

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

AN EXPANDING WAR

1966



A Marine from Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, holds his rifle chest-high as he crosses a stream. The battalion is moving to link up with the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, in Helicopter Valley, in July 1966.

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

AN EXPANDING WAR

1966

by

Jack Shulimson



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
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Foreword

This is the third volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This particular volume details the continued buildup in 1966 of the III Marine Amphibious Force in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps, and the accelerated tempo of fighting during the year. The result was an "expanding war."

The III Marine Amphibious Force had established three enclaves in I Corps during 1965. Employing what they believed was a balanced strategy—base defense, offensive operations, and pacification—the Marines planned to consolidate their base areas in 1966. At the beginning of 1966, the 1st Marine Division reinforced the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam. By the end of the year, the III Marine Amphibious Force had nearly doubled in size. Two separate events, however, were to dash the high hopes held by the Marines in 1966. An internal political crisis in the spring halted the Marine pacification campaign south of the large Da Nang Airbase. In July, the North Vietnamese Army launched an incursion through the Demilitarized Zone and Marines went north to counter the enemy thrust. By December 1966, Marine units were stretched thin along the 265-mile length of I Corps. As one Marine commander observed, "too much real estate—do not have enough men."

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

The author, Mr. Jack Shulimson, is the senior Vietnam historian in the History and Museums Division. He has been with the division since 1964 and is the author of several earlier classified histories and co-author of *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965: The Landing and the Buildup*. Mr. Shulimson has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Buffalo and a master of arts in history from the University of Michigan. He is at present a candidate for a doctoral degree in American studies at the University of Maryland.



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

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit monthly command chronologies, Marine Corps messages and journal files, the Oral History Collection of the History and Museums Division, comment files of the division, and previously classified studies prepared by members of the division. Especially useful in the latter category were Captain Moyers S. Shore III, "Marines in Vietnam, January-June 1966," and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody and Major Thomas E. Donnelly, "Introduction of North Vietnamese Regulars," parts III and IV of a then-projected single-volume history of the war. Two other former members of the division, Major Jack K. Ringler and Mr. George W. Garand, worked on preliminary drafts covering the 1966 period.

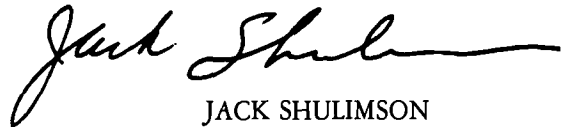
The author has supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 135 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events depicted in the history, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of all those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those ranks held by the individual in 1966.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, especially two former members, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers and Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Access to Marine Corps documents has been facilitated by Mrs. Joyce Bonnett and her assistant, Mrs. Linda Benedict, of the division's Archives Section. Miss Evelyn Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Pat Morgan, have been most helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Mrs. Gabrielle M. Santelli, and her successor, Mr. Danny J. Crawford, made its files available and answered numerous queries cheerfully and professionally. Gunnery Sergeant William K. Judge and Mrs. Regina Strother of the Center's former Still Photo Depository, now a part of the Defense Audio Visual Agency, assisted in photographic research. The Head, Oral Histories Section, Mr. Benis M. Frank, was equally supportive in making his collection available.

Mrs. Vivian A. Lyon and Miss Faye A. Grant typed numerous card entries for the Index, and Major Edward F. Wells provided excellent assistance to the author in organizing it.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of Publications Production Section, and his predecessor, Mr. Paul D. Johnston, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Maps were produced by Staff Sergeant Jerry L. Jakes and Mr. Richard A. Hillman. Mr. Hillman also did the design and layout of the book. The manuscript was typeset first, for the comment edition, by Corporal Paul W. Gibson. Final typesetting was accomplished by Corporals Gibson and Joseph J. Hynes, with Miss Catherine A. Stoll contributing significant technical expertise, and assistance in final stages from Lance Corporal Mark J. Zigante.

Special thanks are due Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, who established the guidelines for the Vietnam series and made available his personal notebooks for 1966 when he commanded the 9th Marines; Colonel John E. Greenwood, former Deputy Director for Marine Corps History, who closely supervised the comment edition and gave wise counsel; his successor, Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., who pushed the project to completion; and Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who provided me with the benefit of his long experience in writing Marine Corps history, encouragement when it was needed, and general editorial direction. I am indebted to my colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, who freely exchanged information and made documents available for my examination. I must express my gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and insight available only to those who took part in the events. Finally, however, the author is responsible for the contents of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jack Shulimson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

JACK SHULIMSON

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PART I
THE MARINE BASE AREAS
IN EARLY 1966

CHAPTER 1

A Larger Force for a Growing War, III MAF in January 1966

*III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs—Command Relations—Planned Deployment of the
1st Marine Division—The Enemy Buildup—The Marine Counterinsurgency War Versus the MACV
Perspective—Marine Mission and Future Plans*

III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs

The III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) began 1966 with reason for optimism. From its origin as the 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) in March of 1965, III MAF had developed into a potent combined arms force consisting of the reinforced 3d Marine Division, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and supporting components. Major General Lewis W. Walt, the burly and much decorated III MAF commanding general, now had more than 41,000 men under his command.

The Marines were located in the northernmost of South Vietnam's four military regions, I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). To the north the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), immediately north and south of the Ben Hai River, separated North and South Vietnam. Bordered by Laos to the west, the South China Sea to the east, and II Corps Tactical Zone (II CTZ) to the south, I Corps extended 265 miles from north to south and varied in width from 30 to 70 miles east to west, encompassing 10,000 square miles.

The heavily forested Annamite mountain chain dominated western I Corps. East of the Annamites, the terrain gradually descended into densely vegetated hill masses, interlaced by river valleys and stream beds. A rich alluvial coastal plain characterized eastern I Corps, with occasional ridges, running from the mountains to the sea, compartmentalizing the region.

I Corps was not only a military and political division, but also a significant cultural and economic area. Its five provinces, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai, contained 2.6 million people. Two of South Vietnam's major cities were located in I Corps: Hue, the ancient imperial and cultural capital of Vietnam, and Da Nang, formerly called Tourane by the French, a large seaport, second in size only to Saigon. The

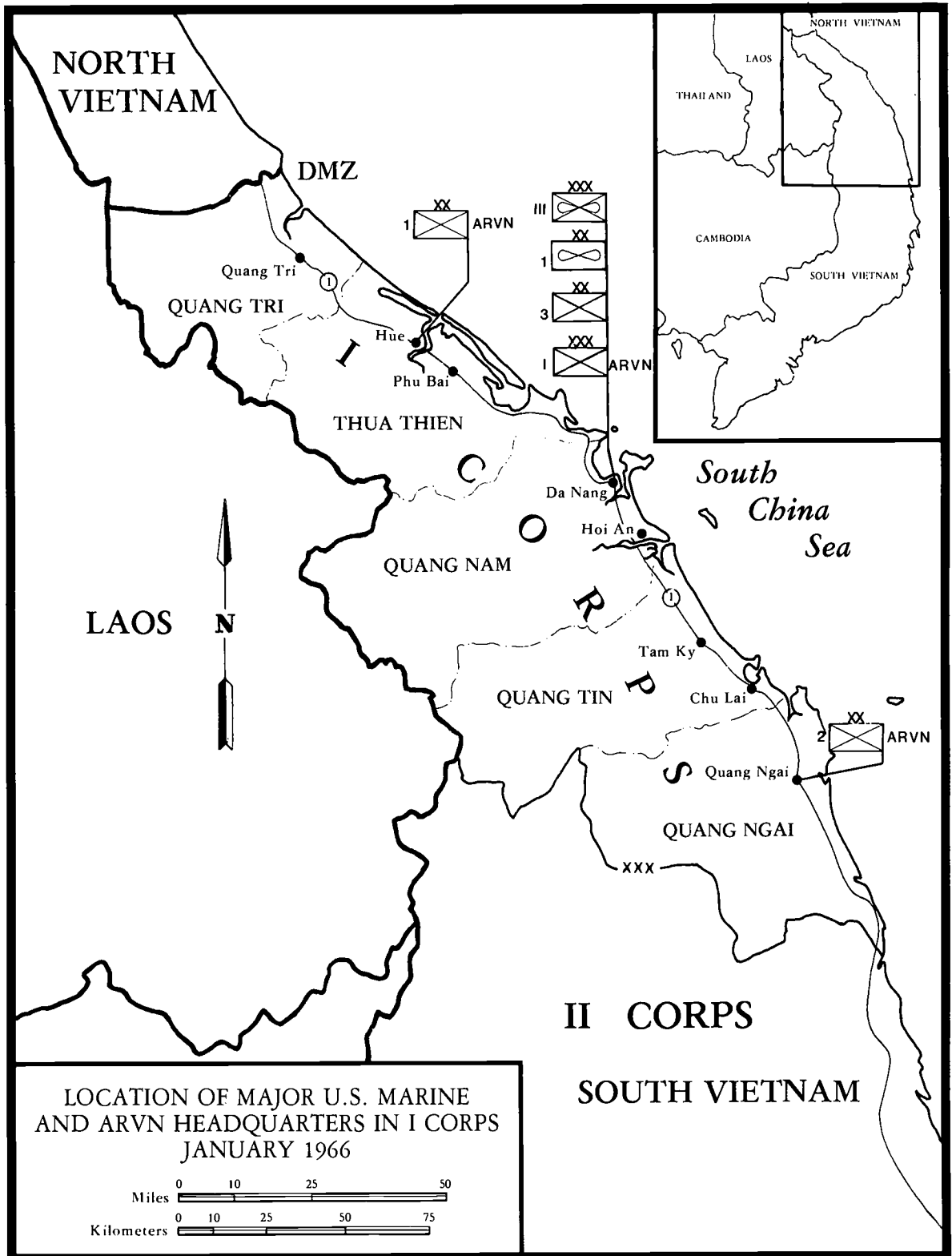
bulk of the population lived in the coastal region and fertile river valleys where most made their living as rice farmers or fishermen.

In 1966, two Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) divisions were in I Corps. The 1st ARVN Division, with its headquarters at Hue, was responsible for the two northern provinces of Thua Thien and Quang Tri. In southern I Corps, the ARVN 2d Division, headquartered at Quang Ngai City, was deployed in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. An independent regiment, the ARVN 51st, protected the approaches to Da Nang in Quang Nam Province.

With the deterioration of South Vietnamese Government control in the spring of 1965 and subsequent American intervention, the 9th MEB established an eight-square-mile base at the Da Nang Airfield. By January 1966, Marine forces, now III MAF, were operating from three enclaves in I Corps which contained 800 square miles and held over 400,000 South Vietnamese civilians. The large Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) consisted of more than 530 square miles.* Over a quarter of a million South Vietnamese lived within its limits, largely in the fertile coastal plain between the air base and the junction of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers.

Fifty miles south of Da Nang along the coast was the Marines' second largest base, Chu Lai. By the

*According to present U.S. military usage, a TAOR is, "A defined area of land for which responsibility is specifically assigned to the commander of the area as a measure for control of assigned forces and coordination of support." See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, JCS Pub 1 (Washington, 3Jan72), p. 295. Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, who commanded Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 during 1965 and early 1966, emphasized that when his unit arrived in Vietnam in August 1965 the term TAOR referred to much more than tactical operations. "It seemed to imply the Civic Action Program, pacification, charitable works and many other human kindnesses. . . ." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).





Marine Corps Photo A186662

The American and South Vietnamese flags fly in front of the 3d Marine Division Headquarters at Da Nang. This massive bunkered structure reinforced by timbers and concrete was indicative of the growing Marine presence in I Corps.

beginning of 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR contained 205 square miles of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces and over 100,000 persons, who lived in the numerous fishing and farming hamlets in the area.

Phu Bai in Thua Thien Province, the third Marine base, was approximately 35 miles northwest of Da Nang and eight miles southeast of Hue. The Phu Bai TAOR was the smallest of the three, only 76 square miles in area with 36,000 persons living in the six villages surrounding the small airstrip there.

Da Nang, the central and largest of the three bases, was the site of the headquarters of III MAF, the 3d Marine Division, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, with a total of six infantry battalions, were also in the Da Nang TAOR. An artillery regiment,

the 12th Marines, which had its headquarters and two battalions at Da Nang, supported the infantry.

The rest of the 3d Division was divided proportionately between the other two bases. Two regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, consisting of five infantry battalions supported by a two-battalion artillery group, were at Chu Lai. At Phu Bai, the Marines positioned an infantry battalion, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by an artillery battalion, the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, both under the operational control of the 3d Marines at Da Nang.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing also was widely dispersed. One fixed-wing group, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11, was based at Da Nang and another, MAG-12, at Chu Lai. The Marine



Marine Corps Photo A194585

MajGen Lewis W. Walt, Commanding General, III MAF (left), pins the second star on his newly promoted deputy, MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon. Gen McCutcheon is also the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam.

helicopter groups were deployed in the same manner; MAG-16 was stationed at the Marble Mountain Air Facility in the Da Nang enclave, and MAG-36 was located at the Ky Ha Air Facility in the Chu Lai TAOR. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163 from MAG-16 was assigned to Phu Bai, while still another MAG-36 squadron, HMM-363, was at Qui Nhon in II Corps under the operational control of the U.S. Army command, Field Force, Vietnam.

General Walt was the commanding general of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division. Walt, an all-conference guard in football at Colorado State University and an honors graduate of the ROTC unit, accepted a Marine commission upon his graduation in 1936. As a member of the 1st Raider Battalion on Guadalcanal during World War II, he earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart as well as a battlefield promotion to lieutenant colonel. Later in the war, he was awarded two Navy Crosses, one at Cape Gloucester, where a key terrain objective became known as "Walt's Ridge," and the second at Peleliu, which also had its "Walt's Ridge." During the Korean War, he commanded the 5th Marines in 1952-53 and then became the G-3 of the 1st Marine Division. On 4 June 1965, as the junior major general of the Marine Corps, General Walt assumed command of III MAF.¹

Major General Keith B. McCutcheon, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, was also the III MAF deputy commander.* McCutcheon, a slight, deceptively soft-spoken man, had had a brilliant, innovative career in Marine aviation. He played a leading role in the development of Marine close air support doctrine during World War II and in the postwar development of helicopter tactics. During the Korean War, he commanded HMR-161, the Marine helicopter squadron which supported the 1st Marine Division. Prior to assuming command of the 1st MAF in May 1965, McCutcheon had served as the operations officer on the staff of Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific Command (CinCPac), who was responsible for all U.S. forces in the Pacific, including Vietnam.²

To help him with the widely scattered forces, logistics, and construction effort, General Walt had two assistant division commanders in the 3d Marine Division. Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt coordinated activities at Chu Lai, while Brigadier General Lowell E. English assisted Walt at Da Nang. This arrangement lasted until mid-March, when Walt was relieved of his direct responsibility for the 3d Marine Division.**

Command Relations

Command relations in the Vietnam War were complicated by the very nature of the war and the way the United States entered the conflict. Starting with a strength of a few thousand when it was established on 8 February 1962, the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) was committed to the training of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) to fight a counterinsurgency war. As the dimensions of the struggle increased through the succeeding years, the American involvement correspondingly expanded. In 1965, the first major U.S. combat units deployed to Viet-

*At the beginning of 1966, General McCutcheon was still a brigadier general. He received his second star in a formal promotion ceremony at Da Nang on 22 January. See 1st MAF ComdC, Jan66.

**See Chapter 4 for the restructuring of the III MAF command relations in March.

nam and by the beginning of 1966, MACV totaled nearly 185,000 men.

General William C. Westmoreland, a former airborne commander and West Point superintendent, who had assumed command of MACV in June 1964, combined several command functions in his person. He not only headed the military advisory effort to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, but also was a subordinate unified commander under CinCPac. In this latter capacity, he had operational control of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, including III MAF, Field Force, Vietnam, and the U.S. Air Force 2d Air Division, and was responsible for the overall U.S. military conduct of the war, with the exception of the bombing of North Vietnam and the limited air and air-ground operations in Laos. Admiral Sharp retained personal direction of the air campaign in the north while General Westmoreland shared responsibility with the U.S. Ambassador in Laos for the U.S. operations conducted in that country.³ Westmoreland also functioned as the Army component commander and as such was the Commanding General, U.S. Army, Vietnam, the Army's logistic, administrative, and support command within South Vietnam.*

General Walt's command responsibilities were almost as diverse as General Westmoreland's. Not only was he commander of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division, he was also ComUSMACV's Naval Component Commander, Vietnam (NCC), having under his operational control the Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (Seabees) in I Corps. In his role as NCC, Walt was concerned with common item supply for U.S. forces in I Corps, base construction in the northern provinces, and the running of all ports, beaches, and depots from Quang Ngai Province in southern I Corps to the DMZ. As the commander of both III MAF and the Naval Component,

General Walt served directly under the MACV commander. For purely Marine administrative and Marine logistic considerations, however, he reported to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (CGFMFPac), Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak.

As NCC, with operational control of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, Walt had a direct link to the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CinCPacFlt), Admiral Roy L. Johnson. This occurred because Johnson retained command of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, exercising it through Vice Admiral Edwin B. Hooper, Commander, Service Force, Pacific Fleet. General Walt also held one other position that was distinct and separate from his responsibilities as CG III MAF. Since August 1965, he had been the Senior U.S. Advisor for I Corps and directed the U.S. advisory effort in the five northern provinces. Thus, in one capacity or another, General Walt directed the activity of nearly all U.S. forces in I Corps.**

Political considerations limited the authority of the U.S. military in Vietnam. General Westmoreland did not have command of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, and his military advisory functions often overlapped those of the U.S. civilian assistance program under the U.S. Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who then was serving his second tour in that position. Westmoreland's relationship with both the South Vietnamese and the U.S. Embassy was one of close consultation and coordination. He was a member of the U.S. Mission Council, chaired by Ambassador Lodge, which developed and coordinated U.S. policy within South Vietnam. Moreover, General Westmoreland was the senior

*According to U.S. military doctrine, "With the exception of the commander of a unified command and members of his joint staff, the senior officer of each Service assigned to a unified command and qualified for command by the regulations of his own Service is the commander of the component of his Service. . . ." JCS, *Unified Action Armed Forces* (UNAAF), JCS Pub. 2 (Washington, D.C., Nov59), p. 40. As a subordinate unified commander, General Westmoreland could have designated another Army general to head the Army component command, but decided to retain responsibility for this function in his own person.

**Vice Admiral Hooper commented that these complex command relations were not "widely understood. Yet from them stem much of the effectiveness and flexibility of the Navy and Marine Forces. The exercise of responsibility and authority up the Navy's chain of command was one of the secrets of the notable success of the logistic support provided by the Navy." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Hugh M. Elwood, who became assistant wing commander of the 1st MAW in April 1966, was less sanguine about command relations, remarking that "CGFMFPac, in his Op Order, applied the term 'Command less OpCon' to III MAF. This made command relations sticky indeed since it gave CG III MAF two masters. . . ." LtGen Hugh M. Elwood, Comments on draft MS, dtd 4Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, which according to the former MACV commander, gave him "defacto control over the broad scope of operations."⁴

General Walt developed similar procedures with the South Vietnamese authorities and U.S. civilian agencies in I Corps. He and the Regional Director of the U.S. Operation Mission (USOM) in the I Corps Sector, Marcus J. Gordon, initiated the organization of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. The council consisted of senior representatives from the Marine command, the Navy, the U.S. civilian assistance program, and the Vietnamese Government who met once a month under the chairmanship of General McCutcheon. It had no command responsibility, but under its auspices the various American and South Vietnamese civilian and military authorities could meet, discuss their programs, coordinate policy, and smooth out misunderstandings.*

As significant as the development of the Council, and perhaps even more so, was the close relationship that General Walt established with the volatile I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi. Thi, who as a paratroop brigade commander had led an abortive coup against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime as early as 1960, played a large role in the inner circle of "young Turk" military commanders who dominated South Vietnamese politics following the fall of Diem in 1963. As I Corps commander, Thi controlled both the South Vietnamese civilian and military apparatus in I Corps. Although not openly defiant of Saigon, he carefully selected the directives which he chose to obey. In the South Vietnamese capital, one often heard rumors that Thi was about to lead a coup against the flamboyant Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and the more reticent General Nguyen Van Thieu, who, respectively, as the Commissioner in Charge of the Executive Branch and the Chairman of the Joint Directorate, the official name for the ruling military junta, governed South Vietnam.⁵

General Walt did not concern himself with the machinations of Vietnamese politics, but rather with

the establishment of a working partnership with General Thi. The Marine general respected the courage and military competence of the Vietnamese I Corps commander and recognized that Thi also had political responsibilities. Walt later commented, "We sometimes find that this political purpose and military purpose get on collision courses, but always to date we [Thi and himself] have been able to sit down and talk this out." Acknowledging that Thi was an ambitious man, Walt nevertheless believed that the Vietnamese general's ambition lay in making I Corps an example for the rest of the country.⁶

During 1966, the existing command relations were to become even more complex as the war, and the American role in it, expanded. As hope for any peaceful solution to the conflict diminished and the American "peace" offensive, inaugurated in late 1965 by a temporary suspension of the bombing of the north, proved futile, the war increased in intensity and dimension. With the accelerated arrival of U.S. combat forces, MACV planned further alterations of its component commands. The one that directly affected the Marine Corps was the proposed change in the NCC.

Both General Westmoreland and Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, commander of the Naval Advisory Group, believed that the increased naval participation in the war required a naval component commander to be in Saigon, directly under COMUSMACV. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the forceful Commandant of the Marine Corps, who was in Vietnam on an inspection trip in January, met with General Westmoreland and Admiral Ward in Saigon and received their assurances that an independent NCC would not alter command relations between MACV and III MAF. Although agreeing to the need for a large naval role in Vietnam, Greene suggested that the proposal receive further study in order to determine its possible ramifications. When he asked General Walt for his opinion a few days after the Saigon meeting, the latter replied that he had no objection to the transfer of his NCC responsibility to the Navy, as long as Marines had a "strong representation on the policy and working level."⁷

*Colonel Sumner A. Vale observed that whatever the successes of the Joint Coordinating Council it did not create a "unity of effort"—U.S. and Vietnamese, civil and military—comparable to

what the British found essential for counterinsurgency operations in Malaya. Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 18Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Planned Deployment of the 1st Marine Division

With the continuing buildup of U.S. forces, increasing responsibility was spread among the various component services of MACV. In late 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara recommended to President Lyndon B. Johnson the doubling of U.S. forces in Vietnam during the new year. For the Marine Corps, this involved the further deployment of both ground and air units to Vietnam and the establishment of a force structure for III MAF consisting of 18 infantry battalions, 21 aviation squadrons, and other supporting units, totaling approximately 70,000 troops.⁸

The major deployment for the Marines during the first half of the year was to be the movement of the 1st Marine Division from Okinawa to Vietnam. Major General Lewis J. "Jeff" Fields, the division commander, an experienced artillery and staff officer who had served with the 11th Marines during both World War II and Korea, had transferred the headquarters of the division from Camp Pendleton, California, to Camp Courtney, Okinawa, in August 1965. He held a rear echelon, including the 5th Marines, at Pendleton under his assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles. Even before the establishment of the division forward headquarters at Courtney, one of its regiments, the 7th Marines, sailed from Okinawa for Vietnam with its 1st Battalion. The other two battalions had already departed Okinawa; the 2d Battalion was inserted at Qui Nhon in II Corps and the 3d Battalion became the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) battalion. By the end of the year, all three 7th Marines battalions and a supporting artillery battalion from the 11th Marines were at Chu Lai. Two other infantry battalions from the division were also in Vietnam at this time, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang and the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. These two battalions represented no further reinforcement for III MAF, but were "in country" as a result of an FMFPac intratheater rotation system. Under this policy, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rotated from Vietnam with the former battalion slated to become the SLF with the Seventh Fleet and the latter returned to Okinawa for rest and refitting.⁹

Under the new deployment authorized by the President, the division headquarters, the regimental

headquarters of the 1st, 5th and 11th Marines, the remaining infantry and artillery battalions, and division support elements were scheduled to reinforce III MAF. Lieutenant Colonel Roy E. Moss, the 1st Marine Division embarkation officer, related that he learned about the decision at a December conference at FMFPac Headquarters in Honolulu at which a tentative schedule for moving the division to Vietnam was drawn up. Moss arrived back on Okinawa at 0200, the morning of 27 December and five hours later briefed General Fields. According to Moss, the general asked, "Roy, how do we get all of our units moved to Vietnam . . . ?" Moss replied that the tentative schedule called for 30 ships, staggered over a two and a half month period, to accomplish the mission. General Fields approved and sent Moss to Subic Bay in the Philippines to discuss the matter with representatives of Task Force 76, the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force. At the U.S. Naval Base at Subic, the Navy agreed that with "judicious scheduling [it] could meet the needs of the division."¹⁰

The Enemy Buildup

The American buildup did not occur in a vacuum, but because of the South Vietnamese inability to cope with the increase in strength of the Communist-led forces within South Vietnam. Allied intelligence estimates of the total enemy strength in South Vietnam had risen from a possible 138,000 in March 1965 to over 226,000 men by the end of the year. MACV believed that these forces consisted of more than 110,000 guerrillas, 39,000 political cadre, 18,000 combat support troops, and approximately 70,000 men organized in regular formations, including 19 regiments ranging from 2,000 to 2,500 men in strength. Seven of these regiments were positively identified as North Vietnamese.¹¹

Although Communist North Vietnam had long provided the insurgency in the south with leadership, inspiration, and logistic support, it was not until late 1964 that regular North Vietnamese Army [NVA] units began to infiltrate into South Vietnam, and it was not until the autumn of 1965 that the first major encounter between allied forces and North Vietnamese troops occurred. In October, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) defeated elements of two NVA regiments, the 32d and 33d, during the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in the II Corps Central Highlands. The following month, the South Viet-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

North Vietnamese Army troops parade in Hanoi. By the beginning of 1966, North Vietnamese regulars were infiltrating into South Vietnam at the rate of 12 battalions per month.

name 37th Ranger Battalion repulsed the NVA 18th Regiment's attack of the Thach Tru outpost, 16 miles south of Quang Ngai City. Despite the allied victories in these two engagements, the growing North Vietnamese presence in the south alarmed both the South Vietnamese and American commands. General Westmoreland later stated that the North Vietnamese were infiltrating at the rate of 12 battalions a month at the end of the year and more than 26,000 NVA soldiers had come south during 1965.^{12*}

Larger enemy formations continued to appear in South Vietnam in 1966, especially in the Central Highlands, southern I Corps, and the border region between I Corps and II Corps. By early 1966, three

North Vietnamese divisions were operating in these areas: the 1st NVA Division, consisting of the 33d, 32d, and 66th NVA Regiments, was in the Central Highland provinces of Pleiku and Kontum; the 2d NVA Division, consisting of the 21st NVA, 3d NVA and 1st Viet Cong (VC) Regiments, was in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces; and the 3d NVA Division, consisting of the 18th NVA, 22d NVA, and 2d VC Regiments, was in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces. The allies also received reports of a substantial North Vietnamese unit buildup just north of the DMZ.

The Communists made several administrative changes in their command and control organization which reflected the increasing North Vietnamese role in the war, especially in northern South Vietnam. Since 1961, the headquarters of *Military Region 5 (MR-5)*, which extended from Quang Tri Province in the north to Dar Loc and Khanh Hoa Provinces in the south, had been responsible for both military operations and the political ad-

*U.S. Air Force historians commented that Rand Corporation analysts in a 1968 study of infiltration raised the estimate of North Vietnamese moving into South Vietnam during 1965 to 36,000 personnel, "roughly a three-fold increase over the total for 1964." Office of Air Force History, Comments on draft MS, dtd 28Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

ministrative process in this sector. Although MR-5 received both military and political direction from North Vietnam, the headquarters was ostensibly subordinate to the *Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN)*, the Viet Cong military high command and politburo. The North Vietnamese partially discarded the facade of subordination to COSVN when they established two new commands. In the Central Highland provinces of Kontum, Dar Loc, and Pleiku, they formed the *B-3 Front* which was directly under North Vietnamese military control, while in I Corps, they detached the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from *Military Region 5*. These two provinces then became the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region* under the direct control of *Military Region 4*, the administrative and military subdivision for southern North Vietnam.

*The Marine Counter guerrilla War
Versus the MACV Perspective*

Despite the buildup of enemy main force units and North Vietnamese intervention, the major concern of the Marine command in I Corps was with the tightly knit VC political and guerrilla substructure. Of the 30,000 estimated Viet Cong and NVA in I Corps, approximately half were believed to be irregulars, subordinate to local village and hamlet level VC organizations. At Da Nang, for example, III MAF estimated no more than 2,000 main force and local force VC troops to be within a 25-mile radius of the airbase, yet the Communist political and guerrilla apparatus permeated the southern portion of the TAOR.¹³ General Walt estimated that this VC local "infrastructure" controlled one-third of the population living in I Corps and influenced, largely through terror, still another third of the populace.¹⁴

Confronted with this situation, the Marines had emphasized small-unit counter guerrilla tactics through 1965 rather than multibattalion operations against the enemy's main force units. Operation Starlite, south of Chu Lai in August, and Operation Harvest Moon, in the Que Son Valley along the border between Quang Nam and Quang Tin in December were notable exceptions, but the emphasis was on pacification. General Walt stressed that the objective of the war was to win the loyalty of the populace to the government, and the only way to

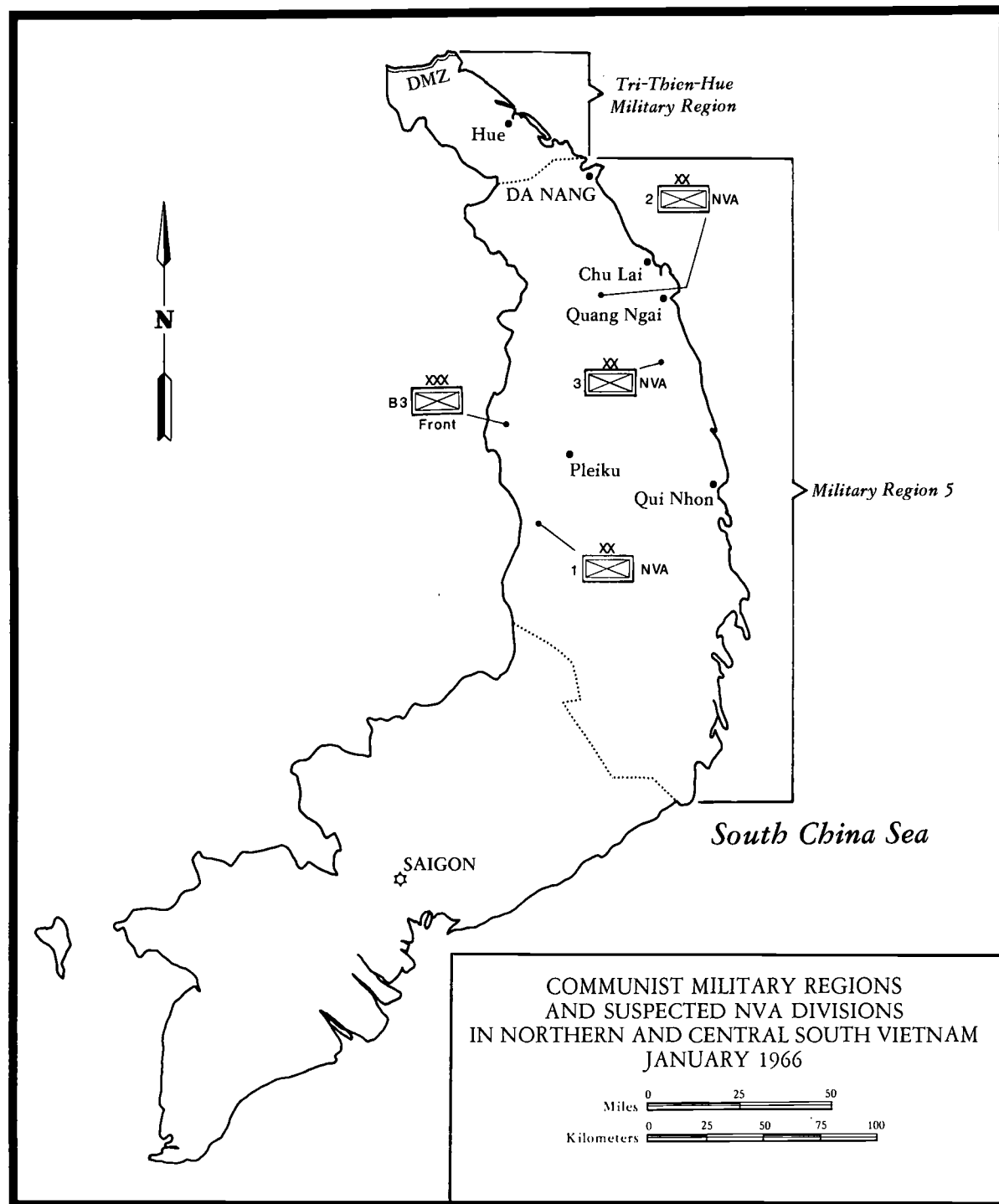


Marine Corps Historical Collection
General Nguyen Chi Tranh, who in 1966 was Commander-in-Chief, "Liberation Army of South Vietnam," and Chief of the Viet Cong Central Office for South Vietnam, is seen reading a book in his South Vietnam headquarters. Tranh was also a general in the North Vietnamese Army and a member of that government's National Defense Council.

obtain this objective was to eradicate the Viet Cong in the villages and hamlets. This was what the Marines sought to do. In describing this pacification effort, one former Marine staff officer, Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., the 3d Marine Division G-2 in January 1966, later wrote that:

... to reassure the villagers that they were safe, supported and protected, U.S. Marines undertook a most demanding pattern of intensive, multiple, day-and-night, tedious patrol activity. The incredible total of man-hours devoted to this end and the sincere, compassionate, and dedicated manner in which thousands of Marines did their duty were never understood or appreciated by outsiders.¹⁵

General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, was a strong advocate of the III MAF concept of operations. Known since his Naval Academy days as the "Brute," partially as a jesting reference to his small stature, but also in deference to his commanding and forthright personality, Krulak had served earlier



as a special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs during the Kennedy administration. According to General Krulak, Admiral Sharp used him as a personal advisor "on *all* Marine matters," and he [Krulak] sought to persuade:

CinCPac . . . that there was no virtue at all in seeking out the NVA in the mountains and jungle; that so long as they stayed there they were a threat to nobody, that our efforts should be addressed to the rich, populous lowlands. . . .¹⁶

Krulak argued:

It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among these mountains.¹⁷

General Westmoreland had a different perspective. He contended that the introduction of North Vietnamese Army units into the south created an entirely new situation. The MACV commander's opinion was that the Communists wanted to develop multidivision forces in relatively secure base areas, while at the same time continuing extensive guerrilla action to tie down allied forces. His intelligence staff section stated that the enemy planned to mount major offensives in 1966 in the provinces northwest of Saigon and in the Central Highlands. According to MACV, the enemy hoped to achieve control of the Pleiku-Quy Nhon axis and thus isolate I Corps from the rest of Vietnam. General Westmoreland viewed 1966 as a year of transition in which he was building up his troop strength and "a widespread logistical infrastructure (ports, airfield, supply storage areas, etc.)." He believed that in order to protect his vulnerable base areas, he had to husband his forces and resources and use in concert the intelligence available, the tactical mobility, and the shock action his troops possessed to launch spoiling attacks and keep the enemy's main forces off-balance.¹⁸

The MACV commander, moreover, had some reservations about the thrust of the Marine Corps pacification campaign. He recalled that in 1964, the ARVN 22d Division in the populated, coastal Binh Dinh Province had concentrated on small-unit operations against the guerrilla forces, and as:

. . . progress began to become evident, two main-force enemy regiments debouched from the hills and virtually destroyed the spread-out South Vietnamese units in detail, making a shambles of the pacification program. It took well over a year to recover what was lost.¹⁹

General Westmoreland's staff reinforced his doubts about the Marine Corps concentration on the small-unit counter guerrilla campaign south of Da Nang. On 15 November 1965, Brigadier General William E. DePuy, the MACV J-3, reported to General Westmoreland after a visit to III MAF that he was "disturbed by the fact that all but a tiny part of the I Corps area is under the control of the VC who have freedom of movement east and west—north and south—outside the Marine enclaves." DePuy stated that the Marines were "stalled a short distance south of Da Nang," because the Vietnamese were unable to "fill in behind Marines in their expanding enclaves." Although impressed with the Marine professionalism and concern for the "security of the people and the pacification process," General DePuy believed that III MAF should use part of its force "as a mobile element throughout the Corps." He recommended to General Westmoreland that the Marines "be directed" to launch large-unit offensive operations against VC base areas "with two to three battalion forces during at least two weeks out of every month."²⁰

General Westmoreland agreed with his operations officer's analysis of Marine operations. As he later wrote: "I believed the Marines should have been trying to find the enemy's main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population." Although General Westmoreland wanted the Marines to form mobile strike forces, he "had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt" that he would "precipitate an interservice imbroglio." He recognized that "as a senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution." Westmoreland explained, "Rather than start a controversy, I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads."²¹

From the III MAF perspective, the differences with MACV were more in emphasis than in substance. General Walt did not consider his "ink blot strategy," with its gradual extension of the



Marine Corps Photo A186695

Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, holds a news conference at Da Nang during a visit there in January 1966. Gen Walt is seated to his right.

Marine enclaves as manpower became available, necessarily in conflict with General Westmoreland's advocacy of highly mobile "search and destroy"* operations aimed at the enemy's main force units. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF operations officer, later observed:

Westmoreland's view was, "Yes, we accept the Marine Corps' concern about pacification, but we want you to do more." He wanted the Marines to experiment with lighter battalions and new tactics. General Walt's position was, "Yes, I will engage the enemy's main force units, but first I want to have good intelligence."²²

At FMFPac Headquarters, General Krulak viewed

*General Westmoreland believes that the term "search and destroy," which was later abandoned, had been distorted by critics to imply "aimless searches in the jungle and the random destroying of villages and other property." Westmoreland states that this was not the case, and that "search and destroy" was nothing more than an operational term for a tactic . . . , synonymous with "sweeping operations or reconnaissance in force." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 83. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1966, observed in his comments: "Search and destroy means traversing the same terrain repeatedly against a nebulous foe—while the people were untended." Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

the Marine differences with MACV as more basic. He recalled in 1978 that he differed with General Westmoreland, ". . . not in a limited, but in a profound way." Krulak declared, "Our effort belonged where the people were, *not* where they weren't. I shared these thoughts with Westmoreland frequently, but made no progress in persuading him."²³

In Washington, the Commandant perceived the disagreement between the Marines and MACV in much the same way as General Krulak. General Greene later stated that General Westmoreland and his commanders were preoccupied with the large unit war and that, "From the very beginning the prime error had been the failure to make the population secure—to stamp out the VC hidden in town and hamlet." Greene contended that:

I Corps was ideally established geographically (the bulk of the population in a narrow coastal strip) to do this—and to initiate security operations from the sea against key points along the coast.

He declared that he had advocated such a strategy:

. . . in a presentation to the Joint Chiefs and to General Westmoreland. The Chiefs were interested but Westmoreland wasn't and being CG MACV his views of the "big picture," the "broad arrow," prevailed. . . .²⁴

Marine Mission and Future Plans

Despite the differences over pacification and the big-unit war between MACV and the Marines, the basic directives which governed III MAF operations were broad enough to incorporate both approaches. According to the 21 November 1965 MACV Letter of Instruction (LOI) to General Walt, the mission of III MAF was to:

Conduct military operations in I ARVN Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps, and in other areas of RVN [Republic of Vietnam] to defeat the VC and extend GVN [Government of South Vietnam] control over all of Vietnam.

In order to carry out this assignment, the Marines were to defend and secure the base areas of Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai; to conduct search and destroy missions against VC forces which posed an

immediate threat to these bases; to launch other search and destroy operations against more distant enemy base areas; to extend clearing operations in selected areas contiguous to the major bases; and finally to execute any contingency plan in I CTZ or elsewhere in Vietnam as directed by ComUSMACV.²⁵

These all-encompassing objectives were reinforced by the U.S./GVN Combined Campaign Plan for 1966 which was promulgated by General Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff on 31 December 1965. American forces were to secure their base areas and conduct clearing operations in the vicinity of the base, and all "friendly forces were to conduct operations against VC forces in heretofore 'safe havens, areas, and bases.'"²⁶

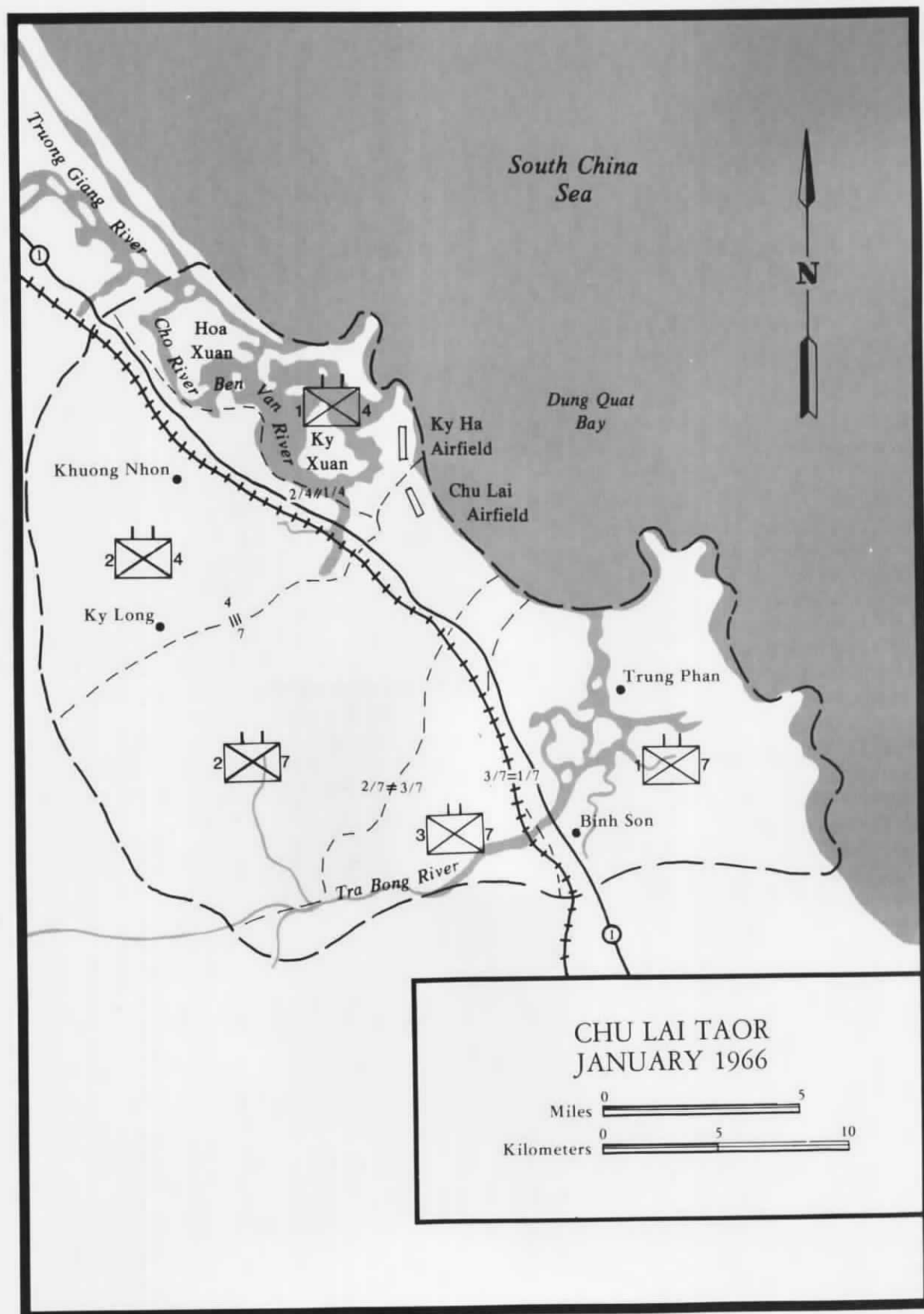
Working within these very general guidelines, General Walt's III MAF 1966 campaign plan maintained a balance among mutually supporting activities. This "balanced approach" consisted of a three-pronged effort comprised of search and destroy missions, counterguerrilla operations, and pacification.* With the aim of extending government con-

trol throughout I Corps, the Marines were to concentrate first on the coastal region between Da Nang and Chu Lai. Once the linkup of these two TAORs was accomplished, the Marine command was to focus its attention on the coast north of Da Nang to the DMZ and south of Chu Lai to the II Corps' boundary. III MAF believed that it could secure the entire coastal plain from Quang Tri to Quang Ngai by the end of 1966 and could make considerable progress in the populated inland river valleys.²⁷

General Walt based his concept of operations on several contingency factors, the two most important being the arrival of additional allied forces and no North Vietnamese buildup except in southern I Corps. With the arrival of the remainder of the 1st Marine Division and the possibility of obtaining operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade, then in II Corps, the III MAF commander had hopes of having 21 infantry battalions under his command by midyear. He required 10 battalions to develop and defend the base areas, which would allow 11 battalions for more mobile operations.²⁸

During 1966, the implementation of III MAF plans was different at each of the Marine enclaves; the military situation at each base was dissimilar and called for various approaches. With only one infantry battalion at Phu Bai, the northern Marine enclave was primarily concerned about base defense. At Da Nang, major emphasis was on pacification because of the highly concentrated population south of the airbase. Although not neglecting the pacification aspects, the proportionately stronger Marine forces in the less settled Chu Lai region were able to mount operations against the enemy's regular force buildup in southern I Corps.

*General Krulak commented in 1978 that this "'balanced approach' was a compromise with Westmoreland and not a balance, that every man we put into hunting for the NVA was wasted. . . ." The former FMFPac commander further maintained that he had sought to persuade CinCPac that this approach was "a mutation strategy . . . designed to pacify all shades of strategic thought; that if we persisted in such a compromise, we would bleed ourselves—which we did." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File).



CHAPTER 2

Expanding War in Southern I Corps

The Chu Lai TAOR—Operation Double Eagle

The Chu Lai TAOR

In January 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR, which straddled the Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Province boundary, stretched from Hoa Xuan Island in the north to just below the town of Binh Son in the south, a distance of 17 miles. The eastern portion of the TAOR bordered the South China Sea and the western sector extended 15 miles inland at its widest point. Route 1, the major north-south highway, bisected the TAOR, paralleling the coast and connecting Chu Lai to Da Nang, 57 miles to the northwest, and Quang Ngai City, 20 miles to the south.

In the Chu Lai region, the Annamite chain reaches within four miles of the sea and the coastal plain is relatively narrow, limiting the amount of arable land. Several rivers provide drainage, the most important being the Truong Giang, the Cho, the Ben Van, and the Tra Bong. With the South China Sea, these waterways form islands, peninsulas, coves, and bays along the coast which provide an excellent livelihood for the inhabitants of the several fishing villages in the region.

Selected in 1964 as a possible site for a supplementary airbase to Da Nang, Chu Lai became a major Marine base in May 1965. Immediately after landing, Marines and Seabees began work on a short airfield for tactical support (SATS) inland from Dung Quat Bay, aligned with the prevailing winds, northwest to southeast. Within a month, MAG-12's Douglas A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft were flying from Chu Lai. Soil stabilization was a continuous problem throughout 1965, but at least half the 8,000-foot runway was always operational. In addition, III MAF had contracted with a U.S. commercial firm for the construction of a permanent 10,000-foot concrete runway, 2,000 meters west of the SATS

field.* Northwest of the SATS field, the Marines and Seabees had already built a helicopter air facility on Ky Ha Peninsula, which, since September 1965, had been the base of operations for MAG-36.

With the buildup of Marine forces at Chu Lai during the summer of 1965, General Walt appointed Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, one of his two assistant division commanders (ADC), the base coordinator. In November 1965, newly promoted Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt relieved Karch at Chu Lai after the latter had completed his overseas tour. Platt was responsible for the 14,000 Marines at Chu Lai, the defense of the base, and all tactical ground operations. He had operational control of two reinforced infantry regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, and the artillery group, consisting of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines. As the Chu Lai Base Coordinator, General Platt directed the security arrangements for the two Marine aircraft groups, Colonel Leslie E. Brown's MAG-12 and Colonel William G. Johnson's MAG-36, as well as for the Chu Lai Logistic Support Unit.

The two infantry regiments shared the responsibility for the defense of the base. Colonel James F. McClanahan's 4th Marines had two battalions on line for the protection of the northern and central portions of the TAOR. His northernmost, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, defended the northern coastal approaches and the Chu Lai vital areas.

*In the strict sense, Chu Lai was not a true SATS field. "A SATS is a type of shore-based carrier deck complete with catapult and arresting gear. The Chu Lai field was longer than a true SATS and a catapult was not installed until April 1966, but it did use SATS components." LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation in Vietnam, 1962-70," *Naval Review*, 1971, pp. 129-130. For additional information concerning the building of the airfield and 1965 operations, see Chapter 18 and Jack Shulimson and Major Charles Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965* (Washington: His&MusDiv, HQMC, 1978), Chapters 3 and 12.



Marine Corps Photo A186377

Two Marines relax outside their defensive positions on the outskirts of a hamlet in the western sector of the Chu Lai Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). The men are from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.



Marine Corps Photo A186383

Marines of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines cross a flooded rice paddy in the western Chu Lai sector. The troops are after local guerrillas who have fired upon them.

Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, maintained his command post and two companies on Ky Ha Peninsula, and his other two companies were on Ky Xuan and Ky Hoa Islands which controlled the access into the inland waterways of the northern TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Rodolfo L. Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines manned the defenses in the central portion of the TAOR, operating west of the airfield and Route 1. The battalion's area of operations centered around the farming villages of Khuong Nhon and Ky Long in the western sector of the TAOR.

Colonel Oscar F. Peatross' 7th Marines had all three battalions on line to secure the southern sector defenses. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, on the coast, had a company-size combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula and tied in with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines on its western flank. The 3d Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley, was responsible for most of the sector in Quang Ngai province immediately to the west of Route 1. Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, flanked by the 4th Marines on the

north and Bodley's battalion to the east, was responsible for the southwestern portion of the TAOR.

During the first weeks of January, securing TAORs was the main objective of both the 4th and 7th Marines, with the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's battalion which participated in the 3d Marines' Operation Mallard from 10-17 January in the An Hoa region south of Da Nang. The two regiments had established several civil affairs programs in conjunction with the Vietnamese authorities. These included such diverse activities as the distribution of food and clothing, medical assistance programs, and school and market place construction. Nevertheless, the major emphasis of the Marine battalions at Chu Lai was in aggressive small-unit patrolling designed to eliminate the VC guerrillas.

Contact was sparse throughout most of January in the 7th Marines TAOR. Only the company stationed at the combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula had any significant combat. It accounted for 10 of the 13 VC killed by the regiment during the month. According to Colonel Peatross, the VC tactics consisted of

small-scale probes, harassment of patrols, and extensive use of land mines.¹

In the 4th Marines TAOR, Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion found and destroyed more than 40 mines and booby traps. Although reporting a marked increase in reconnaissance and probing activity by the *VC A-19* and *A-21 Local Force Companies*, the thinly spread 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to the northeast found itself hard pressed to engage the VC in significant numbers, killing only one VC and capturing seven while sustaining nine casualties, including five dead.² Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the battalion commander, later stated that his main concern during the period "was that the VC would bring 120mm mortars onto Hoa Xuan Island," located just northwest of Ky Hoa Island, and thus bring the Ky Ha airfield within mortar range. He explained that since he "was 'two-hatted,'" serving also as the Ky Ha defense commander, and that two of his companies "were tied by order to manning the 'swath' on Ky Ha during hours of darkness, we were too 'troop poor' to occupy Hoa Xuan." Sullivan declared that his requests for a fifth company "to 'sit on top' of the *A-19* and *A-21 VC LF Companies*, who were active on Hoa Xuan, were denied." The battalion commander several years later remarked:

Hoa Xuan, according to my mission, had to be patrolled each week. It made no difference if I sent a platoon up there, or exercised the whole battalion, Hoa Xuan was exerting an average toll of one KIA and several WIA each week . . . The island was literally nickel and diming us to death whenever we set foot on the place.

He contended: "Occupation of Hoa Xuan, I remain convinced, would have cut our casualties, and virtually eliminated the northern 120mm mortar threat to the Ky Ha Peninsula and the airfield at Chu Lai."³

The war for the Chu Lai Marines intensified with the incremental deployment of 1st Marine Division units to Vietnam and the continuing buildup of regular forces in southern I Corps. On 17 January, Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell's 1st Marines Headquarters arrived at Chu Lai, followed a little over a week later by Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's Battalion Landing Team (BLT)* 3/1. Young's battalion remained on board its amphibious shipping in preparation for the pending multibattalion Double

Eagle operation in southern Quang Ngai Province. These reinforcements allowed the Marines to mount large mobile operations and provided more flexibility at Chu Lai.

In the 7th Marines' sector, Colonel Peatross ordered his battalions to advance 4,000 to 5,000 meters toward the forward edge of the regimental TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, on the western flank of the regiment, began its displacement on 20 January, followed by the other two battalions on the 24th and 25th. Upon the completion of the movement, the 7th Marines established new defensive positions along the Tra Bong River and the 1st Battalion's positions extended as far south as Binh Son across the river.⁴

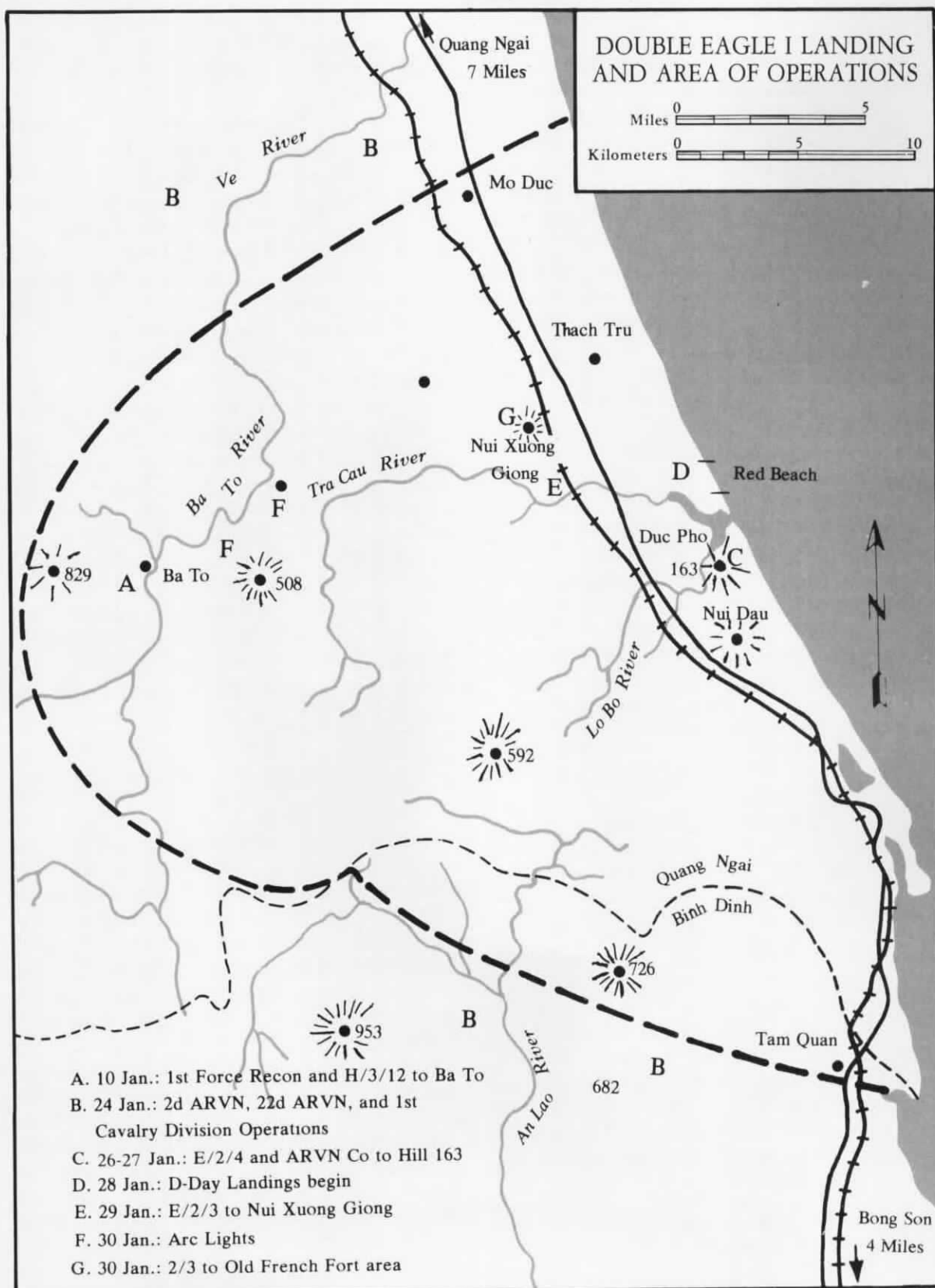
The major change in troop dispositions occurred in what had been the 4th Marines sector. On 20 January, the 1st Marines assumed operational control of the two battalions of the 4th Marines. Six days later, the 1st Battalion, reinforced by a 7th Marines company, took over responsibility for the 2d Battalion's TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion was assigned to the reactivated Task Force Delta, essentially the 4th Marines Headquarters and maneuver battalions from Chu Lai. Operation Double Eagle, one of the largest search and destroy missions in South Vietnam up to that time, was about to begin.⁵

Operation Double Eagle

Double Eagle planning began the previous month. On 7 December 1965, General Westmoreland ordered III MAF and Field Force, Vietnam to initiate a coordinated offensive against the enemy buildup in the region of the I and II Corps border during late January. By the beginning of the year, General Walt had received approval of a general concept for a multibattalion operation in southern Quang Ngai Province.⁶

On 6 January, General Walt ordered General Platt to reactivate Task Force Delta Headquarters for planning. General Platt had commanded Task Force Delta during Operation Harvest Moon in December, but closed out the headquarters upon completion of the operation. A task force organization allowed the Marines a large degree of leeway in both composition and command for operations outside the major enclaves. Its size was limited only by its mission, and

*A Marine infantry battalion reinforced by artillery and other supporting elements to permit independent operation; the basic unit for amphibious operations.



its formation permitted the employment of air and ground components under a single commander. Equally important, this ad hoc organization permitted the least disruption of the command structure of units remaining in the TAORs. Normally a Marine task force was of such size to merit a general officer as commander. According to Colonel Peattross, "This was a strong factor in getting the Vietnamese generals into the field."⁷

General Platt and Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, the South Vietnamese 2d ARVN Division commander, had established excellent personal relations since working together during Harvest Moon. They also discovered they had a common interest in tennis and played when they had the opportunity. Generals Lam and Platt soon became good friends. On a professional level, the Marines found Lam very cooperative and respected his military judgment.⁸

Similar personal friendships facilitated coordination between III MAF and the South Vietnamese I Corps military commanders. General Walt stated that for large operations, "General Thi and I talk it over—we come up with a concept and we put the concept to our staffs, who get together" and work out the details.⁹

The working out of details for Double Eagle was somewhat more complicated. It involved coordination not only with I Corps but with MACV, Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the Vietnamese authorities in II Corps. General Walt's original concept involved a two-battalion amphibious landing in southern Quang Ngai Province near Duc Pho and a helicopter landing of another battalion in the vicinity of the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To, 18 miles inland. Field Force, Vietnam and RVN II Corps commands were to launch a supporting operation in Binh Dinh Province to the south while an ARVN task force under General Lam was to block the enemy's avenues of retreat to the north.

General Walt established liaison with the Seventh Fleet very early in the planning phase.* On 6

January, the commander of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), Captain William J. Maddocks, and the Marine commander of the Special Landing Force, Colonel John R. Burnett, visited III MAF to discuss the operation. By the next day, General Walt's staff and the amphibious commanders had adopted a tentative concept of operations for the proposed landing. Shortly after the departure of Maddocks and Burnett from Da Nang, Admiral Sharp approved the plans and the assignment of two battalions for the landing, BLT 2/3, the SLF battalion, and BLT 3/1, which at that time was on board Seventh Fleet amphibious shipping for its previously planned move to Chu Lai. On 12 January, Vice Admiral John J. Hyland, Commander of the Seventh Fleet, issued his initiating directive for the operation, designating Captain Maddocks commander of the amphibious task force, and Colonel Burnett commander of the landing force. In accordance with amphibious doctrine, the amphibious commander was to transfer operational control of the ground forces to the III MAF ground commander for the operation, General Platt, once all the troops were ashore.¹⁰

The morning after Admiral Hyland issued his directive, General Thi, the I Corps commander, hosted a conference at his Da Nang headquarters, which included the senior U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders in both I and II Corps. General Thi explained that the purpose of the meeting was to develop an overall concept for operations in southern Quang Ngai-northern Binh Dinh Provinces. After a two-hour discussion, the conference reached a general agreement. Most of the conferees believed that the NVA and VC main force units were in Quang Ngai Province, but that their base areas were located in the Tam Quan coastal region and the An Lao River Valley in Binh Dinh Province. The III MAF task force, buttressed by 2d ARVN Division units, was to destroy the enemy main force units while the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), in a

*III MAF was under the operational control of MACV while the Seventh Fleet was a component command of CinCPacFlt. Both ComUSMACV and CinCPacFlt were subordinate to CinCPac. When General Walt wanted Seventh Fleet amphibious forces committed in I Corps he had to submit his request through MACV which, assuming concurrence, forwarded the request to Admiral Sharp for his approval. Despite this seemingly lengthy command chain, the amphibious forces were normally readily

available for in-country use when requested. Vice Admiral Hooper, former ComServPac, pointed out the reason for this arrangement in commenting on the draft manuscript: "Seventh Fleet under CinCPacFlt, had responsibilities throughout the entire Far East and western Pacific. Its forces, including TFs 76 and 79, had to react to crises, and sometime multicrisis . . . not just in Vietnam." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 78](Vietnam Comment File).

separate but coordinated operation supported by the ARVN 22d Division, was to go after the base areas.

General Walt viewed "these operations as a converging effort to entrap" the enemy. On the other hand, Major General Stanley R. Larsen, the Field Force, Vietnam commander, was less sanguine than Walt and declared "that we should not think in terms of entrapping and annihilating large bodies of VC, but should consider ourselves highly successful to destroy one battalion." Both commanders did agree that the Corps boundaries "were not inviolate—they could be crossed by I Corps and II Corps forces as required to exploit the situation."¹¹

During the next two weeks the Marines refined their plans for the operation. On 15 January, III MAF published its operation order which directed Task Force Delta to be prepared to deploy two reinforced battalions by helicopter or amphibious shipping to an objective area near Thach Tru in Quang Ngai Province. General Platt was to coordinate the date of D-Day with the Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the ARVN commanders. A reconnaissance effort was to precede the operation and U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses were to fly bombing missions against suspected enemy positions further inland subsequent to the landing. The SLF battalion, BLT 2/3, was to remain on board amphibious shipping, ready to land on order to exploit the situation. III MAF modified its order the following day to provide for two BLTs, BLT 3/1 and BLT 2/4, to land over the beach on D-Day. Later, on 16 January, General Walt established D-Day for the operation as 28 January, so BLT 3/1 and the SLF BLT could conduct a practice landing in the Philippines.¹²

General Platt and his staff expedited final planning for the operation. His ADC command group, reinforced by the Headquarters Company of the 4th Marines as well as members of the 3d Marine Division and 7th Marines staffs, provided the personnel for the Task Force Delta Headquarters. Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the former 3d Division Chief of Staff who had relieved Colonel McClanahan on 24 January 1966 as commander of the 4th Marines, became General Platt's Chief of Staff for the operation. After establishing liaison with the Seventh Fleet, General Platt and Colonel Johnson, whose MAG-36 was to provide helicopter support for the operation, visited General Lam at his headquarters in Quang Ngai to coordinate with the 2d ARVN

Division. On 24 January, the task force commander published his operation order and briefed General Walt the next day on the final plan.^{13*}

Task Force Delta's operating area consisted of 500 square miles, the center of which was approximately 20 miles south of Quang Ngai City and about 10 miles west of Duc Pho. The southern boundary encompassed a small portion of northern Binh Dinh Province in II Corps. Red Beach,** the site selected for the landing, was a 1,000-meter stretch of flat sand about three and a half miles northeast of Duc Pho. Inland from the beach, the assault elements would have to place heavy reliance on helicopters and amphibian tractors for movement in a region partially inundated by numerous rivers, streams, and marshes. To the west lay a mountainous area of jagged peaks criss-crossed by valleys and trails. Despite heavy foliage, there were numerous sites suitable for helicopter landing zones, but the lush jungle vegetation, precipitous hills, and intertwining valleys seriously impeded overland movement from these zones. In short, it was the sort of terrain which

*Several commentators remarked on various initiatives taken during the planning phase of the operation. Colonel Noble L. Beck, who was the executive officer of the 4th Marines in 1966, recalled that "General Platt had learned on Operation Harvest Moon that command control of several infantry battalions and supporting air simply couldn't be managed by an inadequately staffed task force headquarters. Accordingly he tasked me (then) . . . Deputy Chief of Staff designate for Task Force Delta for Operation Double Eagle to come up with the Task Force headquarters T/O . . . this Task Force T/O proved-out on Double Eagle and became standard for the expeditionary task force operations which followed." Col Noble L. Beck, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Aug 78](Vietnam Comment File). According to Colonel Zitnik, Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, was made the tactical air commander for the operation. "Colonel Johnson and one or two of his Sqdn. COs and Staff Officers were involved in all the ground planning." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commander of the 3d Engineer Battalion in January 1966, stated that unlike the planning for other operations his battalion supported, General Platt at the Double Eagle briefing, "had each unit commander provide a resume of what role his unit would perform." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78](Vietnam Comment File).

**Marine Corps documentation refers to the landing beach for Double Eagle as Red Beach while Navy documentation refers to Blue Beach. See TF Delta AAR Double Eagle I and II, 28Jan-1Mar66, dtd 15Mar66 and TG 76.6 OpO 304-66, dtd 24Jan66.

favored the enemy's highly mobile light infantry and hit-and-run tactics.

General Platt's intelligence section estimated the enemy strength to be 6,000 regulars, reinforced by approximately 600 guerrillas. Two NVA regiments, the 18th and 95th, were supposedly located in the mountains roughly 10 miles southwest of Red Beach, while the 2d VC Main Force Regiment was thought to be four miles north of the NVA regiments. Additionally, the 300-man 38th Independent Battalion and 11 separate companies, ranging from 90 to 150 men each, normally operated in this area. The remaining enemy units consisted of scattered guerrilla bands and support troops including the Binh Son Transportation Battalion with 250 permanent personnel and about 1,000 laborers.

The 5,000-plus Marines of Task Force Delta approximated the size of the enemy's regular units. Ultimately, General Platt would have four Marine battalions under his command, including three BLTs, initially BLTs 2/3, 3/1, and 2/4. The fourth battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 9th Marines from the Da Nang TAOR, would consist of only a command group and two of its four rifle companies. Supporting forces were organized into provisional commands. These were Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's artillery group with a total of 26 pieces ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 155mm guns and howitzers, a provisional reconnaissance group, an engineering company, an

amphibian tractor company, and a shore party group.

The Marine concept of operations called for three distinct phases: reconnaissance, landing, and exploitation. Marine reconnaissance units and an artillery battery were to be inserted at the Special Forces camp at Ba To well before D-Day. From this location, the reconnaissance Marines were to provide information on enemy positions and movement in the western portion of the Double Eagle area of operations. The artillery battery would not only support the reconnaissance missions, but would be in position to cover the amphibious landing forces as they moved inland beyond the range of naval guns. After the establishment of the Ba To contingent, one company of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was to conduct a reconnaissance of the landing beach in conjunction with the 2d ARVN Division two weeks before the landing. On D minus 1 (27 January), another company from the battalion, with a company from the 4th ARVN Regiment, was to secure Hill 163, which overlooked Red Beach from the south. At H-Hour on 28 January, BLTs 3/1 and 2/4 were to land across Red Beach and secure immediate objectives north and west of the landing beach. Once the landing force had secured the beachhead, the Delta command group was to land, at which time the amphibious task group commander would pass operational control to General Platt. BLT 2/3 was to remain on board amphibious shipping as the

Reconnaissance Marines at the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To protect themselves from the rain with their ponchos. Inserted by helicopter into various landing zones, reconnaissance teams monitored enemy movement in the western sector of the Double Eagle operating area.

Marine Corps Photo A186724



task force reserve while the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was airlifted from Da Nang to Quang Ngai City for the final phase of the operation.

Since General Platt wanted to create the impression that his forces were ashore only to conduct limited sweeps close to the coast, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was to stay at Quang Ngai and the SLF battalion to remain on board its shipping out of sight over the horizon. The exploitation phase was to be the main effort, signaled by B-52 strikes against suspected enemy troop concentrations and marshalling areas. These B-52 missions or Arc Lights, the codename for all B-52 strikes in Vietnam, were scheduled for D plus 2. Following this intensive bombardment, the Marine infantry was to move inland by helicopter to cut off any enemy forces attempting to escape.¹⁴

The reconnaissance phase began in early January. On 7 January, General Walt ordered the establishment of the 3d Marine Division reconnaissance base at Ba To Special Forces Camp. Three days later, six U.S. Air Force Sikorsky CH-3C helicopters ferried four 105mm howitzers and crews from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines and two platoons of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company from Chu Lai to the camp. After establishing his base on 12 January, Captain William C. Shaver, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance company, sent out his first patrols.¹⁵

For the next two weeks, the reconnaissance Marines reported the movements of small groups of VC. One 14-man patrol, led by 1st Lieutenant Richard F. Parker, Jr., encountered a significant enemy force near Hill 829, approximately 4,000 meters northwest of the Ba To Camp. Lieutenant Parker and an advance party reached the top of the hill at 1400 on 21 January and halted for the day because of poor visibility. Three hours later, Parker's Marines heard yelling and firing from the vicinity of their rear base on the lower slope of the mountain. By the time Parker and his group reached the patrol's rear party it had already repulsed four or five attacks. In the confusion, 1st Lieutenant James T. Egan, Jr., a forward observer from the artillery battery, had disappeared. Parker and his men searched the immediate area, but found no sign of the missing lieutenant.

At 0745 the next morning, the reconnaissance Marines began the difficult climb down the mountain to continue their mission. About two and a half

hours later, 50 to 60 enemy soldiers suddenly attacked from the rear. Lieutenant Parker wryly remarked in his after action report, "the entire descent was made under conditions of heavy contact and was not a controlled movement."¹⁶ The patrol leader and five of his men escaped into a densely vegetated draw and set up an ambush. They were joined one-half hour later by three other Marines from the patrol. Lieutenant Parker then called for an artillery mission on suspected enemy positions. After the battery stopped firing, four helicopters from MAG-36, two Sikorsky UH-34s escorted by two Bell UH-1E gunships, picked up the patrol, the nine men in the draw, and three other Marines stranded nearby. One Marine, Lance Corporal Edwin R. Grissett, was missing. The 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, which had come under the operational control of Task Force Delta on 21 January, conducted other patrols in the vicinity of Hill 829 several days after Parker's men returned to Ba To, but never found Lieutenant Egan or Lance Corporal Grissett.*

While the reconnaissance Marines continued their patrolling in the Ba To region during mid-January, the preparations for the coordinated allied offensives in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces entered the final stages. On 13 January one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines conducted a surveillance mission with the Reconnaissance Company, 2d ARVN Division in the initial objective area at Red Beach and the immediate coastal region. Ten days later, BLTs 2/3 and 3/1, conducting Exercise Hill Top III, landed on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines as a dress rehearsal for Double Eagle. With the completion of the exercise the following day, 24 January, both battalions embarked on their amphibious shipping and sailed for the South China Sea where they were to rendezvous with the rest of the amphibious task force.**

*On 3 February 1978, the Marine Corps officially changed the status of by then Major Egan from missing in action to killed in action. HQMC, Report of Casualty 2866A66 Final JNL/1fr, dtd 3Feb78, Subj: Egan, James Thomas, Jr., Maj USMCR. Lance Corporal Grissett was captured by the enemy and died of malnutrition in December 1968 while in captivity. Information provided by GySgt William A. Hoffman, Casualty Section, Personnel Affairs Branch, HQMC, 13Mar75.

**The two BLTs were embarked in the attack transports *Paul Revere* (APA 248) and *Montrose* (APA 212); the dock landing ships *Catamount* (LSD 17) and *Monticello* (LSD 35); and the am-

On the 24th, four battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division began Operation Masher near Bong Son in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province, 50 miles north of Qui Nhon. Six ARVN airborne battalions and six infantry battalions from the 22d ARVN Division reinforced the airmobile division during Operation Thang Phong II, the South Vietnamese companion operation to Masher in Binh Dinh. Further north in I Corps, General Lam's 2d ARVN Division prepared to launch Operation Lien Ket-22. With the two-battalion South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo attached to his command, General Lam planned a five-battalion advance from a line of departure eight miles south of Quang Ngai City to blocking positions in the Song Ve Valley and the coastal region north of the U.S. Marines in Double Eagle. The combined allied forces for Masher/Thang Phong II and Double Eagle/Lien Ket-22 were the equivalent of three divisions; the area of operations covered more than 2,000 square miles.

On 26 January, Task Force Delta undertook the last of the preliminary operations before the amphibious landing. Nine UH-34Ds from HMM-261 carried 190 troops of Captain Brian D. Moore's Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines from Ky Ha Airfield at Chu Lai to the Nui Dau ARVN outpost, eight miles south of the Double Eagle landing beach. At Nui Dau, Major Ernest L. Defazio, the executive officer of the Marine battalion, assumed command of a combined force, consisting of Company E, 4th Marines and the 2d Company, 3d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment. Shortly after midnight, the combined unit left the outpost, Company E in the lead followed by the ARVN company. The force was to move to the beach and then travel along the coast and secure Hill 163. According to Defazio, it took over six hours in the darkness to cross the one mile of rugged terrain from Nui Dau to the beach.



Marine Corps Photo A186776

Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines scale rocks along the shore line as they begin ascent to secure Hill 163 on 27 January prior to D-Day for Double Eagle. From Hill 163, the company had a ringside seat for the amphibious landing the following day.

Slowed by the loose sand, intense heat during the day, and heavy packs, the combined task unit did not reach the top of Hill 163 until 1300 on 27 January. The Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers prepared defensive positions on the hill which had a commanding view of Red Beach. Major Defazio remarked that he had a "ringside seat" for the amphibious landing the next day.¹⁷

D-Day, 28 January, was a dismal day with low overcast and light rain. Despite the heavy seas, the first wave of Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's BLT 3/1 landed at 0700 as planned. Offshore, a destroyer, the USS *Barry* (DD 933), and a cruiser, the USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) provided naval gunfire coverage, while eight Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 and eight McDonnell F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 were on station overhead. The only opposition encountered by the assault troops occurred late that day. Companies I and M were exposed to occasional small arms fire; one Company I Marine was wounded. Shortly after Lieutenant Colonel Young's men secured their objectives, five 105mm

phibious assault ship *Valley Forge* (LPH 8). Other ships assigned to, or supporting, the amphibious task group for Double Eagle included: the attack transport *Navarro* (APA 215); the dock landing ship *Fort Marion* (LSD 22); the tank landing ships *Tom Green County* (LST 1159), *Tioga County* (LST 1158), *Windham County* (LST 1170), and *Westchester County* (LST 1167); the high speed transport *Weiss* (APD 135); the gasoline tanker *Elkhorn* (AOG 7); the salvage vessels *Safeguard* (ARS 25) and *Bolster* (ARS 38); the attack cargo ship *Skagit* (AKA 105); the guided missile light cruisers *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) and *Topeka* (CLG 8); and the destroyer *Barry* (DD 933).



Marine Corps Photo A186615

Marines clamber down net from the transport into landing craft for the assault across Red Beach in Double Eagle. This operation was the largest extended amphibious operation of the war.

howitzer-equipped amphibian tractors (LVTH-6) moved ashore to provide artillery support for the infantry battalion. Company B from the 3d Engineer Battalion was also on the beach to establish various water points. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the battalion commander, remembered that "The beach assault took a toll of operational engineer equipment and generators."¹⁸

At midmorning the surf began to build rapidly. Swells, six to eight feet in height, held up the debarkation of Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Nevertheless, by noon, the battalion was ashore, as were the forward elements of Task Force Delta's Headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery command group. Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines also landed and reinforced the LVTH-6 platoon in support of the infantry.

Weather hampered the operation for the rest of the day. Although General Platt arrived at Red Beach from Chu Lai by midafternoon, he was unable to assume operational control of the Double Eagle forces because high seas and pounding surf prevented the landing of sufficient communication equipment. As a result, the command of forces ashore remained with the amphibious task force commander, Captain Maddocks, and with the commander of the landing force, Colonel Burnett, the SLF commander. General Platt received the concurrence from Captain Maddocks "to coordinate actions



Marine Corps Photo A186581

Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move across Red Beach. Ships of the amphibious task force and landing craft approaching the shore can be seen in the background.



Marine Corps Photo A186738

Marines unload LST on Red Beach. Rough seas, as seen in the background, hampered the bringing of additional equipment and supplies ashore.

ashore in the event of emergency," which in practical terms would give operational control to Platt.^{19*}

High seas also curtailed the artillery and logistic buildup. Supplies slowly accumulated at the beach support area (BSA) while the rest of the artillery remained on board ship. These units included the 3d 155mm Gun Battery; the 107mm Mortar Battery, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines; Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines; and a platoon from the 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 11th Marines.

The weather, typical of the second half of the northeast monsoon season, continued to plague the operation on the following day, 29 January. Low overcast and periodic rain squalls prevented any sizeable helicopter operations until late afternoon and restricted both infantry battalions to operations

within 6,000 to 8,000 meters of the landing beach. The Marine infantry did receive some reinforcements during the day. Captain Moore's Company E left its positions on Hill 163 and rejoined its parent battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. That same afternoon, HMM-362, the SLF helicopter squadron, assisted by six MAG-36 UH-34s which arrived at the BSA from Chu Lai, flew Company E, BLT 2/3 from the USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) to Nui Xuong Giong, a 180-meter peak west of Red Beach. The Marine company was to provide security for a detachment of the task force communications platoon which was to establish a radio relay station on the hill to insure reliable communications for the planned operations in the mountains and Song Ve Valley to the west.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6, later remarked that his UH-1Es accompanied the SLF squadron's UH-34s to Nui Xuong Giong. He recalled:

The landing . . . was to be unopposed, but at the last

*See Chapter 19 for a further discussion of command relations during the amphibious portion of Double Eagle.

minute VMO-6 was assigned to escort the helos on this mission. . . . As the H-34s were landing on the hilltop the lead pilot . . . of my second section observed what he described as a military training unit with some uniformed VC. . . . a uniformed soldier (with rifle) was shedding his uniform while running and as we were trying to get permission to fire we heard the firm order "Do not fire." . . . all the VMO-6 pilots on this flight experienced . . . frustration at not being allowed to pursue what appeared to be, and eventually proved to be, the only few enemy in the area.²⁰

The VMO-6 commander conceded that he never was able to pinpoint the originator of the message but believed "that it was either from afloat or an enemy transmission." Zitnik concluded: "This incident occurred before the transfer of control ashore and contributed to frustrations in General Platt's headquarters as well as with the UH-1E pilots."²¹

Although General Platt had not as yet received operational control of the units ashore, preparations for the exploitation phase were well under way on 29 January. Air Force Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports lifted Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command

group and two rifle companies from Da Nang Airbase to Quang Ngai Airfield, 2,000 meters west of Quang Ngai City. From the airfield, which the Marines were using as a helicopter staging area, MAG-36 UH-34s were to helilift the battalion into the Song Ve Valley to exploit B-52 Arc Light missions.

The Marine command attempted to postpone the B-52 strikes for a day, but MACV replied that the missions would either have to be flown on the 30th as scheduled or canceled altogether.²² Flying high above the low-lying clouds on 30 January, the Stratofortresses struck three target areas in the Song Ve Valley. Despite some improvement in the weather, poor visibility prohibited helicopter operations in the mountains and Marine ground exploitation of the Arc Light missions.

Task Force Delta took advantage of the calm seas on the 30th to bring more forces ashore. The remaining artillery batteries and other supporting units arrived in the BSA. Later that afternoon, 28 helicopters from three MAG-36 helicopter

Marines from BLT 213, part of the Special Landing Force (SLF) on the carrier Valley Forge (LPH 8), run to board helicopters for movement ashore on D plus 1 (29 January 1966) of Double Eagle. Some of the troop-laden helicopters are already airborne and can be seen flying above the ship.

Marine Corps Photo A186769



squadrons and 12 UH-34s from HMM-362 transported Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's BLT 2/3 command group and his remaining three companies from the *Valley Forge* to an old French fort northwest of Company E's position, eight miles inland. After the lift was completed at 1730, most of the helicopters returned to the Quang Ngai Airfield since Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, thought it unnecessary to risk the aircraft overnight in a forward area when they could easily return in the morning.²³

On the afternoon of 30 January, MAG-36 did establish a forward operating base in the Double Eagle BSA, located 400 meters inland from Red Beach and known as "Johnson City." In addition to the logistic support area* and task force headquarters, "Johnson City" contained an expeditionary airfield complete with a tactical air fuel dispensing system (TAFDS), maintenance facilities, tower, runway, and airfield lights. As the tactical air commander for the operation, Colonel Johnson established his MAG-36 combat operations center 100 yards from General Platt's command post and adjacent to the mobile direct air support center (DASC) from Marine Air Support Squadron 2. This collocation allowed the air commander to tie in the DASC with the fire support coordination center (FSCC). According to Johnson, the close proximity of the Task Force Delta air and ground commanders "permitted the detailed and continuous planning which enabled us to react expeditiously throughout Double Eagle."^{24**}

On 31 January, the weather finally cleared in the objective area and the tempo of operations increas-

ed. At 1210, General Platt assumed operational control of the landing force and began to move inland. Two USAF CH-3C helicopters and a Marine Sikorsky CH-37 Mojave lifted the six 105mm howitzers from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines from the "Johnson City" support area to the old French fort so that the artillery could support operations to the west. Shortly after noon, Marine UH-34s transported Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines to Hill 508, five miles southwest of the fort. The Marine company was to provide protection for another detachment from the communications platoon, whose mission was to relay radio transmissions from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion which was to operate in this rugged terrain. At 1600 that afternoon, MAG-36 completed the helilift of Trevino's command group and his remaining three companies into a landing zone in the Song Ve-Song Ba To Valley, 2,000 meters northwest of Hill 508. The Marine battalion advanced rapidly to exploit one of the Arc Light targets on the high ground to the northeast. During the day, 14 Marine jets, 6 A-4 Skyhawks, 2 F-4B Phantoms, and 6 Chance Vought F-8E Crusaders, provided helicopter landing zone preparations and air cover for the infantry.

The next day, 1 February, General Platt moved his forces deeper into the interior of the Double Eagle area of operations. Helicopters from MAG-36 lifted Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two rifle companies to a landing zone on the high ground east of the Song Ve, 7,000 meters northwest of where the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had landed the previous day. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Bat-

*Major General Oscar F. Peatross, who in 1966 commanded the 7th Marines, remarked, "that although Task Force Delta was self-supportive, some critical supplies were flown by helicopter from the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai . . . into the Logistics Support Area." He recalled that he only visited the Task Force headquarters a few times, but that "each time I rode down in a helicopter taking supplies from Chu Lai and on three occasions the helicopter was loaded with among other things . . . radios that had been picked up the evening before, repaired overnight, and returned the next morning." According to General Peatross, Lieutenant Colonel William L. Nelson, the commanding officer of the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai, visited the TF Delta Headquarters each day and "brought back a critical list every day, filled it every night, and criticals were flown back the next morning."

MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Zitnik in his comments reinforced Colonel Johnson's remarks. Zitnik observed: "Aircraft were requested and provided as needed. There became a new kind of relationship between the planners on the spot and the [Wing Tactical Air Command Center (TACC)]. . . . Even though the TACC was not 100 percent up to date, when the word came to them that MAG-36 and the ARVN or Marines, or both, were being committed there appeared a remarkable spirit of cooperation and trust on the part of the TACC . . . they never questioned the need for fixed-wing or helo support just because a request came that did not appear on the pre-planned schedule." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A186620

Gen Walt together with LtGen John A. Heintges, USA, Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command (USMACV), visit Task Force Delta Headquarters during Double Eagle. From left to right: Gen Heintges; Gen Walt; BGen Jonas M. Platt, the Task Force Delta commander; and an unidentified U.S. Army colonel.



Marine Corps Photo A186583

A Marine 60mm mortar section from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines provides fire support for the advancing infantry. Apparently feeling relatively secure, the troops have placed their rifles against the right side of the Vietnamese structure in the picture.

talion, 3d Marines made an overland sweep west of the fort area in the valley of the Tra Cau River.

During the succeeding days, despite the extensive commitment of Marine units, there was no heavy fighting. Marine units encountered only small guerilla bands. According to Captain James R. Hardin, Jr., company commander of Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the Viet Cong "would hit us—pull out. Hit us and pull out. They wouldn't stick around for firefights."²⁵ Although firefights were the exception the Marines did take a heavy toll of the enemy's local forces. In two engagements on 2 February, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines accounted for 31 enemy dead in the coastal region north of Red Beach. On 3 February, General Platt began to move most of his forces south toward Binh Dinh Province to trap the NVA and VC main force regiments between the Marines and the 1st Cavalry Division.

In contrast to the Marines, the 1st Cavalry troopers encountered North Vietnamese regulars early in their operation. In heavy fighting which lasted from 28 January through 3 February, the Cavalry's 3d Brigade engaged the 18th NVA Regiment in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province eight miles



Marine Corps Photo A187622

Marines move through densely jungled terrain after a B-52 strike. The broken tree limbs and fallen trees are a result of the heavy carpet bombing of the area.



Marine Corps Photo A186723

An Air Force CH-3C helicopter lifts a Marine 105mm howitzer from the beach support area further inland. The rapid deployment of the guns permitted the Marine artillery to keep the advancing infantry within the artillery fan.



Marine Corps Photo A186713

A heavily-laden Marine 81mm mortar section trudges forward to a new firing position during Double Eagle. The first man carries the mortar bipod and an extra round while the third man totes the mortar tube.



Marine Corps Photo A421241
Marine in the foreground directs an UH-34 into a landing zone during Operation Double Eagle. Gen Platt had the use of two-thirds of the III MAF helicopters for the operation.

north of Bong Son. During that six-day period, Colonel Harold G. Moore, the brigade commander, reported that his troops killed over 600 enemy by body count, captured 357 NVA soldiers, and recovered 49 individual weapons and six crew-served weapons. The Army brigade suffered 75 KIA and 240 wounded. After being reinforced by the 2d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry near Bong Son, Moore's brigade moved into the rugged interior of the An Lao region to link up with the Double Eagle Marines with the aim of smashing the 18th NVA Regiment once and for all.²⁶

As Task Force Delta deployed into the southern portion of the Double Eagle area of operations, General Platt split his battalions into smaller elements, each consisting of a command group and two rifle companies reinforced by an 81mm mortar section. This provided Platt with six to seven maneuver elements in the field while at the same time enabling him to provide security for the

"Johnson City" support area. The task force commander took full advantage of the fact that he had two-thirds of III MAF's helicopters available for his use and ordered a series of small search and destroy missions. His improvised maneuver elements would land in an area, search it, and reboard the helicopters for further movement south. The infantry units accomplished 17 battalion and 19 company helilifts during the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery group displaced 47 times, including two small amphibious landings further south along the coast, in order to support the fast advancing infantry.²⁷

During the advance, the Marines seized hills both for the purpose of providing supporting artillery fire and to maintain better voice communication with the infantry battalions. The Task Force Delta communications platoon established three relay stations



Marine Corps Photo A186718
Marine infantrymen advance through a gully with razor-sharp punji stakes protruding on both embankments. Local Viet Cong guerrillas employed such crude, but effective, impediments to hinder the Americans during the operation.

on mountain tops to keep radio contact with the widely dispersed maneuver elements. According to General Platt, the task force communications capability was stretched to the absolute limit and the newly distributed AN/PRC-25 radios proved indispensable and reliable, often reaching distances of 20 to 25 miles.²⁸

On 4 February, Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, accompanied by a small communication platoon detachment, secured Hill 726, 1,000 meters south of the I Corps boundary, and linked up with Battery B, 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division.* While the Marines provided security and radio communication, the Army battery fired in support of Marine units in Quang Ngai Province and the 1st Cavalry Division in Binh Dinh. Through the next week, neither the Marine infantry nor the cavalry brigades encountered enemy main force units, only light resistance from local guerrillas. On 11 February, Task Force Delta maneuver elements began to redeploy north toward the "Johnson City" support area, using the same tactics in the retrograde movement as they had in the advance.

During this period, the most significant sighting of enemy forces was made by Captain James L.

Compton's provisional reconnaissance group, which consisted of a command group, Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, and Captain Shaver's 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. While Shaver's men patrolled a 11,500-meter circle around Ba To, the Company B reconnaissance Marines operated throughout the Double Eagle area. The task force reconnaissance group primarily employed four- to five-man teams, who could call artillery and air missions on targets of opportunity.

On 12 February, two UH-34 helicopters inserted two four-man teams from Company B into the mountainous terrain 11,000 meters northwest of Ba To. Shortly after landing, one of the teams observed 31 armed men to their front dressed in green uniforms carrying two mortars. The Marines called an artillery mission which killed 10 enemy. After the artillery had fired another mission, 80 more enemy soldiers appeared. The team asked to be extracted and 15 minutes after its departure, 1st MAW jets, controlled by radar, dropped 39 250-pound bombs on the enemy concentration. The next day, a UH-1E from VMO-6 took out the second team, which had come under heavy fire and suffered one man dead.²⁹

During the entire operation, the Marine reconnaissance group conducted more than 40 patrols and sighted nearly 1,000 enemy soldiers. The reconnaissance Marines called for 20 artillery and naval gunfire missions which resulted in at least 19 known enemy dead.³⁰ Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines at Ba To fired more than 1,900 rounds in support of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company alone.³¹

Gradually, it became apparent that most of the North Vietnamese units had left the Double Eagle operating area. According to one prisoner report, the main force enemy units withdrew from Quang Ngai Province a few days before D-Day. The Army's Operation Masher, redesignated White Wing on 5 February because of criticism in certain U.S. Government circles that the U.S.-named operations sounded too brutal, turned out to be the main show instead of a side event when the 1st Cavalry Division encountered the *18th NVA Regiment* in Binh Dinh Province. Even during Masher/White Wing, nearly half of the 2,000 enemy casualties claimed by the operation occurred during the first heavy fighting. Thereafter, until the end of the operation on 6 March, the cavalry troopers met the same pattern of

*Although uneventful for the Marines of Company G, the helilift of the company from its former positions in the Lo Bo Valley, 12,000 meters north of Hill 726, caused some excitement for the helicopter pilots. A Marine aircraft reported taking ground fire from one of the villages near the pickup point and UH-1E gunships were assigned to escort the UH-34 troop transports. Colonel Zitnik, at the time VMO-6 commander and the flight leader of the gunships, recalled, "I directed the troop carrier helos around a burning village from which 50 caliber or heavier fire was observed. I called for A-4 support but could not get it in time (this was an on-call mission laid on late in the day) to help the troop carriers, so I commenced a rocket run towards the village and immediately received fire causing my helo to crash." Zitnik's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William L. Buchanan, landed in the darkness next to the wrecked aircraft and loaded onboard the five-man crew, who all survived the crash. According to Zitnik, "the trip out was memorable," as Buchanan's aircraft, with now nine men on board, "staggered into the air along and between the burning villages in the dark of the night." Task Force Delta sent a reinforced Marine infantry platoon and maintenance men to protect and repair the downed aircraft. An Air Force CH-3C lifted the UH-1E out of the crash site the next morning. See: Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File); MAG-36 AAR, Double Eagle, dtd 28Mar66, encl MAG-36, ComdC, Mar66; 2/4 AAR 5-66, Operation Double Eagle, encl, 2/4 ComdC, Feb66; MASS-2, Report of Double Eagle DASC Opns, dtd 17Mar66 in 1st MAW, Double Eagle Folder, Jan-Mar66.

sporadic resistance that the Marines faced during Double Eagle.

Generals Platt and Lam ended their coordinated operations in Quang Ngai Province in mid-February. South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo closed out Lien Ket-22 on 12 February, having found only a few enemy in its zone of operations.³² By 17 February, all Task Force Delta forces, including the reconnaissance and artillery elements that were at Ba To, were on board amphibious shipping, or had already returned to their respective base areas. During the operation, the U.S. Marines killed 312 enemy soldiers and captured 19. General Platt's men also captured 20 tons of rice, 6 tons of salt, and 4 tons of miscellaneous supplies including barley, copra, corn, concrete, and fertilizer. In addition, the Marines captured 18 weapons and 868 rounds of ammunition. These results were achieved at the cost of 24 Marines killed and 156 wounded.³³

Although Task Force Delta ended its operations in southern Quang Ngai Province on 17 February, Double Eagle entered an entirely new phase 50 miles to the north, a development not called for in the original plans. Major General McCutcheon, acting CG III MAF* at that time because General Walt was in Washington, had received intelligence that the 1st Viet Cong Regiment had entered the Que Son Valley near the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces west of Tam Ky, the area where the Marines had previously conducted Operation Harvest Moon. McCutcheon ordered General Platt to redeploy Task Force Delta and launch Double Eagle II in this region.

Retaining his basic task organization, but replacing the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, a unit which had participated in Harvest Moon, General Platt began the operation on the morning of 19 February. Elements of four battalions, employing both helicopters and trucks, converged on the objective area. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved by



Marine Corps Photo A186586

Marines from Task Force Delta confiscate VC rice and salt during Double Eagle. During the operation in southern Quang Ngai Province, the Marines captured or destroyed 26 tons of rice and salt belonging to the enemy.

truck from Chu Lai to north of Tam Ky where it dismounted. As Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion moved into blocking positions, helicopters carried the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; BLT 2/3 of the SLF; and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines into landing zones further to the southwest in the Que Son sector. The helilifted battalions then attacked in a northeasterly direction towards the 3d Battalion.

The 1st VC Regiment was not there. Interrogation of prisoners revealed that the Viet Cong unit had withdrawn long before the Marines arrived. For the next 10 days, the Marines swept through numerous villages, cleared out isolated guerrilla bands, and uncovered enemy supplies, but found no major VC units. Task Force Delta accounted for 125 enemy dead and 15 captured. Marine losses were six killed and 136 wounded. The Marines also captured or destroyed caches including 28 tons of rice, 500 pounds of sweet potatoes, 53 weapons, and 450 rounds of ammunition.³⁴

*During General Walt's one-month absence from Vietnam, 10Feb-9Mar66, General McCutcheon was both CG 1st MAF and acting CG III MAF. Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Division ADC, was the acting CG 3d Marine Division. According to English, "Keith McCutcheon and I had an agreement while Gen Walt was back in the States. Keith said: 'You run the ground war and I'll run the air war.'" MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

On the next-to-last day of the operation, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines entered the hamlet of Ky Phu, west of Tam Ky, where the battalion had encountered the *80th VC Battalion* during Harvest Moon in December. This time the Marines found a concrete marker on which was inscribed the Viet Cong claim that they had defeated the Americans. According to Captain Alex Lee, the acting S-3 of the battalion, "While many desired to use demolitions on this sign, it was Lieutenant Colonel Utter's decision to let it stand for the lie it was."³⁵

Task Force Delta began returning to Chu Lai the afternoon of 27 February, but the VC made one last attempt to disrupt the Marine forces before the closeout of the operation. In the early morning hours of 28 February, a VC squad attacked the Task Force Delta command post perimeter, just outside of Tam Ky. A Marine platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines repulsed the enemy. Captain Edwin W. Besch, who was at the time the Task Force Delta Headquarters Commandant, remembered that the VC were led by a man "who had dressed in ARVN uniform and sauntered up in a friendly manner to Marines who had taken him into their . . . CP for coffee the night before. . . ."³⁶ Another Task Force Delta Headquarters staff officer, Colonel Glen

E. Martin, recalled that the Marines stopped the VC assault "just short of General Platt's tent."³⁷ Captain Lee later wrote that "five naked VC with explosives strapped around their bodies stumbled directly into a 2/7 machine gun position . . ."³⁸ As a result of the early morning action, the Marines killed two VC for sure, possibly another two, and took one wounded VC prisoner. The Marines suffered casualties of one man dead and another wounded. The last elements of Task Force Delta departed Tam Ky at 1300 on 1 March and Double Eagle II was over.³⁹

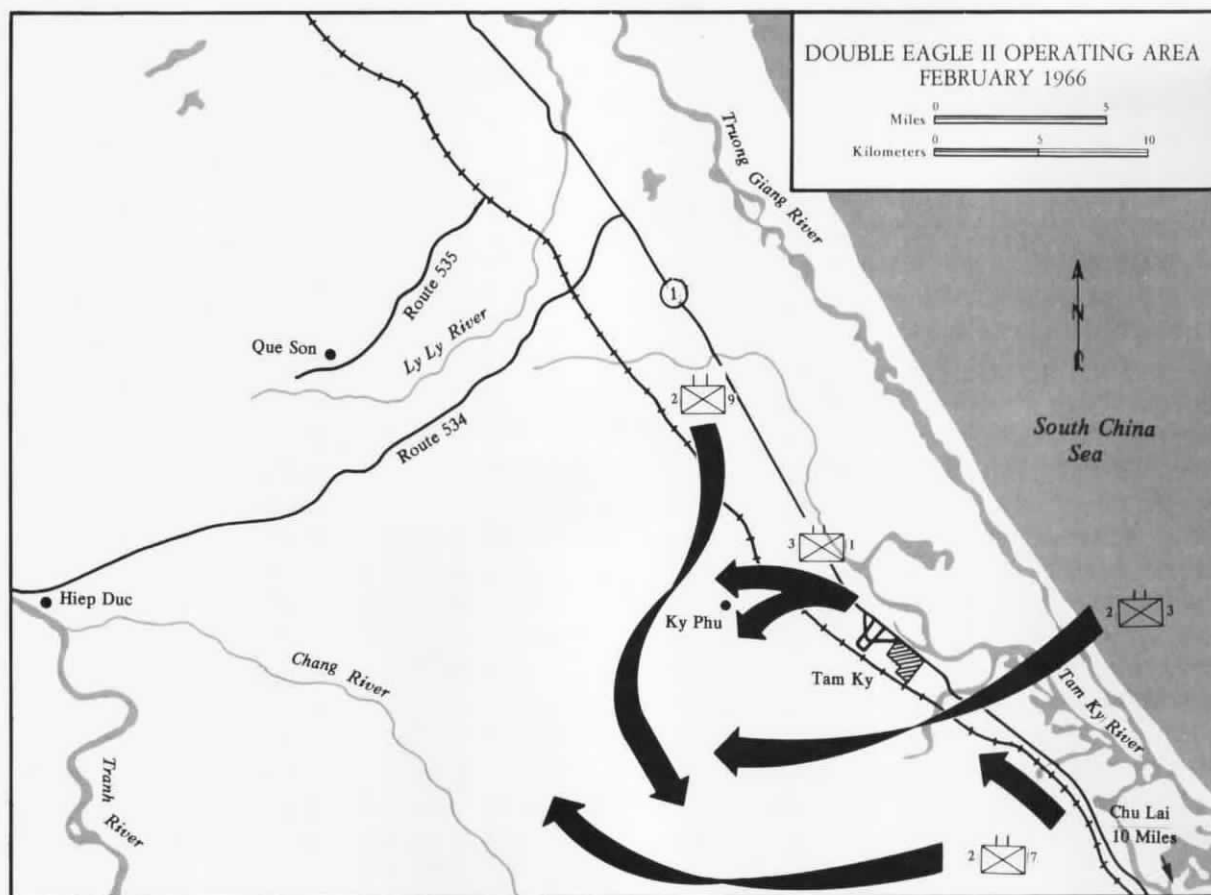
While neither of the Double Eagle operations produced the desired results, General Platt believed that they both achieved an element of success. Although the Marines had not encountered any sizeable enemy formations, they had taken a heavy toll of local guerrilla forces in these areas. Moreover, General Platt argued that the people residing in both the Que Son Valley and southern Quang Ngai Province learned that neither area was "the VC private backyard because U.S. Marines trampled over a huge area with little or no significant opposition."⁴⁰

General Krulak, on the other hand, insisted, several years later, that the lessons of the Double Eagle operations were largely negative. He pointed

A UH-34 lifts off after bringing Marines into a landing zone during Double Eagle II. Double Eagle II took place in the Que Son Valley, 50 miles to the north of the site of Double Eagle I.

Marine Corps Photo A186763





out that the operations failed primarily because the VC and NVA had been forewarned. Furthermore, and even more important, Krulak contended that both operations taught the people in the area that the Marines "would come in, comb the area and disappear; whereupon the VC would resurface and resume control."⁴¹

The displacement of two Marine battalions and supporting elements from Chu Lai for such an exten-

sive period placed a heavy strain on the remaining units in the TAOR. For example, on 27 February, a VC raiding party hit a squad outpost of the thinly stretched 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. They killed five Marines before being repulsed.⁴² In February, the 7th Marines reported that the local VC initiated more than 60 incidents in its sector.⁴³ The Marines had conducted a major, mobile operation, but they had yet to secure their base areas.

CHAPTER 3

The War in Central I Corps

The Da Nang TAOR—Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification

The Da Nang TAOR

The Marine buildup was well under way in the extensive Da Nang TAOR at the beginning of 1966. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, were reinforced by air, artillery, and a large logistic facility. The four fixed-wing squadrons of Colonel Emmett O. Anglin, Jr.'s MAG-11 were stationed at the main airbase, while three of the helicopter squadrons of Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor's MAG-16 were located across the Da Nang River at the Marble Mountain Air Facility on the Tiensha Peninsula. The headquarters and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Marine Division's artillery regiment, Colonel James M. Callender's 12th Marines, were at Da Nang. One infantry battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, was the Base Defense Battalion, under direct operational control of III MAF. Including the personnel of the Naval Support Group, the Seabees, and Colonel Mauro J. Padalino's Force Logistic Support Group, there were over 24,000 Marines and sailors at Da Nang.

Colonel John E. Gorman's 9th Marines was responsible for the southern and eastern sectors of the Da Nang TAOR, an area of approximately 250 square miles. Bounded by three major rivers, the Cau Do on the north, the Yen on the west, and the Ky Lam on the south, the regiment's zone of action was cut up by numerous streams. Except for a narrow sandy strip along the coast, the area consisted of rich, densely populated farm lands interspersed with heavy vegetation. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler, who on 5 January assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, was responsible for the eastern portion of the TAOR extending from Route 1 to the coast. The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr., occupied the sector of the TAOR be-

tween Route 1 and the main north-south railroad. Lieutenant Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey III's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, under the operational control of the 9th Marines, secured the regiment's western flank by occupying the key terrain between the railroad and the Song Yen. Although the 9th Marines' TAOR extended as far south as the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers, the regiment confined most of its activities, with the exception of some patrolling, to that area north of the Thanh Quit and La Tho Rivers.

The 3d Marines, commanded by Colonel Thell H. Fisher, protected the more sparsely populated northern and western sectors of the 3d Division TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Harold A. Hatch's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, attached to the 3d Marines, tied in with the 9th Marines sector at the Yen River and occupied the strategic high ground west of the airbase. The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III, defended the northern and northwestern approaches, including the Cu De River Valley, where the Marines had first begun their pacification efforts.

Pacification continued to be the principal concern of the regiments at Da Nang. In mid-1965, the Marines first experimented with population security in the village complex of Le My, seven miles northwest of the airbase in the 3d Marines sector. Here the regiment's 2d Battalion, later relieved by the 1st Battalion, occupied defensive positions around the village. Behind this security shield, the Marines instituted a civic action program with the assistance of the local Vietnamese authorities. Le My, at least initially, set the pattern for the Marine pacification campaign.

This system worked well in the lightly populated 3d Marines sector, but the problem was more complex in the 9th Marines area south of Da Nang. A quarter of a million people lived in the villages and hamlets in the 15-mile stretch of land between the airbase and the Ky Lam River. Many were sympathetic to, or dominated by, the Viet Cong; the



Marine Corps Photo A187162

Two men of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines move past a Buddhist tomb while on patrol in the southern part of the Da Nang area of operations. As evidence of Viet Cong influence in the region, the scrawled sign in Vietnamese on the building in the picture reads: "Long Live the People's Revolution."

South Vietnamese Government controlled only a thin belt of territory paralleling Route 1.

During the latter half of 1965, the South Vietnamese began the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign, a pilot pacification program, within the 9th Marines TAOR. The campaign was slated for a 20-square mile, rice-rich, alluvial plain in southern Hoa Vang District containing 38 hamlets. The South Vietnamese divided the target area into two sectors, one consisting of a five-village complex west of Route 1 and the other consisting of a four-village complex east of the highway.

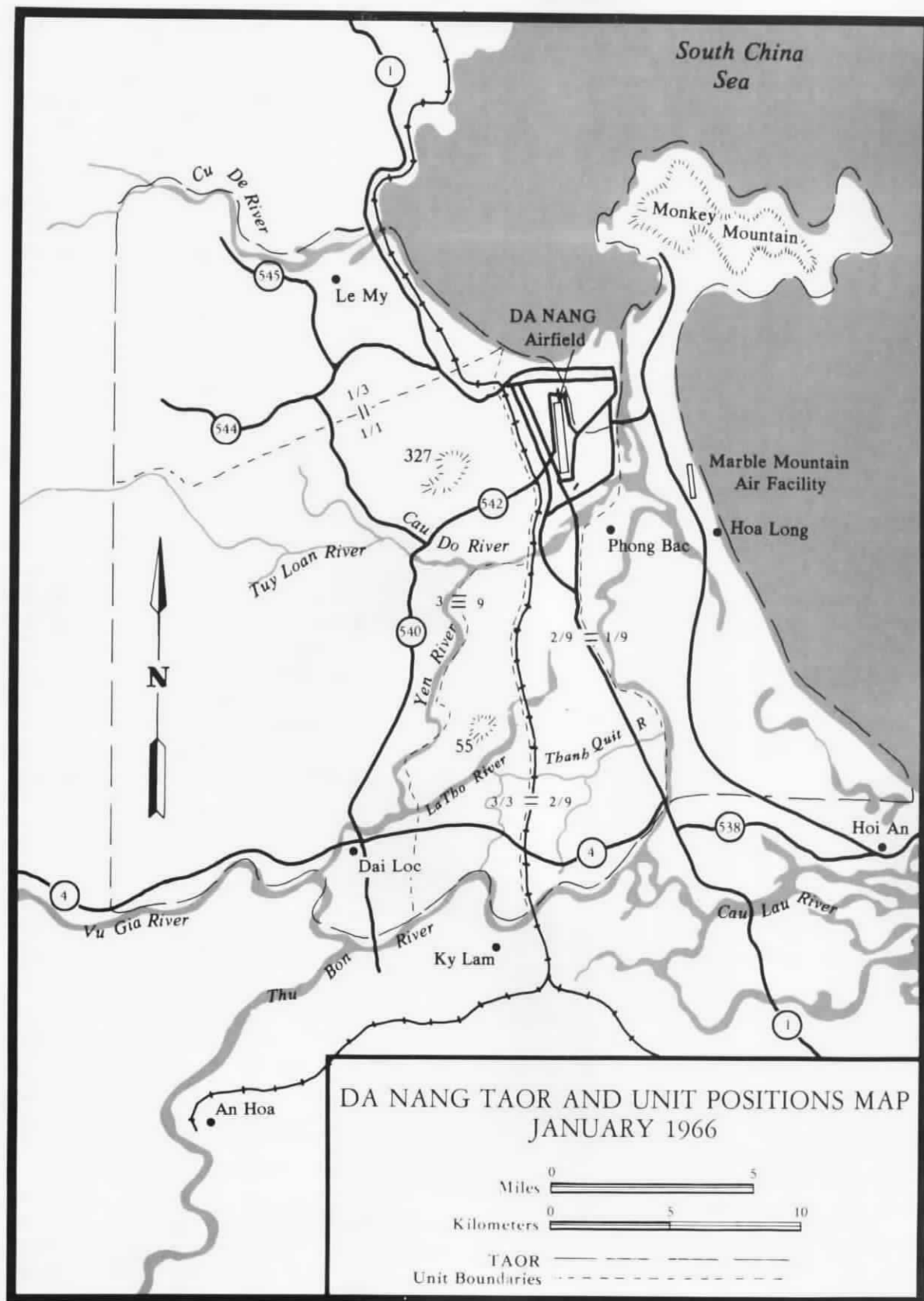
In November 1965, the South Vietnamese assigned a 60-man Rural Reconstruction, or *Can Bo*,* Platoon, to the five-village sector west of Route 1, thus inaugurating the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign. Part of



Marine Corps Photo A186455

A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, pulls the nails from his boot after stepping on a punji trap in the contested sector south of Da Nang. The nails went through the side of the boot but were stopped by the punji liner in the boot.

*The word *Can Bo* is of Chinese origin and during World War II the Communist Viet Minh used the term to designate highly motivated individuals who operated clandestinely against the Japanese and Vichy French. It was their mission to first indoctrinate and then organize the local populace against colonial rule. According to the MACV historian, the South Vietnamese Government attempted to capitalize "on the position of honor and respect these Can Bo occupied in what became a historic and successful revolution . . . and so designated those lower level government employees who worked at the village and hamlet levels." MACV Comd Hist, 1966, p. 502.



the platoon furnished limited security within the hamlets, while the other members assisted the villagers in building up the local economy and meeting community needs. Supplementing the Rural Reconstruction cadre were the 59th Regional Force Battalion (RF) and Popular Force (PF) units. The RF were locally recruited militia who operated directly under the province chief and could be assigned anywhere in the province while the PF personnel operated directly under the district chief and normally remained in their native hamlets. The battalions of the 9th Marines were to provide the forward protective screen for the five villages undergoing pacification.¹

Although there was some initial progress, the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was in difficulty by the beginning of 1966. Both the Marines and the South Vietnamese had overestimated the ease with which they would be able to eradicate enemy influence. One problem the program faced was that nearly 20 percent of the 9,000 families, living in the five villages, were estimated to have Viet Cong relatives. Complicating the situation even further, confusion prevailed among the Vietnamese as to who was

Marines from the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines engage VC in a firefight during Operation Mallard. The operation took place northwest of the An Hoa region, later called the "Arizona Territory" after the western badlands.

Marine Corps Photo A186547

responsible for the campaign. The demarcation of authority between the commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who had operational control of ARVN forces and military responsibility for pacification in Quang Nam, and the Quang Nam Province Chief, who also was responsible for pacification as well as political administration within the province, was vague and a cause for some friction. Nevertheless, the basic factor for the lack of success in the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was the lack of security within the hamlets. The Viet Cong simply avoided the Marine battalions and attacked the understrength South Vietnamese militia and Rural Reconstruction cadre. Over 15 percent of the latter quit their positions. Instead of building up the PFs and RFs, the South Vietnamese removed the province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Trung Tuong, who had originated the concept, from the chain of command. The program continued to flounder through January.²

Another area, the An Hoa region just south of the Da Nang TAOR, was to play a significant role in Marine pacification efforts during 1966. An Hoa lies nestled in a fertile plain 20 miles from Da Nang immediately southwest of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Vu Gia Rivers. To the west, the terrain rises into the foothills of the Annamite mountain range while another series of mountains, the Que Sons, rises to the south and southeast. This small triangular area possesses all the basic ingredients for industrialization. The rivers and small streams in the region form a natural basin with hydroelectric potential. The only coal mine in South Vietnam is located seven miles to the southwest at Nong Son.

The South Vietnamese Government had realized the economic possibilities of this region. In 1962, the Diem regime selected An Hoa as one of its strategic hamlets and started establishing an industrial complex to consist of hydroelectric, water purification, and chemical fertilizer plants. By 1964, the factory equipment was either in Saigon or awaiting shipment to Vietnam. The project engineer, Le Thuc Can, had chosen the sites for the buildings and construction had begun.

It was then the Viet Cong struck, isolating An Hoa from government influence. In late 1964 and early 1965, enemy troops severed the roads in the area leading to Da Nang and the coast. At the same time, they forced the South Vietnamese to halt all con-



struction of a railroad spur to link An Hoa with the main north-south railway.

Despite these setbacks, the French-educated Can was determined to continue the project. At An Hoa, he had gathered together several Vietnamese engineers and established training schools to teach the young Vietnamese peasants the rudiments of mechanics, electronics, and other useful industrial skills. When the roads were cut, Can had supplies flown into the small An Hoa airfield. Eventually, he found it necessary to lengthen the 1,500-foot runway to 3,000 feet in order to accommodate larger aircraft.³

Security continued to be a problem. To protect the industrial area, the hard-pressed ARVN 51st Regiment maintained an infantry company, reinforced by two 105mm howitzers, in the hills to the south. Despite the government presence, the VC *R-20 [Doc Lap] Main Force Battalion* controlled the area surrounding the complex. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF G-3, recalled: "My own feelings at the time [1966] were that an accommodation had been reached between the VC and local ARVN commander. . . ." ⁴*

The 3d Marines' Operation Mallard during January 1966 was the first large III MAF penetration into the An Hoa region. Acting on intelligence that the *R-20 Battalion* had been reinforced by the *5th VC Main Force Battalion*, the Marine regiment, supported by a composite artillery battalion, conducted a two-battalion operation in the area. On 10 January, Air Force C-130 transports flew two 105mm howitzer batteries from the Da Nang airfield to the An Hoa airstrip where the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines established an artillery fire base. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by Company G from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, crossed the Vu Gia River in LVTs and began to search for the VC in the area northwest of An Hoa, later commonly known as the



Marine Corps Photo A186548
A Marine takes time to relax and eat during Operation Mallard. C-Rations were the basic staple of the Marines in the field.

"Arizona Territory" after the Western badlands. A 155mm howitzer battery north of the Vu Gia also supported the operation. On 12 January, MAG-16 helicopters lifted Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which had arrived two days previously at the Da Nang airfield from Chu Lai, into landing zones in the mountains west of An Hoa to exploit a B-52 raid.

The heaviest action occurred during the early morning hours of 14 January in the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines sector. A four-man fire team from Company G, 9th Marines, leaving its platoon's patrol base on the west side of the Thu Bon some 4,000 meters northwest of An Hoa, surprised about 40 VC "deployed in skirmish line with four 60mm mortars on line."⁵ According to the fire team leader, Corporal Mark E. DePlanche:

We moved along this trail when all of a sudden I saw something white move . . . It appeared as though there was a hedgerow along the trail and suddenly two more bushes started moving and I yelled, "Oh God" and started spraying the area to my left. . . .⁶

*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., in his comments, agreed with Colonel Simmons' view that an accommodation existed between the ARVN and the VC and further remarked on the incongruities there: "There were tremendous anachronisms and inequities that stick in my memory. . . . I seem to recall that there were French resident engineers in An Hoa, who continued to live in very comfortable homes and enjoyed speedboating and water skiing on the lake there." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

The three other members of the Marine fire team also opened fire and the startled VC "became disorganized and dispersed," leaving behind the mortars.⁷ A number of the enemy withdrew to a nearby small hill and began throwing down grenades at the Marines. Maintaining radio contact with its platoon, the fire team was soon reinforced and the VC broke contact. Policing the battlefield, the Marines found four dead VC, captured the four mortars, and 80 60mm mortar shells, and recovered 15 enemy packs and a quantity of assorted small arms ammunition. Corporal DePlanche was the only Marine casualty, sustaining a slight wound to his right hand from an enemy grenade. He was later awarded the Navy Cross and the other three members of the team received Silver Stars for the action.

The military results of Operation Mallard, nevertheless, were minimal if measured with the enemy casualty yardstick. Viet Cong units simply fled west into the mountains upon the approach of the Marines. The important aspect of the operation, which ended on 17 January, was the response of the An Hoa population. More than 300 villagers asked to be evacuated to more secure areas. According to the Dai Loc District Chief, these people wanted to

live in their own hamlets "but not until the VC had been driven out. . . . the people wanted the Marines to come back into their area, drive the VC out, and stay there to make security."⁸ General Walt met Le Thuc Can for the first time and was impressed with what the man had accomplished under adverse circumstances and promised that the Marines would return to An Hoa.⁹

The lack of South Vietnamese Government cohesion in I Corps and Viet Cong strength in the Da Nang area prevented General Walt from carrying out his promise to Can for several months. On 25 January, the enemy forces demonstrated their capabilities. Employing 120mm mortars, the VC brazenly shelled the Da Nang Airbase, firing from positions within the Ngu Hanh Son area. Although the attack resulted in the death of one Marine and the wounding of seven others, the mortar rounds caused only minor damage to the base itself.* Again

*This was the second reported attack during the month in which the enemy employed 120mm mortars. In an earlier attack, the enemy shelled the U. S. Army Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province. Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War*, p. 115.

A Marine attempts to make friends with a puppy during Operation Mallard. The interior of the Vietnamese house in the picture is typical of those in the villages surrounding Da Nang.

Marine Corps Photo A186549





Marine Corps Photo A186559

Marines escort villagers who asked to leave their homes for a more secure area during Operation Mallard. Gen Walt promised that the Marines would return to the An Hoa region.

on 15 February, the Viet Cong revealed the vulnerability of government control in the Da Nang sector when an assassination team killed the Le My village chief during a ceremony in one of the Le My hamlets. These instances demonstrated that continued emphasis upon pacification and security in support of pacification was still sorely needed.

Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification

At two high-level conferences early in 1966, U.S. policymakers stressed that pacification in Vietnam should receive greater priority. In January, representatives from General Westmoreland's staff, the

American Embassy in Vietnam, Admiral Sharp's CinCPac staff, and their Washington counterparts met secretly in Warrenton, Virginia, to review the course of the war. The conferees examined the South Vietnamese Rural Reconstruction Program, the label for pacification at the time, as well as the structure of the American civilian assistance organization in South Vietnam. The most important result of the conference was its general focus and direction. William J. Porter, the U. S. Deputy Ambassador to South Vietnam, commented that the watchword in Washington was to become "pacification."¹⁰

The truth of this particular statement became evident the following month at the Honolulu meeting between President Johnson and the Vietnamese Chief of State, Nguyen Van Thieu, and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. On 8 February 1966, the U.S. and South Vietnamese Governments issued the "Honolulu Declaration." President Johnson renewed the American pledge to support the South Vietnamese in their struggle against the Communists, while Ky and Thieu promised renewed dedication to the eradication of social injustices, building of a viable economy, establishment of a true democracy, and the defeat of the Viet Cong and their allies.¹¹ President Johnson stated that as a result of this conference both governments were committed to winning the "other war," an euphemism for pacification. He quoted Henry Cabot Lodge, the U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam: "We have moved ahead here today in the fight to improve the lot of the little man at the grassroots. That is what this is all about."¹²

Despite its emphasis on pacification, the conference was by no means a repudiation of General Westmoreland's large unit strategy. At the conclusion of the conference, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided the MACV commander with a memorandum of understanding as to the consensus of the meeting. The memorandum approved an increase in South Vietnamese and U.S. regular forces and directed "intensified offensive operations against major VC/PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] forces, bases, and lines of communications—almost doubling the number of battalion-months of offensive operations from 40 to 75 a month." In effect, Honolulu endorsed the so-called "balanced approach." As General Westmoreland recently commented: "It was not a matter of either pacification or

actions to thwart enemy main force operations, it was both."¹³

Still, the Honolulu Conference gave a renewed impetus to the country-wide South Vietnamese pacification program. On 21 February, General Nguyen Duc Thang, the Minister for Rural Construction, became the Minister of Revolutionary Development, and the Rural Reconstruction cadre became Revolutionary Development teams, although retaining the Vietnamese designation *Can Bo*. General Thang designated national priority areas to be targeted for an extensive pacification effort in each of the four corps areas.¹⁴

In I Corps, the Ngu Hanh Son area was expanded to include all of Hoa Vang and parts of Hieu Duc and Dien Ban Districts and was redesignated as National Priority Area 1 (NPA 1). Lieutenant Colonel Lap, commander of the 51st ARVN Regiment, was placed in charge of both the security and pacification aspects of the program.¹⁵

Lap's appointment promised both a more vigorous Vietnamese pacification effort and better coordination with the 9th Marines, the regiment largely responsible for supporting the South Vietnamese effort in NPA 1. Colonel Simmons, who relieved Colonel Gorman as commander of the 9th Marines on



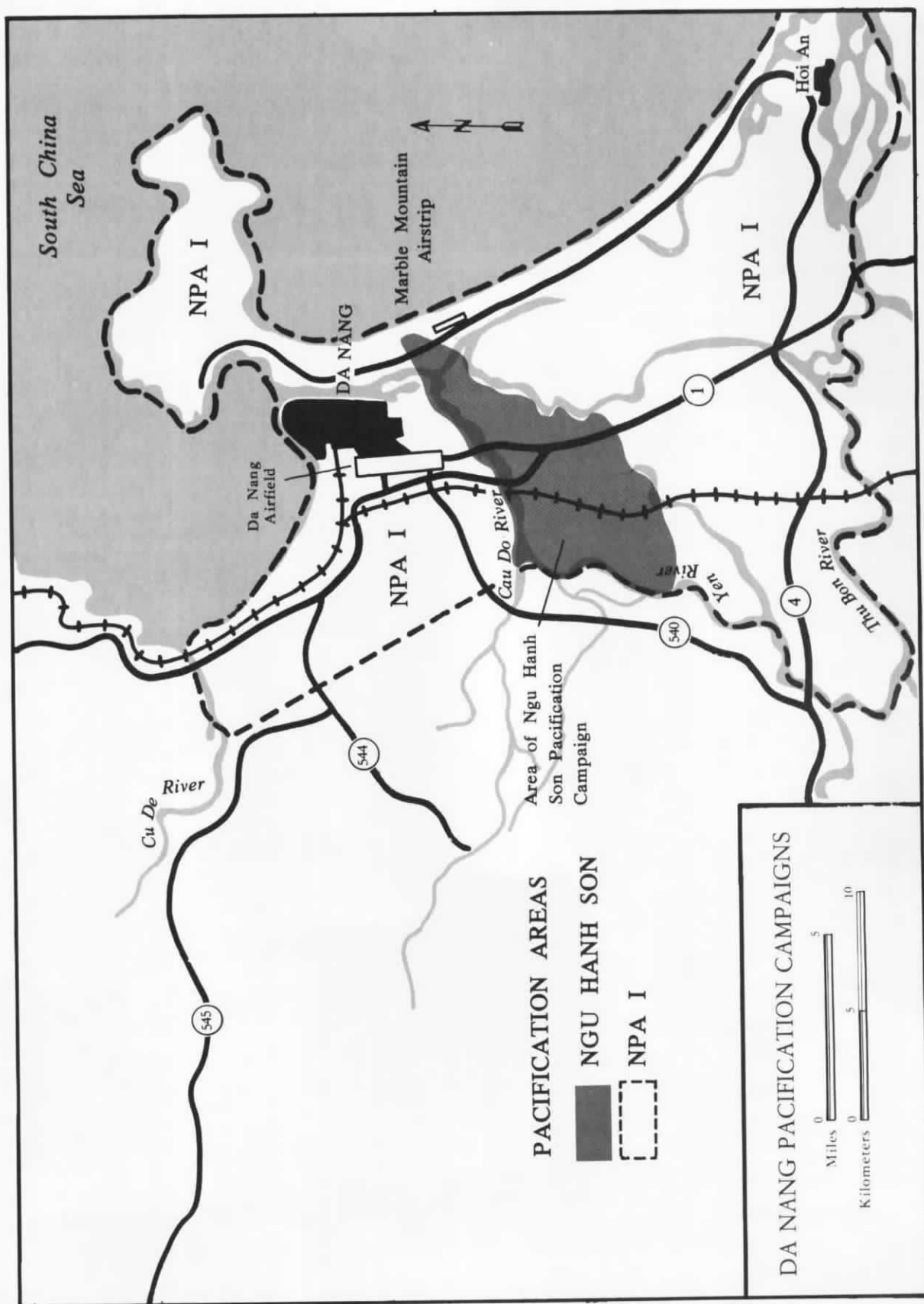
Marine Corps Photo A801847

MajGen McCutcheon, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and Deputy Commander, III MAF, congratulates Col Edwin H. Simmons upon the latter's assumption of command of the 9th Marines. Col Simmons, the former operations officer of III MAF, relieved Col John E. Gorman.

At the Honolulu Conference, President Johnson (at right center) speaks across the table to Vietnamese Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu (leaning forward) and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky (seated to the left of Thieu). To the right of the President is the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





18 February, described Lap as a "compassionate man, brought up in the classical Confucian ethic, [who] had an affinity with the people and a maturity of judgment which previously had been lacking."¹⁶

The Marines for their part continued to experiment with techniques of cooperating in pacification with the local South Vietnamese forces. The 3d and 9th Marines each had an RF company under their command. Lieutenant Colonel "Woody" Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the Base Defense Battalion, had eight PF platoons under its operational control, seven in the vicinity of the main airfield and the eighth in the village of Hoa Long south of the Marble Mountain helicopter facility.

In January, General Walt received permission from General Thi to extend the combined action company program to all Marine enclaves including Da Nang. The program had begun the previous year in the Phu Bai TAOR under Lieutenant Colonel Taylor, then commanding the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. Under its concept, a Marine squad was integrated with a PF platoon on the premise that while the Marines provided training for the local forces they themselves gained knowledge about the local populace and countryside. This, it was hoped, would create a bond of mutual interest among Marines, PFs, and villagers. Although Taylor initiated the training program at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines relieved the 3d Battalion as the Base Defense Battalion on 17 February and established the first formal combined action unit in the TAOR at the Hoa Long Village complex.¹⁷

In the 9th Marines sector, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with South Vietnamese troops and local administrative and police officials, conducted a sophisticated cordon and search operation in the hamlet of Phong Bac on 24-25 February. While the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support and attempted to remain as unobtrusive as possible, South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers. Although the regiment had experimented with this technique in 1965, this was the first operation to have the full cooperation of the local officials and to bear the title, "County Fair."^{*}



Marine Corps Photo A187590
Vietnamese villagers in the hamlet of Phong Bac drink water from Marine lister bags during 9th Marines "County Fair" operations on 24 February 1966. The County Fair concept employed a sophisticated cordon and search technique in which the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support while South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers.

The design of the program was "to convince the people that the GVN (Government of Vietnam) was an effective government that was interested in the welfare of the people and that a GVN victory against the VC was inevitable."¹⁸

During February, the 9th Marines concentrated on plans to eradicate the guerrilla forces in its TAOR. Colonel Simmons reminded his officers that General Walt's highest priority was the pacification effort south of Da Nang.¹⁹ The regimental commander anticipated a gradual, coordinated advance of his battalions from their base areas south of the La Tho and Thanh Quit Rivers to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers. Despite the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two of his rifle companies participated in the Double Eagle operations during most of the month, the remaining regimental units maintained

^{*}See Chapter 14 for further discussion of the combined action and County Fair programs.

a high level of small unit patrolling in preparation for the clearing operation.*

To sustain mobility and flexibility, the regiment stationed a reinforced rifle squad of 22 men at Marble Mountain which could be rapidly helilifted to exploit a VC contact. According to a III MAF special report, this concept, codenamed Sparrow Hawk, gave a battalion commander "a small, effective air-ground unit able to respond . . . in a rapid manner without tying down large forces of either infantry or helicopters." The report concluded that although the 9th Marines had not as yet killed any large number of VC, "the use of this fast-acting force has undoubtedly prevented a number of friendly casualties."²⁰ In an incident on 25 February, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's Company E, one of the battalion's rifle companies remaining in the Da Nang TAOR during Double Eagle, engaged 30 Viet Cong in the hamlet of La Tho Bac (1), 1,000 meters east of the railroad and 2,000 meters north of the La Tho River. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr., the company commander, requested and was reinforced by the Sparrow Hawk squad. According to the 9th Marines situation report for the day, "At 1200 all major units involved linked up (at the river south of the hamlet). . . . Total of 11 VC KIA (body count)."²¹***

The greatest difficulty the 9th Marines encountered during February was not with Viet Cong troops, but with mines and booby traps. Over 70 percent of the regiment's casualties for the month, 12 of the 17 killed and 120 of the 173 wounded, were a result of these explosive devices.²² Extensive

*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, observed in his comments that the deployment of rifle units from Da Nang during Double Eagle "resulted in a quasi-reaction force being organized from service and service support units in the Da Nang TAOR to meet any contingency." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).

**Variations of the Sparrow Hawk technique existed in other sectors as well. Colonel Zitnik commented that "Marines in the Chu Lai sector also operated in a manner similar to Sparrow Hawk, except the designated troops remained in their battalion area and were picked up en route to the target area. Upon initial insertion of the small unit, the parent company (and battalion if necessary) prepared to reinforce its unit again with a larger helo lift." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

enemy use of mines was best exemplified on Hill 55. The hill, 3,000 meters northeast of the confluence of the Yen, the Ai Nghia, and the La Tho Rivers, was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines TAOR. It had to be occupied before any advance could be made to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers.

In late January, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion began mine clearing operations when Captain Grady V. Gardner's Company I secured the hill. During February, the battalion, supported by mine-clearing LVTE-1s from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and engineers from the 3d Engineer Battalion, started the difficult and dangerous task of removing the mines and constructing the forward battalion CP on the low-lying hill. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey recalled that on 4 February, he personally briefed General Krulak "on top of the only engineer constructed bunker there at that time."²³

During the month, the engineers lost a road grader and a light crane to mines while constructing a road and bunkers on the hill. The LVTE-1s expended 31 line charges which caused 99 secondary explosions. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion, remembered that his engineers employed man-pack line charges together with transistorized mine detectors in addition to the engineer tractors to detonate the enemy explosive devices.*** By the end of February, the infantry and engineers had completed most of their mine clearing mission on Hill 55, but as Lieutenant Colonel Dennis later observed, "No sites were ever considered 'cleared' since the VC would remine and booby trap locations we previously had cleared."²⁴

In the 3d Marines sector, Colonel Fisher, an experienced combat veteran of both World War II and Korea, expressed the same concern about the enemy mines and booby traps. Although reporting only light contact with enemy units in February, he

***In his comments, Colonel Dennis remarked that the man-pack units "were not a normal item of issue," for a Marine engineer battalion. Prior to coming to Vietnam, he had seen both the man-pack units and the "new" transistorized mine detectors on a visit to the Army's Fort Belvoir. When he later assumed command of the 3d Engineer Battalion, he requested both items "for testing." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187759

A Marine from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines uses a flamethrower to clear obstacles near Hill 55. This small hill was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines area of operations and was later to be the site of the command post for the regiment.

observed that the number of mine incidents during the month represented a 110 percent increase over January and a 350 percent increase over the preceding four months. All told there were 52 mining incidents in the 3d Marines TAOR during February, the worst occurring near the Cu De River when an amphibian tractor hit a mine, exploded, and caught fire, resulting in the death of five Marines and one ARVN soldier, and the wounding of 20 other Marines and one Navy corpsman. Colonel Fisher concluded that the increasing incidence and sophistication of the enemy explosive devices reflected a determined organized attempt of the VC to

restrict the freedom of Marine patrol activity in the Da Nang TAOR.²⁵

With the expanding small-unit war in the enclave, the Marine infantry buildup at Da Nang continued. After the completion of Double Eagle II at the end of February, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the former SLF battalion, rejoined its parent regiment at Da Nang. The battalion relieved the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in the 3d Marines southern sector. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch's 1st Battalion went into division reserve with its command post at Marble Mountain and prepared to act as a mobile force wherever needed.

CHAPTER 4

A New Threat in Northern I Corps

The Buildup at Phu Bai—The Fall of A Shau—The Aftermath of A Shau—Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon

The Buildup at Phu Bai

At the beginning of 1966, the Phu Bai enclave, centered around the airfield located there and eight miles southeast of Hue in Thua Thien Province, was the smallest and northernmost of the three Marine base areas. The Phu Bai forces consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hanifin, Jr.'s reinforced 2d Battalion, 1st Marines supported by a Marine artillery battalion and helicopter squadron. Lieutenant Colonel Edwin M. Rudzis' 4th Battalion, 12th Marines artillery pieces included 105mm howitzers, 107mm howtars (a combination of a howitzer and mortar), and both towed and self-propelled 155mm howitzers.* HMM-163 under Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. House was the UH-34 helicopter squadron at the base. Rounding out the defensive forces at Phu Bai and attached to Hanifin's battalion, were a platoon each of tanks and Ontos, a platoon of reconnaissance troops, and a platoon of engineers. A small logistics support unit provided the material support for the Phu Bai units. Although the 2d Battalion was under the operational control of

the 3d Marines at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, as the base coordinator, was responsible for the 2,000-plus Marines at Phu Bai and the defense of both the airfield and the U.S. Army's 8th Radio Research Unit facility based there.

Hanifin accomplished his defensive tasks by extensive patrolling throughout the 76-square-mile TAOR. The terrain to the west consisted of low rolling hills. Lack of vegetation and very little population permitted easy spotting of any movement in this area. North and east of the airstrip, an extensive built-up area, consisting of a series of hamlets and ricelands, extended to the waterways. Three rivers, the Dai Giang to the north and east, the Nong to the east and south, and the Ta Trach on the west, formed a semicircle around the Marine enclave, roughly defining the boundaries of the entire TAOR. The combined action company, which was formed at Phu Bai in August 1965, provided the defensive force for the built-up area, called Zone A. Six combined action platoons were in this sector, one in each of the hamlets of Thu Duong, Thuy Tan, Phu Bai, and Loc Ban, and two guarding Route 1 and the railroad bridges. Roving combat patrols kept the enemy off-balance and maintained the security of the base.

Through 1965 and into January 1966, the enemy threat in the Phu Bai area was largely guerrilla in nature. Enemy units confined themselves to night harassment of the Marine perimeter, minelaying, and intelligence gathering. According to the Marine enemy order of battle, only one VC battalion was in the area, the 360-man *810 VC Main Force Battalion*, located in the mountains 14 kilometers south of the base. During January, the Marines mounted three combined operations with the ARVN outside of the TAOR, but accounted for only 22 enemy dead, largely as a result of Marine artillery and air. At the end of the month, the Marines' major concern was with the VC's increased use of mines throughout the TAOR, and not with any major buildup of enemy forces.¹

*The 4th Battalion, 12th Marines was made up of Hq Btry, 4/12; 107mm Mortar Battery, 1/11 with six howtars; Battery B/1/11 with six 105mm howitzers; Battery M/4/12 with six M109 155mm howitzers (SP); and Yankee Battery, a provisional battery, with six 155mm towed howitzers. Colonel Rudzis explained the reason for the existence of the provisional battery when he commented: "... in September 1965 when the M109s ... were brought into Vietnam as replacements for the towed 155mm howitzers, nothing was known about their capabilities in combat, such as durability, maintenance problems and ability to fit into the scheme of tactical maneuvers. Therefore by stretching the personnel assets of the battalion, instead of providing just one six-howitzer medium artillery battery, two were provided consisting of the M109s and the provisional battery of six towed 155mm howitzers." Col Edwin M. Rudzis, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

With the relatively small level of enemy activity in the Phu Bai area, General Walt planned to keep the Phu Bai forces at the same strength until July. At that time, he hoped to obtain operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade and position the Korean Marines at Phu Bai. The U.S. Marine reinforcements arriving during the spring of 1966 would either go to Da Nang or Chu Lai.²

General Westmoreland and his staff, however, perceived a much larger threat in the northern two provinces than did III MAF. In January, MACV intelligence estimates placed 22 Communist battalions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces as opposed to nine identified by the Marine command. At the urging of General Westmoreland, III MAF at the end of January, prepared contingency plans to counter any Communist thrust in the north. These plans called for the entire 3d Marines to deploy north in the event of an enemy attack or major buildup in the north.³

In contrast to January, all signs during February pointed to a marked increase in the presence of enemy main force units in Thua Thien Province, especially near Phu Bai. At the end of the month, Colonel Fisher, the 3d Marines commander, reported, "For the first time since the occupation of the Hue/Phu Bai TAOR, there appears to be considerable enemy interest in that area."⁴ He believed a general Communist main force buildup was in progress. Marine intelligence sources in mid and late February identified two VC regiments, the *1st Provisional* and the *6th VC*, reinforced by two separate battalions, the *803d* and the already identified *810th*, within striking distance or 35 miles of Phu Bai. These same reports indicated that the enemy was planning to attack the Marine base at the beginning of March.⁵

Reacting to this intelligence, the Marine command refined its plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai and for the possible activation of a battalion-sized task unit, under Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, at the base. This task unit, designated Hotel, would have the mission of supporting the hard-pressed ARVN 1st Division. Hanifin would be given operational control of two additional infantry companies which were to arrive from either Da Nang or Chu Lai or both. These companies would provide the 2d Battalion commander enough forces to defend the Phu Bai base area in the event Task Unit Hotel was ac-

tivated and committed outside the TAOR. Other plans called for further reinforcement.⁶

With the approval of Brigadier General English, acting 3d Marine Division commander in the absence of General Walt, who was still on leave, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin on 26 February activated Task Unit Hotel, "for the purpose of providing a reserve for CG 1st ARVN Division."⁷ At this time, the 1st Division was committed to three operations and thinly spread. In Lam Son-234, the Vietnamese were operating in Quang Dien District northwest of Hue and called for Marine assistance. On the afternoon of 26 February, Hanifin attended a briefing at 1st ARVN Division Headquarters at Hue and Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st Division's commanding general, assigned the Marine battalion an objective area in the Pho Lai village complex, some seven kilometers northwest of Hue. According to allied intelligence, a 100-man local force VC company was in the vicinity of the village.⁸

Returning to Phu Bai, Hanifin hurriedly made his plans for the operation, codenamed New York. He assembled, under Task Unit Hotel, three infantry companies, Companies F and G from his own battalion, and Company K from the 3d Marines. The 3d Marines company and Company F from the 9th Marines had arrived at Phu Bai that day from Da Nang. This reinforcement permitted Hanifin to leave three companies behind to cover the base area together with most of the Marine artillery. One Marine battery, the provisional 155mm towed-howitzer battery from the 4th Battalion, had already been committed to Lam Son-234 since 21 February and was in position to provide general support to Task Unit Hotel.⁹

The first phase of Operation New York went as planned except the enemy simply was not in the objective area. Companies F and G of the 2d Battalion moved by truck into jumpoff positions southwest of Pho Lai, arriving at their destination in the late afternoon and early evening of 26 February. About the same time, HMM-163 brought Company K, 3d Marines into blocking positions northeast of the village. Establishing his command group with Companies F and G that evening, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin ordered the two companies into the attack. Companies F and G advanced through Pho Lai without opposition and reached Company K's blocking positions at 2215 that night. Task Unit Hotel remained in the Pho Lai vicinity through the next mor-

ning, but failed to encounter any enemy. The Marine units of Task Unit Hotel were back at Phu Bai by 1815 on the 27th.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin and Task Unit Hotel were to have little rest. An hour and a half after his return to Phu Bai, Hanifin received another call for assistance from General Chuan. The 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment and a small group of Popular Force and Regional Force troops had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* on the supposedly pacified Phu Thu Peninsula located almost immediately to the east of the Phu Bai TAOR. After returning from another briefing at 1st Division Headquarters and receiving permission from III MAF, Hanifin decided to order at 2100 a night helicopter landing of the same forces that he had used in the Pho Lai village area to relieve the pressure on the South Vietnamese battalion. He realized that his men were not fresh, "but they were all that was available. The anticipation of engagement with a VC force boxed in on a peninsula overcame physical handicaps on the part of the troops."¹⁰

Lieutenant Colonel House's HMM-163 landed the three infantry companies of Task Unit Hotel into landing zones just north of the peninsula, completing the entire helilift at 0200 the next morning. Supported by the Marine artillery at Phu Bai on 28 February, Companies F, G, and K advanced abreast toward the southeast. While the South Vietnamese blocking forces from the 1st Battalion moved into position on the enemy's flanks, the Marine com-

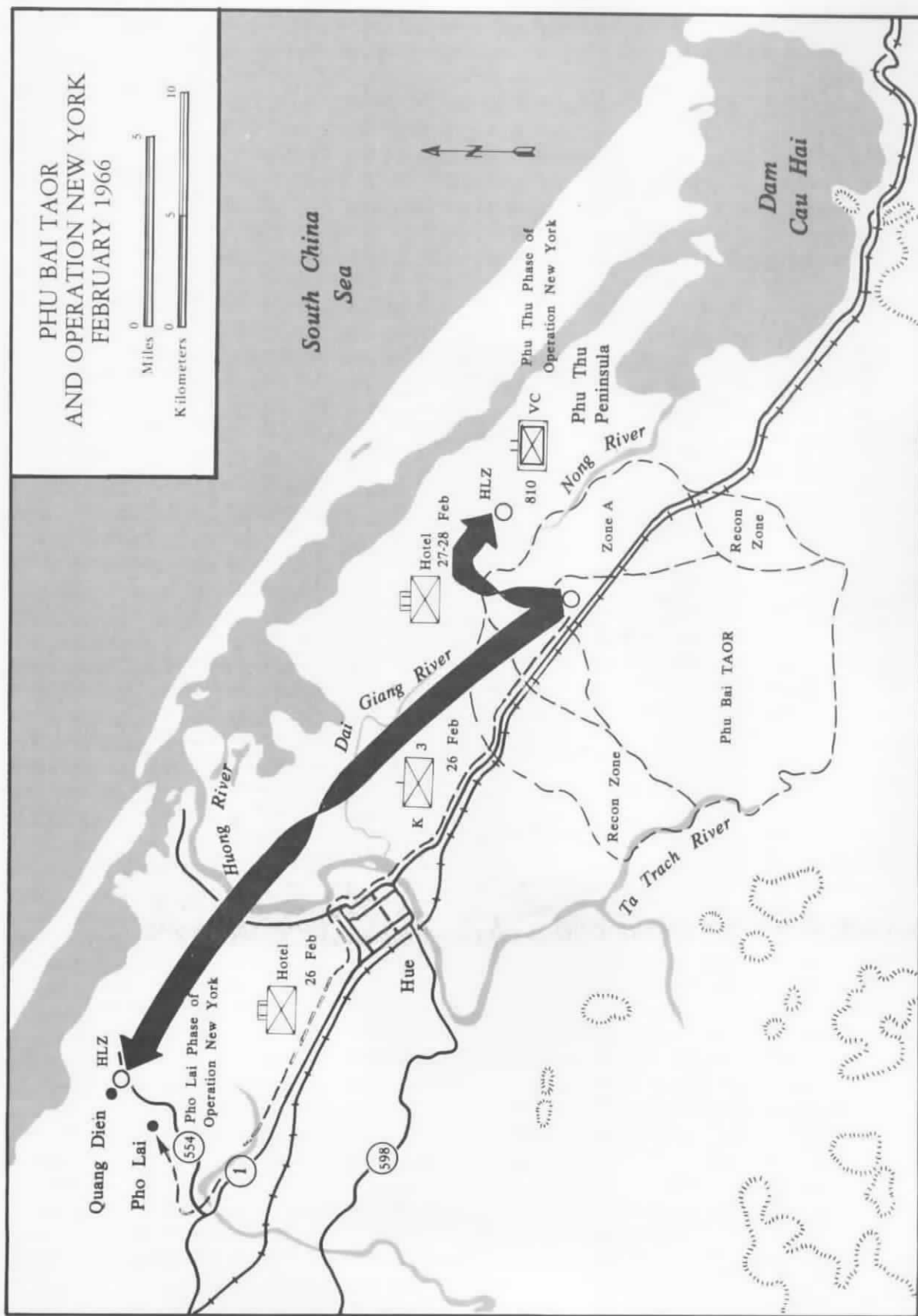
panies made a frontal assault against the well-prepared VC defenses, "at which time the VC broke contact and withdrew in small disorganized groups." The Marines continued the cleanup phase of the operation, meeting occasional enemy resistance, until 3 March. Task Unit Hotel during the one-week operation, also called New York, killed 120 of the enemy, captured 7 more, and seized 69 weapons. The Marines suffered casualties of 17 dead and 37 wounded.¹¹

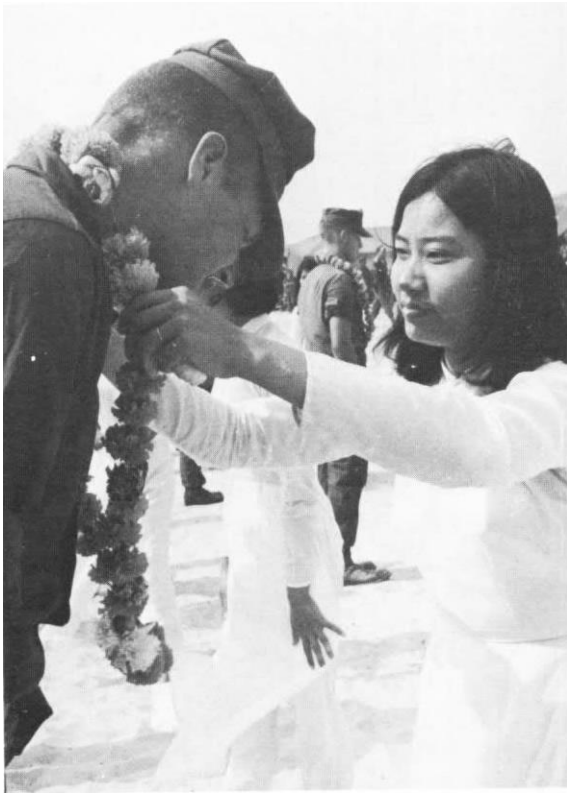
While the Marines conducted Operation New York on the Phu Thu Peninsula, evidence of a growing enemy presence in southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces continued to mount. In Lam Son-235, 1st ARVN Division units operating east and south of Quang Tri City accounted for over 240 enemy troops, but sustained losses of 23 killed and 158 wounded, including two U.S. advisors, through the end of February. Further south, Communist main force troops on 28 February ambushed a 1st Division unit conducting Operation Lam Son-236 in Phong Dien District of Thua Thien Province, 17 miles north of Hue. As a result of this action, the South Vietnamese suffered casualties of 15 killed and 22 wounded, and lost 56 weapons. Closer to Phu Bai, an ARVN unit reported contact on 1 March with a small Communist force at the Truoi River Bridge on Route 1, six miles south of where Task Unit Hotel had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* the day before. Other intelligence revealed that a VC company from the badly mauled *810th*, carrying its

In Operation New York, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines advances on the enemy under cover of Marine air strikes. The Phu Bai-based Marines engaged the 810th VC Battalion on the Phu Thu Peninsula, located just east of the Marine base.

Marine Corps Photo A186946







Marine Corps Photo 187628

A Vietnamese student places a lei around the neck of a Marine from the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. The Vietnamese awarded their Cross of Gallantry to 32 Marines from the battalion for their participation in Operation New York.

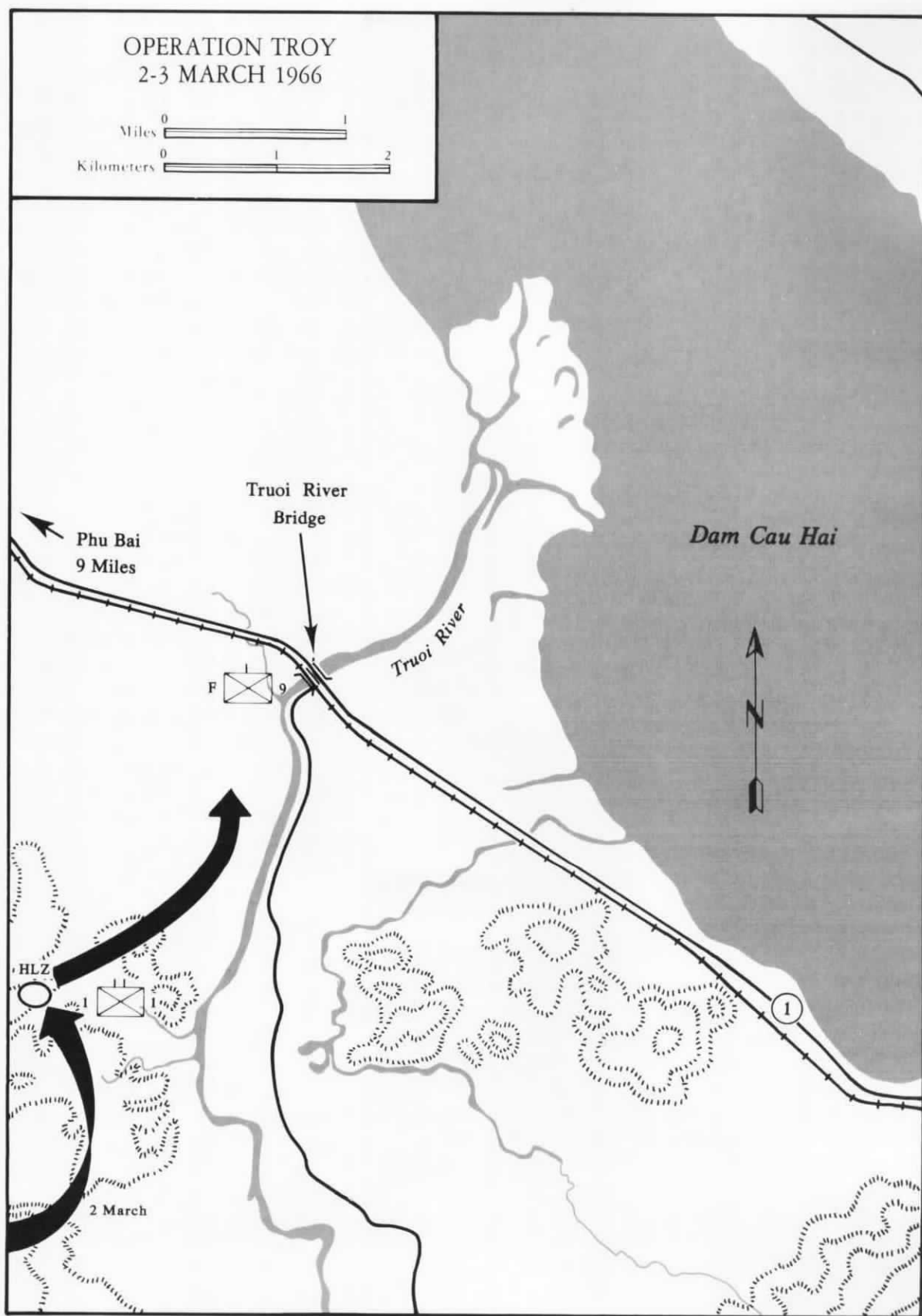
wounded, was moving toward Route 1 just north of the bridge.¹²

Influenced by the general buildup of enemy forces and also wanting to capitalize on the intelligence indicating that the remnants of the 810th were fleeing toward the Truoi Bridge, the Marine command decided to reinforce its northern enclave. While alerting additional units at both Da Nang and Chu Lai and with the concurrence of General McCutcheon, the acting CG III MAF, on March 1 General English ordered the deployment of his reserve battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, to Phu Bai. Company A of the 1st Battalion, which had only been relieved on line earlier that day, departed Da Nang on Marine fixed-wing transports at 1700 on 1 March. The following day, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, his command group, and Company C joined Company A at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher, the

3d Marines commander, also arrived at Phu Bai on 2 March to look over the situation.¹³

Upon his arrival at Phu Bai on 2 March, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch came under the operational control of the 3d Marines. Hoping to trap the retreating elements of the 810th, Colonel Fisher ordered Hatch to conduct an operation in the Phu Loc District of Thua Thien Province, southwest of the Phu Thu Peninsula and south of Route 1 and the Truoi River Bridge. One of the reserve companies of Task Unit Hotel at Phu Bai, Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, already had established blocking positions at the bridge the previous day. Assuming control of the 9th Marines company at the bridge and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch prepared his scheme of maneuver for a three-company operation. At 1230 on 2 March, one and a half hours after the battalion commander first received his orders, helicopters from HMM-163 inserted the 1st Battalion's command group, together with Company E of the 2d Battalion and Company C of the 1st Battalion, into a landing zone 3,000 meters south of Route 1. Remaining west of the Truoi River, the two companies advanced north without encountering any resistance toward the blocking positions of Company F at the bridge. With negligible results, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch closed out the operation, designated Troy, on 3 March, at about the same time Task Unit Hotel secured from Operation New York further north. The remaining elements of the 810th had made good their escape.¹⁴

During this time, Generals English and McCutcheon, after receiving Colonel Fisher's report on the enemy buildup in the area, decided to continue with the augmentation of the Phu Bai defenses. Colonel Fisher returned to Phu Bai at 0815 on 3 March with a small command group from the 3d Marines and established Task Group Foxtrot, assuming responsibility for the Phu Bai enclave. Task Group Foxtrot included both infantry battalions, the artillery battalion, and other supporting forces. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch had only a forward headquarters and two of his own infantry companies at Phu Bai, the rest of his command remaining at Da Nang. Hatch assumed operational control of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin retained control of his four infantry companies and also Company F of the 9th Marines. Rounding out



the new reinforcements, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines arrived from Da Nang with six 105mm howitzers on the afternoon of 3 March and brought the number of artillery pieces under Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis to 30.¹⁵

Although intelligence reports continued to speak of a buildup of VC forces near Hue and the likelihood of an attack against the Phu Bai base, the enemy remained quiescent for the next few days. Task Group Foxtrot spent the time consolidating its defenses and planning the extension of the Phu Bai TAOR.

The Marines were confident that they were in control of the situation. On 4 March, General McCutcheon radioed General Krulak that III MAF in Operation New York and the ARVN 1st Division in Operations Lam Son-234, -235, and -236 had killed over 700 of the enemy. Comparing these operations to the French experience in Vietnam, McCutcheon observed:

This overall campaign took place essentially in the area of the "Street without Joy" where the French in 1953 used about 20 battalions against a Viet Minh Regiment. Contrary to their actions we and the ARVN used about 8 battalions to engage about 6 VC battalions and of these the 806th, 808th, and 810th Battalions were rather severely mauled. Although it was not a perfect operation by any manner or means it did result in victory.¹⁶

McCutcheon concluded:

Furthermore, I believe it substantiates our concept and strategy that the primary battleground is close to the sea because that is where the people are and the people are the primary object for both sides . . . we can act swiftly in strength to good intelligence and engage the enemy on our own terms rather than merely react to his actions or waste our efforts beating the bushes in the hinterlands chasing shadows.¹⁷

McCutcheon's message touched on the continuing debate between MACV and III MAF concerning offensive operations. Since returning from the Honolulu Conference, General Westmoreland placed even more pressure on his command to take the offensive against the enemy main force units. At a high-level MACV commander's conference on 20 February, Westmoreland told the assembled officers that the U.S. had enough troops in Vietnam to step up the tempo of operations "by going out after the Viet Cong rather than sitting around base areas."¹⁸ On 3 March, Westmoreland visited General McCutcheon at Da Nang and reiterated that 50 to 75 percent of the Marine units should be engaged with the

enemy at all times and to "Leave defense of bases to logistic and headquarters types."¹⁹ McCutcheon succinctly defined the MACV philosophy as "defend less and attack more . . ."²⁰ On the other hand, the Marines countered that they were "indeed, on the offensive," pursuing simultaneously their antiguerrilla campaign and large unit actions. They promised to redouble their efforts to demonstrate that they were "doing more offensive work per capita than anybody else and, moreover, that it . . . [was] being done on a balanced basis with some tangible results to show" for their effort.²¹ Despite all of the talk of the offensive, the American command, as evidenced by the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, was largely reacting to unforeseen circumstances and the corresponding buildup of the enemy's forces.

The Fall of A Shau

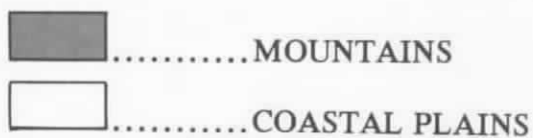
While the Marines reinforced their Phu Bai forces in response to what they perceived as a major buildup in eastern Thua Thien Province, the 95th NVA Regiment completed its preparations for an attack on the isolated A Shau Special Forces outpost in western Thua Thien, some 33 miles southwest of Phu Bai. Manned by a U.S. Special Forces detachment and a South Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG),* this allied camp was ideally situated to monitor enemy movement through the A Shau Valley. The valley, itself, was a major Communist infiltration route about two miles from and parallel to the Laotian border. Surrounded by steep, jungle-covered mountains, this key artery extended along a northwest-southeast axis for about 15 miles. One branch ran westward and joined the elaborate Ho Chi Minh Trail network. Other tributary trails led eastward from A Shau through the mountains into the populated area around Hue and Phu Bai. During 1965, the allies had manned three CIDG bases in the valley, A Loui, Ta Bat, and A Shau. The South Vietnamese had abandoned two of the camps, A Loui and Ta Bat, on 8 December 1965, leaving only the A Shau base in the southern portion of the valley, 13 miles south of A Loui and eight miles south of Ta Bat.

*The CIDG forces, mostly Montagnards, the nomadic tribes which populate South Vietnam's highlands, normally manned the isolated outposts along the borders and were advised by U.S. Army Special Forces.

A SHAU IN RELATION TO DA NANG,
HUE, AND PHU BAI

Miles 0 10 20 30

Kilometers 0 10 20 30 40



In late February and early March, the A Shau garrison obtained intelligence on the presence of the *95th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* in the area. On 28 February, the Special Forces captured an NVA soldier who had maintained a diary. According to the soldier's account, the NVA regiment had left "the friendly country," probably a reference to North Vietnam, on 29 December 1965. Seven days later, 5 January 1966, the unit arrived in the A Shau. Through January and February, enemy patrols reconnoitered the Special Forces camp. The prisoner recorded in his diary that on two occasions, he "had crawled through the first row of barbed wires, surrounding the camp."²² On 5 March, two more North Vietnamese soldiers surrendered to the A Shau defenders. Claiming to be officers from the *325th NVA Division*, the two deserters reported that the enemy planned to attack the A Shau Camp on 11 or 12 March.²³

Reacting to this intelligence, the A Shau CIDG commander asked the South Vietnamese I Corps command for reinforcements. With the 1st Division spread thin in eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and the 2d ARVN Division heavily engaged in Quang Ngai Province, the South Vietnamese had few if any additional forces to send to the isolated outpost. From Nha Trang, the commanding officer of the 5th U.S. Special Forces Group (Airborne) committed one of his mobile strike force companies to A Shau. It arrived at the base on 7 March and increased the allied defenders' strength to approximately 400 men.^{24*}

*Mobile strike forces were small battalion-size units used as reserve or reaction forces. Each mobile strike force consisted of a headquarters and three companies, a total strength of 594 men. The mobile forces were trained to a tactical competence beyond that of a regular CIDG company. A detachment of U.S. Special Forces troops was normally assigned to the strike force. See Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, p. 92. There is no evidence that the Special Forces called upon III MAF for reinforcements prior to the attack and the command relations between the Marines and the Special Forces were rather tenuous. General Simmons recalled: "Westmoreland specifically told Walt that he had authority and responsibility over and for the outposts and the Special Forces. However, the Special Forces covertly resisted this authority." BGen Edwin H. Simmons, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9Sep74 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, recalled in 1978 that he was never overly impressed with the military efficiency of the Special Forces and "never too sure of the accuracy of their intelligence reports or combat action reports." Col Roy C. Gray, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 20July78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Believing that an attack was imminent, the A Shau garrison commander on the night of 8 March placed the camp on a general alert. At 0300 on the early morning of the 9th, the North Vietnamese opened up with a heavy two-and-one-half hour mortar barrage, inflicting 50 casualties on the defenders and destroying several buildings. Under cover of the mortar attack, two enemy companies probed the camp's southern defenses with the apparent mission of cutting through the wire and determining the camp's firepower. Throughout the remainder of the day, the enemy continued pressure on the base, but refrained from launching a full-scale ground assault.²⁵

A Shau was beyond the range of friendly artillery, enabling the enemy to take full advantage of the weather and surrounding mountains. A heavy ground fog shrouded the valley and a 100-foot cloud ceiling limited the effectiveness of allied air support. The nearest Marine Air Support Radar Team (ASRT), equipped with TPQ-10 radar, was at Da Nang, 60 miles away and out of range. Ground controllers could not conduct radar bombing missions around the perimeter. General McCutcheon, the wing commander, directed the Chu Lai ASRT to deploy to Phu Bai, where on subsequent days it was able to provide TPQ support for the camp.²⁶

North Vietnamese gunners, on the 9th, shot down an Air Force AC-47 "Puff the Magic Dragon" ground support plane. An Air Force helicopter was able to rescue three of the crewmen from the wreckage at the crash site north of A Shau.

While weather hampered the fixed-wing pilots on the first day of fighting, a few helicopters were able to reach the camp. Two Marine helicopter crews, on search and rescue alert at the small Quang Tri City airstrip, took off for A Shau to evacuate wounded. The two UH-34s from HMM-363, piloted by Lieutenants Richard A. Vasdias and David E. Brust, respectively, skimmed under the overcast. When it attempted to land at the camp, Vasdias' aircraft was hit in the oil line and crashed within the compound. Brust quickly touched down, picked up the downed Marine crewmen, and flew to Marble Mountain Air Facility at Da Nang. The crashed helicopter was later destroyed by U.S. forces.

Shortly after noon on the 9th, the A Shau defenders radioed: "We suspect we are heavily infiltrated, don't think the camp will last the night without reinforcement."²⁷ At this point, I Corps in-

formed III MAF that a CIDG company would arrive at Phu Bai from Nha Trang to be helilifted into A Shau. The Marines also placed two companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on alert at Phu Bai, but also told the I Corps command not to expect any helicopter support unless the weather conditions cleared up.²⁸

That afternoon, Brigadier General Marion E. Carl, the assistant wing commander and one of the Marine Corps' first helicopter pilots, flew his own UH-1E from Da Nang to Phu Bai. According to Carl, he then discussed the A Shau situation with Lieutenant Colonel House, the HMM-163 commander.²⁹ House later commented that General Carl stopped off at Phu Bai to refuel his aircraft, but did not talk to him. The squadron commander remarked in 1978, "We anticipated commitment, so recon'd the route."³⁰ In any event, General Carl took off from Phu Bai to look over the objective area for himself. He later recalled that the weather "would come down, go up, go down . . ."³¹ At 1500, III MAF informed MACV that the helilift of the CIDG company into A Shau would begin at 1620, but shortly afterward had to postpone the lift because of the weather and the enemy's concentrated anti-aircraft guns surrounding the camp. By 1700, it was clear that the reinforcements could not be flown in that

evening. All the Marines at this point could accomplish was to monitor the radio communications and prepare plans for the next morning.³²

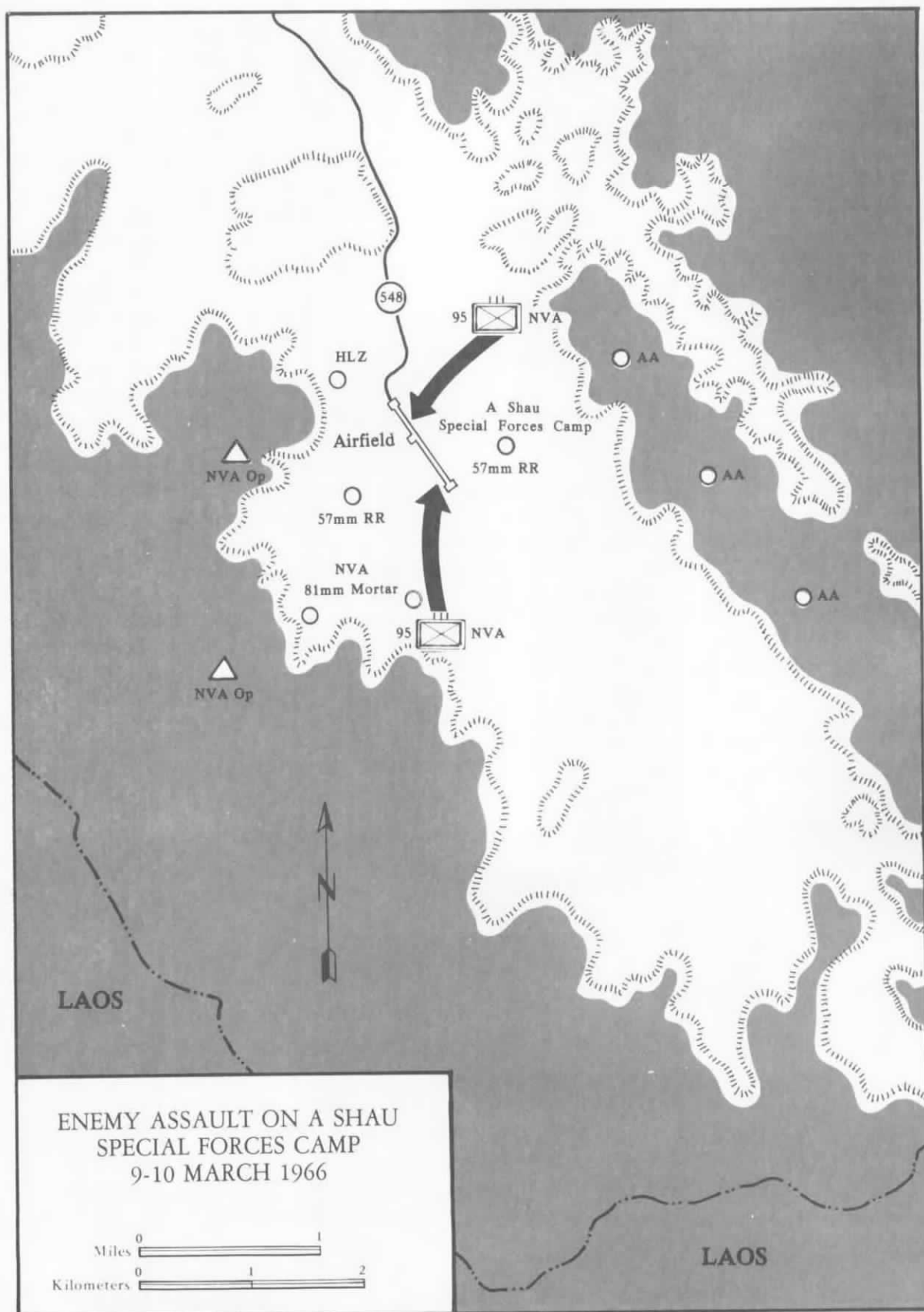
In the early morning hours of 10 March, the North Vietnamese began their final assaults on the besieged camp. Initiating the action at 0400 with an intensive mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment which lasted for about an hour, the enemy followed up with a heavy ground attack which breached the southern and eastern defenses. With the enemy troops surging into the compound, the defenders either retreated across the runway into the communications bunker or into hastily-built fighting positions along the northern wall. Some of the South Vietnamese irregulars fought bravely while others surrendered en masse to the North Vietnamese. According to Captain John D. Blair IV, USA, the Special Forces detachment leader, the CIDG camp commander hid "in various bunkers making no effort to lead or command during the entire battle." At 1000, Blair requested that the camp with the exception of the communication bunker and the northern wall be bombed and strafed.³³

Despite heavy cloud cover and the steep mountains surrounding the valley, Marine and U.S. Air Force aircraft had been providing close air support since the early morning. In one of the missions, the

An aerial view of the A Shau Special Forces Camp near the Laotian border in western Thua Thien Province before the assault on the camp by the 95th NVA Regiment. The surrounding mountains combined with heavy clouds to hinder allied relief and evacuation efforts.

U.S. Air Force Photo 96256





Marines lost an A-4 Skyhawk from MAG-12. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Augusto M. Xavier, the leader of a two-plane flight from Chu Lai, arrived over the camp in predawn darkness and ordered his wingman to orbit above the cloud cover. Xavier descended through the overcast under the glow of parachute flares dropped by an Air Force C-123. He maneuvered his Skyhawk around the mountains and made a low-level bombing pass on the enemy positions. In the face of heavy ground fire, he made a second pass, this time strafing the NVA with 20mm cannon fire. Xavier failed to pull out and crashed into the side of a mountain. For his actions, Lieutenant Xavier was posthumously awarded the Silver Star. The commander of MAG-12, Colonel Leslie E. Brown, later commented: "Xavier's performance on this mission might indeed be termed a classic in an aviator's determination to support the man on the ground."³⁴

An Air Force aircraft was also lost while supporting the camp on 10 March, but the pilot was saved in an unusual rescue. Major Bernard F. Fisher from the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku led a flight of Douglas A-1E Skyraiders over A Shau. One of the Skyraiders, piloted by Major Dafford W. Myers, suffered heavy damage from ground fire. Major Myers made a forced landing on the dirt strip at A Shau and escaped seconds before the plane exploded. Major Fisher immediately called for a rescue helicopter, but then saw that the air strip below him was swarming with enemy soldiers. He then decided to rescue the downed pilot himself. Fisher landed his A-1E on the shell-cratered runway and Myers quickly scrambled into the cockpit with him. While the NVA fired at the aircraft, Fisher gunned his engine and successfully took off. For his action, Major Fisher was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

Despite the heroics of the Marine and Air Force aviators, the situation on the ground for the A Shau defenders continued to deteriorate. Shortly after noon, they radioed "Need reinforcements—without them kiss us goodbye," and 20 minutes later sent the message "Do not have area where they can land reinforcements."³⁵ The options open to the allied command in response to these appeals were limited. Given the miserable weather, marginal flying conditions, mountainous terrain, and concentrated enemy antiaircraft and ground strength in the area, the helilifting of reinforcements into the camp was now out of the question. Two choices remained: to at-

tempt a helicopter evacuation of the trapped garrison, or to tell the defenders to break out and escape the best they could.

Later in the afternoon of 10 March, General Walt, recently promoted to lieutenant general and just back from leave, chaired an emergency meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the A Shau situation. All of Walt's senior officers were present at the conference; Lieutenant General John A. Heintges, Deputy Commander, USMACV, represented General Westmoreland, and General Chuan was the Vietnamese I Corps command representative. Brigadier General Carl, who earlier in the day had made another reconnaissance flight over A Shau in his UH-1E and, in fact, had been 20-minutes' flying time from A Shau when Major Fisher made his dramatic rescue, recommended the immediate evacuation of the camp. Having witnessed the low overcast and heavy antiaircraft fire in the area, he warned that the Marines stood the chance of losing one out of every four helicopters in the evacuation attempt but believed "we could not abandon the troops encircled there."³⁶ Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, who was also at the meeting, remembered:

The weather was lousy and there was not too much daylight left for an evacuation attempt. . . . Everything considered it was decided to have HMM-163 make an attempt to get under the weather into the valley for one last attempt. As I recall we merely called the Phu Bai Squadron on the land line phone and asked them to give it a try, explaining the situation as best we could and advising that if the Special Forces types had to "bug out" they would be outside the camp over the north wall.^{37*}

*As previously noted, General Carl and Lieutenant Colonel House have differing recollections on the events that led to the decision to order the helicopter evacuation of the camp. General Carl recalled that on the morning of the 10th he had stopped off at Phu Bai and discussed with Lieutenant Colonel House the feasibility of flying into the Special Forces camp. According to Carl, House responded that the weather had not improved and recommended against any further flights into the valley, but "would make the effort if so ordered." Carl then took off in his UH-1E and made his own reconnaissance of the area. Carl Comments, 1969. Lieutenant Colonel House, on the other hand, denied that he had any discussion with General Carl on 10 March. According to House, "I was told to go by Wing G-3, but said I would only go if ordered by the Wing Commander. Later, I received another call, 'It's an order.'" LtCol Charles A. House, Comments on drafts MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

At A Shau, the defenders on the 10th continued to hold out the best they could. Under cover of the American air support, Captain Blair's forces made several unsuccessful counterattacks on North Vietnamese positions on the southern wall, but finally had to give up the attempt to dislodge the heavily entrenched enemy. At 1415, American aircraft broke up an enemy concentration east of the camp, but the North Vietnamese continued to place heavy fire on the allied defenders on the northern wall and in the communication bunker. By 1500, the end was in sight. According to Blair's account, "Almost all friendly crew-served weapons were destroyed. Very little ammunition remained. No food and water had been available for 36 hours."³⁸ At 1530, the defenders received word that the Marine helicopters would arrive in about an hour and a half to take them out. At approximately 1730, Blair ordered the evacuation of the camp and the establishment of a helicopter landing zone, about 300 meters north of the camp. The plan was for the able-bodied Special Forces troops and the irregulars to fight a rearguard action while the wounded were placed first on the aircraft.³⁹

Shortly after 1730, Lieutenant Colonel House led 16 UH-34s from his squadron, supported by six UH-1Es from VMO-2 and fixed-wing aircraft, into the valley. According to one account, a North Vietnamese machine gun on a hill just north of A Shau opened fire on House's aircraft as he approached the camp. Veering away from the fire, the squadron commander, "noticed the survivors pouring over the parapets on the north side. . . ."⁴⁰ House then turned around and began his descent into the improvised landing zone.

There was chaos on the ground. The South Vietnamese irregulars had panicked and abandoned the wounded. They clambered over one another in order to get into the helicopter. House later stated in a television interview: "So many people wanted to get out, they hung on the cables, almost pulled the helicopters into the zone." Attempting to create a semblance of order, the Special Forces troops clubbed some of the able-bodied South Vietnamese off the aircraft with their rifle butts. When this failed, the Americans fired into the hysterical men. House observed during the television interview:

. . . it was a hell of a thing to have to do; some of them had to be shot in order to maintain control. . . . I know of no other answers in a case of this nature. It was either that or

sacrifice everybody. That's the only decision to be made.^{41*}

As House's aircraft began to rise, a North Vietnamese recoilless rifle round struck its tail section, causing the helicopter to crash 260 meters from the landing zone. House and his crew then joined the Special Forces on the ground. The North Vietnamese also shot down House's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William J. Gregory. Gregory, his copilot, and crew chief survived and made their way to another helicopter, but the gunner was forced to hide in the bush. In addition to the two downed aircraft, three Marine F-4Bs, two A-4s, two UH-1Es, and three other UH-34s sustained damage, but returned to Phu Bai. With approaching darkness and deteriorating weather, the wing halted the evacuation of the camp. Only one flight had been able to get into the landing zone, but the helicopters succeeded in taking out 69 of the defenders, including four of the U.S. Army advisors.⁴²

With the end of the evacuation attempt on the 10th, the survivors of the camp escaped into the jungle to avoid capture. Lieutenant Colonel House took command of a ragtag group, including his crew, the gunner from Gregory's aircraft, South Vietnamese irregulars, and Army advisors. Shortly after noon on the 11th, Marine pilots from HMM-163, searching for the evacuees, spotted House and his men in a small clearing, approximately 3,000 meters northwest of the previous landing zone. As the helicopters landed, there was once more difficulty with the CIDG, who rushed pell-mell to get on board the aircraft. House later claimed that the Special Forces had to shoot about 13 of the irregulars.⁴³ The Special Forces, on the other hand, denied killing any of the South Vietnamese, but declared they and some of the CIDG maintained

*The evidence is unclear who initiated and took part in the shooting of the Vietnamese troops. House declared in the aforementioned interview that the Special Forces troops took the initiative: "They knew the men more and they were well aware that was the only way the situation could be solved." See Transcript of Intvw, Current News, dtd 15Mar66, p. 4. The Special Forces, on the other hand, reported that Lieutenant Colonel House ordered his crew to shoot the Vietnamese. See 5th Special Forces Group AAR, Battle for A Shau, dtd 28Mar66 (Acc. No. 69A729). In a message to Washington, MACV declared that the helicopter crew chief and a Special Forces sergeant were involved in the shooting of the CIDG. See ComUSMACV msg to SecDef OASD PA, dtd 16 Mar66 (III MAF Msg & Jnl Files).

control, "by using butt strokes and firing" in front of the feet of the terror-stricken men.⁴⁴ The UH-34s succeeded in taking out about 60 of the group, including House, six other Marines, and one Special Forces soldier.⁴⁵

On the following morning, seven aircraft from HMM-163 and two from VMO-2 flew through extensive ground fire and evacuated 34 more survivors, including two Marine crewmen and five Army advisors. On the ground, the CIDG panicked and fought among themselves. One of the South Vietnamese threw a grenade, killing 10 of the struggling troops. According to the Special Forces, "U.S. personnel . . . witnessed the action, but did not participate in the shooting."⁴⁶ All of the Marine aircraft returned safely to Phu Bai, but many sustained severe damage. Captain Wilbur C. McMinn, Jr. nursed his crippled UH-34 back to base with 126 bullet holes in the aircraft. According to Lieutenant Colonel House, 21 of the 24 helicopters of this squadron eventually had to be replaced as a result of the three-day evacuation operation.⁴⁷

Following House's return to Phu Bai, CBS Correspondent John Laurence conducted an interview with the squadron commander that appeared on national television and caused some furor. In addition, syndicated columnist Jim Lucas wrote an article relating to the performance of the CIDG troops at A Shau. At the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, MACV and III MAF completed an investigation into the "unfavorable TV and press releases in the U.S. . . ."⁴⁸ Lieutenant Colonel House had the dubious distinction of receiving a Navy Cross and a letter of reprimand for his part in the A Shau evacuation. According to General Carl, who presided over the investigation, House's difficulty arose out of his statement to the press.⁴⁹ Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, commanding officer of MAG-16 and House's immediate superior, wrote in 1978:

I had flown with Chuck House on several missions and knew him to be a dedicated Marine. Unfortunately upon his return from A Shau he made some rather emotionally charged statements to authority about the wisdom and futility of the mission, thus the anomalous results of both a citation and disciplinary action.⁵⁰

Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the wing G-3, recalled that Lieutenant Colonel House in conversation with both reporters and with senior commanders "ex-



Marine Corps Photo A194536
LtCol Charles A. House, the commander of HMM-163, whose helicopter was shot down during the evacuation of A Shau, poses at Phu Bai with U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers and South Vietnamese irregulars who survived the enemy overrunning of the base. Capt John D. Blair IV, USA, who commanded the Special Forces detachment is to the right of LtCol House.

pressed considerable bitterness and criticism of the Wing and how the mission was handled." Gray then declared that House was "probably right, but in retrospect I don't know what else there was to do except either forget A Shau or make an attempt for the pickup of survivors as was done."⁵¹

With the end of the helicopter evacuation of A Shau on 12 March, those survivors who escaped the enemy attack and missed the airlift had little choice but to try to make the long trek over the mountains to friendly lines. For the allies, the battle had been costly. In addition to aircraft lost during the fighting, 248 out of the total garrison of 434 were either missing or dead, including five U.S. Special Forces soldiers. Marine helicopters, mostly from HMM-163, flew 131 sorties from 9-12 March and brought back 161 of the 186 survivors, including 10 of the 12 Army advisors who got out. The fall of the A Shau Camp opened the way for increased enemy infiltration of men and material through the valley into central I Corps.⁵²

The Aftermath of A Shau

During and immediately after the fall of A Shau, the allied commanders in I Corps evaluated the idea of launching a combined operation into the valley. On the morning of 10 March, General Chuan, the 1st Division commander, gave serious consideration to the insertion of one of the I Corps reserve battalions, reinforced by Marines, to relieve the embattled garrison. With one battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on three-hour alert at Phu Bai since 9 March, III MAF on 10 March placed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on one-hour standby at Chu Lai for possible air movement to Phu Bai.⁵³

Despite the decision of the meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the afternoon of the 10th not to send infantry reinforcements into A Shau, the Marines continued to maintain the two battalions on an alert status and strengthened the forces at Phu Bai. At 2000 on the 10th, the rear elements of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang, hampered by rain and darkness, began loading their equipment on 41 trucks for movement to Phu Bai. The truck convoy departed Da Nang at 0630 on the 11th and arrived at its destination at 1330 that afternoon. The following night, III MAF ordered the deployment of the battalion command group and two companies of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, his headquarters, and his Companies A and B arrived at Phu Bai by KC-130 transports on 13 March. Colonel Fisher, Commanding Officer, Task Group Foxtrot, now had the principal elements of three Marine infantry battalions under his command at Phu Bai.⁵⁴

During the next few days, the South Vietnamese pressed for a large search and destroy operation in the A Shau Valley and the reestablishment of a Special Forces camp in the area. On 15 March, General Chuan, who had just relieved General Thi as a result of a falling out between Thi and Premier Ky, urged the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff to intercede with MACV for such a course of action. Explaining that he already had committed most of his reserve forces into strategic areas near Hue that were now threatened because of the fall of the camp, Chuan wanted the Marines to make up the bulk of the attacking forces into the A Shau Valley itself.⁵⁵

Despite Chuan's recommendation, the allied commanders finally rejected the idea of a direct

assault at this time into the valley. Both Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, now at Phu Bai with the two companies of his battalion, remembered that their units remained on alert for several days for an operation into the valley. Sullivan described A Shau "as a place for disasters to occur in . . ." and recalled:

After an aerial recon, and talking to Chuck House and others, I became convinced that if two bob-tailed battalions were to be sent into A Shau, that someone had better have a string on a regiment in case we stepped in defecation. Fisher agreed, and the operation was called off.⁵⁶

American and South Vietnamese intelligence during this period continued to show a buildup of enemy units in the two northern provinces. The U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division reported to General Walt that despite the relative quiet in the division's sector, the available intelligence indicated the movement of enemy units and the possibility of a major enemy campaign in the northern two provinces. He pointed to an enemy regiment with three battalions massing near Quang Tri City and another two battalions, the 802d and 804th of the 1st VC Provisional Regiment, in the Co Bi Thanh Tan area about 15 miles west of Hue, and moving toward Route 1 and the coast. As yet, the allied commanders had no hard evidence of the intentions of the 95th Regiment, which had just overrun the A Shau Camp.⁵⁷

In order to obtain such information, the South Vietnamese brought into I Corps a special long-range reconnaissance group called Project Delta. The Project Delta forces consisted of six-man reconnaissance teams made up of four South Vietnamese Special Forces troops and two U.S. Army Special Forces advisors; five-man CIDG road patrols, nicknamed "roadrunner" teams; and a reaction force of South Vietnamese Army ranger companies. From 17 March through 29 March a total of 10 Project Delta reconnaissance teams, 3 roadrunner teams, and 2 ranger companies shuttled in and out of an approximately 150-square-mile operating area extending southwest of Hue to the Quang Nam-Thua Thien border. Although not entering the A Shau Valley itself, the teams penetrated the most significant infiltration corridors leading from the valley into the coastal region. Enemy gunners shot down,

during the course of the inserts and extractions, two Army helicopters, and Communist antiaircraft fire forced the aborting of several missions. The reconnaissance teams spotted several enemy concentrations and called either artillery or air strikes on various occasions against such forces. Nevertheless, the teams accounted for only four confirmed enemy dead and one wounded. The results of the extended intelligence operation were tentative. Despite finding some enemy units, the teams obtained little evidence of a major NVA buildup in the area southwest of Hue. The North Vietnamese plans to exploit their A Shau victory remained obscure.⁵⁸

Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon

While the deliberations over returning to A Shau continued and the Project Delta forces operated southwest of Hue, General Walt made new plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai. In a discussion on 12 March with Marine Brigadier General William K. Jones, the director of the MACV Command Center, whom General Westmoreland had sent to Da Nang to discuss the situation with III MAF, Walt declared that he decided to position four battalions permanently at Phu Bai. Two of the battalions would be from the Korean Marine Brigade, slated to arrive later in the spring.⁵⁹ Two days later, the III MAF commander began to implement his decision to build up his northern base. He ordered Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the commanding officer of the 4th Marines, whose headquarters personnel provided most of the staff for the Chu Lai ADC command group, to prepare to move his headquarters to Phu Bai and assume control of the TAOR from Task Group Foxtrot. At the same time, Walt requested the Seventh Fleet to land BLT 3/4, which had embarked on amphibious shipping on Okinawa for return to Vietnam, at Hue/Phu Bai instead of Da Nang as originally scheduled. The same ships would then be used to reembark Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's headquarters group and two companies for return to Chu Lai. When the ships arrived at Chu Lai, the 4th Marines Headquarters would then embark for movement to Phu Bai.⁶⁰

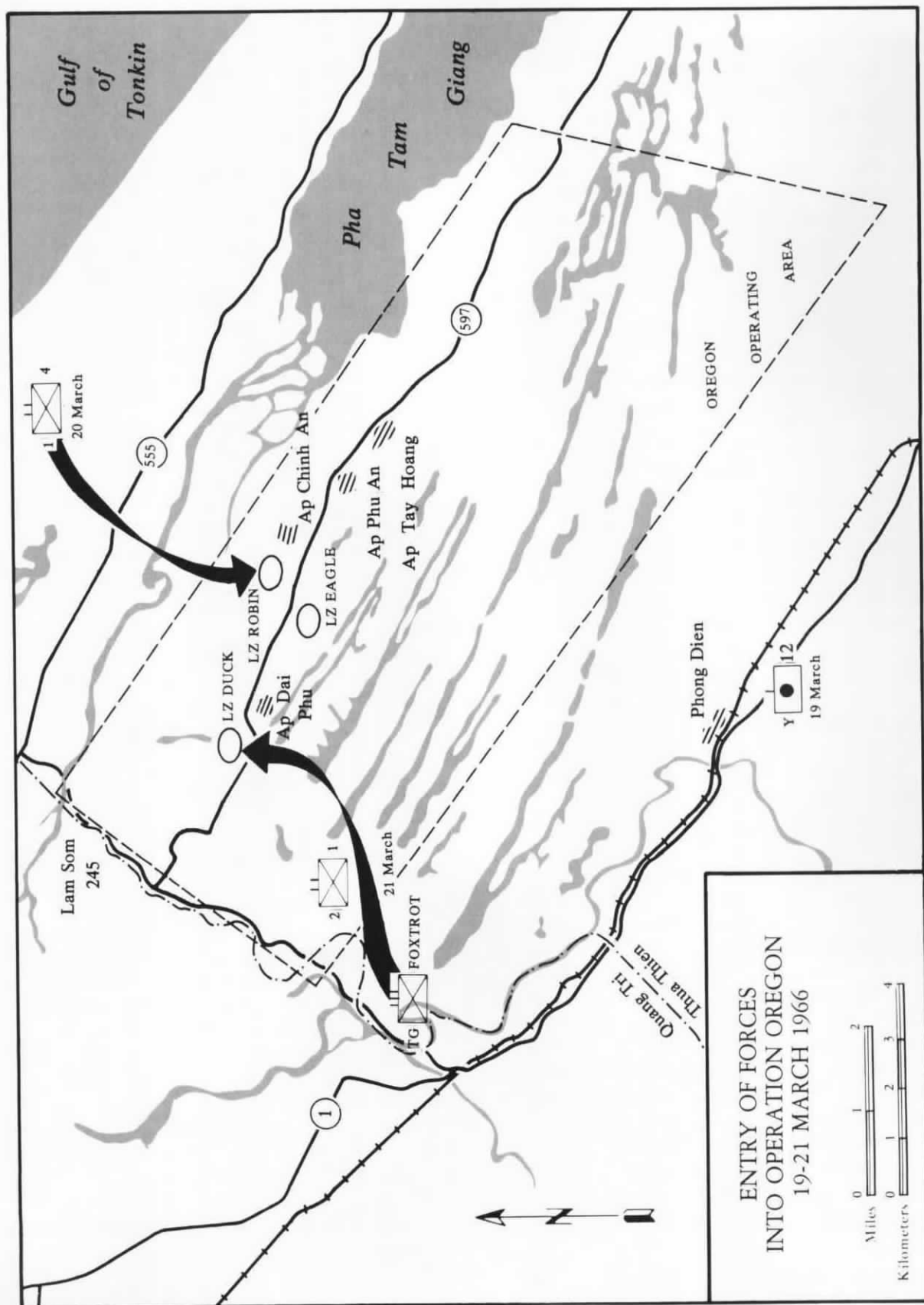
On 19 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sumner A. Vale's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines debarked from amphibious shipping and arrived at Phu Bai, ending for the time being the intratheater battalion rotation

program between Okinawa and Vietnam. But once more events altered Marine plans. Instead of returning to Chu Lai with the arrival of the ships, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command was committed to an operation 20 miles north of Hue.

Earlier, on 17 March, General Chuan had requested III MAF to provide a Marine company for a combined operation with a South Vietnamese unit in an area south of Phong Dien, the district capital where the ARVN had killed about 50 enemy troops from the *804th VC Battalion*. General Walt, on the following day, directed Colonel Fisher, the Task Group Foxtrot commander, to make liaison with the ARVN 1st Division. That afternoon, Fisher visited the division headquarters in Hue where he learned that the target area was in the coastal plain between Route 1 and the sea some 8,000 meters north of Phong Dien, rather than south of the town as originally indicated.⁶¹

With the concurrence of Walt and the South Vietnamese, Colonel Fisher decided upon a battalion-size operation and to hold in reserve both a Marine and a South Vietnamese battalion. His plan for Oregon, as the operation was named, called for the helicopter insertion on the morning of 19 March of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and Companies A and B into two landing zones, designated Eagle and Robin, located north and south respectively of Route 597, which roughly paralleled Route 1. The two Marine companies were to advance to the southeast on either side of the road and clear the hamlets of Ap Phu An and Ap Tay Hoang, some 4,000 meters from the landing zones. Allied intelligence placed two companies of the *VC 802d Battalion* with some VC local force units at an approximate strength of 250 men in the two hamlets. If Sullivan's companies made contact with the enemy, Fisher planned to reinforce the battalion with Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and if need be with the 3d ARVN Regiment. Other ARVN units were conducting Lam Son-245 to the north and west of the proposed Marine area of operations. Marine air and artillery and Navy gunfire were available to support the Marine infantry.⁶²

Delays plagued the operation from the very beginning. Heavy cloud cover, rain, and winds on 19 March forced Colonel Fisher to cancel the helilift of Sullivan's battalion and to reschedule it for the following morning. On the 20th, heavy fog caused the task group commander to hold up the helicopter



assault for two hours. At 1015, the helicopters from HMM-163 arrived in the objective area, but enemy antiaircraft fire prevented the aircraft from landing. Fisher then requested Marine artillery and air to soften up the landing zones. Provisional Battery Y, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines with six towed 155mm howitzers, which had moved by truck the morning of the previous day from Phu Bai to forward firing positions just outside of Phong Dien, responded to the request. Because of the low ceiling, Marine fixed-wing aircraft were not available until 1145. After the artillery and air bombardment, HMM-163, finally, at 1255, started to bring Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and both companies into Landing Zone Robin.⁶³

Based on South Vietnamese intelligence that a large force of VC had moved east from the Lam Son-245 sector into the Marine area of operations and from the location of the enemy antiaircraft fire, Colonel Fisher ordered Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan to clear out the hamlet of Ap Dai Phu, about 1,000 meters to the west of LZ Robin before advancing to the south. After consolidating his positions around the landing zone, Sullivan was about to carry out his new orders when his Company A opened fire on two VC. The enemy soldiers evaded the Marines and escaped into some heavy brush to the east of the landing zone. According to the battalion commander, this action initiated "one of the Battalion's fiercest and hardest fought battles. . . ."⁶⁴

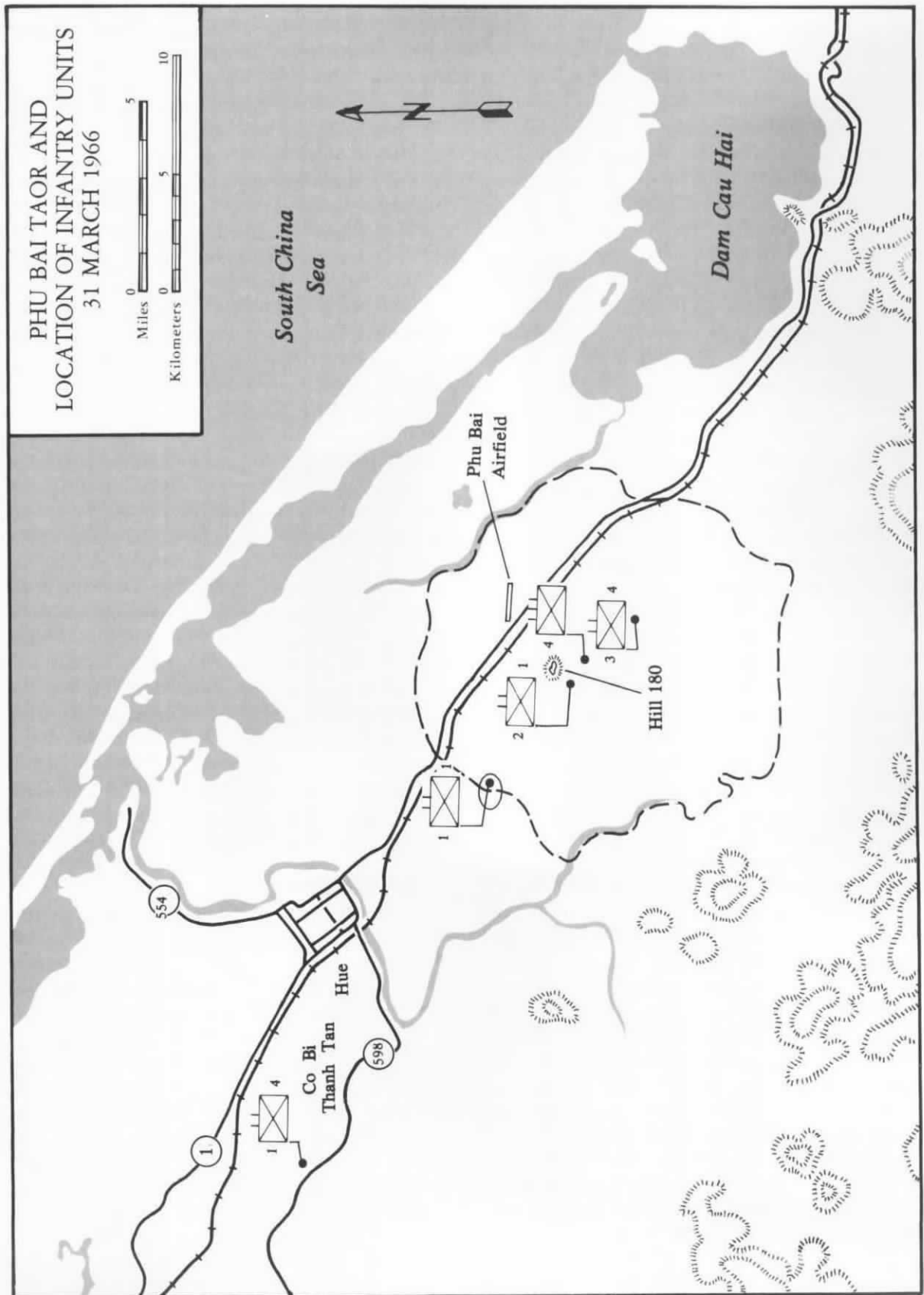
Unknown to the Marines, the *802d Battalion*, with two infantry companies, supported by a heavy weapons company, had fortified the tree-shrouded hamlet of Ap Chinh An, 800 meters east of LZ Robin. Camouflaging their bunkers as simple straw houses, the enemy carefully laid out fields of fire for their automatic weapons. They surrounded the village with barbed wire and a minefield. While extending its perimeter outward from the landing zone, Company B entered the minefield and detonated a mine which wounded one Marine. Still unaware of the extent of the enemy defenses and the size of the enemy force, Sullivan attempted to maneuver both his companies to take the hamlet. The enemy countered with 61mm and 82mm mortars and heavy machine gun fire. Forced to fall back, the battalion commander requested supporting arms. Marine artillery, air, and naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Richard B. Anderson* (DD 786) bombarded the Communist positions, but the

enemy, well dug-in, continued to hold out. At the request of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, Colonel Fisher reinforced the battalion with Company E from the 1st Marines, which arrived in LZ Robin at 1649. After repeated unsuccessful assaults and after sustaining casualties of nine killed and 41 wounded, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan decided to halt the attack that evening and wait for reinforcements the following morning.⁶⁵

Colonel Fisher on the night of 20 March developed his plans for the next day. He directed an artillery command group and a battery of 105mm howitzers to join the 155mm howitzers at Phong Dien. After a massive artillery and air bombardment, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan would renew his assault on Ap Chinh An. Fisher planned to helilift Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines into a landing zone, called LZ Duck, some 3,000 meters west of Robin. Hanifin's battalion would first clear the village of Ap Dai Phu and then reinforce Sullivan's attack on Ap Chinh An.⁶⁶

A dense morning fog prevented air strikes in the objective area on 21 March, but Marine artillery laid down a heavy barrage on suspected enemy positions. After the artillery fire lifted, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion finally took Ap Chinh An against minor enemy resistance. Taking advantage of the darkness and fog, the bulk of the enemy force had moved out of the hamlet, leaving only a small rear-guard to harass the Marines. The fog also delayed the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's battalion into LZ Duck until 1115. Hanifin's battalion met no opposition and was able to clear its objectives without incident. Colonel Fisher arrived in LZ Duck later in the day and established his CP with the two Marine battalions.⁶⁷

For the next two days, Task Group Foxtrot and its two Marine battalions, reinforced on the 22d by two South Vietnamese battalions, remained in the Oregon objective area. The 2d Battalion operated in the northwest sector while Sullivan's battalion advanced to the southeast, as originally planned, toward blocking positions established by the South Vietnamese battalions. Encountering only an occasional straggler, neither battalion met with any serious resistance. The operation officially came to end at 1130 on 23 March. Colonel Fisher and Hanifin's battalion returned to Phu Bai while Sullivan's unit remained in the Operation Oregon sector for a few more days.



For the four-day operation, the Marines sustained casualties of 11 dead and 45 wounded while killing at least 48 of the enemy and taking eight prisoners. Estimates of enemy dead were as high as 100. All of the Marine casualties occurred in the heavy fighting for Ap Chinh An. Supporting arms accounted for most of the enemy dead. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis, the commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, recalled several years later that his provisional 155mm battery during the operation fired on a VC machine gun bunker "and scored a direct hit on the first volley of fire."⁶⁸ In his analysis of the operation, Colonel Fisher observed that the weather was a large factor, denying the Marines the advantage of surprise. Fisher also remarked that the lightness of Sullivan's assault battalion limited the Marines' maneuverability once contact was made.⁶⁹ Moreover, the Marines had encountered a seasoned and well-trained foe. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan grudgingly complimented his enemy, declaring, "The tactics they utilized were not uncommon to good soldiering."⁷⁰

With the completion of Operation Oregon, the new changes in command at the Phu Bai enclave were about to take place. As planned, on 28 March, Colonel Sherman, whose 4th Marines Headquarters had arrived from Chu Lai, opened his command post at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher dissolved Task Group Foxtrot and returned to Da Nang and the 3d Marines. At about the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Headquarters assumed control of the Phu Bai artillery from Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis' 4th Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis and his headquarters personnel departed on 29 March for Da Nang where he established his new CP. The Marines had reinforced Phu Bai with two reconnaissance companies, B and D, from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, which on the 28th formed Provisional Reconnaissance Group B, under the Company B commander, Captain James L. Compton. By the end of the month, the Marine forces at Phu Bai

numbered nearly 6,400 men including four infantry battalions, a helicopter squadron, the artillery battalion, the reconnaissance group, and other supporting units.⁷¹

Responsible for the defense of the northern base, Colonel Sherman assigned three of the battalions within the TAOR, and one outside, protecting the northwestern approaches. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was in the western sector; the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had the defense of the Phu Bai vital area; and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines operated in the southern portion of the TAOR. On 27 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's battalion had moved from the Oregon area to the Co Bi-Thanh Tan region west of Hue. From there, the battalion, together with two artillery batteries located 2,500 meters to the south of its position, was able to support and provide a quick reaction force for the Marine reconnaissance teams operating northwest of Phu Bai.⁷²

Despite the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, III MAF and MACV still differed about the extent of the enemy threat in the northern two provinces. General Walt believed that the successful operations earlier in the month together with the buildup of his northern forces had combined to contain the enemy.⁷³ Although A Shau had fallen, there was no apparent attempt by the *95th NVA Regiment* to move toward the coast. On the other hand, General Westmoreland's intelligence staff spoke of a major enemy offensive in the north, referring to the formation of a new enemy division and other units and a "known plan to attack Phu Bai."⁷⁴ In a meeting with General Walt on 24 March at Chu Lai, Westmoreland expressed his concern that the fall of A Shau exposed the I Corps western flank to the enemy. He also pointed to reports of NVA troops in the DMZ and near the Khe Sanh Special Forces Camp in northwestern Quang Tri Province as evidence that the enemy was on the move.⁷⁵ The Marines continued their close watch over developments in the north.

PART II
CRISIS AND WAR IN CENTRAL I CORPS,
SPRING 1966

CHAPTER 5

A Troubled Spring

The Beginnings of the Political Crisis—Restructuring the Command—The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive—“Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles”

The Beginnings of the Political Crisis

The increasing threat from the north during the spring of 1966 was a major concern, but an internal South Vietnamese political crisis in I Corps overshadowed the Communist buildup. Beneath the outward facade of national unity, several groups were dissatisfied with the military regime in Saigon. Deposed and disgruntled politicians maneuvered to restore civilian authority. Various Buddhist leaders criticized the National Leadership Committee or Directorate and demanded a national assembly. Within the government itself, military factions jockeyed for position. Compounding these rivalries were the traditional schisms between “northerners” and “southerners,” and between Catholics and Buddhists. These elements of disharmony threatened the delicate fabric of South Vietnamese political cohesiveness.

Until the end of February, Premier Ky managed to keep his political opponents off-balance by granting piecemeal concessions. He promised a constitution to be approved by a referendum, followed by creation of a representative government; this reform process would take over a year to implement. The referendum on the constitution was not to be held until October 1966, and elections to any resulting national assembly would not take place until sometime in 1967. In effect, Ky was offering his rivals the possibility of power sometime in the future, while he and his supporters remained at the helm for an indefinite period.

The South Vietnamese Premier viewed General Thi, the I Corps commander, as his most dangerous potential rival. Born of peasant stock and native to the region, Thi was popular with both his troops and the people of I Corps. He capitalized on this sentiment, as well as the population’s traditional distrust of Saigon, and carved out his own power base, centered in Hue where he maintained his residence.

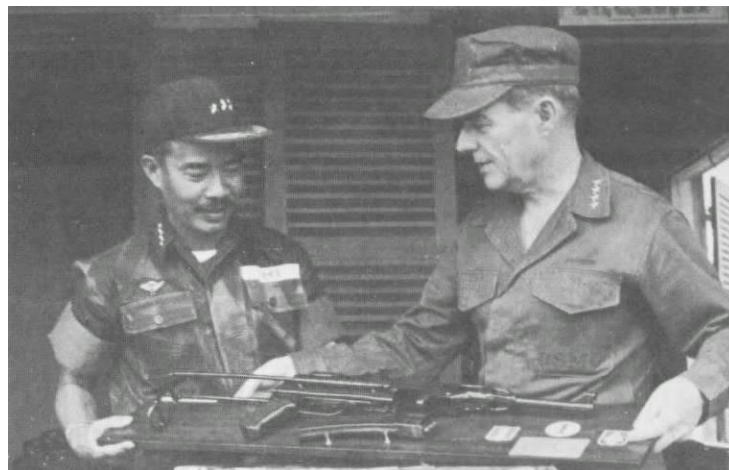
During 1966, Thi continued to consolidate his position in I Corps by appointing officials personally loyal to him, including a new mayor of Da Nang, a civilian physician with little administrative experience, Dr. Nguyen Van Man.

After his return from the Honolulu Conference, General Ky viewed the existing political situation in I Corps with increasing alarm. On 3 March, the premier flew to Hue in order personally to investigate allegations that Thi was directing agitation against the government. In a lively confrontation, Ky and the I Corps commander exchanged charges and countercharges; Premier Ky promptly returned to Saigon and called for a special meeting of the National Leadership Council to settle the dispute.

At the extraordinary session of the Council which assembled on 10 March, Ky asked his military colleagues for a formal vote of confidence. He further

LtGen Nguyen Chanh Thi, the South Vietnamese I Corps commander, presents a captured enemy weapon to Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, during the latter’s visit in January 1966. The removal of Gen Thi in March was to trigger the spring political crisis.

Marine Corps Photo A186694

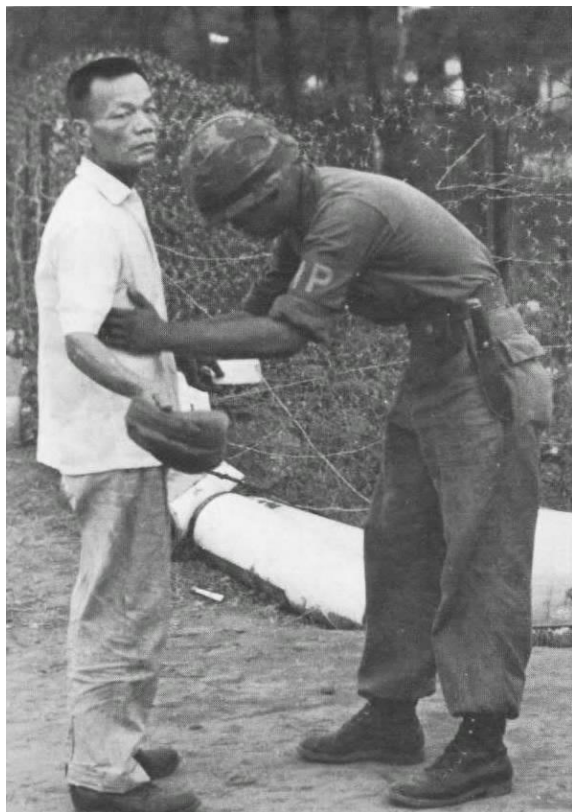


stated that he would resign if Thi was not stripped of his command. In a secret ballot the majority of the Council backed the premier and called for Thi's dismissal on grounds of insubordination. The deposed I Corps commander, present during the proceedings, accepted the decision gracefully. On 11 March, a government spokesman announced that General Thi had requested sick leave because of "sinus trouble." Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st ARVN Division commanding general, became the new I Corps commander and Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan replaced Chuan as division commander.¹

The removal of General Thi caused an immediate shock wave throughout I Corps. On the announcement of his removal, approximately 2,000 persons, including soldiers, marched through the streets of Da Nang in protest. Soon afterward, elements loyal to the ousted general and other factions opposed to the government, including several Buddhist groups, joined forces. A number of anti-Ky coalitions were formed in the northern cities. The one in Da Nang assumed the title of the "Military and Civilian Strug-

A Marine MP searches a South Vietnamese worker employed at the Da Nang Airbase as he departs the base. Political tensions, which included strikes by Vietnamese employees of the Americans, increased security precautions.

Marine Corps Photo A187177



gle Committee for I Corps," while a group in Hue called themselves the "Popular Forces to Struggle for the Revolution."

The "Struggle Force," as the dissident forces came to be known, immediately applied economic and political pressure on the Saigon regime. On 13 March the Struggle Committee in Da Nang called a general strike which practically paralyzed the city. No policemen reported for duty; shops, port facilities, and schools closed; and approximately 90 percent of the civilian workers at the Da Nang Airbase failed to show up for work. Large numbers of protesters held mass meetings and conducted more demonstrations.

On 15 March, Premier Ky made an unsuccessful attempt to placate the insurgents. He allowed General Thi to return to I Corps for a brief visit. Supposedly the former I Corps commander was to announce publicly that he accepted his dismissal as being in the best interest of the country. Upon his arrival, Thi was received by large enthusiastic crowds both in Da Nang and Hue. In his somewhat ambiguous addresses to the throngs, Thi expressed several reservations about the central government. Furthermore, instead of a brief visit, Thi moved into his official residence in Hue for an "extended rest." He remained in I Corps for almost two months, thus adding to the political ferment by his presence.

Restructuring the Command

Despite the internal Vietnamese political crisis, the United States continued its planned buildup in Vietnam and revamped the command structure to accommodate the needs of the growing American force. During March, the Secretary of the Navy approved the establishment of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam while the Air Force moved to transform the 2d Air Division into the Seventh Air Force. These two new MACV component commands were established on 1 April 1966. In the interim, General Westmoreland made some changes in his Army combat forces. On 15 March 1966, he redesignated Lieutenant General Stanley R. Larsen's command in II Corps from Field Force, Vietnam to I Field Force, Vietnam. In III Corps, he established II Field Force, Vietnam under Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman. Generals Larsen and Seaman were responsi-

ble directly to General Westmoreland in his capacity as ComUSMACV for all U.S. ground operations in their respective corps operating areas.

In I Corps, similar changes were occurring in the Marine command. Throughout the first three months of 1966, units of the 1st Marine Division continued to arrive in Vietnam. Major General Fields planned to move his headquarters from Okinawa to Chu Lai at the end of March. The 1st Division was to assume responsibility for the Chu Lai TAOR while the 3d Marine Division was to retain control of the Phu Bai and Da Nang enclaves.

In March, General Walt began to restructure his command to conform to the planned transformation of III MAF into a two-division ground force supported by a large aircraft wing. On the 15th, he established the Force Logistic Command (FLC), which assumed control of the force logistic support groups at Da Nang and Chu Lai and the logistic support unit at Phu Bai. The III MAF commander named his former Chief of Staff, Colonel George C. Axtell, Jr., as the FLC commander. General Walt then abolished the 3d Marine Division command group at Chu Lai. Colonel Peatross, as the senior officer there, temporarily assumed command of the enclave awaiting the arrival of General Fields and the 1st Division Headquarters. The former assistant division commander at Chu Lai, General Platt, then replaced Colonel Axtell as the III MAF Chief of Staff.

On 18 March, General Walt relinquished direct command of the 3d Marine Division so that he could devote more time and energy to his duties as Commanding General, III MAF. Recently promoted Major General Wood B. Kyle, winner of two Silver Stars during World War II, became the new commanding general of the division. Brigadier General Lowell E. English continued as the assistant commander of the 3d Marine Division.* He assumed responsibility for Task Force Delta operations outside the Marine enclaves and later moved his headquarters to Phu Bai.

*Brigadier General English arrived at Da Nang in late December 1965 on very short notice from the U.S. Strike Command as the replacement for Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson. He later wrote that he moved out of the Strike Command "with 48 hours notice to HQMC (16 Dec) and Da Nang (20 Dec)." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Walt also prepared to give up his functions and responsibilities as MACV's Naval Component Commander to Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, who was to head the U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, a command that was to be established effective 1 April 1966. The Naval Support Activity, Da Nang would then come under Ward's operational control although remaining under the command of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and continuing to provide common item supply and other supporting services to III MAF.²

These structural changes in the command and staff had little effect on III MAF's basic mission. It remained all-inclusive. The Marines would continue to conduct military operations in I Corps "in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps and in other areas of RVN as directed by ComUSMACV, in order to assist the GVN to defeat the VC/NVA and extend GVN control over all of South Vietnam."³

The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive

During early and mid-March, the 3d Marine Division units in the Da Nang enclave made some progress in extending government control within the TAOR. Although Colonel Fisher and many of his 3d Marines staff were attached to Task Group Foxtrot at Phu Bai during much of this period, both his 1st and 2d Battalions maintained a high level of small-unit activity at Da Nang.

In the 3d Marines northern sector, Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines conducted extensive patrols throughout its area of operations. One company operated north of the Cu De River while two companies sent out long-range patrols to the western edge of the battalion's TAOR. The remaining company maintained security for the battalion CP.

On 14 March, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey issued his operation order for Golden Fleece II, an operation to protect the spring rice harvest in his TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines had originated the designation for this type operation during the previous fall harvest season.** Under the Golden

**See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, Chapter 9.

Fleece concept, a Marine battalion protected the Vietnamese villagers harvesting their crop "by conducting day and night patrols in areas suspected to be used by VC for access to rice harvest areas; assisting local PF units to guard rice harvesters and rice storage areas as requested by village chiefs."⁴ Dickey's Marines provided protection for the harvesters and the crop through the remainder of the month. Contact with the VC was minimal.

In the regiment's southern area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conducted more than 550 squad patrols and established over 530 night ambushes during the month of March alone. More than half of the patrols were conducted at night. Like Dickey's battalion, Horn's Marines made only limited contact with the VC. The 2d Battalion suffered casualties of six killed and 31 wounded, while killing one VC and capturing one prisoner. Despite the low-grade combat in his area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Horn observed in his monthly chronology, "... numerous reports indicate VC units are moving eastward," into the 9th Marines sector.⁵

Colonel Simmons' 9th Marines was responsible for the southern approaches to Da Nang. At the beginning of March, he prepared plans for offensive operations against local VC forces that were literally entrenched within his TAOR. The regimental commander compared the VC "infrastructure" in his sector to a cancerous growth with its tentacles embedded in the hamlets. Simmons believed that the only way the Marines could root out the "cancer" was to "scrub" the hamlets clean. He observed that mere patrolling and ground sweeps would not do the job. It was:

... not a matter of going from here to there. We can march from Dien Ban to Dai Loc any time of the day we want to. This didn't mean anything. You had to take apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again.⁶

Simmons' concept of operations for his March offensive south of Da Nang required the regiment to continue its "vigorous clearing action down to the La Tho and Thanh Quit River line," employing County Fair search and cordon tactics. Later in the month, the 9th Marines would extend its "scrubbing" operations southward. The regiment first would concentrate its efforts around Route 4 where the ARVN maintained a number of outposts, and then gradually advance south of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. In these phases of the offensive,

the Marines would take a 1,000-meter square or a complex of hamlets as an objective, using one or two companies to "work this area until we find what was there."⁷

At the beginning of March, the battalions of the 9th Marines started their clearing operations south of Da Nang. On the regimental western flank, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines on 5 March established its forward headquarters on Hill 55, which was later to become the regimental command post for the southward advance. The Viet Cong, nevertheless, continued to resist the battalion's clearing efforts on this important site as exemplified in the following excerpts from Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's diary:

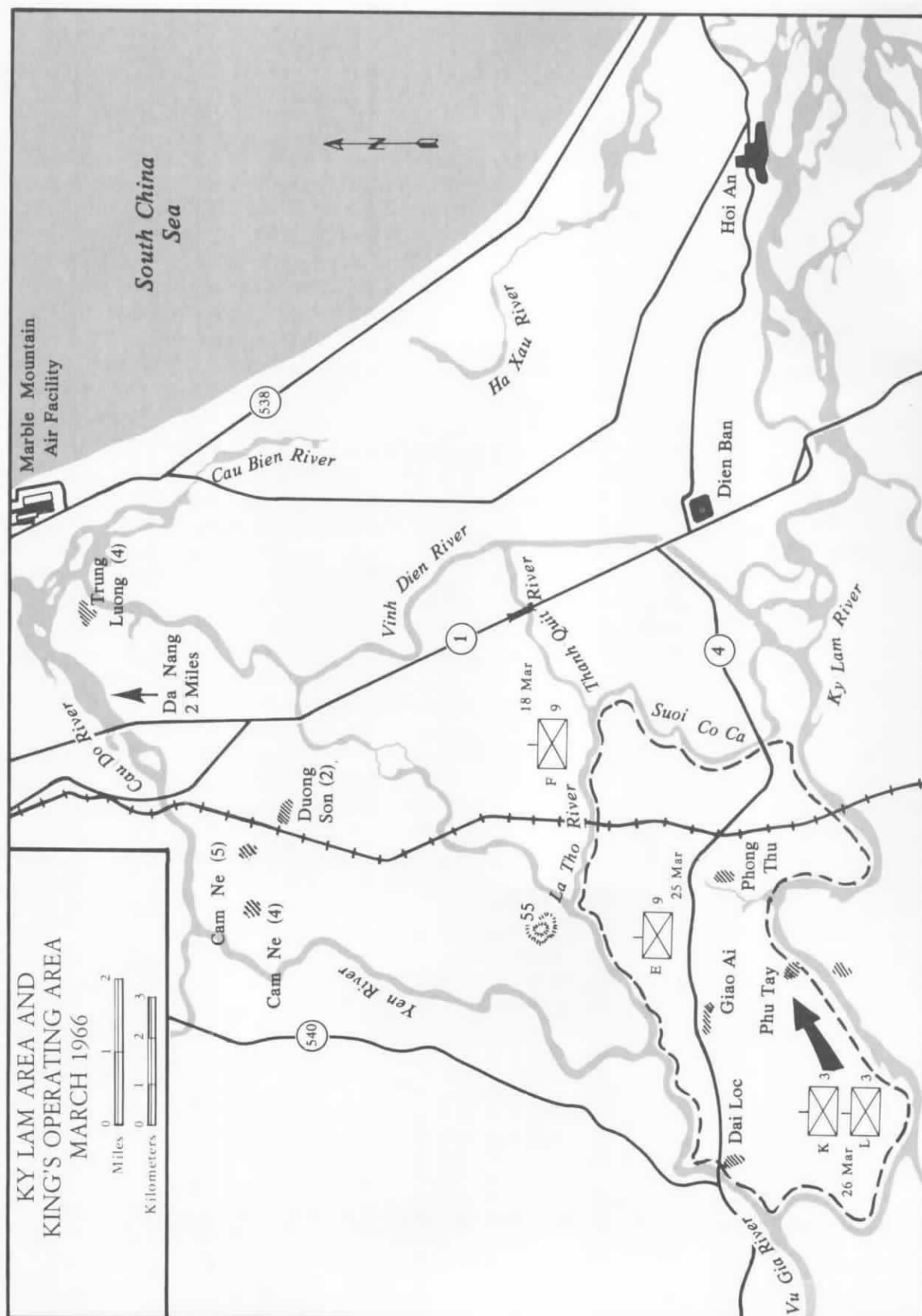
On 10 March two VC killed as they attempted to infiltrate the defensive wire on Hill 55.

On 12 March Hill 55 came under mortar attack.

On 17 March three engineers were KIA at the water point just to the east of Hill 55 (... back-to-back chewings by Gen Walt and Col Simmons re security at W.P. ...)*

In the 9th Marines' eastern zone of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, acting on intelligence that a guerrilla platoon was in the vicinity of the Can Bien River, conducted a three-company operation at the Hoa Long village complex south of Marble Mountain. Although the Marines encountered no VC, they found evidence of recent guerrilla activity. The village chief, who accompanied the Marines, pointed out the house of a local VC and assisted in the screening of the villagers. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor observed that the presence of the village chief not only assisted in the questioning of the suspects, but also exposed the population "to a local GVN official." The battalion commander also asked that RFs or PFs be attached to his unit for such operations as these Vietnamese would "... remove the image of 'American occupation,' that is generated by the extended use of U.S. forces only on such operations."^{8*}

*Colonel Carrington recalled an incident involving Lieutenant Colonel Taylor that graphically illustrated the frustrations the U.S. forces faced in telling friend from foe in the hamlets south of Da Nang. Taylor had personally been involved in a "chase to catch some enemy suspects, but had to admit that he could not prove them such after they had abandoned their weapons and were without identifying uniforms." Carrington quotes Taylor explaining to General Walt, "'Yeah. There they were, General, sweating like whores in Church.'" Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the 9th Marines central sector, conducted the month's first County Fair operation on 7-8 March in the hamlet of Duong Son (2), 2,500 meters below the Cau Do and east of the railroad. In this combined operation, the Marines killed five VC. According to a captured enemy document, "The U.S. and GVN forces displaced the villagers to a general area where our cadre were isolated from them. Some of our cadre and guerrilla fighters were forced to emerge from their hiding places. . . ." ¹⁰

After the operation in Duong Son (2), the 9th Marines' battalions conducted three more County Fairs during the next 10 days. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines carried out one in the hamlet of Trung Luong (4), on a small peninsula 2,500 meters southwest of Marble Mountain. In this two-day operation, 14-15 March, Marines and ARVN officials registered 1,397 persons and provided them with identity cards. They held three suspects for further questioning.

Further west, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with the ARVN 51st Regiment, held two County Fairs in the Cam Ne village complex, the scene the previous year of the notorious Zippo lighter incident.* During County Fairs on 17 March, Dorsey's Marines and the ARVN troops netted some measurable results in the hamlets of Cam Ne (4) and (5). They killed two Viet Cong, held 13 persons for further questioning, captured a VC nurse, confiscated over a ton of hidden rice, found several VC documents, and, as an extra bonus, discovered two ARVN deserters. ¹¹

While the 9th Marines was conducting the County Fair cordon and search operations in the hamlets north of the La Tho and Thanh Quit line, the Marine command was perfecting plans for the advance to the Ky Lam-Thu Bon Rivers. General Kyle, who assumed command of the 3d Division on 18 March, was in complete agreement with Colonel

Simmons' desire to "scrub" the area south of Da Nang. He ordered his division staff to prepare an operational order for a regimental operation to relieve enemy pressure on the ARVN outposts along Route 4. The mission of the 9th Marines was to conduct "search and destroy operations in south central Quang Nam Province . . . and to provide Golden Fleece and/or Rural Construction operations as required or requested." Although officially designated as a search and destroy mission to satisfy MACV demands for battalion days in the field, the operation, codenamed Kings, was obviously intended to be a long-term occupation of the area. The Kings area of operations extended from the La Tho-Thanh Quit Line southward to the Ky Lam, with the main target the area south of Route 4. ¹²

On 18 March, Company F, 9th Marines, under Captain Carl A. Reckewell, was conducting a routine search and clear mission on the northern bank of the La Tho just east of the railroad. At 1630 the Marines came under 81mm and 60mm mortar fire. After the mortar bombardment, a VC company launched three ground assaults. Captain Reckewell's men repulsed each of the enemy attacks and later found 10 enemy bodies nearby.

Although it had been scheduled for later in the month, Colonel Simmons decided to begin Operation Kings at once. He designated Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion as the controlling unit. Donahue, whose command post was located in Duong Son (2), asked for permission to move his headquarters to Hill 55 to ensure "a central location and good observation of the area" for the operation. When approval was given, the 2d Battalion established its forward headquarters on the hill, temporarily displacing the command post of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. ¹³

From 19 March through the 23d, the battalion systematically worked over the eastern sector of the Kings area of operations, extending from the La Tho River south to the Ky Lam and from the railroad east to the Suoi Co Ca River. Although reinforced by two companies of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, Donahue employed no more than three companies in Kings at any one time. On 23 March, as the companies moved into the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines sector west of the railroad track, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey assumed command of the operation and also operational control of Company E, 9th Marines and his own Company M. ¹⁴

*See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam*, 1965, Chapter 4. The Cam Ne area continued to be a trouble spot for the Marines. Colonel Dennis commented that the Cam Ne villages were located along the Marine main supply route which "required mine-booby trap clearing at least daily—sometimes twice or three times daily. In fact, one bridge along this route was destroyed four times, including burning and dismantling." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [June 78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187763

Marines of Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines search a house in a Vietnamese hamlet south of Da Nang during Operation Kings. The Marines' objective was to eliminate the VC power base in the area south of Da Nang by taking "apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again."

The heaviest action occurred in the early morning of 25 March. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr.'s Company E had established defensive positions for the night, 3,500 meters west of the railroad and 1,000 meters north of Route 4. At 0030, the Marines at a listening post heard a small force of VC, using water buffalo as a screen, attempting to infiltrate the company's perimeter. In the resulting exchange of small arms fire, the Marines killed two VC. Another listening post reported enemy movement to its front at about the same time and a Marine threw a grenade at the suspected VC. One-half hour later, a 75-round mortar barrage hit the company position. The Viet Cong followed the mortar attack with a two-company assault. Simultaneously, other enemy units placed a heavy volume of small arms fire on night positions of Company M, 9th Marines to the southwest, preventing these Marines from coming to Driver's assistance. Company E bore the brunt of repeated VC ground attacks for the next hour. With the help of 1,000 105mm rounds of supporting fire from the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, Driver's men repulsed the VC with heavy losses. Although the enemy attack ended shortly after 0200, Marine ar-

tillery continued to fire interdiction missions, and a Marine flare plane illuminated the battlefield until 0500. As a result of the fighting, Company E suffered five killed and 19 wounded, but the Marines killed at least 40 of the enemy.¹⁵

The Marines identified the attacking enemy unit as the *R-20* or *Doc Lap Battalion*, which had been harassing the ARVN outposts on Route 4 since mid-February. In its March chronology, the 9th Marines made the following observations about the attack on 25 March:

The preliminary contacts, sequence of attacks, scheme of maneuver, large-scale employment of mortars, use of a diverting force, speed and ferocity of attack once battle was joined and the very evident seeking out of the specific key targets and objectives during the attack, all indicate that this was a well-planned, deliberately executed, and hard fought action conducted by seasoned well-trained Main Force Viet Cong troops.¹⁶

The operation continued for three more days. On the morning of 26 March, Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from newly arrived HMM-164 brought two companies from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines in-

to landing zones south of Route 4.* After artillery and fixed-wing preparation, Captain William F. Lee's Company L landed at 0730 just north of the Ky Lam River and approximately 3,700 meters southwest of where Company E had been attacked by the *Doc Lap Battalion*. Company K under Captain Lyndell M. Orsburn landed two hours later, 1,500 meters north of Company L's landing zone. The two companies then advanced along a northeasterly axis toward Route 4. At about 1400, Captain Lee's company met heavy resistance from VC, who fought from well-prepared positions near Phu Tay (3). Lee asked for close air support; Marine jets from MAG-11 and MAG-12 responded, dropping general purpose bombs and napalm on the VC entrenchments and then strafing them with 20mm fire. Enemy opposition ended.¹⁷

On 27 March, the two 3d Battalion companies renewed their advance toward Route 4, experiencing the same pattern of fighting as that of the previous day. Both companies met stiff resistance from well-entrenched VC and called in air support to destroy the enemy. After the air missions, the Marine companies proceeded with their "scouring" action south of the highway. In the meantime, Companies E and M of the 9th Marines were withdrawn from Operation Kings at midday, after completing a similar operation north of Route 4. The following day, the 28th, the entire operation came to an end when the two 3d Battalion, 3d Marines companies reached Route 4, their final objective. Eight Marine companies had participated in Kings, although no more than four during any given period.¹⁸

The results of Operation Kings were more significant than the resulting kill ratio. The 9th Marines killed at least 58 enemy, while the regiment suffered eight Marine dead and 60 wounded. The most important result was the Marine penetration for an extended period of an area that had long been dominated by the Viet Cong. Colonel Simmons later observed that, "we moved back and forth during Kings with rather good results."¹⁹ According to the

9th Marines monthly report, the regiment cleared out:

... a substantial portion of the ... enemy fortification's defenses, extended the boundaries of the battalion's zones of operation, and went far toward preparing the region for the reassertion of GVN influence and control.²⁰

By the end of March, the 9th Marines had made a significant enlargement of its zone of operations south of the Cau Do and its operations now extended below Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey had moved his battalion command post back to Hill 55 and, on 29 March, Marine engineers had begun constructing the regimental command post there.

The Marines believed they had made vital progress in pacification, both as a result of Operation Kings and the County Fairs conducted during the month. Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, in the 9th Marines eastern sector, began its rice harvest protection mission, similar to the one conducted by the 3d Marines and also called Golden Fleece II. On 4 April, General Kyle issued an operation order which extended Golden Fleece II to all rice harvesting areas in 3d Marine Division sectors.

At this point the bubble of optimism about pacification progress suddenly burst. During the period 5-12 April, the dispute over the removal of General Thi almost caused open combat between armed factions of South Vietnamese forces. South of Da Nang, elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment, including the attached 39th Ranger Battalion, abandoned their Giao Ai and Phong Thu outposts along Route 4. At Phong Thu, the rangers left behind, unguarded, 13 tons of ordnance, including small arms ammunition, mortar rounds, and 700 antipersonnel mines. The Viet Cong helped themselves to this material. Necessarily, the 9th Marines halted all offensive operations and assumed a defensive stance.²¹ The effect upon pacification was readily apparent in the I Corps National Priority Area.

An American civilian official assigned to the sector during this period, Paul Hare, commented that the Marine County Fair operations were one of the most successful security measures and "... probably the only way to break the back of the local VC infrastructure, but to be effective it must be a continuing operation. Needless to say, none have taken place in the last ten days or so." Hare pointed out that other factors, such as the confusing command structure, were also responsible for some of the difficulties in the National Priority Area. He wryly remarked:

*HMM-164, under Lieutenant Colonel Warren C. Watson, arrived in Vietnam on 7 March. It was the first CH-46 squadron assigned to Vietnam. The twin-engine, tandem-rotor Sea Knight aircraft carried almost twice the load of the UH-34s. For further discussion of the 46s, see Chapter 14.

Basic to the problem is the relationship of Major Nhat (. . . Pacification Leader) and Captain Hoa (District Chief of Hoa Vang). Cadre generally speak to Major Nhat; village and hamlet chiefs to both; ARVN to Colonel Lap; RF to nobody; and the PF and (Revolutionary Cadre) to anyone who happens to talk to them. The situation is confusing to the extreme.

This, compounded with the fact that ARVN security forces now "focused on the political intrigues of Da Nang," brought pacification to a standstill.²²

"Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles"

Following General Thi's return to I Corps, the political situation deteriorated. The deposed corps commander's presence in Hue provided the "Struggle Forces" with a living symbol of their confrontation with the Saigon regime. On 23 March, they held crippling strikes in Da Nang and Hue, which seriously impeded the flow of supplies to III MAF. The Buddhist leaders demanded that the military junta resign in favor of a civilian assembly and for the first time attacked Premier Ky by name. Students seized the Hue radio station and used it to support their antigovernment agitation. Statements of dissidents began to take on anti-American overtones. While expressing gratitude for U.S. assistance, they accused the Americans of interfering in internal South Vietnamese politics by supporting the Ky administration.

General Walt attempted to keep his forces out of any involvement in the dispute, but minor incidents between the Marines and the "Struggle Forces" occurred. In one such incident on 26 March, a Marine lance corporal from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, assigned to the Marine security guard at the Hue City LCU ramp, tore down an anti-American banner put up by some students on a nearby wall. The student leader went to the American consulate and warned that if he "did not receive an apology within two hours," the students would destroy the United States Information Service Building. At that point, Colonel Fisher, who was still at Phu Bai as Commander, Task Group Foxtrot, arrived at the consulate to discuss the matter with the student leader, Buu Ton, and consular and other U.S. and South Vietnamese officials there. Colonel Fisher told Buu Ton that he would investigate the affair, and that if Marines were responsible, he would apologize.

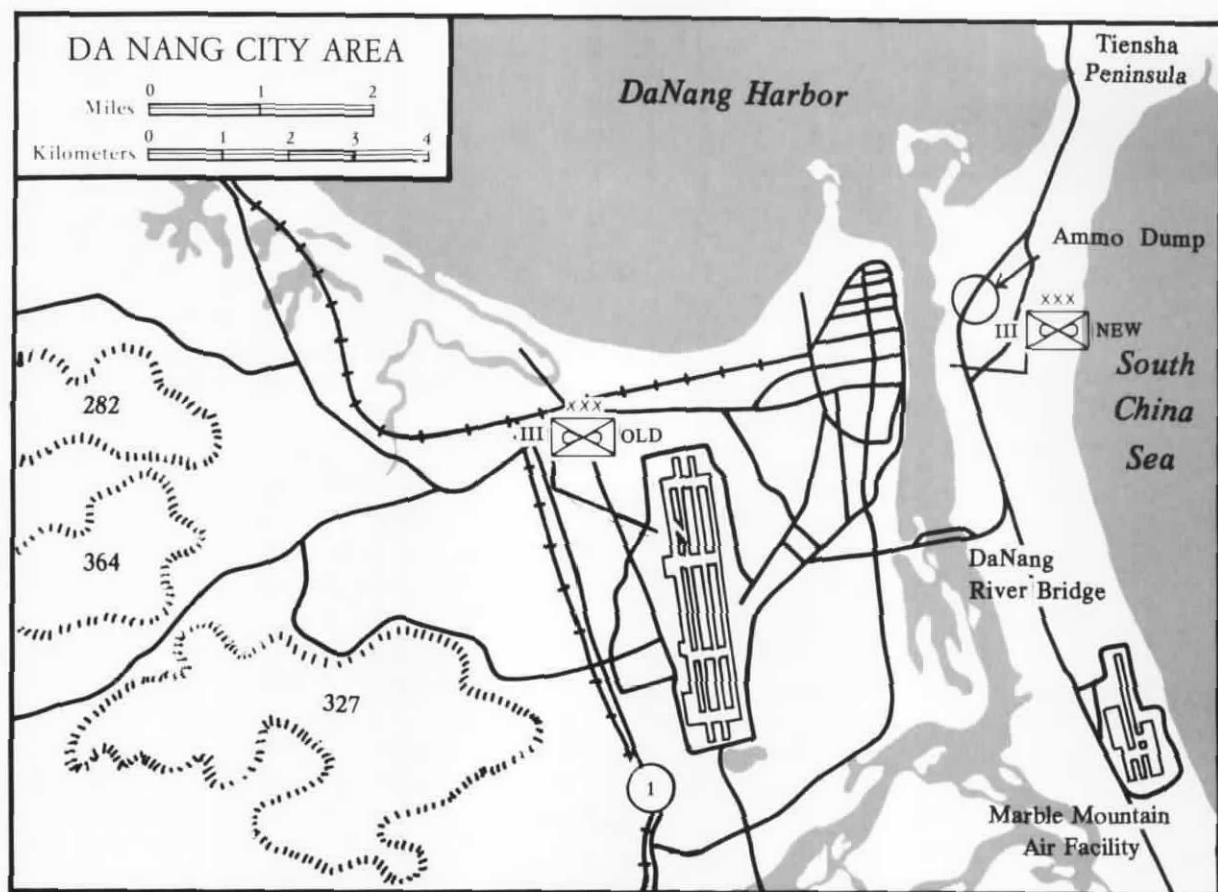
Fisher insisted that the tearing down of the banner in no way reflected U.S. policy. Buu Ton was unwilling to accept Colonel Fisher's explanation and demanded to go to the LCU ramp and identify the Marine.²³

The group at the consulate, including Buu Ton and Colonel Fisher, departed for the LCU ramp area where they confronted the hapless Marine responsible for the incident. The young lance corporal apologized for his action to the student leader, but the latter refused to acknowledge it. Buu Ton had further demands. He wanted the Marine to make his apology publicly over the Hue radio and then replace the banner "in public view." Moreover the American officials were to issue orders to all U.S. personnel not to interfere or participate in South Vietnamese politics. Buu Ton then left the U.S. and South Vietnamese officials and returned to his headquarters.²⁴

After arriving back at the consulate, the American officials received instructions from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon on how to deal with the situation. There was to be "no public apology;" the Marine "would not replace the banner . . . [and] The man would be punished within the framework of U.S. military justice;" but Buu Ton "would be assured that there would be no further occurrences of this nature."²⁵

In another meeting with the student leader and South Vietnamese officials later that day, Colonel Fisher informed Buu Ton that the "Act was by an individual contrary to orders and U.S. policy and that appropriate disciplinary action would be taken by III MAF authorities." Buu Ton was still not satisfied. He stated that he had to have something "in writing to show his followers." At that stage, Colonel Geoffrey H. Boston, the U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division and the subarea coordinator, entered the discussion. He promised Buu Ton "a written assurance that he would do what he could to prevent such acts in the future." Buu Ton received his letter the following day, thus ending this particular episode.²⁶

On 30 March, there occurred another incident which further inflamed relations between the U.S. military and the dissident groups in I Corps. A Marine driver in Da Nang scraped the fender of a civilian vehicle on one of the city's narrow streets. The dissidents claimed two Vietnamese died in the accident and demanded that "top U.S. officials come to Da Nang within 48 hours or we will not be



responsible for the lives and property of U.S. residents." Both the Embassy and MACV ignored the ultimatum, but it was indicative of the increasing militancy of the Struggle Forces.²⁷

Since the dissidents held many of the centers of political power in I Corps, Premier Ky decided to reassert his authority. At a press conference on 3 April, he stated: "I consider Da Nang to be in the hands of the Communists and the government will organize an operation to retake . . . [the city]." The next night, Ky, accompanied by two members of the Directorate and three Vietnamese Marine battalions, flew to Da Nang on board U.S. Air Force transport aircraft. The Marines were held at the airfield and did not attempt to enter the city. General Chuan, the I Corps commander, visited Ky at the airbase on the morning of 5 April and apparently convinced the premier to change his mind about moving against the insurgents. Ky made a radio broadcast that afternoon in which he stated that the city was not under Communist control as he had first believed. Ky left

for Saigon that night, but the Vietnamese Marine battalions stayed behind.²⁸

With the three Vietnamese Marine battalions poised at Da Nang Airbase and the rebels in control of the city, General Walt was in a very uncomfortable position. Although not wanting to appear to be meddling in South Vietnam's internal politics, the III MAF commander wanted to keep the antagonists apart. He feared that the crisis would not only interrupt the war against the Communists, but, more importantly, that U.S. forces would become embroiled if fighting broke out between the two factions.²⁹

The situation came to a climax on 9 April. Colonel Dam Quang Yeu, commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who openly supported the Struggle Movement, led an armored convoy of anti-government ARVN forces equipped with four 155mm howitzers north along Route 1 from Hoi An toward Da Nang. About 1030, General Kyle directed Colonel Simmons to block the highway as

close to Dien Ban as possible. The 9th Marines commander decided that the Thanh Quit Bridge, nine miles south of the airbase, was the best place to stop the convoy. An hour later, Captain Reckewell, the commander of Company F, 9th Marines, stationed one of his platoons supported by two Ontos on the northern side of the bridge. The Marines purposely had stalled a 2½-ton truck on the bridge itself. In somewhat of an understatement, the 9th Marines reported, "This block effectively served its purpose by stopping northbound vehicular traffic."^{30*}

The dangers of a serious confrontation at the bridge remained. Armed American Marines faced the heavily armed South Vietnamese convoy. Colonel Yeu emplaced his 155mm howitzers and trained them on the airfield. When General Walt learned of the situation, he sent the III MAF G-3, Colonel John R. Chaisson, who had relieved Colonel Simmons when the latter assumed command of the 9th Marines, to talk over the situation with Colonel Yeu. Chaisson, a 1939 Harvard graduate, a veteran of two previous wars, and a highly articulate officer, arrived at the bridge site to meet with the South Vietnamese commander. He warned Yeu that if the latter's troops continued their advance or shelled the base, the Americans would consider it an attack upon themselves and would react accordingly. As Chaisson spoke, a flight of Marine F-8E Crusaders, armed with bombs and rockets, circled overhead. General Walt ordered Marine artillery to lay one 155mm battery and two 8-inch howitzers on the rebel positions, but to fire only on his personal command.

While the situation remained tense, Colonel Chaisson apparently convinced Colonel Yeu that aggressive action by the rebels would not be in anyone's best interests. Yeu contented himself with a show of force. Thirty minutes after Chaisson left to report back to General Walt, the ARVN commander



Marine Corps Photo A187321
Marines from the 9th Marines stand outside the Hotel Da Nang as they prepare to evacuate U.S. civilians from the city during the political crisis. Using loudspeakers, radios, and telephones they directed people to the evacuation sites.

ordered his artillery unit to return to Hoi An, but Yeu and the ARVN infantry stayed where they were.³¹

Prior to the confrontation at the Thanh Quit Bridge, the Marines evacuated American civilians, U.S. military personnel, and foreign nationals from the city of Da Nang in accordance with orders from MACV. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines commander, later recalled that he was helilifted at 0200 on the morning of 9 April to the III MAF CP to attend a briefing on the planned evacuation by Colonel Chaisson "and a representative of the State Department."³² At 0740, helicopters from MAG-16 landed two of his companies, E and H, in the northeastern sector of the city. The Marines, using radios, telephones, and loudspeakers, directed the people to the evacuation site. Marine helicopters and Navy landing craft brought 700 evacuees from Da Nang to Marine positions on the Tiensha Peninsula. By 1620, the evacuation operation was over.³³

During the following week, there was a considerable lessening of tension in I Corps. On 10 April, General Ton That Dinh replaced General Chuan as the I Corps commander and the newly appointed officer quickly took steps to defuse the situation. He ordered all ARVN troops back to their units and moved one of the Vietnamese Marine battalions

*According to one Marine officer, Captain Reckewell later told him that Colonel Yeu had threatened to use his howitzers, but Reckewell had replied: "I'll see those 155's and raise you two F-8's." General Simmons recently wrote that not finding the battalion commander, he personally led Reckewell's "company to the bridge that day." Col Paul C. Trammell, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 and BGen Edwin H. Simmons, notation on Trammell Comments, dtd 16Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, had been called earlier to the III MAF CP for a briefing on the evacuation of U.S. nationals from Da Nang.



Marine Corps Photo A421624

A Marine carries a baby for its mother as they hurry to board a waiting helicopter. During the evacuation, the Marines brought out 700 people from Da Nang City.

to Quang Ngai. On 12 April, the remaining Vietnamese Marines returned to Saigon. At the conclusion of a government-sponsored national political congress on 14 April, Chief of State Thieu announced that general elections would be held in three to five months. This decree satisfied many of the dissidents. Even the outspoken Thich Tri Quang, who had led the 1963 Buddhist revolt and was still a key Buddhist leader in Central Vietnam, called for a moratorium on strikes and demonstrations. The head of the Buddhist Institute, the moderate Tam Chau, also agreed that the Ky government should stay on until the formation of a national assembly. In Da Nang and Hue, shops reopened, civilian laborers reported for work, and governmental functions returned to normal.

This uneasy calm was short-lived. On 15 April, General Thi demanded that the Saigon government step down immediately. Mayor Man supported the demand and the rebel-controlled Da Nang and Hue radio stations repeated the verbal attacks against the Ky regime. In a move reminiscent of the 1963 Revolution against Diem, the radical Buddhist leaders announced that 60 monks and nuns were prepared to immolate themselves if Ky did not resign.

At a press conference on 7 May, Ky provided further provocation. He announced that the constituent assembly, which the government had promised within five months, would not be transformed into a national assembly. Instead that body would simply draft a constitution and be dissolved until a national assembly was elected some time in 1967. Ky's statement drew an immediate reaction. Tri Quang led a chorus of protests, and demonstrations once more broke out in Da Nang and Hue. The premier remained adamant and replaced the Director General of the National Police, a Thi supporter, with Colonel Ngoc Loan, a man loyal to Ky.

Early on the morning of 15 May, Premier Ky moved swiftly to put down the revolt in Da Nang once and for all. Charging that the Struggle Forces had committed acts of terror the previous night, Ky airlifted two Vietnamese Marine battalions and two airborne battalions to the Da Nang Airbase in South Vietnamese transport aircraft. The sudden arrival of the four battalions came as a surprise for III MAF Headquarters, especially since the city had been quiet that night. Ky had made the move without consulting any of his American advisors. Whether an actual threat to the inhabitants of Da Nang did exist at that point was immaterial. In short order government forces controlled most of the city. They secured Vietnamese I Corps Headquarters, the police station, the city hall, the ARVN garrison barracks, and the radio station, and arrested Mayor Man and several Struggle Movement leaders. The rebels still occupied the Da Nang soccer field, several pagodas, and most of Tiensha Peninsula across the river from the city. General Dinh, the I Corps commander who had been attempting to negotiate with the Struggle Forces, was not a party to the government's move. In fact, he fled from his quarters only minutes ahead of a government armored column to the asylum of III MAF Headquarters.³⁴

As during the April crisis, III MAF was caught in the middle and General Walt once more attempted to mediate. He radioed Major General William B. Rosson, the MACV Chief of Staff, about the situation in Da Nang since General Westmoreland at the time was visiting CinCPac Headquarters in Honolulu. Walt told Rosson that General Dinh had the support of most of the ARVN forces in I Corps and that he recommended that the government be urged to withdraw its Marine and airborne forces from Da Nang city. Later that morning, III MAF

received the MACV reply; Deputy Ambassador William J. Porter had relayed Walt's message to Premier Ky. MACV directed Walt, to "continue to do what we are doing. . . . Use good offices to prevent bloodshed."³⁵

Several incidents involving South Vietnamese aircraft and U.S. Marine ground units occurred during the morning of 15 May. Two Vietnamese Air Force aircraft strafed ARVN units on Highway 1 north of Da Nang, near Marine positions. Later that morning, a small Vietnamese Air Force observation aircraft buzzed Marine ground positions near the strategic Nam O Bridge across the Cu De River north of Da Nang. It also dropped a cannister near a Marine truck on Highway 1 which contained the message, "Keep out of Da Nang because Da Nang has troubles." In response, General Platt, the III MAF Chief of Staff, radioed the U.S. advisor with the Vietnamese Air Force units at Da Nang, "Tell VNAF from General Walt that these dangerous incidents must cease and desist. VNAF's provocative

actions can lead to bloodshed. III MAF does not want bloodshed." The III MAF warning, for the time being, halted Vietnamese flights over Marine positions.³⁶

The South Vietnamese Government was in no mood to compromise with the dissidents in I Corps. The Directorate rejected General Walt's advice to support the I Corps commander and to withdraw its forces from Da Nang, but on the morning of 16 May, Premier Ky replaced the I Corps Commander, General Dinh, with Major General Huynh Van Cao. Cao was not only a Catholic but had been the IV Corps commander under President Diem. His appointment hardly served to placate the militant Buddhist leaders of the Struggle Force.

The new I Corps commander soon learned the extent of dissident support in I Corps when he visited the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters in Hue on 17 May. Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan, the division commander, had refused to commit himself to the government's side and conveniently was sick

South Vietnamese infantrymen supported by tanks enter Da Nang to put down the "Struggle Movement" in May. They arrested the mayor of the city and several of the leaders of the movement.

Marine Corps Photo A193990



on the 17th so that he could not meet with Cao. After leaving Nhuan's headquarters where he was briefed by the division staff, General Cao, accompanied by Colonel Archelaus Hamblen, the senior U.S. Army advisor in I Corps, and General Platt, prepared to depart for Da Nang. An angry crowd had broken into the division compound so the trio hastily boarded the U.S. Army helicopter waiting for them. As the aircraft lifted off, an ARVN lieutenant fired two pistol shots at it at point blank range. Although not hitting any of the occupants, both rounds struck the helicopter. After the second shot, the U.S. Army helicopter gunner fired a six-round burst killing the ARVN lieutenant and wounding two other Vietnamese soldiers. The Struggle Forces immediately made the dead lieutenant a "martyr" to their cause and accused the Americans of blatant interference in South Vietnamese internal affairs.

The most dramatic confrontation between the American and the dissident forces occurred the following day, 18 May, at Da Nang and involved General Walt himself. By that morning the Vietnamese Marines had pushed to the western edge of the Da Nang River Bridge which connected Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. When they attempted to cross, they were fired on by Struggle Force troops entrenched on the other side. The leader of the dissident forces sent a message to General Cao that he had wired the bridge with demolitions and would destroy it if the Vietnamese Marines continued their advance. Cao relayed the message to General Walt. The bridge was a single span over which III MAF received much of its logistic support.

Indeed, all of the bridges in the Da Nang area were important. Da Nang is essentially an island city. Every exit from the city to the south, east, and northwest is by way of a major bridge and any force that controlled these points, controlled the city. General Walt, therefore, wanted to keep the Da Nang River Bridge intact and ordered Colonel Chaisson to work out a compromise between the government and the Struggle Forces.

Arriving at the bridge, the III MAF operations officer asked the Vietnamese Marine commander to pull back and allow American Marines to occupy their former positions. The Vietnamese commander readily agreed to Chaisson's proposal and Company M from the 3d Marines, then part of the airfield defense battalion, replaced the Vietnamese Marines on that side of the river. Before crossing the river to

talk with the rebel leader, Chaisson asked for a reinforced squad from the 3d Battalion to meet him on the eastern side.

Colonel Chaisson then flew across the river in a Marine helicopter and began negotiations with the Struggle Force commander. He was unable to persuade the Vietnamese to abandon their positions on the eastern bank. Chaisson then ordered Captain William F. Lee, the commanding officer of Company L, 3d Marines who had accompanied his reinforced squad to the other side, to move his troops into the dissident ARVN troop formation. The Americans advanced directly into the midst of the rebels and simply sat down; they made no attempt to dislodge the Vietnamese. Colonel Chaisson then boarded his helicopter and reported to General Walt.

Walt and Chaisson then returned to the bridge in Walt's staff car. According to Colonel Chaisson:

Walt and I went back down to the west side . . . in his car and we got out. He walked out on the bridge and I went out with him. And as we got to the east side this [Vietnamese] warrant officer walked out and told him to stop. This warrant officer showed that he was going to blow it up—take the whole three of us out.

The III MAF commander tried unsuccessfully to convince the Vietnamese officer to remove the demolitions. Chaisson vividly described the confrontation between the large Marine general and the small Vietnamese officer in the following manner:

Walt really gave him hell and was trying to intimidate him. The guy wasn't intimidating very much and so Walt said, "Well, I'm going to stay right here and send for a platoon of Marines." So he called this platoon of Marines . . . and this warrant officer . . . was holding his hand up as though he was going to give the signal to blow it and Walt stood right in there.³⁷

General Walt in 1978 recalled:

. . . the Vietnamese warrant officer said in a very commanding voice, "General we will die together." He brought his raised arm down sharply to his side. There was no doubt that he expected the bridge to blow on his signal. I shall never forget the expression on his face when his signal did not blow up the bridge and us with it.³⁸

The incident ended in somewhat of an anticlimax. Chaisson later related:

This platoon of Marines came from the west side and just came right across and went right through . . . an Army lieutenant, who'd been the advisor with this engineer outfit, went [alone] over the rail and went underneath and pulled off whatever the stuff was. And they did have it wired. Then Walt got back in his car and drove away. But

he really showed them it was a showdown and he called it and they did it.³⁹

III MAF laconically reported to MACV: "After considerable debate ARVN engineers succeeded in removing the demolitions from bridge. . . . It is planned to use the bridge for civilian and U.S. military traffic commencing 19 May."⁴⁰

Once the bridge incident was over, the focus of attention returned to the fighting in the city itself. The Struggle Forces had barricaded themselves in several pagodas and refused to surrender. The main point of resistance was the Tinh Hoi Pagoda where about 350 heavily-armed rebels held out against government troops. General Cao did not want unnecessary casualties and would not order a direct assault on the pagodas. The National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, went to the I Corps Headquarters where, according to Cao, the colonel pulled a gun and threatened his life unless Cao gave the order to attack. General Cao made a hasty retreat to the III MAF compound and asked General Walt for "asylum and transport to the United States."⁴¹ Premier Ky did not relieve Cao; he simply named Brigadier General Du Quoc Dong as the acting I Corps commander. The following day, Ky recalled Colonel Loan to Saigon and directed the government forces not to attack the pagodas. The government

troops were to encircle each stronghold and starve out the defenders.

On the Tiensha Peninsula, the situation remained tense. The Struggle Forces continued to control the eastern bank of the Da Nang River and exchanged shots with government forces on the western bank. A large ARVN ammunition dump was adjacent to the new III MAF Headquarters compound being constructed on the peninsula. Captain Dinh Tan Thanh, the commanding officer of the 519th ARVN Ordnance Company, which controlled the supply point, threatened to blow up the dump if government troops crossed the river.

To prevent this, on 20 May, General Walt told the 9th Marines to move Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang from Chu Lai the previous month, to the new III MAF compound. The battalion was to occupy the site and be prepared to seize the ammunition dump which was just across the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley loaded two rifle companies on trucks at Marble Mountain and, supported by a platoon of tanks, headed north. After a brief delay at a Struggle Forces' roadblock, the Marines reached their destination. While the Marines were preparing defensive positions, Captain Thanh paid a visit to Lieutenant Colonel Kelley. Thanh vaguely hinted that if the Marines would guarantee his safety and that of his men he would consider turning the dump over to the Marines. The battalion commander relayed the gist of this conversation to III MAF Headquarters.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley had reason to be concerned about the safety of his troops. Firing across the river continued all night and into the morning of 21 May. Shortly after sunrise, a Vietnamese A-1 Skyraider made two strafing passes on the Marine positions, but no one was injured. Minutes later, two more Skyraiders fired into the compound with 20mm cannon and 2.75-inch rockets, wounding seven Marines. Apparently the Vietnamese Air Force pilots were after a rebel truck parked outside the perimeter fence, but missed their target.

General Walt warned the Vietnamese Air Force that if any further air attacks occurred, Marine jets would shoot down the Vietnamese planes. He later remembered that after the strafing incident he ordered four Marine A-4s to fly as a combat air patrol (CAP) over the four Vietnamese Skyraiders. The Vietnamese air commander then ordered:

An aerial view of the bridge connecting Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. The bridge was the site of a dramatic confrontation between Gen Walt and dissident forces.

Navy Photo K-52114



... four more Skyraiders above our jets. I then ordered four more A-4's to fly CAP over the top of the second layer of Skyraiders. For over an hour I sat in the III MAF command center with two phones in my hand—one to the Marine air commander and the other to the Vietnamese air commander.

According to Walt, he cautioned the Vietnamese air commander:

... that if his planes fired one round, one rocket or dropped one bomb we would shoot all his planes out of the sky. On the other phone I told my Marine air commander to be prepared to immediately carry out my order. Finally having been convinced I meant what I said the Vietnamese commander gave orders for his planes to land at the airfield and the crisis was past.⁴²

There were no further air strikes, but later that morning the 2d Battalion came under mortar attack from the rebel side. Eight more Marines were wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley warned the insurgents that he would retaliate if there were any more provocations. There were none.

During the next two days, the Marines attempted to convince the ARVN dissidents to surrender the ammunition dump to the Americans. Finally at 0200 on 23 May, Captain Thanh, fearing the Vietnamese Marines were preparing to attack, told Lieutenant Colonel Kelley that he was willing to turn over the dump. For the next two hours, the officers ironed out the details of a 15-point agreement. Thanh was extremely meticulous and insisted that every word be approved by other members of the local Struggle Force committee. Kelley only insisted that the Marines be able to bring tanks into the dump, a point which Thanh conceded. After completing the final draft of the document, the two men conducted a tour of the installation. At 0530, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley brought the text of the agreement to General Walt, who gave it his approval. At 0800, two M-48 tanks followed by a Marine company entered the dump.⁴³

Although not related to the incident at the ammunition depot, the entire Struggle Movement in Da Nang collapsed on 23 May. At 1400, the dissidents in the Tinh Hoi Pagodas surrendered; the loyalist troops disarmed 325 rebels, removed 33 bodies, and recovered over 1,300 weapons. All ARVN troops sympathetic to the Struggle Movement returned to their former units. The Directorate appointed Lieutenant Colonel Le Chi Cuong to replace the imprisoned Nguyen Van Man as mayor of Da Nang and by the evening of the 23d, the city

had returned to normal. All told, about 150 Vietnamese on both sides were killed during the fighting in Da Nang and another 700 wounded. American casualties were 23 wounded, including 18 Marines.⁴⁴

The end of the Struggle Movement in Da Nang apparently convinced General Thi to abandon any hope for a return to power. He conferred with General Westmoreland on 24 May and reluctantly agreed to meet with Premier Ky to discuss their differences. Three days later the two met at Chu Lai.* Thi stated that he only wanted what was best for the Vietnamese people and that he was not a puppet of the Buddhists. According to Thi, the Struggle Forces lacked discipline and he offered to cooperate fully with the premier. Ky decided that the former Corps commander would be most "helpful" if he left I Corps and shortly after the meeting Thi left for Da Lat to await reassignment. Later in the year, General Thi and his family went into exile in Washington, D.C.

Before leaving I Corps, Thi tried to persuade General Cao at Da Nang to return to I Corps Headquarters and work for a final settlement. General Cao refused since he still feared for his personal safety and that of his family. Indeed, he wrote a letter to General Westmoreland:

... asking for asylum in the United States where he would like "to become an American citizen, to join the Marines or the Army, to fight against the Communists. . . . My wife and children will be safe in your country, and I will do my best to serve freedom and the United States."⁴⁵

In any event, recognizing that Cao was unacceptable to Ky, the Directorate named the loyal 2d ARVN Division commander, Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps commander.

Despite Thi's departure, the situation in Hue continued to deteriorate. The most radical of the Buddhist leaders had taken control. The day before the

*Lieutenant Colonel Alex Lee, who at the time, as a captain, commanded Company F, 7th Marines, recalled that Companies E and F of the 2d Battalion had the assignment to guard the Chu Lai strip during the meeting. According to Lee, there was "an unending stream of rumors and counterrumors concerning possible VC attack, NVA attack, and possible RVN unit attack. None of these rumors came true; however, it was a hot dusty and very tense time to wait developments with little or nothing in the way of valid information." LtCol Alex Lee, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187170

Gen Walt (right) greets MajGen Hoang Xuan Lam (left), upon his arrival at Da Nang to assume command of I Corps. Lam, the former Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division, was the last in a rapid succession of I Corps commanders after the removal of Gen Thi.

Chu Lai conference, an estimated 10,000 people filed through the streets of Hue in a massive funeral procession for the young Vietnamese officer who had fired on General Cao's helicopter. After the funeral, 300 students marched on the United States Information Services Library. While police and ARVN soldiers watched, the mob smashed windows, set books and furniture ablaze, and even pried the brass lettering off the face of the library. All that remained of the modern, two-story structure was a burned-out shell.

On 29 May, the radicals employed a familiar but most gruesome tactic. A Buddhist nun sat down in front of a pagoda in Hue, doused her robe with gasoline, and set herself on fire. That night, another nun followed suit in front of the Saigon Buddhist Institute and next morning a monk did the same in Da Lat. In a press conference, Tri Quang stated that

President Johnson was responsible for the fiery suicides and several days later he began a much-publicized hunger strike to protest American support of the Vietnamese Government.

On 1 June, the protests were once more aimed at the Americans. Intelligence reports indicated that a mob planned to attack the U.S. consulate at Hue. The staff therefore destroyed all classified material and evacuated the building. Before leaving, the U.S. consul contacted General Nhuan and asked for troops to protect the building. The 1st ARVN Division commander complied, but his guards hastily departed when a mob of 800 protesters stormed the mission. After first stoning the building, the mob broke down the door and set the consulate on fire with barrels of gasoline. It then moved next door where it sacked and burned the residence of the U.S. administrative assistant. The homes of the Thua

Thien province chief and other Vietnamese officials also went up in flames.

As a result of the increasing violence, the government granted additional concessions to the Buddhists. At a meeting of the Armed Forces Council on 6 June, the Directorate was enlarged to include 10 civilian members, two of whom were Buddhists. A week later, Premier Ky established a predominantly civilian 80-man People-Army Council to advise the government on political, economic, and social matters. These changes in Saigon did not satisfy the dissidents. Those Buddhists who had been installed in the government were not official representatives of the Buddhist Institute and both Tam Chau and Tri Quang continued to voice their opposition to the existing administration.

The Buddhists also employed a nonviolent harassing tactic. In Da Nang, Hue, Quang Tri, and Qui Nhon, they began placing family altars and statues in the streets. All U.S. personnel were ordered not to touch the religious figures since the desecration of one could precipitate an incident. In Da Nang, the cluttered streets snarled traffic and General Walt restricted the use of vehicles. The movement of supplies from the piers came to a halt. The I Corps commander, General Lam, ordered the police to remove all shrines; this was accomplished in Da Nang. In Hue, however, the 1st ARVN Division troops and National Police refused to touch the altars.*

*Several Marine commanders stationed near Phu Bai during this period remarked in their comments on the inconvenience caused by the Buddhist demonstrations. Colonel Samuel M. Morrow, then a major and commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, remembered that "... the Buddhists would set shrines down the middle of Highway 1 making the passage of trucks and self-propelled artillery virtually impossible for fear of knocking one of them over. ..." Col Samuel M. Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Sumner A. Vale, then commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled that the altars "... were not placed in the center of the highway but enough off-center so that a 2½-ton truck could still use the road." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, commented that during the Buddhist difficulties in Hue, "... nearly all our resupply was by helo. Since ammo had first priority, we frequently got only one meal of C's per day. We made up the other two meals from captured rice, sweet corn, and peanuts." LtCol Ralph E. Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

At this time, Premier Ky decided to act. He ordered General Lam to rectify the situation in Hue. On 10 June, Lam airlifted 300 riot control police to the old imperial capital. Two days later, the first of four government battalions arrived and the National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, took command of final operations against the rebels.

This time the government forces acted with restraint and there was little fighting. While clearing the streets, the Vietnamese policemen bowed three times and then carefully removed each altar. Those demonstrators who refused to disperse were quickly hustled into waiting trucks and rushed off to jail. In breaking up the few last protest marches, ARVN troops used tear gas instead of bullets. The main areas of resistance were located in the Citadel and near two Buddhist pagodas, but by the evening of 18 June Colonel Loan's unit had neutralized these strongholds. With the arrest of key rebel leaders and the ousting of General Nhuan as the 1st ARVN Division's commander, the Struggle Movement disintegrated. By morning, the government had reestablished its control of Hue.

Throughout the crisis period, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Lodge backed Premier Ky and the Directorate. Their cooperation, especially during April when the Vietnamese Marines arrived at Da Nang, placed General Walt in a difficult position. He viewed the situation differently than MACV. Walt had an extremely close relationship, both professionally and personally, with General Thi. The Marines considered Thi a good, competent commander who had been effectively prosecuting the war in I Corps. His removal was a disappointment to III MAF.^{46**}

The Marines were not anti-Ky. Their main interest was to get on with the war, and each move by the government, be it a troop deployment, an inflammatory public announcement, or a removal of a key

**One veteran Marine commander observed in his comments: "... it would appear that the natural (and healthy) differences and professional rivalry between [U.S.] Marine and [U.S.] Army sort of played into the hands of the political differences between Ky and Thi in this one instance. Of course the geographic separation of Walt from Westmoreland, coupled with the proximity of Thi to the former and Ky to the latter, also aggravated the situation. I think it's even more to General Walt's credit that he managed this situation so expertly." Col Leon N. Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Struggle leader, caused reverberations throughout I Corps. The parade of corps commanders through Da Nang, finally ending with the appointment of Lam, also complicated the Marine task. Colonel Chaisson, much later, expressed the fears of the Marine command when he stated:

If we'd got ourselves in a position with the government forces fighting the local forces up there, and particularly if we had been caught in the middle of it and there'd been

any significant U.S. casualties, I have a feeling that the U.S. Government would have probably pulled out of the war right then and there.⁴⁷

The fact of the matter was that the Saigon forces put down the revolt without a full civil war, thus, Ky and the Directorate achieved temporary solidification of their government at the expense of a certain amount of instability in I Corps.

CHAPTER 6

The Advance to the Ky Lam

April Actions and Operation Georgia—The May Ky Lam Campaign—Operation Liberty

April Actions and Operation Georgia

The spring political crisis caused a serious disruption of Marine offensive operations at Da Nang. With the sudden arrival of Vietnamese Marine battalions at the Da Nang Airbase in April, the U.S. Marine regiments in Quang Nam Province suddenly found themselves with a new mission. They not only had to fight a war against the Communists, but also to prevent one between government troops and the Struggle Forces. Colonel Simmons compared the role of his regiment to that of the "ham in the sandwich," the filler to absorb the shock of the confrontation between the two opposing sides.¹

This situation could only benefit the Communists. The 9th Marines had to revert to the defensive because of the threat to the security of Da Nang created by the polarization of the ARVN forces into hostile factions. With the abandonment of several government outposts along Route 4 and vast amounts of ammunition, the VC not only rearmed at GVN expense, but reentered the area the Marines had just cleared during Operation Kings.*

On 16 April, an old enemy, the R-20 "*Doc Lap*" Battalion, attacked one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in position north of the abandoned 39th Ranger outpost at Phong Thu. Company H, commanded by Captain Everette S. Roane, had established defensive positions north of Route 4, and

put a squad ambush south of the road. Suddenly, at 0400, the enemy opened up with recoilless rifle and mortar fire. Simultaneously, the enemy launched two company-size assaults, one from the southeast and the other from the southwest. The attack from the southwest, about 100 men, ran into a Marine ambush and stalled. According to the Marine squad leader, his men "shot 12-15 VC for sure—most likely more." At dawn the following morning, the squad found two enemy bodies in front of its position.²

The approximately 150-man force attacking from the southeast reached the north side of Route 4, but was unable to penetrate the Marine company's perimeter. As soon as the attackers crossed the road:

The VC were like ducks in a shooting gallery. Many VC were shot as they crossed the road and went down into the paddy in front of the 2d Platoon. At one point, 22 VC bodies could be counted in that vicinity. Other VC were shot as they attempted to remove bodies. During the lulls in illumination, as bodies would be removed and more VC would cross the road, there would be more bodies.³

Marine aerial observers arrived overhead and as Marine artillery responded, the enemy's supporting mortars and recoilless rifles fell silent. The VC ground assault dissipated, and the attacking force broke up into small groups. Enemy probes continued along the Marine company perimeter, but, "this most likely was to cover the collection of VC casualties and the withdrawal of the main force."⁴

At first light, the Marines counted 12 enemy bodies, but estimated killing another 63. Company H had not gone unscathed, suffering seven dead and 37 wounded, largely as a result of the enemy's recoilless rifle and mortar attack.⁵

In mid-April the 9th Marines resumed the initiative, following the temporary standoff of the political crisis. Originally, the regiment planned to follow Kings with a one-battalion operation beginning on 10 April in the An Hoa region south of the Ky Lam and Thu Bon. Thus, the Marines would

*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, commented that he vividly recalled "a request . . . for engineers to clear mines and booby traps from one of the abandoned ARVN encampments on Route 4." He and his engineers came under a night attack from the VC before the job was done and his engineers sustained four casualties, including one man killed. Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File). 92

carry out General Walt's promise to Mr. Can, the An Hoa project leader, that III MAF would protect the industrial complex there. Though unable to meet the original date, the 9th Marines completed its revised order for Operation Georgia by 14 April. The mission was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.⁶

With the completion of the planning, the 9th Marines battalions began preliminary preparations for the operation. On 18 April, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang three days earlier, relieved the 3d Battalion on the eastern flank of the 9th Marines area of operations. Both Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion and Taylor's 3d Battalion then reentered the former Kings area of operations in conjunction with ARVN and Vietnamese militia forces. Their assignment was not only to eradicate the VC but to determine suitable LVT river-crossing sites and assembly and resupply points for the forthcoming operation.

Although the operation had not officially begun, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor established a forward base at the An Hoa airstrip on 20 April. Helicopters from MAG-16 lifted the command group and Company L from Marble Mountain while Air Force C-123s, as in Operation Mallard, flew in an artillery battery, Battery F, 12th Marines.

On the 21st, the designated date for the start of the operation, the rear headquarters and two rifle companies, supported by a platoon of LVTHs from Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, moved overland toward the objective area. A third company, Company I, 9th Marines, arrived at An Hoa by helicopter and Air Force transports brought in a second 105mm battery, Battery B, 12th Marines. Both fixed-wing transports and helicopters continued to fly in supplies for the An Hoa buildup. On 22 April, Company L linked up with the LVT convoy after it had crossed the Thu Bon River.

With the establishment of the An Hoa base, the battalion began the second phase of the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor had divided the An Hoa region into 20 well-defined, company-size TAORs and the Marines, with local ARVN and South Vietnamese Popular Forces, began a series of actions, using tactics similar to those used during Operation Kings. Combining County Fair and Golden Fleece techniques, the Marines attempted to secure the



Marine Corps Photo A186933

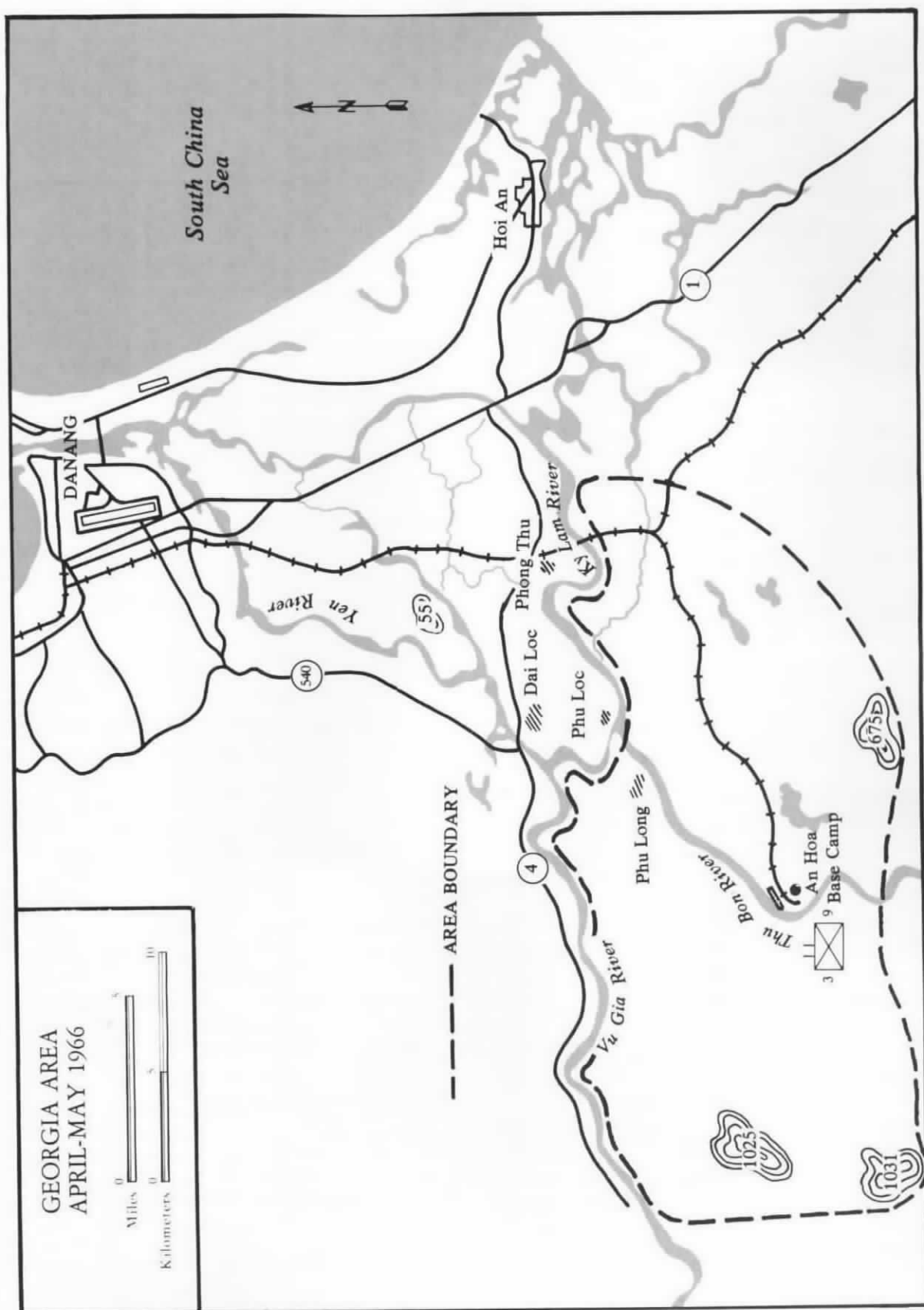
Le Thuc Can, project leader of the An Hoa Industrial Complex (center), discusses plans with Gen Walt and LtCol William W. Taylor (left), Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion is about to reenter the An Hoa region in Operation Georgia.

hamlets surrounding the An Hoa base in order that the industrial complex there could become a reality.

Despite intelligence reports indicating the presence of the VC V-25 (5th VC) Battalion in the western sector of the Georgia zone of action, that area between the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, the Marines encountered little opposition through the end of April, only harassing fire and mines. Marine aerial observers and a platoon from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, supporting the operation, accounted for most of the VC sightings at this stage. Air observers and reconnaissance Marines "frequently detected movement of small enemy forces at long range and directed artillery fire at the VC with telling effect."⁷ Major Samuel M. Morrow, commander of the provisional artillery group at An Hoa, commented that although some:

... very fine targets were observed and some excellent missions ... fired, there was a tendency on the part of these untrained observers [the reconnaissance Marines] to enter fire for effect too early and attempt to "chase the target" rather than reenter the adjustment phase. ...⁸

Yet the reconnaissance outposts on the southern and



western fringes of the Georgia operating area controlled 36 artillery missions and six air strikes, resulting in at least 30 enemy dead.⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Paul C. Trammell, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Taylor in early May as the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, later recalled that although Major Morrow expressed his doubts about the “effectiveness of the recon teams in fire adjustment,” the artillery commander afterwards “conceded that the concept worked well.”¹⁰

The heaviest action of Operation Georgia occurred on 3 May. Captain George R. Griggs’ Company M, 9th Marines, which had just relieved another company during the operation, prepared to cross the Thu Bon. Its objective was the hamlet of Phu Long (1) on the northern bank of the river in the north-central sector of the Georgia area. During the river crossing, an estimated one- to two-company enemy force, later identified as being from the ubiquitous *R-20 Battalion*, opened fire on the Marine company in LVTs. In a four-hour firefight lasting through the afternoon, Griggs’ company, reinforced by two other Marine companies and supported by air and artillery, finally secured Phu Long (1). LVTHs, which accompanied the Marines in the river crossing, brought direct fire upon the enemy positions and



Marine Corps Photo A187160
A 60mm mortar team from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in Operation Georgia has just fired off a round at a VC sniper.

A Marine appears to be watching over a pastoral scene during Operation Georgia. Smoke, however, can be seen rising where Marines have destroyed a VC bunker.

Marine Corps Photo A187042





Marine Corps Photo A187050

Marines from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines engage the VC in a firefight during Operation Georgia. The Marine on the left appears to be reaching for a clip to reload his M14 rifle.

As Marines from the 3d Battalion watch, a VC suspect raises his hands in surrender and comes out of his bunker. The Viet Cong made effective use of bunkers, fighting holes, and underground tunnels.

Marine Corps Photo A187024



were "instrumental in neutralizing enemy fire and preventing more casualties."¹¹ During the engagement, the Marines suffered five dead and 54 wounded. They killed 15 of the VC and estimated that they had inflicted another 100 casualties.

Although technically ending on 10 May, Georgia, like Kings before it, was in reality an extension of the Marine area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Trammell held his command post and two rifle companies, reinforced by an artillery battery from the 12th Marines at the An Hoa base. The final reports of Georgia indicated that a favorable kill ratio had been achieved, 103 confirmed VC dead at a cost of nine Marines killed and 94 wounded.

The May Ky Lam Campaign

Taking advantage of the truce in the political situation, on 4 May, Colonel Simmons published a

plan for a renewed offensive above the Ky Lam River. The Ky Lam Campaign, named after the river, was to be a three-phased advance "to clear the regimental zone of action of organized resistance south to the line of the Thu Bon-Ky Lam-Dien Binh-Cau Lau-Hoi An Rivers."¹² At the end of May, the forward battalions were to reach Phase Line Brown, a line which extended from below Dai Loc in the west and followed the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers eastward, with the exception of a 2,000 meter-wide horseshoe-shaped salient extending south 5,000 meters along both sides of Route 1 to just above Dien Ban. In June, the regiment was to begin the second phase of the operation, securing all of Route 4 west of Route 1 and extending the Marines' lines down to the Ky Lam. During July, the 9th Marines, in the final phase of the campaign, was to advance southward in the region east of Route 1 and incorporate the city of Hoi An in its area of responsibility.¹³

The concept of operations for the offensive required the same "scrubbing" tactics used in Kings and Georgia. Battalions were "to deploy their companies in a diamond configuration, terrain permitting, and to employ all supporting arms imaginatively and vigorously."¹⁴ Colonel Simmons later explained that the failure to use air and artillery in the past had resulted in needless Marine casualties. He believed that the American command had to take a realistic attitude toward civilian casualties. The selective employment of supporting arms did not by itself increase the number of civilians killed and wounded, but did cause the inhabitants of contested hamlets to abandon their homes, thus becoming refugees. Simmons viewed the refugee from his perspective as an asset, "a person who had made his election physically to move over to our side." The removal of refugees from the hamlets in the uncleared area made the Marine task of identifying and eradicating the VC that much easier. The cost of housing, feeding these refugees, and rebuilding their hamlets, if necessary, was considered a minimal price to pay.¹⁵

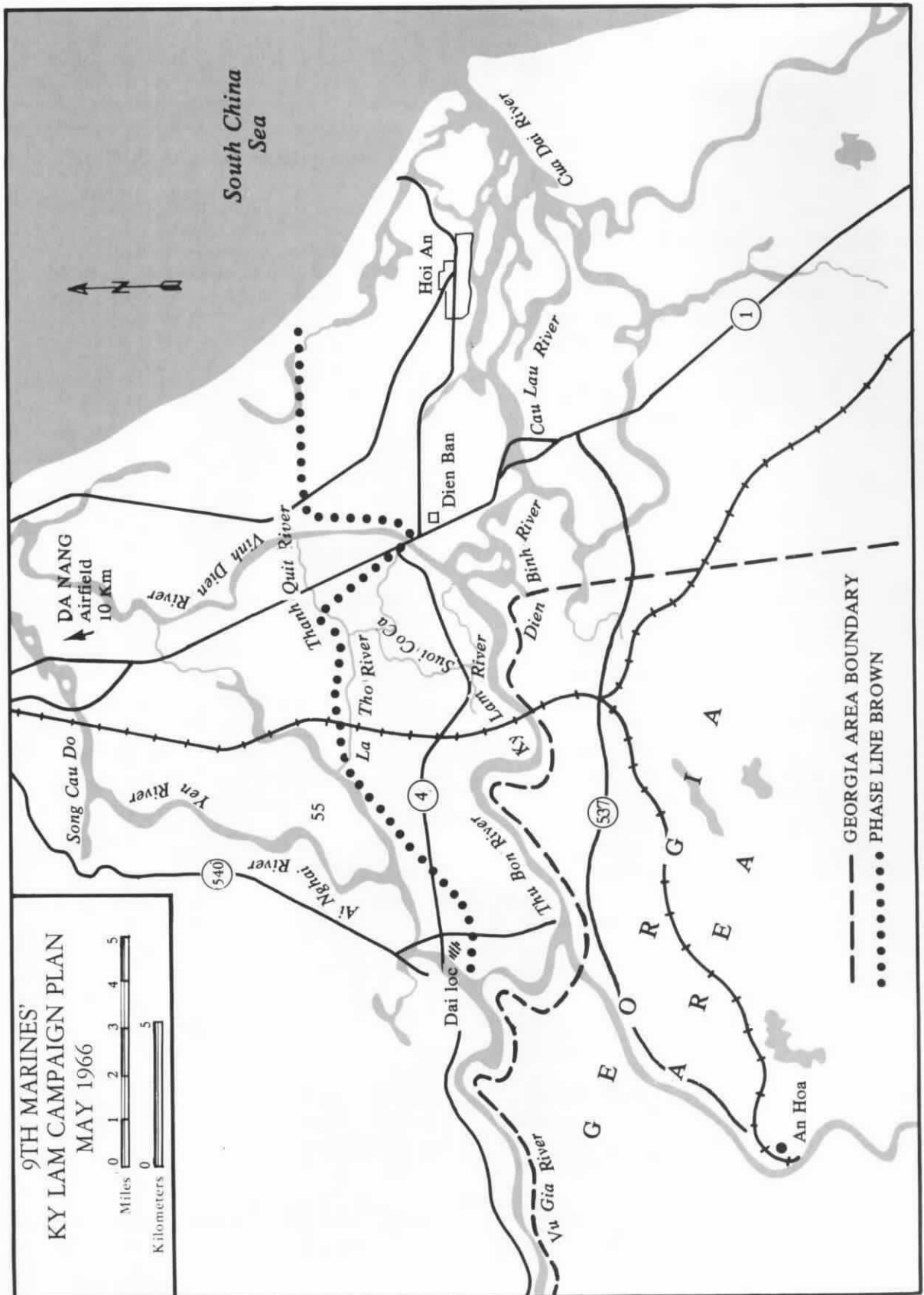
For the Ky Lam Campaign, Colonel Simmons had four infantry battalions under his operational control. These were the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and all three 9th Marines battalions, including the 3d Battalion in An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which had been the Da Nang Base Defense Battalion, became

available for the campaign when relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Doehler's battalion inherited Dorsey's responsibility for the 9th Marines' western sector.

The heaviest fighting in the early stages of the campaign was in Doehler's zone of action. On 10 May, he had established the battalion's forward command post in Dai Loc. His Company B, commanded by Captain Norman E. Henry, was on the eastern bank of the Vu Gia, 3,500 meters south of Dai Loc to provide a covering force for units leaving the Georgia area of operations. That morning, Company A, 9th Marines, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Battalion during Operation Georgia, crossed the Vu Gia in LVTs and rejoined its parent battalion at Dai Loc. After the river crossing, Company A prepared for a clearing operation around the town of Dai Loc, while Henry's company made preparations for a similar operation in southern Dai Loc District above the Thu Bon. Allied intelligence sources indicated that the *R-20 Battalion* had reinfiltrated this area. A report received on 11 May stated that a company of the battalion was in the hamlet of Do Nam near a small finger lake, 2,000 meters northeast of Company B's position.¹⁶

On the morning of 12 May, one of Henry's patrols unexpectedly came upon the enemy. The 14-man squad had left the company CP at 0630, moving east. One hour later, the patrol reported that it had come under small arms fire and captured a VC suspect. Encountering no further resistance, the Marines continued their patrol. At 0830, the squad leader radioed back that a water buffalo was in its path. Captain Henry ordered the squad to avoid the animal, but "if threatened by it, they were given permission to shoot." In the squad's next report, about 30 minutes later, the Marines stated that they had wounded the buffalo and were giving chase to finish it off. Fifteen minutes after that, the patrol reported harassing fire and seeing Viet Cong fleeing to the east "and that the patrol was giving physical pursuit." The patrol leader asked for supporting mortar fire. Company B's mortar section fired an 81mm ranging round, but the patrol was unable to observe its impact. Captain Henry ordered his mortars to cease firing, fearing that they might hit his own men. About that time, the company lost radio contact with the patrol.

The company commander sent out a second squad to follow the route of the first patrol. The second



squad came under small arms and mortar fire itself. The Marines countered with mortar fire from the company base area which silenced the enemy's weapons. About 1030, the squad leader reported hearing a "heavy volume of small arms fire, mortars, M79s, and hand grenades due east of their position," near the village of Do Nam. Believing that he had found the missing Marines, he asked for an aerial observer.

Although no Marine observation aircraft was available, "an Army AO [aerial observer] happened into the area and reported an apparent firefight" in the vicinity of the action recently reported by the second squad. The Army aircraft dropped a red smoke grenade in the village of Do Nam and fired four rockets into a trenchline in front of the Marines. Making another pass, the Army AO threw out two messages to the Marines below, informing them that there were 20 VC in the trench line.

By this time, Captain Henry decided to move the rest of his company to support his embattled Marines. By 1145 he had established a 500-meter defensive line near the village of Hoa Tay, 500 meters southwest of the second squad's position. The company commander then ordered the squad, which had suffered five heat casualties, to pull back to the company lines. By 1230, the entire company was heavily engaged. The company's 81mm and 60mm mortars failed to silence the enemy's weapons and Henry asked for artillery and air support. After an artillery mission fired by the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, the action died down for about 20 minutes. At noon, the enemy opened up again with small arms and mortars, but by this time F-4Bs from VMFA-542 were overhead. The jets' first runs on the entrenched VC in Do Nam once more temporarily silenced the enemy.

Following the air strikes, about 1320, Captain Henry's men spotted two Marines crossing an open field toward their lines. Henry ordered "a base of fire and mortar fire" to cover the two men. Both Marines were from the first patrol and badly wounded. The company commander asked them, before they went under sedation, where the rest of the squad was. The men vaguely pointed in a general direction to the northeast and said that they were all dead. Before being overrun, the wounded men claimed that the patrol had killed 30 of the enemy.

Despite poor communications, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler had been able to follow the course of

the Company B action. Through "fragments of information which had sifted through," the Marine battalion commander believed that his company had encountered the *R-20 Battalion*. He had just received an intelligence report that two companies of the *R-20* had reinforced the enemy company already in the area "to ambush Marine units operating in the area." Doehler ironically remarked later that since Company B was heavily engaged at the time, "it was considered to be an accurate if not timely report."

Shortly after 1330, the 1st Battalion commander decided to reinforce his Company B. After some initial problems in obtaining helicopter support, he moved Company D and a platoon from Company A to link up with Henry's company. By 1815, the three Marine units were consolidated in a 360-degree defensive perimeter around the hamlet of Hoa Tay.

By this time, Marine air and artillery had broken the back of enemy resistance. F-4Bs, F-8s, and A-4s from VMFA-542, VMF(AW)-235, and VMA-214, respectively, joined UH-1E gunships from VMO-2 in 27 close air support missions. Nine airstrikes were run at half-hour intervals. Marine artillery had fired 242 supporting rounds. The combination of air and artillery apparently inflicted heavy casualties on the VC. According to Doehler, the supporting arms disorganized the enemy, forcing them to break up into small groups. Later interrogation of the villagers revealed that these small bands of VC had slipped back across the Thu Bon during the night of 12 May. They had forced civilians in the hamlets to carry their dead and wounded.

On the morning of 13 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP into Hoa Tay and prepared to conduct a two-company search and clear operation. That afternoon Company B recovered the bodies of the 12 missing Marines near the western tip of the small finger lake. For the next two days the battalion carried out a series of cordons and searches in the area of southern Dai Loc District containing the hamlets of Hoa Tay, Hoa Nam, and Giao Thuy (2) and (3).

This entire sector contained a series of heavily fortified hamlets interspersed among large, open fields. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler described the village defenses as formidable, observing:

A complex network of trenches surrounded each of the villages. In many cases, communication trenches extended from village to village. These trenches typically were four



Marine Corps Photo A187064

Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines recover the bodies of the men from the unit's lost patrol. The VC had overrun the Marine squad, killing 12 of its 14 members.

to six feet deep with firing positions located every few meters. At the bottom of the trenches, tunnels were dug back into the ground to provide overhead cover. . . . In some places bamboo-lined bunkers were found, some of which were underground and some above ground.

The Marines found the villagers of Hoa Nam and Giao Thuy "cooperative and fairly talkative as long as they were alone with an interpreter and an interrogator." They told what they knew about VC movements in the area and in several cases volunteered the names of VC guerrillas living in their hamlets.

The Marine battalion was unable to take advantage of this intelligence. The renewal of the political crisis on 15 May, signaled by the arrival of the South Vietnamese Marines at Da Nang, forced Lieutenant Colonel Doehler to cut short the operation on that date. Once more the ARVN units south of Da Nang divided into opposing factions and abandoned their outposts along Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP back to Hill 55, and his battalion was again on the defensive.

During the first two weeks in May, the other 9th Marines' battalions conducted similar scrubbing actions in their respective sectors, but encountered only harassing fire and mines. With renewed political troubles in Da Nang, they too returned to their former positions. The regiment's offensive ground to a halt. Nevertheless, in the three-day period from 12-15 May, Doehler's battalion claimed to have killed 57 of the enemy. One later intelligence source indicated that the VC casualties may have been as high

as 150 dead. The Marine battalion suffered 15 killed, 17 wounded, and 10 nonbattle casualties.*

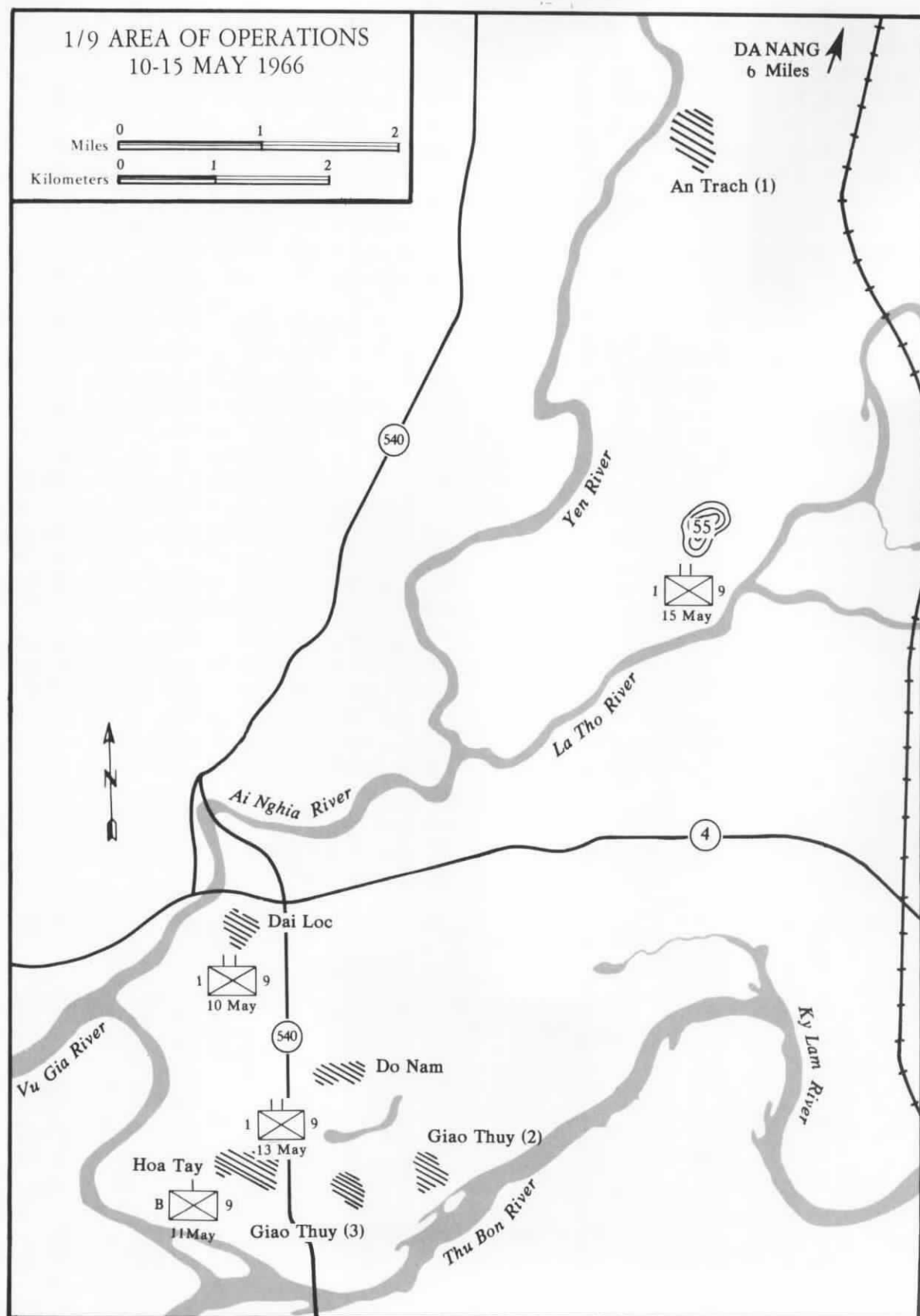
With the Marines on the defensive south of Da Nang, the enemy tried to exploit the chaotic situation caused by the political crisis. On 21 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines met the *R-20 Battalion* again. The enemy unit had infiltrated the hamlet of An Trach, a former model village for Marine Corps civic action, located north of Hill 55. At 1115 a Company C squad made contact with 40 to 50 VC 500 meters across the Yen River from An Trach (1). The fighting escalated into a fierce engagement extending across both banks of the river. In a seven-hour battle, Companies A and C, reinforced by Sparrow Hawk squads, M-48 tanks, and supported by air and artillery, defeated two companies of the *R-20*. According to the 3d Marine Division account:

In the initial stages of the contact, the Viet Cong fought from trenches until they were overrun by Marines. Later, Viet Cong were seen attempting to run from the Marines, even digging frantically, to evade contact with Marine units. During the later stages . . . the Viet Cong became very confused and appeared to be without leadership.¹⁷

In the day's fighting, the battalion killed 53 enemy and possibly another 83, but suffered 12 dead and 31 wounded.¹⁸

Colonel Simmons observed that all of the regiment's significant contacts during May resulted from VC initiative. The enemy would begin the action when the Marines were at a disadvantage, either because of numbers or terrain, and in some cases because of both. The Marines, nevertheless, eventually attained the upper hand. For the entire month, the 9th Marines killed more than 270 of the enemy; 75 Marines died, 328 were wounded. Over 50 percent of the Marine casualties in May were caused by enemy mines and explosive devices, many of them made from equipment abandoned by the

*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., who during this period was the 3d Marine Division G-2, recalled, ". . . they told Bill Doehler to confirm body counts . . . he replied there is not a damn, single [enemy] body out here. We had to pause for about three full days in counting bodies, in order to allow the totals to catch up with what [was] already reported." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



ARVN forces south of Da Nang. Colonel Simmons remarked upon the considerable increase of enemy incidents during the month, declaring that this upsurge was largely due to "the increased freedom of movement enjoyed by the Viet Cong in many outlying areas as the result of diminished GVN military activities during the periods of political instability" As a result, the regiment failed to reach Phase Line Brown on 31 May and the Ky Lam Campaign was behind schedule.¹⁹

Operation Liberty

With the surrender of the Struggle Forces at Da Nang and the restoration of some stability there, the 9th Marines once more renewed its offensive, coordinated with the South Vietnamese. On 2 June, Colonel Lap, who had replaced Colonel Yeu as the Quang Da Special Sector commander, visited Colonel Simmons at his CP. The South Vietnamese commander wanted the 9th Marines to resume County Fair operations in the five-village pacification area. He assured Simmons that at least one battalion from the 51st ARVN Regiment would be committed to the pacification campaign. Following Lap's visit, Colonel Simmons revised portions of his previous orders. On 5 June, he ordered his battalions to renew County Fair operations with the Vietnamese and extended the deadline for the attainment of Phase Line Brown from 31 May to 20 June.²⁰

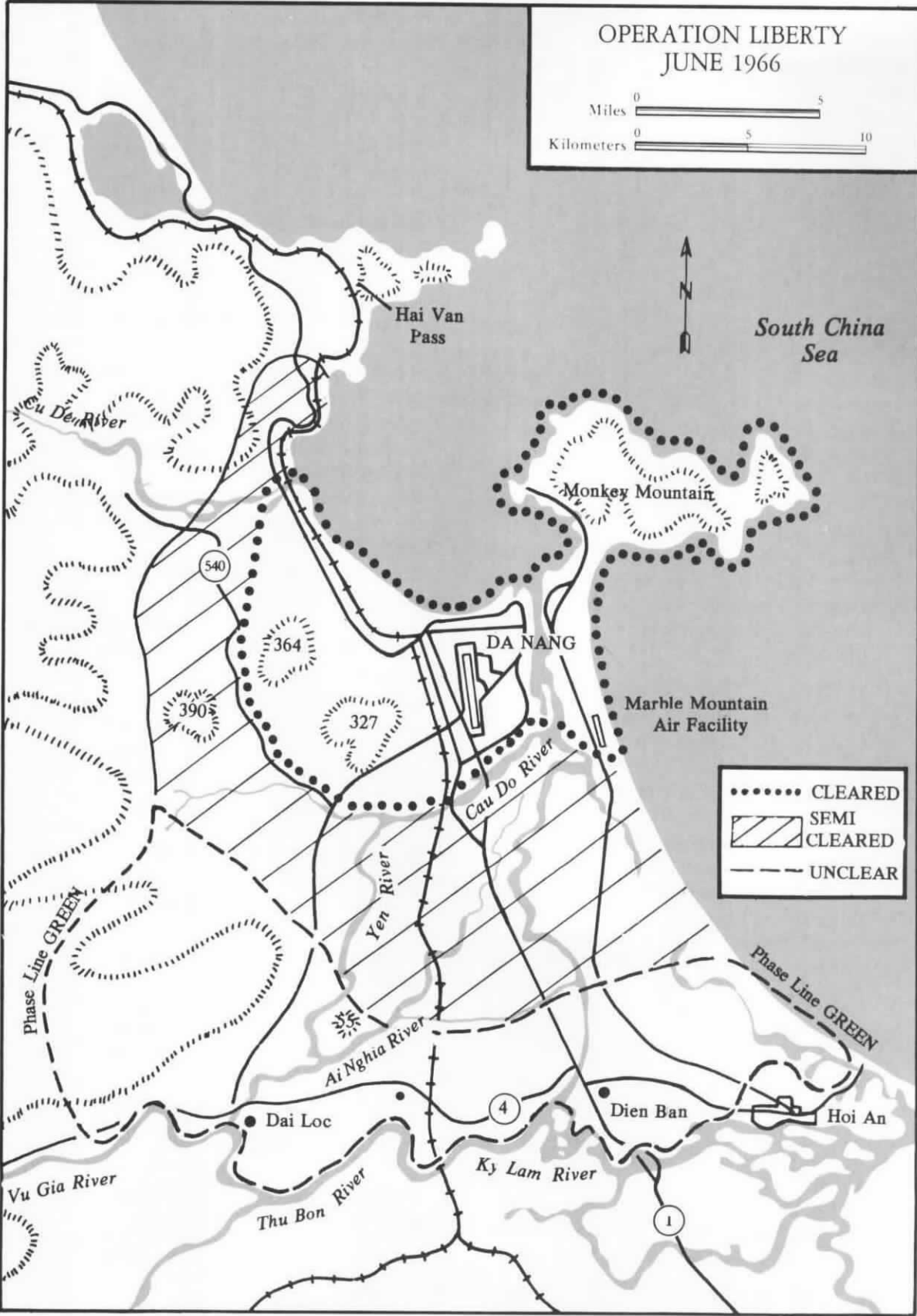
At this juncture, General Kyle decided to transform the 9th Marines Ky Lam Campaign into a division-size offensive, involving "a conventional linear type attack of all forward units to push the frontlines forward in a deliberate search and clear operation to include the cordon and search of every hamlet in the zone. . . ." He divided the Da Nang TAOR into three sectors: the cleared, the semicleared, and the uncleared. The cleared area formed an irregular arc around the Da Nang Airbase, delineated by the South China Sea to the east, the Cau Do to the south, the foothills to the west, and the Cu De River to the north. Extending the arc outward from the cleared area boundary, the semicleared sector reached the Thanh Quit River to the south, three to five kilometers into the high ground to the west and the Hai Van Pass to the north. The uncleared region consisted of the area between the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers and the banks of the Ky Lam-Thu Bon. Phase Line Green, the final phase line, paralleled the latter two rivers. The 3d Marine Division commander ordered that only minimum forces be held in the rear and set 30 June as the target date for reaching Phase Line Green.²¹

Continuing arrival of Marine reinforcements allowed General Kyle to make this all-out effort. On 28 May, the 1st MP Battalion arrived at Da Nang from the United States and relieved the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines of its airfield security mission. The 3d Battalion then returned to the operational

Marines of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sit in a captured Viet Cong barracks and training site in Dai Loc District south of Da Nang. The site is near where the Marine lost patrol was overrun.

Marine Corps Photo A187072





control of its parent regiment, taking over the 3d Marines western TAOR. Colonel Harold A. Hayes, Jr., who had relieved Colonel Fisher on 16 April as 3d Marines commander, at last had command of all three of his battalions. Other reinforcements were scheduled to arrive at Da Nang, or were already in place. Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell was slated to transfer his 1st Marines Headquarters from Chu Lai to Da Nang in June. In fact, two of his battalions had already moved by the end of May. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines arrived at Da Nang on 22 May while the 1st Battalion arrived on 31 May. Both battalions were temporarily placed under the operational control of the 9th Marines. The 3d Battalion became the regimental reserve; the 1st Battalion relieved the regiment's eastern flank battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which rejoined its parent regiment at Phu Bai.

By mid-June General Kyle could expect to have three Marine infantry regiments consisting of eight battalions at Da Nang. He planned to reduce the extensive 9th Marines TAOR by assigning the 1st Marines to the eastern flank while the 3d Marines took over that part of the 9th Marines TAOR west of the Yen River. In effect, Kyle visualized a shoulder-to-shoulder advance to the Ky Lam. The operation, codenamed Liberty, was scheduled to begin on 7 June, with the 9th Marines bearing the brunt of the campaign in its initial stages.

Colonel Simmons divided his TAOR into company-size objective areas. His reserve battalion, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was to concentrate on combined operations with ARVN and Vietnamese local forces in the five-village pacification region in the semicleared area. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was to continue its two-company holding action in the An Hoa region. All the remaining infantry companies were assigned to the three forward battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the eastern flank, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in the center, and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on the western flank. Thus each forward battalion was to consist of five infantry companies instead of the usual four, with three companies deployed to the front and two to the rear. The advancing battalions were to secure Route 4 by 20 June and reach the Ky Lam by the end of the month.²²

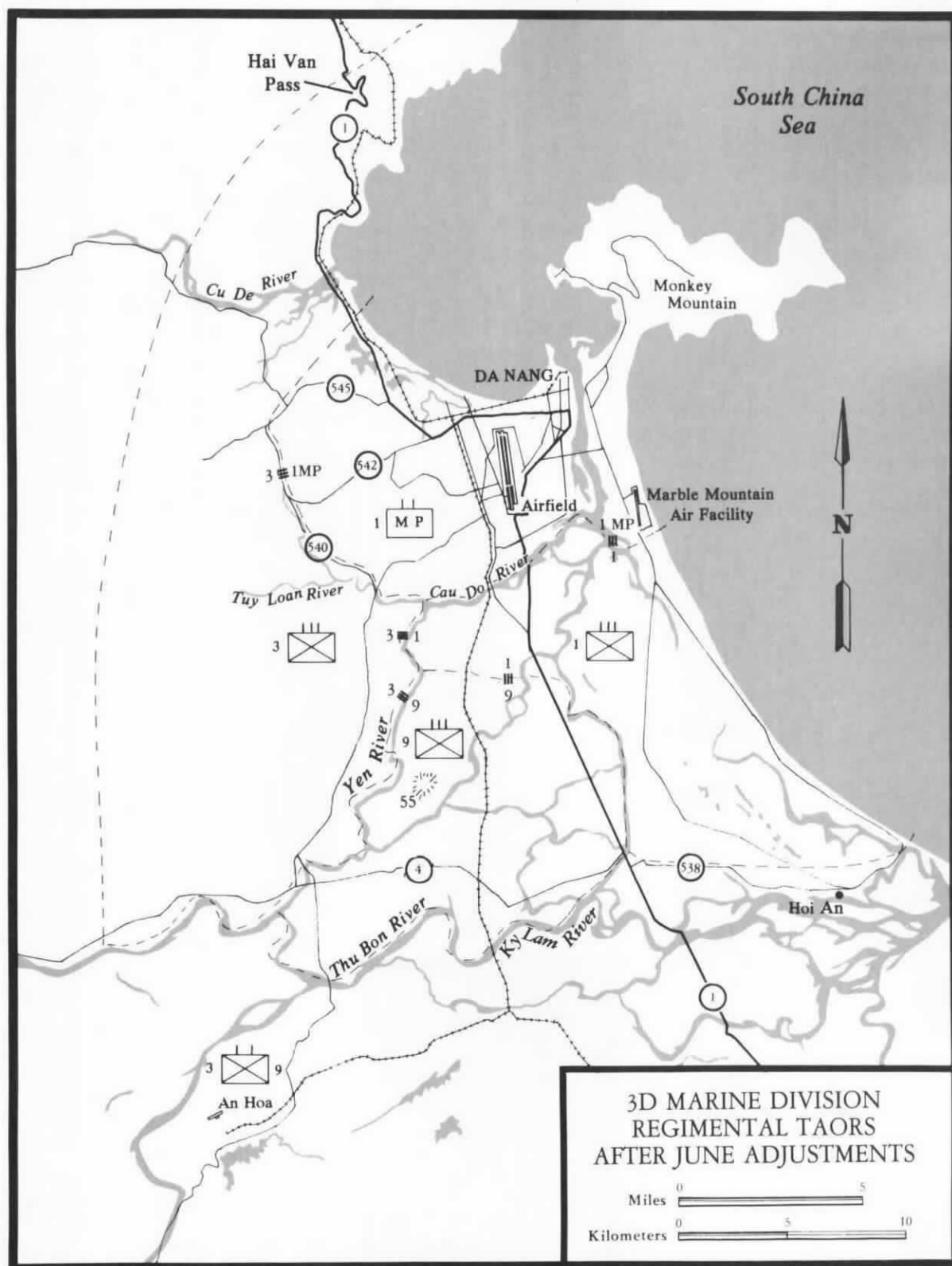
Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on the division's left, had its heaviest engagement just before Operation Liberty

started. During the evening of 5 June, the battalion commander and his small mobile command group, embarked in three Ontos,* found themselves stalled on the northern fringes of Phong Ho (2), a hamlet 10,000 meters south of the Marble Mountain Air Facility and in an area "noted for their hostility toward ARVN soldiers and their allies." Bell's vehicle had run out of gas and the group had just been resupplied by helicopter. As the aircraft took off for the return trip to Marble Mountain, VC weapons from positions approximately 1,000 meters to the southwest opened fire. Using his command group with its Ontos as a blocking unit, Lieutenant Colonel Bell ordered reinforcements from his Company B, supported by LVTs and tanks, brought up from the south of Phong Ho (2). According to the battalion commander, "the result was a sound thrashing of the VC" with 11 dead enemy left on the battlefield and a number of captured weapons. Bell remembered several years afterward, "This area was never pacified and later was leveled, and the villagers removed and relocated."²³

On 7 June Operation Liberty began with heavy preparatory artillery fires. Marine artillery neutralized 35 objective areas in front of the advancing infantry.²⁴ Initially, the enemy countered the Marine offensive with only small arms fire and mines. The mines were the more deadly of the two. The most significant mine incident occurred on 11 June in the 9th Marines central sector. Captain Carl A. Reckewell's Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, walked into a large minefield in a grassy plot just south of the La Tho River. Two detonations killed three Marines and wounded 21. While the wounded were being evacuated, four to five additional explosions occurred and the grass caught fire, but fortunately there were no further Marine casualties. The following day, the artillery fired a destruction mission which caused seven secondary explosions in that same field.²⁵

On 15 June, the division completed its planned realignment of regiments in the TAOR. Colonel Mitchell assumed operational control of his two 1st Marines battalions and took over responsibility for

*The Ontos was a full-tracked, lightly armored, mobile carrier, mounting six 106mm recoilless rifles, four .50 caliber spotting rifles, and one .30 caliber machine gun. It had a crew of three and was the primary weapon of the antitank battalion.



the division's eastern flank from the 9th Marines. With a corresponding reduction in the western sector, the 9th Marines' TAOR now consisted of only 134 square miles, the regiment having given away nearly 100 square miles in the exchange.

With the adjustment of forces and sectors, the 3d Marine Division continued its "scrubbing" actions in Operation Liberty. The only serious enemy opposition occurred in the 9th Marines zone of action. On 18 June, Company C, 9th Marines, operating 2,000 meters south of Dai Loc, came under heavy mortar and small arms fire, suffering eight wounded. The company asked for supporting air and artillery which ended the enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines underwent a similar attack on 22 June in the hamlet of La Hoa (1), immediately east of the railroad and 4,000 meters north of the Ky Lam. Marines once more called upon supporting arms, including naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Marton* (DD 948), to silence

the enemy.* By the end of the month, all three Marine regiments reached Phase Line Green and the operation ended. VC resistance to the Marine advance had been scattered and ineffective. The 9th Marines observed that the lack of major enemy resistance gave plausibility to the thesis that the momentum of Operation Liberty prevented them from gaining any degree of initiative and uprooted them "from what had been a relatively secure operating area."²⁶ That regiment alone claimed to have recovered 40 square miles from the VC. The Marines were once more optimistic about pacifying the extensive Da Nang enclave.

*According to U.S. Navy historians, "Between four and nine ships including destroyers, cruisers, and rocket ships were available for gunfire support in Vietnam at any one time and more than half the missions supported Marines in I Corps." NHD, Comments on draft MS, dtd 19Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

PART III
SPRING FIGHTING IN
SOUTHERN I CORPS

