "T" from the bottom. As Lieutenant Ambort later summed it up: "It was beautifully set up and very, very well executed. They held and fought and stayed there."⁹³

Lieutenant Ambort formed his other available platoon in a north-south line along the western edge of the paddy where his forward elements were fighting with the intention of outflanking and driving off the NVA. The fire from the enemy's flanking positions blocked these efforts. The NVA in their fighting holes fired only when a Marine tried to move out into the paddy or otherwise broke cover, making it difficult for either platoon to find targets.

Reinforcements and supporting arms broke the deadlock. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles G. Cooper, informed of the situation by Lieutenant Ambort, ordered First Lieutenant James D. Deare's Company C to land by helicopter west of Company B's position and attack eastward along the north bank of the Ly Ly while two companies of the Americal Division's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, 196th Brigade, would move in from the southeast and east to envelop the enemy. The 2d Platoon commander called for artillery, and within minutes of the start of the fight, the shells fell in the treelines to the front and flanks. A tactical observer arrived overhead soon afterward and directed Cobra gunships and flight after flight of jets against suspected NVA positions. The enemy in the treelines were too close to the Marines for bombing or napalming, so the jets concentrated on the hill mass to the south and silenced the snipers there while the Cobras strafed the treelines as near the Marines as safety would allow. The air strikes and gunships suppressed enemy fire enough for the 2d Platoon to pull its dead and wounded out of the paddy and recover their weapons and ammunition. The platoon then withdrew about 200 yards to the west to await helicopters which had been called in to evacuate the casualties.

Around 1300, helicopters, still under sporadic fire in the landing zone, began lifting out Company B's dead and wounded. A few minutes later, Company C arrived and started its attack north of the river. The enemy broke contact, slipping off the battlefield through their tunnels and then probably withdrawing eastward. They left behind four dead. Company B's 3d Platoon now advanced into the hill mass to follow up the air strikes. They found and killed two more

NVA. The enemy then struck at the Marines one last time. Company C, after sweeping for a distance along the north side of the Ly Ly, turned and attempted to cross to the south bank, only to receive automatic weapons fire from the east. The fire killed two more Marines and wounded several. The company returned fire, called for air strikes on the suspected enemy positions, and pulled back to the north bank. At the day's end, the Marines counted 13 killed and 13 more wounded, nine of the dead and eight of the wounded in Company B.

The following day, 13 February, Companies B and C and two companies of the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, 196th Brigade swept the battle area along the Ly Ly. They shot two enemy stragglers, but the main NVA units clearly had made good their withdrawal. About a month later, from 9 to 16 March, the 1st Battalion returned to the banks of the Ly Ly. With three of its own companies, a company from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, two Army companies, and a RF unit, the battalion conducted another search for elements of the *31st NVA Regiment*. The troops uncovered several bunkers and ordnance caches, had a few small fire-fights, and lost some men wounded by boobytraps but encountered no major enemy force.⁹⁴

Firebase Ross and the valley and hills south of it continued to feel enemy pressure after the 7th Marines' 2d Battalion took over responsibility for the area early in March. Significant enemy units at times approached close to the base. On 24 April, for example, Company H of the 2d Battalion encountered an estimated company of NVA troops only two miles southwest of the firebase and between it and the Marines. In an engagement that lasted for about five hours, Company H, aided by artillery fire, airstrikes, and a Pacifier reinforcement, forced the NVA to flee in groups to the northeast and southeast, leaving six dead behind. The Marines had six wounded and an accompanying RF unit lost two more wounded.⁹⁵

In an effort to reduce civilian support for the enemy in the Que Son Valley, the 2d Battalion in mid-April committed three of its rifle companies to an ambitious pacification program. Each company, supported by a RF platoon and a few National Policemen, was assigned one or more target hamlets, most of them VC-controlled, in the countryside north, west, and south of Firebase Ross. By day, the companies were to surround their target localities, allowing only permanent residents, who were identified by a special census and issued passes, to enter or leave. At night, the

companies would saturate the approaches with patrols and ambushes. While these measures were geared to prevent the enemy from moving in and out of the hamlets, the South Vietnamese Government, with American assistance, would try to win the people away from the VC through medical aid, propaganda, and the other well-tried methods of pacification. The battalion continued this program through the end of June with indications of progress but, as so often in the complex process of pacification, no dramatic or definitive results.*⁹⁶

During April, May, and June, the enemy repeatedly hit Firebase Ross and the neighboring Que Son District Town with rocket and mortar fire. On 3 May, for instance, they fired five 122mm rockets and 28 82mm mortar rounds into the area, killing eight Vietnamese and wounding 12 Vietnamese and five Marines. The Marines replied with artillery cannon and mortar fire on suspected attack positions and withdrawal routes. Recalling the attack of 6 January, the 2d Battalion's commanders—Lieutenant Colonel Arthur E. Folsom until 9 April and then Lieutenant Colonel Vincent A. Albers, Jr.—carefully maintained and strengthened the fortifications of Ross. Beginning in March, they required all off-duty Marines at the firebase to sleep at their night defensive positions rather than in tents or huts. This measure at once increased readiness to repel ground assaults and reduced the number of casualties from rocket and mortar fire.⁹⁷

Enemy sappers did not try a second attack on Firebase Ross, instead around 0300 on 6 May they struck Que Son District Headquarters. At the same time, they fired a diversionary mortar and rocket barrage and made a light ground probe at Ross. The diversion failed. While the RFs and headquarters personnel at Que Son battled the attackers, a reaction force of 20 Marines from the 2d Battalion's Headquarters and Service Company supported by two tanks left the firebase at 0345 to assist them. Later in the night, Company H also moved into Que Son. In about two hours of skirmishing, the Marine and Air Force fixed-wing strikes killed 20 VC and NVA at a cost of five Marines wounded. Que Son's South Vietnamese defenders claimed another seven enemy killed. The attack, however, had been costly. Besides the wounded Marines, U.S. Army personnel at Que Son had suffered one dead and nine injured while the Vietnamese had

14 soldiers and 74 civilians wounded and an "unknown" number of civilians killed.⁹⁸

Besides mortar, rocket, and sapper attacks, the enemy in the hills south of Ross continually harassed the Marines with accurate sniper fire. The snipers' favorite positions were on the slopes of Hills 270 and 441 respectively, about two and one-half and four miles southwest of the firebase. Here, hidden by rocks, caves, and brush, they made operations on the valley floor hazardous for allied troops. The Marines used infantry sweeps, artillery fire, and air strikes to suppress the snipers, but they proved "very skillful and tenacious," and operations against them were hindered because Hill 441 was outside the Marine division's TAOR.

The 7th Marines established Outpost Lion on top of Hill 270, but even this did not end the sniper threat, as the events of 9 June demonstrated. Around 0910 on that day, a CH-53D from HMH-463, on a routine supply mission to the outpost, received four rounds of small arms fire from snipers on the southwestern slopes of Hill 270. The 3d Platoon of Company E, operating in the area, replied with machine guns and recoilless rifles. About an hour later, the platoon again exchanged shots with the snipers. In the afternoon, a squad from Company E on a sweep of the snipers' suspected morning location called for medical evacuation for two heat casualties. Reaching the Marines' position around 1330, the medevac helicopter, a CH-46D from HMM-161, came under heavy automatic weapons fire in the landing zone and took a number of hits, one of which severed a hydraulic line and forced the helicopter to land. Infantry from Company E set up security around the downed helicopter while gunships raked the suspected hiding places of four or five snipers still clinging to the slopes of Hill 270.

The gunships' fire kept the snipers' heads down long enough for another helicopter to come in and pick up the heat casualties, but later in the afternoon they surfaced again. At about 1600, a CH-46D, again from HMM-161, brought in a team to prepare the downed helicopter to be lifted out by a CH-53. As the team landed, their helicopter drew fire and lifted away with two hits. Two and one-half hours later, when the CH-53D from HMH-463 came in to complete the recovery, the snipers drove it off with fire, wounding the crew chief and the gunner. The day ended with Marine jets dropping napalm on the slopes of the hill and Company E planning to sweep the area at first light. They made the sweep early the next morning, but that afternoon, the snipers opened up again, this

*For further details on this effort in the general context of pacification, see Chapter 9.

time at an infantry platoon, and wounded one Marine. Thus the frustrating, deadly struggle went on.⁹⁹

In the Que Son Mountains, the 7th Marines kept offensive pressure on the enemy, seeking to deny them use of this well established refuge. Typical of this kind of operation was the search and destroy mission conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Gerald C. Thomas, Jr.'s, 3d Battalion from 26 May through 12 June. The regiment ordered this movement in response to information from an enemy defector who pinpointed the locations of several hospitals and base camps. On D-Day, 26 May, Company I of the battalion flew by helicopter from Baldy to Landing Zone Crow on top of Hill 800 about five miles northwest of Firebase Ross. At the same time, the rest of the battalion with two platoons and a fire direction center from the mortar battery of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, landed by helicopter upon Landing Zone Buzzard on Hill 845 about one mile northeast of LZ Crow. Both landing zones had been secured the day before by teams from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. While elements of one company and the mortar platoons set up a fire support base at LZ Buzzard, the other rifle companies began searching the hills for enemy troops and installations. If they needed it, they could request artillery support from the mortars at Buzzard and from Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, located at FSB Ryder. Besides providing fire to assist the infantry, this battery coordinated all artillery support for the operation. Tactical air observers were also on station to direct fixed-wing strikes if necessary.¹⁰⁰

The rifle companies established patrol bases and from them dispatched platoons and squads to comb the area. Usually in single file, the Marines toiled through the rough terrain. They found movement up and down the sides of the steep ridges almost impossible and often had to follow the contours of the land along ridge tops or the bottoms of ravines. In many places, they had to use ropes to hoist their mortars and other heavy equipment up and down almost vertical slopes. Extreme heat aggravated conditions, causing most of the casualties during the first few days of the operation.¹⁰¹

As they struggled through the mountains, the Marines began to find what they were looking for. First Lieutenant Wallace L. Wilson Jr., commanding Company I's 1st Platoon, described the trials and successes of his men:

After we landed on Hill 800 and walked down on the southeast side, we stayed down there for a couple of days

checking out the area. We didn't find anything of significance—found a couple of bodies that had been buried approximately a month. Then we got word to move out in search of a comm center and having almost reached this comm center we found that the Chieu Hoi had decided that it wasn't in this place and he gave us another coordinate on the other side of the mountain. So my platoon was placed in the lead to go back and find our way over the mountain. As we started moving over the mountain we came to an enemy base camp, started seeing bunkers, well fortified, well positioned; moved on and up, found this cave complex, checked it out, found a considerable amount of ordnance, gear, no weapons—only documents, gear, chow Next day we moved on over Hill 845, started down on the northwest side. After staying there for a couple of days [we] started to move out. My platoon again found another complex. This time they found 12 SKS's, several light submachine guns, one light machine gun, approximately 1,000 pounds of corn, 750 pounds of potatoes, lots of documents There was also some graves in this area. We found some mortar rounds that were booby trapped in these caves. We . . . destroyed all this as we left.¹⁰²

Another company found the communications center, and daily the Marines unearthed additional camps with caches of ordnance, food, and equipment. Most of these installations were so well camouflaged that the Marines were unaware of their existence until they walked into them. The enemy had usually built their camps at the bottoms of ravines or the bases of cliffs. In these locations, streams provided water; the jungle concealment; and caves and clusters of boulders protection against American artillery and airstrikes. Some of the camps "even had running water coming in from bamboo water devices to bring water down from the higher ground."¹⁰³ The camps were often protected by cleverly concealed and mutually supporting bunkers from which, a platoon leader reported, "12 men can chew a whole battalion up."¹⁰⁴

Early in June, the battalion, which had had its companies working generally northwest of its initial landing zones, began shifting them southward through the hills by foot and helicopter. On 2 June, Company I was lifted out of the mountains altogether, moving to the Rocket Belt to reinforce the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, against a possible enemy offensive. A week later, the company returned to the Que Sons, landing from helicopters on Hill 848 just southeast of LZ Crow then working its way overland to Hill 953 a mile or so further south. The same day, the battalion command post and Company L were airlifted to another hilltop a mile or so south of LZ Buzzard while Company K continued to operate around Buzzard. On 9 June, the battalion dispatched Company M to Fire-

base Ross to reinforce its defenders against a threatened attack. The rest of the battalion, in the final phase of the operation, marched southeast down the ravines toward the valley floor northwest of Ross.¹⁰⁵

Up to this point, the enemy had offered little resistance to the Marines other than to boobytrap campsites and trails. One of these early in the operation disabled the battalion's Hoi Chanh guide. As the companies moved down the slopes toward the valley floor, however, the enemy struck at them, concentrating on Captain John C. Williams's Company I. On 11 June, a patrol from the company ran into two NVA in bunkers near Hill 953. The enemy's opening bursts of automatic fire killed the point man and wounded the Marine behind him. Moving to assist the patrol, the company's reaction force also took fire. The Marines worked their way around the flanks of the bunkers, threw grenades, and managed to pull their casualties to safety. Then they called in air strikes and artillery which silenced the bunkers. After the fight, Marines searching the bunkers found one dead NVA with an AK-47.

The following day, as the company moved down the mountain with each of its platoons following a separate ridge line or stream bed, the 1st Platoon twice came under sniper and automatic weapon fire, losing three men wounded. In the second and more severe contact, the enemy poured in automatic and RPG fire from both front and flank of the Marines. In each encounter, the platoon's own fire plus shelling and bombing by the supporting arms forced the enemy to withdraw, but after the second action the platoon shifted to a less sharply contested line of march into the valley.¹⁰⁶ The commander of another platoon commented: "They're pretty weak at this time. If you move into an area with a battalion or a company intact, they won't fight, but anything less than a company and they feel pretty free and easy about continuing contact."¹⁰⁷

As the companies reached the valley floor late in the day on 12 June, Company I's 2d Platoon set up its night perimeter within 50 meters of a company-size enemy base camp occupied at the time by about 50 VC or NVA. The Marines had moved in quietly, and the thick undergrowth prevented either side from immediately discovering the other. Within a few minutes, however, three of the enemy blundered into the Marine position and a fire-fight erupted. The enemy fled and the platoon pursued them while calling for air strikes. Three flights attacked the scattering enemy, but most of them had reached cover before the

aircraft arrived, and some of the aircraft by accident almost hit the pursuing Marines.¹⁰⁸

On 13 June, the battalion assembled in the Que Son Valley and the operation ended. It had netted nine VC/NVA killed, while capturing four prisoners, 44 weapons, and over two tons of food and medical supplies. The battalion moved back to LZ Baldy and began Category II activities in the region southeast of it. On 22 June, Company I, reinforced with an additional rifle platoon, an engineer team, and a forward air controller, returned to LZ Buzzard to resume search and destroy operations under a plan to keep one company in rotation continually in action in the Que Sons.¹⁰⁹

Throughout the first half of 1970, the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, provided most of the artillery support for the 7th Marines. With its headquarters and usually one or two batteries at Baldy, the battalion kept one battery each at Ross and Ryder. Reinforcing the 3d Battalion, Battery K of the 4th Battalion, 13th Marines (redesignated in January Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines) operated from Firebase Ross, and the 1st 8 inch Howitzer Battery had a platoon stationed at Ross and a second at Baldy. Occasionally, the battalion displaced a unit to a temporary firebase, as it did in May in sending two mortar platoons from Baldy to LZ Buzzard. The battalion also regularly rotated its gun batteries between Baldy, Ross, and Ryder.¹¹⁰

Early in May, in order to support the infantry more effectively, the 3d Battalion altered its firing policy. When firing in aid of troops in contact with the enemy, the battalion's batteries, as standard procedure, had used a first volley of white phosphorous (WP) shells to register on the target. This practice, 7th Marines infantrymen complained, warned the VC or NVA that shells were on the way and gave them time to escape. The 3d Battalion, therefore, instructed its gunners to begin firing first volleys of high explosive unless specifically asked to use WP by the forward observer. According to the artillery battalion, "the new procedure worked well in practice, and the change was enthusiastically received by the infantry units."¹¹¹

Like the other regiments, the 7th Marines employed the full range of Marine air support, from jet air strikes to helicopter troop transport, medical evacuation, and resupply. The 2d Battalion, while defending Firebase Ross and the Que Son Valley, called for and received numerous close air support strikes. In June, for example, aircraft of the 1st MAF flew 31 attack missions for the 2d Battalion, dropping over 450,000 pounds

of ordnance.¹¹² During May and June, the period of its Que Son Mountains operation, the 3d Battalion requested and received 23 fixed-wing close air support missions. Helicopters of MAG-16 airlifted each member of the battalion an average of three times, carried out 95 medical evacuations, and delivered over 250,000 pounds of cargo.¹¹³

Throughout the first half of 1970, the 7th Marines regularly accounted for about half of the division's monthly totals of contacts with the enemy and of claimed VC and NVA killed. At the end of June, after six months of operations in the lowlands around Baldy, in the Que Son Valley, and in the enemy's mountain sanctuaries, the 7th Marines reported a total of over 1,100 engagements with VC or NVA units. In these actions, the regiment had killed an estimated 1,160 enemy, taken 44 prisoners, and captured 291 weapons. These accomplishments had cost the 7th Marines over 950 combat casualties, including 120 Marines killed in action or dead of wounds.¹¹⁴

Results

Measurement of the results of six months of small-unit action in relation to the overall progress of the war was not an easy task. The war as the Marines were fighting it had become a slow contest in attrition, seemingly to be won or lost by accumulated tiny increments. By the mid-point of 1970, the 1st Marine Division could point to many indications that it was hurting the enemy worse than it was being hurt. Casualty statistics offered an indication: a claimed 3,955 VC and NVA killed within the Marines' TAOR

as against 225 Marines killed in action, 58 more dead of wounds, and 2,537 wounded, to which, however, had to be added ARVN and Korean casualties. The Marines could also point to captured enemy materiel: 826 individual and 76 crew-served weapons, tons of rice and foodstuffs, countless rounds of assorted ammunition, rockets, medical supplies, and communications equipment.¹¹⁵ They could add the count of base camps, hospitals, and other installations destroyed, installations the enemy would have to replace instead of building more to increase his capabilities. Captured documents, taken a few at a time from the bodies of enemy dead and prisoners or seized in larger quantities in camps and caves, would often add to the mosaic allied intelligence was trying to build of enemy strength and intentions, and also would expand the list of hidden VC terrorists and operatives in the hamlets.

An operations summary prepared late in June by the 1st Marine Division's G-3 suggested another and perhaps more reliable indication of progress:

... Unlike other wars, and even other areas in South Vietnam, the success of combat action in Quang-Nam Province cannot be measured in terms of numbers of enemy killed. Rather, effectiveness of 1st Marine Division operations must be considered in light of the relative safety of Da Nang City and the security of the surrounding populace. Some indication of this security is evidenced by the fact that for the past two years the enemy has made no serious attempt to inflict major damage on the Da Nang Vital Area. Even the occasional enemy massacre of [the inhabitants of] a village, as horrible and regrettable as it may be, must be viewed in perspective of the relatively secure position of the total civilian populace in the lowlands of the Division TAOR¹¹⁶

The Cambodia Invasion and Continued Redeployment Planning, April-July 1970

The War Spreads Into Cambodia—Redeployment Planning Accelerates: Keystone Robin Alpha Plans for the 3d MAB

The War Spreads into Cambodia

While the day-to-day war absorbed the full attention of most of the officers and men of III MAF, commanders and staff officers at MAF, division, and wing headquarters, besides directing current operations, had to keep track of developments elsewhere in the war and plan for events and contingencies as much as a year away. During the spring and early summer of 1970, the attention of these officers centered on three problems: the probable effects in I Corps of the allied invasion of Cambodia; plans and preparations for major new troop withdrawals; and the organization of the Marine air and ground forces that would be left in Vietnam after most of III MAF redeployed.

During the spring, the allies opened a new theater of war in Cambodia, South Vietnam's neighbor to the west. They acted in response to the collapse of Cambodia's long maintained but increasingly precarious neutrality. In March, the Cambodian premier, General Lon Nol, led a successful *coup d'état* against the country's ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. When the new government tried to expel the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from the extensive base areas they had built up on the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, fighting broke out between government troops and the NVA and VC, who were assisted by the growing forces of the Communist-inspired Khmer Rouge movement.

The American and South Vietnamese high commands had long wanted to strike at the border base areas only 35 miles from Saigon. Taking advantage of the Cambodian upheaval, the allies, beginning on 29 April, sent division and brigade-size task forces slashing into what had been enemy sanctuaries. During May, the U.S. Army and the ARVN carried on search and destroy operations in a dozen base areas adjoining the II, III, and IV Corps areas of South Vietnam. A U.S.-Vietnamese naval task force* commanded by Rear Admiral Herbert S. Matthews, Deputy Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (ComNavForV) at the

*According to Admiral Matthews, the supply line up the Mekong River to Pnomh Penh remained open until January 1971 when heavy interdiction by the VC necessitated a second Vietnamese task force to reopen it. RAdm Herbert S. Matthews, Comments on draft ms, 3Mar83 (Vietnam Comment Files).

same time swept up the Mekong River to open a supply line to Cambodia's besieged capital, Pnomh Penh. The fighting continued through June. At the end of that month, in accord with a promise by President Nixon that this would be a limited attack for the sole purpose of preventing enemy offensives against South Vietnam, all U.S. ground troops left Cambodia. ARVN units continued to range the base areas, however, and American arms and supplies flowed to the ill-trained and hard-pressed forces of General Lon Nol.

While bitterly controversial in American politics, the invasion of Cambodia seriously weakened the enemy. By early July, MACV estimated that the Communists had lost as a result of the invasion 10,000 men, over 22,000 weapons, 1,700 tons of munitions, and 6,800 tons of rice. According to allied intelligence, the attack had forced *COSVN Headquarters* to displace, causing the enemy to lose command and control of many of their units in South Vietnam. Destruction of the base areas combined with Lon Nol's crackdown on pro-Communist elements in Cambodia had left the NVA and VC in southern South Vietnam temporarily without sufficient supplies for a major offensive. Replenishment of the Cambodian caches with material brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos would require much time and the commitment to supply operations of thousands of additional troops and laborers. Further weakening their position, the NVA now had to use their own soldiers to control a large portion of northeastern Cambodia as well as to support Khmer Rouge units.¹

The invasion of Cambodia had little immediate impact on conditions in I Corps. Of the allied forces there, only Marine aviation units participated in the invasion. During May and June, jets from MAGs-11 and -13 flew 26 missions over Cambodia, most of them in support of the U.S. Army's 4th Division and the ARVN 22d Division as they swept an enemy base area about 40 miles west of Pleiku. Other Marines, advisors to the Vietnamese Marine brigades, accompanied the Mekong River task force.*²

*For details of air operations, see Chapter 15, and for the Marine advisory role see Chapter 21.

While Marine forces took only a limited part in the invasion, officers on the XXIV Corps and III MAF staffs closely scanned the intelligence reports for indications of what effect the opening of this new front would have within their own area of responsibility. Colonel George C. Fox, a member of the III MAF Staff, early in May summed up the staff's thinking in these words:

The question I think that most of us have in I Corps, whether we've stated it openly or whether we haven't, is . . . supposing the enemy isn't willing to take this thing laying down, he can't react in III Corps and he sure can't react in IV Corps, so where does he have to go? He's got to go to II Corps where he's got nothing or I Corps where he has a lot. So there's a feeling amongst us that we could see a pickup of activity in I Corps, if he wants to do it, and

I'm talking particularly of northern I Corps, across the D[MZ] and in through the A Shau Valley³

Estimates of enemy strength in northern and central I Corps gave the allies cause for concern. By early summer, 19 Communist battalions were reported in Quang Tri Province, 20 in Thua Thien, and 16 in Quang Nam. Many of the units in Quang Tri and Thua Thien had moved in since the beginning of the year and remained in mountain base areas for training, refitting, and stockpiling of supplies. Supported from North Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they retained the ability to launch large-scale attacks.⁴

True to their pattern, however, the NVA seemed content merely to maintain the threat. While they displayed occasional instances of aggressiveness during

President Richard M. Nixon prepares to board Marine 1, the Presidential Helicopter from Marine Helicopter Squadron (HMX) 1. The President ordered the accelerated redeployment of U.S. forces from Vietnam simultaneously with the incursion into Cambodia.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A419542





Marine Corps Historical Collection

Gen Creighton Abrams, USA, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam is seen in a formal ceremony at XXIV Corps Headquarters. Gen Abrams, in overall command, oversaw the planning of the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Vietnam.

the spring, such as harassment of the new allied Fire Support Base Ripcord 35 miles west of Hue and attacks on the villages of Hiep Duc and Thuong Duc in Quang Tin and Quang Nam Provinces respectively, the Communists mounted no major offensive.⁵ Nevertheless, the possibility of such an offensive remained and had to be taken into account as the commanders in Vietnam entered into a new discussion of troop redeployments with the authorities in Washington.

*Redeployment Planning Accelerates:
Keystone Robin Alpha*

On 30 April, in his speech announcing the raids into Cambodia, President Nixon told the American people that the operation would pave the way for continued and accelerated U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam. In fact, planning for additional redeploy-

ments had begun in Washington and Saigon even before the last personnel of Keystone Bluejay boarded homebound ships and planes.

Throughout the first months of 1970, the now familiar dialogue recurred between General Abrams and the authorities in Washington, the latter pressing for early additional withdrawals and Abrams urging delay. Abrams asked that no more American units be scheduled for removal until late summer or early fall. The allies, he insisted, still needed reserves to deter or counter a major offensive, which the enemy remained capable of launching. The South Vietnamese needed time to enlarge and reposition their forces to replace the Americans removed in Keystone Bluejay, and it would take several months to embark all of the equipment which was to accompany the personnel of Keystone Bluejay.

In anticipation of new withdrawals, MACV in February prepared plans for redeploying 150,000 men during 1970 in three increments of 50,000 each, with the scheduling of each increment to be decided later. If implemented, these plans would leave about 260,000 Americans—mainly service and support troops—in Vietnam at the year's end.⁶

Under MACV's plans, the first 50,000 men to go would include most of the Marines of III MAF. As before, MACV preferred a "Marine-heavy" first increment because it would allow them to send aviation units home early while retaining more Army ground troops until the very last stages of redeployment. Marine planners now assumed that the Marines' combat role in Vietnam probably would end late in 1970. They intended to organize the 10,000 or so Marines remaining after the next withdrawal into a Marine amphibious brigade (MAB)—a balanced air-ground force built around a reinforced infantry regiment and two air groups, one of fixed-wing aircraft and one of helicopters.⁷

On 20 April, only 10 days before the invasion of Cambodia, President Nixon established the framework for withdrawal planning for the rest of the year. In a nationally broadcast Vietnam "Progress Report" to the American people, Nixon declared that while negotiations at Paris remained deadlocked, encouraging advances had been made in training and equipping the ARVN and in pacification. Therefore, he said, the United States could safely adopt a longer-range and larger-scale withdrawal program. He announced that 150,000 Americans would leave Vietnam before 1 May 1971. The President made no mention of a schedule for this redeployment, but on 27 April Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird ordered the withdrawal of 50,000 men by October. The 150,000-man redeployment soon received the codename Keystone Robin, and its first increment was called Keystone Robin Alpha.⁸

During May and early June, MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff debated various ways to apportion the 150,000 troops into withdrawal increments. Throughout, they remained committed to a pull-out of 50,000 by 15 October. MACV, still in favor of a Marine-heavy withdrawal, suggested early in May that almost 30,000 Marines (two full regimental landing teams and a proportional slice of the wing) be included in the first 50,000 troops. To retain adequate combat power in I Corps, neither RLT was to begin preparations for embarkation until early September. Lieutenant General McCutcheon objected that this plan would not per-

mit the necessary balanced removal from action of combat and support units and that it could not be executed with the available shipping. If two RLTs were to leave by 15 October, he insisted, one must stand down as early as 15 July. By the end of May, MACV had tentatively decided to remove only 20,000 Marines, including one RLT, in Keystone Robin Alpha and to redeploy 9,400 more (a second RLT) in the expected second Keystone Robin withdrawal (Keystone Robin Bravo) between 15 October and 1 January. This would leave in-country about 12,600 Marines of the MAB and a logistic cleanup force which would probably stay until mid-1971.⁹

By 30 May, the III MAF staff had drafted tentative troop lists for two withdrawal increments, the first to be completed by 15 October and the second by 1 January. The first list included the 7th Marines; its support artillery, the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines; and three fixed-wing and two medium helicopter squadrons. The 5th Marines headed the second list, which included the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines; two fixed-wing squadrons; and three helicopter squadrons.¹⁰

On 3 June, President Nixon publicly announced the initial withdrawal of 50,000 men. MACV then informed III MAF that 19,800 Marines—as expected, a regimental landing team with aviation and support units—would be included in this increment. In response, III MAF submitted a proposed roster in mid-June of units for Keystone Robin Alpha. As already decided, the 7th Marines would depart in this redeployment, with the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, elements of the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, and an assortment of support units and detachments. The aviation contingent would include Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1, Marine (All-Weather) Attack Squadron (VMA[AW]) 242, Marine Fighter/Attack Squadrons (VMFAs) 122 and 314, and two medium helicopter squadrons, HMMS -161 and -262. III MAF also proposed to redeploy the Marines of three of the four combined action groups (CAGs), which were to be deactivated, leaving only one, the 2d CAG, operating in Quang Nam. In order to retain as many troops as possible for the summer campaign, the 7th Marines and the aircraft squadrons would delay their stand-down until well into September. The CAGs would cease operations, a few platoons at a time, between 1 August and 1 October.¹¹

Hardly had III MAF developed this list of units when XXIV Corps, supported by MACV, demanded changes in it. As Lieutenant General Leo Dulacki, then

III MAF Chief of Staff, would later evaluate XXIV Corps reaction: "The continuing withdrawal of forces dictated that, in structuring the remaining forces, emphasis must be placed on fully integrated combat units. The Marine task-organized air-ground teams, whatever the size, provided a ready solution to this requirement."¹²

In particular, the XXIV Corps staff had realized the full impact of the loss of the Marine helicopter and attack squadrons. Lieutenant General Zais and his officers feared that the departure of these squadrons would leave the allies in I Corps dangerously short of tactical air support and transport helicopters. XXIV Corps also wanted to keep VMCJ-1 for its photographic reconnaissance capability and the 1st Radio Battalion, one of the support units scheduled for redeployment, which provided irreplaceable intelligence by intercepting enemy radio messages. At a Saigon meeting on 15 June, MACV and III MAF agreed to postpone the redeployment of most of the 1st Radio Battalion and of one squadron each of jet attack aircraft and medium helicopters. The MACV staff officers also argued for retention of VMCJ-1, but gave way on this issue when the III MAF representatives pointed out that keeping this unit would overcrowd Da Nang Airbase and force continued operation of the base at Chu Lai which the Marines planned to close during Keystone Robin Alpha. To provide adequate control for the additional aircraft that would remain in-country, MACV at III MAF's request cancelled withdrawal orders for Marine Air Control Squadron (MACS) 4, another support unit supposed to leave in Keystone Robin Alpha. The changes decided upon would reduce the Marines' share of the coming redeployment by about 1,200 men who would be taken instead from Army, Navy, and Air Force elements, while the retained Marine units would probably leave after 15 October in the second Keystone Robin withdrawal.¹³

III MAF's revised troop list, issued in late June, incorporated the changes agreed upon. Besides the 7th Marines and the artillery battalions already provided for, the list included the 1st 8-inch Howitzer Battery and 3d 175mm Gun Battery. The two remaining force engineer battalions with III MAF, the 7th and 9th, were scheduled to leave, as were more than 400 men of the 1st Marine Division's organic 1st Engineer Battalion. III MAF's reconnaissance strength would be reduced by redeployment or deactivation of the 1st and 3d Force Reconnaissance Companies and by withdrawal of a large detachment from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. Most of the Marines of the 1st and 3d MP

Battalions, which had defended the Da Nang Vital Area, would also redeploy. VMFA-314 and HMM-262 had been dropped from the aviation contingent, which still included VMFA-122, HMM-161, VMA(AW)-242, and over 2,300 personnel from headquarters and maintenance squadrons. Detachments from division and wing headquarters, from Force Logistic Command, from various transport and service units, and over 1,300 CAP Marines completed the roster of withdrawing troops.¹⁴

With the size and composition of Keystone Robin Alpha apparently set, planning began for execution of the complex movement of men and equipment. From 6-10 July, staff officers of FMFPac and III MAF attended a Keystone Robin Alpha movement planning conference at CinCPac Headquarters in Hawaii. There, with representatives of other Pacific-area commands, they began working out stand-down, embarkation, and movement schedules.¹⁵

At Da Nang during June and July, the III MAF, division, and wing staffs completed plans for repositioning their forces to fill in for the departing units. As the 7th Marines left its TAOR around LZ Baldy and in the Que Son Mountains, the 5th Marines (which was expected soon to follow the 7th Marines out of Vietnam) would evacuate its combat base at An Hoa and probably also its positions covering the highway to Thuong Duc and shift its battalions to LZ Baldy and the Que Son Valley.¹⁶ Colonel Floyd H. Waldrop, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 1st Marine Division explained:

We have made a point to strive to get rid of An Hoa prior to the [fall monsoon] rains, because . . . once the monsoons start and Liberty Bridge gets about nine feet under water, nothing moves to An Hoa* except by air until the rains subside, which could be several months. So we are trying to turn over An Hoa and get our forces—at least all of the non-helicopter-transportable forces—north of the river . . . prior to the monsoon.¹⁷

*Reducing a base like An Hoa was no small order. "Not only did the area in question have to be immaculate, all equipment left in place must be functioning properly," recalled Colonel Miller M. Blue, then Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4, 1st Marine Division. "Early liaison between USMC/SVN forces was essential; joint inspections were required, in some cases by the Division Commander and Quang Da area commander." Blue explained further that "the requirement to reduce bases to their pre-war appearance caused the expenditure of vast amounts of diminishing engineer resources." Reducing or turning over a base at times required a weapons transfer, and the weapons had to be in perfect order. All of this "was a time-consuming process at an inconvenient time." An Hoa was, nevertheless, turned over within the targeted time schedule. Col Miller M. Blue, Comments on draft ms, 5Apr83 (Vietnam Comment File).

As the aviation units redeployed, almost five years of Marine air operations would come to an end at Chu Lai. There in 1965, on a lightly inhabited stretch of land along the South China Sea about 57 miles south of Da Nang, Marines had proved the workability of their experimental Short Airfield for Tactical Support (SATS). Since then, Chu Lai had ranked with Da Nang and Marble Mountain as a major Marine air facility. Now, with the number of Marine squadrons in I Corps being reduced, the III MAF staff decided to end operations at Chu Lai around 1 October. Da Nang and Marble Mountain could accommodate all the remaining aircraft of the 1st MAW, and the closing of Chu Lai would reduce the demands upon the aircraft wing's diminishing force of ground security, maintenance, and supply personnel.¹⁸

Plans for the 3d MAB

As the selection of troops for Keystone Robin Alpha and the planning for relocation of the units to remain in-country went forward, the Marine staffs also began preparations for replacing III MAF with a MAB. By mid-July, Colonel Noble L. Beck, just finishing a tour of duty as Chief of Staff, 1st Marine Division, could report that "There's a lot of thrashing around [at Da Nang] currently to get a MAB established and to get a MAB headquarters going and to get the MAB shaken down so they can assume control . . ."¹⁹

Planning for the MAB had begun late in 1969 as the troop lists for Keystone Bluejay were being completed. By that time, two related sets of facts had become apparent to the Marine Corps. First, given MACV's commitment to a Marine-heavy withdrawal, most elements of the 1st Marine Division and 1st MAW would probably leave Vietnam during 1970 in redeployment Increment Four. Second, under the plans of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all the Services were to keep units in Vietnam as long as the American combat role continued.

While most Marines would redeploy during 1970, not all would, and the composition of the force to remain had to be determined early to assure the retention in-country of the units required for it. Marine Corps leaders from the Commandant on down wanted the last Marine force in Vietnam, whatever its size, to be an air-ground team. As Lieutenant General William J. Van Ryzin, Chief of Staff, HQMC, later recalled, the Marine Corps' main concern "was in keeping that balanced force in there and keeping the Ma-

rine command entity out there, regardless of the level of forces, starting from III MAF down . . . We didn't want to get into [a] World War I type of organization where we just became another brigade of an Army Division . . ."²⁰

Marine Corps doctrine prescribed standard organizations for air-ground task forces from the division-size MAF through the battalion-squadron size Marine amphibious unit (MAU). Among these, the Marine amphibious brigade seemed ideally suited to the probable numbers and mission of the residual Marine combat force in Vietnam. According to the official Marine Corps definition:

The MAB, normally commanded by a brigadier general, is capable of conducting air-ground amphibious assault operations in low- and mid-conflict environments. The ground element of the MAB is normally equivalent to a regimental combat team (RCT). The air element is usually a MAG with varied aviation capabilities. The combat service support element includes significant resources from force troops, including the FSR (Force Service Regiment), division and wing combat service support units, and the Navy support units.²¹

In mid-December 1969, the Commandant of the Marine Corps ordered the headquarters of FMFPac and III MAF to begin planning for the organization of a MAB in Vietnam of about 10,800 men built around a regimental landing team and two aircraft groups—one fixed-wing and one helicopters. In addition to the MAB, FMFPac and III MAF were to plan on retaining after Increment Four between 600 and 1,200 CAP Marines and a logistic "rollup" force of about 1,200 support and service troops who would finish packing and shipping the equipment of the units leaving in Increment Four.

FMFPac then drafted a more detailed plan of organization for the MAB, proposing a ground element consisting of an infantry regiment, an artillery battalion, a platoon of 8-inch howitzers, and a battery of 175mm guns supported by reinforced companies of reconnaissance Marines, engineers, and tanks. For the aviation component FMFPac suggested a single composite aircraft group of two fixed-wing squadrons, a light helicopter squadron, and a medium helicopter squadron. FMFPac sent this plan to III MAF for its comments and for the designation of specific units for the brigade.²²

On 6 January 1970, Lieutenant General Nickerson, still Commanding General, III MAF, sent FMFPac his proposals for a 10,800-man MAB. III MAF based its plan on the assumption that the brigade would oper-

ate around Da Nang or in the lowlands of Quang Nam and that it would remain in Vietnam for about one year. Both of these assumptions would govern discussions of the MAB throughout most of 1970. III MAF's proposals for the ground element of the MAB followed those of FMFPac with the 1st Marines designated as the infantry regiment and the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, as the principal artillery unit. For the aviation element, III MAF favored two aircraft groups—MAG-11 (fixed-wing) and MAG-16 (helicopter)—rather than a single composite MAG on the grounds that two groups were needed to control eight different aircraft types flying from two separate airfields. III MAF also provided a tentative list of jet and helicopter squadrons and heavy artillery, armor, reconnaissance, support, headquarters, and maintenance units. Many of these designations would change during the next several months, but throughout the planning process the major elements—the 1st Marines and MAGs -11 and -16—would remain the same.²³

FMFPac quickly approved III MAF's proposal. The next step was to persuade MACV which thus far had envisioned a post-Increment Four Marine force of one RLT (about 7,500 men with no aviation component), to incorporate the MAB in its planning. Early in February, General Abrams asked his corps area and component commanders for comments on the next redeployment. General Nickerson took the occasion to request approval for planning purposes of the formation of a 10,800-man MAB from the Marines not removed in Increment Four. Nickerson pointed out that the MAB, with its own air, artillery, and logistical support, would provide MACV with a reserve force in I Corps of greater mobility and firepower than would the smaller RLT. He stressed also the greater ability of the MAB to assist the ARVN with artillery, helicopter transport, and tactical air support. Uncertain whether MACV would accept the MAB and with the overall size and composition of the 1970 redeployments undetermined, FMFPac and III MAF during the next two months developed fall-back proposals for MABs of 9,400 and 8,900 men. These plans involved removal from the 10,800-man MAB of various combinations of aviation, artillery, and support units. All the plans, however, maintained the MAB as an air-ground task force.²⁴

During March and April, while they waited for MACV's approval of the MAB concept and for decisions from Washington on new redeployments, staff officers of the MAF, division, and wing, in close con-

sultation with FMFPac Headquarters, refined their plans for the 10,800-man brigade. With the overall structure of the force already set, discussion centered on two issues—the organization of the aviation element, and the size and organization of the MAB headquarters.

From the start of planning for the brigade, Major General William G. Thrash, commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, insisted that as long as both fixed-wing and rotary-wing squadrons stayed in Vietnam, it was "absolutely essential" that they be organized in two separate aircraft groups. Thrash argued that the different support requirements of jets and helicopters would necessitate retention of most of the headquarters, maintenance, and housekeeping squadrons of two groups even under a single composite structure. He pointed out also that with Marine fixed-wing squadrons operating under single-management arrangements with the Air Force,* a full Marine aviation staff was needed to assure proper coordination with the other Services. Finally, Thrash contended a single MAG could not direct operations effectively from the two separate fields at Da Nang and Marble Mountain. General McCutcheon, an experienced aviator, agreed with Thrash on this point after he took command of III MAF in March.²⁵

Nevertheless, late in February, Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., commanding FMFPac, directed further study of the feasibility of a composite MAG in the hope of meeting the air support needs of the brigade with a force requiring fewer scarce headquarters and maintenance personnel. McCutcheon and Thrash reexamined the problem, but reached the same conclusion as before. In mid-March, they informed FMFPac that a composite group could operate with fewer men than two groups only if all of its squadrons, both fixed and rotary wing, could fly from the same base. This would mean operating helicopters from Da Nang, already crowded with aircraft of the Marines and of the U.S. and Vietnamese air forces. Such an effort, McCutcheon and Thrash pointed out, would cause major air traffic control and safety problems and would meet strong opposition from the U.S. Air Force. McCutcheon and Thrash, therefore, reiterated their preference for separate MAGs on separate fields.²⁶

With the issue still unsettled, the 1st MAW staff

*For details of the complicated and controversial question of "single management" of aircraft, which involved the placing of Marine aircraft under Air Force control for some purposes, see Chapter 15.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Major General William G. Thrash, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, greets Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, who is visiting Da Nang. Redeployment would be a topic of concern for senior U.S. commanders in 1970-1971.

submitted troop lists on 19 March for both single-MAG and two-MAG organizations. Each list contained two jet attack squadrons, an observation detachment of OV-10As, and two helicopter squadrons—one medium and one light. The two-MAG list provided for MAG-11 and the fixed-wing squadrons to be based at Da Nang while MAG-16 and the helicopter units remained at Marble Mountain. In the composite group,

all units would be based at Da Nang under MAG-11, which would have its headquarters and maintenance squadrons reinforced with personnel from counterpart units of MAG-16.²⁷

While FMFPac, III MAF, and the 1st MAW debated aviation organization, the size and composition of the MAB headquarters came under discussion. During March, a committee of officers representing all sec-

tions of the III MAF staff, under the chairmanship of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Ganey of the G-3 section, drafted a proposed table of organization for the brigade headquarters. The committee's plan called for an "austere" staff of 88 officers and 171 enlisted men supported by a small headquarters company. To keep the entire establishment under a previously set limit of 380 officers and men in Headquarters and Headquarters Company, the drafting committee proposed that a number of key brigade staff jobs, such as that of engineer officer, be taken over by commanders of the brigade's component units.²⁸

On 26 March, the committee sent its plan to the various staff sections for review and comment. The staff sections responded with an almost unanimous demand for more headquarters manpower and with protests against imposing brigade administrative duties on unit commanders. Such a doubling of functions, many of the sections pointed out, might be possible in a MAB engaged only in normal combat missions, but the brigade in Vietnam would have much larger responsibilities. As the senior Marine command in-country, it would have to maintain relations with MACV, XXIV Corps, the ARVN, and the other U.S. Services, and this would involve much complicated staff work. Colonel Wilbur F. Simlik, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4, III MAF, objecting to the plan to make the commander of the engineer battalion the brigade engineer officer, summed up the probable results of such "double-hatting" in the MAB:

To depend on the harried commander of a bobtailed far flung Engineer Battalion to: (a) be available when required; (b) have the time to spare from his command to sit in on endless conferences and briefings, compose immediate, detailed action briefs, to attend conferences at XXIV Corps, Okinawa, [and] Hawaii away from his command, and (c) demand from his separated staff the necessary research for meaningful recommendations, is . . . courting failure.²⁹

The committee revised the table of organization, submitted it for additional staff comment, and by the end of April had created a version which incorporated many of the staff sections' demands for more men and eliminated most of the extra duty for unit commanders. By reducing the strength of the headquarters company, the committee increased the number of headquarters staff personnel to 321 while keeping the combined total within the 380 ceiling. Lieutenant General Leo Dulacki, who was then Chief of Staff of III MAF, later remembered the frustration of tailoring the MAB headquarters, "incongruously, the pro-

posed MAB Headquarters actually would contain more officers and men than did the much reduced III MAF Headquarters."³⁰

While the MAF, division, and wing staffs refined the details of the brigade's organization, General McCutcheon sought approval of the overall concept from XXIV Corps and MACV. Early in April, McCutcheon suggested, and Lieutenant General Melvin Zais, Commanding General, XXIV Corps, approved as a basis for planning, creation of a Marine brigade under the operational control of XXIV Corps to operate around Da Nang. Also during April, without formal announcement, the 10,800-man MAB replaced the 7,500-man RLT in MACV's discussions of Increment Four and its aftermath. Colonel George C. Fox, Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, III MAF, reported on 6 May that "MACV started out loud and clear for 7,500 Marines to stay in-country, and we have brought him up, and he has bought this 13.2 [thousand].* I haven't seen a figure come out of him with anything less than 13.2 in some time."³¹

Colonel Fox recalled the process which brought the MACV staff to accept the MAB:

There was a lot of shoe work going on We never told them specifically what was in that thing except that it had artillery, and it had tanks, and it had this and so, . . . and we never gave them any specific figures of so much artillery, and so much this and so on. We kept it pretty broad And I know there was some working going on back here [at FMFPac]. There was some work going on in Washington along the same lines, too, but it all jelled, and . . . that's the important thing.³²

By mid-April, both XXIV Corps and MACV had given tentative approval to the MAB, and at III MAF Headquarters the list of units composing the MAB was taking permanent form. The ground element continued to be built around the 1st Marines and the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, an 8-inch howitzer battery, a 175mm gun battery, and a tank company. The aviation component, now set at two aircraft groups, consisted of MAG-11 (VMA-311, VMA[AW]-225, and a detachment of four OV-10s) and MAG-16 (HMM-262,

*The 13,200 figure to which Fox referred consisted of the MAB (10,800); the 2d Combined Action Group (600 men who by previous agreement between General Abrams and Lieutenant General Nickerson would remain after Increment Four in addition to the MAB); the logistic cleanup force of 1,200; and 600 more Marines of ANGLICO, the advisory group, the Embassy security detachment, the MACV staff, and other detachments not under III MAF.

HML-367, and a detachment of six CH-53s from HMH-463). The brigade would have a logistic support group of about 900 officers and men and would have attached to it companies of engineers, shore party, military police, medical and dental personnel, a detachment from the 1st Radio Battalion, and Communications Support Company, 7th Communications Battalion,* which would replace 5th Communications Battalion.³³

As the troop list for the brigade began to take shape, so did its mission and area of operations. Early in April, III MAF proposed that the MAB take charge of the present 1st Marines TAOR in the Rocket Belt while retaining the ability to conduct mobile operations of short duration anywhere in Quang Nam. This concept became the starting point for further discussion of the brigade's mission.³⁴

By early June, Marine staff officers involved in MAB planning were facing without enthusiasm the likelihood that much of the MAB's infantry would be immobilized defending Da Nang airfield. III MAF had been long charged with protecting the airbase and had employed the 1st and 3d Military Police Battalions for that purpose. These battalions were scheduled to redeploy in Keystone Robin Alpha. XXIV Corps, while it issued no formal directives on the subject, indicated that the MAB would inherit III MAF's base defense task and that neither U.S. Army nor ARVN troops would be provided to replace the MPs. Thus, in the words of Colonel Beck, the 1st Marine Division Chief of Staff, "obviously somebody is going to be tied to that dad-blamed airfield, and it looks as if inevitably this is going to fall on the MAB. The circles in which I operated . . . were very fearful of this happening, but we were braced to accept it" ³⁵

With the MAB likely to be responsible for both the

Rocket Belt and the Da Nang Airbase and city, late in June Marine planners began reconsidering the composition of the brigade's ground element. At III MAF and 1st Division Headquarters, staff officers suggested that the heavy artillery and armored units of the MAB, which probably would find little use in a brigade committed to defense of populated areas in a period of diminishing combat, be dropped and replaced with a fourth infantry battalion. This battalion could protect the airfield, freeing the three battalions of the 1st Marines for mobile operations. On 29 June, at a III MAF generals' conference, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, the new assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division, who had assumed his duties 13 days before and had been made the division's principal spokesman on MAB planning, endorsed the proposal for a fourth infantry battalion. Lieutenant General McCutcheon initially doubted that another battalion could be squeezed into the MAB under existing manpower ceilings, but finally he also gave the idea his support. By mid-July, the substitution of more infantry for the brigade's tanks, heavy guns, and howitzers appeared to be on the way to adoption.³⁶

Although the final details of organization for what now was designated the 3d MAB remained unsettled, by late July the staffs of III MAF and FMFPac had developed a schedule for activating the brigade headquarters as the MAF division, and wing headquarters left Vietnam with the redeploying troops. The plans were based on the assumption that all Marine units except those designated for 3d MAB and the other residual forces would have withdrawn by 31 December. According to the schedule approved by Lieutenant General McCutcheon and by Lieutenant General William K. Jones, who replaced Lieutenant General Buse in July as Commanding General, FMFPac, a small MAB planning staff would begin operations on 15 September. About a month later, 3d MAB would start directing ground operations of the 1st Marines under operational control of the division, and about 15 November, the brigade would take charge of the activities of MAGs-11 and -16. In late November and December, the division and wing headquarters would leave, and toward the end of December, III MAF would turn over all of its functions as senior in-country Marine command to 3d MAB. Then the MAF headquarters itself would redeploy.³⁷

As the Marines entered their last summer of combat in Vietnam, the end of their participation in the

*Reorganization often required organizational redesignation that had an effect on command relations. For example, 5th Communications Battalion, which included four companies, was redesignated to Communications Support Company, 7th Communications Battalion, and was organized into seven platoons. The mission assigned the company was identical to that of the battalion. To effect the change, officers, staff noncommissioned officers, and administrative and other enlisted personnel were transferred to the newly designated units. Major Robert T. Himmerich, who commanded Communications Support Company, recalled that he "was authorized almost twice the men and equipment as was the parent battalion in Okinawa and had half the officers and staff NCOs. Ours was not the only Force Troops unit to experience this anomaly." Maj Robert T. Himmerich, Comments on draft ms, 28Apr83 (Vietnam Comment File).

war seemed close at hand. III MAF was expected to redeploy two-thirds of its strength by the end of the year. Plans were well advanced for reorganization of

the remainder into a smaller air-ground task force. The Marines still had time, however, for a final offensive, and by mid-July that attack was getting under way.

PART II
SUMMER AND FALL-WINTER
CAMPAIGNS, 1970

The Summer Campaign in Quang Nam, July-September 1970

*New Campaign Plans—Summer Offensive: The 7th Marines in Pickens Forest
The 1st and 5th Marines Continue the Small-Unit War—Combat Declines, But the Threat Continues
Deployment Plans Change: More Marines Stay Longer*

New Campaign Plans

On 10 June, MACV issued orders for an aggressive summer campaign to exploit the Communist reverses caused by the allied invasion of Cambodia. The orders directed allied regular forces to attack enemy bases and main force units. The Americans and other non-Vietnamese contingents would operate only within South Vietnam while the Vietnamese, besides taking part in the in-country offensive, would also continue limited operations in Cambodia. RFs and PFs were to speed up their takeover of local defense responsibilities to free more regulars for mobile warfare in the back country. The MACV directive enjoined continued concern for pacification and population security, but for the U.S. and ARVN units, at least, the emphasis for the summer was to be on wide-ranging attacks to drive the enemy still further from the populated regions.¹

The announcement of the summer campaign was followed by a reorganization of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) command structure. On 2 July, President Nguyen Van Thieu issued decrees incorporating the RFs and PFs into the Vietnamese Army and redesignating Corps Tactical Zones as Military Regions (MRs).^{*} Under the new arrangement, I Corps, for example, became Military Region 1 (MR 1). Each corps commander now received two deputies—a corps deputy commander and a military region deputy commander. The corps deputy commander would conduct major offensive operations and furnish artillery, air, and other support to the MR, while the MR deputy commander, in charge of territorial defense and pacification, would command the RFs and PFs and supervise their training and administration. Concurrent with these decrees, MACV and the Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) completed plans for incorporating the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups into the ARVN as Border Defense Ranger Battalions. As the

summer campaign opened, many American and Vietnamese officers expressed uncertainty about how much change in day-to-day activities and working relationships these decrees would actually bring about. The overall purpose seemed clear: to unify command and strengthen the administration of the RVNAF.²

In I Corps, or MR 1 as it was now called, the fruition of III MAF's effort to build up Quang Da Special Zone (QDSZ) into an effective tactical headquarters coincided in time with the larger RVNAF reorganization. During the spring, the able commander of QDSZ, Colonel Nguyen Van Thien, moved his command post from downtown Da Nang to Hill 34, about five miles south of the city, a more suitable site from which to direct field operations. In the same period, QDSZ's combat operations and fire support direction centers finally reached the stage of development where they could support multibattalion operations.

General Lam, the commander of MR 1, turned over tactical direction of the ARVN summer campaign in Quang Nam to QDSZ. By early July, besides the 51st Regiment, QDSZ had received from General Lam operational control of the 1st Ranger Group, the CIDG 5th Mobile Strike Group, the 1st Armored Brigade, the 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron, and the 44th and 64th Artillery Battalions. On 11 July, when the 258th Vietnamese Marine Brigade—three infantry and one light artillery battalions—arrived to reinforce I Corps for the summer campaign,^{*} General Lam placed it under control of QDSZ.³ When the Vietnamese Marines reached Quang Nam, a III MAF staff officer recalled that QDSZ:

. . . [was] given the full responsibility for receiving [them] from Saigon and getting them staged . . . and they took hold of this job in comparable fashion to how a Marine division headquarters would respond. They moved them in, got them bivouaced, got them squared away⁴

^{*}These decrees, and another issued on 7 July, also reorganized the JGS in Saigon by, among other changes, abolishing the posts of the separate RF/PF commander and Special Forces Command and placing the inspector general of the RF/PF under the Inspector General Directorate of the JGS. *MACV Comd Hist 70*, II, chap. VII, pp. 16-20.

^{*}Discussion of bringing in a Vietnamese Marine Brigade to strengthen I Corps had gone on since the beginning of the year, but its arrival was delayed until July. Col Floyd H. Waldrop, Debriefing at FMFPac, 19 Aug 70, Tape 4926 OralHistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373406

LtGen James W. Sutherland, USA, center, Commanding General, XXIV Corps, looks out from FSB Ryder with Col Edmund G. Darning, Jr., left, Commanding Officer, 7th Marines, and MajGen Charles F. Widdecke, Commanding General, 1st Marine Division.

This Quang Da Special Zone troop reinforcement was part of the preparations for the XXIV Corps/MR 1 joint summer campaign. Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, USA, who in June had succeeded General Zais as XXIV Corps commander, had worked out an ambitious plan with General Lam to implement MACV's call for a summer offensive. In Thua Thien, the 101st Airborne and 1st ARVN Divisions would strike toward the Da Krong and A Shau Valleys, base areas from which the NVA threatened Hue. (The establishment of FSB Ripcord in March and April had been a preliminary to this operation). In Quang Tin, elements of the Americal and 2d ARVN divisions would reopen an abandoned airstrip at Kham Duc, deep in the mountains, and from there fan out, hunting enemy troops, supply caches, and lines of communication. In Quang Nam, QDSZ, controlling a division-size force for the first time and supported by two battalions of the 7th Marines, would attack Base Areas 112 and 127 west and southwest of Da Nang.⁵

Summer Offensive: the 7th Marines in Pickens Forest

In early July, as preparations began for the summer

offensive, the 7th Marines had two of its battalions deployed in what its commander, Colonel Edmund G. Darning, called "pacification mode," the 1st Battalion covering the eastern part of the regiment's TAOR around LZ Baldy and the 3d Battalion guarding the Que Son Valley. The 2d Battalion also operated from LZ Baldy. It functioned as the regiment's "Swing Battalion," or mobile reserve, providing companies to reinforce the Rocket Belt during threatened enemy offensive "high points" and conducting multi-company operations where intelligence found profitable targets, usually in the Que Son Mountains or their foothills.

By early July, the 7th Marines faced what seemed to be a diminishing enemy threat. Colonel Darning's Marines now rarely encountered enemy soldiers in groups of more than 10, and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong usually avoided sustained combat, relying on sniper fire and boobytraps to inflict Marine casualties. Darning, who had commanded the regiment since February, had gradually altered tactics in response to this decline in combat intensity. A graduate of the Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg,

North Carolina, he was well versed in counter guerrilla tactics and regarded pacification as his main mission. His training with the 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II provided him with an excellent understanding of night combat. Derning's new plan drew heavily on both of these elements of his experience.

Fundamental to Derning's "pacification mode," was the substantial abandonment of daytime patrols, sweeps, and searches by the 7th Marines' battalions around Baldy and in the Que Son Valley. Daytime maneuvers at the level of combat then prevailing, Derning believed, physically exhausted the troops without achieving significant results. Extensive daytime patrolling also increased the risk of boobytrap casualties with little probability of seriously hurting the enemy in the lowlands since the VC/NVA usually did not move much in the daylight. Instead of maneuvering, Derning's battalions by day surrounded known Viet Cong-controlled hamlets. Manning checkpoints, the Marines supervised the movement of the people between their houses and the fields, to prevent supplies from going out of the hamlets and VC from infiltrating.* The cordons, which consisted of static observation posts and firing positions, could be maintained with relatively few Marines. The rest could sleep, repair equipment, or train while company and platoon commanders planned extensive night ambushes and patrols to intercept small enemy units during the VC's preferred time for movement. Derning was convinced that these tactics both weakened the enemy by denying them supplies and mobility and reduced allied losses.⁶

While two of the battalions followed Derning's scheme of operations, the "Swing Battalion" continued daytime search and destroy maneuvers, usually in the Que Son Mountains. These operations at times proved productive. On 13 July, for instance, Company H of the 2d Battalion pursued a wounded Viet Cong into a cave in the Que Son foothills west of Baldy and discovered that it had trapped almost 30 VC.

A night-long siege ensued during which seven of the Viet Cong were killed, some of them by Marines who crawled into the cave and shot them at close range with pistols. A total of 20 VC, most of them the Communist leaders of a village, eventually surrendered. Colonel Derning considered this mass surrender and other defections by guerrillas an indication that his pacification strategy was succeeding.⁷

*For more detail on the pacification aspect of this strategy, see Chapter 9.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373325
Marines from the 2d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines ford the Thu Bon River. Note many of the Marines are wearing soft floppy hats.

In mid-July, Colonel Derning and his staff put aside pacification plans and, instead, took up preparations for Operation Pickens Forest.* This, the 1st Marine Division's first operation of the year outside its regular TAOR, would form part of the general allied summer incursion into Base Areas (BAs) 112 and 127, the enemy's two principal mountain refuges in Quang Nam.

Each of these areas was a quadrangle of mountain and jungle which served as a collection point for supplies brought from Laos or the Quang Nam lowlands. Each contained cleverly hidden and fortified headquarters, communications centers, and training and rest camps. Here enemy main force units normally spent most of their time between operations. Command groups, including, it was believed, the *Front 4*

*In July the division staff resumed the practice of assigning names to operations of battalion or larger size.

Headquarters, directed enemy military and political activity from both bases. BA 127 extended north from Thuong Duc and eastward into Charlie Ridge. BA 112, larger in area and considered by allied staffs to be the more important of the two, was bounded on the north by the Vu Gia River. It stretched eastward to the western fringes of the Arizona Territory, southward into Quang Ngai Province, and westward to the Song Cai, a river which runs northeastward to enter the Vu Gia five miles west of Thuong Duc.

Allied reconnaissance teams had conducted almost 250 separate patrols in these two base areas since January, killing about 300 enemy and confirming the presence of many more. Hundreds of air attacks, including 22 Arc Light B-52 strikes, had showered bombs and napalm on suspected campsites and supply depots, and artillery had pounded still other targets. Now ground forces were scheduled to go in and stay long enough and in sufficient strength to deny the enemy use of these areas for the summer, find hid-

Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines are seen on the march in the Thu Bon River Valley in Operation Pickens Forest southwest of Da Nang.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373921



den supplies, and clear out any surviving enemy formations.⁸

Under the plan worked out by Quang Da Special Zone and the 1st Marine Division, South Vietnamese forces would penetrate deep into the western reaches of the base areas while the Marines swept an area closer to the populated regions. In July, continuing activities begun in May to relieve Thuong Duc, the 51st ARVN Regiment launched Operation Hung Quang 1/32B in southern BA 127. Southwest of Thuong Duc, in northwestern BA 112, the 1st Ranger Group continued Operation Vu Ninh 12, which it had started on 16 June. This operation expanded on 13 July when the 256th Vietnamese Marine Brigade began searching an area of operation south of that of the Rangers. By mid-July, Quang Da Special Zone, which had established its forward command post at An Hoa, had 11 battalions under its control scouring the base areas—three of the Vietnamese Marine battalions, two of the 51st Regiment, three of the 1st Ranger Group, and three of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group Mobile Strike Force.⁹

The block of terrain selected for Operation Pickens Forest was southwest of the Vietnamese Marines' area of operations. Encompassing the southeastern portion of BA 112, the area straddled the Thu Bon River. Its center lay about nine miles southwest of An Hoa where a small stream flowing northeastward out of the mountains of BA 112 empties into the Thu Bon. Here several major infiltration routes to and from Base Area 112 came together. To the west, a complex of stream beds and trails led into the mountains. To the south, enemy units could follow the Thu Bon into the Americal Division's TAOR while northward the same river offered access to the Arizona Territory, the An Hoa Region and, where the Thu Bon branched eastward into Antenna Valley, to the Que Son Mountains. Aerial and ground reconnaissance had observed continual enemy use of the area, which was known to be pocked with bunkers, caves, fighting holes, and probably large supply caches. In late 1969 and early 1970, the 1st Marine Division had made tentative plans for a drive into the region by the 5th Marines, but the operation had never been launched. Now, in Pickens Forest, the 7th Marines would take up the task.¹⁰

In the western part of their operating area, the Marines would encounter typical Vietnamese mountain terrain—a tangle of ridges cut up by steep-sided gullies and stream beds, and overgrown with dense jungle, underbrush, and in many places bamboo. Near

the Thu Bon, they would find a few hamlets where Viet Cong-controlled farmers grew rice and corn for the enemy. Surrounding the hamlets, level paddy and farm land was interspersed with treelines, palm and rubber tree groves, and stretches of elephant grass. Immediately east of the Thu Bon, the ground is hilly, but less densely forested than the terrain west of the river. Near the southern boundary of the area of operations, jungled hills close in on the Thu Bon, confining it to a series of narrow, steep-sided gorges.

According to allied intelligence estimates, this terrain probably concealed about 400 enemy troops. These included elements of *Front 4 Headquarters* and headquarters and supply units of the *38th NVA* and *1st VC Regiments* and the *490th Sapper Battalion*. Should they choose to counterattack the Marines, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong could bring into the area perhaps 1,500 combat troops of the *1st* and *38th Regiments*, but allied officers considered this a most unlikely course of action for the enemy, who probably would evade the Marines while harassing them with sniper fire and boobytraps. In fact, all the estimates of enemy strength and capabilities were only tentative. As Colonel Dering put it, "The real problem was what was the enemy, where was he, or was he really there at all?"¹¹

Pickens Forest would be what the 1st Marine Division defined as a Category III operation, "designed to locate and destroy NVA forces, supplies and installations in the highlands before they can interfere with pacification Maintenance of a personnel presence in these areas is not envisioned." Because the enemy's strength and disposition were uncertain, the operation plan emphasized deployment of a substantial Marine force at the start, able to envelop any hostile units encountered and positioned to bring all of its men and firepower quickly into action in the event of a major engagement.

The scheme of maneuver centered around a triangle of hilltop fire support bases (FSBs): Defiant, just west of the Thu Bon at what Colonel Dering labelled "the hub of the whole AO"; Mace, about three and one-half miles northwest of Defiant; and Dart, five miles southwest of Defiant. The latter two FSBs had been used in earlier Army and Marine operations, so they could be reopened quickly. In the first phase of the operation, one rifle company would land from helicopters to secure FSB Defiant, followed closely by a battery of 105mm howitzers. Two more rifle companies would then land along the banks of the Thu

Bon to search that area and to provide a blocking force for units driving toward them from Mace and Dart. In the second phase, Mace and Dart would each be occupied by a battalion command post with two rifle companies and a 4.2-inch mortar battery. The rifle companies from each of the western firebases would work their way toward FSB Defiant, along the hill trails and stream beds, carefully searching the ground and, it was hoped, driving groups of enemy before them into the blocking force on the Thu Bon. As the companies reached the river valley, the reunited force would begin the third phase, a thorough search on both sides of the river.

The 7th Marines committed two of its battalions to the operation, the 1st under Lieutenant Colonel Charles G. Cooper and the 2d under Lieutenant Colonel Vincent A. Albers, Jr. Cooper's battalion, controlling three of its own rifle companies* and one from Albers' battalion, would establish the blocking force east of the Thu Bon and FSB Mace. Albers' battalion with two companies would secure FSB Dart. A Pacifier company from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, temporarily under control of the 7th Marines, would protect the main artillery position at FSB Defiant. The artillery contingent would consist of Battery G (six 105mm howitzers) and Battery W (six 4.2-inch mortars) from Lieutenant Colonel David K. Dickey's 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, reinforced by two 4.2 mortars and their crews from Battery W, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. While these forces conducted the operation, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth L. Robinson, Jr., would protect the regiment's TAOR with its four rifle companies, the regimental CUPP company, and one company from Albers' battalion, aided by the RFs and PFs.¹²

Early in the morning of 16 July, D-Day for Pickens Forest, CH-46s and CH-53s of MAG-16 loaded with Marines, artillery, and supplies descended on their initial objectives. At about 0800, the Pacifier unit, Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, took position on FSB Defiant. Thirty minutes later, the first three howitzers of Battery G were landed, followed shortly by the rest of the battery and Colonel Dering's regimental command post. About at the same time, Company B of the 1st Battalion dropped into LZ Bluejay just north of Defiant on the west bank of the Thu Bon, and Company E, 2d Battalion, deployed at LZ

*Company A, of the 1st Battalion was serving as the 7th Marines' Combined Unit Pacification Program (CUPP) company. See Chapter 9.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A373328

Three Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines search the high grass in the Thu Bon River Valley southwest of Da Nang for the enemy during Operation Pickens Forest. Starting in early July 1970, Pickens Forest was the first named operation of the year.

Starling, about two miles south of Defiant on the east side of the river.

About 0930, the 1st Battalion command group with Companies C and D and four mortars of Battery W began landing at FSB Mace, while the 2d Battalion CP and four more mortars of Battery W occupied Dart, and Companies F and G landed just to the south in LZ Robin to achieve surprise. The Marines had not prepared Mace and Dart with air strikes or artillery fire. Instead, patrols from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, airlifted into the vicinity the previous day, determined that the landing zones were safe, and on D-Day, guided in the troop-carrying helicopters.¹³ By 1500 on the 16th, the entire attack force, brought in by helicopters, had moved into its planned positions. Colonel Darning, who spent much of the day aloft with the airborne helicopter commander, called the initial insertion "a beautiful example of air-ground team work . . . I've never seen school solutions work quite that well."¹⁴

As the Marines had expected, the enemy offered no opposition to their landings. The rifle companies quickly began searching the areas into which they had been inserted. The artillery used air-transported miniature bulldozers ("mini-dozer") to clear undergrowth from the fire support bases and to scoop out gun emplacements and ammunition storage pits. Each of the three fire bases had its own fire direction center, and

Lieutenant Colonel Dickey set up a small artillery battalion CP and communications center at FSB Defiant to coordinate the batteries' efforts.¹⁵

For the next ten days, the operation went forward as planned. Company E gradually worked its way southward up the Thu Bon while Company B and the Pacifier company searched the river valley north of FSB Defiant. The units from FSBs Mace and Dart, meanwhile, pushed across country toward the river. In the extremely rough and overgrown mountains, Cooper's and Albers' Marines followed the major trails and streambeds on the assumption that this was where the enemy should be. The assumption proved correct, but the channelling of the Marines' approach into predictable routes often allowed Communist troops to escape before the Marines advanced into their base camps.

The enemy in the area avoided sustained combat, but small parties occasionally harassed the Marines with sniper fire and grenades, usually to cover the evacuation of base camps or the escape of a larger group. Until late in the operation, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, presumably for lack of time, set few boobytraps. By attacking aggressively when the enemy showed themselves, the Marines killed a few NVA and VC, and they often forced the Communists to leave food and equipment behind when they fled. In the southern part of the operational area, night am-

bushes on the trails produced several significant contacts with the enemy. During the most important of these skirmishes on the night of 26 July, elements of Company E ambushed about 30 NVA in an exchange of gunfire and grenades that wounded six Marines. Searching the area of the fight the next morning, the Marines found 5 dead North Vietnamese soldiers, 3 weapons, and 24 packs, evidently abandoned by the retreating enemy survivors. Documents taken from the packs identified the ambushed men as members of a naval sapper group which had started south from Hanoi in February.¹⁶

Spreading out in squad and platoon patrols, the companies uncovered bunkers, camps, and caches of food, ordnance, and medical supplies. Many of these discoveries resulted from the careful search of target areas identified by intelligence sources. On 27 July, for example, a patrol from Company E, working with Vietnamese province officials and RF troops and guided by a Viet Cong defector, located a cache of 139 SKS rifles in the hills east of the Thu Bon. Colonel Darning later commented that "Most of . . . our scoring was done with intelligence. Intelligence targets are the key."¹⁷

As the companies that landed at Mace and Dart moved toward the Thu Bon, the artillery shifted position to support them. On 22 July, the mortar battery from Mace and the 1st Battalion CP were lifted by helicopters to a new position near the Thu Bon about two miles north-northeast of Fire Support Base Defiant. The next day, the other mortar battery moved from FSB Dart to Defiant, completing the concentration of the artillery to cover the Thu Bon Valley.

While most of the Pickens Forest area of operation contained few civilians, FSB Defiant overlooked several hamlets and a rice and corn growing area. Colonel Darning, in the first couple of days of the operation, had over 200 inhabitants of the hamlets collected and temporarily resettled in friendly villages to the north. He did this to screen the civilians for enemy soldiers and agents and to clear the area for Marine fire and maneuver. On the second day of the operation, Darning's Marines used helicopter-borne loudspeakers to order all civilians to move towards the Thu Bon, warning them that anyone moving away from the river would be considered hostile and fired upon by supporting gunships. The technique proved effective, but failure to use it immediately after insertion of the troops, in Colonel Darning's opinion, probably allowed most of the enemy hidden among the people

to slip away into the hills. "I wish," Darning said later, "I had been able to use that technique to begin with, and I think I would have scored better."¹⁸

In the fields near FSB Defiant, acres of corn were ripe for harvesting. To deny this food to the enemy, Colonel Darning persuaded 1st Marine Division Headquarters to give him 50,000 piastres with which to hire friendly Vietnamese civilians to pick the corn. He offered the corn to the local Duc Duc District Chief, who did not think his people could use it. Darning then turned to the authorities in Que Son District, back in the 7th Marines' regular TAOR, who responded favorably.

Beginning on 24 July, CH-53s roared into LZ Baldy each morning to pick up loads of eager peasants, many of whom had assembled at the base gate at daybreak so as not to miss the trip. Loaded with people and with two and one-half-ton trailers slung underneath them, the big helicopters then flew to selected corn fields, set down the trailers, and disgorged the pickers who fanned out and went to work. By 1100 or 1130 each day, the trailers would be full, and the helicopters would fly them and the people back to Baldy. The 50,000 piasters ran out quickly, but, according to Darning, "it was just like taking a very small cup of water and priming the well." The peasants continued working for the corn itself, turning part in to their district authorities and keeping the rest to feed themselves and their animals. By 8 August, when the harvest ended, the Vietnamese had taken over 42,000 pounds of the enemy's corn, much of which could be seen laid out to dry on the paving of Route 1 "from Ba Ren River . . . to . . . just outside of Baldy."

Colonel Darning was "delighted" with the harvest he had set in motion. "I thought that every day we pulled that out we were really dealing old Charlie a good blow . . . and it was a good morale factor. It was good to be a member of the GVN."¹⁹

During the corn harvest, the 7th Marines began realigning and reducing its forces in Pickens Forest. All the infantry companies were now operating in the hills near the Thu Bon.

On 26 July, the 1st Battalion command group and Company B returned to LZ Baldy. The next day Company C followed them, leaving Company D to continue operations attached to Lieutenant Colonel Albers' 2d Battalion. Albers' battalion had resumed control of Company E on the 22d, and on the 27th, Company H, which had been under operational control of the 3d Battalion, arrived in the Thu Bon Val-

ley and began combing the hills north of FSB Defiant. On 28 July, the Pacifier company boarded helicopters to return to Division Ridge and control of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. That same day, the 7th Marines command group moved back to LZ Baldy, and a regimental order assigned the 1st Battalion to defense of the eastern AO around Baldy and the 3d to protection of the Ross-Ryder area. The 2d Battalion, its CP now located on Hill 110 about three-quarters of a mile northeast of Defiant, would continue Pickens Forest.

The artillery also reduced and realigned forces. On 25 July, the mortar battery located north of FSB Defiant was broken up. Two of its weapons and their crews went from the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, to Baldy, and two more from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines returned to their parent unit near Da Nang. Two days later four howitzers of Battery G and the artillery battalion command group moved to LZ Ross. The other two howitzers and their crews displaced to Hill 110. There they joined the four remaining mortars and crews of Battery W to form a provisional battery which continued to support Operation Pickens Forest.²⁰

The Marines of the 2d Battalion continued searching along the Thu Bon. On 30 July, Company E, working its way upstream (southwesterly) along both banks of the river, ran into the strongest enemy opposition yet encountered in the operation. The contact occurred about four miles south of Hill 110 at a point where the river flows through a narrow, steep-sided gorge about 2,000 feet deep. At about noon on the 30th, eight Marines from Company E in two boats were hunting for caves in the cliffs overhanging the water, while other patrols moved along the bank. Without warning, perhaps 50 NVA or VC with as many as four machine guns, well concealed in caves and bunkers in the sides of the gorge close to water level, opened fire. They quickly riddled and sank the two boats, killing two Marines and wounding three. The survivors, both wounded and unwounded, were left floundering in the stream. The Marines on land returned fire, covering the retreat of their swimming comrades whom the current carried northward toward safety. Three flights of jets came into support Company E. In spite of low clouds, rain showers, and the narrowness of the gorge, which made direction of the strikes difficult, the Marine pilots managed to drop enough napalm to silence the enemy weapons and allow the infantry to regroup while a CH-46 evacuated the wounded. The skirmish had cost the company two

men killed and a total of four wounded; enemy losses, if any, could not be determined.²¹

That evening, Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, returned to Pickens Forest. Helicopters landed the Pacifier company in a valley south and west of the site of Company E's fight in the hope of blocking withdrawal of the hostile force. Sweeping northward up a mountain the next day, Company C killed one VC sniper and detained six civilian suspects but found no sign of the enemy main body. Companies C and E continued to sweep the area on 1 August, without significant contact, and that evening the Pacifier company returned to Da Nang.²²

For another week after the fight at the river, the Marines continued searching the Thu Bon Valley. They killed or captured a few more Viet Cong and uncovered three large food caches and several smaller ones of weapons and medical supplies. The number of troops in the operation steadily dwindled. On 1 August, Company F returned to LZ Baldy for rest and rehabilitation. Its place was taken by Company G which had just finished a similar rest period. On 5 August, Company E also left the Thu Bon Valley for Baldy.

On 9 August, companies of the 2d Battalion moved into a new area of operations farther west. This change of position resulted from a decision by General Lam late in July to send several Vietnamese battalions beyond the western border of BA 112 in a raid on suspected enemy logistic and communications centers. Lam, supported by Lieutenant General Sutherland, the XXIV Corps commander, asked III MAF to extend the 7th Marines' area of operation to support this advance. General McCutcheon argued against the movement. He pointed out that information about the advance probably would reach the enemy, eliminating any chance of major finds or contacts, and that the ARVN could achieve more by renewing and intensifying operations nearer the populated areas. Lam insisted on the westward thrust and Sutherland backed him, so McCutcheon finally agreed reluctantly to commit a Marine battalion to support the ARVN.²³

Accordingly, on the 9th, Lieutenant Colonel Albers received orders to occupy FSB Hatchet about 20 miles northwest of Hill 110 while leaving one company in the Thu Bon Valley. That same day, Company E, fresh from its rehabilitation at Baldy, supported by two 105mm howitzers of Battery G from FSB Ross, took position at FSB Hatchet. The firebase, recently vacat-

ed by a Vietnamese Marine battery, crowned a high hill just east of the Cai River, which borders BA 112 on the west. The surrounding country is mountainous with the exception of some level ground and a few hamlets near the river. A major, but long unused highway, Route 14, which ran from Thuong Duc southward into the Central Highlands, passed by the east side of the firebase.

The enemy reacted to the Marines' arrival at Hatcher with a salvo of five 122mm rockets. The rockets inflicted casualties—one Marine wounded and one ARVN soldier killed and another wounded from a South Vietnamese unit still operating in the area. On 10 August, more Marine artillery arrived; helicopters lifted in two 105mm howitzers of Battery G and two 155mm howitzers of Battery W from FSB Ross.* On the 11th, the 2d Battalion command post established itself at FSB Hatcher, and within the next few days, Companies F and H of the battalion joined Company E in search and destroy operations in the hills around the base. The howitzers fired in support of the Marines and also of the ARVN units to the west.²⁴

While Albers' Marines searched the hills along the Cai River, Operation Pickens Forest and the concurrent South Vietnamese operations moved into their concluding phases. On 16 August, Company G of Albers' battalion and the provisional battery from Hill 110 left the Thu Bon Valley for LZ Baldy, ending Marine activity in the original Pickens Forest area. At the same time, General Lam informed XXIV Corps and III MAF that on 23 August he would start withdrawing his South Vietnamese Marine and Ranger battalions from the western mountains to have them back near the coast before the onset of the fall monsoon rains made air support and supply difficult. To cover this ARVN pullback, III MAF would keep Albers' battalion at FSB Hatcher until 24 August.²⁵

During its last few days around FSB Hatcher, the 2d Battalion made contact with North Vietnamese regulars. About 0915 on 20 August, the 3d Platoon of Company H was sweeping toward the northeast through open forest and elephant grass near the hamlet of My Hiep (2) which was two miles north of the firebase. An estimated platoon of NVA opened fire from bunkers with machine guns and grenade launchers, wounding three members of Company H. The Marines replied with small arms and grenades and called in artillery and air support. The fight continued

through the morning. Other elements of Company H assisted the engaged platoon. Company F marched toward the action from its search area to the southeast, and Company G was brought in by helicopter from LZ Baldy. The action ended around 1300, when the Marines lost contact with the enemy. By that time, they had suffered one man killed and a total of nine wounded; the fleeing NVA left behind three dead.²⁶

Before dawn the next day, Lieutenant Colonel Albers led Companies G and H in a sweep through the abandoned enemy position. His troops found 12 bunkers, 1 more dead NVA, and 5 boobytraps, one of which exploded and wounded three Marines. Continuing to search near My Hiep (2) on 22 August, Company G found a group of six more large bunkers a short distance east of the site of the engagement. Intelligence revealed that these had housed the headquarters of an element of the *38th NVA Regiment*.²⁷

These events partially confirmed other indications that troops of the *38th Regiment* were forming in Lieutenant Colonel Albers' area of operations. Evidence gathered from many sources from 20-23 August suggested that the NVA were preparing to attack FSB Hatcher. On the 23rd, for example, Marines of Company E sighted four enemy, probably a reconnaissance element, about 1,200 meters from the perimeter of the firebase and fired a 106mm recoilless rifle at them. Albers later concluded that it was "probable that had the operation not ended on 24 August and evacuation of FSB Hatcher been executed the *38th NVA Regiment* would have launched an attack."²⁸

Albers' battalion did not wait to receive the attack. As previously planned, the CP and all four companies were airlifted back to the 7th Marines' TAOR on the 24th while the artillery displaced to rejoin their parent units at FSB Ross and LZ Baldy. With these movements, Operation Pickens Forest came to an end.

During the six weeks of the operation, the batteries supporting the 7th Marines fired 771 missions, most of them at targets designated by intelligence as probable base camps and avenues of enemy movement. For the 2d Battalion alone, aircraft of the 1st MAW flew 37 close air support missions with 500- and 1,000-pound bombs, 5-inch Zuni rockets, and 500-pound napalm cannisters. Besides making repeated trooplifts, helicopters of MAG-16 carried out 147

*The Mortar Battery (W) of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines consisted of six 4.2-inch mortars and two 155mm howitzers.

*In Thua Thien to the north, the allies had evacuated FSB Ripcord late in July under heavy NVA pressure, and during August a second outlying firebase, O'Reilly, came under continual mortar attack.

medical evacuations and performed over 150 other missions.²⁹

Throughout the operation, the 7th Marines relied entirely upon helicopters to resupply its wide-ranging battalions. All supplies for the units engaged in Pickens Forest went to the field from the regiment's logistic support area (LSA) at LZ Baldy. Here personnel of the regiment's logistic support unit (LSU)* maintained stockpiles of food, fuel, and ammunition which were brought in daily by truck convoys from Da Nang. Each battalion at Baldy set up its own supply dump of clothing, individual equipment, and construction and fortification material. Daily requisitions from the maneuvering battalions went to regimental headquarters where the S-4 section of the staff consolidated them and transmitted them to the LSA while the air liaison officer arranged for helicopters from MAG-16. At the LSA, a work crew from each battalion, stationed at Baldy for this purpose, packed its unit's supplies, drawn either from its own stockpile or from the general reserve, and placed them at assigned points on the helicopter pad. The morning after the requisition was received, helicopters picked up the shipment and flew it out to the battalion. To prevent shortages in the field if bad weather interrupted this flow of supplies, the battalions maintained two days' reserve stocks at their fire support bases.

Under this system, helicopters of MAG-16 lifted over 3,500,000 pounds of cargo for the 7th Marines between 16 July and 24 August. As a result of their efforts, no major supply shortages or interruptions occurred during the operation.³⁰

During Pickens Forest, the 7th Marines killed a total of 99 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong at a cost of four Marines dead and 51 wounded. Units of the regiment uncovered 5 major weapons and ordnance caches, 6 significant stockpiles of food, 12 base camps, a large hospital, 121 bunker complexes, and the enemy's *Quang Da Post Office*. Weapons and stores taken from the caches included 174 SKS and AK-47 rifles, over 72,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, almost 500 82mm mortar rounds, over 55,000 pounds of corn, and 215 pounds of medical equipment. In the *Quang Da Post Office*, the Marines found 50 letters from North Vietnam and a Communist manual of postal procedure.³¹ Temporarily at least, the operation had

*Logistic support units, ordinarily collocated with regimental command posts, consisted of supply and maintenance personnel from Force Logistic Command who worked hand in hand with representatives from 1st Division units. For further detail on their organization and operation, see Chapter 18.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Col Paul X. "P.X." Kelley, facing the camera, accepts the colors of the 1st Marines from Col Edward A. Wilcox in a formal change of command ceremony.

blocked a major part of the enemy's trail network. Colonel Waldrop, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 1st Marine Division, summed up: "It [Pickens Forest] has not been a fantastic success, but it has considerably hampered the enemy, not so much in the kills that were made, but in the fact that it blocked and cleaned out the caches in one of his choke points in his transportation system."³²

Pickens Forest's South Vietnamese companion operations, Vu Ninh 12 and Hung Quang 1/32B, had produced comparably modest but still significant results. The Vietnamese infantry, rangers, and Marines claimed over 500 enemy casualties while losing 44 of their own killed and 227 wounded. They had captured some 290 weapons and had found a number of base camps and supply caches. Their most important discovery occurred on 10 August when the rangers west of BA 112 came upon 30 huts which allied intelligence later identified as a recently abandoned site of *Front 4 Headquarters*. The huts contained much communication equipment, including 21 telephones, over a mile of wire, and about 100 pounds of documents.³³

The 1st and 5th Marines Continue the Small-Unit War

While the 7th Marines drove into the enemy's mountain bases during the summer, the 1st and 5th

Marines continued small-unit operations in defense of Da Nang. The TAORs of the two regiments and the deployment of their battalions remained as they had been since the rearrangements that followed the departure of the 26th Marines. The 1st Marines defended the Rocket Belt, and the 5th Marines protected An Hoa and the Vu Gia River Valley while conducting periodic forays into the Arizona Territory.

The 1st Marines underwent a change of command on 29 June when Colonel Wilcox, in a ceremony at the regimental CP at Camp Perdue on Division Ridge, turned over the colors to Colonel Paul X. Kelley. Colonel Kelley would remain in command of this regiment, already designated as the principal ground element of the proposed MAB, until the end of operations at Da Nang in June 1971. A native of Massachusetts, Kelley wore Army jump wings and earned Marine jump wings while commanding 2d Force Reconnaissance Company. He had attended Commando school in England and jungle warfare courses in Malaysia as an exchange officer with the British Royal Marines. During his previous Vietnam tour in 1966, he had won the Silver Star Medal while commanding the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Aggressive and athletic, Colonel Kelley spent much of his time in the field with his troops. Nicknamed "PX," he had a reputation as a hard-driving commander, but one who inspired officers and men alike to achieve his high standards.

On 10 August, a rearrangement of command of the close-in defense of Da Nang occurred when the 1st Marine Division discontinued the Northern and Southern Sector Defense Commands. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines extended its TAOR to the southeast to embrace part of the old NSDC, with its commander now responsible for coordinating the defense of the resident support and supply units. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, still the division reserve, continued to direct the defense of most of the former SSDC and enlarged its area of responsibility to include the division command post and the installations on Division Ridge. These changes in designation and command responsibility had little effect on the day and night routine of patrols and ambushes that protected the division's rear area.³⁴

By the time these command rearrangements were made, another long-standing feature of the defenses of Da Nang had been almost completely dismantled. This was the Da Nang Barrier, or Da Nang Anti-infiltration System (DAIS), the line of mine fields,

cleared land, barbed wire fences, and electronic sensors which Marine commanders had hoped would allow them to stop infiltration of the Rocket Belt with fewer troops. The system had never been put in full operation, and the 1st Marine Division lacked the engineers and equipment to finish its construction and the infantry to man it. The sensors which had been installed furnished little useful intelligence because activations caused by passing farmers and water buffaloes could not be distinguished from those caused by rocket-bearing NVA or VC. Maintenance of the sensors had proved, in the words of a division report, "nearly impossible, due to indigenous personnel cutting and removing sections on the cables." The barrier, by restricting civilian movement, retarded pacification, and the Marines now were emphasizing mobile tactics rather than barrier defense. Therefore, on 3 May, III MAF approved a 1st Marine Division request for permission to demolish the barrier. By 3 June, efforts to control population movement through it had ended. Removal of sensors began late in July and was completed by 15 August.³⁵

Thus, by mid-summer, protection of the Rocket Belt depended primarily on Colonel Kelley's three infantry battalions. Their deployment did not change. The 3d Battalion, its TAOR enlarged, continued to defend the northern and northwestern quadrants of the arc drawn around Da Nang; the 1st Battalion protected the western and southwestern approaches; and the 2d Battalion guarded the southern sector. To block enemy infiltration of the Rocket Belt, each battalion conducted daily small-unit patrols and ambushes, varying these with larger operations. The Marines cooperated in cordon and search operations with Vietnamese territorials, or, in the case of the 2d Battalion, with Korean Marines. Occasionally, the 1st and 3d Battalions sent two or more of their companies on short reconnaissances in force into the hills on the edge of the populated area. The 2d Battalion, in its heavily boobytrapped TAOR, continued the practice adopted in June of covering its terrain in daytime from static observation posts and doing most of its patrolling, ambushing, and fighting at night when the Viet Cong often removed many of their mines to permit their own forces to maneuver.³⁶

Throughout the regiment's TAOR, the enemy appeared to be concentrating on collecting supplies and maintaining contact with the underground in the villages. Small groups of VC and NVA, rarely numbering more than 10, continually tried to move in and



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Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines cross a fast-moving stream in the Elephant Valley, a jungled enemy base area 17 miles northwest of Da Nang.

out of the Rocket Belt. In brief exchanges of grenades and small arms fire, Marine patrols and ambushes frequently intercepted the infiltrators, and batteries of the 11th Marines continued to fire their nightly harassing and interdiction fire* at suspected rocket launching sites and infiltration routes. The effect of this sporadic skirmishing on the larger tactical situation was difficult to measure, as always, but at the end of September, as an indication of effectiveness, the 2d Battalion could report that for 100 consecutive days no rocket or mortar shell had been fired at Da Nang from within its TAOR.³⁷

The enemy's reduced effectiveness in the 2d Battalion's area may have resulted from an unusually successful attack on a VC command post by elements of the battalion.³⁸ Late in July, a combined sweep south of Marble Mountain by units of the 2d Battalion and the Korean Marine Brigade captured a woman member of the Viet Cong's *District III Da Nang Headquarters*, the control authority for enemy activity in the area

*Harassing fire: Fire designed to disturb the rest of enemy troops, to curtail movement, and, by threat of losses, to lower morale. Interdiction fire: Fire placed on an area or point to prevent the enemy from using it.

from Marble Mountain north to Tien Sha Peninsula. Under interrogation, the woman detailed the operations of the headquarters and pointed out the approximate location of the bunker complex which housed it. A Marine search then discovered the bunkers in flat paddy land near the hamlet of Quang Ha (1) about six miles south of Marble Mountain airfield. Finding the bunkers empty, the Marines left them intact in the hope the enemy would continue to use them. The enemy did so, but two attempted surprise night attacks on the bunker complex failed when the assaulting force encountered VC pickets and boobytraps.

In spite of the increasing attention their hideout was receiving from the Marines, the Viet Cong leaders continued to conduct regular work sessions in the bunkers. They evidently thought that lookouts among the farmers in the fields by day and rings of sentries and boobytraps at night would assure them time to evade any attacking force. Lieutenant Colonel William G. Leftwich, Jr., the 2d Battalion's commander, decided to try to exploit the enemy's overconfidence with a surprise daytime raid. Under the plan he and his staff worked out, helicopters would land an assault force directly on top of the bunkers with no prior preparation of the landing zone, thus avoiding the enemy's security ring and trapping them.

Lieutenant Colonel Leftwich organized an assault force under his personal command, consisting of a detachment of staff and communications personnel from battalion headquarters, the 3d Platoon of Company G, the battalion reconnaissance squad, and a group from the 3d Counterintelligence Team.* These units would conduct the helicopterborne assault while a second rifle platoon and a section of tanks from Company C, 1st Tank Battalion stood by on the ground to lend support if required.

At 1400 on 4 August, the assault force took off from Camp Lauer, the 2d Battalion's CP, in four CH-46s of HMM-364 and flew northward away from the target area to mislead enemy observers. At the same time, the command Huey from HML-167 and two Cobra gunships of HML-367 lifted off and flew toward the west. At 1430, after making a wide, circuitous approach, the entire force swooped down on the bunkers. No overflights by reconnaissance aircraft or preparatory bombing or shelling had forewarned the VC of the impending attack, and they were caught. The bat-

*Counterintelligence Teams (CITs) and Interrogation and Translation Teams (ITTs) consisted of Marines specially trained in interrogation of prisoners and translation of captured documents.

talion's after action report described the ensuing scramble.

The VC were caught by surprise and attempted to flee. The first action upon landing was a melee in and around the bunkers as the Marines chased down the slower moving VC. Another more far ranging pursuit then developed as the C & C ship and Cobras chased the faster moving VC. By swooping low and firing guns into the nearby ground the helicopters forced the VC to stop until the foot Marines closed with their quarry. In some cases, CH-46's dropped in and quickly shifted rifle squads over to the next target. If VC shot at a chasing helicopter, door gunners or on board ordnance quickly dispatched them.³⁹

By 1600, the fight had ended, and the Marines spread out to collect the enemy dead and wounded. There were no Marine casualties. The raiders had killed 12 Viet Cong, including the district chief, the military affairs officer, and the security officer of *District III Da Nang*. They had captured 9 others, 8 rifles, 14 grenades, and headquarters papers of considerable intelligence value.

That night, the Marines left an ambush in the bunker area, and the next day, after further search, engineers destroyed the bunkers. The Marines delivered the bodies of the dead VC leaders to the GVN's Dien Ban District Chief, who planned to display the corpses in the hamlets as gruesome but graphic evidence that the allies were winning the war.

In September, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Yeager's 3rd Battalion conducted Operation Dubois Square, the 1st Marines' only named operation of the summer. This operation was a reconnaissance in force to determine whether or not major enemy units were massing in the mountains northwest of Da Nang. On 9 September, three rifle companies, Company K of the 3d Battalion and Companies B and F of the 1st and 2d Battalions respectively, under operational control of Yeager's battalion, landed by helicopter in rugged hills on both sides of the Cu De River about 15 miles northwest of Da Nang. At the same time, a composite howitzer and mortar battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines established FSB Sam on a hilltop just north of the Cu De east of where the infantry had landed. After six days of searching the steep jungle slopes and boulder-strewn ravines near the initial landing zones, Company K moved by helicopter about 10 miles to the northeast to investigate another suspected enemy base area. The Marines ended the operation on 19 September, having encountered no VC or NVA. They found a few small, abandoned camps and other indications of enemy activity, but no

sign of the presence of any large Communist force.⁴⁰

Southwest of the 1st Marines, the 5th Marines operated throughout the summer along Route 4 and in the broad basin where the Thu Bon and the Vu Gia River flow together. Like the 1st Marines, the 5th Marines underwent a change of commanders. On 27 June, Colonel Clark V. Judge took over the regiment from Colonel Estey. Colonel Judge, a Pennsylvanian, had entered the Marine Corps as a reservist and received his regular commission in 1953. A veteran of Korean combat, he was now beginning his first tour in Vietnam.

As had been the case since the Keystone Bluejay redeployments, Colonel Judge, as regimental commander, directly controlled only his 2d and 3d Battalions. The 1st Battalion, as division reserve, operated under control of 1st Marine Division Headquarters. Of the battalions under Judge's control, the 2d continued to defend Liberty Bridge and An Hoa while conducting mobile operations in the Arizona Territory and on eastern Go Noi Island. The 3d Battalion remained in position on Hills 52, 25, and 65 guarding the supply line to Thuong Duc.

LCpl Larry Hicks from Company G, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines guards an enemy suspect after a successful operation that netted several Viet Cong leaders.

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