

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE LANDING AND THE BUILDUP

1965



Marines from BLT 3/9 came ashore on 8 March 1965 at RED Beach 2, northwest of Da Nang. The heavy surf delayed the landing for an hour. (USMC Photo A183676)

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1965

by

Jack Shulimson

and

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HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
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Foreword

This is the second volume in a series of nine chronological histories being prepared by the Marine Corps History and Museums Division to cover the entire span of Marine Corps involvement in the Vietnam War. This volume details the Marine activities during 1965, the year the war escalated and major American combat units were committed to the conflict. The narrative traces the landing of the nearly 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade and its transformation into the III Marine Amphibious Force, which by the end of the year contained over 38,000 Marines.

During this period, the Marines established three enclaves in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps, and their mission expanded from defense of the Da Nang Airbase to a balanced strategy involving base defense, offensive operations, and pacification. This volume continues to treat the activities of Marine advisors to the South Vietnamese armed forces but in less detail than its predecessor volume, *U. S. Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1964; The Advisory and Combat Assistance Era*.

The co-author, Mr. Jack Shulimson, is the senior civilian historian on the Vietnam project. He has been with the division since 1964 and has worked on Vietnam studies since 1965. Mr. Shulimson has a MA in history from the University of Michigan and is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the University of Maryland.

Major (now Lieutenant Colonel) Charles M. Johnson was with the History and Museums Division from September 1972 until September 1973. He has a BA in history from the University of Minnesota and was commissioned in the Marine Corps upon graduation in 1959. Lieutenant Colonel Johnson served two tours in Vietnam, first as Commanding Officer, Battery L, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines from May 1966 until May 1967 and then from December 1970 until August 1971 as public information officer in the Public Information Office, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in Saigon. He is now Commanding Officer, Headquarters and Service Battalion, 1st Force Service Support Group at Camp Pendleton, California.



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15 June 1978

Preface

U. S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965 is largely based on previously classified studies prepared by the History and Museums Division in the 1960s and early 1970s. These are: Lieutenant Colonel John J. Cahill and Jack Shulimson, "History of U. S. Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, January-June 1965"; Jack Shulimson, "U. S. Marine Corps Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, July-December 1965"; and Jack Shulimson, "U. S. Marines in Vietnam, Introduction," and "U. S. Marines in Vietnam, May-December 1965," Parts 1 and 2 of a then projected eight-part, single-volume history, entitled "Marines in Vietnam, 1954-May 1968."

In 1972, Major Johnson was given the task of combining these four separate histories into one coherent narrative. Upon Major Johnson's departure from the division the following year, Mr. Shulimson continued with the revision, incorporating new research material as it became available. In addition to the four studies listed above, the authors have consulted the official records of the U. S. Marine Corps, records of other Services when appropriate, the Oral History Collection of the History and Museums Division, comment files of the History and Museum Division, and pertinent published primary and secondary works. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. Comment drafts of the manuscript were reviewed by over 110 persons, most of whom were directly associated with the events and many of their remarks have been incorporated into the narrative. A list of all those asked to comment is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those ranks held by the individual in 1965.

The production of this volume has been a cooperative effort on the part of several members of the History and Museums Division. The manuscript was prepared under the editorial direction of Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian of the History and Museums Division. Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers completed the final editing and also wrote the reconnaissance section of Chapter 11. Mr. Benis M. Frank prepared the index. Mr. Paul D. Johnston, head of the Publications Production Section, skillfully shepherded the manuscript through the various production stages. Special thanks go to Mrs. Mary Lewis, who helped type the first comment draft, and Miss Catherine A. Stoll, Corporal Denise F. Alexander, and Lance Corporal Paul W. Gibson of the Production Section, who worked unstintingly on both comment editions and the final version. Staff Sergeant Jerry L. Jakes was responsible for preparing all maps, charts, and cover layouts. Unless otherwise credited, photographs are from official Marine Corps files. The authors, of course, assume sole responsibility for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.



Charles M. Johnson



Jack Shulimson

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Introduction

In 1965, the Marines were the first of the U. S. Armed Services to deploy large ground combat units to South Vietnam. By the end of the year, more than 38,000 Marines made up the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) under the command of Major General Lewis W. Walt. III MAF was part of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), commanded by General William C. Westmoreland. General Westmoreland in turn was responsible to Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac) in Hawaii, and through Sharp to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington. The American command's mission in Vietnam was to assist the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in its war against the Communist insurgents, the Viet Cong, who were being provided with leadership, reinforcements, and supplies from the north by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN).

Since July 1954, when the Geneva Accords ended the Communist Viet Minh war against the French in what was then called Indochina, Vietnam remained divided along the 17th Parallel with a Communist government in the north and an anti-Communist regime in the south. Throughout the following decade, Vietnamese Communists conducted a sub-rosa political war, which after 1960 became an active guerrilla war to overthrow the southern government. Long before 1965, the United States had been involved in this embattled nation.

A U. S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) existed in Vietnam as early as 1950 and continued to function after the signing of the Geneva Accords. At the end of 1954 the United States agreed to support the South Vietnamese Armed Forces in conjunction with the French. After the last French military advisors departed Vietnam in 1957, the entire advisory effort came under American auspices.

In the first year of his administration, 1961, President John F. Kennedy sent a high-level mission, headed by former U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor, to determine what the United States could do to prevent a Communist takeover in South Vietnam. Acting on General Taylor's recommendations, President Kennedy directed the

implementation of a series of military and political measures to strengthen the South Vietnamese regime. These actions included the provision of substantial amounts of military equipment, as well as sending U.S. military advisors and support units to Vietnam.

With the growing U.S. commitment in South Vietnam as a result of the Communist insurgency, on 8 February 1962 the United States established the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam under Army General Paul D. Harkins. By the end of the year, more than 12,000 U.S. military personnel, including technicians, advisors, pilots, and supply and administrative personnel, were in Vietnam. Among this number were 18 Marine advisors to the South Vietnamese Marine Corps and a Marine helicopter task group, code named SHUFly, consisting of a helicopter squadron and support elements.

Despite this infusion of American assistance, an open dispute between the South Vietnamese government and the Buddhist hierarchy tore apart the delicate fabric of the South Vietnamese political structure. Faced with increasingly violent and dramatic Buddhist demonstrations against his rule, Ngo Dinh Diem, the controversial President of the RVN, attempted to crush the Buddhist movement in August 1963 by arresting its leaders. The crisis eventually resulted in a successful military coup against Diem's government in November and his death.

Following the coup, there was a drastic realignment of the South Vietnamese civil and military apparatus. More than 31 high-ranking military officers were dismissed for having actively supported the Diem regime. On 6 January 1964, the provisional government appointed a three-man military junta consisting of Major General Duong Van "Big" Minh,* as Chief of Staff, Major General Tran Van

*Ironically General Minh was to be the last President of South Vietnam. He ordered the surrender of South Vietnam to the Communist forces on 30 April 1975, two days after assuming the Presidency when the South Vietnamese cause was already lost.

Don, and Major General Le Van Kim, to run the government and the armed forces. Twenty-three days later, a new personality, Major General Nguyen Khanh, assumed the leadership from the junta. He became the chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council while General Minh remained as the nominal chief of state. In August, Khanh, having encountered Buddhist opposition, promised liberalization of his regime. On 26 September, the Vietnamese Revolutionary Council elected Phan Khắc Sửu as Chief of State, and the former mayor of Saigon, Tran Van Huong, as Premier. Real power, however, continued to lie with the military, which on 20 December dissolved the Civilian High National Council. although Sửu and Huong remained in their respective positions.

With this political instability and growing enemy strength, the U.S. increased its military support to the South Vietnamese regime. By the end of 1964, the United States Military Assistance Command, now commanded by General Westmoreland, had grown to over 20,000 men.

The Marine contingents in Vietnam showed a corresponding increase in 1964. Of the over 800 Marines in Vietnam, the bulk were in South Vietnam's I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ) consisting of the five northern provinces. Sixty Marine advisors were attached to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units in ICTZ. The SHUFLY unit, reinforced by a Marine rifle company for airfield security, was at the Da Nang Airbase just south of the city of Da Nang in Quang Nam Province. The remaining Marines served as advisors to the Vietnamese Marine Corps (20 Marines served in this capacity), as members of the Marine guard detachment at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, and with the MACV staff in Saigon.

In May 1964, a Marine radio detachment supported by a reinforced Marine infantry platoon deployed to Tiger Tooth Mountain, north of Khe Sanh in northwestern South Vietnam. This composite force, designated Advisory Team One, later redeployed to Dong Bach Ma, a 3,500-foot mountain 25 miles west-northwest of Da Nang. Advisory Team One returned to Da Nang in September 1964 and then was disbanded. During its short existence, Advisory Team One became the first Marine ground

unit to conduct independent operations in South Vietnam.*

During 1964, the U. S. government examined the possibility of sending U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam for the defense of critical U.S. installations within the country. At that time General Taylor, then the U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, warned Washington against overstressing static security and observed that aggressive field operations by the Vietnamese Armed Forces were the best means for restoring law, order, and public safety in the Republic of Vietnam.¹

In August 1964, tensions between North Vietnam and the United States reached a new high when North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers, the *Turner Joy* (DD 951) and *Maddox* (DD 731), in the Gulf of Tonkin. On 4 August, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended retaliatory air strikes against several North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and fuel storage areas. The President approved the recommendation and on 5 August Seventh Fleet carrier aircraft carried out bombing missions against selected targets in North Vietnam. On 7 August, the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in which it approved and supported "the determination of the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

The possible involvement of American forces was of special concern to the Marine Corps. In the summer of 1964, the most combat ready American troops in the Far East were those of the 3d Marine Division (3d MarDiv) on Okinawa, commanded by Major General William R. Collins, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) at Iwakuni, Japan, and Okinawa, under the command of Major General Paul J. Fontana. These two Marine units were task-organized under several provisional headquarters to support the various contingency plans for Southeast Asia. The largest of the provisional commands was the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) consisting of the entire 3d Division and the 1st MAW. Components

*See LtGen Victor H. Krulak (Ret), comments on draft MS, dtd 2Aug77 (Vietnam Comment File) and Captain Robert H. Whitlow, *U. S. Marines in Vietnam; The Advisory and Combat Assistance Era, 1954-1964* (Washington, D. C.: History and Museums Division, HQMC, 1977), pp. 138-41.

of the division and wing could also be combined provisionally into a Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB), essentially composed of a regimental landing team (RLT) and a Marine aircraft group (MAG). Both the air and ground components could be quickly loaded on board Navy amphibious shipping for deployment to South Vietnam or anywhere in the Pacific.

Following the attack against the U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, the U.S. Pacific Command activated the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB). The MEB, under the command of the assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division, Brigadier General Raymond G. Davis, a holder of the Medal of Honor, consisted of the 9th Marines regimental headquarters and three battalion landing teams (BLTs). On 6 August, the 6,000 Marines of the MEB embarked on board Seventh Fleet amphibious shipping. A composite Marine aircraft group (MAG), with headquarters and fixed wing squadrons in Japan and helicopter squadrons on Okinawa, was alerted to support the MEB, but was not embarked. Although the brigade did not land in Vietnam at this time, the August crisis resulted in the transformation of the 9th MEB from a paper organization into an effective force in readiness, capable of landing wherever needed on extremely short notice.

When the Gulf of Tonkin crisis faded, the am-

phibious task force carrying the MEB relaxed. Of the three BLTs making up the brigade, one returned to Okinawa, another to the Philippines, and a third remained afloat as part of the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet. While General Davis returned to Okinawa, he maintained a skeleton headquarters at Subic Bay on board the U.S. task force command ship, *Mount McKinley* (AGC 7). Brigadier General John P. Coursey relieved General Davis as brigade commander on 16 October 1964.

As 1965 began the Viet Cong had entered a new phase of their insurgency against the South Vietnamese government. The Communists departed from their usual hit and run guerrilla tactics and engaged the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) near the village of Binh Gia, 40 miles east of Saigon, in a pitched battle which lasted from 28 December 1964 until 1 January 1965. During the struggle for Binh Gia, two regiments from the *9th VC Division* ambushed and virtually destroyed two battalions of South Vietnamese troops, including the 4th Battalion, Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC), and inflicted heavy casualties on relieving armored and mechanized forces. According to General Westmoreland, Binh Gia marked the start of the final Communist offensive, "it meant the beginning of an intensive military challenge which the Vietnamese government could not meet with its own resources."²

PART I
ESTABLISHING THE ENCLAVES

CHAPTER 1

The Call for Marines

Alert and Realert—Air Retaliation and the Arrival of the HAWKS—Land the Marines—The Landing

Alert and Realert

On 22 January 1965, Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, the assistant division commander (ADC) of the 3d Marine Division and a veteran of several amphibious campaigns during World War II, assumed command of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. The brigade consisted of two Marine battalion landing teams,* BLTs 1/9 and 3/9, which had been embarked in ships of the Seventh Fleet's Task Force 76 since the beginning of the year in the South China Sea. At this time, the brigade was the U.S. combat force most readily available for deployment to South Vietnam. As General Karch later remarked, "When the temperature went up we got closer."¹

At this stage of the war the United States was not yet prepared to make the decision to intervene in Vietnam with ground combat units. On 23 January, the U. S. Joint Chiefs of Staff approved a recommendation by Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific, for a relaxation of the alert status for the 9th MEB. BLT 1/9, then embarked in the ships of Navy Task Group 76.5, 30 miles off Cap St. Jacques, a point 70 miles southeast of Saigon, reverted to a 96-hour reaction time for a landing in South Vietnam while BLT 3/9 resumed normal operations.

Political instability within South Vietnam caused this reprieve to be of short duration. On 22-23

January, Buddhist-inspired antigovernment riots with anti-American overtones rocked Saigon and the former imperial capital of Hue. As a result, the Vietnamese military continued their political version of "musical chairs" and ousted Premier Tran Van Huong on 27 January. BLT 1/9, which had been on its way to Hong Kong, was diverted first towards a position off Da Nang and then back to its former position off Cap St. Jacques. Arriving at its previous location on the 28th, the battalion stood by to land in Saigon if so directed. BLT 3/9, embarked in the ships of Navy Task Group 76.7, reached its assigned position off Da Nang on 29 January. The South Vietnamese formed an interim government and the Marines returned to normal shipboard routine.

The confusing alert status of the amphibious forces resulting from the unstable conditions in Vietnam was the subject of extensive message traffic between General Westmoreland, Commander, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (ComUSMACV), and Admiral Sharp. On 30 January, ComUSMACV requested that the Seventh Fleet position one amphibious group off Cape Varella within 24 hours of either Da Nang or Saigon. Admiral Sharp only approved a 72-hour alert status for the forward amphibious group, explaining the disadvantages of maintaining a Marine battalion for an extended period of time in amphibious shipping. In an earlier message to the Joint Chiefs, Sharp observed that since August 1964 the amphibious forces had proven, "we can react quickly as the occasion demands."²

While still concerned about possible commitment of Marine forces to South Vietnam, the Pacific Command had made arrangements with the Thai Government for combined maneuvers in Thailand. From 26-30 January, General Karch attended a planning conference at Subic Bay for the MEB-size exercise, JUNGLE DRUM III, scheduled to take

* Battalion landing team (BLT) is the basic Marine unit in an assault landing. It is composed of an infantry battalion reinforced by necessary combat and service elements. The reinforcements are usually a battery of artillery; a platoon each of trucks (motor transport), tanks, amphibian tractors, reconnaissance, and engineers; and detachments of communications, shore party, beachmasters, medical, and logistical support. Although BLTs are tailored to meet specific needs, the average strength of a BLT is about 1,500 men.



USMC Photo A184433

A Marine HAWK missile launcher is in position at the Da Nang Airfield. The HAWKS are designed to defend against low-flying enemy aircraft.

place in March. On 31 January, both BLTs 1/9 and 3/9 departed for Subic Bay with the latter on 72-hour reaction time for landing in Vietnam. Once more events in Vietnam were to alter training and deployment plans.

Air Retaliation and the Arrival of the HAWKS

On 7 February 1965, the Viet Cong (VC) attacked the U.S. compound at Pleiku in the Central Highlands, a provocation that altered the entire course of the war. In the early morning of the 7th, the Viet Cong attacking force laid down a mortar barrage on the advisors' quarters and airfield, killing 9 Americans, wounding 128 others, and damaging or destroying 122 aircraft. At the urging of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and with the concurrence of Ambassador Taylor, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. Addressing the nation later that day, the

President announced the withdrawal of U.S. dependents from Vietnam and warned that the United States might take further actions. He declared: "I have ordered the deployment to South Vietnam of a HAWK air defense battalion. Other reinforcements, in units and individuals, may follow."^{3*}

Late on the evening of 7 February, Lieutenant Colonel Bertram E. Cook, Jr., the commanding officer of the 1st LAAM Battalion, which had arrived on Okinawa in December from the U. S., received orders to move one battery to Da Nang. The battalion had originally been slated to deploy to Vietnam

* The acronym HAWK stands for Homing-All-the-Way-Killer. The HAWK air defense is a mobile, surface-to-air guided missile system designed to defend against enemy low-flying aircraft. It also has a capability to defend against short-range missiles/rockets. In the Marine Corps, this system is found in the light antiaircraft missile (LAAM) battalions.

in 1964 but the decision was deferred because of facility construction cost. Budgetary considerations on 7 February were of minor relevance; the battalion commander alerted his Battery A, commanded by Captain Leon E. Obenhaus, to prepare for an airlift to an unknown destination. The battery had just completed a firing exercise at Bolo Point, four miles northwest of Kadena, and its equipment was still emplaced there. After a rapid overnight breakdown from "the firing exercise configuration" and delays caused by the morning rush hour, the first echelons of Battery A arrived at Naha Air Force Base, 14 miles to the south of Bolo Point.⁴

Through the night of the 7th and the early morning of the 8th, Lieutenant Colonel Cook had worked out with Colonel Clarence B. Slaughter, commander of the 6315th U.S. Air Force Operations Group, the complicated details of moving a HAWK battery by air from Okinawa to Da Nang. Several years later, he recalled:

Colonel Slaughter had been a student at the Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, Senior Course . . . at the time I was attending the Junior Course. We had been personal friends then and this friendship plus his appreciation of our problems greatly contributed to an extremely smooth, well coordinated operation. His first comment to me upon receipt of his orders to provide aircraft for the airlift was, "How many aircraft of what type do you want and what time do you want them?" He immediately dispatched Air Force loadmaster personnel to work with the 1st LAAM Bn embarkation personnel to iron out possible problem areas. However, 1st LAAM Bn. had participated in several airlift exercises prior to departure from CONUS, and I immediately gave him our requirements—26 C-130 type aircraft and 1 C-124.⁵

The first aircraft took off at 1045 on the morning of 8 February. The LAAM battalion commander planned that the battery would have a "limited" operational capability after the arrival of the 8th or 10th planeload at Da Nang. Lieutenant Colonel Cook remembered, "This was not to be, due to my lack of knowledge that two different models of C-130 were to be used in the airlift and Colonel Slaughter's lack of knowledge that sequential loads were of great importance to our operational readiness." The older C-130A models of the Lockheed Hercules transports held 1,700 fewer gallons of fuel than the newer C-130B models and therefore had to make a refueling stop in the Philippines before flying on to Da Nang. According to Cook, "our sequencing was in trouble. This caused substantial delay (several hours) in achieving both partial and full operational status."

Nevertheless, Battery A was set up on the northwest side of the Da Nang Airfield runway and prepared to fire less than 12 hours after the arrival of the first aircraft. On 8-9 February, the Air Force transports had lifted 52 loads of LAAM personnel and equipment, carrying 309 passengers and 315 tons from Okinawa to Da Nang.⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Cook had attached additional officers to the battery to facilitate the establishment of the battalion at Da Nang and to make liaison with Detachment 1, 619th Tactical Command and Control Squadron, U.S. Air Force, already at the airbase. On arrival, Battery A established radio communication with the Air Force Control and Reporting Post (CRP), located east of the city on top of Monkey Mountain on the Tiensha Peninsula. For missile firing control, the Air Force detachment and the Marines used as their guide a Southeast Asia Standing Operating Procedure (SOP) which had been developed in November 1964 when Major George G. Long, the LAAM battalion executive officer, and USAF 2d Air Division representatives met at MACV headquarters in Saigon "to effect a common understanding." The Air Force determined under what conditions the HAWKs could be used, but employment authority remained with the Marines. On 14 February, Captain Ronald G. Richardson, the battalion operations officer, collocated the Marine Antiaircraft Operations Center (AAOC) with the Air Force CRP on Monkey Mountain.^{7*}

On 16 February, the remaining units of the battalion, with the exception of Battery C, which remained on Okinawa, arrived at Da Nang on board the attack cargo ship USS *Washburn* (AKA 108), and the dock landing ship USS *Gunston Hall* (LSD 5). Because the one pier at Da Nang was shallow draft, the cargo of the two ships was lightered from the bay to the military ramp in the port. Trucks transported the Marines of the LAAM Battalion's Battery B and Headquarters and Service Battery and their equipment through the city to the airfield.

Battery B, under Captain Everett L. Cowley, set up a HAWK site in the southwestern sector of the airfield complex in an old bunker area which the

* In the following months, the Air Force expanded its CRP facilities and capabilities and redesignated it a Control and Reporting Center (CRC), which reported to the USAF Tactical Air Command Center (TACC) at Tan Nhut Airfield in Saigon.



(Courtesy of Maj Gary W. Parker) USMC Photo A70714

An aerial view of Da Nang Airfield looking toward the northeast. The city of Da Nang is to the right or east of the airfield.

Japanese had built during their occupation of the airfield in World War II. Lieutenant Colonel Cook housed the battalion's command post in an abandoned French military compound adjacent to the airfield located midway between the two firing batteries. The Marine LAAM battalion and Air Force detachment established a communication network, linking the two batteries, the battalion CP, and the AAOC/CRP. On 18 February, Company C, 7th Engineer Battalion, a Force Troops unit of FMFPac, arrived on board the amphibious tank landing ship USS *Vernon County* (LST 1161) at Da Nang from Okinawa to provide construction support for the LAAM battalion. The HAWK deployment to South Vietnam was complete.⁸

Although chances of air retaliation by the small North Vietnamese Air Force were slim, the U.S. Government considered that the deployment of the HAWK missiles in conjunction with the air strike, code named FLAMING DART, on 7 February, would convince Hanoi of American determination to support South Vietnam. The Communists, never-

theless, continued attacks against U.S. installations. On 10 February, the Viet Cong destroyed a U.S. enlisted billet in the coastal city of Qui Nhon, killing 23 U.S. soldiers and wounding 22 others. Once more, President Johnson, on the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs, ordered U.S. aircraft to bomb the north in retaliation. On 11 February, more than 100 Navy carrier planes in FLAMING DART II struck at military targets in North Vietnam.⁹

Land the Marines

During this period, American authorities in Vietnam and Washington were reappraising the U.S. effort in Vietnam. In early February, President Johnson sent a delegation, headed by Presidential Special Assistant McGeorge Bundy, to Vietnam. The President specifically instructed Bundy to discuss with General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor the feasibility of air strikes against North Vietnam and the value of such attacks in deterring the Communists. Returning to Washington after the

Pleiku attack, Bundy included in his report the recommendation that the U.S. develop a "sustained reprisal policy" using air and naval forces against North Vietnam. According to Bundy, the situation in South Vietnam was:

... deteriorating, and without new U.S. action, defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks or perhaps even months, but within the next year or so. There is still time to turn it around, but not much.¹⁰

On 9 February, just prior to the VC attack on Qui Nhon, General Westmoreland offered his appraisal of the war. He recalled that in the past he had considered requesting American combat troops to provide for close-in security of the U. S. bases in Vietnam. This course of action had been rejected for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that the presence of American forces might cause the South Vietnamese to lose interest and relax. The general was now of the opinion that the attack on Pleiku marked a new phase of the war. With direct Communist attacks on American personnel and facilities, MACV could no longer ignore the question of protecting these troops. Westmoreland believed that this would require at least a division declaring: "These are numbers of a new order of magnitude, *but we must face the stark fact that the war has escalated.*"¹¹

Following the Qui Nhon attack, on 11 February the Joints Chiefs of Staff forwarded to the Secretary of Defense a program of reprisal actions to be taken against Communist provocations. The chiefs observed that the retaliatory air raids against North Vietnam had not achieved the intended effect. They recommended in its place a "sustained pressure" campaign to include continuing air strikes against selected targets in North Vietnam, naval bombardment, covert operations, intelligence patrols and cross-border operations in Laos, and the landing of American troops in South Vietnam. On 13 February, President Johnson approved a "limited and measured" air campaign against North Vietnam, which took the code name ROLLING THUNDER. The ROLLING THUNDER campaign was delayed until 2 March because of a combination of bad weather and the instability of the South Vietnamese political situation.¹²

In mid-February, the South Vietnamese were in the midst of another power struggle. The South Vietnamese Armed Forces Council declared on the 15th that it alone had the responsibility for selecting

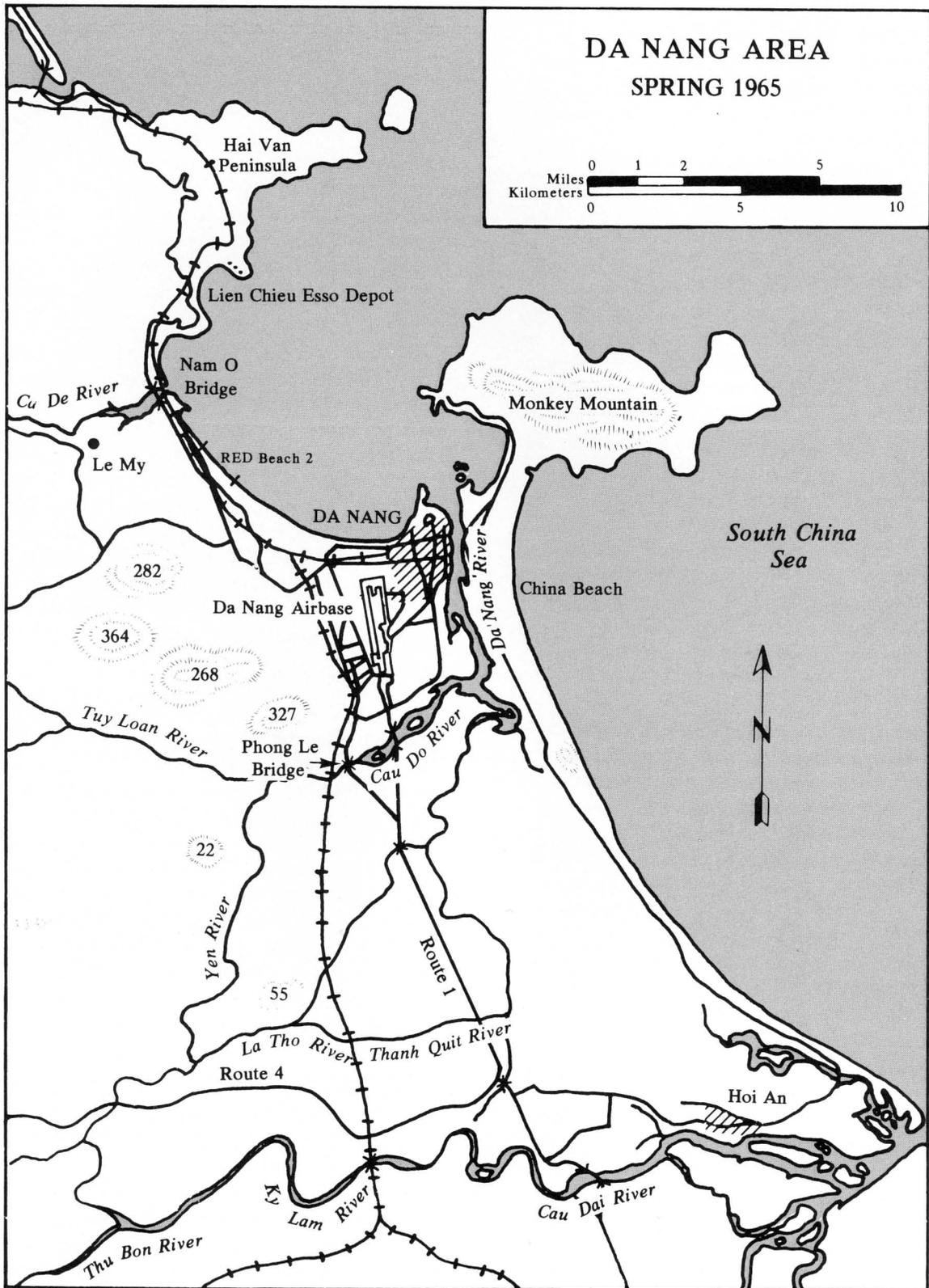
the Premier and Chief of State. While the veteran politician Phan Khac Suu remained as Chief of State, the Council appointed a Saigon physician, Dr. Phan Huy Quat, who had formerly served as Foreign Minister in 1964, as the new Prime Minister. Six days later, a group of senior generals led by Major General Nguyen Van Thieu, the South Vietnamese IV Corps Commander, and Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, Commander of the Air Force, deposed General Khanh, a veteran of other coup attempts, as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

Confronted with both a deteriorating political and military situation, General Westmoreland directed his deputy, Lieutenant General John L. Throckmorton, USA, to determine what American ground forces were needed for base security. After completing his survey, Throckmorton recommended the deployment of a three-battalion Marine expeditionary brigade to Da Nang because of the vital importance of the base for any air campaign against the north and "the questionable capability of the Vietnamese to protect the base." General Westmoreland several years later recalled:

While sharing Throckmorton's sense of urgency, I nevertheless hoped to keep the number of U.S. ground troops to a minimum and recommended instead landing only two battalions and holding the third aboard ship off shore.¹³

On 22 February, General Westmoreland forwarded this request to Admiral Sharp who in turn informed the JCS that he agreed with Westmoreland's assessment of the situation. Although expressing strong reservations about sending any American ground forces to Vietnam, Ambassador Taylor, in a message to the State Department on 22 February, agreed to placing one Marine BLT at Da Nang "in view of General Westmoreland's understandable concern for the safety of this important base."¹⁴

By this time, BLTs 1/9 and 3/9 were back on board ship at their former stations near Cap St. Jacques and Da Nang. The Task Force 76 flagship, the USS *Mount McKinley* (AGC 7), with the task force commander, Rear Admiral Don W. Wulzen, and General Karch on board, accompanied the amphibious task group carrying BLT 1/9 off Vietnam. General Karch had met with Westmoreland and the MACV staff in Saigon. The Marines were



prepared for any eventuality and ready to land at Da Nang or Saigon as the situation required.

By the end of February, President Johnson had made the decision to commit a two-battalion Marine expeditionary brigade to Da Nang with the mission of protecting the base from enemy incursion. General Karch and members of his staff once more visited General Westmoreland on 25 February to discuss plans for a Marine landing at Da Nang. The MEB commander left Saigon two days later for Da Nang where he coordinated his plans with the South Vietnamese I Corps Commander, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, the virtual warlord of South Vietnam's five northern provinces. Karch later recalled:

On our way back into Thi's headquarters a jeep came out with a New York Times reporter in it. Westmoreland's J-3 [BGen William E. DePuy, USA] turned to me and said, "That is bad news." When he got in he had a phone call from Saigon saying, "Get Karch and his staff out of the country as quickly as possible."¹⁵

General Karch and his staff immediately departed Da Nang for Subic Bay and then Okinawa.

On 27 February (26 February, Washington time), the Department of State cabled Ambassador Taylor that the Marines were to be landed and that he was to secure approval from the Government of Vietnam for this eventuality. On the afternoon of the 28th, Ambassador Taylor met with Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat to discuss with him the proposed American landing. The following day, 1 March, the Ambassador met with the Minister of the Vietnamese Armed Forces, General Nguyen Van Thieu and the Vietnamese Chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Tran Van Minh ("Little Minh") to discuss the details of the deployment of the 9th MEB. The two Vietnamese officers posed no objections to the proposed commitment of American combat troops. They did, however, express concern about the reaction of the Vietnamese population and requested that the American forces be brought into Da Nang "in the most inconspicuous way feasible."¹⁶

Evidently this "inconspicuous way" statement had some effect on U.S. officials in Washington. On 3 March, Ambassador Taylor received a message from Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton stating that it was desirable to deploy the Army's 173d Airborne Brigade by air from Okinawa instead of the 9th MEB.¹⁷ Some Washington planners obviously believed that the

light infantry of an airborne brigade landing at Da Nang airfield would be a "quieter arrival" than the more formidable appearance of a Marine brigade with its tanks, amphibian tractors, and other heavy weapons arriving in an armada of amphibious ships. General Westmoreland, supported by the American Ambassador, immediately objected to the proposed change. Both considered that the Marines were more self-sustaining. Admiral Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific, cabled the JCS:

Since the origination of OPLAN 32 in 1959, the Marines have been scheduled for deployment to Da Nang . . . contingency plans and a myriad of supporting plans at lower echelons reflect this same deployment. As a result, there has been extensive planning, reconnaissance, and logistics preparation over the years. The CG, 9th MEB is presently in Da Nang finalizing the details for landing the MEB forces in such a way as to cause minimum impact on the civilian populace . . . I recommend that the MEB be landed at Da Nang as previously planned.¹⁸

The objections to the MEB landing were overruled and on 7 March 1965 (6 March 1965, Washington time) the JCS sent the long-awaited signal to land the 9th MEB at once with two of its three BLTs.

The Landing

The days before the landing were a hectic period for General Karch and the Marines of the brigade. General Karch and his staff had completed 9th MEB Operational Plan 37D-65 for the amphibious landing of a BLT and the airlift of another battalion from Okinawa to Da Nang on 26 February. The MEB staff then conducted a command post exercise (CPX) on Okinawa. According to Major Ruel T. Scyphers, the MEB G-1, the operations order for the deployment of the MEB, "was put together following a non-stop 48 hour CPX . . . we got word about 2000 [27 February] and armed with a staff manual and some borrowed clerks we put together an order and had it boxed about 0300 . . ."¹⁹

Still on Okinawa at the beginning of March, General Karch scheduled a two-day map exercise of the Da Nang area beginning on 2 March and a briefing for Lieutenant Colonel Herbert J. Bain,* commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, whose battalion was slated to fly to Da Nang. On the

* Lieutenant Colonel Bain was a combat veteran of World War II. He had earned a battlefield commission in November 1944 and later was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic actions during the Okinawa campaign in 1945.



USMC Photo A183676

Marines from BLT 3/9 came ashore on 8 March 1965 at RED Beach 2, northwest of Da Nang. The heavy surf delayed the landing for an hour.

2d, however, Karch cancelled both the exercise and the briefing when he received orders to proceed immediately to Da Nang. Boarding a Marine KC-130F, the tanker/transport model of the C-130, General Karch and 28 members of his staff departed Okinawa at 2300. The aircraft stopped at Cubi Point to pick up staff members of Navy Task Force 76 and arrived in Da Nang the morning of the 3d. MACV liaison officers met General Karch and his group as they landed and escorted them about the airbase and landing beaches. At 1600, the MEB staff boarded its plane for the return flight to Subic Bay.

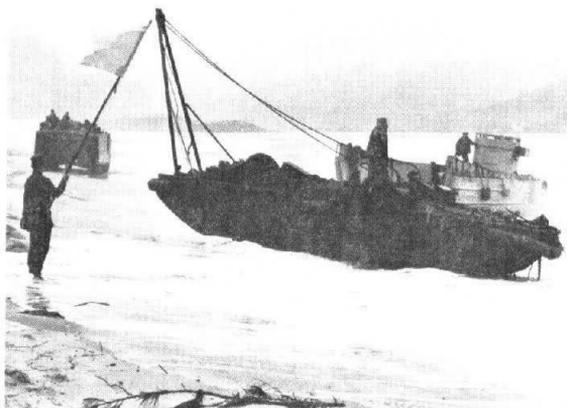
The next day, the general issued a warning order to BLT 3/9, which had been off the coast of Da Nang in Navy amphibious shipping since early February, to be prepared "to administratively land the landing force." The BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. McPartlin, Jr., was to land his battalion at RED Beach 2, north of the airbase and west of the

city of Da Nang, and move by truck convoy along Route 1 to defensive positions at the airfield.^{20*}

At the same time, the Marines and the Navy made refinements in dispositions of their tactical units. BLT 2/9, embarked on the ships of the amphibious ready group, relieved BLT 1/9 at Subic Bay. The JUNGLE DRUM III exercise was rescheduled for 14-31 March and was scaled down from a MEB-size exercise with only BLT 2/3 slated as the participating unit.

General Karch flew back to Da Nang on 6 March and joined Admiral Wulzen on board the *Mount McKinley*, which was 10 miles off Da Nang with the rest of the task force. As the MEB commander later recalled:

* Lieutenant Colonel McPartlin had enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1932. A first sergeant at the outbreak of World War II, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1942. He saw combat in both World War II and Korea.



USMC Photo A183798

Marines from BLT 3/9 continue landing across RED Beach 2. A member of the beach party (holding flag in foreground) directs traffic.

On 7 March, I was sitting in my stateroom when Admiral Wulzen comes in and says, ‘Here is a dispatch,’ which said, ‘Close Da Nang, land the landing force.’ I looked at the dispatch, I looked at Admiral Wulzen, and I said ‘Don, do you think in Washington they know what time it is in Da Nang? This means a night landing if we close Da Nang at this point.’

Karch went on to exclaim:

And not only that—we were in the worst weather we had encountered in the South China Sea ever. Visibility was limited to 150-200 yards, and it was about 12 o’clock. The move into the Da Nang harbor from which the landing would be launched was going to take about four to five hours.^{21*}

Upon his return to the command ship that evening, General Karch radioed Lieutenant Colonel McPartlin. He assured the battalion commander that Route 1 would be closed to civilians for 36 hours and that McPartlin would control traffic in the beachhead area. The Vietnamese would regulate movement along the rest of the route. The MEB commander concluded: ‘Unless the situation ashore changes during the night, you can count on an administrative move from beachhead to airfield. Speed in execution is essential . . .’²²

* A last minute requirement to coordinate the public announcement of the Marine landing with the South Vietnamese may have accounted for the timing of the JCS message. See ‘Marine Combat Units Go to Da Nang,’ *Pentagon Papers*, bk 4, sec. IV-C-4, p. 8.

Shortly afterward, General Karch ordered the execution of OPlan-37D. The plan, with H-hour set for 0800, 8 March, scheduled general unloading to be completed by 1600 the next day. Lieutenant Colonel McPartlin planned for Company I to land over the northern portion of RED Beach 2 and Company K over the southern sector. They were to insure that the landing area was secure and provide the advance guard for the movement to the airfield. Company M was designated battalion reserve.

At 0545 on the 8th, the four ships of Amphibious Task Force 76, the flagship *Mount McKinley*, the attack transport USS *Henrico* (APA 45), attack cargo ship USS *Union* (AKA 106), and amphibious transport dock USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2) closed to within 4,000 yards of the Da Nang shore and anchored in the harbor. Admiral Wulzen gave the order ‘land the landing force’ at 0600. At this time, other than an intermittent drizzle, weather conditions were moderate. Visibility was five miles and the wind was blowing at eight knots from the northwest. Near the shoreline, waves were cresting from two to four feet, spilling gently onto the landing beach. Unfortunately, these conditions did not last long.



USMC Photo A183780

South Vietnamese children wave at a Marine vehicle heading for the Da Nang Airbase. A South Vietnamese flag flies above the banner welcoming the Marines to Vietnam.

In the transport area, swells reached 8 to 10 feet, playing havoc with the debarkation. It was almost impossible to hold the nets for the troops to debark; several of the lines mooring landing craft to their mother ships snapped under the strain. At 0730 it became impossible to load small boats alongside; Admiral Wulzen postponed H-hour until 0900. At the same time, General Karch left the *Mount McKinley* for the airbase by helicopter. An hour later, the first planes arrived from Okinawa with additional shore party personnel to aid in clearing the beach.

At 0830 the task force commander confirmed the 0900 H-hour. A high surf plan was put into effect which directed that the loads for the smaller landing craft (LCVPs) be rescheduled for larger and heavier landing craft (LCMs). The first wave of assault troops in 11 Marine amphibian tractors (LVTPs) touched down at RED Beach 2 just three minutes late and the fourth and final assault wave of 3/9 landed at 0918.*

On the beach, the commander of I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ), General Thi, and the Mayor of Da Nang welcomed General Karch while a group of Vietnamese university students led by a vanguard of pretty girls holding leis of flowers greeted the Marines.** Vietnamese troops secured the beachhead and the route to the airfield. The first echelons of Company L moved out from the beachhead at 0945. Banners in both Vietnamese and English were strung along the route of march welcoming the troops; Vietnamese children lined



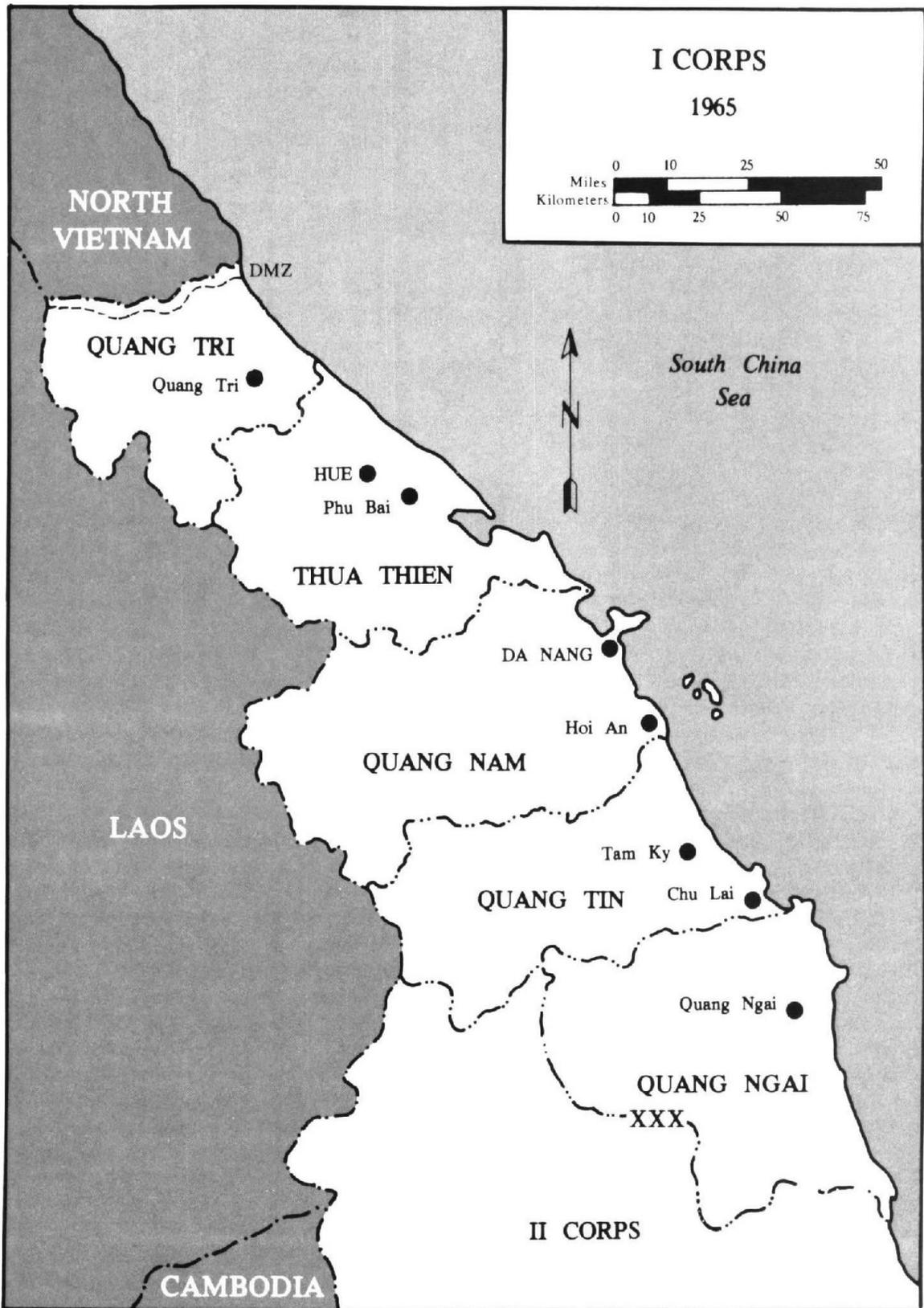
Photo courtesy of Associated Press and Wide World Photos
Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, the Commanding General, 9th MEB, watches the landing bedecked with flowers presented to him by South Vietnamese schoolgirls. This picture received wide distribution in the U.S. press.

* The landing craft, mechanized (LCM) is a steel-hulled boat. Two versions exist, the LCM-6 (weight of 29 tons empty which carries 80 troops or 24 tons of cargo), and the LCM-8 (weighs 61 tons empty and carries 200 troops or 60 tons of cargo). The personnel and vehicle landing craft (LCVP) is a wooden-hulled landing craft weighing nine tons and capable of carrying 36 troops or four tons of cargo. The landing vehicle tracked, personnel (LVTP-5) is a steel amphibian tracked vehicle weighing 45 tons and capable of carrying 34 troops or six tons of cargo. The LCM and LCVP are landing craft organic to the Navy while the LVTP-5 is a Marine Corps vehicle.

** The picture shown at upper right appeared in many American newspapers depicting a dour General Karch with a garland of flowers around his neck. Karch later remarked: "That picture has been the source of a lot of trouble for me. People say, 'Why couldn't you have been smiling?' But you know, if I had it to do over, that picture would be the same. When you have a son in Vietnam and he gets killed, you don't want a smiling general with flowers around his neck as the leader at that point." *Karch Intvw.*

both sides of the road, waving and shyly smiling at the Marines. The lead company was followed by Company I, artillery attachments, and Company K, which formed the rear guard of the motor march to the southern portion of the airbase. Company M remained behind as beach security for general unloading.

Simultaneously with the preparations for the landing of the BLT across the beach, the Marines had





USMC Photo A184402

Marines from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines disembark from U.S. Air Force C-130 transports at the Da Nang Airbase on 8 March. The airlift of the battalion was held up for 24 hours shortly after these Marines arrived.

begun the airlift of Lieutenant Colonel Bain's battalion from Okinawa to Da Nang. On the morning of 7 March, Major General William R. ("Rip") Collins, the 3d Marine Division commander, as directed by a CinCPac message, requested the 315th Air Division of the U.S. Air Force to provide the transportation to move the unit to Vietnam. On Okinawa the 3d Division commander alerted Lieutenant Colonel Bain, and the first elements of the battalion moved from Camp Schwab to the air facility at Futema that night. The BLT was organized into assigned aircraft loads, then moved from Futema to Naha Air Base. At 2200, the Air Force approved the movement orders, establishing 30-minute intervals between launches of the C-130 aircraft.

Shortly after midnight, General Collins radioed MACV headquarters in Saigon for authority to launch the first plane of the airlift which was scheduled to arrive at Da Nang at 0900 on the 8th. Six hours later, MACV granted this clearance but later changed the arrival hour to noon. After a three-hour wait, the first elements consisting of the

command group of the battalion and part of Company C left Naha Air Base at 0725. In reporting the move, General Collins observed that the entire lift could take place during daylight if he were allowed to expedite aircraft departures. The MACV Chief of Staff, Major General Richard G. Stilwell, called the CinCPac Command Center and stated that Da Nang could not accommodate two BLTs arriving at the same time. Brigadier General Keith B. McCutcheon, an outstanding Marine aviator of both World War II and Korea then serving as the CinCPac J-3, reminded Stilwell that MACV had already granted clearance for the air movement. General Stilwell replied that conditions had changed and that the airlift would have to be held up. CinCPac so instructed the Commanders, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Air Force.²³

The first planes carrying the lead elements of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, arrived at the Da Nang Airbase about 1300 on the afternoon of 8 March. Although snipers fired at them during their landing approach, the aircraft were undamaged. After the

arrival of 13 planes at Da Nang, the airlift was halted with Companies C and B assembled in defensive positions on the western portion of the airfield. Company D, the security company already at Da Nang for protection of the SHUFLY helicopter unit, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163, reverted to parent control. Only Company A was left on Okinawa. Lieutenant Colonel Bain later recalled that the “‘arbitrary’ cutoff [of the airlift] separated the units which had landed from their backup rations.”²⁴

Although the arrival of the remainder of Bain’s battalion was held up, a different airlift occurred on 9 March. The helicopter carrier USS *Princeton* (LPH 5) with HMM-365 (Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Koler, Jr.) on board, arrived off Da Nang shortly after sunrise that morning. Between 0700 and noon on the 9th, all 23 of the squadron’s helicopters were transferred to HMM-162,* commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. Curtis, whose personnel arrived by Marine KC-130 aircraft at Da Nang from Okinawa the same day. The pilots of HMM-365 returned to the *Princeton* which then steamed for Okinawa to take on replacement aircraft.

That same afternoon, General Karch, who on the 8th had been given operational control of all Marine units at Da Nang, reporting directly to MACV,

* The squadron, HMM-162, was no stranger to operations in Vietnam. It had been in the Far East since 1 June 1964 and had been previously assigned to SHUFLY for four months. Much of the intervening time had been spent on board Navy LPHs in Vietnamese waters as part of the Special Landing Force. It had just returned to Okinawa on 4 March from SLF duty. Now, only five days later, the squadron again was in Vietnam. LtCol Oliver W. Curtis had previously commanded this squadron in 1964 when it was assigned to SHUFLY. He was a veteran of both World War II and Korea and had been awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his actions at Okinawa and later three more DFCs for his aerial feats in Korea.

telephoned General Westmoreland and received permission to resume the airlift of BLT 1/3. The first planes took off from Okinawa shortly after midnight and arrived at Da Nang the morning of the 10th. By 12 March, the rest of the battalion landing team, with the exception of its attached tanks and low priority vehicles, was in Vietnam.

On that date, general unloading of the 9th MEB was completed. Because of a fire fight on the night of 8-9 March between VC elements and Vietnamese Army troops only two miles north of RED Beach, the ships of the amphibious task force had moved to anchorages near the mouth of the Song Han (Da Nang River). The next day unloading continued up the river over a ramp into the city. This too had its limitations as Admiral Wulzen brought out:

The complete lack of port facilities—cranes, heavy duty fork lifts, cargo nets, and lighterage—coupled with unmarked channels, single small off-loading point (which can only handle two LCMs simultaneously), distance from anchorage to pier (four miles average), lack of staging area at the pier are contributing to slow off-loading.²⁵

The administrative landing of the 9th MEB occurred in an uncertain atmosphere; the JCS order directing the landing, bore the laconic title “Improved Security Measures in the Republic of Vietnam.” Adding a further surrealistic touch to the Marines’ arrival, a few days after the landing General Thi invited the commanders and staff of the 9th MEB to a garden reception, replete with “several orchestras and accompanying nicities.” Lieutenant Colonel Bain ironically recalled that the festivities were “followed by a return to my foxhole and C rations.”²⁶

Nevertheless, a new phase of the Vietnam war had begun. About one-third of the Marine ground forces and two-thirds of the Marine helicopter squadrons in the Western Pacific had been committed to South Vietnam.

CHAPTER 2

The 9th MEB in Vietnam

The First Weeks—Estimate of the Situation—More Marines Arrive—An Expanded Mission—Chu Lai

The First Weeks

Despite the arrival of the 9th MEB, the Marine intervention in Vietnam was still of a limited nature. The Joint Chiefs of Staff made this very clear in their landing order of 7 March which directed that “the U.S. Marine Force will not, repeat will not, engage in day-to-day actions against the Viet Cong.” General Westmoreland gave the 9th MEB the responsibility to protect the vital Da Nang Airbase from enemy attack but declared that “overall responsibility for the defense of Da Nang area remains a RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] responsibility.”¹

To carry out this limited mission, General Karch had nearly 5,000 Marines under his command, including McPartlin’s and Bain’s infantry battalions, two helicopter squadrons, and limited logistic and combat support forces. The brigade had absorbed the former Marine Unit Vietnam (MUV), or Task Unit 79.3.5, better remembered as SHUFLY. On 9 March the MUV became Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 16. Colonel John H. King, Jr., the former MUV commander and veteran Marine aviator who had commanded a helicopter squadron in Korea, assumed command of MAG-16.

The 9th MEB air-ground team at Da Nang faced a difficult logistical situation. General Karch later recalled:

In late February, Bob Oddy [Colonel Robert J. Oddy, CO, 3d Force Service Regiment] came to me and said, “Your biggest problem is going to be logistics and I am going to find you the best people I have to get you through this test.” And bless old Bob, he did just that, otherwise the Brigade would have been flat on its back.²

The 3d Service Battalion and Force Service Regiment on Okinawa provided the personnel for the Brigade Logistic Support Group (BLSG). According to Colonel Oddy, “When the time came to embark the Brigade, we split the Service Battalion 50/50, and

supported by personnel from the Force Service Regiment, we were ready to launch the fledging BLSG.”* Original plans called for a BLSG in excess of 1,000 men, but because the Joint Chiefs imposed a personnel ceiling on the number of Marines who could be brought into Vietnam the group had been cut to 660 men. Colonel Oddy recalled in 1976, “The personnel ceiling resulted in an extremely austere staff group that made service and support a big question mark”³ General Karch remarked that there were several contingency plans which fitted the situation in Vietnam better than the one that was used.⁴

The only representatives of the brigade logistic group who participated in the first phase of the landing were the executive officer, Major Pat Morgan, and 11 other Marines. They arrived on 10 March by air with elements of BLT 1/3 and assumed control of the entire logistic operation, but the advance echelon could accomplish very little “except to console the MEB that supplies were on the way.”⁵

Despite the activation of the BLSG on 12 March and the arrival of its commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel George H. Smith, six days later, the first two weeks for the MEB were a logistic nightmare. The entire brigade subsisted on the 15 days of rations that had landed with McPartlin’s battalion and an

*Colonel Oddy wrote in 1976: “. . . this was a time when unrestricted officers with infantry MOSs could be assigned command of service units. This was fortunate for me as I had previous command experience with infantry platoons, companies and battalions and it seemed unlikely I would command one of the infantry regiments of the Division. Command of a large service organization and the opportunity to formulate from scratch a larger task organized service and support group was certainly a major high point in my career.” Col Robert J. Oddy, Comments on draft MS, dtd 25Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

emergency airlift from Saigon. Major Morgan later wrote: "Lieutenant Colonel Smith and I almost lost our sanity until matters were straightened out."⁶

On 22 March, the ships carrying the seatail of the 9th MEB entered the port. They were unloaded at the ramp near the base of Monkey Mountain, across the Song Han from the airfield. Since the bridge spanning the river had been destroyed by the Viet Cong the year before, the Marines had to rely on a ferry to carry the supply-laden trucks to the airbase. Despite the complicated unloading, the arrival of its seatail ended the MEB's first logistic crisis.

In this transitional phase of U.S. involvement, some confusion existed as to whether the MEB was to subsist from Marine Corps and Seventh Fleet mount-out stocks, or whether MACV would assume part of the logistic burden. MACV apparently believed that the Marine Corps had received permission from the Department of Defense to use its mount-out supplies, which was not the case. This authority was not given until June. (See Chapters 3 and 12). Marine Colonel Webb D. Sawyer, who headed the MACV J-4 Plans Branch, later provided a MACV perspective of the situation in the following comment:

When the Marine Brigade landed at Da Nang I had a representative from my J-4 office there, an Air Force Officer, Major Robinson. When Robby returned to Saigon, he brought a very long, very complete, listing of all types of supplies that were being requested by the Marine Brigade. I knew that most of the items were in the Code Plan stocks [mount-out stocks] aboard the shipping that had brought the Marines. I asked Robby why the Marines weren't using the Code Plan supplies. His reply was that the Marines said those supplies were for an emergency. My reaction was that the Marines had just participated in the emergency.⁷

General Karch later recalled that for days the air was filled with messages regarding rations and ammunition. At the end of March, General Westmoreland declared that his command could take on the task of supplying the Marines with basic rations and ammunition for the time being. Although the question was not resolved at this time, the Marines were equipped, armed, and fed; supplies were unloaded and stockpiled; and the MEB was functioning.⁸

During this same period, Colonel King reorganized MAG-16, the air arm of the MEB, to reflect the changes in his command. On 14 March, the headquarters sections became Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 16 (—) (H&MS-16) under

Major John J. McMasters while the housekeeping section became Marine Airbase Squadron 16 (—) (MABS-16) under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Vernon. Colonel King also retained the LAAM battalion as well as the two helicopter squadrons.

The Marine helicopters continued to operate under MAG-16 much the same as they did when under SHUFLY. Most of their missions were flown in support of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) forces throughout I Corps. Initially, after the landing of the 9th MEB, most of these flights were made by Lieutenant Colonel Norman G. Ewers' HMM-163. The newly arrived squadron, HMM-162, under Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. Curtis, became operational on 12 March, but at first was confined to support of the MEB. By the end of March, both squadrons were supporting the Marines and the ARVN.

In support of the ARVN operations, the Marine pilots flew both resupply and strike missions. The former missions, consuming a majority of the flight hours, involved moving troops and cargo to outposts located throughout I Corps. The resupply cargo was a mixture of military supplies, as well as pigs, cows, chickens, and other items required by the sometimes isolated Vietnamese detachments. Strike missions consisted of lifting company- or battalion-size ARVN units in helicopter assault operations.

These strike missions produced the only significant enemy contact experienced by Marines during this period. On 31 March, the group flew helicopter support for ARVN Operation QUYET THANG 512. A force of 17 UH-34Ds from HMM-163, 2 UH-34D SAR/maintenance* helicopters from HMM-162, and 7 U. S. Army Bell UH-1 'Huey' gunships was assigned to lift 465 troops of the ARVN 5th Airborne Battalion. The air task force was to move the ARVN paratroopers from the vicinity of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province to a landing zone (LZ) about 25 miles south of Da Nang.

Led by Lieutenant Colonel Ewers, the helicopters encountered such heavy antiaircraft fire when they approached the landing zone that Ewers later remarked that the squadron might have flown into a

* SAR/maintenance teams are search, rescue, and maintenance teams used to expedite the recovery of downed aircraft. These teams, composed of mechanics and infantry, were placed on board helicopters which remained well above the strike force, or acted as decoys during the initial assault.

trap. In the first lift, Ewers' wingman, First Lieutenant Wendell T. Eliason was killed in the landing zone, but his co-pilot, First Lieutenant Donald R. Wilson, managed to fly the badly damaged craft back to Da Nang. Four other helicopters in this lift also had to be returned to Da Nang for battle damage repair.

The enemy shot down one of the Marine UH-34Ds, whose pilot, First Lieutenant Dale D. Eddy, "was wounded in the neck and initially believed KIA." Eddy's copilot, First Lieutenant James E. Magel, also wounded, was able to make his way to another helicopter, but then died. According to Ewers, Eddy's crew chief, Sergeant Cecil A. Garner, "himself wounded, took his M-60 machine gun with him and joined the firefight on the ground." Another pilot from HMM-163, Major Bennie H. Mann, Jr., landed his craft in the face of the heavy enemy fire and rescued Garner and Eddy. According to Ewers, Mann's crew chief, Staff Sergeant Stanley J. Novotny, "somehow found the strength singlehandedly to lift the concious but paralyzed" six-foot, 200-pound Eddy out of the downed craft. Mann was awarded the Navy Cross and Novotny received the Silver Star for the rescue.⁹

Despite heavy enemy opposition, HMM-163 continued to make three lifts into the zone until the entire 5th Airborne Battalion had been landed. All told, 25 Marine helicopters and 10 U.S. Army helicopters took part in the operation.* Nineteen of the aircraft sustained battle damage. Two Army UH-1s, in addition to the Marine UH-34D, also were shot down. The Army craft were later recovered but Eddy's aircraft was a complete loss. The Marines suffered a total of 19 casualties including the two killed while two U.S. Army personnel required hospitalization. Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, at the time the 1st MAW Chief of Staff, later wrote: "It was obvious to us in Japan from battle damage and casualty reports of this mission that the VC were really moving into the Da Nang area in strength and that the situation was changing."¹⁰

In contrast to the helicopter squadrons, the

*The U. S. Army helicopters belonged to the Utility Tactical Transport Detachment, 68th Aviation Company, USA, also located at Da Nang. This unit provided the armed helicopter escorts for Marine air operations since the Marines did not have their organic fixed-wing attack aircraft support with them at this time.



USMC Photo A183859

Lieutenant General Krulak; Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. McPartlin, Jr., Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines; Brigadier General Karch; and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Muir, 9th MEB operations officer (left to right) study the terrain from Hill 327 west of Da Nang. This hill was the highest point in the 9th MEB area of operations.

Marine infantry battalions were confined to the approximately eight square miles of relatively unpopulated terrain encompassing the airfield and the high ground to the west which made up the MEB's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR).** Within the Marines' TAOR, Bain's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines manned defenses on the airfield while McPartlin's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines moved to forward positions on hill mass 268-327 due west of the base. There, the latter battalion not only protected the airfield but also provided security for Battery B of the LAAM Battalion which moved to Hill 327. To accomplish the mission of airfield defense, Bain's battalion established an extensive system of listening posts forward of the company defensive areas around the

**According to *Dictionary of United States Military Terms for Joint Usage* (JD), JCS Pub 1 (Washington: Dec 64), p. 169, a TAOR was "a defined area of land in which responsibility is specifically assigned to the commander of the area for the development and maintenance of installations, control of movement and the conduct of tactical operations involving troops under his control"



USMC Photo A184119

HAWK missiles move to new positions on Hill 327 from the airfield. The missiles are from Battery B, 1st LAAM Battalion.

airfield perimeter. The battalion was prepared to support these posts with a strong reaction force which could deploy rapidly to any sector of the airfield. The inherent difficulty of the unit's defensive assignment was that the battalion could not establish listening posts or conduct defensive reconnaissance patrols beyond the confines of the airfield.

Although McPartlin's battalion ran patrols into the hills to the west, his Marines encountered no Viet Cong. In fact, the first American casualties were inflicted by another Marine when two men from a three-man listening post left their positions to investigate a suspicious movement to their front. The two men apparently lost their way in the dark and came upon their remaining partner from the rear. He turned and opened fire, mortally wounding his two comrades.

Initially, the Marine infantrymen suffered more from the heat and humidity than from the combat situation. In order to reduce the number of heat prostration casualties, General Karch restricted

defensive patrols and heavy work to the cooler hours of the early morning and late afternoon.

Although acclimatization only required time, other problems were not so easily solved. Relations with the South Vietnamese often were difficult. For example, Bain's relief of some ARVN forces at the airfield on 13 March was delayed when the Vietnamese refused to leave their positions. The Marines had to make further liaison with the ARVN headquarters before completing the relief the next day.

McPartlin's battalion recorded a similar experience. The Marines attempted to establish a mutual check point with the Popular Forces (PF), Vietnam's home defense militia.* The PFs showed

* Popular Forces were Vietnamese who were recruited and served in their local villages and hamlets. Regional Forces (RFs) were Vietnamese forces recruited within a province and assigned to the province chief. Although comparison with the U. S. institutions is not exact, one could say that PFs were county- or parish-type troops while RFs were state forces.

up at the check point, but then quickly disappeared. These experiences with the PFs led McPartlin to comment, "that the PFs were most unreliable military personnel."¹¹ To add to the 3d Battalion's problems, fire discipline in an ARVN training camp southeast of the battalion was nonexistent. Periodically, uncomfortable moments occurred as ARVN recruits inadvertently fired towards the unit's positions.

The area south and east of the airbase remained the responsibility of the ARVN because General Thi wanted to keep the Marines away from the populated area, fearing that the Americans might provoke incidents in the villages which would antagonize the local populace.¹² Generals Thi and Karch reached an agreement upon a set of "rules of engagement" which also restricted the activities of the Marines. The Marines were not to fire at persons beyond the

defensive wire of the airbase boundary, but they were to report persons outside the wire to the Combined Coordination Center established by the two commands. General Karch made no secret about his unhappiness with the defensive perimeter assigned to the brigade: "Actually this was not a satisfactory arrangement. As a practical matter there is no doubt that the brigade commander would have been held responsible for any successful assault on the airfield."¹³

Estimate of the Situation

When the MEB was in place at Da Nang, General Westmoreland and his staff reexamined the entire American military effort in Vietnam. According to the MACV commander:

We considered it appropriate to undertake a classical



USMC Photo A801078

Colonel Edwin B. Wheeler, Commanding Officer, 3d Marines (center), discusses the tactical situation with Lieutenant Colonel David A. Clement, commanding officer of the newly arrived 2d Battalion, 3d Marines (right). The other officer in the picture is First Lieutenant Marx H. Branum, the forward air controller for the battalion.



USMC Photo A184342

Marines from BLT 3/4 on board a Marine helicopter en route to Phu Bai from Da Nang. These troops just arrived in Vietnam.

commander's estimate of the situation to think through in a logical and precise manner, strategy, objectives, enemy capabilities, and our own courses of action before making what may prove to be in the light of history, a momentous recommendation.¹⁴

By 26 March, Westmoreland had completed his estimate and was prepared to provide the Washington authorities with a resume of recommendations already forwarded to Admiral Sharp and the Joint Chiefs.¹⁵ He saw the military objectives of his command in relatively simple terms. The American goal was to cause the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) to cease its support of the VC, thus enabling an anti-Communist South Vietnam to survive. To carry out this policy, the American general provided three alternatives.

Under the first, the United States Government

would give more aid to the buildup of the Vietnamese Armed Forces, continue and expand air strikes against North Vietnam, and use the resources of the Seventh Fleet to interdict infiltration by sea. General Westmoreland frankly did not believe this was enough. It would not stabilize the Government of South Vietnam and would offer no assurance for the survival of the country.

The second proposal was the deployment of five divisions, including three American, across Vietnam and the Laotian panhandle near the 17th Parallel. This would be coordinated with stepped-up air attacks against the north, while at the same time strengthening the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. Other American and Free World troops would be sent to South Vietnam to deal with the Viet Cong



USMC Photo A184117

Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., inspects an honor guard at Da Nang during a visit to Vietnam in April 1965. The Commandant later told the press that the Marines would be conducting more aggressive operations.

insurgency. General Westmoreland also rejected this alternative; he did not think that in 1965 the lines of communication or the port facilities in the country could supply and support five divisions strung along the parallel. He feared that by the time this could be done, the war would be lost.

According to the general, this left only one feasible solution. This was to continue the buildup of the ARVN, intensify the air war against North Vietnam, and land the equivalent of two U.S. divisions with their necessary combat and service support in South Vietnam. The American forces would have a three-fold mission: protection of vital U.S. installations; defeat of the Communist efforts to control Kontum and Pleiku Provinces; and the establishment of enclaves in the coastal region. General Westmoreland visualized that the total U.S. reinforcement would consist of approximately 33,000 troops deployed by June. He believed that the insertion of American strength would blunt the Communist offensive in the two northern corps areas and stiffen the backbone of the South Vietnamese forces throughout the country.

Most important for the Marine Corps was the recommendation to reinforce the 4,685 personnel of the 9th MEB. In addition to rounding out the force at Da Nang with a third battalion, Westmoreland suggested that a fourth be stationed at the Hue/Phu

Bai airstrip approximately eight miles south of Hue. The MACV commander later wrote:

I remained disturbed about possible enemy action against other bases, notably a U.S. Army communications facility [manned by the U.S. Army 8th Radio Research Unit] and a small airfield at Phu Bai, near Hue, not a good field but at the time the best we had north of the Hai Van Pass.¹⁶

Although Admiral Sharp and the Joint Chiefs had already recommended approval of the Marine deployment to Phu Bai, one influential Marine general opposed this suggestion at the time. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak,* then Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) and perhaps the Marine Corps' leading theoretician on counterinsurgency, later commented:

Here is an example of where dollar economics wagged the tail of the military deployment. Phu Bai is as tactically indefensible as anyone could imagine. General Westmoreland was determined, however, that we should go there because of the existence of the 8th RRU. There was an investment of probably 5 million dollars in the unit. It was firmly locked to the Phu Bai plain and he was determined not to see it move. He was reinforced by the testimony of experts who said its location was particularly good from a "technical" point of view. Whether or not this is true and our own . . . people strongly questioned it, he insisted that we go there despite the tremendous land barrier between Da Nang and Phu Bai, difficulty of providing logistical support, and the many better uses to which a Marine BLT could have been put. I believe we would have been better off by far to have moved the 8th RRU to another place and to have kept our forces more concentrated. General Westmoreland felt differently and Admiral Sharp was not prepared to override him.^{17**}

In any event, General Westmoreland's J-3,

*General Krulak had served as the Special Assistant for Counter-Insurgency and Special Activities for the Joint Chiefs of Staff just prior to his assumption of command of FMFPac. Although as CGFMFPac, General Krulak did not have operational control of any of the Marine units committed to Vietnam, he was responsible for the combat readiness and logistic support of all Marines in the Pacific. A 1934 Naval Academy graduate, the general earned the Navy Cross during World War II. He was affectionately known throughout the Corps as "Brute," a nickname gained by the fact that he is five feet, five inches tall.

**The Center of Military History, Department of the Army, made the following observation in its comments on the draft manuscript, "General Westmoreland also desired the BLT for the defense of the air strip in that he intended to eventually move the helicopters from Da Nang to Phu Bai to reduce airfield congestion at Da Nang." CMH Comments on draft MS, dtd 15Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File).

Brigadier General William E. DePuy, accompanied Ambassador Taylor to hand carry the MACV "Estimate of the Situation" to Washington for a special meeting of the National Security Council. At this 1 April meeting, President Johnson made several far-reaching decisions, two of which were of particular concern to the Marine Corps. He approved an 18,000- to 20,000-man increase in the U.S. forces in Vietnam to include the deployment of additional Marine forces. Furthermore, the President permitted a change of mission for the 9th MEB which would allow the use of Marines "in active combat under conditions to be established and approved by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State."¹⁸

More Marines Arrive

Initial Marine reinforcements were to consist of both ground and air units. With growing tension in the Far East, General Krulak had made plans at the beginning of the year for the movement of Marine forces and large-scale preparatory maneuvers. In early February, he alerted two U.S. Marine fixed-

wing squadrons in the United States for deployment to Japan in late March. Coincidentally, the FMFPac commander scheduled the largest landing exercise since World War II to take place on the west coast of the United States in early March. The scenario for the exercise, code named SILVER LANCE, reflected the situation in Vietnam, featuring guerrillas, hard-core aggressor forces, and political-military problems.

In Hawaii, the 1st Marine Brigade, consisting of the 4th Marines and MAG-13, made preparations to reinforce the 1st Marine Division and the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in SILVER LANCE. With the imminent landing of the 9th MEB in Vietnam, the Pacific Command ordered the curtailment of forces for the exercise at the last minute. At this time, 7 March, the Marines of the 1st Brigade were already embarked in amphibious shipping. Crediting General Krulak for "the amazing coincidence of the readiness of the Brigade" for movement, Lieutenant Colonel Rex C. Denny, Jr., then the Brigade G-3, 11 years later recalled:

We were on again/off again for Okinawa. Then on precisely the planned sailing date for SILVER LANCE . . . the shipping sailed from Pearl Harbor and turned right instead of left. Perfect timing for the movement to the Far East to be in position for the April troop deployment to Vietnam.¹⁹

The hastily planned deployments of Marine units from Hawaii and the west coast to Okinawa and Japan went smoothly. The 4th Marines, reinforced by a reconnaissance company, antitank company, and by an artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, arrived and reported to the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa by the end of March. At the same time, MAG-13 became part of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Japan.²⁰

On 25 March, Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 311, one of the two squadrons alerted in February, began its air transit from California to Japan, followed two days later by the second air unit, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 542. According to Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. "Doc" Savage, squadron commander of VMFA-542, the two squadrons refueled in flight from Marine KC-130 tankers, and "in leap frog fashion flew the Pacific in some seven days time." The last elements of VMFA-542 landed in Japan on 2 April, thus ending Operation HAMMERHEAD, the code name for the trans-Pacific flight. Savage wrote in 1976:

This movement not only marked the largest and



USMC Photo A185086

Brigadier General Karch greets Lieutenant Colonel William C. McGraw, Jr., Commanding Officer, VMFA-531, upon arrival of the squadron at Da Nang. VMFA-531, flying F-4B Phantom II aircraft, was the first Marine fixed-wing tactical squadron to deploy to Vietnam in 1965.



USMC Photo A184344

Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines have just debarked from helicopters at Phu Bai. The troops in the background, ready to embark in the same helicopter for the return trip to Da Nang, are from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.

longest in-flight refueling operation for the Marine Corps at this time, but dramatically illustrated the capability of the Marines to move their air resources rapidly to meet a possible combat situation.²¹

While the units of the 1st Brigade and the two squadrons from the United States arrived in the Western Pacific, plans for the deployment of the Marine reinforcements authorized by the President from Okinawa and Japan to Vietnam were completed. Colonel Edwin B. Wheeler's Regimental Landing Team (RLT) 3, composed of the RLT headquarters and two battalion landing teams, BLT 2/3 from his own regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel David A. Clement, and BLT 3/4 from the newly arrived 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. Jones, made up the ground component. Air elements of the reinforcements consisted of Lieutenant Colonels Paul L. Hitchcock's Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 2 and William C. McGraw, Jr.'s VMFA-531. The 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade headquarters, which General Collins had activated on 14 March under Lieutenant Colonel Edward Cook after the landing of the 9th MEB, was to control the movement. On 4 April, the 1st Brigade commander, Brigadier General Marion E. Carl, a World War II

flying ace who had downed 18 Japanese aircraft, assumed command of the 3d MEB. He left Okinawa the following day to join Admiral Wulzen on board the *Mount McKinley* at Subic Bay.

As the *Mount McKinley* weighed anchor for the South China Sea, Task Force 76 and 3d MEB staffs completed embarkation and landing plans. RLT 3, BLT 3/4, and MASS-2 would sail from Okinawa on board five tank landing ships. VMFA-531 would fly its aircraft to Da Nang, while its heavy support equipment would follow in amphibious shipping. Lieutenant Colonel Clement's BLT 2/3 was already on board the ships of Navy Task Group 76.6, having completed the JUNGLE DRUM III exercise in Thailand. On 4 April, while underway for the Philippines, the task group received instructions to move to a position 50 miles off the coast of Da Nang. The amphibious squadron arrived there the next day and awaited further landing instructions.

Landing plans of the 3d MEB directed Lieutenant Colonel Clement, a holder of the Silver Star from the Korean War, to land his battalion over RED Beach 2 while the supplies and heavy equipment of the battalion landing team were unloaded at the LST landing on the Tiensha Peninsula, across the Da

Nang River from Da Nang.* Two companies of BLT 2/3 were to be lifted to Phu Bai and await BLT 3/4. Upon the arrival of Jones' battalion, two of his companies were to land across RED Beach 2 and were then to relieve Clement's force at Phu Bai. The rest of BLT 3/4 would remain on board the transports and the task group would move north to the mouth of the Hue River where the Marines and their equipment would unload into landing craft for the trip to Hue City. Lieutenant Colonel Denny, then the 3d MEB G-3, later recalled:

... coordination for this landing plan had to be worked closely with the 9th MEB, requiring several trips from the *Mount McKinley* to Da Nang. In fact, command relations were not clear to all at this point. The 9th MEB wanted control and those of us on the 3d MEB staff wanted control until the troops were ashore. . . .²²

It was finally resolved that the 9th MEB would assume control of each unit as it landed.

On the morning of 10 April, Navy Task Group 76.6, joined by the flagship *Mount McKinley*, entered Da Nang harbor. In contrast to the landing of 8 March, the sea was calm with only a light wind blowing from the south. Visibility was unrestricted with a slightly overcast sky.

At 0823, the first of five waves touched down on RED Beach 2. By 1310, the landing was completed. The ships then moved to positions off Tiensha Peninsula and general unloading continued. A provisional task force under Lieutenant Colonel Clement, consisting of Companies F and G of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and support elements was helilifted to Phu Bai. At Da Nang, Company H took up positions on Hills 278 and 312 north of the high ground held by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines while Company E remained on board the ships to assist with the unloading. The next day, Company E joined Company H. General Westmoreland complimented General Karch:

MACV staff officers who observed the amphibious landing at Da Nang and air movement to Phu Bai of elements of your command on 10 April report the movement was accomplished smoothly and profes-

sionally, reflecting high standards of training, discipline, and esprit. Congratulations to you and others responsible.²³

On the same day that BLT 2/3 landed, VMFA-531 arrived at Da Nang from Atsugi, Japan. Lieutenant Colonel McGraw's squadron was an all-weather jet fighter/interceptor unit equipped with the Navy/Marine Corps version of the McDonnell Phantom II, the F-4B.** General Westmoreland had requested a Phantom squadron because it was capable of performing both tactical missions within South Vietnam and strike missions against North Vietnam. McGraw had received his deployment orders at 0930 from General Fontana's headquarters and the first flight of four Phantoms was airborne within five hours.*** Refueling in flight from two Marine KC-130s southwest of Okinawa, the planes arrived at Da Nang five and one-half hours after takeoff. Later that afternoon the remaining 11 F-4Bs took off. These aircraft stopped for refueling at the Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines and arrived in Vietnam the next morning. Most of the squadron personnel and light support equipment arrived the same day in Marine KC-130s of Marine Transport Refueler Squadron (VMGR) 152. The heavy equipment closed on Da Nang 11 days later on board the tank landing ship *Snobomish County* (LST 1126). The entire squadron movement had gone so smoothly that the wing commander, General Fontana, remarked: "it was a splendid demonstration of operation and coordination of all concerned . . . a fine professional performance."²⁴

On 12 April, RLT 3 headquarters, which had embarked on amphibious shipping at Okinawa, arrived at Da Nang. Colonel Wheeler, a former Marine raider, had arrived in Vietnam by aircraft a week earlier than his command. This was not his first

** Lieutenant Colonel William C. McGraw, Jr. was a veteran of World War II and Korea; in the latter war he had flown 82 combat missions and had earned the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 1962 while serving as a test pilot, he set two world class records in aerial flight in a F-4H Phantom II.

*** Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor wrote in November 1976: "The movement of VMFA 531 was impeded somewhat by a last minute question among the major commands involved, as to whether it was appropriate for a combat air unit to deploy directly from a base in Japan to South Vietnam. The delay involved questions of Japan's neutrality in the South Vietnam situation. For this reason, later flights of combat aircraft flew via the Philippines." Col Thomas J. O'Connor, Comments on draft MS, dtd 27Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File).

* According to Major Marc A. Moore, the S-3 of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, "The original plan called for unloading BLT 2/3 at the mouth of the Hue River and moving to Hue via the river with flank security on each bank. A specific plan was drawn up to carry out this operation, but was canceled in favor of the plan described in the text." BGen Marc A. Moore, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Nov76] (Vietnam Comment File).



USMC Photo A184049

Marines from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines hurry to board a waiting helicopter. They will reinforce a reconnaissance patrol south of Da Nang.

visit to Vietnam; he had landed with airlifted Marine elements on 10 March and had remained in Vietnam for 10 days to discuss the possibility of the future deployment of the remainder of the 9th MEB. Now upon his return, Wheeler quickly completed a survey of the areas for which he would be responsible upon the arrival of RLT 3 and BLTs 2/3 and 3/4: the defense of Da Nang Airfield, and the 8th RRU area and airstrip at Phu Bai. He flew to Hue to meet with Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, commanding general of the 1st ARVN Division, to discuss and coordinate Marine activities there. On the 18th, he reorganized his RLT under the 9th MEB structure as the 3d Marines, Reinforced.

While the Da Nang landings presented few problems to the Marines, Hue posed an entirely different situation. On 23 March, a detachment of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, under the command of Captain David Whittingham, and a Navy underwater demolition team surveyed landing beaches and movement routes to the Phu Bai area. The intelligence collected indicated that unloading at sea off the coast and then boating up the Hue River (or Song Huong, better known to westerners as the Perfume River) to Hue by landing craft was the most feasible plan. Personnel and equipment could then move south by truck along Route 1 to Phu Bai.

Rear Admiral Wulzen and his staff were not convinced that the Hue River transit was desirable. They believed that there was a lack of detailed information on sandbars, water depth, and most important, VC strength in the area. To overcome the Navy's objection, the 3d MEB commander decided to take a look for himself. General Carl flew to Hue where Brigadier General Chuan provided him with four outboard motor boats. With four ARVN soldiers in both the lead and rear boats, General Carl and his G-3, Lieutenant Colonel Denny, in the second boat, and two American noncommissioned officers in the third, the "armada" set out. They traveled the entire length of the river to the South China Sea and returned to Hue, the trip taking approximately five hours. Although uneventful, the trip provided the desired information. Denny later recalled:

... when the Navy at the next planning meeting brought up the hazards of the Hue River, General Carl said he had personally reconnoitered the river [and] this ended all discussion on the subject and the Navy put the stamp of approval on the landing plans.²³

On 14 April, BLT 3/4 began landing. The amphibious ships had arrived from Okinawa and anchored in the Da Nang harbor at 0500 that day. Three and one-half hours later, two companies

landed across RED Beach 2 and were flown to Phu Bai, where they relieved the task force from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines that had been positioned there four days earlier. The last elements of the latter battalion departed for Da Nang on the 15th. Colonel King, in the meantime, stationed 10 UH-34Ds at the Phu Bai airstrip to support the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.

The remainder of the Navy Task Group 76.7 had sailed up the coast to the mouth of the Hue River where the ships anchored late on the evening of the 14th. Before dawn on the 15th, the ships lowered their LCMs and LCVPs; the boats were divided into small groups of four to six craft and the first of these groups departed for Hue, 11 miles inland, at 0640. As the craft approached the landing site in the city, they turned, beached, and lowered their front ramps together. The Marines in full combat gear stepped ashore to be met by an ARVN band and 500 cheering Vietnamese holding aloft a large banner reading "Welcome, U. S. Marines." Dressed in summer white uniforms, the sailors of the Navy beach group supporting the operation also were on hand to greet the Marines. The troops piled into trucks and proceeded south through the city to the base at Phu Bai. The river operation was completed on 19 April. The Navy landing craft made 263 trips, carried 1,371 tons of cargo, and traveled 6,000 miles.

Two other Marine units arrived at Da Nang during April. Lieutenant Colonel Paul L. Hitchcock's MASS-2 debarked during the morning of 16 April. The squadron proceeded to the airfield, where it was assigned to a living area with the LAAM battalion elements west of the runway. The MASS-2 troops immediately began erecting facilities for a direct air support center (DASC) and an air support radar team (ASRT) site.*

The last Marine unit to arrive in Vietnam during the month was Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1, less detachments, with six Douglas EF-10B (F3D-2Q) Skynight jets. Lieutenant

Colonel Otis W. Corman, commander of the unit, led the squadron onto the Da Nang Airfield on 17 April. This squadron, previously based in Japan, was not new to air operations in Southeast Asia. Since 1964, it had provided the Navy and Air Force with electronic countermeasure support. Although administratively assigned to MAG-16 upon arrival, the unit's activities were directed by the U.S. Air Force 2d Air Division. According to Lieutenant Colonel Corman, the directive which placed VMCJ-1 under the operational control of MACV authorized U.S. Navy Forces to use:

. . . Marine air in accordance with their normal and established practices. . . . It directed MACV to coordinate U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force requirements for Marine air EW [electronic warfare] support. This coordination was accomplished by designating 2d Air Div as his coordinating authority.²⁶

With the arrival of two fixed-wing squadrons, two infantry battalions, and support elements, the MEB reached a strength of 8,878 by the end of April. The brigade now consisted of a four-battalion regiment and a four-squadron Marine aircraft group, as well as artillery and engineer groups and a logistic support group. General Karch was satisfied that he could handle anything that the enemy could throw at him.²⁷

An Expanded Mission

As significant as the arrival of reinforcements was the Presidential decision to lift the restrictions on the Marine infantry battalions and permit them to engage in counterinsurgency operations. On 14 April, General Westmoreland provided the MEB with a concept of operations which he divided into four phases: establishment of defensive bases; deep reconnaissance patrols of the enemy's avenues of approach; offensive action as a reaction force in coordination with the Vietnamese; and finally, "undertake in coordination with RVN I Corps, an intensifying program of offensive operations to fix and destroy the VC in the general Da Nang area."²⁸

General Karch immediately attempted to implement his new orders. He met with General Thi the same day to negotiate for the realignment of the Marine TAOR in the Da Nang area. After two days of talks, they agreed to a four square mile increase in the Marine area of responsibility, but this still did not include the terrain just south of the airbase. The number of villages in the Da Nang sector under

*DASC provides the tactical air control system required for control and direction of close air support and other tactical air support operations; it is normally collocated with fire support coordination elements. An ASRT is a subordinate operational component of the DASC. These teams vector aircraft to targets and provide ground-controlled precision flight path guidance and weapons release at night and during periods of low ceiling and reduced visibility.

Marine control increased from one to three, and hamlets from three to 15, with a total population of 11,441.

General Krulak was present at the discussion. He recalled that:

Thi was opposed to any patrol or offensive action on our part outside the airfield perimeter. With respect to the area south of the field and on the bank of the Da Nang River, he said, "This is enemy country. You are not ready to operate there."²⁹

Marine operations in the Phu Bai area were also the subject of discussion with Vietnamese authorities. Colonel Wheeler and Lieutenant Colonel Jones held several informal conferences at Hue and Phu Bai with Brigadier General Chuan, the commanding general of the 1st ARVN Division and the Phu Bai Special Sector, concerning the assignment of the Marines and their mission. It was decided that the Vietnamese would be responsible for the defense of the villages bordering the base on the north and east. Within the Marine sector, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines would conduct defensive operations "with emphasis on quick reaction offensive moves" within the TAOR.³⁰ The Marines and South Vietnamese troops of the Phu Bai (Dong Da) Special Sector would establish a combined operations center for the coordination of efforts. Check points along Route 1 in the Marine TAOR were to be manned by ARVN personnel and supported by the Marine battalion.

On 20 April, the Marines began patrol activities beyond their TAORs at Da Nang and Phu Bai, as far as six miles in front of their former positions. These patrols included ARVN troops and Vietnamese civil affairs officers to avoid incidents with Vietnamese villagers. The extended patrolling resulted in the Marines' first fire fights with the VC. On the 22d, a patrol from Company D, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion accompanied by 38 South Vietnamese troops, encountered a Viet Cong force of approximately 105 men near the village of Binh Thai, nine miles southwest of Da Nang. A company from Lieutenant Colonel Bain's battalion was helilifted into the area to reinforce the reconnaissance unit. They pursued the enemy to the south and west, but lost contact and returned to the battalion area. The results of this first engagement were one Viet Cong killed and one Marine slightly wounded. A second engagement occurred two days later when a Marine reconnaissance platoon was attacked on a hilltop 2,000 meters south of Phu Bai by an undetermined number



USMC Photo A184031
Lieutenant Colonel Herbert J. Bain, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines (center left), confers with his operations officer, Captain Gaetano F. Squillace (right), and his forward air controller Captain John W. Garriott, in a VC-dominated hamlet south of Da Nang. The arch under which they are standing was built by the Viet Cong.

of enemy. Two Viet Cong and two Marines were killed.

Very little was known about the enemy. A Marine staff officer commented, "intelligence of what the situation was, was non-existent."³¹ This of course was an exaggeration; the MEB and MACV staffs had some idea of enemy forces in the area. They credited the VC with seven combat units totaling 560 troops within 25 miles of Da Nang; within 50 miles, 14 enemy combat units, ranging from company to regimental size, with a total of 1,480 personnel. What was lacking was knowledge of the day-to-day movements of the Communist forces, their disposition, and their influence upon the people.

General Karch remarked that, from the day of the landing, reports indicated a continuing enemy buildup in the area. Most of this intelligence had been attained from hired agents who were paid ac-



Marine amphibian tractors move across Route 1 after landing at Chu Lai.

Navy Photo 1111761

ording to the significance of their information. Their veracity was highly doubtful at best.

Even with the expansion of the Marine mission, contact with enemy forces remained slight. General Karch noted:

... when we had reached the limit of our Phase II TAOR we still had encountered no VC in strength other than undersized platoons After a few sniper shots were fired at the patrol and [the Marines] moved out to attack, the VC disappeared. Also the only attack . . . at Phu Bai could well have been a mistake . . . or a chance encounter . . . it was broken off immediately after the first exchange of fire.³²

The Marines had accomplished their basic mission, the defense of the Da Nang and Phu Bai bases, but as General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps, observed during a visit to the MEB: "You don't defend a place by sitting on your ditty box."³³

Chu Lai

By the end of April, the days of the 9th MEB in Vietnam were numbered. Throughout the month, the question of American participation in the war preoccupied those in authority. On 20 April, a high-level conference convened at CinCPac headquarters

in Honolulu attended by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, his Assistant Secretary of International Security Affairs, John McNaughton, Ambassador Taylor, Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland, and Admiral Sharp. The conferees reached a consensus that the relatively light Viet Cong activity was the lull before the storm and recommended the additional deployment of 42,000 U.S. servicemen to Vietnam, including 5,000 more Marines. These Marine forces, organized into three reinforced battalions and three jet aircraft squadrons, were to establish another enclave at Chu Lai, 57 miles southeast of Da Nang.³⁴

The Chu Lai coastal plain lies astride the boundary dividing the two southern provinces of I CTZ, Quang Ngai and Quang Tin. A few miles inland and west of the plain are the heavily jungled and extremely rugged Annamite Mountains. Route 1, an all-weather, macadam road, parallels the sea, bisecting the plain. This national highway, stretching from Saigon to the DMZ, connects the area with Da Nang to the northwest and Quang Ngai City, 20 miles to the south.

The selection of Chu Lai as the base for the next increment of Marine forces resulted from an ex-

tended Pentagon debate which lasted over several months concerning the building of an expeditionary airfield south of Da Nang. The proposal for the construction of the expeditionary field originated with General Krulak. Krulak had selected the Chu Lai site on an inspection tour the previous year and gave the future base its name. According to the FMFPac commander, a naval officer accompanying him on the trip remarked that the place looked good, but was not marked on the maps. Krulak replied that the name was "Chu Lai" but later explained: "In order to settle the matter immediately, I had simply given him the Mandarin Chinese characters for my name."³⁵ In any event, Krulak suggested that the Chu Lai airfield be built according to a Marine Corps concept still in its early stages which employed metal runways and taxistrips. The program, called short airfield for tactical support (SATS), had been developed to meet Marine Corps requirements for the rapid construction of short expeditionary airfields, in effect shore-based carrier decks. Although the proposed field at Chu Lai would not qualify as "short," it would make use of SATS components including catapults and arresting gear.*

On 30 March 1965, Secretary McNamara tentatively approved the building of the SATS field at Chu Lai but the final decision, according to General Krulak, was not made until late April after the high-level Honolulu Conference. At this conference, representatives from the U. S. Pacific Air Forces command had made a presentation stating that it would take about 11 months to build a concrete airfield. General Krulak then described the SATS concept after which, Krulak remembered:

[Secretary of Defense] McNamara, in his characteristic bottom line manner, said "how long?" I hesitated for a moment and then said, "25 days." Keith McCutcheon had to live with my estimate.³⁶

* According to Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Goode, who was the 1st MAW engineering officer: "The concept of a short Airfield for Tactical Support (SATS) is for a runway 2,000 to 3,000 feet long by 72 feet wide, with a parallel taxiway and the necessary parking space for aircraft. It was envisioned that the Chu Lai field would be required to be in operation for a longer period of time, and would be required to support many more aircraft; therefore, the design was made accordingly. The final design specified a runway 8,000 feet long by 102 feet wide. Obviously this could no longer be termed a Short Airfield for Tactical Support. It was sometimes facetiously referred to as a LATS—a Long Airfield for Tactical Support." LtCol Charles L. Goode, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

After the McNamara decision of 30 March, Major General Paul J. Fontana, the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Japan, briefed his senior officers about the proposed Chu Lai airfield. He selected the MAG-12 S-1, Major Frank P. Costello, Jr., who had worked with SATS since its inception at Quantico, to be the wing project officer.

On 3 April, Major Costello accompanied General Carl, members of his staff, and the 1st MAW engineering officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Goode, on a reconnaissance of the Chu Lai site. While making their inspection, the Carl party happened upon some markers apparently placed there by a civilian airfield survey team. According to Lieutenant Colonel Denny, Carl's operation officer:

I recall that we . . . were to meet a civilian survey party on the beach at Chu Lai. They didn't show. General Carl found some markers . . . and then because we "had to get on with it" stepped off the SATS field . . .³⁷

Lieutenant Colonel Goode remembered that the Carl party remained on the site for only two hours and, "From this very brief reconnaissance and from the available maps and photographs of the area, the location of the runway and supporting facilities was determined and detailed planning commenced."³⁸

After completing the reconnaissance, General Carl reported to General Westmoreland in Saigon and mentioned the survey markers found at Chu Lai. The MACV Commander replied that he did not know the specifics of the civilian survey and suggested that the selection of the exact location for both the SATS field and a later permanent airfield would require further study.

Lieutenant Colonel Goode and Major Costello returned to Japan where they developed the plans for the operating areas of the airbase. It was determined that approximately 1,400,000 square feet of aluminum matting would be required for the runway, taxiways, and supporting areas.** The end results would be an airfield with an 8,000 by 102 foot runway, a 7,916 by 36 foot parallel taxiway, four 300 by 36 foot cross taxiways, and parking and maintenance facilities for three tactical squadrons.

On 25 April, President Johnson approved the recommendation of the Honolulu Conference to land Marines at Chu Lai for the construction of the airfield

** The 1,400,000 square feet of matting was every plank the Marine Corps had in the Far East. LtCol Frank P. Costello, Jr., Comments on Shulimson, "U.S. Marines in Vietnam, pt 2," dtd 17Feb70 (Vietnam Comment File).

and the establishment of a third Marine enclave in Vietnam. Three days later, the Marine Corps reactivated General Carl's 3d MEB for the second time within three weeks, its headquarters having returned to Okinawa after completing the RLT 3 and BLTs 2/3 and 3/4 deployments. Colonel O'Connor, the 1st MAW chief of staff, recalled that General Carl at first wanted to employ the former 1st Brigade intact, including both the 4th Marines and MAG-13, for the Chu Lai landings. Carl and Colonel Ralph H. "Smoke" Spanjer, the MAG-13 commander, attempted to convince General Fontana, the wing commander, to include MAG-13 as part of the Chu Lai forces. According to O'Connor:

General Fontana listened patiently to the first presentation, but then informed them that, in view of the considerable planning that had taken place before their arrival, MAG-12 at Iwakuni was the group that would deploy. General Carl and Col Spanjer made at least two appeals of this decision . . . Col Spanjer brought in many visual aids explaining his concept of operation of a SATS field at Chu Lai. General Fontana finally tired of the pressure, and told Spanjer very firmly that MAG-12 was in and MAG-13 was out!³⁹*

With this decision made, on 29 April General Carl and his staff flew from Okinawa to the Philippines to join Admiral Wulzen on board the amphibious flagship USS *Estes* (AGC 12). The 3d MEB landing forces for Chu Lai were to consist of Colonel Edward P. Dupras, Jr.'s RLT 4 headquarters, two BLTs, BLT 1/4 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harold D. Fredericks and BLT 2/4 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph R. "Bull" Fisher, and Lieutenant Colonel Don H. Blanchard's 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Wilson's MABS-12 and Commander John M. Bannister's Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 10 were attached to the MEB for the construction of the airfield. The rest of MAG-12 would arrive after the SATS field was completed.

When General Carl and his staff arrived on board the *Estes*, the MEB commander delegated planning

* A former member of MAG-13, Major Gary W. Parker, then a young lieutenant with HMM-161, recalled "Colonel Spanjer in his attempts to persuade the higher echelons of the merits of MAG-13 had a calling card made up which was distributed throughout the wing. In the upper left hand corner it read 'Have MAG-Will Travel.' at the bottom right hand corner it said 'Wire Smoke-Futema.'" Maj Gary W. Parker, Comments on draft MS, dtd 14Jan77 (Vietnam Comment File).

for the landing to his chief of staff, Colonel Norman R. Nickerson. According to Nickerson, General Carl told him "to run the show and to report to him daily the progress of planning for the Chu Lai operation." Colonel Nickerson stated that despite the fact that time was short and the staff was small, and composed of "officers that he had not previously known, the Chu Lai Operation Plan/Order was completed on schedule."⁴⁰

The initial planning concept for the MEB was based on an opposed landing. According to the intelligence available to the planners, the VC operated in strength throughout the Chu Lai area, with approximately 500 Viet Cong living in the local villages and hamlets. The sector included a Communist resupply route from the sea to the VC Do Xa base area, 50 miles to the west. It was estimated that the enemy could mass 2,000 troops in 24 hours and could reinforce with another 2,000 men within 72 hours.

The plan called for RLT 4 to land BLTs 2/4 and 1/4, minus two companies, across the beach; two BLT 1/4 companies would make a helicopter assault of an area inland from the beach. The 3d Reconnaissance Battalion was to follow the two assault battalions across the beach. The planners scheduled a traditional prelanding air and naval bombardment to isolate the beach area. They also planned that the 2d ARVN Division would secure the outer perimeter for an extended period of time.

General Westmoreland was dubious about the landing concept. He believed that two infantry battalions, even if reinforced by a reconnaissance battalion, were an inadequate force to guarantee the permanent defense of Chu Lai. The MACV commander was of the opinion that the 2d ARVN Division, because of its other responsibilities, could not provide adequate perimeter defense for more than a few days. He strongly urged that an additional Marine infantry battalion be added to the Marine brigade. On the other hand, Westmoreland considered the possibility of the enemy opposing the landing to be extremely remote and recommended that the naval and air bombardment be eliminated, although the ships and planes should remain on station. He declared that elements of the 2d ARVN Division would secure the landing site.

General Westmoreland radioed General Collins requesting a meeting in Saigon to iron out the differences. On 30 April, Generals Collins and Fontana departed for Saigon, stopping off at Subic Bay to



USMC Photo A184206

South Vietnamese troops secure the Chu Lai area. Their U.S. Army advisors have made a sign to greet the Marines.

confer with General Carl and Admiral Wulzen, the task force commander. General Throckmorton, Deputy ComUSMACV, chaired the conference held in Saigon on 1 and 2 May. He declared that there were three assumptions that everyone present had to accept: the landing would be unopposed; the area at Chu Lai would have been cleared; and that there would be some civilians in the general area of the landing. An agreement among all the participants was finally reached. A third battalion, BLT 3/3, was added to the 3d MEB to be brought ashore after the initial landing was completed. The prelanding air strikes and naval shore bombardment were changed to planned on-call missions to be used only if the enemy opposed the landing. Marine Aircraft Group 16 would provide limited fixed-wing and helicopter support; Navy Task Force 77 aircraft would fly cover for the Marines; and the U.S. 2d Air Division would be available for additional support. The conferrees agreed to postpone the landing until 7 May to allow for further coordination with the Vietnamese authorities.⁴¹

After the Saigon meeting was over, Generals Collins and Fontana departed for Da Nang. Colonel

Hardy Hay, the 3d Marine Division operations officer, recalled:

The coverage given the Saigon meeting for the Chu Lai landings was really the major springboard for General Collins and I to remain in Da Nang . . . Up to this point we had, since leaving Okinawa, sort of ignored sending movement reports.⁴²

From another vantage point, Colonel O'Connor, the 1st MAW chief of staff, remembered:

I was aware of the very poor high level command communications. Reports of enemy activity in the Chu Lai area had generated a strong inclination on the part of the sea-based forces to make a conventional preparation of the objective area, in anticipation of an opposed landing.

O'Connor remarked further:

The air was full of messages about enemy capabilities, friendly plans, and schedules of coordinating meetings at Saigon, Okinawa, Subic Bay and Da Nang. Finally, it was apparent that message traffic was completely out of phase with reality, and the two-day postponement of the landing was invoked to prevent the disaster of an amphibious task force firing on friendly forces in the objective area.⁴³

On 3 May, the *Estes* rendezvoused with the rest of the amphibious task force off the coast of South Vietnam and then proceeded to the vicinity of Da Nang where Admiral Wulzen and General Carl met with General Collins to discuss the landing. At the

end of these talks, the commander set H-Hour for the amphibious portion of the operation at 0800, 7 May.

Units from the ARVN 2d Division which had secured the Chu Lai area were joined on 6 May by Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from Da Nang to provide additional beach security. All was ready and the U.S. Army advisors with the ARVN had even prepared their own sign to greet the landing force, "Ahoy Marines: Welcome Aboard, Area Secured." Colonel Edward Cook, who at the time was General Collins' G-2, in 1976 wrote:

Prior to the landing, I was at General Lam's [Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam] headquarters for his briefing on the coordination required between units from his ARVN 2d Division and the Landing Force. I asked him to show me specifically where his units would be and how they would phase their withdrawal as our landing force advanced. He called for a piece of overlay paper, put it over a map and drew a series of phase lines. When he was completed with the clear, concise, and explicit overlay, he gave it to me and said, "Just like they do it at Quantico."⁴⁴

Early on the morning of the 7th, the ships of the task force arrived at the transport area off Chu Lai. As planned, at 0800, BLT 1/4 Companies C and D and BLT 2/4 began landing over RED Beach. After crossing the beach, the two companies of the 1st Battalion moved to Landing Zone ROBIN, approximately three miles from the waterline and overlooking Route 1. They quickly secured the LZ and then the helicopters of HMM-161, Lieutenant Colonel Gene W. Morrison commanding, flew in the battalion's remaining two companies from the USS *Princeton*.^{*} The troops met no resistance and occupied their planned objectives. The only casualties were four Marines suffering from the heat and humidity. The scene on the beach was reminiscent of the previous landings the Marines had made in Vietnam. In addition to the usual number of Vietnamese flower maidens and members of the press



Navy Photo 1111513

Troops from the 4th Marines move inland across the soft Chu Lai sand under a welcoming Vietnamese banner. Marine helicopters are seen flying overhead.

corps, Generals Thi, Throckmorton, and Collins were on hand to greet the first waves of troops. The Marines were too busy to pay much attention to the festivities.

By the end of the first day, Colonel Dupras had established his headquarters ashore; his infantry battalions and supporting arms were all in place. The 4th Marines' defensive perimeter extended in an irregular arc from the Ky Ha Peninsula in the north, to the high ground in the west, and from there seaward to a point three miles south of RED Beach. The southern flank was screened by the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion.

The landing of troops and establishment of the defensive lines proved to be the easiest part of the entire operation. The movement of supplies across the beach was a frustrating experience. General Krulak described the Chu Lai Beach area "as great a challenge as any foreshore that I have ever seen. The sand is of powdered sugar consistency and no wheeled vehicle can negotiate it with success."⁴⁵ Although reducing tire pressure provided some traction, a shortage of beach matting and the fine sand forced the Marines to use tracked vehicles to move material inland. Colonel William M. Graham, Jr., at the time the 3d Marine Division engineering officer, related that a:

... civilian soil consultant was hired to sample the sand

^{*} HMM-161 supported the RLT-4 landing from the *Princeton* until 7 May. On that day, the Navy changed amphibious assault ships (LPHs), substituting the *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) for the *Princeton*. Morrison's squadron moved to the *Iwo Jima* which remained positioned off the Chu Lai coast until 12 June. During that period, the squadron provided helicopter support for Colonel Dupras' Marines. On 13 June, the ship moved to a position off the coast from Phu Bai where the squadron unloaded, moved to the Phu Bai airstrip, was placed under the operational control of MAG-16, and began to fly in support of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.