

Counteroffensive Operations in Southern ICTZ

The Situation in September—Operation Maui Peak—The End of Mameluke Thrust and Renewed Attacks on Da Nang—Operation Meade River—Operation Taylor Common

The Situation in September

Following the failure of the Communist “Third Offensive” in late August, III MAF forces in southern ICTZ pursued enemy forces, attempting to defeat them in detail, until Typhoon Bess brought most offensive operations to a halt. During the first week in September, 60-knot winds and 20 inches of rain battered the Da Nang area. Rivers swelled, flooding low-lying areas and carrying away bridges. Trenches and bunkers collapsed, mud slides closed Route 1 over Hai Van Pass, and aircraft remained grounded. In consolation, III MAF Marines had the satisfaction of knowing that the typhoon brought misery to the enemy, as well, flooding their many underground caches of food and arms.^{1*}

In the wake of the typhoon, III MAF forces underwent major organizational changes. On 10 September, the 27th Marines redeployed to the United States following seven months of combat in Vietnam, reducing by three the number of infantry battalions available to General Cushman. Colonel Robert G. Lauffer's 1st Marines, under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division since late March returned at the end of August and early September to the 1st Marine Division and relieved the 27th Marines. The 2d Light Anti-Aircraft Missile Battalion, based near Chu Lai, which had stood ready to engage enemy aircraft since September 1965, but had never fired one of its HAWK missiles in anger, prepared for redeployment to the U.S. Operation Houston ended on 12 September, after more than six months during which the 5th Marines, and then the 26th Marines, kept Route 1 open between Phu Bai and Da Nang, killing a reported 702 enemy in the process. As Houston ended, XXIV Corps units assumed control of the area around Phu Bai, allowing General Youngdale to dissolve Task Force X-Ray and move the 26th Marines south to the Da Nang TAOR.^{2*}

*See Chapters 19 and 20 for accounts of the havoc that Typhoon Bess caused at Da Nang and in the DMZ respectively.

**See Chapters 19 and 20 as well about the departure of the 27th Marines and the arrival of the 1st Marines at Da Nang.

While III MAF realigned forces, the enemy began recovering from the effects of the typhoon and the defeat of the Third Offensive, albeit the recovery was somewhat slow. At the same time, the Communists maintained pressure through small-scale terrorist and sapper attacks. In one small, but spectacular incident, an enemy sapper, using a bamboo reed as a snorkel, swam through heavy debris clogging the Vinh Dien River to place an explosive charge under the Tu Cau Bridge. The Marines guarding the bridge saw the sapper and took him under fire, but could not stop the attack. The charge exploded, damaging a 28-meter section of the bridge and closing it to vehicles.³

Southwest of Da Nang, Operation Mameluke Thrust continued, with the 5th Marines conducting offensive operations in the Arizona Territory and the An Hoa area, and the 7th Marines resumed offensive operations north of Go Noi Island immediately following the typhoon. On 14 September, Lieutenant Colonel Francis X. Quinn, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines commander, sent two of his companies, L and M, to establish blocking positions in support of an ARVN operation in the “Dodge City” sector outlined by the Thu Bon, Ai Nghia, and La Tho Rivers. As Company L started to move into its blocking position about 4,000 meters south of Hill 55, it came under automatic weapons and small arms fire as well as a mortar barrage from a Communist force of unknown-size, well-entrenched in concealed bunkers. In the ambush, the Marine company suffered heavy casualties, reporting 1 known dead, 21 wounded, and 4 Marines missing in action (MIA). Reinforced by Company M, Company L “returned fire and tried to retrieve the MIAs, but [were] unable to do so.” Pulling back to more defensive positions, the two Marine companies called upon supporting artillery and airstrikes as the fighting continued into the night. The Marines did capture one North Vietnamese prisoner who identified his unit as the *D-3 Sapper Battalion*.⁴

During the early morning hours of the 15th and under the cover of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Quinn brought up his command group and newly attached



Photocopy of III MAF Briefing Map (Nov-Dec 1968)

Gen Earl.E. Anderson Collection

Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. Quinn consolidated the three companies in defensive positions about 3,000 meters to the southwest of the original contact. By this time, Colonel Herbert L. Beckington, the 7th Marines commander, had alerted Lieutenant Colonel LeRoy E. Watson, whose BLT 2/7 (the SLF battalion) was under the operational control of the 7th Marines. While BLT 2/7 established blocking positions, Quinn's 3d Battalion was to sweep through the previous day's contact area.⁵

As planned, at first light on the 15th, Marine helicopters landed the BLT 2/7 command group and Companies F and H in the southern Dodge City sector. At the same time, the three companies of Quinn's battalion attacked to the northeast. At 1700, Company L found the bodies of the four Marines who had been reported the previous day as missing in action. The two battalions linked up on the morning of 16 September and continued to sweep the area. While encountering no significant resistance, the Marines uncovered and destroyed 72 heavily fortified bunkers.⁶

Both battalions continued the search until the afternoon of 17 September. At that time, Colonel Becking-

ton, the 7th Marines commander, ordered a change in plans. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines was to return to its combat base area the following morning while BLT 2/7 was to stay in place, receive reinforcements, and then support the 51st ARVN Regiment.⁷

As scheduled, on the morning of 18 September, Marine helicopters brought in Companies E and G of BLT 2/7 and took out the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. BLT 2/7 advanced southeast below Route 4 toward the main north-south railroad line. The mission of the Marine battalion "was to conduct sweeps to find, fix and destroy the enemy" in the new area of operations. At the time, "the only certain information . . . was that ARVN forces of the 51 ARVN Regiment . . . were in contact with a 'large' NVA force" north of the La Tho River near the railroad. On the evening of the 18th, the BLT established defensive positions just west of the railroad berm.⁸

The following morning, the BLT reached the railroad near its intersection with Route 4 and prepared for resupply. Company F sent a security element into a treeline 250 meters east of the railroad. When the Marines approached to within 15 meters of the heavy

band of kunai grass and banana trees, hidden enemy troops opened fire. As the company mounted an attack, North Vietnamese troops in bunkers, holes, and trenches pounded the advancing Marines with heavy, grazing fire. Enemy rifles, machine guns, mortars, RPGs, and snipers positioned on the flanks, where the treeline extended in a crescent, inflicted 42 casualties on Company F in the initial moments of the battle including the company commander. Lieutenant Colonel Watson threw Companies G and H into the fight on either flank and Company E, previously in reserve, surged forward to replace the bloodied Company F.⁹

The heavy growth in the treeline compounded the Marines' problems in estimating the enemy's strength. While initial reports showed a North Vietnamese platoon in the treeline, the estimate later grew to two companies. To make matters worse, constant overflights by RVNAF aircraft supporting a nearby ARVN unit hampered the Marines' efforts to bring artillery fire on the enemy. For safety reasons, the Marines were compelled to "check fire" the artillery during these unannounced overflights.

Companies G and H pressed hard against the enemy's flanks, but more and more Marines fell under the ferocious hail of fire coming from the NVA position. Late in the afternoon, the 7th Marines directed

the helilift of two companies of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, who established blocking positions along the Suoi Co Ca, 1,000 meters to the east. The battle raged, however, until 1900, when BLT 2/7 broke contact and withdrew to the railroad berm so that supporting arms could engage the enemy without endangering friendly troops. Casualties totalled 14 Marines dead and 54 wounded, as well as 19 non-battle casualties (a category which included accidental injuries, heat casualties, and the like).¹⁰

On 20 September, BLT 2/7 directed a heavy preparation fire against the treeline, pounding it liberally with artillery, mortars, and airstrikes. At first light, the Marines moved forward in the attack once again, this time meeting no resistance. Inside the treeline, they found a well-developed fortified position and three dead enemy soldiers of the NVA 2d Battalion, 36th Regiment.¹¹

Companies G and H continued past the treeline toward the 3d Battalion blocking positions near the Suoi Co Ca. By 0800, Company G was engaged with a large enemy force, which it believed to include a battalion command post, in the hamlet of Nong Son (2), about 600 meters from the river. Company G disengaged with 5 Marines dead and 19 wounded, then called for air and artillery support, while Company H attacked the enemy's right flank against strong resis-

A Navy corpsman serving with BLT 2/7 south of Da Nang rushes forward toward the smoke cover to take care of a wounded Marine. Strands of a barbed wire fence can be seen behind him.

Photo is from the Abel Collection





Photo is from the Abel Collection
PFC R. R. Kransiewski, right, adjusts the antenna of radioman LCpl A. J. Terry, who is talking on the radio during a routine sweep south of Da Nang by Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. Other Marines of the company can be seen advancing in the background.

tance. At 0900, while the battle raged, Lieutenant Colonel Charles F. Bunnell, Jr., replaced Lieutenant Colonel Watson as Commanding Officer, BLT 2/7.

In the early afternoon, ARVN units to the north began pushing the enemy southward. BLT 2/7 maintained steady pressure from the west, so that the North Vietnamese were forced into the 3d Battalion's blocking position. Airstrikes and artillery fire tore into the trapped enemy. At 1600, with the North Vietnamese still resisting strongly, aircraft unloaded 500-pound bombs and napalm on them,

prompting enemy troops to begin fleeing in groups of 20 to 30. Aircraft and artillery continued to bombard the area, but a North Vietnamese flag still flew over an enemy bunker.

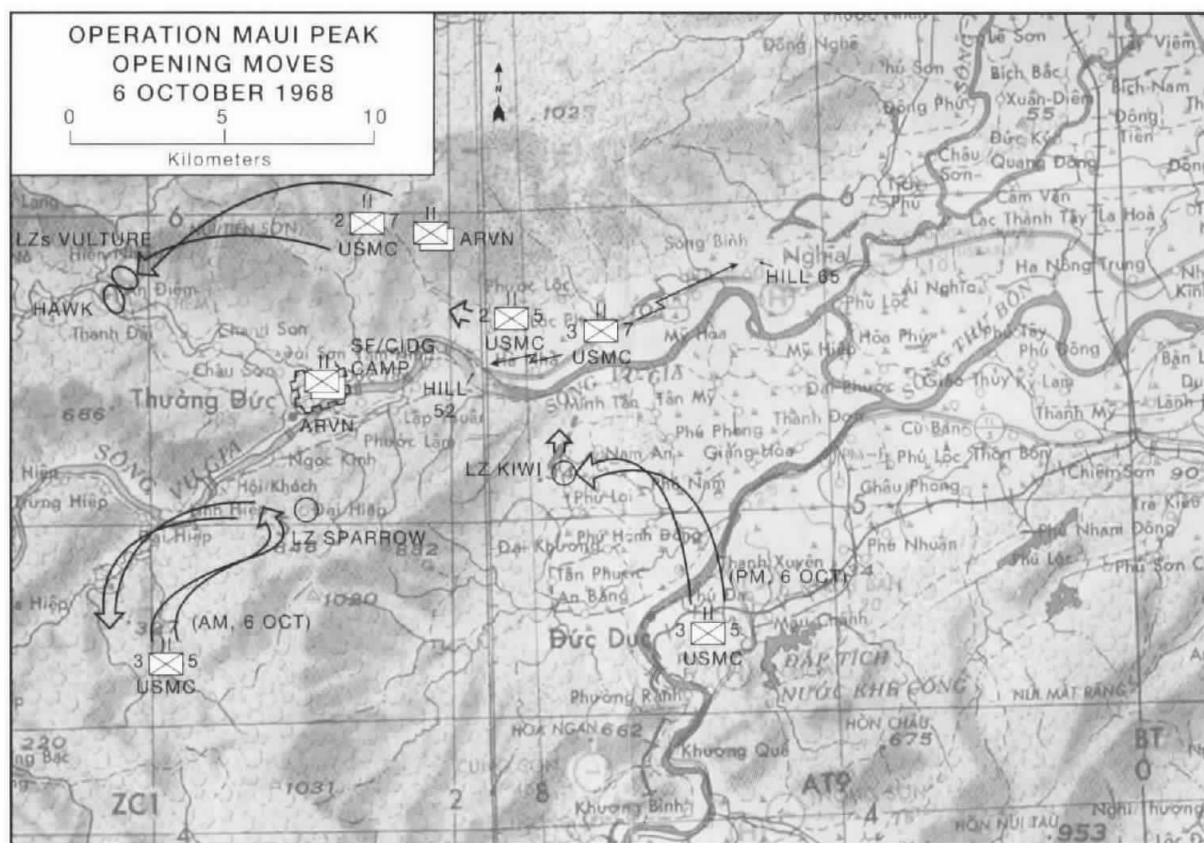
Companies G and H moved forward in the assault, soon hitting antipersonnel mines and boobytraps. Despite the heavy bombing, the remaining North Vietnamese maintained heavy and accurate fire from their fortifications. At dusk, the Marines dug in, hard by the North Vietnamese bunkers. Late that night, Marines reported a strong odor of marijuana drifting from the enemy's positions.

At dawn on the 21st, the Marines attacked once more, and quickly captured the objective. They found the area so liberally seeded with mines and boobytraps that, after three Marines suffered wounds, both companies withdrew and called an airstrike against the area in hopes of detonating the devices. Returning once again, they found the usual assortment of bunkers, trenches, and fighting holes, food, equipment, and documents. Three prisoners indicated that the area was the command post of the NVA 36th Regiment and the main position of that organization's 2d Battalion. The Marines reported 69 enemy dead, and the prisoners admitted that their battalion had lost 80 dead and 60 wounded in the previous day's fight at the treeline. Their battalion's assistant commander was killed in the action.¹²

After another day of sweeping the area, BLT 2/7 returned to the Dai La Pass sector west of Hill 327 and assumed a division reserve mission. The 3d Battalion remained south of Hill 55, searching for the enemy, but the destruction of the 2d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment brought at least temporary calm to that part of the province.¹³

As often happened, however, a hard-fought victory in one part of the province had no effect on enemy activity elsewhere. Shortly after midnight on 21 September, three explosions rocked the Esso gasoline depot at the northern end of Da Nang Bay. With two large fuel storage tanks ablaze, sentries fired on a man who entered the water immediately after the attack, but the man apparently escaped. Later, Marines found a ladder, satchel charges, blasting caps, and a length of fuze in and around the compound.¹⁴

The following night, Communist rocket units attacked Marble Mountain Air Facility, damaging 45 helicopters. Other rockets struck Da Nang Airbase, Force Logistic Command, the NSA Hospital, and I Corps headquarters. At the same time, enemy forces launched company-sized ground attacks on Hoi An,



Dien Ban, and several Combined Action Platoons. One of these attacks, carried out against the Vinh Dien Bridge, one kilometer north of Dien Ban, temporarily closed Highway 1.

On 29 September, south of the Thu Bon River near Liberty Bridge in the Go Noi Island sector, elements of the 5th Marines engaged a large enemy force in the village of Cu Ban, a notorious Communist hideout and scene of many firefights. In a two-day battle, the Marines surrounded and pressed hard against the North Vietnamese. Late on the 30th, Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines assaulted the village and overwhelmed the defenders, reporting 57 enemy dead and 3 prisoners. Seven Marines died and 12 suffered wounds in the fight. Further to the west at the end of the month, NVA regular forces threatened the Special Forces Camp at Thuong Duc, resulting in a III MAF multi-battalion operation.¹⁵

Operation Maui Peak

The Special Forces camp at Thuong Duc was nestled in a valley at the confluence of the Song Vu Gia and the Song Con, where "Green Berets" trained

and advised CIDG troops recruited from the local villages. By controlling these two river valleys, the Special Forces soldiers and their CIDG counterparts forced the enemy to move troops and supplies bound for the Da Nang area along far more difficult routes through the mountainous jungle. Additionally, they denied the enemy access to the source of food and recruits located in the populated areas along the rivers.

Near the end of September, the Communists were ready to strike. III MAF intelligence officers identified elements of two NVA infantry regiments surrounding the camp: the 21st from the 2d NVA Division and a new 141st Regiment. The 368B Rocket Regiment was in support. In a pre-dawn attack on 28 September, the enemy overran and occupied two of the camp's outposts, seriously threatening the main compound. With bad weather hampering normal close air support operations, a Marine Tactical Air Control Party flew into Thuong Duc in the late afternoon. Using a radar beacon, the forward air controller directed 18 sorties of Grumman A-6A Intruder all-weather attack aircraft against the enemy force. By the afternoon of the 29th, the enemy troops occupying the two outposts with-

drew, their position rendered untenable by the A-6A Intruders of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.^{16*}

With Thuong Duc temporarily safe, but still surrounded, General Youngdale moved to lift the siege, assigning Colonel Beckington's 7th Marines the task. For Operation Maui Peak, Youngdale gave Beckington control of the 7th Marines' own 3d Battalion and BLT 2/7 (still the SLF battalion, but temporarily under the operational control of the 7th Marines), and the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines. General Cushman placed one brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division on six-hour standby to reinforce, and General Lam assigned four ARVN battalions to operate in coordination with the Marines.^{17**}

On 1 October, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was conducting operations along the southern bank of the Thu Bon River in the An Hoa sector and Company G

had engaged a small enemy force near the river edge. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple later related that in the middle of this firefight he received orders from the 5th Marines that he was being attached to the 7th Marines for a new operation and that he should prepare his battalion for immediate helicopter movement to Hill 65, about 15 kilometers east of Thuong Duc. Immediately detaching from the engagement, the battalion consisting of Companies E and G, and Company A from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, arrived at Hill 65 about 1300. At that point, Stemple remembered he was told to report to Colonel Beckington at the 7th Marines command post on Hill 55. After some delay to obtain a jeep, he arrived in time to attend the 7th Marines briefing for the operation. Stemple later observed that he was not too inspired when one of the briefing officers remarked, "I don't know how we are going to support this operation; I guess we'll play it by ear."¹⁸

According to Stemple, the concept of operations called for his battalion to secure not only Hill 65, but also Hill 52, only six kilometers from Thuong Duc, before nightfall. Upon his return to Hill 65 and maintaining an outpost there, the battalion moved out in a column of companies following Route 4. With an attached engineer platoon from the 1st Engineer Battalion assisting in the detecting and clearing of antipersonnel, antivehicle, and antitank mines, the battalion arrived at Hill 52 about 1630. In taking the hill, the Marines captured one prisoner from the *141st NVA Regiment*.¹⁹

While the battalion gained a measure of control over Route 4, which was the only road available for ground resupply, Lieutenant Colonel Stemple vaguely recalled that an enemy road mine accounted for at least one Marine vehicle. During the next four days, artillery units of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and Army 175mm guns of the 4th Battalion, 8th Field Artillery took up firing positions at Hills 65 and 52. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines moved into the area between the two hills, guarding the road and freeing the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines to direct its efforts westward, toward the enemy.

On the morning of 6 October, attack aircraft and B-52s began bombarding landing zones in the hills surrounding Thuong Duc.²⁰ At the same time, the 2d

* About mid-July, III MAF intelligence officers reported that captured enemy documents indicated that a new regiment, the *141st NVA Regiment*, *312th NVA Division*, was operating in Quang Nam Province. The first prisoner from the regiment was captured on 5 September, and stated that the regiment had been activated in North Vietnam in 1966. It left North Vietnam in January 1968 and arrived in western Quang Nam about the end of May. In mid-September, the *21st NVA Regiment*, *2d NVA Division* had moved up from Quang Tin Province into southern Quang Nam. According to a Marine intelligence analysis of 15 September, three North Vietnamese Regiments, the *31st*, *21st*, and *141st*, were in position to pose a threat to Thuong Duc. In the attacks on the Special Forces Camp on 28-29 September, the allies captured prisoners from both the *21st* and the *141st*. See: III MAF PerIntRep No. 30-68, dtd 28Jul68, p. A-44, in III MAF PerIntReps, 14Jul-31Aug68; III MAF PerIntRpts, No. 37-68, dtd 15Sep68, pp. 4 and B-3, and No. 40-68, dtd 8Oct68, p. B-3, in III MAF PerIntReps, 1Sep-12Oct68. Lieutenant Colonel Merrill L. Bartlett, who as a captain in September 1968 assumed command of the 13th Interrogation and Translation Team assigned to the 5th Marines, remembered that when he arrived at An Hoa, he "immediately formed sub-teams of one officer, one NCO, and one ARVN each and sent them to the bush with the three infantry battalions of the 5th Marines." Bartlett recalled that the 5th Marines in September captured a North Vietnamese private whose interrogation revealed that he was from the *141st NVA Regiment*, but that intelligence officers from the 1st Marine Division refused to accept that he was from that regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Bartlett faulted the Marine intelligence system in the 1st Marine Division for "failure to get the word down to the subordinate units, reluctance to believe anything unless it was supported by 'usually reliable sources' (intercepts by radio battalion or counter-intelligence agent report), and unwillingness to change an opinion or assessment once it was determined." LtCol Merrill L. Bartlett, Comments on draft, dtd 8Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bartlett Comments.

** There is also some confusion about the allied supporting forces. Although some sources indicate that the only ARVN units participating were the 1st and 2d Battalions, 51st Regiment, others note that two ARVN Ranger battalions were in reserve. Also, where 1st MarDiv FragO 405-68 specifies a brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division on standby, 1st MarDiv ComdC, Oct68, p. 21 claims that it was a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division.

***Colonel Stemple remembered that several bombs from one of the B-52s, "fell short of their objective with two bombs landing in the E/2/5 area to the rear of Hill 52." Fortunately there were no Marine casualties and the rest of the errant bombs fell harmlessly into the river. Col James W. Stemple, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stemple Comments.



Photocopy of painting from Marine Corps Art Collection

In this contemporary painting by Marine combat artist Maj Albert M. "Mike" Leaby, the artist depicts a Marine Douglas A-4E Skyhawk in a close air support mission during Operation Maui Peak about to bomb and rocket enemy positions on a ridgeline near LZ Sparrow. Thuong Duc can be seen in the background.

Battalion, 5th Marines stepped off in the attack westward along Route 4 toward the Special Forces camp. This was to be a feint to distract the enemy from the landing of the helicopter-borne elements. Soon after crossing the line of departure, however, the Marines became decisively engaged with the NVA 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, and Colonel Beckington canceled the plan for a feint and ordered the 2d Battalion to clear the enemy from the battlefield.²⁰

While the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines mounted the hills overlooking Route 4 and came to grips with the enemy, other units joined the operation. At 1030, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters, carrying the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, swooped down into LZ Sparrow, four kilometers south of Thuong Duc. The preparation fires had ended at 0730, after severely pounding the LZ

and surrounding area. If the fires had hurt the North Vietnamese units in the vicinity, the enemy commander apparently made good use of the three-hour break between the end of the preparation and the landing of the helicopters. As the first wave of aircraft touched down in the landing zone, a hail of heavy machine gun fire filled the air. Unable to complete the mission against such stiff resistance, the helicopters turned away, carrying the 3d Battalion back to An Hoa.²¹

At 1100, BLT 2/7 and two ARVN battalions landed unopposed in LZ Vulture and LZ Hawk, seven kilometers northwest of Thuong Duc. While the rest of the battalion remained at the LZ with Battery W, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, Companies E and G, 7th Marines struck out for the high ground overlooking Thuong Duc from the north. The terrain was extremely chal-

lenging. At times, the Marines needed lifelines to negotiate steep hills covered by a thick jungle canopy and dense undergrowth.²²

Back on Route 4, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was still involved in a heated battle against North Vietnamese units in the hills overlooking the road. At one point, where the road passed along a very narrow gap between the river and a large, steep hill, the enemy put up a spirited defense, beating back the Marines' first two assaults. After a third pounding by supporting arms, the battalion attacked and captured the hill, gaining control of the vital pass.²³

In the late afternoon, Colonel Beckington ordered the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, already "shot out" of one LZ that day, to mount a helicopter-borne assault into LZ Kiwi, nine kilometers northeast of LZ Sparrow. Accordingly, the battalion landed at 1740, then marched a kilometer north and established a defensive position on a hilltop overlooking the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia. With the exception of an assault by two squads of North Vietnamese against the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, the night passed quietly.²⁴

On 7 October, the 7th Marines began to close the circle around Thuong Duc. To the west, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines attacked along the valley of the Song Con and along the ridges overlooking it. It did not make contact with the enemy, but lost one Marine to heat stroke in the torturous terrain. Likewise, southeast of Thuong Duc, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved southwest into the rugged mountains, suffering eight casualties from a combination of heat and falls from the steep slopes.²⁵

General Youngdale assigned the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines to the operation, and Colonel Beckington ordered it to attempt another helicopter-borne assault into LZ Sparrow. Since the aborted assault of the previous day, attack aircraft had thoroughly blasted the area around the LZ with 750-pound bombs and Fuel-Air Explosive (FAE)* bombs, but this, apparently, "did not faze the defenses." As the helicopters once again descended into LZ Sparrow at 0910, Communist antiaircraft gunners once more opened up with an overwhelming fire, turning away the assault for the second time.²⁶

The main action of 7 October occurred along Route 4 where the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ran into strong enemy opposition. Company A, 5th Marines, under

the control of the 2d Battalion, engaged two entrenched North Vietnamese platoons on a steep hill adjacent to the highway, only 200 meters west of the hill the battalion had seized the previous day. Even after aircraft and artillery fire pounded the objective, the North Vietnamese still resisted fiercely. Company A fell back with 12 wounded and occupied the same position as it had the previous night. According to Marine sources, the enemy lost 42 dead in the fight.²⁷

After another full day of preparation fires, Company E, 5th Marines, supported by four M48 tanks, attacked the hill late in the afternoon of 8 October, finally capturing it just before dusk after a brisk fight in which one Marine died and nine others suffered wounds. On the hill, the Marines reported 37 dead North Vietnamese.²⁸

Elsewhere in the operation, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued its slow advance along the steep ridge west of Thuong Duc which separated the Song Vu Gia from the Song Con. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved ever deeper into the mountains south of the Special Forces camp, struggling against heat and rough terrain which combined to result, on 8–9 October, in 40 nonbattle casualties, some fatal.^{29**}

The North Vietnamese reserved their main effort against the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in the fight for control of Route 4. At 0400, 12 October, 82mm mortar fire began falling on Company E. Following a preparation of about 40 rounds, an NVA company struck the Marines. As the North Vietnamese infantry attacked, the mortar fire continued, but shifted to Company G, which was to the rear of Company E. Using a heavy volume of small arms and RPG fire, the enemy closed to within grenade-throwing range. Company E held fast, calling for fire support, which involved more than 1,000 rounds of artillery (including 8-inch howitzers) and mortar fire, attack aircraft, and AC-47 gunships. The Marines reported killing 46 North Vietnamese and capturing 1 in the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the battalion commander, commented "this was a particularly vicious attack against 'E' Company that almost succeeded." He cred-

* An aircraft-delivered canister which releases an explosive aerosol vapor over an area, then ignites the vapor, creating blast overpressure which causes casualties and explodes mines.

**The largest number of non-battle casualties involved Marine helicopters. In addition to the casualties on the 8th and 9th, on 11 October, a resupply helicopter from HMM-265, "carrying replacements and supplies . . . was struck from below by a H-34D helo [from HMM 362] that had just taken off." According to Colonel Stemple, who witnessed the accident, "both helicopters exploded in flames a few hundred feet over the river [Song Vu Gia] and crashed." There were no survivors. Stemple Comments. See also MAG-16 ComdC, Oct68; HMM-265 ComdC, Oct68; and HMM-362 ComdC, Oct68.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Troops from the 5th Marines cross a small stream in Operation Maui Peak. The second Marine in the water is carrying a 3.5-inch rocket launcher and a following Marine carries a rocket round for the weapon in addition to his rifle.

ited the close air support “very instrumental in turning the tide of battle” Friendly casualties totalled 8 dead and 20 wounded.³⁰

During the next few days, enemy contact diminished. BLT 2/7 finished its sweep of the high ground and moved into the valley, nearer the Special Forces camp. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines maintained its position and conducted patrols. South of the Song Vu Gia, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines continued to struggle through the heavily forested and treacherous slopes, finally capturing LZ Sparrow on 14 October with the only enemy resistance being desultory mortar fire. Later that day, Company F of BLT 2/7 entered the Thuong Duc Special Forces camp, officially lifting the so-called “siege.”^{31*}

*Lieutenant Colonel Ronald R. Welpott, who as a captain commanded Company F during the operation, recalled that his company was the only one to enter the camp “as the size of the camp and heavy rains made it more suitable for the rest of the battalion to remain in the hills above the camp to the northwest.” Lieutenant Colonel Ronald R. Welpott, Comments on draft, dtd 19Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

In mid-October, Tropical Storm Elaine struck Quang Nam, dramatically curtailing operations.^{**} In the seven days ending on 18 October, 39 inches of rain fell around Thuong Duc, with as much as 13 inches falling in a single day. Swollen rivers washed away many bridges and left others under six feet of water. Air operations slowed to a near halt and many units, particularly those in the hills, suffered a lack of critical supplies. The Special Forces unit at Thuong Duc supplied some food to the Marines to see them through the crisis. Eventually, the rain washed out Route 4 between Hills 52 and 65, then Route 540, to the east, over which convoys carried supplies to Hill 65 for distribution to the forces participating in Operation Maui Peak.³²

**General E. E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, observed at the time in personal letters that the storm had brought both U.S. and enemy operations “to a standstill,” and that for “several days we needed wading boots and rain suits.” BGen E.E. Anderson, ltrs to MajGen McCutcheon, dtd 17Oct68 and LtGen W. J. Van Ryzin, dtd 25Oct68, Encl to Gen E.E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

On 17 October, with the mission accomplished, the rain seriously hampering offensive operations, and the enemy relatively quiet, Colonel Beckington ordered all units to prepare to withdraw. By 19 October, only the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines remained, and Operation Maui Peak officially came to a close.^{33*}

*The End of Mameluke Thrust
and Renewed Attacks on Da Nang*

Operation Mameluke Thrust** ended on 23 October, after five months, with the participating units reporting 2,730 enemy killed, 47 prisoners, and 8 ralliers. As the 5th Marines closed Mameluke Thrust, it opened Operation Henderson Hill in the same AO. The net result of this was a continuation of the same operation, in the same area, under a new operational codename. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple remembered that the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines had returned to the An Hoa sector after Maui Peak, and on the 23d, his battalion command group and two of his companies were patrolling the area east of Liberty Road, when he received word to disengage. The Marines boarded trucks and returned to An Hoa where Stemple was met by Major General Youngdale and several members of the 1st Marine Division staff. According to Stemple, the division commander told him that a new NVA regiment, the 90th, was suspected of having moved into the Arizona Territory and that there had been numerous sightings of enemy troops in the area. After a quick aerial reconnaissance, Stemple and the MAG-16 helicopter coordinator selected a primary and secondary landing zone. While enemy small arms fire prevented the landing in the primary zone, the Marine battalion reached its assigned objectives in the Arizona before nightfall, but no indication of the reported large numbers of North Vietnamese troops. In a series of sweeps as part of Henderson Hill during the next few days, both the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marines developed little enemy contact, but captured a 24-page document describing the enemy's proposed "Winter-Spring 1968-69 Campaign." The

* Colonel Stemple, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, believed it was obvious that the North Vietnamese were "not investing too much in Thong Duc except using it as 'bait' to invite a III MAF response along Route 4 where they could select and prepare positions from which they could attack the U.S. reaction force." While stating that "2/5 beat its head out against the 141st (well dug-in)," Stemple understood that later reports indicated that the NVA regiment "took such a beating that . . . [it] never recovered." Stemple Comments.

** See Chapters 17 and 19.

operation then continued in the An Hoa and Go Noi Island sectors into November.³⁴

October ended as the first month since December 1967 during which the enemy launched no rocket attacks. NVA commissars and VC cadres, though, dramatically stepped up their political proselytizing. They visited hamlets, ostensibly to "train" the populace for upcoming elections which were supposed to result in the formation of "People's Revolutionary Committees." Enemy propagandists distributed leaflets and used loudspeakers to appeal to ARVN troops to desert. In the village of Nui Dat Son, which was adjacent to the large Marine base at Hill 55, the villagers conducted an antiwar demonstration calling for an end to U.S. bombing of villages. South Vietnamese National Police arrested 71 of the demonstrators, 60 of whom they later released. Intelligence reports filtering in to III MAF indicated that the Communists planned a nationwide demonstration during November, in which "the people" would demand the neutralization of central Vietnam.³⁵

On Halloween night, President Johnson announced from Washington that, effective 0800, 1 November (2100, Saigon time), the U.S. would halt all bombing of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, who had stridently insisted on an unconditional bombing halt, had finally accepted a compromise agreement which allowed the inclusion of the South Vietnamese and Viet Cong in the Paris peace negotiations. The only military conditions imposed were an end to North Vietnamese violations of the DMZ, and an end to their attacks on cities and towns in South Vietnam. The President's announcement had no noticeable effect on the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's "out-of-country" sortie rate. The missions previously flown over North Vietnam were transferred to Laos.^{36***}

Again, the Communists stepped up political and propaganda activity in the villages of ICTZ. Commissars hailed the bombing halt as a great Communist victory. They conducted further controlled elections of so-called "Liberation Committees", proclaiming that "a coalition government for South Vietnam is near at hand."³⁷

Meanwhile, the war went on. In Operation Henderson Hill, the 5th Marines surrounded and attacked the NVA 1st Battalion, 36th Regiment at the familiar battlefield of Chau Phong, site of so many earlier engagements. Uncharacteristically, the enemy did not defend, but rather, attempted to escape, the NVA

*** See also Chapters 20 and 24.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A 371827

Marine engineers probe for more rockets as they explore an enemy rocket site. On a mud ramp ready to fire are three NVA 140mm rockets.

troops donning disguises, hiding their weapons, and attempting to slip through Marine lines in the dark.³⁸

On 16 November, the enemy went on the offensive around Da Nang, conducting ground attacks and firing 122mm rockets at Da Nang Airbase and the port, one of which scored a direct hit on the deep-water pier, killing 2 people and wounding 16 others. Within the city, several small firefights erupted, in which Free World security units captured seven prisoners claiming to belong to the *Q.91 Special Action Sapper Unit*. North of the city, near the Song Cu De, North Vietnamese forces overran and annihilated a seven-man ambush team from the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. The dead Marines all suffered bullet wounds to the head inflicted at close range, in execution fashion. At the opposite end of the Da Nang TAOR, at the Vinh Dien Bridge north of Dien Ban, elements of the NVA 36th Regiment attacked ARVN bridge security units and a Combined Action platoon. In heavy fighting that lasted through the following day, the Marine command reported 305 North Vietnamese dead.³⁹

The enemy offensive around Da Nang continued for several days. In an indirect fire attack during the night of the 19th, 13 rockets fell on the Force Logistic Command, and another 12 struck the city. At Marble Mountain Air Facility, mortar fire wounded 7 men and damaged 13 helicopters. Mortar fire also struck the NSA Hospital. On the morning of the 21st, 10 rockets hit the 1st Marine Division command post,

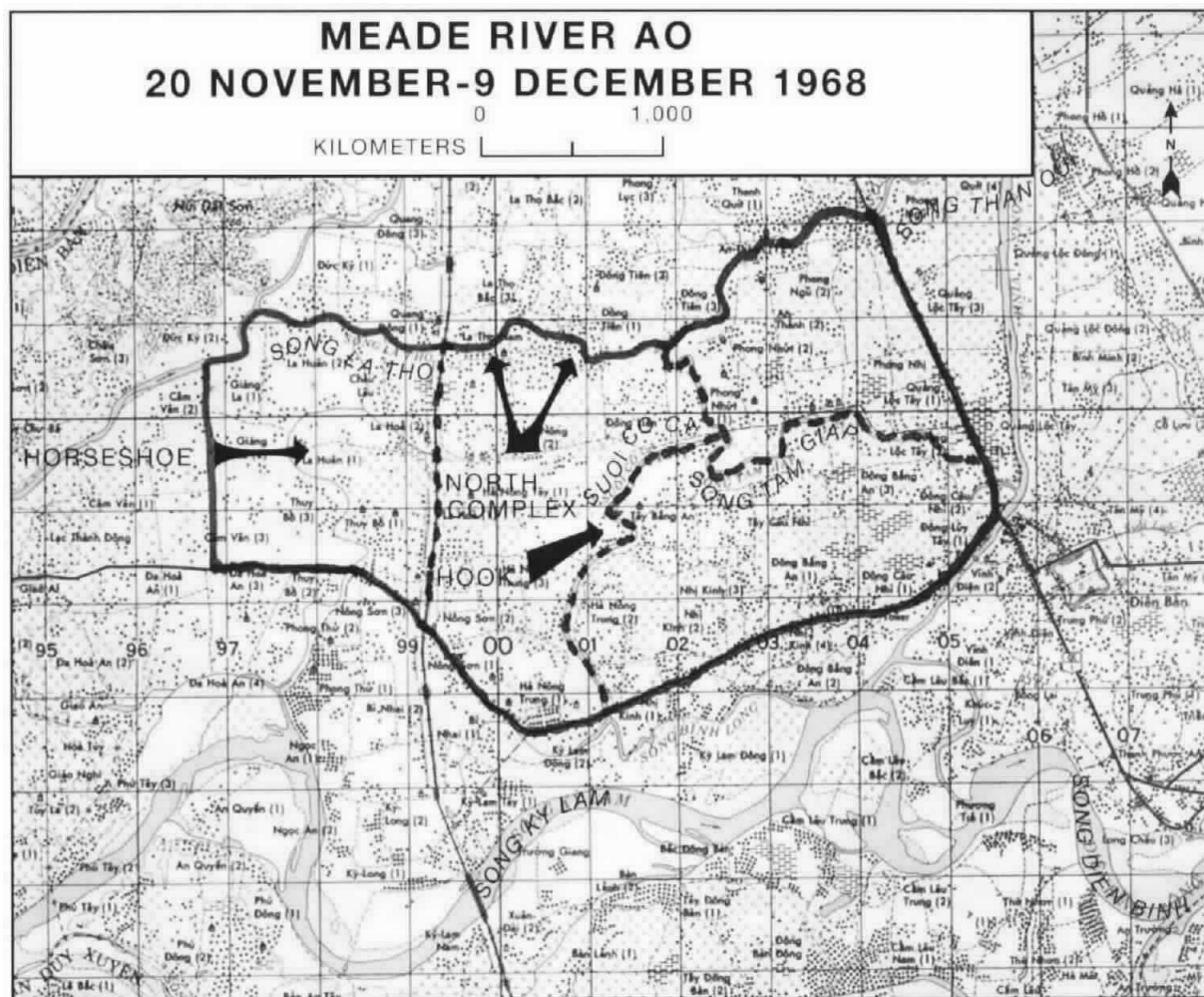
killing 2 American soldiers and destroying a helicopter and 2 jeeps.⁴⁰

During the night of the 21st, an enemy battalion attacked An Hoa. Supported by fire from 82mm and 60mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, and B-40 rockets, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops advanced against the base's eastern perimeter. When the attack began at 2200, Marine tank and artillery crews on the perimeter began direct fire against the advancing enemy, using "Beehive" antipersonnel ammunition.* Amphibian tractors arrived and added the weight of their machine guns to the battle.

CAP 2-9-1, positioned in the hamlet of Mau Chanh (2), about a kilometer east of the base, lay in the path of the attack. The CAP Marines and their PF counterparts took the enemy flanks and rear under fire, calling for air and artillery support. At 2330, the Communist troops fell on CAP 2-9-1. AC-47 gunships held back the enemy while a platoon of Marines mounted in amphibian tractors, with tanks and helicopter gunships escorting, attacked east from An Hoa to reinforce the hamlet and bring an ammunition resupply.

The battle raged for five hours, during which the Marines threw back four waves of attacking NVA and VC. At 0330 the shooting died down. Despite the

* Each "Beehive" projectile contains thousands of tiny darts, called flechettes, which are expelled and thrown forward at high velocity, spreading in a deadly pattern.



heavy fighting, friendly casualties numbered only three Marines and a PF with minor wounds. Marine sources listed 21 dead Viet Cong in the area.⁴¹

The enemy offensive reached a crescendo on the night of 24–25 November. Communist rocket and mortar fire fell on Da Nang Airbase, Marble Mountain Air Facility, the 5th Special Forces Group compound in east Da Nang, and Hoi An. Enemy company-sized units carried out ground assaults against Dien Ban, Liberty Bridge, and three bridges spanning the Song Cau Lau and the Song Vinh Dien along Highway 1. U.S. Marines, Korean Marines, and South Vietnamese soldiers fought off the enemy attacks, and 25 November dawned with all of the enemy's objectives still in friendly hands.⁴²

The attacks of 24–25 November were the last gasp of the Communist November offensive. Fifteen kilometers south of Da Nang, in the infamous Dodge City Area, the 1st Marine Division had begun an offensive of its own, the largest “County Fair”

operation conducted up to that time: Operation Meade River.

Operation Meade River

On 1 November, the Government of Vietnam announced the start of a country-wide “Accelerated Pacification Campaign,” named “*Le Loi*” in Vietnamese. Scheduled to last three months, the campaign’s objective was to extend the legitimate government’s influence into many hamlets still afflicted by the three major Communist offensives launched during 1968. Of the 1,000 hamlets targeted for the campaign throughout the country, 141 were in ICTZ.^{43*}

The 1st Marine Division planned Operation Meade River to support the *Le Loi* campaign. It was to be a cordon and search operation under the 1st Marines,

* For additional coverage of the *Le Loi* Campaign, see Chapter 29. The three enemy offenses were Tet, the May Offensive, and the Third Offensive in August.



Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

In an aerial view of the 36-square-mile "Dodge City" area south of Da Nang, the Ky Lam River, the southern boundary of the sector, is at the top.

like many which had been conducted previously, but on a much grander scale. Rather than surround and search single hamlets or villages, the division planned a cordon around 36 square kilometers in the Dodge City area, south of Da Nang.

Like Go Noi island to the south, Dodge City was heavily infested with Communists. At the center of the fertile Da Nang-Hoi An-Dai Loc Triangle, the area's terrain was almost completely flat, reaching only four to five meters above sea level. Many hamlets dotted the countryside, homes to the farming families who tended the vast tracts of rice paddies. Waterways of various sizes crossed Dodge City, as did the National Railroad and Route 4. The characteristics of the area gave it special potential as a source of food and recruits for the enemy. Its proximity to Da Nang, Hoi An, and the Dien Ban District headquarters gave it tactical significance as a possible enemy staging area for attacks on those key locations.⁴⁴

Colonel Lauffer, the commander of the 1st Marines, recalled that the Korean Brigade had the tactical responsibility for the area, but had failed to keep the Communist forces out. Since its arrival at Da Nang, the 1st Marines TAOR included the area to the north of Dodge City, but in almost self-defense, the regiment had conducted several small-scale operations "to familiarize units with the situation and to gain additional intelligence." According to Lauffer, "we were fully apprised of the fluid and rapidly changing situation concerning enemy troop strength in the Dodge City area." For Operation Meade River, Marine intelligence officers estimated that enemy forces in Dodge City numbered between 100 and 150 Viet Cong infrastructure personnel and could include up to 900 NVA or VC regular forces. The only identified units in the sector, however, were two VC companies, the *R-20 VC Battalion* and the *1st Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment*, totalling an estimated 630 enemy troops.⁴⁵

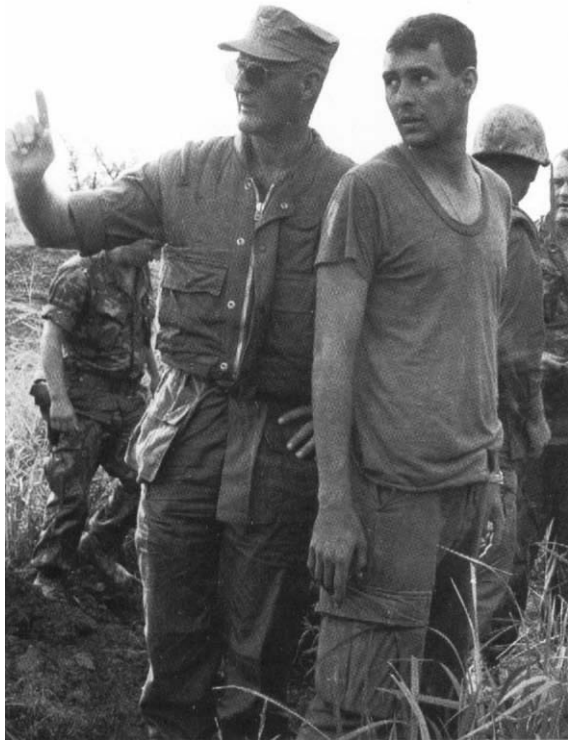


Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection *Col Robert G. Lauffer, the commander of the 1st Marines in Operation Meade River, is accompanied in the field by 1stLt Francis B. Ahearn, the S-2, or intelligence officer, of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.*

Early on the morning of 20 November, seven Marine battalions, under the control of the 1st Marines, began moving into prearranged positions to form a ring around part of Dodge City.* Using 72 aircraft, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in one of its largest helicopter operations lifted four battalions (one of them from amphibious shipping lying offshore). Trucks moved another battalion, and two battalions marched in. By 0825, Dodge City lay within the 1st Marines' cordon. Colonel Lauffer observed that a helicopter was available to him throughout Meade River and that "concerned commanders were given numerous airborne views to enhance our tactical decisions."⁴⁶

In the initial hours of the operation, the Marines encountered light resistance. The Communist forces

shot down two 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters and damaged several others during the assault. On the ground, they used a command-detonated mine to destroy a truck, killing 1 Marine and wounding 23 Marines and 2 ARVN soldiers.^{47**}

Along the Song La Tho, where the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines manned the northern edge of the cordon, helicopters lifted in two towers. In the flat terrain, these towers provided improved observation for Marines controlling artillery fire and airstrikes. Snipers also manned the towers and engaged enemy troops in Dodge City. Clockwise around the cordon from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines were: BLT 2/26; the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines; the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines; BLT 2/7; and finally, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.⁴⁸

Just before noon, Lieutenant Colonel Neil A. Nelson's BLT 2/7 began the next phase of the operation by attacking from its position on the western side of the cordon toward the railroad berm. By 1600, Company H secured the southern end of the battalion's objective, after only minor contact with the enemy. At 1630, however, the battalion ran headlong into a strong Communist defensive complex located at a large bend in a stream which Marines called the "Horseshoe." Company G, attacking in the center of the BLT 2/7 zone of action, made heavy contact with what proved to be North Vietnamese regulars. Under fierce fire from mutually supporting bunkers, Company G withdrew one kilometer, leaving behind six Marines, believed dead.⁴⁹

When darkness fell over Dodge City, artillery and aircraft units illuminated the area with flares. Psychological operations (PsyOps) team used powerful loudspeakers to advise civilians of the cordon and to direct them to central collection points for the questioning which was intended to winnow out the Communists among them. BLT 2/7 licked its wounds and prepared to resume the assault on the Horseshoe.⁵⁰

Colonel Lauffer decided to reinforce BLT 2/7 for the attack. He ordered Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to report to Lieutenant Colonel Nelson for duty. Nel-

*Colonel Lauffer commented that he actually had operational control of nine infantry battalions. While seven participated in Operation Meade River, he kept two battalions in his regular area of operations, "particularly concentrating on the rocket and mortar belts." Because of the large size of his TAOR, he normally had four battalions under his control. Col Robert G. Lauffer, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lauffer Comments.

** According to Colonel Lauffer, the mine knocking out the truck could have been even more devastating: "Highway 1, in many areas was rimmed on either side with rice paddies or low wet areas. A breach in the road could have been catastrophic." To prevent such a breach, the Marines had "strategically prepositioned dump trucks loaded with gravel and marsten matting." This precaution permitted the convoy to continue "to join those in front of the explosion with little delay." Lauffer Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Infantrymen from the 5th Marines advance through five-foot elephant grass after being dropped into a landing zone during Operation Meade River. In one of the largest lifts, Marine helicopters brought four Marine battalions into the cordon operation.

son placed all four of his own companies on line for the assault, then used Company L as his new reserve. He ordered Company D to move south and to sweep the northern flank of Company F, which was on the battalion left.⁵¹

Nelson scheduled a preparation fire to begin on the Horseshoe at 0630. The fire support units found it difficult to coordinate their fires because of the proximity of friendly units to one another, and the almost circular shape of the cordon, which required extraordinary care to deliver fires safely. Thus, the preparation was delayed until 0920.

The enemy reacted violently, even before the infantry attack began. As Company G moved into positions from which it was to provide supporting fire, the North Vietnamese went into action. Heavy fire drove Company G to cover. Company F attempted to carry out a flank attack from the north to relieve the pressure, but, according to Captain Ronald R. Welpott, the company commander, "due to sporadic enemy contact, boobytraps, and difficult terrain," it could not find a place to ford the stream separating it

from the enemy bunkers.⁵² Once again, the attack bogged down and ground to a halt.⁵³

The next day, 22 November, BLT 2/7 launched a third attack on the Horseshoe. Following essentially the same plan as the previous day, Company G established a base of fire while Companies D, 1st Marines and E, 7th Marines attacked from the north, crossing the stream to strike the enemy's right flank. The North Vietnamese hid in their bunkers during the preparation fire, then, when the fire lifted, assumed mutually supporting fighting positions. They usually attempted to keep a rice paddy or other natural barrier between them and the Marines, and in this case, caught Company E at the stream and poured on extremely heavy fire from a range of 100 meters. In 10 minutes, the company lost 7 killed and 23 wounded. With the company commander among the wounded, Company E broke contact and withdrew to the north bank of the stream.

Meanwhile, Company D crossed the Song La Tho and attacked south along the railroad berm, about a mile east of where the BLT 2/7 attack had stalled. The

North Vietnamese within the Horseshoe pounded the advancing Marines with machine guns, rifles, and mortars, but Company D advanced to within 300 meters of the Communist positions as casualties continued to mount. Enemy fire struck down the radio operators for the forward air controller and the battalion tactical radio net, greatly compounding communications problems. Finally, with 2 Marines dead and 17 wounded, Company D withdrew to the stream, but remained on the south bank, setting up an LZ to evacuate the wounded. Medevac helicopters arrived, only to have the North Vietnamese drive them away under heavy fire. Only after dark could Company D begin to medevac its casualties, even then still under heavy fire. Another night fell with the Horseshoe still in enemy hands.

During the morning hours of 23 November, while BLT 2/7 remained in position, still evacuating casual-

ties from the previous day's action, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines advanced from the southwest corner of the cordon into Dodge City. With its right flank anchored on the railroad berm, the battalion attacked across Route 4, moving north. As the battalion approached the Horseshoe, the NVA opened fire and the Marines took cover.⁵⁴

BLT 2/7 joined the attack once again. Company G opened fire on the Communist positions, and Company H, now on the left of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines swept northward and overran one group of enemy positions. BLT 2/7 recovered the bodies of the six Company G Marines missing from the initial attack. To restore the integrity of the cordon, Company H withdrew and linked up with the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines. Although the attack had been partially successful, many enemy positions remained within the Horseshoe.

In an aerial view of the "Horseshoe" sector of Operation Meade River, looking east, from the bend of the stream it is easy to see why the area was so named.

Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection



Determined to eliminate the enemy bunker complex, Colonel Lauffer reinforced BLT 2/7 still again, placing Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines under Nelson's control. On the 24th, after a morning of preparatory fire, Companies H, BLT 2/7 and K, 26th Marines attacked from the south, in the Marines' fifth attempt to eject the North Vietnamese from the Horseshoe. At 1530, the two companies came under extremely heavy fire from enemy troops in bunkers and a treeline 100 meters to the front. Unable to force the position by frontal assault, both companies tried to drive in an enemy flank, but to no avail. Colonel Lauffer added yet another unit, Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, to the attack. Company C moved in from the north, but not in time to help. At 1830, once again frustrated by the enemy's stiff resistance, the Marines broke contact and withdrew with 5 dead and 31 wounded.

On the morning of the 25th, the Marines near the Horseshoe pulled back and began pounding the area

with artillery. Low clouds over Dodge City precluded airstrikes. Following the preparation, BLT 2/7 surged forward, encountering no resistance. By noon, the Marines overran the entire Horseshoe and the battalion consolidated its position along the railroad berm. A search of the area revealed bunkers constructed of reinforced concrete, railroad ties, and rails, covered with six feet of earth. Lieutenant Colonel Nelson, the BLT commander, remembered an order "to destroy" the railroad berm, but "after many tons of explosion being wasted the destruction was called off."⁵⁵

It was apparent that the enemy forces trapped within the cordon was somewhat larger than originally anticipated. At the Horseshoe, the Marines had encountered regular enemy troops, specifically the *3d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment*. While pushed back, the NVA battalion remained a formidable fighting force.⁵⁶

Since the beginning of the operation, South Vietnamese troops and police had worked to evacuate 2,600 civilians from Dodge City to interrogation centers. With these civilians out and the Horseshoe finally cleared, Colonel Lauffer launched the next phase of the operation. BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines attacked from the eastern edge of the cordon toward the Suoi Co Ca to relieve the 51st ARVN Regiment which had earlier established blocking positions at the river.

Over the next four days, the Marine battalions tightened the cordon as they advanced. Using probes fashioned from metal stock especially for Operation Meade River, the Marines located many caches of enemy arms and supplies. Enemy troops attempted to evade at night, but almost continuous flare illumination and Marine ambushes turned them back. When engaged, the enemy would break contact and flee. Captain James F. Foster, the commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, later related that his Marines not only found several enemy caches, but also captured "13 North Vietnamese soldiers who all had automatic weapons and a large amount of South Vietnamese Piasters."⁵⁷

As the cordon grew smaller, fire support coordination problems grew larger. Units in contact with the enemy often experienced interruptions in fire support caused by interference from neighboring units. Worse still, the close quarters created by seven battalions in a constantly shrinking area resulted in severe safety problems and occasional instances of friendly fire impacting Marine positions. One unit reported, "continuing problems with friendly artillery fire which

Marine Sgt H. D. Vines, a section leader of an 81mm mortar section with BLT 2/7, snaps off a shot with his M79 grenade launcher at an enemy-held treeline during Meade River. A puff of smoke from the grenade can be seen by the trees.

Photo from the Abel Collection





Photo from the Abel Collection

South Vietnamese Maj Tran Phouc Xang, a battalion commander with the 51st ARVN Regiment, batless in the left center of the picture, tries to explain to Vietnamese villagers why they have to be evacuated from their homes during Operation Meade River.

inflicted casualties, destroyed confidence in the supporting units, and lowered morale.”⁵⁸

On 28 November, Thanksgiving Day, BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion 5th Marines reached the Suoi Co Ca. On the same day, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines which had been helilifted earlier into the southern Dodge City area, relieved the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines along Route 4. The latter battalion was then to attack north toward a series of phase lines between the railroad berm and Suoi Co Ca. Lieutenant Colonel John W. P. Robertson, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, remembered that his unit “enjoyed” a Thanksgiving dinner of turkey loaf and prepared to follow the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines in the attack.⁵⁹

At midnight on the 28th, Marine artillery began a heavy and concentrated barrage on the now greatly diminished area within the cordon. Following six hours of intense artillery fire, PsyOps teams used loudspeakers in an attempt to convince the enemy to surrender or rally. The broadcasts continued for an

hour between 0600 and 0700 on the morning of 29 November and painted a grim, but true picture:

Why is your unit still surrounded? Why have your leaders found no way for you to escape? There *is* no way to escape. North, south, east, and west, you are completely surrounded and the circle is getting smaller. Today, you cannot go a thousand meters in any direction. Tomorrow, will you be killed in your bunker? Tomorrow, will your legs be blown from your body and will you die in a hole in the ground far from your home?

There is a way to avoid being killed. Many of your friends have become Hoi Chanh [ralliers]; surrender today, or will you be killed tomorrow?

For awhile, now, the artillery and bombs will stop falling. Put down your weapons, pick up your wounded comrades and Chieu Hoi [rally]. Your wounded will receive medical treatment and you will not be harmed.

You are completely surrounded. You cannot move a thousand meters in any direction. Will you Chieu Hoi today or die tomorrow? Chieu Hoi now, while the bombs and artillery are stopped for a little while.⁶⁰

The enemy troops were unimpressed by the broadcasts. As the 1st Marines reported, "they chose to fight."⁶¹

After the broadcasts, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines launched its attack. Although the enemy resisted in isolated groups, clearing even small fortified positions was dangerous and difficult. It took the Marine battalion the entire day of 29 November to secure the first objective, Phase Line Alpha, about 800 to 1,000 meters above Route 4.⁶²

On 30 November, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines continued its northward advance, reaching Phase Line Bravo, where the area between the railroad berm and the Suoi Co Ca becomes narrow, constricting maneuver and further compounding fire support coordination problems. Still, the blocking forces on the eastern bank of the river, BLT 2/26 and the 2d Battalion 5th Marines ambushed and took under fire

enemy troops attempting to avoid the tightening cordon. Marines called nightly upon Air Force AC-47 gunships to add their deadly fires to those of the Marines on the ground. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines commander, remembered that enemy troops tried to swim the river at night to escape to the south.⁶³

On 1 December, about two kilometers north of Route 4 and just above Phase Line Bravo, at a small bend in the Suoi Co Ca which would become known as the "Hook," the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines ran into a strong bunker complex. As the 1st Marines reported, "the Hook was not to be taken in a few hours. The enemy fire from well entrenched, reinforced bunkers was devastating." In the first encounter, Company L sustained 2 dead and 28 wounded. The Marine battalion pulled back and called for artillery and air support.⁶⁴

An aerial view of the bend of the Suoi Co Ca River, called the "Hook" by the Marines, makes it obvious how the "Hook," like the Horseshow obtained its name.

Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection



The fighting for the Hook would continue for the next four days. On 2 December, even after heavy air and ground bombardment, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines failed to make any headway against the North Vietnamese defenders. That evening the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson, left one company to isolate the Hook, while the rest of the battalion moved north another 1,000 meters to Phase Line Charlie. On 3 December, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines advanced from Route 4 to Phase Line Bravo to continue the attack on the Hook.⁶⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, the battalion commander, recalled that Colonel Lauffer, the 1st Marines commander, took him and his battalion operations officer up in a helicopter to make an aerial reconnaissance of the enemy defenses there. According to Robertson, he saw a tremendous bunker and trench complex and it was obvious that the only stratagem was to enfilade the area and then make the final assault on the Hook defenses from the rear. With continuing heavy resistance, the Marines again called upon air and artillery, using 750-pound bombs, napalm, and "danger close supporting arms." Across the Suoi Co Ca, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines pulled back and dug into the soft mud, but Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, the battalion commander, remembered that the exploding bombs from across the river covered his Marines with debris. After the aerial bombardment, an artillery officer, according to Stemple, suggested and Colonel Lauffer approved, "the pin-point destruction of the bunkers using a single 8-inch artillery piece, controlled by an airborne spotter."⁶⁶

With the supporting destructive fires, Company I punched its way into the Hook and by nightfall on 4 December, the battalion had maneuvered to the rear of the bunker complex. After continuing artillery support and airstrikes through the night, at first light the next morning, the "field commander and I Corps Commander both taped broadcasts to entice the enemy out . . ." With only a few takers, the 3d Battalion prepared its final assault. After fixed-wing aircraft gave the defenders a final dousing of napalm and bombs, the battalion overran the position. The heavy preparation fires had done the job. Without a single casualty, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines seized the objective, where the Marines, according to differing reports, found 75 to 100 enemy dead and pulled out some 5 to 15 prisoners from "partially destroyed tunnels and bunkers."⁶⁷

With the securing of the Hook, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines started a sweep to the west and Robert-

son's battalion prepared to take its place on Phase Line Charlie. At the same time, the changing shape of the cordon squeezed out the two battalions on the eastern side of the Suoi Co Ca, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines and BLT 2/26. The latter battalion except for its Company E departed the area of operations and Lieutenant Colonel Stemple ordered his 2d Battalion, 5th Marines to prepare for helicopter extraction and the return to An Hoa.⁶⁸

Captain Ronald J. Drez' Company H, on the 2d Battalion's southern flank, waited for the lift. After 15 days of what had been, for them, a very unexciting operation, the Hotel Company Marines were anxious to return to the base. They sat eating C-rations and idling away the time until the helicopters arrived. At 1400, Stemple radioed Drez, ordering him to prepare his company, not to return to base, but to conduct a helicopter-borne assault under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines. Even more startling, Drez learned that the assault lift was to begin in five minutes! Lieutenant Colonel Stemple later remembered that he selected Drez' company since it was closest to the 3d Battalion. He made the turnover just as the rest of his unit departed the area.⁶⁹

Drez and his company gunnery sergeant quickly put together a plan for what Drez later characterized as one of the "shortest tactical airlifts in history."⁷⁰ The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters which lifted the still surprised Company H Marines from the eastern bank of the Suoi Co Ca set them down again less than 1,000 meters away. At about the same time, helicopters also brought in Captain James F. Foster's Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, which "landed in a 'hot' landing zone, dispatched the enemy" and took up positions west of Company H.⁷¹

Lieutenant Colonel Robertson's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, now reinforced with two additional companies, lined up with five companies abreast to continue the move to Phase Line Charlie. In the meantime, Company E, BLT 2/26, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines remained in "a reconnoitering role" north of the Phase Line. On the 6th, while the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines reached Phase Line Charlie without incident, Company E encountered strong NVA forces in a bunker complex that the Marines called the "Northern Bunker Complex," about 1,000 meters to the north, just below the La Tho River. The company remained in position until first light the next morning and then crossed the La Tho River and joined the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in blocking positions there.⁷²



Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

Aerial view of the Northern Bunker Complex reveals its location just below the La Tho River, near the top of the picture. This was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting during Meade River.

On the 7th, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines launched its assault into the Northern Bunker Complex. Companies I, K, and L, maintaining their line, swung to the left like a huge door, pivoting on Company H, 5th Marines and formed the battalion in a giant inverted "L." With the railroad berm on their left and a three-company blocking position on their right, Company A, 7th Marines and Drez' Company H launched a frontal attack. Soon, the Marines ran headlong into stiff enemy resistance. Company H made contact in a cemetery where North Vietnamese troops fighting from two pagodas laid down heavy fire. Much of the ground was under water, forming a quagmire through which the Marines were unable to maneuver. On

the left flank, NVA units in a fortified hamlet opened fire on Company A and casualties began to mount. Soon, 10 Marines were dead and another 23 were wounded. Under the intense fire, the attacking companies recovered their wounded only with great difficulty. Both companies halted, dug in for the night, and called for preparation fires. After dark, volunteers moved forward to recover the dead. Captain Foster, the commander of Company A, recalled that he, six Marines, and a Navy corpsman participated in the recovery of the dead and the wounded of his company. According to Foster, the Navy corpsman continued treating casualties although wounded himself and was among the last to be evacuated.⁷³

Having had a taste of the enemy's tenacious defense, the Marines prepared themselves for the coming battle. Captain Drez remembered that:

We dug in and prepared for what we knew would be a real hard push the next day. The enemy had shown themselves to be there in force, and they also showed that they were not going to give up easy. The word came down from battalion that we could expect . . . the *3d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment* to die fighting. They had shown no inclination to surrender or to become Hoi Chanhs [ralliers]. They were good, hard North Vietnamese Army troops.⁷⁴

At 1120 on the 8th, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines attacked to the north with five companies abreast. The 2d Troop, 4th ARVN Cavalry, which had arrived the previous evening, consisting of 12 armored personnel carriers (APCs), reinforced the Marine assault. In their path, the Marines reported 79 dead North Vietnamese near the site of the previous day's battle. When Company H reached a rice paddy a few hundred meters from their starting point, Communist troops hidden in a treeline suddenly opened fire, trapping Marines in the paddy. For 30 minutes, the Marines returned fire individually, then began moving in small groups toward a large bunker which appeared to be the linchpin of the Communist defenses. Just beyond the bunker and treeline, they could see the Song La Tho, on the other side of which the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines remained in its blocking position.⁷⁵

The Marines requested air support. Because of the proximity of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, the aircraft had difficulty attacking targets without endangering friendly troops. In one instance, a napalm bomb impacted directly on Company H, but miraculously bounced safely away before detonating. Captain George B. Meegan, the commander of Company L, 26th Marines in another sector, recalled that a "napalm strike landed" by his 1st Platoon and that several Marines sustained minor burns.⁷⁶ Neither the airstrikes nor mortar and 3.5-inch rocket fire overcame the enemy resistance.

When supporting arms failed to silence the enemy in the bunker facing him, Captain Drez requested Lieutenant Colonel Robertson to provide him with some of the ARVN APCs. The APCs arrived, armed with recoilless rifles, and halted in the rice paddy. According to Drez, however, the ARVN refused to help. Instead, Drez had his attached combat engineer, Private First Class Michael A. Emmons, jerryrig a satchel charge consisting of C-4, hand grenades, two 3.5-inch rockets, and a five-second fuze. With the

assistance of another Marine, they carried the satchel charge to the top of the bunker where Drez lit the fuze and Emmons flipped the charge through an embrasure. When the others ran, Emmons momentarily remained atop the bunker. The explosion tossed him into the air, but he landed unhurt.* The blast smashed the bunker, killing all but one of the North Vietnamese inside. The Marines reported 39 enemy dead and 1 prisoner in the vicinity of the bunkers.⁷⁷

The other attacking companies also had their share of fighting. Captain Foster's Company A overran an enemy fortified position containing 12 bunkers and 30 covered fighting holes, reporting 47 North Vietnamese dead. Several hours later, Company A attacked and killed nearly 20 North Vietnamese in a firefight which ended with 6 Marines dead and 12 wounded. Late in the afternoon, Captain Meegan's Company L engaged an enemy platoon. In a short, but fierce encounter, Lima Company accounted for another reported 15 enemy killed, at a cost of 5 Marines dead and 11 wounded.⁷⁸

The combat on 8 December was so intense that some senior Marines said that it was "the fiercest fighting they had ever seen."⁷⁹ That night Staff Sergeant Karl G. Taylor of Company I led a rescue effort to relieve the company's lead platoon, cut off by enemy fire. After his Marines took out several of the most severely wounded, Sergeant Taylor returned with another four volunteers to reach yet another group of seriously wounded men lying near an enemy machine gun position. Finding the position too strong, Taylor told his Marines to go back and then armed with a grenade launcher charged across the open paddy. Although wounded several times, Sergeant Taylor silenced the enemy weapon. The sergeant was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.⁸⁰

On the morning of 9 December, the enemy still occupied a narrow strip of ground between the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines and the Song La Tho. It would take another push to finish the job.

After supporting arms, including the battleship *New Jersey* lying off the coast with its 16-inch guns, bombarded the enemy's last remaining toehold all night and most of the morning, the 3d Battalion launched its final drive at 1000 on the 9th. The Marines assaulted violently, yet methodically, destroying and searching every bunker and fighting hole in their path. Enemy resistance was tenacious, but lacked

*Emmons was later awarded a Silver Star Medal for his action.



Photo from the Abel Collection

Marine engineer LCpl Jerry Kanone runs a detonating cord from a charge placed inside an enemy bunker that can be seen at the right of the picture.

the organization encountered earlier. Lieutenant Colonel Robertson credited the ARVN 2d Troop, 4th ARVN Cavalry with their APCs in providing the necessary shock action to break the final NVA resistance.^{81*} It was apparent that the fighting had taken its toll on the NVA. Collapsed bunkers and scores of dead North Vietnamese gave evidence of the ferocity of the fighting. Within some bunkers, the Marines found stacks of enemy bodies. Other dead were undoubtedly buried under the rubble of their destroyed bunkers.⁸²

Company A was first to shoot its way through the North Vietnamese and reach the river. Captain Foster, the Company A commander, later wrote that his Marines chased "the enemy at a sprint into the Song La

Tho . . . [and a] 'turkey shoot' ensued."⁸³ Company H followed shortly afterward, killing a reported 9 enemy only 20 meters from the river's banks. The battalion swept through the Communist stronghold thoroughly, tabulating 130 dead North Vietnamese—some killed during the preceding days—and took 8 prisoners. Captain Meegan, the Company L commander, remembered that one of his platoons captured an enemy warrant officer who told the Marines that it took him six months to reach the Dodge City sector.⁸⁴

At 1800, 9 December, the 1st Marines terminated Operation Meade River. What had begun as a giant "County Fair" had turned into a major battle pitting determined Marines in the assault against equally determined North Vietnamese soldiers defending from heavily fortified positions.

According to Marine sources, the immediate, tangible results of Operation Meade River included 1,023 enemy dead, 123 prisoners, and 6 ralliers.^{**} Intelligence personnel, working with South Vietnamese police, questioned 2,663 civilians, identifying 71 members of the VC political infrastructure. The attacking Marines destroyed 360 bunkers and captured 20 tons of rice. The price the Marines paid for their success was high, 108 dead and 510 wounded. The ARVN sustained 2 killed and 37 wounded. In a message to General Cushman, General Youngdale speculated that " . . . these results should signify the end of the enemy's stranglehold on the Dodge City Area."⁸⁵

The aftermath of Operation Meade River, however, is more a statement on the nature of counterinsurgency. After the other units departed the area, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines crossed the Song La Tho into Dodge City to exploit the success of the operation. By 11 December, the battalion added to its tabulation of enemy dead, 20 more North Vietnamese while taking 1 prisoner. A week later, patrols observed an increase in sniper fire. As 1968 ended, the 1st Marine Division reported that " . . . the enemy is persistent. By the end of [December] he had reoccupied the Meade River

*The role that the ARVN APC troop played still remains a matter of controversy. Captain Drez complained that the ARVN failed to come to his aid on 8 December and then claimed credit for participating in the battle by reporting the serial numbers of captured weapons. Mr. Ronald J. Drez intvw, 29Mar89, Tape 6512 (Oral HistColl, MCHC). Captain George B. Meegan, the commander of Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines in his comments supported Captain Drez, writing "the same APCs milled around [the] L/3/26 position [on the] last day and then claimed credit for NVA dead that had been killed the previous evening by my machine gunner" Capt George B. Meegan, Comments on draft, dtd 2Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Records disagree on the number of enemy casualties. Figures in the text are from FMFPac, MarOpsV, Nov68, p. 3; 1st MarDiv ComdC, Dec68, p. 17; 1st Mar ComdC, Dec68, p. II-C-4, 5; 1st Mar AAR, Meade River. Other reports were prepared so soon after the end of the operation (in one case, only 57 minutes later) that they did not include enemy dead later found on the battlefield. See 1st MarDiv SitRep No. 78, Opn Meade River, in 1st MarDiv Operation SitReps. Lieutenant Colonel Merrill L. Bartlett, who served as commander of the 13th Interrogation and Translation Team, commented that he personally believed some of the statistics were "suspect, especially the number of enemy captives." He believed that many of the prisoners listed as VC POWs were either Vietnamese civilians or possibly members of the VC infrastructure. Bartlett Comments.



Photo is from the Col Robert G. Lauffer, USMC (Ret), Collection

One can see the formidable nature of the enemy bunkers with their reinforced timbers that the Marines encountered during Meade River. This bunker was in the Hook sector.

area, and gave indications of again preparing for a thrust against Dien Ban/Hoi An and Da Nang⁸⁶

By that time, though, the 1st Marine Division had turned its attention to another operation. Far to the west, a new subordinate command of the division was to strike at a major enemy base area in an operation named Taylor Common.

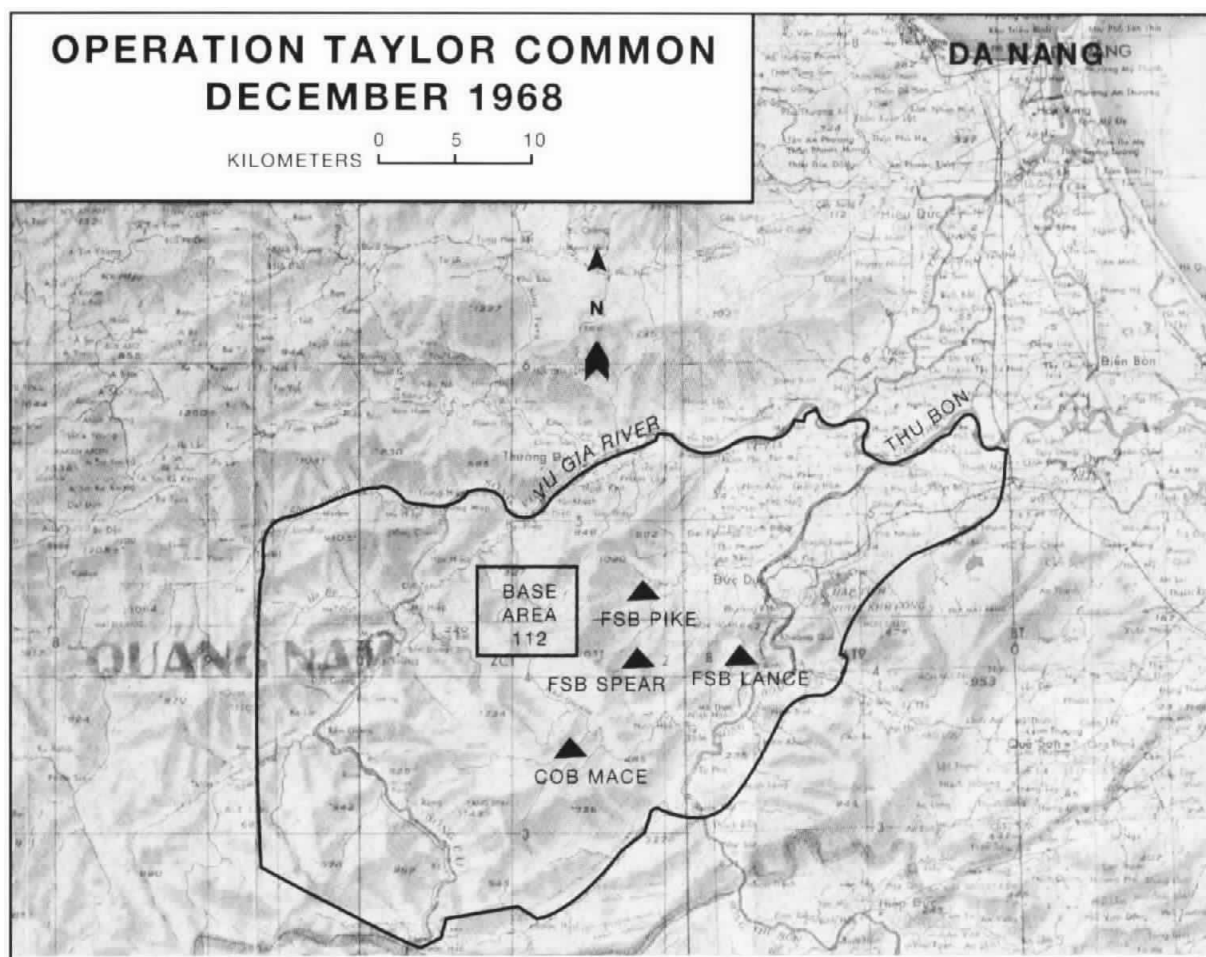
Operation Taylor Common

As Operation Meade River ground to a close, MACV ordered a strike into Base Area 112, the rugged mountainous region southwest of the Arizona Territory, between the Song Thu Bon and the Song Cai. Base Area 112 was a staging and logistic base for enemy units operating in southern Quang Nam Province. Multi-layered jungle canopy 70-feet thick concealed an estimated 7,000 North Vietnamese troops of the 21st Regiment, the 3d Battalion, 68B Rocket Regiment, and the 2d Battalion, 141st Regiment, as well as support and headquarters units.⁸⁷

Under the codename Operation Taylor Common, Brigadier General Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., one of the two assistant division commanders, would form and com-

mand an ad hoc organization under the 1st Marine Division, dubbed Task Force Yankee.* The Task Force was built around Colonel James B. Ord's 5th Marines, which would include BLT 2/7, with the normal complement of supporting organizations. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond B. Ingrando's 1st Field Artillery Group served as the higher headquarters for a force of two direct support artillery battalions and elements of other units, including 8-inch howitzers, 155mm guns, and 175mm guns.⁸⁸

*General Dwyer, who as a colonel commanded the 1st Marines until 14 August, became a 1st Marine Division ADC on 15 August upon his promotion to brigadier general. Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman on 18 August became the second ADC with the division. General Hoffman was previously an ADC with the 3d Marine Division until his transfer to the 1st Marine Division. Hoffman while with the 1st Marine Division served in a dual capacity as G-3 or operations officer for III MAF. He later wrote that Major General Ormond R. Simpson, who relieved General Youngdale as division commander on 21 December 1968, called him [Hoffman], "his phantom ADC." General Youngdale on that date relieved Major General Rathvon McC. Tonipkins as Deputy Commanding General, III MAF. See Command and Staff list and MajGen Carl W. Hoffman, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



On 6 December, General Dwyer issued the order launching Operation Taylor Common. The task force's mission was to "neutralize" Base Area 112 and to develop Fire Support Bases (FSBs) to interdict Communist infiltration routes leading from the Laotian border. The plan included three phases. The first step was to be a search and clear operation to ensure that An Hoa was secure. Units of the task force, in coordination with the ARVN 1st Ranger Group, would sweep the Arizona Territory and the area between Liberty Bridge and An Hoa. In the second phase, TF Yankee would penetrate Base Area 112, establish a series of fire support bases in the eastern half of the area, and begin reconnaissance-in-force operations to locate and destroy the enemy. Phase three was to be an extension of the second phase, with Marine battalions operating out to the western edge of Base Area 112 in search of enemy units and facilities.⁸⁹

In order to free the 5th Marines for assignment to TF Yankee, the 1st Marine Division ended operation Henderson Hill at midnight, on 6 December. Exactly

one minute later, Operation Taylor Common began.⁹⁰

At 0830, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadrons 165 and 364 delivered BLT 2/7 to the Arizona Territory to act as a blocking force for the 1st ARVN Ranger Group. Other units, including the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, were already in the field when the operation began. To these Marines, the fact that Operation Henderson Hill had given way to Operation Taylor Common made little difference, at least initially, for the mission of the units around An Hoa remained the same as before. Having completed Operation Meade River, the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marines departed Dodge City, sweeping the area from Liberty Bridge to the hills south and southwest of An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that during this sweep his Company G "flushed a group of six Vietnamese in civilian clothes." The company commander sent a platoon to investigate. As the Marines approached, someone among the Vietnamese fired a weapon. The troops dropped to the ground, but soon discovered they were not the

target. When the shots ended, one of the Vietnamese stood up with his hands in the air. The other five were dead, killed "execution style by a bullet to the back of the head, apparently while in a kneeling position." The sole survivor refused to answer any questions, but, according to Stemple, his "manner and dress indicated that this was not a run-of-the-mill local VC." The battalion commander later learned that his prisoner turned out to be the chief political officer of the North Vietnamese *Command Group 4*.⁹¹

Starting on 11 December, a major reshuffling of III MAF units occurred as a result of Operation Taylor Common. The requirement to penetrate and "neutralize" the vast reaches of Base Area 112, while simultaneously maintaining the security of the Da Nang TAOR, called for the employment of a large force. With the 27th Marines no longer in Vietnam, the 1st

In a formal change of command ceremony, MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, left, accepts the colors of the 1st Marine Division from his predecessor as division commander, MajGen Carl A. Youngdale. Gen Youngdale became the Deputy Commander, III MAF.

Photo from the Abel Collection



Marine Division did not have enough units to accomplish both tasks. To assist in the effort, General Cushman ordered Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines to redeploy from Quang Tri Province to Quang Nam. General Raymond G. Davis' success in reducing the 3d Marine Division's requirement for fixed garrisons by employing his forces in mobile operations made this move possible.⁹²

Colonel Spark's headquarters moved to An Hoa on 9 December, ahead of the regiment's subordinate battalions. The plan called for the 3d Marines to conduct the actual penetration of Base Area 112 while the 5th Marines secured An Hoa. As the enemy situation around An Hoa did not indicate the need for a full regiment to protect the base, General Dwyer ordered elements of the 5th Marines placed under Colonel Spark's control. Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion reported on 11 December and became the first unit to penetrate Base Area 112 during Operation Taylor Common.⁹³

On the morning of the 11th, artillery and aircraft blasted and bombed Hill 575, about eight kilometers southwest of An Hoa, in an attempt to create a suitable landing zone in the heavily forested terrain. When the fires lifted, some trees remained, so a platoon from Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion and a platoon from Company K, 5th Marines rappelled from helicopters into the LZ to complete the job. At 0950, the rest of Company K landed and the Marines set to work developing the hilltop into what would be called FSB Lance, part of Dwyer's planned network of fire support bases from which TF Yankee units could range throughout Base Area 112.⁹⁴

Two days later, on the 13th, Spark assumed control of Lieutenant Colonel Stemple's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Again a platoon of Company B, 1st Engineers Battalion accompanied this time by a platoon from Stemple's Company E rappelled onto a hilltop near the southwest corner of the Arizona Territory and blasted out an LZ. By evening, the rest of the 2d Battalion had landed and was busy establishing FSB Pike. Just as in the landings at FSB Lance, there was no enemy resistance.⁹⁵

The organic units of the 3d Marines began arriving in Quang Nam on 13 December. By the following day, both the 1st and 3d Battalions were at An Hoa, preparing to enter Base Area 112.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, TF Yankee was employing a new weapon to prepare LZs for the introduction of the newly arrived battalions. The M-121 Combat Trap was a 10,000 pound bomb which parachuted to the



Both photos from the Abel Collection

Top, Marine engineers have just cleared with explosives a landing zone for Operation Taylor Common to take place in Base Area 112 in the rugged terrain southwest of An Hoa. After the "big blast" some stubborn trees and brush remain to be cleared. Below, artillerymen from the 11th Marines at Fire Support Base Lance watch as a Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion brings in ammunition. A 105mm howitzer can be seen in the foreground.



earth and detonated over a potential LZ at a height which would blow down trees without creating a crater. General Dwyer personally directed this experimental operation from a helicopter. Air Force C-130s dropped the M-121s from high altitude, aiming for small hilltops selected by Dwyer and his staff. In terms of explosive power, the Combat Traps proved impressive. In General Dwyer's words, "... it looked like a mini-nuclear weapon burst. The concussion rocked us in the helicopter. ... it just really blew down this high, hundred foot canopy. ..."⁹⁷ Accuracy, however, left something to be desired. Although some near misses still created marginally suitable LZs, Dwyer concluded that the technique was of little use in situations requiring pinpoint accuracy. TF Yankee returned to the proven technique of bringing in low-flying attack aircraft with heavy ordnance, followed by engineers with chain saws and explosives to finish the job.⁹⁸

With help from the indispensable Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines landed, unopposed, atop Hill 558 on 15 December. A steep prominence four kilometers west of the recently established FSB Lance, Hill 558 was, by then, awash in a sea of splintered timber, the results of numerous M-121 near-misses. Following the pattern



Photo courtesy of Col James W. Stemple, USMC (Ret)

Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps, at right with back to tree, receives a briefing on use of Scout Dogs during Operation Taylor Common at Fire Support Base Pike on Christmas Day, 1968. Other officers in the picture are, from left: LtCol James W. Stemple, commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; BGen Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., CG of TF Yankee; Col James B. Ord, commander of the 5th Marines (standing); and MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, Deputy Commander, III MAF (seated). Col Michael M. Spark, commander of the 3d Marines, has his back to the camera.

previously established, the battalion began constructing FSB Spear atop the hill. With Fire Support Bases Lance and Pike, FSB Spear formed the point of a triangle which extended TF Yankee's thrust ever deeper into the heart of Base Area 112.⁹⁹

Northeast of Base Area 112, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and BLT 2/7 maintained the security of An Hoa through constant patrolling. Having accomplished its blocking force mission in the Arizona Territory, BLT 2/7 conducted a helicopter assault into an LZ near the western end of Go Noi Island, at the edge of the huge Taylor Common area of operations. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines patrolled in the vicinity of An Hoa, frequently encountering small groups of the enemy.¹⁰⁰

TF Yankee completed the initial penetration of Base Area 112 on 18 December, when the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines mounted a helicopter-borne assault on Hill 375, about four kilometers south of FSB Spear. After scoring yet another unopposed landing for the task force, the battalion began developing the hilltop as Combat Operations Base (COB) Mace.*

The four battalions ensconced in the eastern half of Base Area 112 began a program of saturation patrolling and reconnaissance-in-force operations, depending upon helicopters alone for all logistic sup-

* A Combat Operations Base differed from a Fire Support Base, primarily, in not having any artillery.

port. Fortunately, the seasonal monsoon did not develop, and incoming loads totalled some 250 tons per day, which were dispersed among the units at bases and those on patrol. General Dwyer later characterized the helicopter support during the operation as "a mixed performance," noting numerous instances of performance that was less than adequate. In the final analysis, however, he allowed that, "... the net effect was: We had plenty of artillery, plenty of food, plenty of ammunition. . . ." ¹⁰¹*

Throughout the last half of December, units of the 3d Marines searched the eastern half of Base Area 112, frequently finding signs of the enemy's recent presence, but only rarely encountering Communist troops. The area included scores of NVA rest camps, kitchens, small unit headquarters, surgical facilities, and even apparent prisons (or POW holding areas), all abandoned. Usually, the Marines found enemy graves, small quantities of stored food, weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, or documents. Occasionally, patrols engaged small groups of North Viet-

namese or Viet Cong, but no major contacts developed. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple remembered that his F and H Companies, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines during patrols on a slope west and south of FSB Pike had "sharp short engagements with small NVA units." According to Stemple, he initially assigned two scout dog teams to each company in this triple canopy terrain "to sniff out any enemy to the front or flank." Because of the restricted visibility, the advantage lay with the side who spotted the other first. The battalion commander stated that the North Vietnamese very quickly observed that it was to their benefit to kill the dogs before shooting at Marines. In late December, he recalled that he had the opportunity to make his case for more dogs during a visit to Vietnam by the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Leonard F. Chapman. The flow of scout dogs to the combat units soon increased and that in the later stages of Taylor Common, Stemple assigned three dogs to a company. ¹⁰²

The second phase of Operation Taylor Common ended with 1968 on New Year's Eve. During the third and final phase of the operation, which lasted until March, TF Yankee pushed west to within 30 kilometers of Laos, finally encountering more enemy troops.** The task force accomplished its mission by locating and destroying the enemy logistics infrastructure in Base Area 112. Although Operation Taylor Common did not attract a great deal of attention—owing this, thought General Dwyer, to the remoteness of the AO—it was a successful large, mobile operation. The multi-regiment task force, operating far from its permanent bases, carried III MAF offensive striking power deep into enemy territory, using much the same tactics as that of the 3d Marine Division in the north.

*Colonel Stemple, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, remembered that while his unit established itself on Fire Support Base Pike and the battalion was in the process of building ammunition storage revetments there he was told that a large number of helicopters was to bring in the next day the entire ammunition storage level to Pike. According to Stemple, he protested the order, stating that the ammunition dumps were far from ready. Nevertheless, the following morning, "a literal daisy chain of helicopters" brought in heavily laden cargo nets filled "with 155mm artillery shells and boxes of green and white bag gun powder for the 155s and boxes of 105 and 81mm mortar ammunition." With the operation in full swing, enemy rocketeers took the base under fire. Two rockets landed in one of the revetments containing 155mm gun powder. The battalion commander related the "resulting explosion was visible for miles around and secondary explosions rocked the fire support base." Miraculously only one Marine was killed. A Marine and Army ordnance disposal team deemed tons of the ammunition as unstable which had to be then helilifted to facilities at Da Nang. Colonel Stemple remembered that, "the ammunition stock levels at the support base were reduced and the stocking completed as safe storage was completed." Stemple Comments.

**For a complete treatment of the closing phase of Operation Taylor Common, see Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1969: High Mobility and Standdown* (Washington, D.C.: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1988), pp. 88–102.

CHAPTER 22

The 3d Division's Labors Bear Fruit

Elimination of the Infrastructure—Rough Soldiering—Thua Thien and the End of the Year

The 3d Marine Division's persistent mobile offensive during the autumn forced the enemy back into his base areas in the hinterlands and the sanctuaries of North Vietnam and Laos. The withdrawal, motivated more by necessity than by choice, nevertheless, afforded the enemy an opportunity to refurbish his consistently outmaneuvered and battle-depleted combat units. Hampered both by heavier than normal monsoon rains during September and October and the offensive mobility of the 3d Division, the enemy, nonetheless, retained the capability for harassing attacks against allied installations and population centers. He also could still initiate a major offensive against the South by marshalling his forces positioned north of the DMZ.

The Government of South Vietnam, with United States assistance, instituted a country-wide accelerated pacification (Le Loi) campaign, on 1 November, designed to drive the enemy from populated areas and provide extra momentum to the 1968 Revolutionary Development Program. The purpose of the campaign was to organize government functions, establish self-help projects, bolster local security, and eliminate the Viet Cong infrastructure in a number of selected hamlets.

The inauguration of the Government's wide-ranging pacification campaign coupled with the withdrawal north in late October of the three regiments of the 320th NVA Division, as well as the 138th and 270th NVA Regiments, now allowed the 3d Marine Division to turn a large portion of its efforts toward implementing and expanding the pacification initiative. In the province's populated coastal lowlands and piedmont, the 3d Division, and forces under its control, would seek out those elements actively attempting to disrupt the campaign. At the same time, it continued the bold employment of Marine infantry in the mountainous jungles to the west.

Elimination of the Infrastructure

The departure of the 1st Cavalry Division from northern I Corps in early November forced a realignment of forces in the division's eastern area and a reduc-

tion in the commitment to the anti-infiltration system along the DMZ. On 1 November, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry (Mechanized), under the command of U.S. Army Colonel James M. Gibson, was directed to move from the Kentucky area of operations into an area near Quang Tri City. The new area, labeled Napoleon-Saline II, incorporated all of the former Napoleon-Saline area, centered on Cua Viet, and the northern, or Quang Tri, portion of the cavalry division's area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, as a result, was placed under the operational control of the brigade and continued search operations in the former Napoleon-Saline area, now designated Area of Operations Green. Lieutenant Colonel George E. Hayward's 3d Tank Battalion, which had been operating in the Napoleon-Saline area, was put in direct support of the 3d Marines, which assumed control of the Kentucky area.

With the evacuation of the 1st Brigade from positions just south of the DMZ, General Cushman requested and received authority from General Abrams to close the strongpoints at A-3 and C-3.¹ The two outposts, part of the Dyemarker strongpoint and trace system, initially were scheduled to be manned by a Marine regiment and a reinforced ARVN regiment. Although all the strongpoints, with the exception of A-5, had been, or were in the process of being completed, by mid-June, the 2d ARVN Regiment had only secured three, A-1, A-2, and C-1. Marine forces occupied the remaining strongpoints and combat bases. A revised plan, codenamed Duel Blade, submitted by III MAF on 15 June, called for the ARVN regiment to relieve Marine units at A-3 and A-4 by December and the elimination of the two westernmost combat bases. However, in follow-on discussions between Lieutenant General Cushman and Lieutenant General Lam, the I Corps Tactical Zone commander, the Vietnamese general balked at committing ARVN forces to the two positions until the sensors and intermediate barriers had been installed. Lam instead suggested that two battalions of the 2d Regiment continue to occupy A-1, A-2, and C-1, while the regiment's remaining two battalions be employed in a mobile role

with Marine forces along the DMZ. General Cushman recommended to General Abrams that General Lam's suggestion be adopted and that he, General Cushman, would proceed on the premise that the original concept be abandoned in favor of a revised, more mobile posture.² Although General Abrams subsequently accepted General Cushman's recommendation, he suggested that the South Vietnamese should be eased into both sites after sufficient training.

As ARVN and Marine commands continued their Duel Blade planning with respect to construction and specific control procedures, General Abrams on 22 October ordered all construction and planning efforts associated with the anti-infiltration effort halted.³ The 1 November bombing halt in the DMZ and North Vietnam, aimed, in part, at restoring the DMZ to a true buffer zone, combined with manpower demands on U.S. forces in the north, made the strongpoint and obstacle barrier system no longer feasible.

Under the new concept, still referred to as Duel Blade, allied forces, supported by air, artillery, and naval gunfire, would, while maintaining a mobile posture, actively resist infiltration from the North by maintaining a comprehensive surveillance effort. While ground reconnaissance inserts would be a part of the effort, attended and unattended detection devices or sensors would provide a majority of the around-the-clock capability. By the end of December, the engineers had implanted three sensor fields in the eastern portion of the DMZ, south of the Ben Hai River.*

At the same time the American command had made rapid progress in the defoliation of a 2,000-meter-wide trace, adjacent to the Laotian border south of the DMZ, which neared completion, and began planning to implant sensors in the western area. Despite these efforts, little evidence existed reflecting a decline in the enemy's intention to continue to use the DMZ for staging troops and supplies, infiltration, and, north of the Ben Hai, as a sanctuary. Marine units, nevertheless, were now under standing orders not to enter the DMZ.

According to the revised concept, the "A" and "C" strongpoint sites considered essential would be used as fire support bases. Those of no value, such as A-3 and C-3, would be closed. With the departure of General

Westmoreland in June and the launching of more mobile operations, III MAF halted construction and shifted much of the material set aside for the Duel Blade effort to the construction of an anti-infiltration barrier around Da Nang.

The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division moved south into the populated coastal sand dune and rice paddy region, covering the districts of Trieu Phong, Mai Linh, Hai Lang, and Quang Tri City. Here, it found an area largely devoid of battalion-sized Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army units. These units, having suffered a number of decisive defeats, had retired west into the jungle-covered mountains bordering on Laos. The remaining Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces continued to maintain liaison with local force units and the VC infrastructure. They also continued to move rice and other supplies to main force units further west. These elements included units of the *808th NVA Battalion* which endeavored to reinforce two local force companies, the C-59 in Trieu Phong District and the H-99 in Hai Lang District. These two companies, in an effort to avoid allied capture, had broken down into small groups of five to six men and tended to operate with village and hamlet guerrilla forces, which varied in size from cells to squads and in some cases platoons. Allied intelligence estimates placed Viet Cong strength in the region, including infrastructure members, at 4,000. Seventy-eight of the 234 hamlets within the brigade's area of operations were considered to be under Viet Cong control. Intelligence analysts rated 18 as being contested and they considered the remainder to be under South Vietnamese control.

Taking advantage of the absence of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main force units, Gibson's mechanized brigade concentrated on conducting strike operations. Emphasizing search and clear and cordon and search operations in cooperation and coordination with local forces and the 1st ARVN Regiment, whose area of operation coincided with that of the brigade's, Gibson's troops sought to weed out and destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure. Organized into two infantry and one armored task forces, the 1st Brigade supported the Le Loi campaign and conducted a series of large-scale cordon and search operations and deployed numerous patrols, ambushes, and small "Hunter Killer" teams throughout its new area of operations during the months of November and December. In addition, it provided transportation, hauled construction materials, assisted in road building, and provided security for the long-awaited reset-

* Colonel John F. Mitchell recalled that from July to October 1968, he was given the task of "establishing the 1st Ground Surveillance Section" in the 3d Marine Division. According to Mitchell, the group used sensors with laser technology to track enemy forces. Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

tlement of coastal fisherman and their families into the Gia Dang fishing village.

The cordon on Thon My Chanh, which began on 2 November as a transition operation to introduce the brigade into the area, involved elements of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry; 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized); 1st Battalion, 77th Armor; and 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry. In coordination with three battalions of the 1st ARVN Regiment, the brigade cordoned the village which straddled the Quang Tri and Thua Thien provincial boundary, while ARVN infantry and South Vietnamese local forces swept through the area. On 5 November, Company B, 9th Marines and Company G, 3d Marines were placed under the operational control of the brigade and assigned security duty at Landing Zone Nancy, relieving other brigade forces which began an extensive campaign of local ambushes and patrols. The Thon My Chanh cordon ended on 16 November with a total of 60 Viet Cong reported killed, 58 of which were credited to the 1st ARVN Regiment.

The following day, Companies B, C, and D, 11th Infantry; Company I, 4th Marines; and Companies B and C, 9th Marines, in conjunction with two battalions of the 1st ARVN Regiment, established a cordon around the Thon Thuong Xa and Thon Mai Dang village complex, eight kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. The three Marine companies anchored the eastern portion of the three village cordon and provided security for the checkpoint of Route 1. While elements continued to sweep through the Thon Mai Dang area, Companies B and C, 9th Marines, working with the 2d Battalion, 1st ARVN Regiment, established a 360-degree cordon around the village of Thon Thuong Xa on the 24th, and sent out patrols in all directions from the cordon.⁴ With the end of the cordon on 27 November, the three Marine companies returned to their parent units and like the Thon My Chanh cordon, the 1st ARVN Regiment garnered the lion's share of the enemy killed and weapons captured.

Throughout the first nine days of December, Gibson's brigade continued large-scale cordon and search operations in the rice growing area east of Quang Tri City at Thon Tra Loc, and in the sand dunes north of Fire Support Base Tombstone and west of Wunder Beach. On the 9th, Operation Napoleon-Saline came to an end. According to Marine sources, the operation which began at the end of February, when operations Napoleon and Saline were combined, resulted in the death of more than 3,500 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops and the capture of 831 weapons. Marine, Army, and ARVN losses

were put at 395 killed and 1,680 wounded.

As Napoleon-Saline ended, the brigade moved into Operation Marshall Mountain. Relying heavily on dismounted infantry units, Gibson's troopers continued to operate extensively throughout their assigned area of operation with elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment and local Popular and Regional Forces. These combined operations included the integration of Popular Force squads and platoons into mechanized infantry and tank platoons, assigning a Popular Force squad to one tank as a means of transportation and fire support for the local South Vietnamese. The tank and mechanized infantry platoons would be used as blocking units while the Popular and Regional Forces searched an area. Although used elsewhere, the brigade concentrated the efforts of these combined search and clear operations during the remainder of the month on the area immediately south and west of Quang Tri City to interdict enemy movement from the piedmont into the populated coastal lowlands.

In addition to small combined operations, the 1st Brigade continued to conduct a large number of cordons of suspected Viet Cong-dominated villages and initiated a series of strike operations in the mountains to the west. On 20 December, three companies from the 11th Infantry conducted heliborne assaults into the southern portion of enemy Base Area 101, but encountered no sizeable enemy forces. By the end of the month, all three companies had returned to Fire Support Base Sharon. The brigade's activities including combat operations and civic action projects resulted in a heightened sense of security throughout the region and an increase in the effectiveness and fighting spirit of local Regional and Popular Force platoons.

To the north of Gibson's brigade, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers, who was replaced in mid-November by Lieutenant Colonel Walter W. Damewood, Jr., continued to conduct an extensive program of combat patrols, and ambushes throughout the Green area of operations. First Lieutenant Peter N. Schneider's Company A conducted mechanized and infantry patrols, night ambushes, and search and destroy missions, concentrating on the area along the Song Cua Viet between My Loc and the Mai Xa Thi village complex to the southwest. During the sweeps, Schneider's Marines discovered and destroyed numerous bunkers, some of which were old and deteriorated and others recently constructed which indicated enemy activity in the area. Company A, however, encountered no enemy troops.

Further north, Company B, under the acting command of First Lieutenant Thomas M. Whiteside, continued the consolidation of the C-4 Strong Point and the outpost at Oceanview, the eastern anchors for the Duel Blade anti-infiltration effort. Reinforced by a platoon of Marine tanks, a section of 40mm Dusters, an Army artillery target acquisition team, and a naval gunfire spotter team, the company maintained both visual and radar coverage of the DMZ and requested fire missions on sighted squad- to company-sized enemy forces, bunker and trenchline complexes, suspected supply and staging areas, heavy trail activity, and sampan and boat movement. While tactical air, artillery, and naval gunfire missions destroyed or damaged many of these targets, the enemy reacted to aerial reconnaissance flights over the DMZ on several occasions by firing at friendly aircraft with small arms as well as .30- and .50-caliber anti-aircraft weapons.

With the end of Operation Napoleon-Saline II in early December, operational control of Damewood's battalion was transferred from the 1st Brigade to the newly formed Marine Task Force Bravo. The Task Force, commanded by Colonel Thomas W. Clarke, took over responsibility for Operation Kentucky and, in addition to the amtrac battalion, consisted of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Tank Battalion. According to Lieutenant Colonel Damewood, as part of Operation Kentucky, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion had one of the largest area of operations in the division sector extending from the DMZ south to the Cua Viet and west of the mouth of the Cua Viet to Dai Do village.⁵ While Company A launched numerous mechanized and infantry patrols along the Cua Viet, in coordination with the Navy Task Force Clearwater, Company B maintained both visual and night detection radar coverage of the eastern DMZ in an effort to prevent enemy infiltration.* The company, in late December, joined the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in an extensive cordon and search of Xuan Khanh Resettlement Village, one kilometer northwest of the mouth of the Cua Viet. While the Marine units maintained the cordon, elements of the 2d ARVN Regiment swept through the village with negative results.

To the west of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's area, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines sup-

planted the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division in early November, which had moved into the 1st Cavalry Division's former area. Operating primarily from Cam Lo, C-2, C-3, and Con Thien, elements of both Marine battalions conducted extensive patrols in their new sector. They also participated extensively in the pacification effort in Cam Lo and Huong Hoa Districts.

Early in November, Lieutenant Colonel Bryon T. Chen's 2d Battalion moved into the Cam Lo District, on a test basis, and began the process of integrating with local Regional and Popular Forces in an attempt to upgrade their training, efficiency, and overall combat effectiveness. The initial effort to place a Marine platoon with each of the district's Regional Force companies met with limited success and the battalion then shifted to a program of total integration. Captain Donald J. Myers' Company H had a fire team with each Regional Force squad, a squad with each platoon, and a platoon with each of the three Regional Force companies in Cam Lo District. Command, control, and coordination was maintained by appointing the Marine unit leader as an advisor or assistant commander to a Regional or Popular Force unit one echelon above their own. A Marine squad leader, for example, was the advisor to a Regional Force platoon and its

Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines integrated with South Vietnamese Regional Forces (RF) in the Cam Lo Sector. In the photo, Marines of the company and RF troops ride on top of a Marine tank during a combined sweep in the sector.

Photo courtesy of Col Donald J. Myers USMC (Ret)



*Lieutenant Colonel Damewood recalled that the executive officer of the Navy Task Force was a Marine and that "extensive coordination was required between division units, especially the 1st AmTrac Bn and Clearwater to optimize safe transit of the river." LtCol Walter W. Damewood, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 31Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Top photo is courtesy of LtCol Justin M. Martin USMC (Ret) and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Donald J. Myers USMC (Ret)
In Huong Hoa District, Marines try to integrate with South Vietnamese forces in Mai Loc Village. Top, Marines from Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines stand by while the U.S. Army district advisor talks to the commander of the South Vietnamese 220th RF Company. Below, Marines of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conduct a cordon and search of Mai Loc village with South Vietnamese RF troops. South Vietnamese officials are seen talking to the assembled villagers.



assistant commander. First Lieutenant Justin M. Martin's Company F adopted a similar force structure in Huong Hoa District.

While integrating at all levels, at the same time elements of the two battalions launched a series of major cordon and search operations throughout the area of operations. Their mission was to capture the local Viet Cong and disrupt his organization as well as conduct an accurate census of the population and civic action program. On 13 November, Companies E, F, and L, 3d Marines; Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; Company B, 3d Tank Battalion; and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines joined the 5th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment in a cordon and search of the Xam Rao Vinh Valley in the northeast portion of the Mai Loc TAOR, east of Cam Lo. The rapid cordon and search of the valley, suspected to be populated by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong whose mission was to harass the civilian population and conduct guerrilla operations against Marine units in the area, yielded little and the operation ended four days later.⁶

While the 2d and 3d Battalions blanketed the Kentucky area with cordons and patrols, the remaining battalion of Colonel Michael M. Spark's 3d Marines, the 1st Battalion, remained in the Lancaster II area and provided security for Camp Carroll, Landing Zone Mack, the Dong Ha Mountain outpost, Thon Sam Lam, and Khe Gio Bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey's Marines also furnished escorts for Rough Rider truck convoys and details for the daily road sweep of Route 9. Although there was a marked increase in the use of mines and Camp Carroll received an occasional enemy mortar attack, the majority of attacks by fire and encounters with enemy forces took place around Landing Zone Mack and Landing Zone Sierra to the north. While on patrol near Sierra on the afternoon of 15 November, Company A's point element came under fire from an estimated enemy platoon, which initiated the contact by detonating several directional, or claymore mines, and grenades. Supported by 60mm mortars, the enemy platoon then opened fire with automatic weapons and small arms. Captain James L. Shaw's Marines countered with direct artillery fire and 106mm recoilless rifle and 81mm mortar fires, and reported as a result five enemy troops killed. During the firefight, Company A lost 7 Marines killed and 23 wounded in addition to a scout dog.

On 21 November, as the western boundary of the Lancaster area of operations again was shifted east, Twohey's battalion was helilifted from Landing Zone Sierra to Mack and then to C-1. The departure of 1st

Battalion, 3d Marines from the jungle-covered mountains northwest of Camp Carroll coincided with the termination of the 10-month-long operation, code-named Lancaster II, and the absorption of the area into that of Scotland II and Kentucky. According to Marine sources, Lancaster II, which began in late January, accounted for more than 1,800 enemy troops killed and 913 weapons captured. Allied losses were placed at 359 killed and a total of 2,101 wounded.

From C-1, on 22 November, Companies A, B, and C, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, in coordination with the 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment moved north along Route 1 and established a tank and infantry cordon near Gio Linh.⁷ The three-day cordon resulted in more than 3,900 Vietnamese being processed, of which 188 were detained. Of the 188, 147 were later classified as Viet Cong suspects and 41 were found to be deserters or draft dodgers. Following the Gio Linh-Ha Thanh cordon, Lieutenant Colonel Richard B. Twohey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines moved to the southern portion of the 2d ARVN Regiment's area of operation and began a cordon and search of the Thon Nghia An, Thon Thanh Luong, and Thon Truong Xa village complex, north and west of Dong Ha. Other than receiving a few sniper rounds, Twohey's Marines found little evidence of recent enemy activity.

The last days of November witnessed the beginning of one more cordon operation. On the 29th, Lieutenant Colonel Chen's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines moved into the rice-growing area around Thon Vinh Dai, east of Cam Lo and north of Route 9. In seven days, working with local Regional and Popular Forces, Chen's Marines, assisted in the screening of 1,604 civilians, 85 of whom were classified as Viet Cong suspects.

Although heavily committed to the pacification effort, two battalions of Colonel Sparks' 3d Marines were alerted for deployment to Quang Nam Province in early December. The III MAF commander, General Cushman, warned General Stilwell the commander of XXIV Corps that intelligence indicated that the enemy planned, "to press his attacks on major cities of Da Nang and Quang Ngai . . . to thwart our successes in the countryside." He told Stilwell:

To counter his plans, III MAF will embark on an intensified campaign . . . to destroy his major means for carrying out his aggression. To do this will require the destruction of BA 112, which contains command and control headquarters and support facilities. It also requires destruction of the 2d and 3d NVA Divisions and prevention of their escape into Laos.

Since no additional forces were available to accomplish this mission, the existing forces in I Corps would have to be reallocated. Cushman asked the XXIV Corps commander to furnish two battalions to the 1st Marine Division "with proportionate share of division combat and combat service support for the accelerated effort against 2d NVA Div and BA 112."⁸ The 3d Marines regimental headquarters, two infantry battalions, and normal combat support elements were designated to move south.*

As Spark's 1st and 3d Battalions left the field for Quang Tri Combat Base and rest and refitting before being airlifted to An Hoa, the 3d Marine Division activated, on 7 December, Task Force Bravo for planning. On 9 December, Colonel Clarke, the task force commander, assumed tactical responsibility for the Kentucky area of operations.

Following a short cordon encompassing a majority of the hamlets in Huong Hoa District, on 12 December, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle, moved into the area of operations formerly occupied by the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Stretching from the DMZ south to the Cua Valley, the 300-square kilometer area included the fixed installations of Con Thien, C-2 Bridge, C-2, and C-3, three of which previously were secured by a battalion each, now were the responsibility of two companies.

The last three weeks of December found McMonagle's battalion with two companies, Company F in Huong Hoa District and Company H in Cam Lo District, assisting in the pacification effort through integrated operations and training with Regional and Popular Forces. Company E provided security for Con Thien and C-2 Bridge, as well as patrolling and ambushing throughout its assigned 54-square kilometer area. McMonagle's remaining Company, G, secured C-2 and C-3, while likewise conducting patrols and ambushes in its area. Despite the lack of enemy activity and the insurmountable tasks assigned, the battalion was fully confident that the area of operations "was being denied to the enemy due to total effort on the part of all companies."⁹

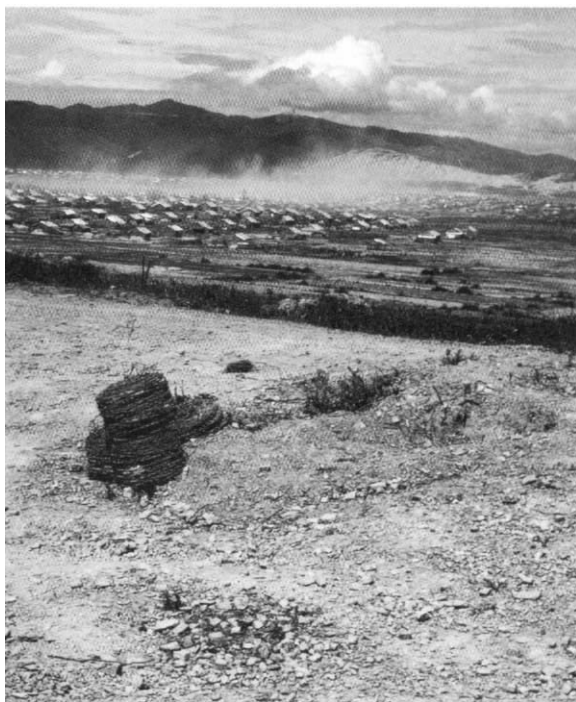
While McMonagle's four companies blanketed their assigned areas with patrols and ambushes, Task Force Bravo conducted two large cordon and search operations targeted at the Cam Lo Resettlement Village and the village of Xuan Khanh, near Cua Viet.

The first, involving two companies of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and elements of the 1st and 2d ARVN Regiments, screened more than 10,000 villagers, 93 of whom were detained as Viet Cong suspects. The target of the second was the fishing village of Xuan Khanh, near the mouth of the Cua Viet. On the day after Christmas, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was relieved of positions in the western mountains and helilifted into the area, where Companies F, G, and H cordoned the fishing village, permitting the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment to search the area and process more than 9,000 inhabitants. Of the 174 who were detained, a majority later was determined to be draft evaders.

Due to the division's extensive commitment to the pacification effort during the last two months of 1968, the local Viet Cong, noted General Davis, had to "rewrite his book." According to Davis, the VC used to "strike and run to a hideaway, in a secure area. He doesn't have that now. Marines are on his trails, in his hideaway, in his secure areas not only in the hills but doing the same thing" in populated areas. The effect of the

A view of Cam Lo Resettlement Village includes the surrounding hills. The U.S. and South Vietnamese built new homes for Vietnamese refugees and resettled them here to keep the people away from the VC and also away from the combat areas.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371645



* See Chapter 21.

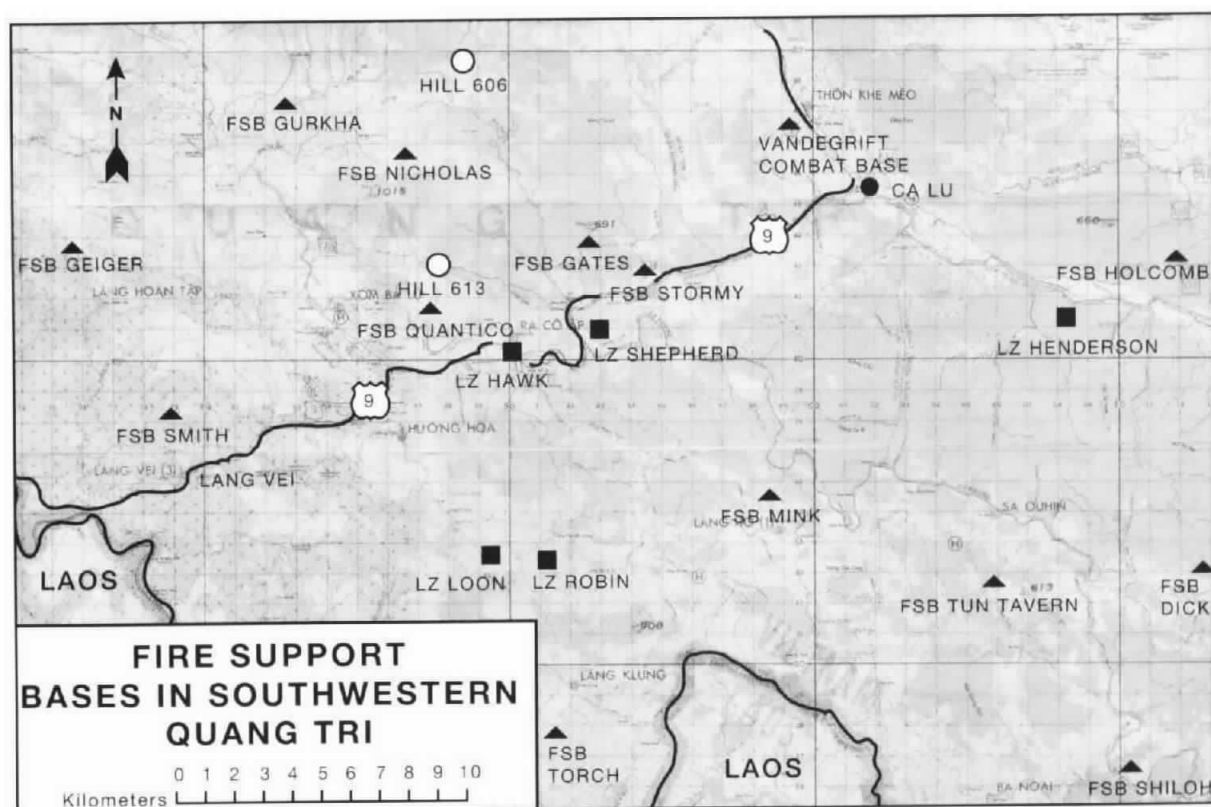
allied pacification on Quang Tri Province, Davis continued, was to make it "as secure internally as it's ever going to be. . . . It compares favorably with many places I know in the United States insofar as levels of violence and security are concerned."¹⁰

Rough Soldiering

As November began, Colonel Martin J. Sexton's 4th Marines and Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines, under the overall command of Brigadier General Frank E. Garretson's Task Force Hotel, conducted offensive operations throughout the Scotland II area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines provided security for artillery units and radio relay sites located at Fire Support Bases Cates and Shepherd and Hills 691 and 950, and patrolled out from the four bases. At the same time, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel James L. Fowler, continued the defense and development of Fire Support Base Gurkha and patrolled the Khe Xa Bai and the Song Rao Quan Valleys. To the northwest of her sister battalions, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Major William L. Kent, completed its sweep west of Fire Support Base Alpine, finding several abandoned North Vietnamese positions,

but no evidence of recent enemy activity. On 4 November, Company E was helilifted eight kilometers northwest to Hill 1308 and began construction of Fire Support Base Argonne. Positioned one-and-one-half kilometers from the Laotian border and the highest fire support base in South Vietnam, Argonne provided excellent observation of the vital enemy road net in Laos which funneled troops and supplies south. Although the Marines on the base made numerous sightings, higher headquarters repeatedly denied clearance for fire missions as the sighted enemy positions were well beyond the border.

By 11 November with construction of the fire support base completed, the 1st Battalion replaced the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The 2d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Hopkins, displaced to Fire Support Bases Cates and Shepherd and Hills 691 and 950. It then began sweep operations north of Cates and west along Route 9 toward the village of Khe Sanh following the closure of Shepherd. With the departure of Hopkins' Marines, Galbraith's battalion conducted a two-company search north and east of Argonne, into an area of sharp-sloped mountains covered in triple-canopy jungle and cut by many small fast-rushing streams. The search yielded





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A800541

Marines of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines cross a fast-rushing stream in Operation Scotland II, east of Vandegrift Combat Base. Drinking water appears to be at a premium, judging from the extra number of canteens that each Marine is carrying.

numerous unoccupied or hastily abandoned living areas, harbor sites, and natural caves containing a considerable number of supply, weapons, and ammunition caches. But, as Companies A and B progressed eastward, enemy forces in the region began a series of delaying actions which took the form of small but sharp engagements between point elements of the companies and small groups of enemy. When contact was broken, pursuit of the enemy inevitably led to the discovery of further caches.

On 21 November, Companies C and D, which had secured Argonne and Alpine, replaced Companies A and B in the search to the east. Thirteen days later and 14 kilometers further east, as the two companies crossed the Khe Ta Bong and moved toward higher ground, they began the process of developing a new fire support base, to be named Neville, atop Hill 1103. With the positioning of Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines at Neville on 14 December, Task Force Hotel ordered all search and destroy operations to the west halted and Fire Support Bases Argonne, Gurkha, and Alpine closed. With Neville in full operation, Compa-

nies C and D evacuated the area and subsequently were placed under the operational control of Task Force Bravo to assist in the Cam Lo Refugee Village cordon, while Companies A and B helilifted to Vandegrift Combat Base.

After a short stay at Vandegrift, where it secured the combat base and surrounding Marine positions following the search around Gurkha, Lieutenant Colonel Fowler's 3d Battalion moved by helicopter 14 kilometers to the north on 21 November to defend and further develop Fire Support Base Winchester and Landing Zones Mack and Sierra. Known as the Son Phan Cong Hoang Quoc Gia National Forest Reserve, the mountainous region surrounding the battalion's positions was characterized by steep slopes and long narrow ridgelines covered with dense forest and jungle consisting of a single, but thick, canopy. The battalion was joined on the 24th by Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which assaulted into Winchester and then moved one kilometer east along the Dong Tien ridgeline and began construction of Fire Support Base Russell. Other than occasional sniper fire, battalion patrols

encountered little enemy resistance, but did discover a number of large, recently constructed enemy bunker complexes which yielded a modest amount of ammunition and equipment.

During the first week of December, as the 3d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William A. Donald, began a several-week, two-company search north of Russell, Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins' 2d Battalion assaulted into four landing zones on two parallel ridgelines east of Mack and three kilometers north of Dong Ha Mountain. The landings were unopposed and Hopkins' four companies fanned out toward their first objectives, establishing perimeters while deploying listening posts and squad ambushes.

Moving toward new objectives on 8 December a squad patrol from First Lieutenant Jimmie G. Bear-den's Company E, as it approached Hill 208, was taken under small arms fire from a tree- and trench-line. Moving to engage, the patrol observed approximately 10 armed enemy troops retreating into the

heavy brush. Two squads were sent to reinforce the engaged unit and prevent the enemy's escape, but as the attacking Marine platoon maneuvered forward it found that the enemy had taken cover in a heavily fortified trench and bunker complex. The platoon entered the complex and immediately was caught in a crossfire of small arms, grenades, and white smoke or CS gas. With darkness approaching and casualties mounting, the platoon withdrew, carrying out nine wounded Marines, but leaving the bodies of three dead behind.

While air, artillery, and mortars pounded the complex throughout the night, Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins rapidly moved the battalion's other three companies into blocking positions around the complex with the hope of catching some of the estimated 50 North Vietnamese soldiers attempting to escape. But the enemy apparently "hit the ground running," and the sweep through the area the following day, during which the bodies of the three dead Marines were recov-

Smoldering fires and a denuded forest bear stark witness to the intensity of the combat for "Foxtrot Ridge," named after Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.

Photo from the Abel Collection



ered, went unchallenged.

Two days later, Hopkins ordered Captain Richard J. Murphy's Company F to cross the Song Ngan valley and assault the ridgeline extending along the southern boundary of the DMZ, the site of several suspected enemy mortar positions. After heavy air and artillery strikes, the company seized the western portion of the ridgeline under fire. As Murphy's Marines moved eastward, hidden NVA opened up with small arms and automatic weapons on the lead elements of the company. The enemy was well entrenched and dense vegetation made it difficult to spot the sources of enemy fire. Having fought its way into the middle of a large, well-laid out bunker complex, the company now found it hard to maneuver without taking additional casualties and leaving its wounded.

Despite overwhelming odds, Murphy's company extracted its casualties, reorganized, and following another heavy air and artillery strike, prepared to assault. Turning to his troops, platoon leader Second Lieutenant Steven P. Brodrick shouted: "All right Marines, take this hill and earn your pay!" Brodrick then led his platoon back into the enemy complex and maneuvered forward until he was killed by a direct burst of automatic weapons fire.¹¹

Alerted earlier in the day to follow in trace of Company F, Hopkins quickly committed Company H to reinforce Murphy's Marines. Attempting to envelop the enemy complex from the north, it too ran into heavy enemy fire and a fierce firefight ensued. However, once Company H was able to bring its full firepower to bear, the enemy withdrew and by the time Company G moved in to reinforce its engaged sister companies, the battlefield had quieted. Enemy losses were unknown, but the battalion suffered 13 killed and 31 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins remembered that the battle, "took place on a hill on which the southern boundary of the DMZ ran across the topographical crest." The NVA kept its forward defensive positions south of the DMZ, "while the bulk of his forces" remained in the so-called demilitarized area.¹²

Following air, artillery, and mortar missions, Captain Joseph M. Dwyer's Company G led out in the assault on 12 December. Those of the enemy, who could, had escaped, and the attacking companies searched the area without contact. One North Vietnamese soldier was found alive and unharmed in a bunker and he quickly was relieved of his loaded light machine gun and whisked off to the battalion command post. Under interrogation, he told his captors that the position had been occupied by the *1st Battal-*

ion, 27th NVA Regiment, and that the battalion commander and his staff had died in the fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins later wrote about his frustration of not being permitted "to pursue the fleeing *27th NVA Regiment* . . ." He recalled bitterly, "standing on the topographical crest . . . showing various media representatives the blood-stained trees on both sides of the trails leading into the DMZ . . ." Hopkins was convinced "that a significant volume of enemy casualties and materiel could have been captured or uncovered before being moved back across the Ben Hai."¹³

During the next two weeks, Hopkins' battalion searched east and west along the ridgeline, dubbed "Foxtrot Ridge." Employing tactics to draw the enemy south of the DMZ, the battalion repeatedly maneuvered out of the area as if leaving, then quickly struck back. But, because of his losses, the enemy apparently had decided not to contest the terrain, and no further engagements occurred. On the day after Christmas, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines departed the area by helicopter for the Cua Viet sector where they participated with the 3d Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment in cordoning the village of Xuan Thanh.*

The first days of November found Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines scattered throughout the southern portion of the division's area of operations, where the Scotland area was expanded due to the departure of the 1st Cavalry Division. Lieutenant Colonel George W. Smith's 1st Battalion, which had relieved elements of the Cavalry division's 1st Brigade at Fire Support Base Anne, southwest of Quang Tri, continued to conduct company-sized patrols of the surrounding area in search of the enemy, his supplies, and base camps. Later in the month, the battalion participated in two combined cordon operations: the first with the 3d Marines in the Mai Loc area and the second with elements of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division around the Thuong Xa and Mai Dang village complexes south of Quang Tri City.

The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Major Frederick E. Sisley, which had been inserted into the eastern portion of the Vietnam Salient in late October, by

*Brigadier General Hopkins remembered that the week before Christmas, bad weather restricted helicopter resupply and then the weather cleared a few days before the holiday. When resupply resumed, the battalion faced the dilemma of either receiving C-rations or "the Christmas packages stacked up in the rear awaiting delivery." The Marines decided upon the "Christmas packages." Hopkins quoted one of his troops, "if we don't get enough food in the Christmas packages, we can always find a few more rice caches." BGen Joseph E. Hopkins, Comments on draft, dtd 6Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

early November had moved around the horn and was patrolling in the northern portion of the area between the Da Krong and the Laotian border. Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine's 3d Battalion, located at Vandegrift Combat Base, secured the base and surrounding Marine installations at Ca Lu and Signal Hill. On 8 November, Company L assaulted into landing zones near Hill 512, 15 kilometers southeast of Vandegrift and began construction of Fire Support Base Tun Tavern. Upon completion of Tun Tavern several days later, the remaining three companies of Laine's battalion moved into the area and began patrol operations in the Da Krong Valley and the ridgeline to the east, between the Da Krong and Ba Long Valleys.

Despite the rugged, mountainous terrain and the physical problems it caused the individual Marine, the two battalions conducted a methodical search of their assigned areas, as Colonel Barrow later described:

Each battalion has four companies operating out of company operating bases, each separated from the other

by about 2 to 3,000 meters. A company will spend, characteristically, two, three, or four days in one of these operating bases and conduct extensive patrolling by platoon or squads in all directions. So that after three or four days the area extending in a radius of a couple of thousand meters out from the operating base has been covered. The operating base represents a place of resupply and for a patrol that has been out perhaps for two days to rest for a day, preparatory for renewing its patrolling activities.¹⁴

According to Barrow, when the companies had worked over one area completely, Marine helicopters would then helilift the battalion into a new adjoining or nearby sector. In leapfrog fashion, the aircraft would bring the two companies of the battalion that were the farthest away into the new area. In turn, the remaining two companies would be "leapfrogged over them." Barrow explained there was, therefore "a constant heli-borne move of companies to new areas, but no company passes overland, covering an area that has already been covered by another company." The methodical

Photocopy of Northern I Corps Briefing Map (Nov-Dec 1968) From Gen E. E. Anderson Collection



search produced large caches of rice and grain in addition to numerous bunkers and fighting positions which were destroyed. Operating in small groups, the enemy chose to avoid contact whenever possible, posing little or no threat to the maneuvering companies.¹⁵

On 14 November, Company A, 9th Marines was lifted by helicopter into Landing Zone Miami and assaulted, seized, and occupied Hill 618, beginning the construction of Fire Support Base Dick. Three days later, Company E took Hill 347, overlooking the horseshoe bend in the Da Krong and began construction of Fire Support Base Shiloh. With the completion of Shiloh, the remaining three companies of Major Sisley's battalion shifted their patrol operations west and south to the Laotian border, meeting little enemy resistance.

With a realignment of divisional boundaries between the 3d Marine and 101st Airborne Divisions in late October, the Marine division's area of operations was expanded southward presenting it an opportunity to conduct major offensive operations in and west of enemy *Base Area 101* and the Ba Long Valley.¹⁶ The first of a series of offensive operations, codenamed Dawson River, began on 28 November, as Colonel Barrow's regiment moved deeper into the new area; an area, he noted, "which had never been entered before by any forces, other than enemy, of course."¹⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion simultaneously relieved Major Sisley's 2d Battalion, which assumed the security for major Marine installations throughout the division's western area of operations.

Broken down into companies and platoons, Laine's and Smith's battalions thoroughly covered their assigned areas, finding numerous small caches of enemy equipment, supplies, and a large number of graves. Although they anticipated encounters with major elements of the *7th Front*, the only groups met in large numbers were Bru and other Montagnard tribesmen who voluntarily surrendered and subsequently were resettled to the east. In his assessment of the operation, which ended on 25 December, Colonel Barrow noted that while the number of enemy killed was low, the regiment provided a measure of security for the entire province:

We have kept him on the move, which combined with the activity that has taken place in the piedmont area to the east and the lowlands still further east, keeps him entirely on the move in this area so that he has no place that he can withdraw to as a sanctuary when pressure becomes too great in one, in say the piedmont or the lowlands. We have . . . given a measure of reassurance to the people operating in the lowlands and pied-

mont that there are no large-scale enemy forces marshalling in these mountains, in these jungles, preparatory to coming down to harass or interdict their operations being conducted in those areas.¹⁸

Following a short, two-day stay at the division's in-country rest and recreation center at Cua Viet, Lieutenant Colonel Smith's 1st Battalion and the 2d Battalion, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George C. Fox, prepared to assault landing zones north of Route 9 and begin search operations west of Khe Sanh to the Laotian border.¹⁹ Concerned about the possibility of a Tet offensive on the scale of 1968, Task Force Hotel and division staffs, as the year ended, began planning for a foray into the lower Da Krong Valley, north of the A Shau Valley, an area of increasing enemy activity and an area that had not been searched or explored since early April.

Thua Thien and the End of the Year

To the south of the 3d Marine Division, in Thua Thien Province, the 101st Airborne Division continued the division-level operation, Nevada Eagle. Targeted against local force units and the Viet Cong infrastructure in the lowlands, and main and North Vietnamese Army forces in the mountains, the operation's central objective was to maintain a favorable environment for the South Vietnamese Government's Accelerated Pacification Campaign in the heavily populated lowlands around Hue.

Working closely with local and Regional Force companies and elements of the 3d and 54th ARVN Regiments, the division again concentrated its efforts of elimination of Viet Cong forces from the districts of Phu Vang, Huong Thuy, and Phu Thu. Techniques such as cordons, intensive searches, saturation patrols, night ambushes, and the rapid exploitation of intelligence appeared to be successful in rooting out enemy forces and dissolving the existing lines of continuity within the local Viet Cong infrastructure.

In addition to uprooting the Viet Cong and his sympathizers in the populated lowlands, Major General Melvin Zais' airborne troops launched a series of mobile operations into the mountains southwest of Hue. Throughout the first, Nam Hoa I, Zais used combat assaults, flanking maneuvers, and massed firepower to trap and destroy elements of the *5th NVA Regiment*. During the second, Rawlins Valley, elements of the division employed similar techniques against the *6th NVA Regiment* with minimal results. However, both operations forced the enemy to withdraw deeper into the mountains thereby abandoning his forward

positions to allied destruction and at the same time losing the capacity to launch attacks into the lowlands in the immediate future.

Throughout the last seven months of 1968, Marine, Army, and ARVN troops continued the relentless and successful pursuit and destruction of enemy forces in northern I Corps. But as the year ended, the enemy avoided contact while maintaining widely dispersed elements of his main force units in the northern two provinces of South Vietnam and regrouping, resupplying, and retraining in his sanctuaries in Laos and North Vietnam.

For the 3d Marine Division, the tactical situation throughout Quang Tri Province during the latter half of 1968 dictated the maximum use of its combat elements in a highly mobile posture. This was a change from the relatively static posture during the early part of the year. Continually on the offensive with hard-hitting mobile operations, troops of the 3d, 4th, and 9th Marines in rapid succession drove

North Vietnamese forces from the coastal plains, crushed the *320th NVA Division*, and penetrated and systematically destroyed the enemy's mountain bases, areas once considered inviolate. Still as one Marine veteran of the 3d Marine Division later commented that all he remembered was "the rain, the mud, the heat and the misery that were so much a part of our existence." The last two months of the year were a blur of "routine patrols marked by little or no contact with the enemy."²⁰

In both Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, nevertheless, a concerted campaign featuring the integration of American, South Vietnamese Army, and territorial forces disrupted the Viet Cong military and political structure in the population centers. The two allied offensives against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong had, by year's end, rendered the enemy incapable of conducting an effective campaign in northern I Corps.

PART V
SUPPORTING THE TROOPS

CHAPTER 23

Marine Air at the Beginning of the Year and Air Support of Khe Sanh

*Marine Air at the Beginning of the Year—Marine Control of Air
Proposed Changes in Command and Control over Marine Air; Operation Niagara, January 1968
Operation Niagara and Air Resupply in the Defense of Khe Sanh*

Marine Air at the Beginning of the Year

In January 1968, like the other elements of III MAF, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing faced a daunting task. Supporting two reinforced Marine divisions as well as flying supplemental missions for the allied and U.S. ground forces in I Corps and the Seventh Air Force, the Marine aviators were stretched to the very limits of their capability in both aircraft and personnel. In addition to the difficult operational environment, doctrinal questions relative to control of both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters would arise that would further blur the entire picture of Marine aviation during 1968. Many of these problems would never be completely resolved, even after the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

As the year began, Major General Norman J. Anderson, a veteran naval aviator who served in the Guadalcanal campaign in World War II and in Korea in 1950, commanded the wing, having done so since June 1967. The 1st MAW now contained over 15,000 men and more than 400 aircraft. This latter figure included nearly 200 fixed-wing planes and more than 220 helicopters. The wing consisted of three Marine fixed-wing and two Marine helicopter aircraft groups plus supporting elements. The fixed-wing groups were at Da Nang and Chu Lai while the helicopter groups were based at Marble Mountain and Phu Bai. All told, in January, the Marine Corps had 10 out of its 27 attack or fighter/attack squadrons and 11 out of its 25 helicopter squadrons in Vietnam. This did not include the two attack and fighter/attack squadrons at Iwakuni, Japan, or the two helicopter squadrons of the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, which could readily reinforce the in-country squadrons.¹

At the overcrowded Da Nang base where Anderson maintained his headquarters, the wing shared space with Seventh Air Force components, the South Vietnamese Air Force, an Army aviation company, and III MAF ground forces. Marine Wing Headquarters Group



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A140843
MajGen Norman J. Anderson, here in an official portrait, commanded the 1st MAW in January 1968. Gen Anderson, a naval aviator, had commanded the wing since June 1967 and was a veteran of the Guadalcanal Campaign of 1942 and of Korea in 1950.

(MWHG) 1, Marine Wing Service Group (MWSG) 17, Marine Air Control Group (MACG) 18, and Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11 were all at Da Nang. MWHG-1, under Colonel Tolbert T. Gentry, furnished general command and control and administrative support for the wing while MWSG-17, commanded by Colonel John E. Hansen, provided logistics, facilities, and intermediate and organizational maintenance on all aircraft and other equipment. Colonel Lyle V. Tope's



Photo from the Abel Collection

A Marine Chance-Vought F-8 Crusader from VMF(AW)-235 takes off from Da Nang Airbase in January 1968. Its landing gears are beginning to retract into the wing.

MACG-18 had the responsibility for all air control and air defense support in the wing.*

Colonel Leroy T. Frey commanded MAG-11, the Marine fixed-wing group at Da Nang. Under MAG-11 were a headquarters and maintenance (H&MS) squadron, an airbase (MABS) squadron, and four fixed-wing squadrons. These included: Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1**;

* In January 1968, the group consisted of Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron (H&HS) 18, Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 2, Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 3, Marine Air Control Squadron (MACS) 4 and the 1st and 2d LAAM Battalions. Until the activation of MACG-18 the previous September these units had belonged to MWHG-1. MASS-3 and the 2d LAAM Battalion were both located at the Chu Lai base.

**The VMCJ squadron flew photo reconnaissance missions in both North and South Vietnam and also electronic jamming missions to foil North Vietnamese radars and communications in support of both the Seventh Fleet and Air Force Rolling Thunder campaign in the north. In January 1968, the squadron had assigned to it 20 aircraft. These included eight Douglas EF-10B, a modified version of the Navy F3D Skynight, a two-engine jet night-fighter. The EF-10B, nicknamed "Willie the Whale," flew both electronic countermeasure (ECM) and electronic intelligence missions. In addition to the "Whales," the squadron inventory included four EA-6A, the electronic countermeasures version of the Intruder, and eight RF-4B, the photo-reconnaissance version of the Phantom II. FMFPac, MarOpsV, Jan68, p. 58a. Colonel Eric B. Parker, who assumed command of the squadron in March, observed that the Marines were the "pioneers of stand-off electronic jamming." He remembered that his pilots "were proud of the effectiveness of our equipment and personnel . . . Our call sign was 'cottonpicker' and to identify yourself as a 'cottonpicker' in an AF [Air Force] or Navy club where deep-strike pilots were, would almost always result in free drinks. We were appreciated." Col Eric B. Parker, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 122 flying 13 McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantom IIs designed for both air superiority and ground support; Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron (VMF(AW)) 235, used in a close-air support role and equipped with 15 of the soon-to-be-phased-out F-8 Chance-Vought Crusader jet fighters; and a Marine all-weather attack squadron VMA(AW)-242 with the newest attack aircraft in the Marine inventory, 12 Grumman A-6A Intruders,*** equipped with the latest in electronic and radar navigational and target acquisition systems.2****

From the nearby Marble Mountain Air Facility, across

***The two-man, twin-jet Intruders which could carry an 18,000 pound payload were equipped with a digital-integrated attack navigation system and an electronic-integrated display system which provided the pilot at night and in bad weather images of targets and geographical features on two viewing screens in the cockpit.

****Attached to H&MS-11 was a three-plane detachment of TA-4Fs, two-seater trainer versions of the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk, used generally for forward air control missions. In Vietnam, both the Air Force and the Marine Corps employed forward air controllers (FAC) (airborne), who in a variety of aircraft like the TA-4F jets, UH-1E helicopters, and small light fixed-wing prop-driven aircraft controlled attack, fighter, and fighter/attack fixed-wing aircraft and armed helicopters in close air support missions. In addition, H&MS-11 owned one Douglas C-117D Skytrain fixed-wing transport (a military counterpart of the civilian DC-3) which the squadron employed for a multitude of purposes including night illumination. Three more of the relatively venerable transports belonged to MWSG-17 at Da Nang. All told, including the four C-117Ds, there were over 60 Marine fixed-wing aircraft based at Da Nang.

the Da Nang River and on the lower end of the Tienhsa Peninsula, MAG-16, a helicopter group, conducted its operations. Under the command of Colonel Edwin O. Reed, MAG-16 consisted of Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron (H&MS) 16; Marine Air Base Squadron (MABS) 16; an observation squadron, VMO-2; and three medium (HMM-262, -265, and -363) and one heavy (HMH-463) helicopter squadrons. VMO-2 had in its inventory 27 armed and unarmed Bell UH-1E (Hueys) single-engine light helicopters, used for a diverse number of missions including observation, forward air control (airborne), and ground support.* The 30 relatively new single-rotor Sikorsky CH-53A Sea Stallion heavy-lift helicopters in III MAF, each powered by two-shaft turbine engines and able to carry a payload of over six tons, were all in HMH-463. Two of the medium helicopter squadrons, HMM-262 and -265, flew the twin-turbine tandem rotor Boeing Vertol CH-46A Sea Knight aircraft that had replaced the older and smaller Sikorsky single rotor UH-34 Sea Horse. With the shortage of helicopters caused by the grounding and refitting of the CH-46s in 1967 because of rear pylon failures in flight, the third medium helicopter squadron, HMM-363, still retained the UH-34D.** In early January, HMMs -262 and -265 had 47 CH-46s between them while HMM-363 owned 24 of the UH-34s.³

In addition to the helicopters assigned to the flying

squadrons, Colonel Reed retained a detachment of 14 Cessna light single-engine fixed-wing O-1C and O-1G bird dog aircraft in H&MS-16 for both air control and observation purposes. Like H&MS-11 at the main base, H&MS-16 at Marble Mountain also possessed one Douglas C-117D Skytrain transport. MAG-16 also had operational control of the U.S. Army 245th Surveillance Aircraft Company, equipped with 18 OV-1 Mohawk aircraft designed for tactical aerial reconnaissance. For the most part, MAG-16 supported the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang but also flew missions on behalf of the 3d Marine Division, Korean Marine Brigade, and Army Americal Division. It also performed a myriad of tasks for the South Vietnamese military units and the related Revolutionary Development pacification campaign.⁴

About 50 miles to the south of Da Nang, at Chu Lai, two Marine Aircraft Groups, MAGs-12 and -13, flew out of the airfield located there. MAG-12, under Colonel Dean Wilker, consisted of three Douglas A4E Skyhawk attack squadrons, VMAs-121, -211, and -311, and one A-6A Intruder all-weather squadron, VMA (AW)-533. All told the group possessed 12 of the Intruders and nearly 60 of the Skyhawks. The maneuverable Skyhawk was a formidable close support aircraft. An extremely accurate bomber, the single-seat A-4 belied its relative small size and could carry a variety of ordnance and a payload of nearly 8,000 pounds. Three F-4B Phantom II squadrons, VMFAs -115, -314, and -323, with a total of 33 aircraft, constituted MAG-13. The versatile Phantom, capable of a speed nearly equal to the fastest interceptors, could also carry a payload of nearly 16,000 pounds, second only to the A-6A. Two C-117D transports, five Douglas TA-4Fs, and three Korean War-vintage Grumman two-seater, single-engine TF-9J fighter trainers rounded out the Marine aircraft inventory at Chu Lai.*

*The armed Hueys carried air-to-ground rocket packs and fuselage-mounted, electrically-fired machine guns and proved to be formidable close air support aircraft. The unarmed Hueys, nicknamed "slicks," were used for medical evacuation, reconnaissance, air control, and occasionally for insertion of reconnaissance teams. Later in the spring of 1968, there was a reduction of the number of Hueys in the VMO squadrons because of the introduction of the fixed-wing North American turbo-prop OV-10A Bronco into the Marine Corps inventory and to III MAF. See Chapter 25. Colonel Samuel J. Fulton, who assumed command of VMO-2 in May, remembered that his squadron then had only 14 Huey gunships and "the only 'slick' I recall is the one that was used for III MAF." Col Samuel J. Fulton, Comments on draft, n.d. [Nov94] (Vietnam Comment File).

**Designed to hold a four-man crew and 17 combat-loaded troops, the CH-46 carried approximately double the load of the UH-34 and with its cruising speed of 115 knots was approximately 25 knots faster than the older aircraft. For detailed discussion of the problems experienced with the CH-46 in 1967, see Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1967*, pp. 210-11 and LtCol William R. Fails, *Marines and Helicopters, 1962-1973* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1978), pp. 101-02 and 121-24. Major General Anderson, the wing commander, commented that he believed that there was "only one instance of catastrophic failure [of the CH-46], the weakness was identified and grounding ensued immediately." According to Anderson, it was "fuselage and pylon cracks . . . [in several aircraft that] gave rise to this essential refit program." MajGen Norman J. Anderson, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

*Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who commanded VMFA-115 until 16 January 1968, commented in 1994 that the Phantom was the "fastest interceptor in the American inventory and its speed has not been equaled by any American interceptor to this date." He observed that in addition to its fighter escort and close air support role, it also had an air defense role. His squadron maintained a strip alert against possible MIG incursions into South Vietnam and that on two occasions, General Carey stated, he personally chased MIG aircraft near the North Vietnamese city of Vinh until "told to abort by my GCI [Ground Control Intercept] controller." According to Carey, the "Phantom was the primary reason our ground forces were never attacked by North Vietnamese Air." General Carey wrote that the Douglas TA-4Fs and the Grumman TF-9Js "were constantly used as TAC(A) [Tactical Air controller (Airborne)] when a FAC [Forward Air Controller] was not available." He mentioned that "throughout the war they also provided a fast FAC capability for strikes north of the DMZ and recovery of downed air crews when the slow moving FAC(A) could not survive." LtGen Richard E. Carey, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Carey Comments.



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog light single-engine observation and air control aircraft from MAG-16 is seen in flight. The Bird Dog was in the Marine inventory from WW II and was to be phased out. Below, passengers are seen boarding a Marine Douglas C-117D Skytrain, a twin-engine transport aircraft. The C-117D was an improved version of the C-47, the military version of the DC-3.





Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A421997 and bottom photo is from the Abel Collection
Top, two Grumman A6A Intruders (only the wing tip can be seen of the second aircraft) from VMA(AW)-533 return to Chu Lai after a mission. Note that the bomb racks of the first aircraft are empty. Below, a fully loaded Douglas A-4A Skyhawk from VMA-211 is located at the Chu Lai airstrip. The small maneuverable Skyhawk could carry a variety of ordnance and a payload of nearly 8,000 pounds.





Photo from the Abel Collection

A Marine McDonnell Douglas F4B Phantom II from VMFA-323 lands at Chu Lai. The tail parachute slowed the speed of the aircraft and the arresting cable brought the Phantom to a complete stop.

Until October of 1967, Chu Lai had also been the home of the second Marine helicopter group, MAG-36. While supersonic Marine jets could cover the distance from Da Nang and Chu Lai to the DMZ in 18 and 27 minutes, respectively, it was quite another matter for the relatively plodding rotary aircraft. With the Americal Division having ample organic helicopter support, III MAF decided to upgrade and expand the small airfield at Phu Bai, build a new one near Quang Tri City out of range of the North Vietnamese artillery positions north of the Ben Hai, and move MAG-36 closer to the northern battlefront.⁶

By January 1968, with the focus of the war on the north, Colonel Frank E. Wilson, the MAG-36 commander, in addition to his H&S squadron, had six helicopter squadrons attached to his command. Four of them, HMMs-164, -362, and -364 and VMO-3, were with the group headquarters at Phu Bai. The remaining two squadrons, VMO-6 and HMM-163, were with the forward headquarters at the newly constructed Quang Tri Airfield, and joined on 10 January by HMM-262. Equipped with 23 UH-1Es each, both armed and "slick," VMOs-3 and -6 performed similar missions in their sectors as their sister squadron, VMO-2, at Marble Mountain. HMMs-163 and -362 were both UH-34 squadrons with 49 aircraft between them while the remaining squadrons flew the Boeing CH-46. HMM-164 had 19 of the older CH-46As while -364 had acquired 32 of the newer and improved D Models, which had fewer problems than the older craft. Finally, one C-117D and 18 UH-34s belonged to H&MS-36 for various logistic runs and other miscellaneous missions. While mainly supporting the 3d Marine Division along the DMZ and in

Thua Thien Province and eventually the 1st Marine Division's Task Force X-Ray, MAG-36, like MAG-16, had a variety of missions to accomplish and several masters to service.⁷

Besides the main airbases, the wing maintained forward airfields at Dong Ha, An Hoa, Tam Ky, and Khe Sanh, large enough to land Marine Lockheed Hercules KC-130 transports which required about 3,000 feet of runway. While Marine Refueler Transport Squadron (VMGR) 152 remained based at Okinawa, it always kept a small detachment or detachments of approximately four aircraft in Vietnam at all times. With a 15-17 ton capacity, the KC-130s flew resupply and reinforcements throughout the Western Pacific from bases in Vietnam, Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. They played a large role in the resupply of Dong Ha in the eastern DMZ and especially of the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh with the land lines of communication closed to that isolated base. Configured for in-flight refueling missions, the KC-130s were an important ingredient in the air war as they serviced attack and fighter aircraft in the skies over both North and South Vietnam.^{8*}

January 1968 proved to be an extremely busy month for the aviators of the 1st Wing. During the month, Marine attack and fighter aircraft flew 4,891

*Prior to the Vietnam War there had been some question whether the Marine Corps would be permitted to have the KC-130, the tanker configuration version of the C-130 Lockheed transport. Air Force officials claimed that the Hercules KC-130 was primarily a transport and should remain only in the Air Force. The Marines successfully argued that it was both and used it as such. See Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, 1982), p. 268.



Photo from Abel Collection

A Marine Lockheed KC-130 Hercules transport/refueler from VMGR-152 refuels two Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 at 10,000 feet over South Vietnam. VMGR-152, based on Okinawa, kept one detachment in Vietnam for both refuelling and transport missions.

combat sorties in South Vietnam, of which 1,174 were close air support missions. Of the remaining sorties, 3,651 were in direct support of ground forces, and 66 were helicopter support, armed reconnaissance, or air defense.* These aircraft dropped some 9,000 tons of bombs, which according to Marine statistics resulted in an estimated 400 dead. Marine fixed-wing aircraft also made 476 visual reconnaissance and 216 sensor reconnaissance flights in providing battlefield surveillance for ground commanders in South Vietnam.⁹

The record was about as impressive in the skies over North Vietnam and Laos. These numbers represented 1,434 combat and combat support sorties, 1,180 of which were strike sorties. The other "out of country" sorties included 226 reconnaissance sorties and 28 combat air patrols. Over North Vietnam, the Marine strike sorties, 739 out of 796, hit targets in Route Package 1, that area immediately north of the Ben Hai River. Marine participation in the bombing of the northernmost sector of North Vietnam, Route Package 4, required an especially integrated effort. The A-6As, EA-6As, F-4Bs, and the KC-130s had to meet precise

time schedules "with fully operational systems" to carry out a successful mission. The two Marine A-6A squadrons, VMA (AW)s-242 and 533, struck more than 1,000 targets, most of them moving, in 350 sorties, 34 of them in the northern route packages over North Vietnam. Marine aviators also flew over 380 strikes against the lines of communication in Laos. All told, the Marine airmen, exclusive of the transports and the helicopters, completed a total of more than 7,000 sorties over South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and Laos, the largest number since July 1967.¹⁰

The helicopter and transport pilots also could boast of similar achievements during January. Marine C-117s and KC-130s carried nearly 30,000 passengers and more than 6,600,000 pounds of cargo during the month. Not to be outdone, the CH-53s of HMH-364 hauled slightly over 19,000 passengers and over 7,500,000 pounds of food, arms, and equipment in January. For the month, Marine helicopters from both III MAF and the SLF of the Seventh Fleet flew 34,957 sorties, lifting nearly 60,000 troops and 6,617 tons of cargo.¹¹

These accomplishments had come at some cost to the Marine wing in both personnel and aircraft. Communist antiaircraft fire downed seven fixed-wing planes including three A4E Skyhawks, one F-4B Phantom II, one F-8 Crusader, one EF-10B Whale, and one A-6A Intruder. The enemy gunners also shot down six helicopters, three CH-46s, one UH-34, one CH-53, and one UH-1E. Enemy rocket and mortar

*Close air support missions were conducted in such close vicinity of the ground force that they required detailed coordination and integration with the ground supporting fires. While coordination with the supported ground force remained important in direct air support missions, these sorties were conducted at a sufficient distance that the integration with the supporting ground fires was less involved.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190806

A completely destroyed Grumman A-6A Intruder is the victim of a rocket and mortar bombardment on the Da Nang Airfield.

men also destroyed six F-4Bs and one A-6A in their shelling of the Da Nang and Chu Lai airfields. In addition, enemy machine gun fire caused some impairment to 328 Marine aircraft, 38 of them sustaining serious damage. Communist mortar and rocket attacks on the airfields also hit another 104 aircraft, 13 of which required extensive repairs.* Even more costly were the losses of trained Marine airmen—enlisted crewmen and Marine aviators—adding to the already existing shortage of aviation personnel.¹²

*The Communists rocketed Da Nang Air Base on 3 January and followed with rocket and mortar attacks at the Da Nang and Marble Mountain Airfields on 30 January, and hit the Marble Mountain facility once again on 31 January. They hit the new Quang Tri airstrip with both rockets and mortars on 24, 27, and 29 January. They also mortared and rocketed MAG-13 at Chu Lai on 31 January 1968. 1st MAF ComdC, Jan68, pp. 3-5—3-8. Colonel Robert Lewis, at the time the commander of VMCJ-1, photographed the Chu Lai Air Base from an RF-4B the day after the attack. He recalled that at Chu Lai, the rockets “hit the MAG-13 bomb dump. The ensuing explosion severely damaged two squadron hangars and absolutely flattened the VMA [AW]-533 hangar.” Col Robert W. Lewis, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Dean Wilker, who commanded MAG-12 at Chu Lai, remembered the attack somewhat differently. According to Wilker, the rockets hit “the Navy bomb dump”—rather than the one belonging to MAG-13—located between the shoreline and the MAG-12 hangars. He stated that “bombs exploded and left a huge hole in the sand dune area. The blast caved in one of my hangars and damaged the others.” Col Dean Wilker, Comments on draft, dtd 18Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

The coming months would bring even more problems. For the entire III MAF staff and particularly for General Anderson, it would be a frustrating experience. It would be a period of conflicting responsibilities, in which Marine Corps doctrine relative to the mission and employment of fixed-wing air in support of ground forces would be called into question.

Marine Control of Air

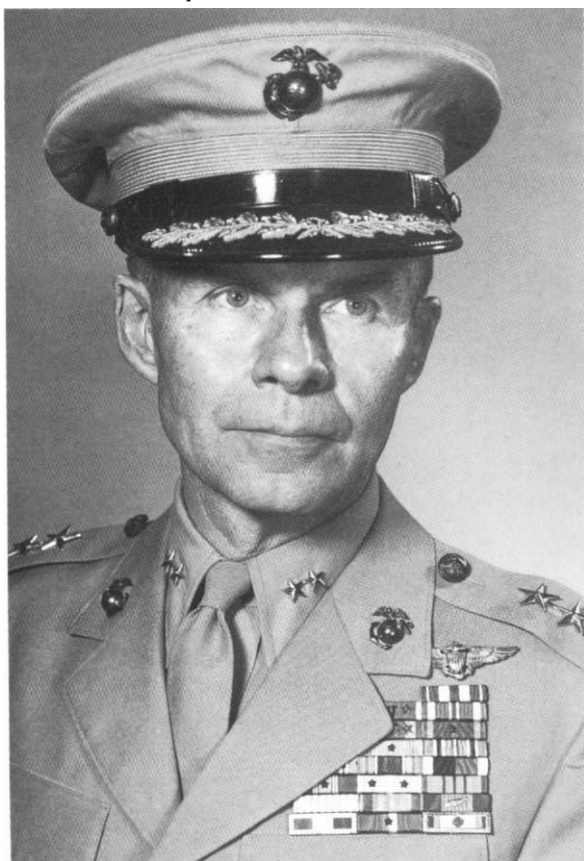
By the end of the month, the siege of Khe Sanh, the insertion of the 1st Air Cavalry into northern I Corps, and the launching of the Communist Tet offensive would bring several Marine aviation issues to a head. Especially sensitive was the issue of control of Marine fixed-wing air in Vietnam. According to Marine Corps doctrine, the purpose of Marine air was to provide close and direct air support to the Marine infantry division on the ground. The Marine Corps had worked out, as noted by Major General Anderson, “detailed and effective procedures,” particularly for amphibious operations, but applicable to extended ground operations, which closely integrated Marine aviation and infantry units into “air-ground task forces.”¹³ As Marine Major General Keith B. McCutcheon, serving in 1968 as Deputy Chief of Staff (Aviation) [DCS (Air)] at Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps and one of the major architects of Marine aviation doctrine, later emphatically

wrote, the Marine Corps “jealously guards the integrity of its air-ground team.”¹⁴

From the very beginning of the Marine Corps involvement in Vietnam, Marine officers sought to avoid any repetition of the Korean War experience where for the last two years of that conflict the Marine ground force “worked for the 8th Army and the [Marine] air forces worked for the Fifth Air Force.” In 1963, then Marine Brigadier General McCutcheon, Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, CinCPac, headed a 12-man board with representatives from the Pacific Command staff and from all of the CinCPac Service component commands to “examine the full spectrum of tactical air support” in the theater and to come up with recommendations for its organization under a joint command. Without going into all of the ramifications, the “McCutcheon Board” proposed

MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon, Marine Deputy Chief of Staff (Air) in 1968, was a former commander of the 1st MAF. Gen McCutcheon was a pioneer Marine aviator who played a large role in the development of Marine close air support doctrine as well as in Marine employment of the helicopter.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A413010



that a joint force commander under CinCPac should appoint a Service commander (in most instances the Air Force component commander) to be the “coordinating authority for tactical air operations.” This distinction was important since under the then existing joint definitions, “coordinating authority” permitted a commander “to require consultation between the agencies involved, but does not have authority to compel agreement.”¹⁵

Although Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp and his predecessor failed to approve the “McCutcheon report,” the CinCPac commander used the “coordinating authority” solution as the basis for command of aviation resources in Vietnam. In fact, when in March 1965, General Westmoreland informed CinCPac that he planned to place Marine fixed-wing units under the overall operational control of his Air Force component commander, at that time the Commanding General, 2d Air Division, Admiral Sharp overruled him. In no uncertain terms, in a message probably drafted by General McCutcheon, Sharp told Westmoreland that he would exercise operational control of Marine aviation through III MAF and that authority could not be “delegated to the 2d Air Division.”¹⁶

The resulting MACV Air Directive 95-4 on air support issued in July 1965 provided the 2d Air Division commander “coordinating authority,” but retained operational control of all Marine air in III MAF. At the same time, however, the Marines were to notify the 2d Air Division on a daily basis of the number of aircraft in excess of III MAF needs and make them available as needed. While modified slightly in 1966, this basic directive remained in effect into 1968. As a member of the 1st MAF staff, Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Carey later observed that the Marines “were very careful to ensure we provided daily reports of the number of aircraft in excess of III MAF needs,” but that by January 1968, “there were seldom excess sorties or aircraft available.”¹⁷

Lieutenant General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, pointedly stated a few months earlier that the Marines had the air-ground team in Vietnam that they had wanted in Korea. According to Krulak, this was, “no accident. We have CinCPac to thank for putting his foot down and saying ‘No . . .’ We have to thank him, plus the stubborn persuasion on him by a few Marines.” Furthermore, the FMFPac commander correctly observed that notwithstanding all the talk about the Marine air-ground relationship the Vietnam arrangement provided the Marine Corps for

one of the first times in combat, the air-ground team "in its classic sense."¹⁸

Despite the operational control retained by III MAF and the 1st MAW of its fixed-wing assets, the Marines recognized the primacy of the Seventh Air Force commander as the MACV air coordinator. The air directive permitted ComUSMACV in the event of emergency to direct the Commander of the Seventh Air Force to assume operational control of Marine aircraft. Moreover, in August 1965 in an agreement between General McCutcheon, who commanded the 1st MAW from May 1965 through May 1966, and General Joseph H. Moore, the commander of the 2d Air Division, which later became the Seventh Air Force, the Marines acknowledged that the Air Force command had overall responsibility for air defense in the unlikely event of a North Vietnamese air attack.¹⁹

In accordance with this agreement, the Marines designated a certain number of aircraft for air defense purposes. The Air Force, through its control and reporting center (CRC)* in I Corps, codenamed Panama, located on Monkey Mountain on Tienhsa Peninsula, had the authority to alert or scramble and assign air defense targets to these Marine fighters. Moreover, the CRC determined when and if the 1st and 2d Light Antiaircraft Missile (LAAM) Battalions "were free to engage a target presumed to be hostile" with its HAWK** surface-to-air guided missiles. Part of MACG-18, the two battalions, each with a basic load of 108 missiles, were responsible for ground antiair defense at Da Nang and Chu Lai. In January 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Marshall J. Treado, the commander of the 1st LAAM Battalion at Da Nang, had one battery near the Hai Van Pass, another on Monkey Mountain, and the third west of the

airbase near the 1st Marine Division headquarters. The 2d LAAM Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Stanley A. Herman, disposed its batteries in similar fashion around Chu Lai to provide adequate protection. Lieutenant Colonel David S. Twining, who later commanded Marine Air Control Squadron (MACS) 4, credited the LAAM Battalions with "permitting the allocation of virtually all of the Marine fighter/attack resources to the attack role." He noted that by 1968, only two "Air Force F-4 aircraft maintained on strip alert for launch against unidentified inbounds were the only additional routine air defense measures required"^{20***}

Outside of the specific air defense measures directed by the Seventh Air Force, the heart of the Marine air command and control system was the 1st MAW tactical air direction center (TADC).**** A component of MACG-18, the TADC oversaw the use of all Marine aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary, and determined the requisite number for specific missions. The TADC consisted of two subordinate agencies, the tactical air operations center (TAOC), responsible for air defense, air surveillance, and air control, and the direct air support centers (DASCs) which maintained control of close and direct air support missions.²¹

The wing TAOC, manned by Marines from MACS-4, had the latest in technology to carry out its duties. When the squadron arrived in June 1967, it brought with it a "modern semi-automated, computer-oriented TAOC" to replace the older manual procedures. MACS-4 emplaced the TAOC on Monkey Mountain near the HAWK firing positions there and the Air Force "Panama" CRC. The squadron required ample space for its sundry radars and antennae. It took four huts to house the Tactical Data

*The Panama CRC was an element of the U.S. Air Force tactical air control system from which the Air Force directed radar control and warning operations within its sector. It was subordinate to the Seventh Air Force Tactical Air Control Center in Saigon which controlled all Air Force tactical air operations and air-warning functions in South Vietnam. The TACC in Saigon "did not have authority over operations in the northern route packages of North Vietnam; Air Force operations there were controlled by the Seventh Air Force Command Center. Until Mar 1968, the Seventh Air Force Command Center also controlled operations in Route Package One." Dr. Wayne Thompson, USAF Historical Office, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**The acronym HAWK stands for Homing-All-the-Way-Killer. The HAWK air defense is a mobile, surface-to-air guided missile system designed to defend against enemy low-flying aircraft and short-range rocket missiles.

***While there was discussion of rotating the 2d LAAM Battalion out of Vietnam, the Tet offensive and the Khe Sanh crisis resulted in the battalion remaining at Chu Lai. Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, even proposed to move the battalion from Chu Lai to Quang Tri because of a postulated increased air threat. Anderson argued, "we all recognize that it is vital to intercept enemy aircraft as far from the troops installation as possible." BGen E. E. Anderson ltrs to MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon, dtd 19Feb and 14Mar68, Encl to Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Later in the year, the possibility of the enemy air threat had diminished again and the 2d LAAM Battalion departed Vietnam on 12 October 1968. See also Chapter 21.

****Although the Marine Corps normally designated its senior air command and control organization the Tactical Air Control Center, it used the usually subordinate term, TADC, in Vietnam to avoid confusion with the Seventh Air Force TACC in Saigon.

Communications Central (TDCC) and another 16 huts for the TAOC proper. Part of the recently developed Marine Tactical Data System (MTDS), compatible with the Navy's Airborne Tactical Data System (ATDS), the new TAOC permitted the Marine controllers to monitor about 250 airborne aircraft at one time, both friendly and hostile, and to handle about 25 air intercepts at the same instance.^{22*}

The new Marine system had a larger capacity and more sophisticated air control capability than the Air Force Panama station. More importantly, the Marines could electronically exchange air defense and air control data instantly with the ships of the Seventh Fleet operating both in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. For the time being, however, the only way that the Air Force CRC could communicate with either the fleet or the Marine TAOC was by voice relay.** Brigadier General Earl E. "Double E" Anderson, a Marine aviator who had previously worked on the DCS (Air) staff at HQMC and was now the III MAF chief of staff, wrote to General McCutcheon in Washington that the "Air Force colonel who now commands Panama finally swallowed his pride." According to Anderson, the Air Force commander had "asked MACS-4 if they would permit him to send Air Force controllers to work with the TAOC." The Marines agreed and "they have Air Force controllers working on the MTDS

equipment and passing plots by phone to the Panama site."^{23***}

The several DASCs made up the second component of the 1st Wing's Tactical Air Direction Center. Personnel from the two Marine air support squadrons, MASS-2 and -3, manned the five DASCs, usually collocated with the Marine fire support coordinating center (FSCC) of the supported unit. MASS-3 ran the DASC with the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang, a mini-DASC with the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh established there in mid-January, and the one at Chu Lai. The two remaining DASCs, manned by MASS-2, were both in early January with the 3d Marine Division, one at the division's main CP at Phu Bai and the other at the division's forward headquarters at Dong Ha. When the 3d Division turned its CP at Phu Bai over to the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray in mid-month, the Phu Bai DASC remained behind and provided the same service to the new command.²⁴

Supplementing the DASCs, the two MASS squadrons also maintained five air support radar

* Lieutenant Colonel William A. Cohn observed that "when the MTDS replaced the manual system, approximately 1700 a month missions were being handled . . . in a few months the MTDS system was handling over 17,000 missions a month." He declared this was a "quantum leap" and contrasted it with the Air Force system at Panama, "where all aircraft were put on punch cards and then introduced into the system, while MTDS acquired aircraft automatically as soon as they were airborne." LtCol William A. Cohn, Comments on draft, dtd 13Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cohn Comments.

** Colonel David S. Twining, a commander of MACS-4 in 1968, recalled that "the TAOC/TDCC had the capability to similarly exchange digital target information with HAWK Missile Battalions and also with adjacent Air Force control agencies. As early as 1965 the JCS had agreed on joint technical standards for such information exchange. The Marine Corps and Air Force implemented these standards in both the MTDS and Air Force 407-L development programs but the Air Force equipment at the site 'Panama' CRC was the older Back-Up Intercept Computer (BUIC-2) which had only the Air Force unique SAGE/BUIC data link. Using the Marine Corps TDCC equipped with mission-specific modems a special data link translator was devised which eventually succeeded in automating the link between the two centers. Col David S. Twining, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Twining Comments.

*** General Anderson had more than a passing interest in the MTDS equipment. He recalled that as a colonel in 1963, he was told that "the MTDS program (which was the largest R&D Program the Marine Corps had ever undertaken) was in serious trouble and despite the Commandant's reluctance the Marine Corps decided to take the Program Manager route. Despite my protestations, I was assigned that billet and while physically located within DC/S Air, I reported directly to the Chief of Staff." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who after his stint as a squadron commander served on the 1st MAF staff, recalled that he "had numerous conversations with Panama in which they sang the praises of our MTDS capability." Carey Comments. Both Lieutenant Colonel Cohn who commanded MACS-4 until April 1968, and his successor, Colonel Twining, commented on their relations with the Air Force commander of the "Panama" station. Lieutenant Colonel Cohn wrote, "the Air Force colonel commanding Panama brought his VIP visitors to see 'his' Marine air control system in action. At this time MTDS was handling Army, Navy, and Air Force aircraft to such locations as Udorn, Piraz, and many other bases. This in addition to the normal day-to-day operations with 1st Wing AC." Cohn Comments. Colonel Twining observed that he had excellent working relations with local Air Force commanders at Da Nang, but contrasted this with the "political agenda" of the Seventh Air Force headquarters in Saigon. He cited as an example where he had worked out a particular working agreement with the Panama commander in which MACS-4 would control returning certain Air Force flights in bad weather when the Air Force equipment "was not up to the task." According to Twining the new procedures worked well until the Panama Commander "made the mistake of relating this to Saigon, whereupon he was summarily relieved and was not even allowed to return for his personal gear. His successor made one call on me upon his arrival and told me that he was under orders to break off all cooperative air control procedures and that he was furthermore prohibited from further meetings with his Marine counterparts." Twining Comments.

teams (ASRT) which used the TPQ-10 radar system to control air strikes in poor and marginal weather. Like the DASCs, each team was usually collocated with the supported unit. At the beginning of 1968, there were two ASRTs at Dong Ha with the 3d Division, one at Phu Bai, one with the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang, and one at Chu Lai, which later in the month moved to Khe Sanh and was operational there on 23 January. From these locations, with the 50-mile range of the TPQ-10 radar, the operators could cover most of I Corps. The Marine A-4s, A-6s, and F-4Bs all came equipped with beacons that the TPQ-10 could track for the entire 50 miles.^{25*}

In January, the MASS-2 DASCs controlled nearly 5,000 missions, about 3,000 fixed-wing and 2,000 helicopter. MASS-3 directed only slightly fewer, about 3,000 missions equally divided between helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The ASRTs belonging to the two squadrons ran about 3,400 radar-controlled missions between them.²⁶

The Marine close and direct air support system called for an intimate relationship between the air and ground commands. With each Marine infantry battalion usually having its own forward air control (FAC) or air liaison party (ALP) attached to it, consisting usually of a Marine aviator and radio operators and equipment so as to be able to communicate with both aircraft and the DASC, ground commanders had their own aviation advisor on their staff. Although the ground FACs had the capability to control both fixed-wing and helicopter airstrikes, usually airborne controllers handled most of these missions because of limitations caused by terrain features and the elusiveness of the enemy. The ground FAC, nevertheless, contributed important assistance to the ground commander. He provided the infantry the ability to talk to the air and perhaps more important was able to advise the

infantry commander just what type of air support and ordnance to use.^{27**}

Fixed-wing direct and close air support was of two kinds, preplanned and immediate. In the preplanned strikes, the infantry battalion commanders, usually with their air liaison officer, determined the day preceding the mission what targets he wanted to hit. The battalion then sent the list through channels to division headquarters where the collocated DASC and FSCC consolidated the air requests. The division then forwarded the complete package to III MAF which in turn relayed the information to the wing TADC. At the TADC, the wing prepared the preliminary or fragmentary order for the next day. In this order, usually called the "frag,"^{28***} the TADC designated the number of missions, time on target, and the type of ordnance. The "frag" then went out to the various aircraft groups to carry out and to the Marine DASCs to control. Despite the complexity of the system, the process allowed for flexibility. Ground commanders could still call for modifications in the preplanned missions until 2000 of the night before. Normally, a battalion commander could expect the air strike within 20 hours of the initial request.^{29****}

Marine fixed-wing immediate support was even more responsive. In the event of need, battalion commanders could send in their request at any time. If necessary, the TADC or DASCs, in an emergency, could divert aircraft from preplanned missions and brief the pilots in mid-flight to the new targets. Lieutenant Colonel Twining, a commander of MACS-4, later

**Ground units used VHF radio nets while aircraft employed UHF radios. All FACs, both airborne and on the ground, could employ either system. Otherwise, the air could not talk to the ground.

***Among both aviators and ground officers this process was called "fragging," not to be confused with the slang term later identified with the attempted killing or injuring of officers and senior non-commissioned officers by throwing fragmentation grenades at them.

****Colonel Joel E. Bonner, the 1st MAW G-3, related that in Vietnam, the wing modified somewhat the formal procedure described above: "... due to improved communications both encrypted and unencrypted most of the required info[rmation] was in the hands of the G-3 action officers long before the formal info arrived. Much of this info came from the Divisions Air Officer and the Ops officers running specific operations. Also, at Da Nang the Wing G-3 and the TADC... were collocated in the same building and the G-3 produced the frag order." Bonner noted that the TADC worked for the G-3 as its control center: "The TADC was the instrument that was used not only to carry out those control functions dictated by the Frag Order, but also by the Commanding General to redirect Tactical Air for higher priority missions and emergencies as the tides of battle changed." Col Joel E. Bonner, Comments on draft, dtd 25Oct92 and 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bonner Comments.

*Colonel Twining provided the following description of TPQ-10 operations: "The TPQ-10 computer compared the aircraft radar track with the operator-entered target location, taking into account bomb ballistics and winds. The indicated aircraft track corrections and bomb release signal was relayed by the operator to the pilot. For the A-4 aircraft this information was designed to be sent automatically by data link to the aircraft autopilot but equipment problems on both ends of the link resulted in the almost exclusive use of the voice relay. The TPQ-10 operator and aircraft pilots became so skillful that all-weather bomb miss distances were typically less than 50 meters. The chief problem with TPQ-10 operations was the occasional entry of gross errors in target location resulting in 'bad drops' which in a number of instances caused casualties to friendly forces and civilians." Twining Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422857

Marines of the 1st LAAM (Light Antiaircraft Missile) Battalion talk on the radio next to their HAWK surface-to-air guided missiles at the missile site overlooking the Da Nang Airbase from the west.

observed that, "moreover, there were generally sufficient preplanned missions canceled after launch to provide a 'divert pool' from which aircraft could be assigned to immediate requests."²⁸ The TADC could also launch strikes from any of the three "hot pads." Each of the fixed-wing groups usually kept four aircraft on strip alert. Completely fueled and armed with an assortment of ordnance, these planes usually would be airborne under 10 minutes from receipt of the initial request. Other aircraft would immediately take their place on the hot pad. In the event of an intense combat situation, the wing would prebrief pilots and then send them aloft in aircraft on airborne alert. If circumstances dictated the wing could also call upon the Seventh Air Force and even Seventh Fleet fixed-wing attack aircraft for assistance.²⁹

For the most part, Marine air flew about 80 percent of its missions in support of the two Marine divisions. The wing gave the remaining 20 percent to the Seventh Air Force. Up to this point, Marine air normally did not support Army units except upon request of the Seventh Air Force. The Korean Marines, however, came directly to the wing which in part was the reason

for maintaining the Marine DASC at Chu Lai. Major General Norman Anderson remembered several years later that the Army's Task Force Oregon, later to become the Americal Division, when it arrived in I Corps in 1967, "provided their own communications into the TADC of the 1st MAF at Da Nang."* The Army division could then lodge requests for preplanned and emergency close air support with the Marines. Mostly, however, the "Americal relied . . . on the Seventh Air Force for preplanned support," although the Marine wing made supplementary sorties available. Anderson, nevertheless, insisted that the arrangement required that the supported unit provide "its own communications into the Marine system . . .

* Army General William B. Rosson, who commanded Task Force Oregon in the Spring of 1967, remembered that he was supported by both the Seventh Air Force and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing then and, "the support was timely and effective overall. Admittedly, the Task Force required duplicate Air Force and Marine liaison and control party assets, but this did not pose a difficult problem for III MAF. (We had deployed with normal Air Force liaison and control party elements; Marine elements joined us from Chu Lai.)" Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb96 (Vietnam Comment File).

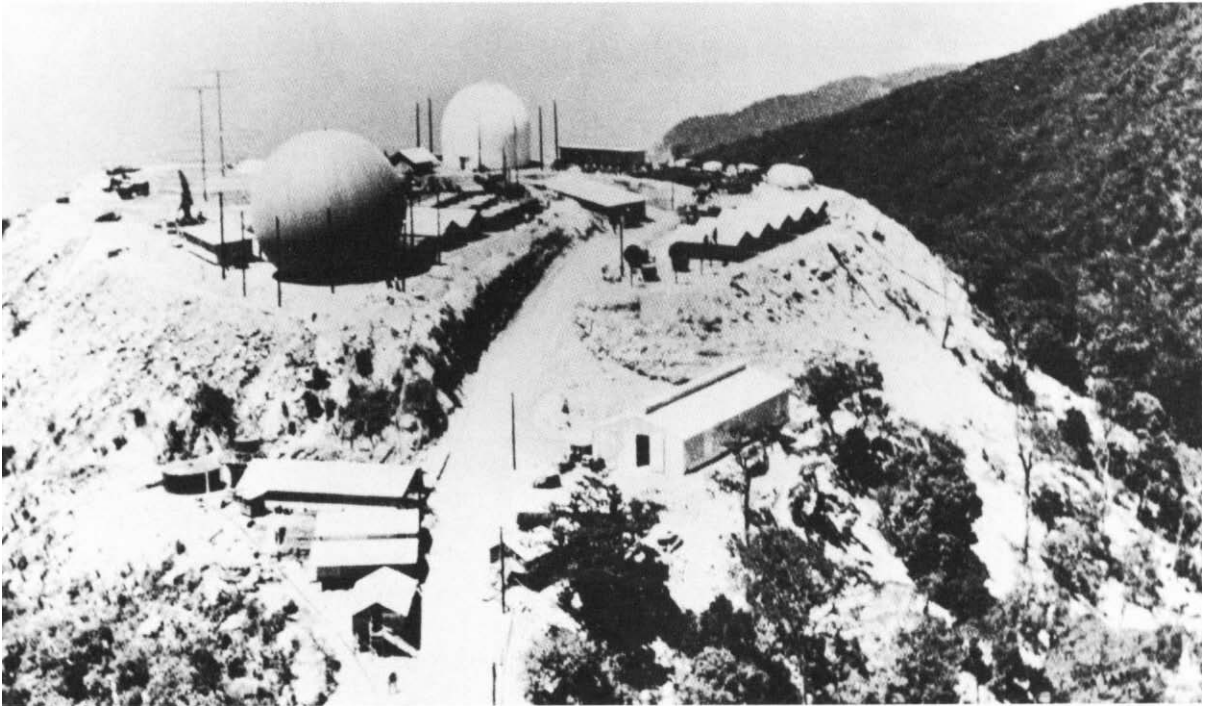


Photo courtesy of LtCol William A. Cohn, USMC (Ret)

The Marine Tactical Air Operations Center (TAOC), located on Monkey Mountain on the Tiensha Peninsula east of Da Nang, was equipped with the latest in computer technology. The TAOC, run by Marine Air Control Squadron (MACS) 4, required ample space for its sundry radars and antennae.

it being manifestly impossible for a Marine Air Wing to possess equipment and personnel to net with all possible supported units." By January 1968, with the situation at Khe Sanh drawing more attention and the planned deployment of more Army units north, General Westmoreland worried not only about whether Marine air could continue to operate independently, but whether he had to alter the entire fabric of command relations in I Corps.³⁰

Proposed Changes in Command and Control over Marine Air; Operation Niagara, January 1968

Early in 1968, General Westmoreland planned to launch an air offensive in northwestern I Corps to protect the Marine base at Khe Sanh and to counter the North Vietnamese Army buildup there. Based on the previous late summer-early fall air effort, Operation Neutralize in support of Con Thien, the MACV air commander decided upon what he called another SLAM (seek, locate, annihilate, and monitor) campaign. Conceived in an imagery "of cascading bombs and shells," Westmoreland labeled the new endeavor Operation Niagara. According to the concept, U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command's eight-engine Boeing

B-52 Stratofortresses would fly massive carpetbombing "Arclight" missions in support of Khe Sanh from their bases in Guam and Thailand. In coordination, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy tactical aircraft would make precision air strikes against identifiable enemy forward positions. Marine and Army artillery from both firing positions at Khe Sanh and Camp Carroll in the DMZ sector would supplement the air bombardment. The idea was to surround the Marine base with both a "steel curtain" and a "ring of fire" to keep the North Vietnamese out.^{31*}

On 5 January, General Westmoreland implemented the first phase of Operation Niagara, which was primarily an intelligence gathering effort employing air and ground reconnaissance resources. This included the use of sensors** and the monitoring of enemy communications. At the same time, the MACV comman-

*For discussion of the Khe Sanh campaign from January through June 1968, see Chapters 4, 14, and 16.

**Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who as a Navy lieutenant was attached to the 26th Marines as the assistant target intelligence officer, wrote that "air dropped sensors were a primary source of targeting data for us." Capt Bernard D. Cole, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 27Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cole Comments.



Photo courtesy of Office of Air Force History

A USAF Boeing B-52 Stratofortress drops its bombs during an Arclight mission over Vietnam. Gen Westmoreland proposed during Operation Niagara to drop a cascade of bombs and shells on the NVA force around Khe Sanh.

der ordered his staff to come up with a plan for the second phase of the operation. Most importantly, Westmoreland placed his deputy for Air, Air Force General William W. "Spike" Momyer in charge.

General Momyer made no secret about his unhappiness with the air arrangements in Vietnam, especially with Marine aviation. As his nickname implied, Momyer, who had replaced General Moore as Commanding General, Seventh Air Force in the summer of 1967, was a strong, opinionated commander who argued his case forcefully. He bluntly shared his views even with Marine generals. Momyer told both Major General Louis B. Robertshaw, the previous commander of the 1st MAF, and Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the director of the MACV combat operations center, that he wanted operational control of Marine air and "didn't think we should have two air forces supporting the battle in South Vietnam." While Marine commanders held up the Korean War aviation arrangement as the one precedent to avoid at all costs, Momyer frankly declared that it was his objective "to

get the air responsibilities straightened out as we had them in Korea . . ." He believed that the Marine system of air control failed to make priorities and, in effect, wasted valuable air assets in attempting to meet all of the needs of the ground commanders.^{32*}

With the impetus now on Operation Niagara, Momyer used the opportunity to try to alter the air relationships at Khe Sanh. He convinced General

*General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., who was Marine Corps Commandant from 1964 through 1967, recalled that during one visit to Vietnam he had an "extremely angry exchange [with General Momyer] which culminated in 'Spike' and his staff following us to the curb on our departure! Verbal fists flying!" Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 11Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). According to a still unpublished Air Force history, General Momyer was selected as commander of the Seventh Air Force because of "his convictions about the best way to employ fighter aircraft . . . No Army commander was apt to get the best of an argument with Momyer over air power." Wayne Thompson, "The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, From Rolling Thunder to Line Backer, The Air War over North Vietnam, 1966-1973," ms, Center of Air Force History, Chapter 1, pp. 21-22.

Westmoreland that changes had to be made. From a Marine Corps perspective, General Chaisson, who was very close to General Westmoreland, later related that the MACV commander “was weak as hell on his comprehension of tactical air support on a day-to-day basis. That’s why I think he got hooked on that one.” During these discussions, interestingly enough, General Chaisson was on home leave in Maine and did not return to Vietnam until later in the month. Also both Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Major General Norman Anderson, the Marine wing commander, at this point, were unaware of the implications of the Niagara plan.³³

While obviously influenced by General Momyer, General Westmoreland also had his own agenda.* The MACV commander already had other concerns with the Marine Corps command. Moreover, Westmoreland did not always acquiesce to Seventh Air Force desires. He had resisted previous attempts by the Air Force to have a larger representation on the MACV staff. Indeed, he kept most strike targeting authority for both B-52s and Air Force tactical air in the Army-dominated Tactical Air Support Element (TASE) of his own staff rather than delegating that function to the Seventh Air Force. Even General Chaisson admitted that Momyer and Westmoreland had a relationship based on mutual respect and trust and that the Air Force general was “a very competent component commander.”³⁴

For whatever his motivation, on 18 January, General Westmoreland proposed to Admiral Sharp that because of the “impending major battle,” that he planned to give operational control of the 1st MAF aircraft “less the helicopters” to General Momyer, his deputy for air. He wanted “rapid decision making” and the ability to concentrate all air, which he did not believe existed under the present system. Westmoreland stated that he was considering the move a “temporary measure,” but made no mention of the emergency provision available to him under his own air directive 95-4. In fact, the MACV commander sev-

eral years later stated that he was unaware that he had that authority: “I didn’t worry about things like that. I had a deputy [Momyer] and he never told me anything like this.”³⁵

At this point, Admiral Sharp denied Westmoreland’s request. In a return message on the same day, he asked the MACV commander to consider all the ramifications including the probable inter-Service wrangle that would result in a change of the existing order. Before making a final decision, the CinCPac commander stated that he wanted to review the recommendations and viewpoints of both Generals Momyer and Cushman on the matter.³⁶

After the shelling of the Khe Sanh base on 21 January and believing that the long-awaited battle may have started, Westmoreland decided against pursuing the subject of control over Marine air any further. Instead, he immediately implemented the second phase of the Niagara operation. In a message to Admiral Sharp explaining his actions and future plans, he stated that it had never been his “intention to in any way interfere with the close air sup-

Gen William W. Momyer, USAF, seen here as a lieutenant general, was commander of the Seventh Air Force and the MACV deputy for air. Momyer was a strong advocate of the Air Force position relative to controlling aviation assets in Vietnam.

Photo courtesy of Office of Air Force History



* Army historian Graham A. Cosmas observed that “this is a valid and necessary point.” According to Cosmas, “the Marine command throughout the single management fight tended to view Westmoreland as little more than a ‘useful idiot’ for Momyer, whom they identified as their principal antagonist. This may have cost the Marines politically, since they failed to address the problem ComUSMACV thought he saw and instead concentrated on a hard-line doctrinal argument against the Air Force. This in turn exasperated Westmoreland, who became as a result more susceptible to Momyer’s arguments.” Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft, 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

port so essential to the Marines." Westmoreland radioed, however, that he still required the "authority to delegate to my deputy commander for air, the control that I deem appropriate." He declared that in Niagara II, he had charged Momyer, "with the overall responsibility for air operations for the execution of the plan." While the Seventh Air Force would coordinate and direct the employment of tactical air in Niagara II, General Westmoreland carefully added that the Marine wing would make only available those sorties not required for the "direct air support" of Marine units. The MACV commander observed that the Seventh Air Force commander and the Marine command would work out the details for the coordination of their effort. Interestingly, both III MAF and the Seventh Air Force received a copy of this message which was not the case of the earlier communications between Westmoreland and Sharp.³⁷

III MAF and the Seventh Air Force quickly resolved the particulars between the two relative to Niagara II. Major General Norman Anderson, the 1st MAW commander, visited the Seventh Air Force headquarters at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon to complete the coordination between the two. During his stay at Saigon, General Anderson inspected the Seventh Air Force intelligence control center for the operation, which eventually produced some 300 targets during a given week. According to Anderson, the intelligence center was designating targets, but was not sure whether they were being hit. The 1st Wing commander and Momyer agreed "to exchange attack information on a 24-hour basis." About midnight, the Seventh Air Force would inform III MAF of the number of targets struck, their coordinates, and any available battle damage assessment (BDA). III MAF in turn would turn over its target data and BDA to the Air Force.^{38*}

For the Khe Sanh sector, the Seventh Air Force established an airborne command and control center (ABCCC), an electronically equipped Lockheed C-130E transport. From its orbit over eastern Laos, the ABCCC controlled all aircraft in Niagara II, except Marine close air support fixed-wing

planes and helicopters.** At Khe Sanh, on 22 January, the 1st MAW moved a mini-DASC from Chu Lai to Khe Sanh, backed by a Marine airborne DASC in a KC-130.*** The Marine wing and the Seventh Air Force divided the air space over the Marine base into six concurrent zones. In the three closest to the base, aircraft reported into the Khe Sanh FSCC and DASC, which, of course, were collocated. The 1st Wing and 3d Marine Division Dong Ha DASC and FSCC controlled the easternmost zone. The Air Force ABCCC had complete authority over the two remaining zones.³⁹

Although somewhat formalized, the aviation arrangements at Khe Sanh were at best ad hoc and sometimes confusing. As General Norman Anderson described it, at first, all sorties within the range of the Marine air support radar teams would be "directed by our forward air controllers" and would be a 1st Wing responsibility. With the beginning of the B-52 sorties, however, "this became a jumbled arrangement as well" and air control became a matter of "expediency" rather than "doctrine." Air Force controllers complained that Marine aircraft over Khe Sanh too often ignored the Seventh Air Force ABCCC. From an Air Force viewpoint, this duo-air-control relationship "perpetuated the existence of two air forces operating in a compressed area." General Momyer believed that the Niagara compromise placed "too much emphasis on geographical considerations." He believed that Marine air was fighting its "own private war at Khe Sanh" rather than fitting into the overall air campaign. As Air Force historian Bernard C. Nalty later

**Colonel Bonner, the 1st MAW G-3, commented that the lack of airbases in I Corps limited General Momyer in his ability "due to time, distance, and weather to place a 'Hallmark USAF stamp' on Air Support in I Corps. Therefore the C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center was invented for Khe Sanh and Niagara with B-52s was the Momyer way of getting the Air Force involved." Bonner Comments. General Carey, who at the time as a lieutenant colonel, worked for Colonel Bonner, recalled that "feedback from the Seventh Air Force ABCCC was non-existent. On the other hand our communications with the Khe Sanh and Dong Ha DASC were excellent and as a result the TADC had a good picture of our sectors." Carey Comments.

***Colonel Twining recalled that there was some thought to moving one of the two TPQ-10 ASRTs at Dong Ha to an area west of Camp Carroll, probably at Ca Lu, to support Khe Sanh. The NVA interdiction of Route 9 in that sector prevented the move. According to Twining the "most logical solution was an ASRT located at Khe Sanh itself, along with elements of a DASC. Accordingly, General Anderson moved one of the TPQ-10's and a mini-DASC from MASS-3 assets at Chu Lai to Khe Sanh . . . To provide interim control of air support operations while the Khe Sanh DASC was being moved into position and set up, MASS-2 provided an airborne DASC in a KC-130 which orbited Khe Sanh at 20,000 ft, out of range of the NVA antiaircraft guns." Twining Comments.

* According to General Carey, who at the time served on the 1st MAW staff, "the concept of intelligence center targeting proved to be ineffective principally because of its lack of timeliness. Targets for the most part were fleeting targets and required quick response. BDA for the most part was unrealistic. We looked upon the system as 'Big Thinking' strategic targeting but not very practical from a tactical standpoint." Carey Comments.

wrote: "Momyer thought in terms of using a limited number of aircraft to attack an increasing number of targets over a wide area; the Marines focused on providing the swiftest and deadliest support for the man with the rifle."^{40*}

In contrast to Momyer, Marine Generals McCutcheon and Norman Anderson were relatively satisfied with the arrangements for Niagara II. While still uneasy about MACV and Seventh Air Force motivations, they believed that for the most part the questions about air control had been put to bed. On 23 January, in Washington, General McCutcheon informally wrote to Anderson, the wing commander, that Headquarters Marine Corps was "watching with great interest the OpCon command relationship game and the flurry of message traffic between the powers-to-be." McCutcheon acknowledged, however, that the Niagara implementing order was "simply a restatement of existing procedures." In reply, about two weeks later, the wing commander assured General McCutcheon that III MAF relations with the Seventh Air Force "have again normalized." According to Anderson, "the heat is temporarily off in doctrinal matters . . . We both can live and perform our jobs while respecting the others' doctrinal position. For the time being, it appears that Spike Momyer is willing to do this."⁴¹

*In 1996, Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Donaghy, who as a captain in 1968 was the 26th Marines regimental air officer, remembered that sometime in late February an "Air Force Jolly Green [helicopter] arrived at Khe Sanh unannounced. . . . Into the Regimental Command Bunker walked Gen Momyer complete with utilities, flak jacket, and helmet." After a briefing, the Air Force general asked to speak to the "senior Marine aviator on the regimental staff," which of course was Donaghy. According to Lieutenant Colonel Donaghy, "General Momyer gave me the impression that he wanted to help us get the job done at Khe Sanh, but only on his terms." General Momyer stated that "he could send us more air than I could control with the ground and air-borne FACs I had available." Donaghy replied that the Air Force aircraft "were carrying the wrong ordnance and were dropping too high. They always carried 'slick' bombs and were dropping so high that they rarely hit the point targets we so often were after (bunkers)." The Marine officer continued that what he needed were "snake and nape." ["Snake" pertained to 250- and 500-pound bombs configured with a special tail called "snake-eyes," while "nape" referred to napalm]. In Donaghy's account, General Momyer "smiled and told me to get the high drag ordnance from the Marines. His pilots would continue to do as they had over the past months because he didn't want to lose planes 'down in the weeds.'" Donaghy stated that after Momyer left, he strived to obtain Air Force aircraft and eventually worked out a system "where we would use the Air Force planes with their low drag ordnance for Marine TPQs on targets well away from friendlies, with FACs that had 'area targets', or pass them . . . for use in Laos where the NVA big guns were always shooting at us from Co Roc. The Marine air we used in close because of their ordnance loads and their release altitudes—they could see who they were going after." LtCol Richard E. Donaghy ltr to Jack Shulimson, n.d. [Jul96] and 4Oct96 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Donaghy Comments.

Operation Niagara and Air Resupply in the Defense of Khe Sanh

While the issue of command and control over air operations still simmered below the surface, the allies unleashed their air offensive in Operation Niagara. From 22 January through the end of March, American airpower in a massive onslaught bombarded the North Vietnamese forces surrounding the Marine base at Khe Sanh with over 95,000 tons of ordnance.** Within the first week, Marine and Air Force fighter bombers flew about 3,000 sorties and the B-52 stratofortresses over 200. On 7 February, General Anderson, the 1st Wing commander, observed that "some fantastic amounts of ordnance are delivered daily, hopefully with a beneficial effect."⁴²

A key element of the Niagara air offensive was the B-52 Arclight strikes. During the period 22 January–31 March, the stratofortresses, each plane able to hold 27 tons of ordnance, released nearly 60,000 tons of high explosive upon the enemy. To enhance the concussion effects, the big bombers carried mixed bombloads of 250-, 500-, and 750-pound bombs. Beginning at the end of February, employing van-mounted Combat Skyspot radar MSQ-77, Air Force ground radar operators directed some of the Arclight missions as close as 1,000 meters to the Marine lines. Thinking that they had a 3,000 meter comfort range, the North Vietnamese had stored some of their ammunition within those limits. The results were some spectacular explosions. Marine defenders at Khe Sanh came out of their bunkers to watch, calling the display of pyrotechnics from the sky, "Number One on the hit parade."^{43***}

**The exact tonnage dropped varies from the figure of 95,430 mentioned by MACV in its history to 103,500 tons listed by FMFPac. Air Force historians Bernard Nalty and John Schlight use the figures 98,000 and 100,000 tons, respectively. MACV ComdHist, 1968, I, p. 423; FMFPac, MarOpsV, Mar68, p. 3; Nalty "Operation Niagara, Air Power, and the Siege of Khe Sanh," p. 39; Schlight, *Years of the Offensive, 1965–68*, p. 285.

***Colonel Bonner, the 1st MAW G-3, observed that the safety zone for the Arclight strikes were three kilometers, and "undoubtedly there were some missions conducted closer than three kilometers but probably not many." According to Bonner, the Air Force briefers told the wing staff that "the Arclight targets would be made by map grid coordinates rather than geographical features and the target would always be one kilometer square. Their rationale was the dispersion of a full load of 250, 500, and 750 pound bombs would safely land in the one kilometer square, ie. Carpet bombing." Bonner Comments. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who at the rank of lieutenant served as the assistant target intelligence officer with the 26th Marines, remembered that the B-52 strikes "were devastating, but their very effectiveness precluded accurate body counts: many enemy were undoubtedly buried by the detonations; there were also interesting POW accounts about the deafening and psychological effects of the strikes . . ." Cole Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191632

The Marine Air Traffic Control Unit (MATCU) 62 detachment area at Khe Sanh displays its radar equipment. Notice the fire truck in the revetment in the foreground.

While the 26th Marines FSCC at Khe Sanh provided the targeting data for 90 percent of the B-52 missions, General Westmoreland personally approved each of the Arclight strikes and occasionally diverted missions from his headquarters at Tan Son Nhut. The 26th Marines sent their requests for the massive air raids with specific targets to the 3d Marine Division air officer about 15 hours prior to the scheduled drop time. Up to three hours prior to the strike, the 26th Marines target intelligence officer could request an alternate target. After that time, no changes were permitted in the targeting process.⁴⁴

The MACV timetable for the Arclights called for eight strikes every 24 hours. Later, the Strategic Air Command pared the response time of the big bombers even further, sending out three-plane cells every three hours from Guam and Thailand and eventually from Okinawa. Every 90 minutes, a Combat Skyspot unit would pick up the bombers and direct them to a particular target block or alternate target. To avoid predictable patterns and to keep the enemy off balance, the B-52 cells would vary their intervals over their targets from an hour to 90 minutes, or even two hours. In the last week of February, the Air Force changed the number and intervals of aircraft once more, dispatching six B-52s every three hours instead of three aircraft every 90 minutes.⁴⁵

While allied intelligence attempted to assess the effectiveness of this heavy intensive bombardment, several factors impeded the collection effort. More than half of the B-52 strikes occurred at night and heavy cloud cover during the day often frustrated aerial photographic coverage. According to an Air Force historian, the aerial photographic experts could only interpret "accurately" about seven percent of the total of Southeast Asia Arclight missions. From the available sources, Air Force BDA officers concluded that for the period 15 January through 31 March, the stratofortresses destroyed over 270 defensive positions including bunkers and trenches and another 17 weapon positions. The raids damaged nearly 70 more of the enemy bunkers and trenches and another eight weapons. B-52 crewmen claimed "1,382 secondary explosions and 108 secondary fires."⁴⁶

Any estimate of the number of enemy casualties as a result of the B-52 bombardment around Khe Sanh would only be a guess. Still, enough impressionistic evidence exists that the bombing created havoc with enemy morale and at the same time lifted that of the Marine defenders at Khe Sanh. In March 1968, a North Vietnamese noncommissioned officer from the 9th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, near Khe Sanh, entered in his diary: "Here the war is fiercer than in all

other places. . . . All of us stay in underground trenches We are in the sixtieth day and B-52s continue to pour bombs . . . this is an area where it rains bombs and cartridges. Vegetation and animals, even those who live in deep caves or underground, have been destroyed." Another enemy diarist wrote, "the heavy bombing of the jets and B-52 explosions are so strong that our lungs hurt." Marine Captain William H. Dabney, the company commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on the isolated outpost on Hill 881 South, observed that "B-52s make excellent CAS [close air support] birds." He then exclaimed: "Not much for bombing trails and base areas, but God! Give them a target and get them to it quickly and scratch one target."⁴⁷

Despite the dramatic aspects of the Arclights, the 26th Marines relied heavily on the close air support missions flown by the tactical fighter-bomber aircraft, especially those controlled by Air Support Radar Team Bravo (ASRT-B) from MASS-3. For much of the period of Niagara, especially through February, the atmospheric conditions called by the French, *crachin*, consisting of low-lying clouds, morning fog, and intermittent rain showers, dominated the weather over Khe Sanh. With the resulting overcast skies and reduced visibility, the pilots flew a greater percentage of radar-controlled strikes. On 18 February, in a record-setting 24-hour period, Marine and Air Force aircraft, all under Marine ground radar control, dropped over 480 tons of ordnance on 105 separate targets. An indication of the confidence that both ground and air commanders had in the accuracy of the radar, TPQ strikes as close as 500 meters to friendly lines were routine. An Air Force liaison officer believed that the Marine radar operators

could safely bring a bombing mission in as close as 50 meters while a Marine member of the Khe Sanh FSCC stated in an emergency, "he would have no qualms about calling in an ASRT-B . . . TPQ within 35 meters of his position." During Niagara, ASRT-B controlled nearly 5,000 missions.* All told, excluding the B-52 raids, Marine, Navy, and Air Force pilots exceeded 22,000 fixed-wing strikes in support of Khe Sanh, with the Marines flying more than 7,000 of those missions and dropping over 17,000 tons of high explosives upon the enemy.⁴⁸

In their bombing campaign around Khe Sanh, the Marines experimented with several techniques. Two of the most unique were the "Mini" and "Micro" Arclights, which were used for area bombing and required close coordination with ground supporting fire. Devised by Captain Kent O. W. Steen, the 26th Marines assistant fire support coordinator, and Captain Mirza M. Baig, the regimental target intelligence officer, the concept behind the Mini Arclight was to act upon fast breaking intelligence when B-52 strikes were not available.** When the regiment received indications that North Vietnamese units were moving into a specific area, the Khe Sanh FSCC would plot a 500-by 1,000-meter zone in the center of the suspected enemy sector. The regiment then asked for Marine fixed-wing aircraft on station to conduct a TPQ mission and at the same time alerted artillery batteries at Khe Sanh, Camp Carroll and the Rockpile for fire missions. With the bombing runs, usually flown by two A-6 Intruders, carrying 28 500-pound bombs, and artillery batteries firing mixed caliber ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 175mm guns, the FSCC and ASRT computed the data so that the initial shells and

*Marine TPQ ground controllers at Khe Sanh could handle as many as four aircraft on "the same pass as long as the pilots flew in a tight formation and radar did not break lock." The Khe Sanh FSCC generally used a rough rule of thumb relative to the weight of the ordnance and distance from friendly lines to determine targets for TPQ missions. Normally 500-pound bombs, because of their large fragmentation pattern, would not be dropped within 500 meters of friendly troops while 250-pound ordnance would not be dropped within 250 meters of Marine lines. Shore, *Battle for Khe Sanh*, p. 104. Lieutenant Colonel Donaghy, who served in 1968 as the 26th Marines regimental air officer, commented: "I cannot imagine what would have happened at Khe Sanh had we not had ASRT-B. They were always 'up', always 'on target and always innovative." He recalled that the Khe Sanh defenders wanted to use napalm against the ever expanding NVA trenches at night, which would have "had to be done under flares and were extremely difficult in mountainous terrain . . . We asked ASRT-B if they could control napalm drops using TPQ radar. At first they said no, because that weapon was not in their ballistic tables, but after some thought said they'd give it a try. We scheduled several flights of A-4

aircraft carrying napalm to arrive at Khe Sanh during daylight. We flew them at several thousand feet over a safe target area and let the ASRT-B folks develop their own ballistics for a napalm canister. They got accurate enough that we later did it at night against the trench lines." Donaghy Comments.

**Colonel Steen commented that the Marine "culture" of fire support planning and coordination integrated with the infantry they support "played a large role in the defense of the base. He wrote that the "integration of the ASRT (ground support radar team) and Marine Corps fire support coordination apparatus was a brilliant but overlooked accomplishment which saved our bacon many times during low visibility . . . when other close air support couldn't be used." Col Kent O. W. Steen, Comments on draft, dtd 14Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Navy Captain Cole who was Captain Baig's assistant related that the mini Arclights involved "several aircraft . . . [usually A-6As] timed for a simultaneous time on target with an artillery barrage (everything from 105s to 175s) . . ." He stated the concept "was thought up by Harry Baig (as was the idea of flooding the NVA trenches with napalm; he was a real wild man)." Cole Comments.

bombs hit the target at the same time. Obviously the calculations of trajectory and flight information had to be carefully dovetailed to have the desired effect and yet avoid shooting down an aircraft. The "Micro Arclight" was a smaller version of the Mini Arclight using smaller targets and lighter ordnance.⁴⁹

Even with the Arclights, the TPQ missions, and the Mini and Micro Arclights, a basic ingredient of Marine air at Khe Sanh remained the visual close air support missions.* Despite the *crachin*, the breaks in the weather permitted the Marines to provide their traditional support of the Marine ground forces. Upon arrival in the sector, the fixed-wing aircraft would report into the Khe Sanh DASC who in turn would assign the pilots to a Marine or Air Force airborne controller. These controllers were from the Air Force 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron or from Marine H&MS-36 and VMO-6. At least five pilots flying either Cessna O1E "Bird dogs" or Huey "Slicks" remained overhead during the day in radio communication with both the ground and air. Once in visual and radio contact with the attack aircraft, the controller would make a "marking run" where he fired either a smoke rocket or dropped a colored smoke grenade upon the target. Given the correct headings by the airborne controller and possibly after a few "dummy" passes, the jets would then strike the enemy positions. In the meantime, the controller would be in contact with the ground and make any necessary adjustments in his instructions to the attack pilots. Once the attack aircraft released their ordnance, the air controller made an assessment of the strike and radioed the results to the fixed-wing pilots. A typical transmission would be:

Your BDA follows: 5 KBA [killed by air]; 2 bunkers, 1 automatic weapons, and 50 meters of trench-line destroyed; one secondary explosion. You have been flying support of the 26th Marines; your controller has been SOUTHERN OSCAR. Good shooting and good afternoon, gentlemen.⁵⁰

Air support involved more than dropping bombs. With Route 9 cut, Khe Sanh depended upon air-delivered supplies for its survival. Even with its 3,900-foot airstrip, this was not always a simple task. The first challenge faced by an aircrew inbound to Khe Sanh was to find the combat base. In addition to

the *crachin* which for much of the morning made navigation difficult, the Khe Sanh airstrip was located hard by a "fog factory," which complicated the task even further. Just off the east end of the runway, the ground dropped away sharply into a gorge over 1,100 feet deep. The wind channelled warm, moist air from the coast into the gorge, producing the right conditions for thick, heavy banks of fog which spilled onto the plateau to obscure the combat base and the surrounding area. Before the siege began, the structures at Khe Sanh showed up vividly on aircraft radar, allowing pilots to "see" through the fog. But soon, heavy shelling forced the Marines further underground and leveled many bunkers and revetments, resulting in poor radar return. A detachment from Marine Air Traffic Control Unit-62, MAG-36, operated a ground control approach (GCA) radar from the airstrip to guide aircraft, but enemy fire knocked it out on 19 February. As an expedient, the ground air controllers pressed into service the ASRT TPQ-10 radar, normally used to control bombing, to direct landings, with some success.^{51**}

If the weather was clear, as occasionally happened, or if a pilot had the skill or luck to find the airstrip despite the fog, he and his crew next had to brave North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire. The enemy cleverly concealed heavy machine guns and some 37mm antiaircraft guns along the approaches to the runway and invariably engaged aircraft on landing and take-off. Even when the supply planes approached the field in dense fog under radar control, the NVA gunners fired away, "in the dark," so to speak, presumably firing at the sound of the engines. For an aircraft loaded with several tons of fuel or ammunition, a single hit could be disastrous.^{52***}

**Lieutenant General Carey then on the wing staff commented that ASRT at Khe Sanh "proved to be invaluable in a multitude of roles. We utilized it in conjunction with aerial delivery on the tin foil strip, for supplementary positioning and control of A-6 . . . strikes which we conducted when the Arclights were not available, and we used them for Special Close Air Support on the hill positions surrounding Khe Sanh." Carey Comments.

***Colonel Twining observed that "one of the problems with the Khe Sanh defense was that the terrain overlooking the airfield was close enough for the NVA to cover the base with direct fire but too far to include within the Marine perimeter. The covering artillery was emplaced in caves with narrow embrasures, making it almost invulnerable to counter-battery or air strikes. According to a defector, the guns were aimed with an awkward but ingenious system of mirrors, moved by lines and pulleys. Once completed, it was possible to fire on aircraft that were in the process of landing or taking off, as well as those stationary and unloading." Twining Comments.

*While the TPQ missions in many instances could be classified close support, Marine close air support usually refers to missions where the pilots under the direction of an airborne or ground controller visually obtain and attack the target.



Photo from David Douglas Collection

An enemy mortar shell impacts below a just-landed Marine Lockheed KC-130 Hercules transport at the Khe Sanh airstrip. One of the Marine crew members can be seen on the ground under the wing.

The necessary sequence of landing, offloading cargo and replacements, loading wounded and evacuees, then taking off again created a precarious time for all concerned. When an aircraft touched down, the enemy immediately fired on the runway with a variety of weapons ranging from small arms to rockets, often damaging the aircraft or causing casualties among the exposed personnel gathered to service or board it. Every moment spent on the ground was fraught with hazard. Pilots soon developed the technique of "speed offloading" for cargo, in which the plane continued to taxi after landing and the cargo was simply rolled out the back. This reduced offloading time from the 10 minutes required with a forklift to less than 30 seconds. Fairchild C-123K Providers, equipped with auxiliary jet engines, could land, offload, take on passengers, turn around and lift off again in as little as one minute. Of course, when leaving the combat base, the planes were once again exposed to enemy antiaircraft guns.⁵³

The workhorses of the fixed-wing air delivery effort were the Lockheed C-130 (or KC-130) Hercules, the Fairchild C-123 Provider, and the C-7 Buffalo, with cargo capacities of 15 tons, 5 tons, and 3 tons, respectively.* VMGR-152 provided the KC-130s while the Air Force flew all three types of transports into Khe

Sanh. While the C-130 had the obvious advantage of greater carrying capacity, the smaller aircraft could land on shorter spaces of open runway, spend less time on the ground, and present a smaller target on the ground as well as in the air.⁵⁴

Prior to 10 February, seven C-130s were hit and damaged on resupply missions to Khe Sanh. On the 10th, North Vietnamese heavy machine gun fire struck a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing KC-130, with a crew of six and five passengers, piloted by Chief Warrant Officer 3 Henry Wildfang and Major Robert E. White on the approach to the combat base. The plane was carrying flamethrowers and bulk fuel in bladders. According to Wildfang, the enemy fire "set the #3 engine ablaze, punctured the fuel cells in the cargo compartment, and ignited the fuel." He recalled that "two explosions rocked the . . . [aircraft] in-flight, with a third occurring at touchdown." Oily black smoke and flames entered the cockpit area and "limited visibility to near zero." Wildfang and White had contacted the base "to keep the approach area and landing zone clear of operating helicopters, and to alert the base fire equipment personnel." They were able to maneuver the aircraft clear of the runway upon landing so that the airstrip could remain in use. He and White escaped the aircraft through their respective "cockpit swing windows" although White had difficulty in extricating his foot, caught in the window. Warrant Officer Wildfang opened the crew door, but "a wall of fire and dense smoke" forced him back. At that point, the crash crews arrived and rescued another three men, two of whom

*The C-7, sometimes also called the "Caribou," is a turbo-engine version of the C-2. All the Marine Lockheed Hercules transports were configured as refuelers and were thus designated KC-130s rather than C-130s.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

An Air Force Fairchild C-123K Provider transport brings in supplies for the Marines at Khe Sanh. This version of the Provider was equipped with auxiliary jet engines and could land, unload, and take off in less than one minute.

later died of their wounds. All told, of the 11 persons on board the aircraft, 8 perished.⁵⁵

The following day, a North Vietnamese 122mm rocket exploded 15 feet from an Air Force C-130 which was offloading troops, killing one and wounding four. Fragments damaged the tail section and the aircraft could not fly until repaired. On 12 February, enemy gunners once again hit the transport, which finally departed the next day, sporting 242 new holes. At this point, General Momyer, the Seventh Air Force commander, ordered the cessation of Air Force C-130 flights into Khe Sanh. Ten days later, General Cushman followed suit, issuing the same prohibition for Marine Corps KC-130s.⁵⁶

The supply needs of the garrison were too great to be satisfied without the heavy lift capability of the C-130s. On the average, the defenders of Khe Sanh consumed or expended 125.6 tons of supplies per day, compared to Marine Corps planning figures for a force of that size which estimated a consumption of 131.4 tons per day. Initially, however, the need to replenish stocks consumed or destroyed, as

in the explosion of ASP No. 1, drove the daily requirement up to 235 tons. The combination of weather and hostile fire prevented the smaller aircraft from flying a sufficient number of daily sorties to fulfill this requirement.⁵⁷

To maintain the flow of supplies without landing C-130s, logisticians switched to other methods of employing these aircraft. The most familiar was the simple parachute drop, known officially as the Container Delivery System. The Marines established a drop zone to the west of the combat base, near the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. C-130s parachuted bundles of supplies into this zone to be recovered by the Marines of Company A, 3d Shore Party Battalion, assisted by working parties from other units and trucks from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. The system was largely successful, but occasionally equipment suffered damage through improper packing or heavy bundles crashed into the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines perimeter, destroying bunkers. Some drops drifted into enemy territory, or could not be recovered from the drop zone because of enemy fire.

In these cases friendly artillery fire or air strikes destroyed the supplies to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy.^{58*}

The Americans introduced two more exotic methods in the air resupply of Khe Sanh. These were the Ground Proximity Extraction System (GPES) and the Low Altitude Parachute Extraction System (LAPES), techniques tested by the Air Force just prior to the Vietnam War, but not in general use. With the GPES, loadmasters positioned palletized cargo on rollers inside the aircraft with a hook attached to the pallet in such a manner that it would hang down like the tailhook of a carrier plane. To drop his cargo, the pilot made a low pass over the drop zone trailing the hook and engaged an arresting cable, much like a plane making a carrier landing. The cargo slid out of the back hatch of the aircraft and onto the ground. GPES only had limited use at Khe Sanh, not for any fault with the system, but rather because of faulty installation of the arresting gear. The enemy took the Marines who attempted to install the arresting apparatus under mortar fire forcing them repeatedly to leave their work and take cover. As a result, they failed to anchor it properly. In the first attempt, the Air Force C-130 ripped the arresting cable out of the ground. After the Marines repaired the cable, other efforts were more successful. In one instance, the system extracted from a C-130 a pallet containing 30 dozen eggs, "without a single eggshell being cracked." Another source allowed that two of the eggs were broken.⁵⁹

LAPES missions, on the other hand, were more numerous, 52 deliveries as compared to 15 GPES, if not more uneventful. For a LAPES delivery, the loadmasters prepared the cargo in much the same manner as for GPES, except that, instead of attaching a hook to the pallet, they attached a parachute. The pilot flew over the runway at an altitude of five feet and fired a small explosive charge which cut a restraining cable and allowed the parachute to

deploy out of the rear cargo hatch. The parachute pulled the palletized cargo out of the aircraft to drop the few feet to the ground. LAPES was extremely accurate, with some crews able to place their cargo within a 25-meter square. One LAPES delivery malfunctioned, however, sending a nine-ton pallet careening a quarter of a mile off the runway at high speed, crashing into a messhall and killing a Marine. LAPES also caused some damage to the runway, the result of repeated pounding by nine-ton loads moving at over 100 knots, slamming down from five feet and skidding along the strip.⁶⁰

Near the end of February, the Air Force resumed C-130 landings at Khe Sanh. A few days later, on 1 March, North Vietnamese fire hit and destroyed a C-123 attempting to take off, causing General Momyer to end the experiment and forbid C-130 landings once again. Enemy gunners continued to take a toll, however. On 5 March, they hit a C-123 caught on the ground while changing a flat tire, wrecking the transport completely. Only a day later, 49 died when another C-123 fell to antiaircraft fire while approaching Khe Sanh to land.⁶⁰

Despite the many problems and risks encountered, both the Air Force and Marine transport aircraft kept the base supplied when they were the only means available to do so. The Air Force aircraft delivered over 12,000 tons of supplies to the garrison, with two thirds of that amount arriving by parachute, LAPES, or GPES. From the period 5 January through 10 April 1968, Marine fixed-wing transports, mostly KC-130s from VMGR-152, hauled 1,904 tons into Khe Sanh and carried 832 passengers.⁶¹

While fixed-wing aircraft largely provided for the needs of the units located within the Khe Sanh base itself, the Marines on the isolated hill posts depended upon Marine helicopters for everything from ammunition to water. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing mounted a monumental helicopter effort using aircraft from both helicopter groups, MAGs-16 and -36. This massive helicopter lift also resulted in new techniques involving close coordination between

*Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, recalled that the drop zone was a "'no-man's land' from the valley floor west of Khe Sanh and north/northwest of . . . [the combat base]." He assigned Company C the recovery mission, supported by Company A. He recalled that the Marines were frequently subjected to sniper fire and an occasional ambush. The North Vietnamese often competed in attempts to recover the supplies, but the Marines seldom lost. Mitchell believed his Marines recovered about 95 percent of the material dropped in their zone. Occasionally the dropped material landed in nearby minefields, which required extreme caution and his men took some casualties as a result. Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Rex O. Dillow, who served as the G-4 or logistics officer for III MAF, described LAPES as an "experimental U.S. Air Force system, which was used effectively until all the equipment was torn up. Although not as efficient as air landed resupply, it was much more efficient than airdrop due to less dispersion. However, it required a large smooth surface; the aircraft came in at such a low altitude that they had the landing gear down in case of an inadvertent touch down. This limited its use." Col Rex O. Dillow, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Both photos are from the David Douglas Duncan Collection

Top, Marines on the ground stand back and watch as the KC-130 piloted by CWO-3 Henry Wildfang and Maj Robert E. White burns on the Khe Sanh runway after enemy fire set ablaze the cargo of flame throwers and bulk fuel. A member of the ground rescue team can be seen at the tip of the wing. Below, a rescue team chief stands exhausted looking at the foam-covered wreckage of the aircraft. Eight of the 11 persons on board the aircraft died in the crash and resulting fire.



Marine fixed-wing and rotary aircraft as well as with supporting artillery fire.*

Helicopter flights to the hills were at least as dangerous as the C-130 runs to the combat base. The helicopters were exposed to small arms fire from hundreds of North Vietnamese positions in proximity to the Marines' lines as well as to mortar fire while in the landing zone or hovering above it. The enemy quickly learned that the Marines ignited smoke grenades to mark their landing zones when helicopters were inbound. As a result, mortar fire almost always greeted the resupply aircraft and harassed the Marines detailed to recover the supplies from the landing zone. Weather also was a factor. Using visual approach and landing techniques, helicopters were subject to the vagaries of the fog and of low-lying clouds which sometimes dipped down to enshroud the peaks of the higher hills, even when the combat base remained clear.**

The Marines on the outposts attempted to alleviate somewhat the problems for the aviators of resupplying the hills. On Hill 881 South, Captain William H. Dabney always tried to obtain needed fire support from external sources, rather than from the mortars and howitzers on his own hill. In this manner, he conserved his ammunition, thereby reducing the number of resupply helicopters. To confuse NVA mortar crews, Dabney would set off numerous smoke grenades of different colors when expecting helicopters, then he would tell the pilot by radio which color smoke marked the correct landing zone.⁶²

The Marine helicopters brought supplies to the hill positions directly from Dong Ha, rather than from the combat base at Khe Sanh, itself. This

reduced the number of times cargo handlers had to package and stage the supplies, as well as the amount of time the aircraft had to remain airborne in the hazardous environment around Khe Sanh. This system was not without problems of its own. One battalion commander complained that priority requests required up to five days for delivery, while routine resupply took 10 days. Further, carefully assembled loads, packaged to fulfill specific requests, sometimes arrived at the wrong position.⁶³

By mid-February, with the enemy shooting down on a single day three helicopters attempting to reach the Khe Sanh hill outposts, Marine commanders realized that they had to take steps to remedy the situation. According to Major General Norman Anderson, Lieutenant Colonel William J. White, the commander of VMO-6, came to him and stated that the wing needed to work up a plan to keep the outposts resupplied. Anderson agreed and had White sit down with his operations staff to iron out the details. On 23 February, with the assistance of the assistant wing commander, Brigadier General Robert P. Keller, the small planning group, within a day drew up an operational resupply concept, later dubbed the "Super Gaggle."^{64***}

The idea was to establish a small task force consisting of 8 to 16 resupply CH-46 helicopters, about a dozen A-4 Skyhawks and four Huey gunships to fly cover, a Marine KC-130 to refuel the aircraft, and a TA-4F with a TAC (A) in the backseat to orchestrate the entire affair. The Khe Sanh DASC and FSCC insured the coordination of the air and ground fires. In

*Lieutenant Colonel Walter H. Shauer, who as a major commanded HMM-362, a UH-34 squadron assigned to MAG-36, recalled that he kept several helicopters at Khe Sanh for three- or four-day periods during January and February, and would relieve them with replacement crews and aircraft: "During the siege there was of course no aircraft maintenance support, only fuel. The . . . [aircraft] were parked in Khe Sanh's revetments, and the crews bunkered underground in the 26th Marines CP. We primarily engaged in emergency medevac, and emergency resupply of ammo and water, to the various adjacent Marine hilltop positions." LtCol Walter H. Shauer, Comments on draft, dtd 1Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Shauer Comments.

**Lieutenant General Carey, then serving on the 1st MAW G-3 staff, observed that helicopters were not always able to use a "visual approach." According to Carey, the "skies were overcast more often than not." The helicopters flew on instruments to Khe Sanh and then "let down through the overcast under control of a TPQ or on a self-devised instrument approach on the Khe Sanh beacon. Once underneath they would pick up their fixed-wing escort. This operation required a great deal of coordination, generally conducted by an airborne TAC(A) in a TA4." Carey Comments.

***Gen Cushman, the III MAF commander, claimed to have conceived the idea for the "Super Gaggle." LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Comments on "The Battle for Khe Sanh," dtd 23Mar69 (Vietnam Comment File). MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon, however, credited Colonel Joel E. Bonner, Lieutenant Colonel William J. White, and LtCol Richard E. Carey, with the further comment that Carey named the procedure. MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon, Comments on "The Battle for Khe Sanh," n.d. (Vietnam Comment File). This latter version appears to be in conformity with MajGen Anderson's recollections. MajGen Norman Anderson intvw, 3d Session, 17Mar81, pp. 225-6. Lieutenant General William J. White noted in his comments that the MAG-36 group commander, Colonel Frank E. Wilson, was the one who decided that White should see the wing commander and accompanied him to the meeting with General Anderson. LtGen William J. White, Comments on draft, dtd 1Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). In his comments, General Carey wrote: "it became apparent that we had to do something fast. In discussion with Col Bonner and Gen Keller, Bill White and I suggested that we could come up with an answer. I was the considered authority on the fixed-wing participation and Bill provided the helicopter expertise. When all the details were sorted out I suggested the name super gaggle as that is a favorite fighter pilot term meaning, 'perceived confusion of the first order.'" Carey Comments.



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

With the closing of the airfield to larger aircraft, aerial parachute drops were the most familiar method of resupplying the Marines at Khe Sanh. Top, an Air Force Lockheed C-130 transport drops supplies for the embattled Marines at the base. Below, Marines on the ground at Khe Sanh watch as the supplies come floating down. Several collapsed parachutes can be seen in the background.



the first "Super Gaggle" mission flown on 24 February, under cover of suppressive fixed-wing and artillery support, each of eight CH-46s successfully dropped off a 3,000-pound external load "covering less than five minutes when they could have been taken under fire." One helicopter took a hit, but landed safely at the Khe Sanh airstrip. All the rest of the aircraft returned to base safely. General Anderson, the 1st Wing commander, exulted "today, was a small victory." He then wrote, "the only way to beat the enemy is to bludgeon the hell out of him. . . . These coordinated resupply missions under marginal weather conditions undoubtedly will be required again and again in the next few weeks."⁶⁵*

In a typical "Super Gaggle" mission, a TA-4 would fly to Khe Sanh on weather reconnaissance. When the TA-4 reported favorable conditions, the A-4s launched from Chu Lai, enroute to Khe Sanh, and the helicopters took off from Quang Tri, enroute to Dong Ha where prestaged supplies waited. After picking up their loads and carrying them externally underneath in especially designed cargo slings, the helicopters began the short trip to Khe Sanh flying on instruments and then letting down through a hole in the cloud cover. Just before they arrived, four A-4s struck enemy positions with napalm and two others saturated antiaircraft positions with CS gas carried in spray tanks. About 30 seconds prior to the helicopters' final approach to the designated hills, two A-4s laid a smoke screen on both sides of the planned flight path. As the helicopters flew in behind the smoke, four more Skyhawks carrying bombs, rockets, and 20mm cannons suppressed known and suspected North Vietnamese gun positions. The Hueys followed closely to pick up any downed crews, and a Lockheed KC-130 Hercules orbited high overhead to refuel any A-4s in need. At times, the entire "gaggle" operated in the hills where some peaks reached 3,000 feet with less than 1,500 feet ceilings and occasionally the helicopters took off and landed at Dong Ha with less than 400 feet clearances.⁶⁶

Using the "Super Gaggle" technique, groups of helicopters could resupply the hills four times per day

with little danger of losses. Indeed, only two CH-46s fell to enemy fire during "Super Gaggle" missions, and in both cases, the Hueys picked up the crews immediately. During the month of March, the helicopters in "Super Gaggles" delivered about 80,000 pounds of cargo per day to the hill outposts. Brigadier General Henry W. Hise,** one of two assistant wing commanders, observed, however, that without the fixed-wing support, "the 46s could no longer have supplied the hills." He noted that the Super Gaggle reduced the "hit rate" among the helicopters from 10 per 1,000 sorties to 5 per 1,000 sorties. According to Captain Dabney on Hill 881 South, with the suppression of the North Vietnamese antiaircraft batteries by the fixed-wing aircraft, "you could get in 10 helicopter loads on the hill in one minute and get the birds the Hell out of there and into smoke where the NVA couldn't see to shoot." With obvious Service pride, Dabney later praised the Super Gaggle: "It was a massive, complex, well rehearsed, gutsy and magnificent performance and only the Marines could have pulled it off."⁶⁷***

On 31 March, with the coming of better weather and the beginning of the pullback of enemy forces from Khe Sanh, the allied command ended Operation Niagara. For the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing it had been an immense effort. In addition to the nearly 7,100 sorties contributed by Marine tactical air to Niagara, Marine helicopters flew over 9,000. Including the Super Gaggle flights, the Marine rotary aircraft carried more than 10,600 passengers and brought in over 3,300 tons of supplies to the Khe Sanh defenders. While the helicopters mostly delivered their cargo to the hill outposts, they also played a part in the resupply of the main base, especially after the enemy gunners curtailed the landings of the large transports. In support of the Niagara operations, 23 Marine fixed-wing aircraft and 123 helicopters sustained some combat damage.⁶⁸

Little question remained that without air support, the entire defense of Khe Sanh would have been untenable. All the U.S. major aviation commands, including the Strategic Air Command, the Seventh Air Force, the

*General Carey observed that the coordination of the Super Gaggle originated at the TADC. The procedure required A4s from Chu Lai and "helos from Dong Ha/Quang Tri to take off at appropriate intervals so as to arrive at Khe Sanh at the same time. When the delivery was successfully completed and aircraft safely egressed [the area] the cycle [was] restarted for subsequent delivery." He observed that Marine ground crews were the unsung heroes: "Helos and strike fixed-wing aircraft were often reloaded in as little as 30 minutes time and sent again on their way to support their fellow Marines at Khe Sanh." Carey Comments.

**Because of the extended operations in the north, the 1st MAW in January 1968 like the two Marine divisions was authorized two assistant commanders.

***Lieutenant Colonel Walter H. Shauer, the commander of HMM-362, expressed a minority view about the effectiveness of the Super Gaggle. He wrote the "'Gaggle' turned out to be what its name connotes. Uncoordinated event waiting to crash." He believed that the reduction of the hit rate occurred because the NVA had begun to withdraw and just "weren't there." Shauer Comments.

Seventh Fleet, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing demonstrated remarkable coordination over the skies of Khe Sanh. This coordination also was tied in very closely with both the Khe Sanh ground defenses and the Marine and Army artillery positions along the DMZ. While obviously the massive airlift and air bombardment permitted the Marines to hold the base and kept the enemy at bay, it still remained unclear how badly the enemy was hurt. The amount of ordnance dropped, as one historian observed, only measured the effort rather than the results.* Moreover, despite the inter-Ser-vice cooperation in the Khe Sanh operation, the Niagara Operation reopened the old dispute about the role of

Marine air in the overall air campaign. Indeed, on 10 March, with the approval of Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland issued his Single Manager directive placing Marine fixed-wing tactical and reconnaissance aircraft, at least as far as fragging purposes, under the operational control of General Momyer. While the Single Manager issue had little impact on the Niagara operations since it came out so late in the campaign, it would dominate, however, MACV, III MAF, and Seventh Air Force relations throughout the rest of the year and in reality throughout the remainder of the war.⁶⁹

*Navy Chaplain Lieutenant Commander Ray W. Stubbe, who has researched and written extensively on Khe Sanh, commented "the US Air Force's count of 'secondary explosions' at Khe Sanh, by which MACV determined through their complex mathematical formulae just how many NVA were killed, is grossly faulted since many of the 'secondary explosions' they counted were actually conjointly-fired artillery missions: What they counted as a secondary explosion being, actually, a 'friendly explosion!'" LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft,

25Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Donaghy, who served as the 26th Marines air officer, also had his doubts, commenting that it was "nearly impossible to measure the real effectiveness of sorties in those days (BDAs were in the eyes of the beholder)" Donaghy, nevertheless, commended General Momyer, the Seventh Air Force commander, for visiting Khe Sanh and "coming to where the action was. . . . General Momyer obviously wanted to see where he was devoting so many of his assets." Donaghy Comments.

A Matter of Doctrine: Marine Air and Single Manager

The Establishment of Single Manager—Point, Counterpoint—The Continuing Debate

The Establishment of Single Manager

While the Khe Sanh situation influenced the implementation of the “single manager” system at the time, General Westmoreland’s doubts about the ability of III MAF and its limited staff provided an underlying motivation for his action. He especially worried about the capability and even willingness of Marine aviation to support the new Army divisions he was sending north. From a senior and joint commander’s perspective, the MACV commander also sympathized with the desire of General Momyer, the Seventh Air Force commander, to centralize the air assets in Vietnam. All of these factors played a role in his final decision.¹

Apparently accepting with relative good grace (at least outwardly) Admiral Sharp’s initial denial of his effort to bring Marine fixed-wing air under the Seventh Air Force in Operation Niagara, General Westmoreland yet remained concerned about air support for the newly arrived 1st Air Cavalry Division in northern I Corps. With the establishment of the 1st Cavalry command post near Phu Bai on 20 January and its subsequent deployment to Camp Evans by the end of the month, Westmoreland became even more agitated on the subject. According to the MACV commander at a meeting with both Generals Cushman and Norman Anderson, the 1st MAF commander, he told them that with the new deployments and the impracticality of Seventh Air Force direct support for the division, he wanted the Marines to provide that air coverage. Westmoreland claimed that he received assurances from both Marine commanders that the Marine wing would establish liaison with the Army division and the necessary arrangements would be made.²

The three commanders had different impressions about the results of their meeting. While Generals Anderson and Cushman promised that III MAF would furnish air support, their understanding about the undertaking was at great variance from that of General Westmoreland. General Cushman later recalled that the Marines flew air support for the 1st Air Cavalry, but that the Army division did not know how to employ it. The 1st MAF commander, Major General Norman Anderson, related that the problem

was one of communication. According to Anderson, he told General Westmoreland that the Marine wing would support the Air Cavalry, but that there would be need for the Army division to establish a communications network with the Marine air command and control system.^{3*}

The upshot of the situation was that the 1st Air Cavalry still had not tied into the Marine Tactical Air Direction Center after it deployed to Camp Evans. According to General Westmoreland, about 24 hours to 48 hours after he had broached the subject to the Marine commanders, he visited Major General John J. Tolson, the 1st Air Cavalry Division commander at his CP and discovered that there had been no liaison with the wing. Until that juncture, Westmoreland claimed he had been content not to alter the air command system, but now “I blew my top . . . [this] was absolutely the last straw. . . . I go up there and nothing has happened and here I’ve got a division up there . . . and they [III MAF] just ignored me.” The result, according to the MACV commander, was his decision to go ahead with the single manager directive.⁴

*General Earl E. Anderson, who at the time as a brigadier general was the III MAF Chief of Staff, recalled that he also attended this meeting, “and it became a little ‘testy’ at times. General Cushman stated that any excess sorties would be made available to Army units on request, but that the 7th AF had the primary responsibility to provide air support for the Army units.” According to the former III MAF Chief of Staff, “the lack of communication between the 1st MAF commander and the CG of the 1st Air Cav at the outset, in my opinion exacerbated the problem and brought the matter to a ‘boil’ in Westmoreland’s mind.” Anderson further stated that “we should have taken the initiative. By not doing so, we got off on the wrong foot as MACV and 7th AF were looking for anything for which they could, rightly or wrongly, assess blame to III MAF or the 1st MAF.” Gen Earl E. Anderson, USMC (Ret), Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter E. E. Anderson Comments. Colonel Joel E. Bonner, the 1st MAF G-3, also emphasized that for Westmoreland the support of the 1st Air Cavalry “was priority ONE!!” Col Joel E. Bonner, Comments on draft, dtd 18Jan93 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Bonner Comments. Brigadier General Henry W. Hise, who was one of the two assistant wing commanders, observed, nevertheless, that the Army units needed the appropriate “radios and frequencies to enter Marine nets . . . [and] this was clearly an Army responsibility.” BGen Henry W. Hise, Comments on draft, dtd 22Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Hise Comments.

Much of the ensuing unhappiness between MACV and III MAF revolved around the expectations of the various commanders and their differing recollections of their various meetings. This was especially true about the debate over the communication net with the 1st Air Cavalry. While General Anderson remembered emphasizing this matter, General Westmoreland denied that the subject was ever brought up and fully anticipated that the Marines would have provided liaison parties with the 1st Air Cavalry Division. In a letter several years later, Major General Anderson recalled that General Cushman accompanied General Westmoreland during the latter's visit to General Tolson. According to Anderson, Cushman sensed the MACV commander's vexation about the situation and "directed my per-

sonal immediate attention to the issue." The wing commander then visited the 1st Air Cavalry with his communications officer. He discovered that the Army division lacked the technical ability to connect into the Marine aviation close-air-support radio net. Anderson remembered "that we had a problem finding within the wing assets" the necessary communication equipment to provide the link. He recalled that it took about 24 to 48 hours to make the connection and this was "unacceptable" to General Westmoreland. As far as the wing commander was concerned, however, this resolved the problem and that General Tolson told him a few days later that the Air Cavalry had no complaint about the quality of its air support. Apparently, however, the damage had been done. Westmoreland, obviously, had

Gen William C. Westmoreland, ComUSMACV, walks with LtGen Robert E. Cushman, CG, III MAF, on a formal visit to III MAF headquarters. The dispute over single manager of air complicated relations between MACV and III MAF during 1968.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191509



expected the Marines to take the initiative while the wing commander believed that the Army division should have taken the first steps to ensure that it was in the Marine air radio net.*

Despite General Westmoreland's later contention that it was the dispute over the air support to the 1st Air Cavalry Division that caused him to go ahead with the single manager issue, it would appear that it was only one of many contributing factors. The discussion over air support to the 1st Cavalry occurred over a two- or three-week span at a series of meetings where it was

only one of several topics.** General Norman Anderson believed that it became a matter of concern sometime before Tet, but was not sure exactly when. On 28 January, Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the director of the MACV combat operations center, wrote home to his wife relative to deteriorating relations between III MAF and MACV. He mentioned that "Westy [Westmoreland] is a bit jumpy and is up to some major moves which [would] have an adverse impact on U.S. Marines." Chaisson claimed that he "worked on him [Westmoreland] considerably and got him to give a little, but not entirely." While aviation support may have been one of the disputed areas, the Marine brigadier made no reference to the 1st Air Cavalry Division and implied that his concern was over the general tenor of the MACV and III MAF relationship. In his own general entry in his historical summaries for this period, General Westmoreland made little reference to air control, but wrote of the limitations of the III MAF staff to handle the number of divisions in I Corps and the necessity of establishing the MACV Forward Headquarters. Finally, in his book, the MACV commander implied that it was the meeting on 7 February with General Cushman that resulted in his final disillusionment with the Marine command and forced his hand on single management.⁶

While Westmoreland's accounts of the 7 February meeting deal largely with his unhappiness concerning the fall of Lang Vei and the slowness of the Marine command at Da Nang to react to the NVA threat to Da Nang,*** the subject of air control must also have been a factor. Up to this point, at least at the III MAF and 1st Wing level, neither General Cushman nor General Anderson appeared to worry about the air control situation. Indeed, on 7 February, General Anderson wrote to Major General Keith B. McCutcheon in Washington that the "heat . . . [was] temporarily off" that subject. Less than a week later, however, Anderson informed McCutcheon that he had been "too optimistic" relative to the Seventh Air Force. According to

*Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who as a lieutenant colonel served on the 1st MAW staff in 1968, commented, "The major problem was that the Army divisions were not tied into our air control system and thus could not, by normally accepted means, submit requests for pre-planned missions. Of course the problem was one of communications. We did not have sufficient organic communications to provide them with communications capability. Our Wing was already supporting two Marine Divisions. Granted over time we had significantly augmented our communications capability to support our Divisions, but we were already stretched very thin with all the widespread communications supporting our Marines. I do recall however that the Comm O was directed to find a way." LtGen Richard E. Carey, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Carey Comments. Colonel David S. Twining, who in January and February 1968 commanded the MASS-2 detachment at the Dong Ha DASC, recalled an investigation that he conducted concerning "a 'bad' TPQ-10 drop" in support of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. An Air Cavalry battalion had made a request for air support which had been "passed up to the 1st Air Cav TOC [Tactical Operations Center]." This agency had forwarded the request through the Seventh Air Force headquarters who then passed it to the Air Force Airborne DASC. There were no Air Force aircraft available and the request ended up at the Marine Corps Dong Ha DASC. Twining stated the "elapsed time was 72 hours and the initiating battalion had considered the request 'over-taken by events.'" The Dong Ha DASC, however, was not aware of this and sent the request to the collocated 3d Marine Division FSCC for clearance. The Marine FSCC observing that the target was in the "1st Air Cav area of responsibility, . . . called the Air Cav Division TOC for verification. This was given and the target cleared." The DASC assigned the TPQ-10 mission to a flight of Navy A-4s who struck the target about 30 minutes later. By this time the Army Air Cavalry battalion had "physically occupied" the target area. According to Twining, it was fortunate that "only unmanned helicopters were on the target when the bombs were dropped and no personnel were injured." Colonel Twining discovered in the course of his investigation at "Camp Evans that targets, air support requests and troop dispositions were not centralized at the senior TOC but rather at the battalion level. The air support coordination element was expected to query the supported battalion directly for clearance. The Army maintained a special net for this purpose but this was not known to the Marine Corps FSCC." Twining recommended that the FSCC should first check directly with requesting Army units down to battalion level and not clear any target area "for which the FSCC lacked direct and current information on friendly troops dispositions . . ." His recommendations were not implemented. Col David S. Twining, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**In his interview with Marine Corps historians, General Westmoreland insisted that the difficulty with air support related to the 101st Airborne Division. This apparently was incorrect as the headquarters of the 101st did not arrive in I Corps until the beginning of March. Major General Anderson is adamant that he had no problems with the 101st Division and moreover in his book, General Westmoreland mentions only the 1st Air Cavalry relative to this matter. Westmoreland intvw, 1983, p. 42; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 342-3; N. Anderson ltr, 8Sep83; Anderson intvw, 3d Session, 17Mar81, pp. 192, 194-95.

***See Chapters 8 and 14 relative to the 7 February meeting.

the wing commander, his liaison officer to the Seventh Air Force had told him that General Westmoreland was about to approve a proposal for General Momyer to "take over all air operations in defense of Khe Sanh."⁷

Despite General Westmoreland's protestations about the support of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, he apparently was only waiting for an opportunity to centralize the air command in the north. Such a move fit in with the steps he had already initiated with the establishment of MACV (Forward) to assume more direct control of the northern battlefield. Admiral Sharp in his message of 18 January denying such centralized authority for Niagara had left room for the MACV commander to implement his request at a later date. On 28 January, Westmoreland implied in a message to Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, who had protested Westmoreland's earlier appeal to change the air command arrangements, that the matter was not settled. While denying that centralization of air control and resources meant an "abrogation of the traditional service roles and missions," the MACV commander observed that the new tactical situation required "careful planning and control of our air resources to assure maximum effective use of this valuable and limited resource in countering major enemy initiatives." Between 13 and 17 February, the Seventh Air Force "presumably at the direction" of MACV issued several directives which in effect positioned General Momyer "to command and control air operations, including those of the . . . [Marine wing] in a wide area and encompassing most of Quang Tri Province."⁸

Worried about the ramifications of these messages, on 17 February 1968, Major General Anderson met at III MAF headquarters with Major General Gordon F. Blood, the Seventh Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. According to Anderson, Blood related that with the number of increasing Arclight strikes at Khe Sanh, the Seventh Air Force believed that "adequate coordination requires firm scheduling, firm targeting, and rigid control of airborne flights." Furthermore, General Momyer wanted "to establish now a control and coordination system which could handle *all* [italics in the original text] sorties that could be made available under emergency conditions." Anderson concurred with the necessity of scheduling and "indicated my willingness to proceed along these lines, to include the fixing of altitudes and orbit points as . . . means for preventing mutual interference." At that point, Blood stated that General Momyer planned to ask for the

extension of the original Niagara operating area to include almost all of Quang Tri Province, including the sector east of Dong Ha, and to extend as far south as the city of Hue in Thua Thien Province. Anderson countered that was too large an area "to be directly associated with the defense of Khe Sanh."⁹

According to the 1st Wing commander, the meeting resulted "in no meeting of the minds." General Anderson fully expected the Seventh Air Force commander "to attempt to influence General Westmoreland to issue a flat order" for the 1st Wing to turn over its control and scheduling of Marine fixed-wing assets to the Air Force. While General Cushman would appeal any such order, Anderson predicted a troubled time ahead for the Marine air-ground team.¹⁰

III MAF anticipated the worst. On 18 February, General Cushman sent a message to General Krulak warning that he expected continuing difficulty over air control and complained that "Momyer attacks us at every opportunity." In a private letter to General McCutcheon on the 19th, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, observed that "some of our biggest battles are with the other Services, rather than with the VC and NVA." He accused Momyer of being more concerned with the "Air Force's party line," rather than "getting this job done within a reasonable period of time."¹¹

The Marines did not have long to wait for the other shoe to drop. On 19 February, General Westmoreland radioed Admiral Sharp that with the reinforcement of the Army divisions in the north and the establishment of MACV (Forward) the situation required "a new and objective look at the control of tactical air." The MACV commander mentioned the added complication of the B-52 strikes further dictated "the creation of a single management arrangement." He wanted one man to bear the responsibility for this air effort and that man logically was General Momyer, who already commanded the Seventh Air Force and was his deputy for air. Westmoreland told Sharp that he had directed Momyer to develop a plan "that will give him [Momyer] control of the air assets" excluding helicopters and fixed-wing transport. The plan was to contain provisions that would permit "Marine aircraft to continue direct support to their deployed ground forces." Momyer was to coordinate his effort with III MAF.¹²

*General Earl E. Anderson remembered that he and other members of the III MAF staff attended the meeting with General Blood. He may have confused this meeting, however, with the one that occurred three days later. E. E. Anderson Comments.

On 20 February, General Momyer came to Da Nang to brief both Generals Cushman and Norman Anderson on his proposed plan to modify the air control situation. At the outset of the meeting, Momyer stated that he was there to discuss General Westmoreland's desire to have a single manager for air and to bring back to the MACV commander the III MAF perspective. In a sense, the conferees generally talked past one another.* The Marine generals emphasized responsiveness to the ground forces while General Momyer and his staff members stressed the need "to mass more of our efforts." In some frustration and obviously as a jab at the Air Force, General Cushman stated it made as much sense to centralize control of helicopters as that of fixed-wing aircraft. The Marine general knew very well that Momyer had no desire to take on the Army on this subject. The Seventh Air Force commander merely stated that helicopters were another matter and had "to be treated separately." According to the proposed outlines of the MACV plan, Momyer in his dual capacity as Commanding General, Seventh Air Force, and the MACV Deputy Commander for Air Operations, would have the responsibility for most Marine fixed-wing aviation.¹³

General Cushman immediately protested and forwarded his concerns to General Westmoreland. On 22 February, the MACV commander attempted to placate Cushman and told him that as the ground field commander in I Corps, the III MAF commander would still retain the "tactical air assets available to support your forces, subject to modifications that I might invoke as the situation dictates." At the same time, Westmoreland stated that his air deputy, Momyer, "would have general direction of all routine matters relating to the procedures for requesting, fragging and controlling air support." On the cover sheet of the message from Westmoreland, a Marine staff officer penned in green ink: "These two positions are in direct contradiction in my opinion." In Saigon, a week later, Brigadier General Chaisson jotted down in his diary: "AF [Air Force] is doing real job on III MAF. Will get op con [operational control] of wing. Very unprofessional work." The Marines had lost the fight in Saigon.¹⁴

The battle had shifted to Honolulu and Washington. In Washington, on 21 February, Marine Corps Commandant Leonard F. Chapman sent a memoran-



Photo courtesy of Office of Air Force History
Adm U. S. Grant Sharp, CinCPac, nearly at end of his tour of duty, acquiesced to Gen Westmoreland's request for "single manager" control of air after rejecting previous proposals.

dum to General Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, protesting General Westmoreland's proposed action as abrogating the Marine air-ground team and in violation of JCS directives establishing "III MAF as a separate uni-Service command directly subordinate to MACV." Wheeler in turn forwarded a copy of the memorandum to the MACV commander. As expected, Westmoreland denied that this was the case. He insisted that Marine air would support the Marine ground forces when "the tactical situation permitted." Westmoreland argued that he had now, including the Marine divisions, the equivalent of a field army in I Corps. He mentioned that the air support of these forces required large elements of the Seventh Air Force as well as the Marine aircraft wing. Because of the air campaign in support of both Khe Sanh and the allied forces in the northern two provinces, the MACV commander contended that "Marine air therefore, has become a junior air partner in the total air effort . . ." According to Westmoreland the problem was one of "coordination and directing all of these diversified air elements so that the air support can be put where and when needed in the required quantity." This needed, the MACV commander asserted, "a single airman [obviously General Momyer] I can hold responsible for coordinating all the air effort that is made available to me." Westmoreland maintained that his proposed

*Among the participants in the meeting were Air Force generals Momyer and Blood and Marine generals Cushman, Norman Anderson, and Earl E. Anderson.

modifications would result in "no change in Service doctrine or roles and mission."¹⁵

Such arguments apparently convinced Admiral Sharp at CinCPac headquarters in Honolulu to acquiesce to Westmoreland's request. On 28 February, General Westmoreland sent to Honolulu Major General Blood of the Seventh Air Force "to make sure Admiral Sharp understood the arrangement in detail." According to the MACV commander, he wanted to reassure Sharp that this was not an "Air Force maneuver," but rather his "initiative as a joint commander." This effort apparently counterbalanced any influence that the Marines may have had in Hawaii to reverse the decision. Lieutenant General Krulak, the FMFPac commander whose headquarters was in the same building as that of Admiral Sharp, admitted his failure to persuade the Navy admiral. According to Krulak, Sharp refused to listen to the Marine case, "telling me that he already knows our side, and anyhow, that Westy is a big commander, and should have what he wants." In a later interview, Admiral Sharp declared that he approved the single manager concept because with the arrival of large Army forces in I Corps, he "thought it a reasonable thing to do."¹⁶

On 4 March, MACV learned that Admiral Sharp had approved the single manager concept. Marine Brigadier General Chaisson at the MACV Combat Operations Center received the assignment to prepare the final directive. Two days later, Major General Anderson, the 1st Wing commander, sent his assistant commander, Brigadier General Robert P. Keller to Saigon to iron-out any remaining differences. According to General Anderson, the Marines proposed "slightly more palatable language" and some alterations in a couple "wiring diagrams," but no substantive changes. Although apparently acceptable to some of the MACV staff, Air Force Major General Blood, supported by Generals Momyer and Westmoreland, vetoed the III MAF proposed alterations. General Momyer and his staff planned to hold on to every advantage they had obtained and viewed the single manager issue as a "catalyst for change."¹⁷

With only minor revisions, Westmoreland's implementing order differed very little from the proposal that he had forwarded to CinCPac. Admiral Sharp had insisted that the senior DASC in I Corps retain "scramble" and "divert" authority in the event of emergency and that Lieutenant General Cushman be permitted to communicate directly with CinCPac on "proposed improvements in the system or in event of his dissatisfaction with the employment of Marine air assets."

According to the directive, CinCPac would be an addressee on any message from Cushman to Westmoreland on this subject. Contrary to the assertion by the ComUSMACV commander that he had given due consideration to the Marine perspective, the III MAF staff denied that General Westmoreland in his forwarding letter provided any evidence of its "violent disagreement."¹⁸

Published on 7 March, to be implemented three days later, in the form of a letter from General Westmoreland to General Cushman with six enclosures, the single manager directive outlined the new aviation command arrangements. Westmoreland officially placed with General Momyer the "responsibility for coordinating and directing the air effort throughout Vietnam, to include I CTZ and the extended battle area." General Cushman was to make available to Momyer as the MACV Deputy Commander for Air Operations, all strike and reconnaissance aircraft and that part of the Marine air command and control system that related to the employment of these aircraft. Marine fixed-wing transports, observation aircraft, and helicopters were exempted from the directive. According to the order, the MACV and III MAF control systems were to be joined for fixed-wing jet operations, but retain the "integrity of the Marine tactical control system . . ." Marine aviation officers were to augment the various Air Force/MACV control systems. These included the MACV Tactical Air Support Element (TASE) and Seventh Air Force Tactical Air Control Center (TACC), both located at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon; the I DASC that the Seventh Air Force maintained at I Corps headquarters in Da Nang; and DASC Victor that the Seventh Air Force maintained at Phu Bai for the MACV (Forward) headquarters, soon to become Provisional Corps, Vietnam.¹⁹

The concept was that preplanned requests for fixed-wing air support from lower commands be consolidated at the I Corps tactical operations center, and then forwarded to the MACV TASE. In Saigon, the TASE would then determine the allocation of strikes to the various commands and send this list to the Seventh Air Force TACC. The TACC in turn would assign the targets to specific air units, establish ordnance loads, and time on target.

As much as the tactical situation permitted, "every effort would be made to have Marine aircraft support Marine units." At the end of his letter, General West-

*See Chapters 8 and 13 for the establishment of the MACV Forward and Provisional Corps headquarters.

moreland declared that these instructions "will be reviewed within thirty days to determine those technical and organizational changes which may prove necessary as a result of experience in this single management system."²⁰

Despite the decision and the issuance of the order on single manager, there were still several rough edges to its implementation. Major General Anderson observed that III MAF did not receive a copy of the directive until 9 March and then only through the personal intervention of General Abrams, who was still at Phu Bai. On the morning of the 9th as well, III MAF received from the Seventh Air Force interim instructions for procedures relative to Marine fixed-wing strike sorties and the incorporation of these sorties into the Seventh Air Force daily "frag" or fragmentary order. According to the Marine wing commander, the Air Force wanted specific information on number of Marine aircraft, flight schedules, and sortie rates. At this point, the Marine fighter and fighter/attack aircraft remained exempt from the Air Force frag, but "were told to continue our operations and cross-tell with I DASC who in turn would keep the TACC informed."²¹

General Anderson, the wing commander, was especially unhappy about the employment of the Marine photo reconnaissance and electronic warfare aircraft of VMCJ-1. According to Anderson, the Air Force ignored the radar and electronic capability of the squadron but informed the Marine wing that it planned to reevaluate current photo reconnaissance missions. Future requests for planned photo missions were to go to the III MAF G-2 (Intelligence) (Air) section and then forwarded to the Seventh Air Force TACC. The TACC would then publish the missions and sorties in the frag order it issued to the wing. General Anderson related that the wing then reported daily by phone and by followup message the activities of the squadron. When the photo aircraft were airborne, they came under the control of the particular DASC in the target area. The MACV TASE had the authority to divert any of the aircraft from any of the DASCs.^{22*}

*Colonel Robert W. Lewis, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded VMCJ-1 until mid March, remembered that he was "in the middle of the air control furor." He recalled that "in early March we started to get our photo recon taskings from Saigon. That meant that a Marine battalion commander who wanted imagery to his front had to wait 2-3 days for a response. When there was a hot operation on we carried the 7th Air Force missions with us in the airplane along with those slipped under the table to us by our int[elligence] briefers. Usually we had time to complete most of the Saigon missions. I, or one of my more experienced pilots, flew the 'weather hop' at first light every morning

On 11 March, the Seventh Air Force I DASC at I Corps headquarters and DASC Victor at Phu Bai announced that they were now functioning under the new system and had assumed control of air operations. I DASC stated that its mission was "to furnish more equitably distributed air support throughout I Corps." Major General Anderson, the wing commander remarked caustically that DASC Victor was more "modest." It merely stated that it had assumed "control for PCV [Provisional Corps Vietnam] area." On the 11th and the 16th, General Anderson met with the director of the Seventh Air Force TACC to discuss the eventual location of I DASC and the phasing in of the Marine Corps system with that of the Air Force. General Anderson wanted to collocate the I DASC with the 1st MAW Tactical Air Direction Center (TADC) in the wing compound and recommended a three-stage implementation. The first stage would consist of improving the information exchange between the TADC and I DASC so that the latter could transmit the necessary data back to Saigon. In the second stage, the U.S. sector of I DASC would be located in the 1st MAW G-3 building and then in the final stage would be the collocation of I DASC with the III MAF DASC and 1st MAW TADC. The Air Force agreed to the first two phases as a temporary measure, but recommended that the permanent location of the III MAF and I

and it was a simple matter to call back to Da Nang and tell them to brief and launch the subsequent photo missions at the Marine hot spots, where we had observed the weather to be suitable for good picture taking." Lewis wrote that the Seventh Air Force TACC "did not understand that immediate photos were required if effective CAS [close air support] was to happen." According to Colonel Lewis, "during the early days of the battle for Khe Sanh we would make a low level run on the airfield perimeter and approaches once an hour, have the film to our photo interpreters 20 minutes later, and immediately advise the 26th Marines intel. section what the threat had been 30 minutes before. You can't do that with 2-day tasking." He stated that the squadron tried to make the system work "to the benefit of our Marines on the ground. During those periods when enemy contact was light we would aggressively execute the Saigon photo plan—it did have a strategic, theater intelligence benefit. However, when Marines were in heavy contact anywhere in I Corps TAOR they got all they requested from us. Often we would arrange for a courier helicopter to drop by Da Nang, pick up negatives which were exposed 20 minutes before and deliver them to III MAF intel. We didn't, however have to rely on III MAF to pass intel. to the ground units. We had photo interpreters assigned to VMCJ-1 and they would read wet negatives shortly after the RF-4B landed. Hot items would then be passed directly to the unit involved (in some cases). We would then deliver all the imagery to III MAF for further delivery to intelligence units in RVN, Hawaii and ConUS. What they ever did with all those pictures we never knew. No I Corps ground units ever saw them." Col Robert W. Lewis, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

DASC air control agencies should be at III MAF headquarters rather than in the 1st Wing compound. General Cushman and his staff supported the Air Force rather than the wing commander relative to the location of the I Corps DASC at III MAF.²³

While the question of the location of I DASC remained in abeyance, on 18 March 1968, Major General Anderson in a message to both Generals Cushman and General Krulak outlined what he considered the weakness of single manager to date. In fact, according to the 1st MAW commander, the system was not working. Anderson believed that MACV and the Seventh Air Force, "in the haste to implement the procedure," overlooked too many details and the necessary air control facilities were simply not prepared to take on their new tasks. Anderson admitted, however, that the Marine and Air Force agencies were identifying and sorting out many of the problems and that the wing was receiving "more cooperation than expected." The wing commander promised to "provide information, assistance, and assets as requested and required to

make the actual transition as smooth as possible." At the same time, he declared "until such time as 7th AF/MACV can formulate, man, and put into being a modus operandi for I Corps, the wing will continue to do what is needed to operate and provide the necessary support." As he concluded, "I see no other way to go, without causing undue risk to our ground Marine currently in critical contact."²⁴

The following day, in a personal note to General McCutcheon, Major General Anderson enclosed his report of the first week's operations under single manager that he had forwarded to General Cushman. The wing commander half humorously wrote: "If it reads in a disjointed fashion, and therefore gives the impression of describing a disjointed maneuver, it is a perfect piece of writing." He observed that for III MAF and the wing the subject of single manager was a "closed issue. We have to, always hoping that you will be more effective in Washington than anyone else has been up the line." In an earlier letter, Anderson had assured McCutcheon that "we will break our backs to

Adm Thomas H. Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations, center, visits with VAdm William F. Bringle, Seventh Fleet Commande, left. Adm Moorer, like the Commandant of the Marine Corps and Army Chief of Staff, supported the Marine position on single manager.

Unnumbered Department of Defense (USMC) Photo



provide you with both fact and fancy if you should decide to go this route."²⁵

In many respects, the entire question of single manager had passed out of the hands of both the III MAF and Fleet Marine Force Pacific commands to influence. After Admiral Sharp approved the single manager directive, Lieutenant General Krulak advised General Cushman about future actions on the subject. Krulak told the III MAF commander to reassure General Westmoreland "that even a poor decision will have your energetic and unreserved support." At the same time, the FMFPac commander directed that Cushman assemble "an honest record of the Air Force stewardship of our assets." Krulak then mentioned that he put Admiral Sharp "on notice that he could be in for trouble," and that the latter had exceeded his authority in approving the single manager directive.²⁶

In Washington, General Chapman and the HQMC staff had already begun its counterattack. On 4 March, upon learning of Admiral Sharp's decision, the Marine Corps Commandant officially placed the matter before the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In a memorandum to the Chairman, General Wheeler, the Commandant protested both the Westmoreland directive and its approval by Admiral Sharp. Chapman argued "irrespective of the various organizational formats and terms of reference, the net effect . . . is to remove Marine fighter/bomber/reconnaissance assets from being directly responsive to CG III MAF." The Commandant closed with the statement that he could not "concur in such an arrangement" and asked that the Joint Chiefs review the entire subject. Like General Krulak, the Commandant maintained that both General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp had exceeded their authority relative to Marine air in Vietnam.²⁷

The Marines could expect some assistance in the "joint arena" from at least the Navy. Despite Admiral Sharp's approval of the directive, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the Chief of Naval Operations, and Vice Admiral John J. Hyland, commander of the Seventh Fleet, both had doubts about the wisdom of the decision. Hyland feared that now that Westmoreland had obtained control over Marine air, that he might want to obtain similar authority over the Navy's carrier aircraft. He also worried about the MACV commander's intentions about Navy and Marine amphibious forces and Navy gunfire ships in Vietnamese waters. Moorer wondered why, if the Air Force was so dedicated to centralized control, it had not placed its B-52 SAC forces under the centralized command. In any event, Moorer

remarked that he would support the Marine Corps position with the Joint Chiefs.²⁸

While the single manager controversy never formally went beyond the Department of Defense, General Westmoreland remembered that shortly after the publication of the directive, he received a telephone call from President Johnson. According to the MACV commander, the President asked him bluntly, "Are you screwing the Marines?" Westmoreland claimed he explained the reasons for his decision and the President apparently accepted for the time being his rationale. In his book, the MACV commander wrote that the single manager was the one issue "to prompt me to consider resigning."^{29*}

Although MACV made no public announcement about the new air command relations, the press soon had the news. According to one account, the Air Force released the story. The article included statements from both Marine aviators and ground commanders. One Marine air commander allegedly said, "Why, oh why, did they have to do this to us at this time? . . . [we] are nose deep in problems of fighting the Reds and now we have to take on the Air Force too." The reporter quoted a "mud-spattered" Marine battalion commander declaring, "now we are faced with the tragic aspect of having this Marine air-ground team broken asunder simply because of the ambitions of the Air Force brass." As would be expected, Air Force officers welcomed the change, one saying, "The Marines have different ways of doing things than we do . . . some may be better ways, others worse, but now all are under one system with increased efficiency and effectiveness."³⁰

Senior Marine officers speculated about the reasons behind the news releases and what their reaction should be. According to Lieutenant General Krulak, Marine commanders should remain silent: "Now that the word is out, there are others who will take the Air Force to task." Krulak believed that the "Air Force erred in making a public announcement which could only be abrasive, and could have no beneficial effect." Brigadier General E. E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, stated that he had not been able to locate any Air Force announcement. General Cushman observed that his bet was that there was no public statement: "Spike [Air Force General Momyer] is not that

*Army historian Graham A. Cosmas noted that by this time, March 1968, "Westmoreland's resignation was somewhat academic, since his departure from MACV was announced on the 22d [March 1968]." Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cosmas Comments.

gauche. Stupid, he ain't." In a later message, General Krulak remarked that HQMC learned from the Department of Defense Public Affairs office that it had no knowledge about an announcement relative to the single-manager issue. The FMFPac commander suspected that the reporter was trying to use the guise of a press statement, "to lend an official flavor to what appears to be a leak."³¹

While the story about the change in air control arrangements received some play in the press, it for the most part remained somewhat muted as did the single-manager issue for a time. Part of the reason may have been that the single-manager system remained in a somewhat grey zone until the later part of March. According to the MACV command history, that although the directive was issued on 7 March, the actual preplanning only began on 21 March and the first programmed missions did not occur until 22 March. MACV considered the entire period from 10 March, when the single manager system supposedly went into effect, until the end of the month, "a period for training and indoctrinating air crews and controller personnel."³²

Major General Anderson, the wing commander, had a harsher judgement. On 23 March, Anderson reported to Generals Cushman and Krulak that the past week had been one of "initial confusion. This had to be expected in view of the urge to implement without proper and prior planning." The wing commander gave specific examples. On the night of 21–22 March, I DASC scrambled three flights of Marine attack and fighter/attack aircraft "for what was termed an immediate mission." A planned rendezvous with a flare and a forward control aircraft over Laos failed to occur and the Marine planes returned to base nearly out of fuel. According to Anderson, a ground radar TPQ team provided one of the Marine flight sections with a secondary mission, but the other two sections jettisoned their ordnance. On the following day, 22 March, I DASC told the Marine TADC that several sorties planned for the 1st Marine Division, "had been canceled by the 'user'." The 1st Division air officer, however, denied making any such request and declared the division "wanted all the air that it could get." Anderson also mentioned problems with obtaining clearance from the Air Force Khe Sanh airborne command and control center (ABCCC). On two occasions, the ABCCC diverted two A6As from missions in support of Khe Sanh because of bad weather. Apparently the Air Force controllers were unaware of the capability of the A6A to operate under all weather conditions.³³

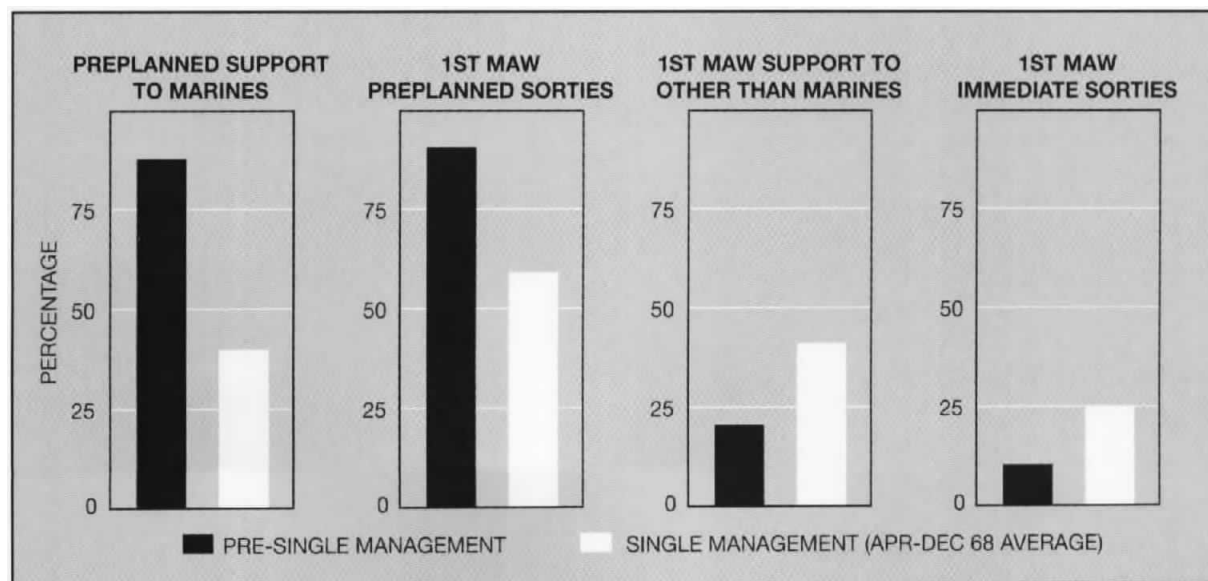
Anderson mentioned that the new system also began to place an added strain on Marine air control resources. Because of the necessity to send personnel to help man the Air Force control centers, the Marine wing decided to close its Chu Lai DASC.* The Americal Division immediately protested and asked the wing to reconsider or "to provide them some means to replace our control." General Anderson reactivated the DASC in the interim until the Air Force decided how it was going to take over. The wing commander also mentioned problems of overcrowding and air traffic control problems at the Phu Bai terminal. While the Army and Air Force helped with equipment and the assignment of additional personnel, Anderson suggested that the Marines might want to consider "a possible withdrawal of some of our air control assets from northern I CTZ." With the expansion of Army forces north of the Hai Van Pass, General Anderson argued that the Marines were not a major logistical and support organization and would be better off to realign to the south; "refurbish and reestablish a mount out capability; and reduce to some extent the stretch we have on our current personnel assets."³⁴

These and many other questions about the implications of single manager remained largely unanswered during this initial period. On 25 March, at the weekly meeting of the Joint Chiefs, General Chapman** formally brought up the subject. Major General McCutcheon accompanied the Commandant and made the presentation before the Chiefs. Generals Wheeler, the Chairman, and Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, were both absent. Major General Haines, Army Deputy Chief of Staff, represented the Army; General John P. McConnell, the Air Force Chief of Staff, the Air Force; and Admiral Moorer, the Navy. According to both Generals Chapman and McCutcheon, the reception was much what they expected. Admiral Moorer openly supported the Marines. The two Marine generals believed that the Army's actual position was favor-

*According to the wing commander, he provided two additional naval aviators to the Seventh Air Force TACC in Saigon making for a total of four to assist with the daily frag order. He also provided seven personnel each to I DASC and DASC Victor: two lieutenant colonels, six captains or lieutenants, and six noncommissioned officers. CG1stMAW to CGFMFPac and CGIIIIMAF, dtd 23Mar68, Doc No. 23, III MAF Incoming Msgs, 15–27 Mar68.

**While not a formal member of the Joint Chiefs at that time, the Marine Corps Commandant had a vote on all matters relating to the Marine Corps, which was usually interpreted in the broadest terms. For all practical purposes, the Commandant was a sitting member of the Joint Chiefs.

EFFECTS OF SINGLE MANAGEMENT ON MARINE FIXED-WING OPERATIONS IN ICTZ



Source: FMFPac, MarOpsV, May68.

able but that it had “probably made some sort of a deal with the Air Force and in all probability go ‘agin’ us.” They had no doubt what General McConnell’s stance would be. General McCutcheon also assumed that the chairman, General Wheeler, “was locked in concrete against us.” Actually the meeting resolved little. General McConnell suggested that no vote on the subject be made until the return of General Wheeler. General Chapman agreed and observed that he would “get McCutcheon to pitch to him [Wheeler] as soon as I can corner him.” According to General McCutcheon, the “die has been cast, we are on record in the JCS and the Commandant will continue the fight.”³⁵

Point, Counterpoint

Although touching upon several themes including legal and doctrinal aspects, the “strongest single factor” of the Marine Corps argument against the single manager system was responsiveness. According to Major General McCutcheon, “there isn’t any doubt about it that when you add more layers to the system it is bound to take more time. We are making a big-to-do about this.” On 26 March, he observed to both Generals E. E. and Norman Anderson that it “was absolutely necessary” that they record “in great detail what [air] you put in for, and when, and what you actually get and when.” The Commandant reinforced

this request in a formal message to General Krulak, remarking that Marine commanders needed to keep detailed records: “We need an audit trail that will stand up under any scrutiny.”³⁶

Major General Anderson needed little encouragement. On 27 March, he began a daily summary on a statistical and narrative account of the workings of the single manager system. This was in addition to the weekly reports that he already had submitted to both FMFPac and Headquarters, Marine Corps. In early April, General Anderson began to draft for General Cushman an evaluation of the single manager system. He reviewed the workings of the system for the last three weeks of March. The Marine general observed that neither I DASC nor DASC Victor was ready to operate when they claimed they were up and running. According to the Marine command, “Facilities were not ready, and personnel not assigned, and no chance to test communication and equipment.”^{37*}

*Different Marine aviation tactical commanders had different impressions about the single manager imbroglio at the time. Brigadier General Harry T. Hagaman, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded VMFA-323 from January into May 1968, recalled that he was, “acutely aware of the Air Force effort to single manage Marine air in I Corps.” He stated that during this period, the first wing “directed MAG-12, MAG-13, and MAG-11 to document all delays and frequency changes that we were required to make when working with Air Force controllers.” General Hagaman remembered that in the second part of March when single manager went into effect, “there were some delays in getting ‘on target’ because of the increased communication requirement.” BGen Harry T.

Because of the existing tactical situation, the Marines continued until 21 March operating under their old procedures. Anderson then offered some comparisons between Marine air support during the first part of the month under its system and that since the 21st under single management. According to the wing commander, a reduction of Marine sorties occurred in support of Marine divisions from 212 for the period 1 through 11 March to 177 for the corresponding number of days from 21 through 31 March. At the same time, the 1st MAW's fixed-wing sorties in support of other forces increased from 135 for the first 20 days of the month to 154 for the last 10 days. Anderson observed that the Seventh Air Force under single management had established a rate of 1.2 sorties per aircraft per day. He remarked that he was considering asking for an exemption to this rate because of the need to increase air support for the ground forces.^{38*}

Hagaman, Comments on draft, dtd 30Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Dean Wilker, who commanded MAG-12 at Chu Lai until early March just before the implementation of single manager, wrote: "While I knew the relations between MACV/USAF and Navy/USMC were not in accord, I did not know to what extent. We flew our missions as fragged and had few problems communicating with the Wing or the forces we supported. I credit the Wing & its control centers for making it simple for us." Col Dean Wilker, Comments on draft, dtd 18Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

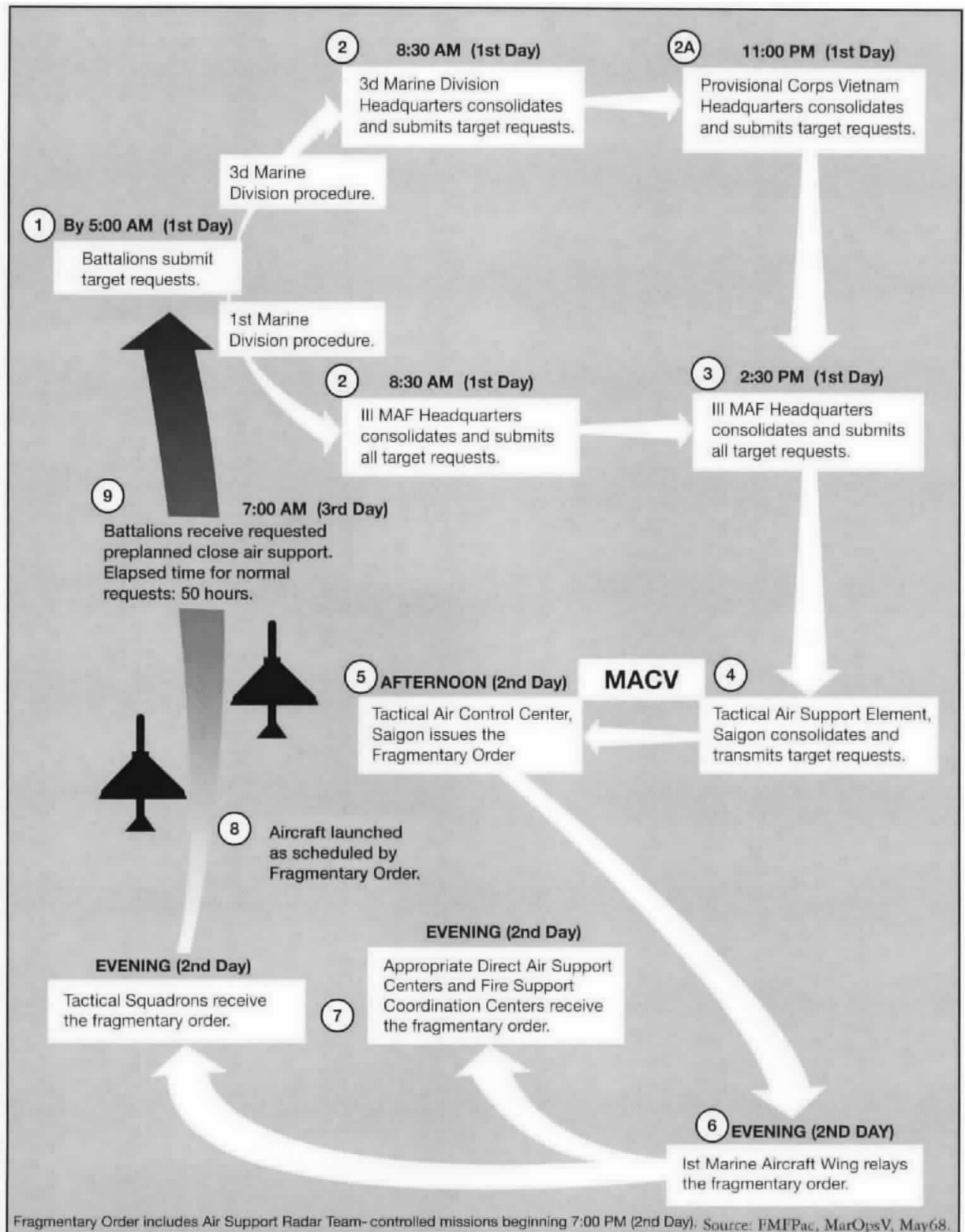
*According to Colonel Joel E. Bonner, the 1st MAW G-3, "the 7th Air Force stated they were manned, supplied and funded to provide 1.2 sorties per available aircraft per day and were rigidly enforcing such a rate in order to sustain their effort over the long term." Bonner argued that "such a statement makes sense at the Air War College and to budget analysts but is not worth anything when there is a fight ongoing and Air Strikes will reduce casualties." He observed that the "1st MAW flew more than 2.0 sorties per available aircraft almost on a daily basis. 7th Air Force stated on more than one occasion that 1st MAW was wasting their resources—but 1st MAW never ran out!!!" Furthermore Colonel Bonner wrote, "the Air Force explained that the 1.2 sortie rate was to be computed on the expected available aircraft for the day. For example: 12 aircraft are expected to be available out of 24 assigned aircraft. A 1.2 sortie rate would provide 14.4 sorties for the frag order. If you change the sortie rate from available to assigned the number of sorties for the Frag Order is 28. This was a problem with the planners in the wing versus the planners at 7th Air Force." Bonner Comments. Lieutenant General Carey, who worked for Colonel Bonner in the G-3 section of the wing in 1968 as a lieutenant colonel, recalled that during the transition period into single management that he "received a call from Saigon, allegedly by direct instruction of Gen Momyer (as I recall at the time I thought the caller identified himself as Gen Momyer) that we were exceeding the desired sortie rate and that we should back off (in rather strong language). I informed him that I was taking my direction from Gen Anderson to give the Marines what they asked for and unless Gen Anderson instructed me otherwise, which I sincerely doubted he would, that was what I was going to do! I never heard from Daigob again and the Marine requests were all filled." Carey Comments.

The basic Marine complaint, however, revolved around the requirements for preplanned missions, especially in support of the Marine divisions. The Marine command believed the entire process too cumbersome and unresponsive. According to the procedures outlined by the Seventh Air Force, a preplanned mission required a submission by the ground unit anywhere from 38 hours to over 50 hours before the mission was to be flown. This contrasted with the old III MAF system, which permitted a ground commander to make his preplanned request as late as 2000 of the night before.³⁹

In a representative preplanned mission under the new system, a Marine battalion commander would submit his target list through his regiment to the division at 0500 on the first day. At 0830, the division would then consolidate all the requests and forward them to the next higher echelon. In the case of the 3d Marine Division it would send its requests on to Provisional Corps, Vietnam, who in turn at 1100 would route them to III MAF. The 1st Marine Division would transmit its requests directly to III MAF. III MAF would then combine them into one list and relay it about 1430 of the first day on to the MACV TASE. The TASE would in turn reroute the approved request list to the Seventh Air Force TACC to prepare the frag order which would not be issued until the afternoon of the second day. It would be evening of the second day before I DASC or the 1st MAW TADC would retransmit the frag order to the proper DASCs and fire support agencies as well as to the tactical air units. During this process, each of the higher headquarters had the authority to determine priorities or even eliminate requests with the possibility of the battalion commander not knowing whether his request had been approved or not. In any event, it would usually not be before 0700 of the third day before that battalion commander received his air strike.⁴⁰ (See Chart).

During April, the numbers appeared to confirm the Marine complaints. According to Marine compiled statistics for the month, the MACV TASE and Seventh Air Force TACC only scheduled 1,547 out of the 4,331 or 36 percent of the targets requested by III MAF ground commanders. Of the remaining targets, American aircraft carried out strikes on only 680 or 44 percent of them. Instead of the preplanned strikes, Marine ground commanders had to rely on 2,682 "diverts" or unscheduled strikes which made up 58 percent of the total tactical sorties flown in support of the Marine ground units.⁴¹

USAF SYSTEM FOR PREPLANNED AIR REQUESTS AFTER 10 MARCH 1968



On 5 April 1968, Marine assistant wing commander, Brigadier General Henry W. Hise,* contrasted the difference between Marine responsiveness and that of the Air Force. According to Hise, the Air Force achieved "rapid response and flexibility by diverting sorties." He observed, however, that the air commander often did not consult the ground commander, "for whom the aircraft were originally scheduled . . ." The Marine general called this depriving "one ground unit of vital support to aid another." He also declared this often resulted in an improper mix of ordnance to accomplish the mission. In comparison, the Marine system also permitted the diversion of airborne aircraft but only after receiving the acquiescence of the ground unit commander. For the most part, Marine aviation responded "to increased requirements by scrambles off the hot pad." According to Hise, the Marines had "the responsiveness of diverts without depriving a ground commander of possibly crucial support and . . . [provided] additional sorties over normal schedules to meet unforeseen needs." Furthermore, General Hise pointed out Marine aircraft on the "hot pad" could be fitted out with the proper ordnance to accomplish the mission.⁴²

III MAF was not the only command unhappy with the progress of the single-manager system. On 5 April, Army Major General Willard Pearson, the Deputy Commander of Provisional Corps, indicated to General Anderson that the new system was not working well in the northern two provinces of I Corps. In response on this date as well to General Cushman's complaints about the workings of the system, General Westmoreland acknowledged that single manager was undergoing "technical and procedural difficulties . . ." He understood, however, things were improving. The MACV commander observed that from his perspective that there was "not enough tactical air capability in the RVN to provide all commanders all the air support they would like to have." He concluded his message that he expected to receive from the III MAF commander an evaluation of the system at the end of the month as to whether single manager was meeting III MAF requirements and if the "I DASC operation falls short in any respect."⁴³

In Washington, on 5 April, the full Joint Chiefs of Staff again took up the single-management issue, this time with both the Chairman, General Wheeler, and

the Army Chief of Staff, General Johnson, in attendance. At the meeting, much to the surprise and delight of the Marine Corps, General Johnson reversed the Army position and supported the Marines. In the final vote, only General Wheeler and the Air Force Chief of Staff, General McConnell, favored single manager. At a second session of the JCS three days later, General McCutcheon, who attended both meetings, related that General Wheeler attempted "to float" a compromise position indicating that the Seventh Air Force operational control of Marine fixed-wing sorties was a "temporary expedient and when the emergency was over the status quo would be resumed." General Chapman argued if that were the case the emergency was over and that the Marines should resume control of their assets. Wheeler rejected that proposition. According to McCutcheon, "so as at the moment the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps are lined up against the Air Force and the Chairman has weakened the position to the temporary gimmick." The next step was to send the matter up to the Secretary of Defense. McCutcheon concluded: "I feel better about it [single-manager dispute] than I have in a long time."⁴⁴

In Washington, General Chapman decided to outline formally the Marine Corps position on single manager and its status to senior Marine commanders. In a "green letter" (so named because of the color of the paper) to all Marine general officers, the Commandant reviewed the initiation of the single-manager system over the protests of all Marine commands and his actions in the JCS. He declared there was an "essential difference between the Marine and Air Force concepts of air control and air support . . ." Chapman emphasized in most strong terms that for Marines, air is "a supporting arm" which was to be employed "directly responsive to the ground commander . . ." He believed this basic Marine concept had been set aside and would result in "increased enemy success, increased friendly casualties, and decreased advancement of the war effort." The Commandant viewed that the "integrity" of the Marine air-ground team and "even our force structure" was at stake. While asking all Marine officers to "face this challenge resolutely to forestall any future inroads" on the Corps, he ordered them not to comment on the subject, "either officially or unofficially," and to refer all queries especially from the press to Headquarters, Marine Corps. With the JCS split on the subject and the possible requirement of a Secretary of Defense decision to settle the matter, Chapman mentioned, "we're preparing for that eventuality now."⁴⁵

*Brigadier General Hise, one of the two assistant wing commanders, stated that because of his previous experience on the Joint Staff of the JCS, General Anderson, the wing commander, used him to argue the Marine case in the single manager dispute. Hise Comments.

In Honolulu, Lieutenant General Krulak was not sanguine about the probability of the Secretary of Defense overruling Westmoreland. As he told General Cushman, he expected the Secretary to hold a hearing on the subject, but "knowing how those things operate, I do not believe that General Wheeler would have permitted the matter to [go] forward to SecDef [Secretary of Defense] without first laying the groundwork for the decision he seeks." Krulak suggested to General Cushman another alternative means of attack. He recommended that the III MAF commander should avail himself of the "complaint channel to CinCPac," referring to the 30-day evaluation period called for in the initiating directive. Since all concerned agreed that the system had not really been implemented until 22 March, this would extend the original trial period until 22 April. General Krulak warned: "When we go down this track, we have to have the aces to a degree that will make it absolutely impossible for CinCPac to ignore us or brush us off."⁴⁶

The FMFPac commander then proceeded to advise both Generals Cushman and Anderson about how to proceed. He counseled that General Anderson as the

senior aviation commander for III MAF should begin his presentation with Marine concurrence to the proposition that within a joint force there should be "single management" in that the senior Air Force commander should be the joint commander's "coordinating authority for all air operations." As far as matters relating to air defense and to the interdiction air campaign over Laos and North Vietnam, there was no debate that there should be a single authority. Krulak then observed, however, that Anderson needed to stress that for the Marine commander, "his air support is as inseparable to his combat team as is his artillery, his tanks, or even his infantryman's M16." He then pointed out that the Marine commander made close air support a "cardinal element in his tactical plan, and, if it is diverted to meet a need elsewhere his operation is compromised."⁴⁷

General Krulak then cautioned the III MAF commanders not to get into a pure numbers game of how many sorties were flown and ordnance dropped, but rather to provide the context for the statistics. For example, he declared that in the case of immediate requests for support, the single-manager system

LtGen Lewis W. Walt, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, talks to Marines during a visit to Vietnam. LtGen Walt made a strong presentation of the Marine position to Gen Westmoreland.

Photo from the Abel Collection



appeared to be working. For the period 3–12 April, the new air control agencies approved over 90 percent of them and that over 75 percent of the tactical air support aircraft arrived within 30 minutes of the request and usually with an acceptable bomb or ordnance load. Contrasting these figures to those relative to preplanned missions, Krulak contended that the “Marines were being shortchanged.” For the same period in April, the Seventh Air Force TACC only scheduled 36 percent of the targets desired by ground commanders, and of the remaining targets, only 51 percent of the missions scheduled against them were carried out. According to the FMFPac commander, nearly 41 percent of the total sorties were extra and not requested by the ground commander, “who could neither preplan for this surge effort nor influence the selection of the ordnance available.” Krulak then concluded with the observation that 42 percent of the preplanned sorties carried out were more than 15 minutes late: “This is unacceptable and compromises the basic principle of integrating totally all available fire power.”⁴⁸

Perhaps partially influenced by Krulak’s message, but largely on their own initiative, III MAF and the 1st MAF had begun the process of evaluating the single-manager process and forwarding their conclusions to higher headquarters. On 22 April, General Cushman sent a preliminary message to General Westmoreland to go on record with his unhappiness with the system. At the same time, Major General Anderson, the wing commander, prepared a lengthy presentation for the III MAF commander with the possibility of giving it later to the MACV commander.⁴⁹

Anderson stated the usual Marine arguments. After interviewing more than 70 Marine officers involved with the new procedures, he expanded upon his themes with specific case studies. While acknowledging that the Marine divisions by the beginning of April reported that air response to immediate requests had improved, Anderson maintained that even this part of the new system did not work as well as the statistics implied. He cited an air observer who spotted enemy troops “running across a bomb crater one at a time.” The observer called the Marine DASC and asked for air strikes, stating that he had a “good target.” Before he finished speaking, the DASC provided him with some A-4s. At about the time the A-4s were to reach the designated rendezvous point, the Marine DASC radioed the observer back and stated “they had to take the planes away because the new DASC said they had to go through them to get planes. It was 45 minutes after we asked for the air that we

finally got it on target.” In another case, Anderson quoted the Marine officer in charge of the Khe Sanh DASC recounting that “there was this Air Force Lieutenant Colonel at Ca Lu who said I had to get airplanes through him, that was very slow. Then there was Colonel Lownds who needed air and needed it bad. I just did what I had to do.” General Anderson contended that the only reason there were no more problems with the immediate response procedures was because “people at the lower echelons, finding themselves faced with an unwieldy and unresponsive system, were simply forced to circumvent it.”⁵⁰

Anderson reserved his greatest criticism, however, for the single-manager preplanned missions and their long lead time. The wing commander quoted a battalion forward aircraft controller as saying, “They are telling us now that we have to turn in our CAS [close air support] request this afternoon for the day after tomorrow. We didn’t know this morning what we were going to do this afternoon.” An infantry battalion commander remarked, “When you are moving, your air has to be flexible, now I have to program myself so far ahead that the air mission doesn’t fix anything.” General Anderson contrasted the 80 percent of preplanned targets hit under the former Marine system with the slightly over 50 percent under single manager.⁵¹

Finally, the wing commander ended with three general criticisms. According to Anderson, single manager was “far less responsive to our tactical needs, it has small provision for coordination of air with the total effort, and it increases the administrative burden.” As an example of the latter, he compared the 50-page frag order coming out of the Seventh Air Force TACC with that of the former nine-page frag order published by the wing. Anderson concluded that the new system accomplished little that the former Marine system did not do better, especially in support of ground Marines.⁵²

In early May, General Cushman forwarded to General Westmoreland in message form many of the concerns that General Anderson had expressed in his formal presentation. Cushman basically stated that his analysis of the period 1–30 April drew him to the following conclusions. While response time may have improved, it occurred only because DASCs had diverted aircraft from preplanned targets. Marines had scrambled some aircraft in certain cases to cover the diverted missions. He again expressed dissatisfaction with the long lead time for preplanned missions. He protested the fact that while the number of Marine air-

craft "fragged" for Army units increased every day, the number of "Air Force sorties remained significantly below the programmed level established for Army battalions." Finally, the III MAF commander recommended "that management of Marine strike and reconnaissance aircraft . . . be returned to me and the workable procedures outlined in [MACV directive 95-4] be reinstituted."⁵³

The Seventh Air Force evaluation of the system contrasted sharply with that of the Marines. General Momyer's command reported no significant problems "other than those associated with training and familiarity with a new system." It praised both the efforts and attitudes of Marine and Air Force officers in their attempts to link the two tactical air systems. While admitting that single manager was not perfect, the Air Force report asserted that "with better understanding by the Marine ground units and more experience on the part of all concerned . . . this system will work." The Air Force insisted that "in consideration of proposed large-scale ground offensive operations in being and planned . . . the air effort available must be concentrated, flexible and integrated to provide the tactical air support essential to all ground units."⁵⁴

Bombarded by conflicting points of view, General Westmoreland held to the concept of centralized control, but began to look to the modification of some of the workings of the system. According to Marine Brigadier General Chaisson, the Director of the MACV Combat Operations Center, the visit to Saigon at the end of April by the Marine Corps Assistant Commandant and former III MAF commander, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, played some part in the MACV commander's changing perspective. Chaisson wrote to his wife that when Walt met with the MACV commander, "He scared the daylights out of Westy by telling him that it was the most dangerous decision he had made—and that it would backfire." Apparently General Westmoreland then asked Walt for his specific criticisms. The Marine general repeated what the Marines had been saying all along: too long a delay in the approval of preplanned missions; too many "diverts" which often resulted in the use of the wrong ordnance on the target; and that the 3d Marine Division was not obtaining the "desired level of support."⁵⁵

Whether influenced by Walt's criticisms or not, General Westmoreland ordered General Momyer to meet with Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the commander of Provisional Corps, relative to what constructive changes should be made in the air support of ground forces in northern I Corps. Because

of the implications for the Marine Corps, General Cushman with the approval of General Westmoreland directed that General Anderson, the wing commander, also attend. Representatives from the MACV TASE, the Seventh Air Force TACC, and DASC Victor were also present. General Momyer presided and declared that the purpose was to determine what were the flaws in the system "and how to correct them." Anderson believed that the question should have been "whether or not we should continue with Single Management."⁵⁶

The conference began with a discussion about the allocation of sorties in northern I Corps. General Momyer stated that he had told General Walt that the reason for the reduced number of sorties for the 3d Marine Division were the priorities established by Provisional Corps. General Rosson agreed, explaining that for a time in the Provisional Corps sector, the 1st Air Cavalry because of Operation Pegasus received about 50 percent of the fixed-wing air sorties. The 101st Airborne and the 3d Marine Division during that period divided equally the remaining available sorties. General Rosson's perception also was that "Marines, having always had more air support tend today to ask for more than the Army units." All of the participants agreed, however, that because the Marine units had less artillery and fewer helicopter gunships than the Army, there was a natural tendency for the Marines to rely on more fixed-wing support. This was especially true relative to the escort of troop transport helicopters into landing zones. General Momyer suggested that the commands should determine the number of sorties Marines needed "in connection with helicopter operations in order to offset the lack of gunship helicopters." The Air Force general then declared that the Seventh Air Force "Frag" order would reflect the "number of sorties daily reserved" for helicopter escort.⁵⁷

Even more surprising, according to Anderson, there was general unanimity on the weakness of the preplanning missions and the system of diverts. All concurred that the present preplanning only resulted "in placing a certain amount of air effort airborne and available for any use a specific ground commander may wish." General Rosson complained that the procedures were "too ponderous," although every one was trying to make them work.* Momyer acknowledged that all concerned

*General Rosson later commented that after he assumed command of Prov Corps, "it soon became evident . . . that the system for preplanned fixed-wing support was too slow, and that too many requests for immediate support were being met by use of diverts. This in turn often meant different ordnance on target." Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb96 (Vietnam Comment File).

were doing the best they could and that he hoped to cut down on lead times and delays. In order to get the proper ordnance for a specific mission, the Seventh Air Force commander stated that he was giving some thought to permit modification to the daily frag order about six hours prior to time on target. General Anderson countered that the "downloading of ordnance and substituting another is much too wasteful of manpower" and recommended instead the strip alert of aircraft preloaded with a mix of bombs and ammunition. While General Momyer made no comment about the wing commander's suggestion, General Anderson observed that "the tenor of this discussion leads me to believe that the Air Force knows it is in some trouble on single management and is willing to modify the system, in major respects if necessary, to keep the system in force." The Marine commander concluded that, "in such an atmosphere of accommodation we will be hard pressed to obtain a reversal of the decision to implement single management."³⁸

General Anderson was correct in his assumption that both Generals Westmoreland and Momyer were under some pressure from higher headquarters relative to the single-management issue. Upon receiving both the III MAF and MACV preliminary reports about the

Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, who relieved Secretary Robert S. McNamara meets with LtGen William B. Rosson, CG Prov Corps. Gen Rosson complained during a conference that the new control provisions were "too ponderous . . ."

Photo is from the Abel Collection



workings of the new system, Admiral Sharp decided to send his own evaluation team, headed by Marine Brigadier General Homer G. Hutchinson, Jr., the CinCPac Chief of Staff for Operations, to examine the situation. According to Lieutenant General Krulak, General Westmoreland protested the move and asked the CinCPac commander to defer the arrival of the team until he held his own hearings on the subject. Admiral Sharp apparently denied the request. At that point, as related by General Krulak, Westmoreland made the statement that the CinCPac team would "come back and recommend to you that the system be returned to the old status quo."³⁹

The Hutchinson evaluation group arrived in Vietnam on 4 May and visited both MACV in Saigon and III MAF at Da Nang. Upon their return to Honolulu three days later, Brigadier General Hutchinson and his staff began to work on the report. After completion of the draft, he wrote to General McCutcheon at Marine headquarters in Washington that Admiral Sharp viewed single management "pretty well cracked." Hutchinson enclosed a copy of the draft report in his letter to McCutcheon and asked the latter to keep it "fairly well disguised." Despite his own viewpoint on

Marine BGen Homer G. Hutchinson, Jr., the CinCPac J-3 and a naval aviator, headed a CinCPac evaluation team on the new air control provisions.

Unnumbered Department of Defense (USMC) photo



the subject, General Hutchinson observed that the "report had to be written with some obvious restraint from [a] 'joint staff' standpoint."⁶⁰

While not directly criticizing the decision for single management, the report discussed in detail what it considered several shortcomings in its implementation and operational procedures. Admitting that the Army units in I Corps received in April more air support than they had in the past, the report, nevertheless, pointed out that Marine ground units did not enjoy "as much or as responsive tactical air support" as under the old system. Like all the other evaluations of single manager, the report remarked upon the long lead time for preplanned sorties and the resulting large number of diversions. It observed, moreover, that the Marine wing met the most urgent "unfragged" requests from Marine ground units by overflying by 22 percent its aircraft "programmed sortie rate." At the same time, Air Force aircraft flew only at 96 percent of their "utilization index." According to the report, the Air Force wing at Da Nang conducted 1,404 missions over North Vietnam and Laos. The authors of the report commented that with the availability of Thailand-based Air Force aircraft and naval carrier aircraft in the Gulf of Tonkin that "it would not be necessary to use South Vietnam-based aircraft for this purpose when requests for sorties in I CTZ are not being filled." As Hutchinson mentioned in his personal letter to General McCutcheon, "we have pressed the point with Sharp that 7th AF has been flying too much out of country" with in-country-based aircraft, "thus alluding to the fact that if this were stopped, MACV should be relieved of his concern that the Army isn't getting needed support in I Corps."⁶¹

For his part, General Krulak, also in Honolulu, continued his efforts to convince Admiral Sharp to intervene in the single-management issue. According to the FMFPac commander, he persuaded Sharp to send a message to Westmoreland again noting that General Cushman remained unhappy with the present working arrangements of the single-manager system. The CinCPac commander stated that he wanted to hear the briefings that were to be presented at MACV headquarters by III MAF, the Seventh Air Force, and Westmoreland's own MACV evaluation team. These were scheduled for 8 May. In his reply, General Westmoreland agreed to have the concerned parties make the same presentations before Admiral Sharp a few days later in Honolulu. He observed, however, that many of the rough spots of the system had been worked out. General Krulak warned the Marine Corps

leadership, "Westy is not going to let us get away with a presentation only of our gripes, but will include his own story too."⁶²

At the conference in Saigon at MACV headquarters, both Generals Cushman and Norman Anderson represented III MAF. General Anderson presented the III MAF position on single management. Basically, Anderson argued that the new system for III MAF had few advantages, but several disadvantages. The Seventh Air Force briefer stated that all concerned including the Marines were doing their best to make single manager work and several modifications were in the works.⁶³

After all the presentations, the senior commanders, including both Cushman and Anderson, met in a closed session. According to Cushman, General Westmoreland addressed the group and emphasized that the issue of single management involved Service conflicts revolving about "procedures, tactical arrangements, [differing] philosophies," and the desire of "commanders to allocate total resources in the most effective way." The deployment of the 1st Air Cavalry and 101st Airborne Divisions and the establishment of Provisional Corps headquarters in northern I Corps had irretrievably altered command relations including air arrangements. Westmoreland believed the briefings helped to clarify the points of contention. The MACV commander stated that the trial period for single management demonstrated "that the strong features of the Marine system are evident. The practical advantage of [the] commandwide area of the Air Force system is also evident." Westmoreland stated that he wanted to combine the best features of each: the responsiveness of Marine air together with the Air Force flexibility for concentrating air assets. He declared that the TASE and the Seventh Air Force procedures for fragging aircraft were too cumbersome and Marine practices were wasteful of bombs and aircraft. The MACV commander stated that it was his intention "to use our resources to meet the problem we face not on theory and not by ineffective practices."⁶⁴

Following a desultory and inconclusive discussion about possible changes, Westmoreland turned to the upcoming briefing at CinCPac. He declared that his chief of staff, Major General Walter T. Kerwin, would represent him and provide the opening statement. III MAF, the Seventh Air Force, and the MACV evaluation team would make separate briefings based from their respective perspectives. General Kerwin, however, would field all questions. The MACV commander concluded the meeting by declaring, "it was fiction

that this thing [single manager] was generated by Air Force roles and mission. It was his idea—his decision and not a maneuver by the Air Force.” General Westmoreland stressed that he wanted “this point included in the briefing.”⁶⁵

The Honolulu Conference for the most part proved to be a restatement of already established positions. As planned, on 10 May, the representatives from the respective services and commands of MACV made their standard briefings before Admiral Sharp. General Blood once more represented the Seventh Air Force. As General Anderson, who made the case for III MAF, remembered, the Seventh Air Force indicated its willingness to make adjustments “in accordance with any criticism that we might have, which had the effect of taking the rug right out from under us.” As the wing commander recalled, Admiral Sharp “elected to not intervene.” Anderson observed that Sharp was near the end of his tour and “must have felt that further protest would have to be at [a] higher level”⁶⁶

Admiral Sharp may have been aware that the Department of Defense was about to act upon the referral of the single-management issue to the Secretary by the Joint Chiefs. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, who replaced Robert S. McNamara in February, delegated the decision to Deputy Secretary Paul H. Nitze. On 15 May, after listening to the formal presentations and reviewing the various position papers by the respective Services, Deputy Secretary Nitze generally supported the position of Generals Wheeler and Westmoreland. The secretary stated that he agreed with the Chairman that “the unified combat commander on the scene should be presumed to be the best judge of how the combat forces assigned to him are to be organized” Nitze added that he considered this a temporary measure and not a precedent and believed that MACV would return control of the Marine air to III MAF “when the tactical situation permits.” He, nevertheless, expressed concern about the apparent weakness of the present single-manager system relative to responsiveness, but presumed that General Westmoreland was taking action to rectify the situation. Nitze directed General Wheeler “to review personally the single-management arrangement in I Corps to determine, in coordination with CinCPac and ComUSMACV such changes as he considers necessary to minimize delays between requests for air support and execution”^{67*}

*General Chapman, the Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1968, remembered that about the time Deputy Secretary Nitze made his decision the House Armed Services Committee “held a hearing on the state of the War with JCS. Single management came up and was

In reply to the Deputy Secretary, General Wheeler stated that he was also troubled about the lack of responsiveness to preplanned air requests. Although he argued that the Marines may have exaggerated the length of time required for such requests and that some of the deadlines were self-imposed, the Chairman admitted that the system needed modification. He mentioned that MACV was looking to a partial decentralization “based on resource considerations” which would permit “the majority of preplanned requests” to be coordinated between III MAF and the “collocated DASCs.” Wheeler stated that General Westmoreland’s basic interest was to “have the flexibility to employ the tactical air resources most effectively where and when support is required.”⁶⁸

By this time, all concerned with the issue were looking toward some settlement of the dispute. In one instance, General McCutcheon recommended to General Chapman, the Marine Corps Commandant, that the latter meet with the Air Force Chief of Staff, General McConnell. McCutcheon believed that a frank discussion between the Service chiefs might result in McConnell “to tell Momyer to back off a little.” On 17 May, after learning about Deputy Secretary Nitze’s decision, McCutcheon told Major General Anderson, the 1st MAW commander, about a new Marine Corps tack, “which is to get the opcon back, let them keep ‘single management’ and get on with the war.”⁶⁹

Lieutenant General Krulak outlined this Marine Corps proposal in a back-channel message to Admiral Sharp. Krulak conceded that MACV under the old system had some reason for dissatisfaction. He observed that while MACV had controlled about 75 percent of the fixed-wing sorties in South Vietnam which included those sorties that the 1st MAW made available, General Westmoreland “was never sure of what number of sorties the Marines would make available”

strongly criticized by [the chairman of the committee] for loss by Marines of *immediate* [emphasis in original], responsive close air support. Gen Wheeler presented the standard arguments to support S/M [single manager]. I . . . elected to remain silent, as did the other chiefs, because I believed Congress was no place to solve a war-time operational problem.” Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Comments on draft, dtd 17Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Chapman Comments. Army historian Graham A. Cosmas noted the “very lukewarm nature of even Wheeler’s and Nitze’s support of Westmoreland. Both indicated grave doubts about the practical workings of single management, but were unwilling to overrule their theater commander on a question of organization of his forces. However, both emphasized this was a temporary tactical expedient and urged ComUSMACV to restore the former command arrangement as soon as he felt the situation warranted, which of course ComUSMACV never did.” Cosmas Comments.

Moreover, even the MACV emergency authority did not permit "a day-in, day-out diversion of additional Marine sorties" to other missions. Krulak observed, however, that the single-manager system as instituted by General Westmoreland resulted in too severe a "surgery . . . that has left the patient extremely weak, with his Marine leg partially paralyzed." The FMFPac commander suggested instead return to III MAF operational control of Marine fixed-wing tactical and reconnaissance aircraft sorties. In turn, III MAF would make available to the Seventh Air Force "such sorties as ComUSMACV regards necessary to ensure a proper weight of tactical air effort." Krulak would not limit this MACV authority to preplanned sorties, but would permit the preemption of additional Marine air resources, when "in MACV's judgement, the overall tactical effort so requires." The III MAF TADC would provide the MACV TASE "with real time information on Marine air availability and status at all times." According to General Krulak this Marine solution "would legitimize single managership without question and would still leave essential operational direction of III MAF organic air resources in CG III MAF hands." In a memorandum to the Joint Chiefs on 18 May 1968, General Chapman presented much the same argument and concluded that the Marine proposal would provide a transition to normal command relations and also increase responsiveness.⁷⁰

While the Marine Corps continued to present alternative policies, General Westmoreland's staff worked upon modifications relative to air control procedures. On 18 May, at a meeting with Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland discussed his intention to make some changes in the working of the single-management system at the end of the month. The MACV commander wanted a 30-day trial period until the end of June and planned to ask "III MAF to withhold comments" until that time. Admiral Sharp indicated his general approval of Westmoreland's course of action. According to Marine Brigadier General Chaisson, the head of the MACV Combat Operations Center, General Westmoreland was well aware of both the Marine objections and suggested revisions and tried to accommodate them. On 20 May, Chaisson jotted in his notebook diary, "Got Gen West[moreland] to go along with our approach to single management. Mommyer is next hurdle." General Westmoreland also received prodding from General Wheeler, who directed that MACV in conjunction with both III MAF and the Seventh Air Force, "continue to evaluate the effectiveness" of single manager. Westmoreland was to

inform both CinCPac and the Chairman of JCS "each month of the results of his evaluation and of any modification he has made to the system."⁷¹

While neither General Westmoreland nor Mommyer was willing to return to III MAF full authority over Marine fixed-wing sorties, they made a drastic change in the scheduling of preplanned ground support missions. On 21 May, General Westmoreland outlined the new procedures. MACV now divided preplanned strikes into two categories, one to be determined weekly and the other daily in two separate frag orders. According to the modified system, 70 percent of all preplanned sorties were to be contained in the Seventh Air Force TACC weekly frag order. While the frag order designated number of aircraft, time on target, and basic ordnance load, the supported ground commander could use these sorties any way he desired, "consistent with aircraft and control capabilities." The Seventh Air Force daily frag order designated the remaining preplanned missions to meet "justified requests for additional support and increased enemy threats as they occur." In essence, as General Krulak observed, III MAF made available all its air "attack and reconnaissance capability" to the Seventh Air Force, who in turn hands about 70 percent back "to the Marine command."⁷²

The new procedures were to go into effect on 30 May for a 30-day test period. At the end of that time, the concerned commands were to provide constructive criticism. General Cushman observed that he was under orders not to forward any comments on the modifications to CinCPac until after completion of the evaluation period. The III MAF commander, nevertheless, stated that he would provide ComUSMACV with his views and would share them with CMC and CGFMFPac "to preclude any action that cross pending proposals to Dep Sec Def or JCS." At the same time, General Cushman looked favorably on the new MACV directive, remarking that it "appears to offer us a considerable opportunity to regain control of our assets."⁷³

Admitting that the modification provided more flexibility, Marine commanders and staff officers still pointed to several continuing disadvantages. While prescribed ordnance loads and time on targets could be adjusted, III MAF still had to match the ground requirements of its subordinate Army and Marine units with the predetermined 70 percent sorties in the weekly frag order. As far as the remaining 30 percent preplanned sorties outlined in the Seventh Air Force daily frag report, with the exception of less required detailed information, III MAF was to follow the same procedures as before.

The Marines still considered the single-management system, even with the changes, more cumbersome than necessary. Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Carey in the Wing G-3 section later commented that while the 70-30 split "gave us more flexibility at the working level, matching available sorties to the requests of the units was time consuming, confusing, and error prone." He stated his staff "affectionately termed the system, 'Momyer's Chinese Fire Drill.'" In more earthy terms, General Anderson, the wing commander, described the entire procedure "an ass-backwards system." General Cushman concluded that "until Marine air assets are returned to full opcon of CG III MAF, command relationships will remain more complex."⁷⁴

At the same time MACV was altering single manager, General Chapman and the Marine headquarters staff in Washington proposed their own modification to the air arrangements in South Vietnam. In mid-May, the Commandant circulated for comment to both Generals Krulak and Cushman a headquarters point paper on the subject. The idea was for MACV formally to return to III MAF operational control 70 percent of Marine fixed-wing assets, while retaining sortie control of the remaining 30 percent. General Chapman planned to give the point paper to the Secretary of the Navy to forward to the Secretary of Defense.⁷⁵

While both Generals Cushman and Krulak had some reservations about some of the details contained in the point paper, they saw merit in the Commandant's course of action. General Cushman wanted return of 100 percent of the air assets to his control, remarking that the retention of the 30 percent by MACV would result in a "duplicative air request, control, and direction system." He, nevertheless, believed that the CMC proposal could be the basis for a further compromise on the single-management issue. While agreeing with Cushman and also taking exception to a few added minor details in the Commandant's proposal, Lieutenant General Krulak's reply was more positive. Krulak believed that the Marine headquarters recommended modification to the air control system "gets the camel's nose back into the tent—most advantageous, since the tent happens to be our own." The FMFPac commander then observed that he had not mentioned any of this to Admiral Sharp as he was of the opinion that "the impetus just has to come from the top down." Krulak stated that if Chapman wanted, he, Krulak, would "take him [Sharp] on immediately . . . but my recommendation is to give him a few thousand volts from above first."⁷⁶

Incorporating many of the suggestions provided by both III MAF and FMFPac, General Chapman proceeded on two fronts to revise the air control policy in Vietnam. He met with the Secretary of the Navy and provided him the point paper and at the same time prepared a memorandum for the Joint Chiefs making the same points. As Chapman's chief air officer, General McCutcheon wrote, "at first blush this [the Marine recommendations] looks similar to the ComUSMACV proposal where 70 percent of the missions would be fragged on a weekly basis," but insisted "there are some vital differences." The basic difference, of course, would be that the Marine proposal would do away with the long weekly frag with its predetermined times on target and ordnance loads. In fact, McCutcheon, like both Cushman and Krulak, opposed any mention of 70 percent and favored "a 100 percent recapture" of Marine sorties.⁷⁷

In his presentation to Secretary of the Navy Paul R. Ignatius, General Chapman argued his case. He provided Secretary Ignatius the statistical rationale for the Marine strong emphasis on fixed-wing support for its ground forces.* While appreciating the need for ComUSMACV, whether General Westmoreland or General Abrams, to have some form of "single manager" over tactical air, Chapman stressed that even the new MACV modification had not made the air support

*The level of air support required for Marine and Army divisions differed because of many factors. According to an analysis by FMFPac, a Marine division in Vietnam consisted of approximately 20,736 and an Army division of 17,116 men. [For further discussion of Marine division strength see Chapter 27 and Appendices of Marine T/Os.] The Marine wing supported the Marine division with 276 transport helicopters, 60 armed observation helicopters, and 159 fixed-wing attack aircraft. The Army division on the other hand contained 479 transport helicopters and 184 authorized gunships, and required 132 fixed-wing aircraft in support at a 1.1 sortie rate. Citing DOD SE Asia air planning criteria, FMFPac analysts figured that the 159 Marine aircraft were to provide each Marine battalion with 200 fixed-wing sorties per month. This came out to six sorties per battalion per day or 160 daily sorties to support the Marine units in I Corps. These were about one-third more sorties than the Air Force programmed for fixed-wing support of Army divisions. According to FMFPac, the Air Force was to provide the Army four fixed-wing sorties per battalion per day or 150 sorties per battalion monthly. The resulting difference in the fixed-wing support between the Army and Marine divisions was based on the following: the Marine battalion was about a third larger than that of the Army; the Marine division had about 20 percent less artillery support; and the Marines had fewer armed helicopters. CGFMFPac msg to CMC, dtd 30May68, HQMC Msgs, Mar-Jun68. In his comments, General Norman Anderson made the additional point that the 1st MAW supported two Marine Divisions and also Army and allied units when required. MajGen Norman J. Anderson, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

as responsive as it should be. According to the Marine Commandant, the “net effect is that ground operations become responsive to air operations rather than the converse.” Chapman recommended, instead, that III MAF retain mission direction of 70 percent of his available sorties and would make available to MACV the other 30 percent based on a rate of 1.1 sorties per day. Such a solution, according to General Chapman, permitted III MAF to ensure “the immediate availability of aircraft for support of troops on the battlefield,” while MACV would in effect still control 30 percent of Marine sorties and able to divert any Marine air mission when the situation demanded.⁷⁸

The Commandant's efforts once more to have higher authorities in Washington reverse single manager by edict from above failed. While Secretary Ignatius endorsed General Chapman's recommendations to him, Deputy Secretary of Defense Nitze again refused to dictate air policy to MACV. Using much the same rationale as he had on 15 May, Nitze stressed that ComUSMACV was studying the responsiveness of the new procedures established at the end of May and the secretary was sure that the field commander would make any changes that were necessary. At the same time, while General Wheeler, the Chairman, forwarded the Commandant's memorandum to CinCPac and ComUSMACV, the Joint Chiefs also declined to take any action on their own.⁷⁹

Given Secretary's Nitze's two unfavorable decisions, General Chapman believed any further exertion on his part to influence action through DOD to be self-defeating. Instead, he planned to revert to pressure from below. As he advised Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., his former chief of staff at HQMC and new Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, who relieved General Krulak at the end of May, “a move from Saigon may be our best bet at this time.”⁸⁰

The Continuing Debate

The Commandant's change of course was based in part on the actual or scheduled reshuffling of the key personalities both at CinCPac and at MACV. At CinCPac headquarters in Hawaii, in addition to General Buse replacing General Krulak, Admiral John C. McCain was to take over command from Admiral Sharp at the end of July. In Saigon, on 15 June, General Abrams became ComUSMACV in place of General Westmoreland, who returned to Washington to become the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. Both Generals Norman Anderson, the commander of the 1st MAW,



Photo courtesy of Center of Military History
Army Gen Creighton W. Abrams, ComUSMACV, right, talks to MajGen George I. Forsythe, CG, 1st Air Cav Div. Upon his relief of Gen Westmoreland in June 1968, one of the problems facing Gen Abrams was the question of single manager.

and also General Momyer, the commander of the Seventh Air Force, were scheduled for reassignment. The hope was that with a different cast of commanders in place in strategic command billets there would be more room for compromise. Both General Buse, the new FMFPac commander, and General George S. Brown, the new Seventh Air Force commander, had less prickly personalities than their predecessors, Lieutenant General Krulak and General Momyer. In his appraisal of the situation, however, General Chaisson, who also completed his tour at this time in Saigon, stated that he personally did not believe that General Momyer's departure would change much, “essentially . . . [Momyer] was playing an Air Force policy push here, and I don't see the Air Force falling off on their push.”⁸¹

While not too much was known about General Abrams' position, except that he wanted to ensure adequate fixed-wing air support for Army units in I Corps, Marine commanders assumed that he was more flexible about the single-manager issue than Westmoreland. Colonel Edward L. Fossum, the III MAF liaison officer at MACV, upon his relief, related that the bickering between III MAF and MACV over air command relations disturbed both Westmoreland and Abrams. Fossum believed that Abrams' solution might be to reduce Marine strength in the north and bring the



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422245

LtGen Henry W. Buse, CGFMFPac, in the foreground, arrives at the 1st MAW helicopter landing pad for a visit to the wing headquarters. As it was for Gen Abrams, the question of single manager was a major priority for the new FMFPac commander.

Marine divisions together and “solve this air business.” Fossum admitted that he “could not really read General Abrams about the Marine Corps.” General Chaisson, who also rotated at this time, observed that Abrams, while often critical* of the Marines and publicly supporting the single-management policy that he inherited, was not as adamant as Westmoreland and “has it [single manager] up for review.”⁸²

In one of his first actions, Lieutenant General Buse made arrangements to visit Vietnam to discuss the situation with General Abrams. On 16 June, the new FMFPac commander met with Abrams in Saigon. Buse described Abrams as “very cordial” and said that the two had a very frank discussion. According to General Buse, he told the MACV commander that he “wasn’t down there to critique at what he [Abrams] was doing operationally, nor was I going to tell him what to do operationally.” In turn, Abrams replied that he had no particular problems in I Corps, “unless air control could be so considered.” Seeing an opportunity, Buse suggested that Abrams end the emergency in I Corps and return control of Marine air to III MAF. The MACV commander, however, was not prepared to take such drastic action. Abrams countered that the “Marines use

more air support than anyone,” and not only because of their lightness in artillery and helicopter support. Buse explained that “air support is part of our life and that we were structured, trained, and accustomed to use it to maximum benefit.” General Buse then asked Abrams directly if he felt as strongly on the subject as General Westmoreland. The MACV commander answered “in a definite and strong negative.” In assessing his meeting with Abrams and later that day with General Bruce Palmer, Deputy Commander, U.S. Army Vietnam, Buse considered Abrams still open on the subject and that “a tinkle has been heard from the bell of freedom.”⁸³

Fresh from his trip to Vietnam, Lieutenant General Buse reported to the Commandant on the favorable atmosphere he found in Saigon and the present situation relative to single management. He observed that from the MACV perspective there was general satisfaction with the new modified system and “with the quantity and timeliness of air support.” Although the loss of overall air control authority over fixed-wing sorties for III MAF still caused several deficiencies, Buse maintained the “Marine air control system is intact and functioning” He stated that the weekly frag procedures caused less of an administrative burden for III MAF in that it did not require specific coordinates. Still the FMFPac commander related that the only reason that single-manager system still worked was the

*General Chaisson noted in his diary on 15 May that at dinner, “Abe [Abrams] took off on Marines, ‘loners, small vision, won’t play.’” Chaisson Diary, Jan–Jun68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute).

existing Marine Corps system and the "fact that the 1st MAW continually generates sorties in excess of the 1.2 [sortie] rate."⁸⁴

Despite the apparent happiness on the part of MACV with the new modified single-manager system, General Buse agreed with General Chapman that the best channel for reversal of the policy was through Saigon and possibly Honolulu. The FMFPac commander stated that there was possibly a means of compromise through reducing the span of control of III MAF in I Corps. He posed the possibility of dividing I Corps into two sectors, one Army and one Marine, possibly divided at the Hai Van Pass. If that occurred, Buse thought Abrams might be induced to "return control of Marine air." One disadvantage that he saw to this path might be a lopsided distribution of air support. The Marines in a reduced two-division sector might be receiving more support while "our Army neighbors, who now have no complaints, could starve." Buse preferred that General Cushman, the III MAF commander, in his June evaluation, present "a plan for restoring the integrity of the air-ground team." According to Buse, the III MAF commander "had a good feel of the pulse and have some local accommodations which can be digested at this point and still lead to full recovery." At that point, General Buse would then approach Admiral Sharp, still CinCPac, "in consonance with Cushman's efforts and rationale, adding to them the personal observation and staff data I found during my trip."⁸⁵

On 29 June 1968, the III MAF commander provided both Generals Buse and Chapman his draft appraisal of the May modification to Single Management and proposed recommendations to MACV and asked for their comments. General Cushman acknowledged a definite improvement and reported a 54-percent increase during the month in Air Force sorties. For Marine air, however, he stated that the weekly and daily frags "has required an inordinately high number of scrambles and add-on sorties." He concluded that the present preplanned sortie level fell far short of the number of air missions required by the ground commanders.⁸⁶

General Cushman's suggested revisions to single manager were much more moderate than earlier proposals he had made to MACV and those already being forwarded by the Commandant. He recommended that MACV retain the present system, but improve its coordination with supporting arms and basically refine the preplanned procedures. Cushman suggested that MACV give to III MAF, in a weekly block frag order, control over all Marine preplanned sorties, with the exception of those interdiction strikes against Laos and North Vietnam. III MAF would determine time on target and ordnance loads based on the needs of the respective Army and Marine divisions in I Corps. In turn, the Marine command would provide the Seventh Air Force control centers "real time reports" on Marine sorties.⁸⁷

Both Generals Buse and Chapman were somewhat disappointed with the III MAF proposal and wanted a stronger statement from General Cushman. While agreeing with Cushman's evaluation and understanding his delicate position as a subordinate to MACV, they still desired the III MAF commander to preface his recommendations with a "positive statement reaffirming our collective position on the return of air assets" to Marine control. General Buse argued that this may be "our last shot" to reverse the situation because Abrams "and no one else will make this decision and once made we can expect it to last for the duration." According to Buse, the new MACV commander was "practical, apolitical, not necessarily bound by prior arrangements, and not intimidated by Seventh Air Force pressure." While Abrams possibly was impressed with the improvement in support of the Army divisions under the revised single-manager system, Buse believed the Army general susceptible to an appeal based on the relationship between infantry and supporting arms. The FMFPac commander thought that Cushman could make a convincing case that it was the Marine interface with the cumbersome Seventh Air Force mission control procedures that resulted in the enhanced air support for the Army divisions, not the centralization of air assets under the Seventh Air Force.⁸⁸

In his revision of his reply to MACV, General Cushman made some minor cosmetic changes but decided against the direct approach suggested by General Buse. Cushman thanked the FMFPac commander for his advice, stating he incorporated "as many as possible under the circumstances prevailing." The III MAF commander declared that he had

*Lieutenant General Carey made the observation that "our salvation in operating under the single-management concept was that our Marine Air had more flexibility than Seventh Air Force in that we were able to generate and maintain a higher sortie rate, we could surge to as high as a 3.0 sortie rate if required. In many informal conversations with my Air Force counterparts they marveled at our endurance and questioned, 'How do you do it?'" Carey Comments.

advanced "much of the philosophy" recommended by Buse several times to Abrams and "to repeat it once again could be counterproductive." Moreover, according to Cushman, if Abrams accepted the III MAF proposals, "I will once again have control of all my air assets" General Cushman, nevertheless, expressed his doubts about a positive outcome for the Marine position, but that his present tactic was "more saleable than our past direct approaches."⁸⁹

As General Cushman predicted, the MACV evaluation, despite the Marine arguments to the contrary, saw no need to alter the arrangements over air control in Vietnam. In fact, the author of a Marine Corps Headquarters memo on the subject wrote that the tenor of General Abrams most recent comments "seem to indicate the system may have reached a point of equilibrium unless some additional force is applied." In Washington, Major General McCutcheon expressed little surprise that General Abrams was relatively satisfied with the modified single-manager system. As McCutcheon* wrote to Major General Charles J. Quilter, the new 1st MAF commander who had relieved General Anderson on 22 June, "it is only us Marines who have noticed the diminution in effectiveness." McCutcheon even admitted that this so-called reduction in effectiveness "isn't very much now since they [the Air Force] incorporated all our suggested changes." The nub of the matter was, according to McCutcheon, "we still don't have the OpCon [operational control]."⁹⁰

The Commandant and General McCutcheon were in hopes that the selection of Admiral John C. McCain to be the new CinCPac might provide another avenue to challenge single manager in Vietnam. As early as 23 May, just after his nomination for the command, the Marine headquarters staff in Washington briefed the admiral on its perspective of the single-manager dispute. The Marines continued

to update McCain from time to time before he took over his new post. As General McCutcheon observed in his letter to Quilter, the new CinCPac would not be able "to jump in . . . right away and right the wrong that was done, but I think we have a solid friend in him."⁹¹

At the same time in Honolulu, Lieutenant General Buse tried to use his influence with Admiral Sharp to endorse the Marine proposal of giving General Cushman, as CG III MAF, the authority to frag directly the 70 percent of preplanned missions in the weekly frag order. According to Buse, Sharp had completed his own evaluation and basically supported General Cushman's recommended changes. Apparently, the admiral had discussed his recommendations with the new Seventh Air Force commander, General Brown. The Air Force general proposed that Admiral Sharp first clear his revisions with General Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, before sending them on to General Abrams. General Buse believed that "Sharp will stick to his decision . . . But we now will encounter a day or so delay . . ." Buse stated that he could see

MajGen Charles J. Quilter relieved MajGen Anderson as CG, 1st MAF in June 1968.

Unnumbered Defense Department (USMC) photo



*As Deputy Chief of Staff for Air at Headquarters Marine Corps, General McCutcheon was not in any chain of command relative to the administration or operations of Marine aviation in Vietnam. While fully aware of this, General McCutcheon kept himself fully informed about Marine aviation matters in the country through an informal correspondence. As he wrote earlier to General Quilter, he would write "from time to time as I did Norm [General Anderson] and Ben [Major General Louis B. Robertshaw, an earlier commander of the 1st MAF] and occasionally get on the phone . . . I think we both understand that FMFPac is sensitive to being passed over so in most cases the kind of information that will be passed personally will be of such a nature that it will not compromise FMFPac's command prerogatives." McCutcheon ltr to MajGen Charles J. Quilter, dtd 5Jul68 (Ltr No. 34, File Q, 1968 Correspondence, McCutcheon Papers).



Unnumbered Defense Department (USMC) photo

Adm John C. McCain, CinCPac (seated with cigar in his mouth), visits Marine Fire Support Base Lance in Operation Taylor Common. LtGen Cushman is seated just behind and to the right of Adm McCain. Both Gen Quilter and Adm McCain also had to wrestle with the single manager issue.

"no impact on anyone in Washington, if Sharp makes this decision with exception" of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.⁹²

With Sharp leaving his command, however, it was obvious that his recommendations would only have validity if they were endorsed by his successor. Obviously, the Marines believed that the chances were good that Admiral McCain would do so. Marine Brigadier General Hutchinson, the CinCPac J-3, wrote to General McCutcheon that "we had McCain as near fully locked in on a decision to return about 70 percent of our fixed-wing assets to Marine control as it was possible to be short of having the decision signed off."⁹³

Again the Marine aspirations were to lead to frustration. After assuming command, in August, Admiral McCain together with Lieutenant General Buse visited General Abrams in Saigon. Their visit also coincided with one by General Chapman to Vietnam. General Hutchinson related that McCain had "withheld his final decision for the obvious pro-

ocol reasons of being able to say he had discussed the subject directly with Abe." In the meeting over single management that included the two Marine generals as well as McCain and Abrams, General Abrams apparently was willing to modify single manager in return for an alteration of command relations in I Corps. The Marine generals, at that point, decided not to push the issue. According to Brigadier General Hutchinson, this course of action made "it impossible for McCain to do anything but go along." Hutchinson stated that the admiral was not yet "in writing, but I would guess that after he sees Chapman . . . the issue will be closed out." In General Chapman's version, Admiral McCain, a close personal friend, told him, "that he was new on the scene, that such an order was vehemently opposed by his principal commander in the field . . . and that he just didn't feel persuaded that it was a good idea and that he ought to do it, and he never did."

Through the rest of 1968, the Marines would continue to bring up the single-manager issue, but with



Photo from the Abel Collection

U.S. Army BGen Howard H. Cooksey, an assistant division commander of the Americal Division, paints a "Happy Birthday" on a 500-pound bomb at the Chu Lai airstrip in honor of the 193d anniversary of the Marine Corps and in appreciation of Marine close air support for the division. Col Rex A. Deasy, commanding officer of MAG-12, looks on.

diminishing expectations.* On 9 September, General Cushman asked General Abrams for authorization to have "mission direction of in-country Marine strike assets on a 30-day trial period within the framework of single manager." The III MAF commander then provided Abrams with a detailed breakdown both of Air Force and Marine sorties in support of ground forces in I Corps covering the period from 30 May until 2 September. According to III MAF statistics, 61 percent of the total sorties were preplanned while 34 percent of this total were "add-ons" and scrambles" (See Table 1).

*On the tactical level, Colonel Robert D. Slay, who commanded MAG-11 from June through the end of the year, wrote that he "insured that my FRAG orders from 1st MAF were carried out; I really didn't care where the FRAG orders to Wing came from. Politics and in-fighting for control of air assets was of little concern . . . where the flying and dying took place. The concept of the Marine Air-Ground Team was well understood, however, and my command was briefed to give first and highest priority to any Marine ground unit in trouble." Col Robert D. Slay, Comments on draft, dtd 25Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Nearly 40 percent of the Marine sorties fell into this latter category as compared with only 29 percent of the Air Force sorties in I Corps. According to Cushman, such a high percentage of add-ons and scrambles "points up either a shortage of preplans or less than optimum utilization of available resources." He believed the 30-day trial period would demonstrate a marked improvement in these percentages.⁹⁴

Despite discussion with Seventh Air Force officials and some optimism on the part of the 1st MAF staff that MACV might accept this trial period, General Abrams turned down the III MAF request. The MACV commander opposed what he considered double management, and hoped to end the dispute once and for all. Supported by General Wheeler, the JCS Chairman, Abrams ended the formal monthly evaluations of the system. As he stated in November 1968, "we do not wish to appear intransigent about this matter . . . but it is vital that ComUSMACV retain the centralized control and direction of TacAir [tactical air] in the hands of a single individual."⁹⁵

Table 1
Attack Sorties Planned and Flown by
Marine and Air Force Aircraft
30 May—2 Sept 1968

Type	USAF	USMC	Total	Percentage of Total Flown
Preplanned				
Flown	7,731	9,960	17,691	61
Immediate				
Diverts	468	573	1,059	5
Scrambles	1,505	3,235	4,740	16
Add Ons	1,807	3,696	5,503	18
Totals				
Flown	11,529	17,464	28,993	
Preplanned				
Fragged	9,473	11,980	21,453	83

While General Abrams remained firm in his support of single manager as modified in May, the Marine Corps continued the struggle in the following months and years, but in different forums. While the Commandant continued to raise the issue among the Joint Chiefs, only the Navy, since General Westmoreland became the Army Chief of Staff, now supported the Marine position. As General McCutcheon observed to General Quilter, the 1st MAW commander, in November, 1968, "I am working . . . on the philosophy that single management is here, and the way to beat it is to join it and out-manage them."⁹⁶

Using this tactic, the Marines in a series of local arrangements and working agreements managed to

obtain in 1969 and 1970 practical control of their aviation assets. In early 1969, III MAF had succeeded in vetoing an attempt by MACV to modify its air directive 95.4 to include the term "operational direction" to define the relationship between the Seventh Air Force and III MAF. Finally, in August 1970, Lieutenant General McCutcheon as CG III MAF, agreed to a new MACV air directive that gave "formal sanction" to the changes that the Marines had succeeded in obtaining from MACV and the Air Force. The Air Force accepted the Marine Corps interpretation of "mission" and "operational direction." Under the new directive, III MAF retained operational control of its aircraft and included a provision permitting the Marine wing to withhold "specialized Marine support sorties" from the Seventh Air Force. If the Marines obtained much of what they wanted, then as Bernard Nalty, an Air Force historian, asked, "Why the fuss?" Nalty answered his own question with the conclusion: "Tactically, the single manager meant nothing. Doctrinally, however, it affirmed a principle, centralized control, that the Army Air Corps and U.S. Air Force had consistently championed, and in doing so, it established a precedent for the future."^{97*}

* The new directive defined Mission/Operational Direction as "The authority delegated to DepComUSMACV for Air Operations (Cdr, 7th AF) to assign specific fixed-wing air tasks to the CG, III MAF, on a periodic basis as implementation of a basic mission assigned by ComUSMACV." MACV Directive 95.4, dtd 15Aug70 as quoted in Cosmas and Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1970-71*, p. 277. General Chapman summed up the outcome of the dispute in the following manner: "1. Marine system essentially restored—no gain or loss. 2. Army gained close air support from Air Force equivalent to Marine scope and type—a clear important winner. 3. Air Force lost accordingly." He emphasized that the precedent applied "only to joint land operations after the conclusion of [an] amphibious operation." Chapman Comments.

A Question of Helicopters

*Another Debate—The Need for Lighter Aircraft—To Keep the Mediums and Heavies Flying
Another Look at Helicopter Air-Ground Relations*

Another Debate

As the debate with the Air Force and MACV continued through the second half of 1968 over the control of Marine fixed-wing aircraft, a second controversy festered in Marine Corps circles. This question involved the employment and control of another indispensable, but relatively short-supply Marine aircraft resource, helicopters. While ComUSMACV and the Army were on the fringes to the dispute, the principals were III MAF ground and aviation commanders. Ironically, the 1st MAW, which argued so vehemently against central control from Saigon of its fixed-wing assets, insisted on "single management" of its rotary aircraft.

Again it was the arrival of the Army divisions, especially the 1st Air Cavalry Division, into northern I Corps in early 1968 that provided the impetus to this discussion. Major General Raymond G. Davis, as Provisional Corps deputy commander in March and April 1968, was tremendously impressed with the Cavalry's mobile helicopter-borne tactics in the relief of Khe Sanh, Operation Pegasus, and later in the A Shau Valley in Operation Delaware. When he took over the 3d Marine Division in mid-May, while not abandoning the strongpoints along the DMZ, Davis wanted to break free of them and strike at the battered North Vietnamese units in a series of free-wheeling operations throughout the division sector. From the aviation perspective this created an insatiable demand on the wing's already overburdened and limited number of helicopters and crewmen. According to Major General Norman J. Anderson, the former wing commander, he just did not see how his successor, Major General Charles J. Quilter, could meet the desires of General Davis and at the same time "still take care of the 1st Division and provide logistic support elsewhere."¹

The Army and Marine Corps organization of their helicopters differed markedly. In one sense,

the Marine Corps viewed the rotary aircraft as a boat and a means to land troops from ship to shore to exploit the situation beyond the beach in an amphibious landing.² On the other hand, the Army looked at the helicopter as a horse, as cavalry, and a means of outmaneuvering and outflanking an enemy. Because of the limitations of room on board ship, the Marine Corps depended on fewer, but larger helicopters, the UH-34 or CH-46, to carry the assault force ashore. With less concern about space restrictions and more about maneuverability, the Army relied on an assortment of helicopters, mostly smaller and more maneuverable than the Marine aircraft, to carry the assault forces into the rugged forested hinterlands. With the establishment of small artillery fire bases on key hills, the 1st Air Cavalry could launch fast-paced, leap-frog airmobile operations far from its base areas irrespective of terrain.²

Marine aviation officers were quick to respond that there should be no comparison between Marine and Army helicopter support, especially that available to the 1st Air Cavalry Division. In contrast to the 1st Air Cavalry which had more than 400 helicopters under its control, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing owned slightly more than 300 to support two and a third Marine divisions, ARVN units, and the Korean Marines in I Corps. Major General Norman Anderson, the wing commander, observed that the wing had inadequate numbers of helicopters because "the demand was limitless and was stimulated by the example of the

²²One should not carry the analogy of the boat too far. As Major General John P. Condon, a veteran Marine aviator and commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in the early 1960s commented, "The boat could never envelop any unit in position on land. The Marine Corps pioneered vertical envelopment, beginning 'from the sea,' but never stopping just beyond the beach. The use of the helo in maneuver and envelopment, as well as in movements of heavy equipment and logistic support of follow-on actions was also visualized from the start." MajGen John P. Condon, Comments on draft, dtd 30Jan1993 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Condon Comments.

¹See the discussion of the 3d Marine Division offensive operations during this period in Chapters 15, 16, 18, 20 and 22.

1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in an adjacent area zipping about all over.”^{3*}

Despite the massive and even decisive role the Marine helicopters played in the resupplying of the Marine hill outposts at Khe Sanh, ground officers elsewhere had complaints about helicopter support. Immediately after the recapture of Hue, newspaper accounts circulated that Army helicopter pilots flew under more adverse conditions than Marines. In response to a criticism in one article about a 500-foot ceiling limitation during the battle, Major General Anderson wrote that the wing placed such restrictions on “all aircraft operations subject to the exigencies of the tactical situation.” The wing commander remarked the reason for the 500-foot ceiling was “because of the extreme vulnerability to enemy fire of low flying helicopters” He then argued that the “Army UH-1 type aircraft has more capability for contour flying than the CH-46 and was therefore occasionally useable when the CH-46 was not”^{**} Even with the deplorable flying conditions during much of the battle of Hue, Anderson pointed out that the Marine helicopters flew 823 regular sorties, transported 1,672 passengers, carried more than a million pounds of cargo,

and conducted 270 medical evacuation sorties, lifting out 977 casualties. More to the point, he maintained provisions existed in the order to override the flying restrictions when the tactical situation demanded. General Anderson admitted, however, “that this proviso, in all honesty was little known or understood. The order is widely distributed, but little read.”^{4***}

By April 1968, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff and also an aviator,

***In a contemporary letter, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, expressed the following opinion about the subject: “Regardless of what we said in our official response, the fact remains that if the weather isn’t above 1,500 feet and two miles, the mission has to be declared a priority one before the Wing will fly. If the weather is 500 feet and a mile, the requesting organization must declare an emergency before the helicopters will fly. If the weather is less than 500 feet and one mile, and if helicopters are required, the mission must be declared as mandatory, and the only two individuals who can approve a mandatory mission are the Wing Commander and the Commanding General III MAF. I should say, they *were* [emphasis in the original] the only ones who could approve such a mission, because following my investigation of certain allegations made during the Hue battle, General Anderson, at General Cushman’s insistence, expanded the individuals who could approve a mandatory mission to include the two Assistant Wing Commanders, and the Chief of Staff, III MAF.” Anderson concluded that even this was “not adequate. The helicopter pilots will fly, and do fly, in almost any kind of weather, but to require a requesting unit to go to the Wing Commander or the III MAF Commander to have a mission flown, when the ceiling is 400 feet, does not seem to be justified.” BGen E.E. Anderson ltr to MajGen McCutcheon, dtd 14Mar68, Encl, Gen. Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded a fixed-wing squadron in 1968 and also served on the 1st MAW staff, recalled that during the battle for Hue a “CH46 did not do a MedEvac because of an extremely low ceiling (allegedly on the ground). At wing we were notified that a Huey had done the Med Evac for us because of our 500-foot restriction. We reiterated the proviso about exigencies of the tactical situation but too late. Unfortunately, this incident gave an impression that the Army provided better helo support than us. The 1st Cav observation helos buzzed around at low altitudes further emphasizing the difference in equipment, numbers of birds, and methods of operations, which certainly didn’t enhance our support image to Marine ground units.” LtGen Richard E. Carey, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Several Marine helicopter commanders emphasized their willingness to fly under adverse conditions. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Walter H. Shauer, who commanded HMM-362, wrote, “We were mission oriented merely flying in whatever weather, terrain, or combat situation in a manner to accomplish the mission. In my briefings the only restriction was attempt no mission that you were not capable of performing, otherwise, attempt it later when you could get thru.” LtCol Walter H. Shauer, Comments on draft, dtd 1Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Shauer Comments. See also Col Roger W. Peard, Comments on draft, dtd 9Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Peard Comments and LtCol Jack E. Schlarp Comments on draft, dtd 21Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Schlarp Comments.

*Colonel David S. Twining, who as a lieutenant colonel commanded Marine Air Control Squadron 4 in 1968 and earlier served in the Dong Ha DASC, agreed with General Anderson that to an extent the difference between Marine Corps concepts of helicopter usage and that of the Army was based on “Marine Corps conservatism as a result of having far fewer helicopter assets.” Twining, nevertheless, claimed that Marine Corps “helicopter doctrine or practice in Vietnam was not only conservative but relatively unimaginative.” While stating that the Marine Corps was the “first of the services to institute a program to work out helicopter combat techniques,” he believed that internal divisions within the Marine aviation community between fixed-wing and helicopter pilots hampered Marine helicopter innovation. In Twining’s opinion, “it was only due to the insistence of the ground community and the Commandant himself, that we entered the war with the helicopter inventory that we had and this proved to be insufficient for the innovative tactics that we might have otherwise developed.” Col David S. Twining, Comments on draft, dtd 15 Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Miller, who served on the MAG-16 staff and commanded a helicopter squadron in 1968, was unimpressed with the Army helicopter organization and tactics. According to Miller, some Army helicopter operations “anticipated aircraft losses of up to 25% of the first assault wave. I don’t believe the Marine Corps would ever consider accepting such losses.” LtCol Thomas F. Miller, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Miller Comments.

**One experienced CH-46 helicopter pilot suggested that the CH-46 has the same capability as the HU1 as far as contour flying, but that the Army helicopter was smaller and able to fit into tighter landing zones than the larger Marine craft. LtCol Dale Johnson comments to author.



Department of Defense (USMC) Unnumbered Photo
A Marine Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter from HMM-165 approaches the helicopter carrier USS Tripoli (LPH 10) for a landing. Because of concern for space on board amphibious ships, Marines depended on larger capacity helicopters to carry the assault force so as to require fewer helicopters on board ship.

related that “there has been considerable fuss and fury over the responsiveness of the helicopters, and both division commanders are complaining . . .” It may have been a matter of perspective, but General Cushman even had some doubts about the dedication of Marine helicopter pilots. The III MAF commander remembered that “some of the helicopter pilots from Marble Mountain would go up to Phu Bai to provide some support and hell, they’d come all the way back to Marble Mountain to eat lunch, just . . . baloney as that.” According to Cushman “we had a long battle to utilize helicopters efficiently and it took great overhaul on the part of the divisions and the way they ran their logistics and a great overhaul on the part of the

wing and the way they ran their helicopters.”^{5*}

General Westmoreland also believed that the Marines had problems with their helicopter organization. While he accepted the Air Force argument about the need of centralized fixed-wing air control by the air commander, he disagreed with the Marine concept of keeping the helicopter assets under the wing rather than the division. He believed the Marine Corps system was too inflexible. While crediting the Marines as the originators of the air assault doctrine, he confided to Brigadier General Chaisson, “You’ve got yourself so wedded to this centralized control of all your air assets over in the wing and the air-ground team, that down at the working level, the battalion, the infantry battalion, he has to ask for helicopters like he normally would have to ask for tactical air support.” He believed the Army had advanced “way ahead of you in the way we’ve married our helicopters right in with the tactical infantry command.”⁶

Marine aviation commanders, on the other hand, believed that the Army system, especially that of the 1st Air Cavalry, provided very little control and endangered not only helicopters, but also fixed-wing aircraft that were in the sector.⁷ The Marine Direct Air Sup-

*Observing that the Marine wing supported two and a third Marine divisions, plus ARVNs and Koreans, General Condon wrote that “with assigned missions of that scope for the helos, it seems reasonable to me to take a centralized C&C [command and control] stand.” Condon went on to say, nevertheless, “If full coordinated planning had been accomplished by both members of the Air-Ground Team as a meticulous doctrinal observance in all helicopterborne operations, I don’t think there would ever have been any ‘difficulty’ to be discussed [Emphasis in the original].” Condon Comments. Lieutenant General Carey, also remarked on the dilemma of the wing with the “total overcommitment” of its helicopter assets to support not only Marine units but also other forces. The wing then was “taken to task by our own Marines for not being able to respond to a commitment . . .” Carey, nevertheless, wrote that the “argument of ground commanders that helo assets are designed for the direct support of the division and should consequently be assigned to them for operational control has merit.” He believed that while valid, “the aviation argument . . . that with the Corps’ limited assets, training, employment, and logistic support is optimized with central control,” there was still room for compromise. He believed that by task organizing “we . . . would have been more effective in supporting our Marines in Vietnam by selective assignment of certain Helo assets to the Divisions for operational control.” Carey Comments.

**Lieutenant General Carey, who at the time was in the G-3 section of the wing, wrote that the “Army employment of their organic helos was totally unorthodox to us. In the Marine system the HDC in the DASC controlled helo movement and coordination of fires. In those cases where large helo operations were scheduled we considered it absolutely essential to lift or shift fires as required to ensure safe passage of our helos. On the other hand, as we observed Army operations they appeared to ignore the requirement to monitor their helo flights to ensure safe passage through hot areas. They generally by-passed

port Centers (DASCs) controlled not only fixed-wing sorties, but also contained a Helicopter Direction Center (HDC) to oversee rotary-wing flights. Collocated with the divisions' FSCCs, the Marine DASCs were able to coordinate their helicopter assaults with both fixed-wing and artillery support. On the other hand, the Army had no similar system and their helicopter units, according to Marine commanders, "just didn't know what each other were doing." Major General Anderson observed that the Army Americal Division unit commanders were "delighted" with the Marine system "because they recognized the desirability of this kind of coordination." He noted that it was an entirely different situation with the 1st Cavalry since "they had such a mass of helicopters that the control became an utter impossibility, except in accordance with whatever control is the result of planning."⁷

The Need for Lighter Aircraft

In the spring of 1968, however, no matter whether the Marine Corps wanted to adopt more of the Army airmobile tactics, it was in no position to do so. Much of this was due to the type of aircraft. For much of its success, the 1st Air Cavalry depended on its fleet of light helicopters, both unarmed and armed, which it used to find, fix, and kill the enemy. As General McCutcheon expressed in Washington after a visit to Vietnam, the Marines could match the Army in helicopter lift, but "we are woefully short of small helos, both slick and gunships."^{8*}

During March, in an exchange of messages with Headquarters, Marine Corps, FMFPac, and MACV, General Cushman discussed means of making Marine helicopter operations more effective, specifically through increasing helicopter reconnaissance and gunship assets. General Westmoreland had recommended to III MAF that the Marines adopt more of the Air Cavalry techniques relative to these as well as heli-

copter reaction missions. While the Marine hierarchy "appreciated" the MACV recommendations, General Krulak, then the FMFPac commander, observed that General Westmoreland "knows, moreover, that we cannot lay hands on any significant number of Hueys [UH-1Es] in a short time, any more than the Army can." The Commandant, General Chapman, commented that the Marines needed more light helicopters and "we need them now." Using phraseology recommended both from Washington and from Honolulu, General Cushman told the MACV commander that given the situation it was "difficult to see how current Marine Corps helicopter resources could be used to an advantage greater than now is achieved in conjunction with our fixed-wing aviation." He mentioned that he had requested more light helicopters, UH-1Es, and specifically more gunships. According to Cushman, Westmoreland agreed to a III MAF proposal for an exchange of Marine and Army helicopter pilots and reconnaissance personnel. Moreover, the MACV commander would support a Marine effort to expand its light helicopter assets. At the same time, Cushman allowed that he would continue to monitor III MAF reconnaissance and reaction capability.⁹

At the same time, III MAF was in the midst of reorganizing its UH-1E assets. With the planned introduction of the fixed-wing North American turbo-prop OV-10A Bronco into the Marine Corps inventory, these aircraft were to take over from the Hueys more of the observation and aircraft control missions. The "Broncos" were slated for the VMO squadrons and the original concept was to reduce the number of Hueys in-country by the number of the new aircraft. Given the increased demand for lighter helicopters, General McCutcheon instead proposed in mid-1967 that the Marines obtain permission to create new light helicopter squadrons that would be equipped entirely with Hueys. The VMOs would

checking in with the DASC causing concern that they would fly through friendly artillery fire with its possible consequences. We frequently observed massive helo movement out of Camp Evans and did not know of their destination, their routes or mission until they would suddenly reappear back in the landing pattern of their home field. It was a standard question, 'Wonder how many they lost to friendly fire today?' Carey Comments. Colonel Joel E. Bonner, who was the Wing G-3 in 1968, observed that the subject of helicopter usage "will be with both the Army and the Marines forever—like frontal assaults and flanking maneuvers." Col Joel E. Bonner, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

*Major General Condon observed that the Marine Corps developed its helicopters under "the concept of the amphibious assault" and in effect, this concept drove all Marine helicopter design.

According to Condon, until the Vietnam War, there was no need for the gunship. Fixed-wing would provide helicopter protection and prepare the landing zones. On the other hand, the Army was limited by legislation from developing fixed-wing aircraft and "to acquire some organic airborne firepower, it was a natural step for the army to pursue the helicopter gunship development with vigor." Condon stated that the Marine Corps had "no comparable developmental thrust for either the high performance light helo or the growing capabilities of the gunship models." In General Condon's opinion, that as early as 1962, when Marine helicopters first deployed to Vietnam, the Corps should have pursued the development "*of the best performing light helicopter, the helicopter gunship, and defensive armament for all helicopters . . . on a high priority basis* [emphasis in the original]." Condon Comments.



Photo courtesy of Col Warren A. Butcher

Crew members of a Bell Iroquois UH-1E helicopter (Huey) gunship pause in the field awaiting a new mission. By 1968, the Marines required more helicopter gunships to support operations.

retain half of the Huey inventory while the new HMLs would acquire the surplus number displaced by the Broncos. As McCutcheon observed, the chances for approval were good in that the UH-1Es were already on hand and the procurement needs were modest. The Secretary of Defense agreed to the changes but only on a temporary basis.¹⁰

On 8 March 1968, Headquarters Marine Corps issued its implementing bulletin to restructure the VMOs and to establish the light helicopter squadrons (HMLs). The three permanent Marine VMO squadrons were eventually to contain 12 UH-1Es and 18 OV-10A Broncos. According to the headquarters directive, the Marine Corps would transform both of its temporary VMOs into HMLs consisting of 24 UH-1Es. A third HML would be established at Camp Pendleton in California. The Marine Corps was to retain the three HML squadrons only through the duration of the war.¹¹

In Vietnam, in early March, VMO-3 at Phu Bai, the one temporary observation squadron in-country, became HML-367 with a transfer of aircraft and personnel. On 15 March, HML-167 was established at

Marble Mountain with 13 UH-1Es assigned to it. The first Bronco aircraft arrived in July and joined VMO-2 at Da Nang.* While the arrival of the Broncos may have eased the burden on UH-1Es somewhat, there were still too few of the new light fixed-wing aircraft in country at the end of 1968, 13 total, and all in VMO-2, to make much difference. In December, there were 74 Marine UH-1Es in Vietnam—12 attached to VMO-2, 14 with HML-167, 15 with HML-367, and 23 with VMO-6—only three more than were in-country in January. While there had been a change in designation, the HML squadrons through the year

*Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., who commanded the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, remembered that in July 1968, the enemy shot down one of the new aircraft "in our area of Go Noi. The spotter aircraft was probably lower in altitude than he safely should have been because he received a number of rounds through the bottom of the plane, causing it to go down." Woodham sent a company to retrieve any survivors and bring back what they could of the "sophisticated and classified equipment and manuals." With continuous air support, "that was about as close to an 'air show' as I'd seen in Vietnam," the company accompanied by tanks found the aircraft and recovered the bodies of the crew. Unidentified draft, Encl, Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec1994 (Vietnam Comment File).

basically performed the same missions as the VMOs.* It would not be until 1969 with the introduction of the Bell AH1G Cobra helicopter gunship into the Marine inventory and the arrival of additional Broncos that the demands upon the overworked UH-1Es began to ease.¹²

While the Marines used the UH-1E both for observation and as a gunship, it had many disadvantages in comparison to the diverse light helicopter mix that the Army helicopter units had available to them. The 1st Air Cavalry already had the Cobra gunships in service. In addition, the Army division had available the bubble-topped Hughes OH-6A Cayuse or LOH (Light Observation Helicopter) for scouting missions and finally the UH-1H model of the Huey for command and control and trooplift purposes. The Army still used the UH-1B model in a gunship role.¹³

As early as March 1968, Brigadier General Henry W. Hise, one of the two assistant commanders of the 1st MAW, outlined the handicaps of the Marine UH-1E as a gunship. Equipped with the TAT-101 Turret, the UH-1E armament, according to Hise, did "not have enough range or punch."** Also in both the fight for Hue and in the environment around the DMZ and Khe Sanh, the Marine general argued that "the armed chopper is a point target to the man on the ground while in the great majority of cases the chopper pilot is firing at an area target." The result was that the helicopters were vulnerable to the enemy's 12.7mm machine guns while pilots had difficulty "in pin-pointing the guns firing at them." Hise believed "that chopper operations into 12.7[mm machine gun] defended areas is not good sense unless the weather allows fixed-wing support." The assistant wing commander observed that armed UH-1E pilots flying into these regions now "holler for longer range area

weapons; specifically 20mm guns or at a minimum .50-caliber guns."¹⁴

In June, the new FMFPac commander, Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., picked up on the refrain for more of a mix of light helicopters for the Marine Corps. After a visit to III MAF and especially the 3d Marine Division, he told the Commandant that the division's recent mobile operations in the interior and the western mountains "underscore the requirement for the relatively small, light, and powerful helicopter vis a vis the CH-46." While remarking that the latter aircraft was "worth its weight in gold," he stated it was "not the answer to the requirement for a troop carrier" in the rugged terrain in the central and western DMZ sector. According to Buse, the infantry and reconnaissance "insert and extraction problem in undeveloped LZ's, often under fire, dictates the employment of smaller, faster, more maneuverable helos." While recognizing the yeoman service performed by the Marine UH-1Es and the old Sikorsky UH-34s Sea Horses,** he was especially impressed with the Army UH-1H "with its slightly greater capacity and increased power" for these purposes.¹⁵

Major General Davis, the 3d Marine Division commander, also had doubts about the Marine UH-1E as a command and control aircraft and compared it unfavorably to the Army UH-1H. While assistant Provisional Corps commander, prior to taking over the 3d Division, Davis recounted that the Army had provided him with his own Huey, an H model, and that he had been "spoiled." With the Army aircraft, with its increased power, he was able to get into "all of these out of way places and these hilltops, and through all this weather . . ." When he assumed command of the 3d Division, the Marine wing provided him with a UH-1E "that couldn't hack it." The Marine aircraft with its comparative lack of lift would have difficulty in the mountains. Davis remembered that he "got

*Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Miller, who commanded HML-167 from August through the end of 1968, recalled that out of the 14 UH-1E aircraft that he had assigned to his squadron, he scheduled five of these aircraft each day as VIP aircraft for the commanding generals of the two Marine Divisions, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, III MAF, and the Korean Marine Corps. While stating that the number of these especially designated aircraft by themselves were not significant, they consisted of nearly six percent of all UH-1E assets. Miller Comments.

**According to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Miller, he did not recall that when he assumed command of HML-167 in August 1968 that any of his aircraft were equipped with the TAT 101. He stated that his UH-1E's "were armed with forward-firing 7.62 machine guns and 2.75 rocket pods attached to each landing skid. Two crew members operating 7.62 machine guns fired out the aircraft's side doors." Miller Comments.

***Both Lieutenant Colonels Jack E. Schlarp and Walter H. Shauer, who both commanded HMM-362, a UH-34 squadron, in 1968, praised the reliability and availability of the UH-34. Lieutenant Colonel Shauer observed that when he arrived in Vietnam in the last half of 1967, the "[UH-]34's were doing the bulk of the flying. . . . This was because the older H-34 [in comparison to the CH-46] was much simpler to maintain and [had a] reliable piston engine vs sophisticated jet turbine engines [of the CH-46] subject to FOD (foreign object damage) and temperature limitations." Shauer Comments. Lieutenant Colonel Schlarp wrote, "if the Corps had hung on to the H-34's and not tried to rely on the H-46s, and/or H-53s everyone might have been better served. The H-34 was a reliable helicopter that did not suffer from the lack of availability as did the newer helicopters." Schlarp Comments.



Photo from the Abel collection

A Marine North American OV-10A Bronco lands at the Marble Mountain airstrip at Da Nang. The Bronco was to take over more of the observation and aircraft control missions from the Hueys.

flopped down two or three times with those Hueys [UH-1Es].” According to the 3d Marine Division commander, the Army provided him with a backup helicopter because, “those Marine helicopters could not go where the H-model could go.”¹⁶

While the situation was not entirely bleak, General McCutcheon commented in mid-November that the improvement in the inventory of Marine gunships and other light helicopters would only be modest in the foreseeable future. As he wrote to Major General Quilter, the 1st Wing commander, “I must tell you in all honesty, that there just aren’t any more helos or any more pilots to make available to III MAF in the foreseeable future.” He mentioned a combination of both personnel ceilings and an attempt to

reduce the budget as “tremendous constraints on any expansionist program at this stage of the game.” McCutcheon, nevertheless, stated that he was working on “a final crack . . . to increase the number of light helos in our structure.”¹⁷

To Keep the Mediums and Heavies Flying

While the Marine command remained concerned about its shortage of light helicopters during much of 1968, it continued to have difficulties with the availability of both its medium and heavy rotary aircraft. After taking the drastic measure in the latter part of 1967 of grounding all of the Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knights because of several accidents involving the rear pylons of the aircraft, the Marine Corps and Boeing undertook an expensive and extensive repair program, including both structural and system modifications.** In the first phase of the solution, the Marines rotated the aircraft from Vietnam to Okinawa and Japan where structural modifications were carried out. By the end of

*Colonel Roger W. Peard, Jr., who commanded HMM-463, in 1968, observed that the greatest difference between the UH-1E and UH-1H models was engine power, otherwise the aircraft were very similar. Peard wrote that maneuverability “relates to a machine’s ability to change direction, accelerate, and decelerate. These are important characteristics for fighter/interceptor aircraft, but not so crucial in a helicopter. Maneuverability in a helo may add to the exhilaration of flight, but most helos are flown to maintain the lift vector from the rotor disc close to vertical to maximize lift.” Peard acknowledged that size considerations were another matter and that “laymen” speaking of maneuverability usually refer to ability to “get into a small LZ, which is a size consideration.” In any event Colonel Peard did not believe there was enough size differentiation to quibble about between the E and H versions. He concluded, “I imagine that MGen Davis may just [have] liked flying in the newer H rather than in a well-used ‘E’.” Peard Comments.

**Lieutenant General Louis Metzger who in 1967 and early 1968 as a brigadier general served as the 3d Marine Division Assistant Division Commander, recalled that it took some time to identify the problem with the CH-46 as equipment failure. He remembered that it was sometime in the second half of 1967 that when the 3d Division assistant aviation officer, “was flying and observed the tail come off a CH-46. His report was the first indication of this equipment problem. This observation led to the ‘expensive and extensive repair program’ . . .” LtGen Louis Metzger, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

1967, Marine, Navy, and corporate technicians and mechanics had replaced the rear pylons on all but 16 of the 105 Sea Knight aircraft in the Western Pacific. They refitted the remaining aircraft with the structural modifications by February 1968.¹⁸

During the remaining months of 1968, the Marine Corps and Navy initiated the second phase during regularly scheduled maintenance overhaul of the 46s or those aircraft sent back because of extensive battle damage. Called Project Sigma, these modifications consisted of the installation of a new tail section, a new transmission mount, and a cruise guide indicating system.* While the second phase caused less of a draw-down of the CH-46 resources than the initial alterations, about 12 to 14 of the aircraft a month were either at Japan or Okinawa undergoing rework. In July, moreover, the 1st MAW reported two instances of the "structural failure of CH-46 rotor blades" manufactured prior to March 1967. This required the Marine Corps and Navy to undertake a new testing procedure of all the blades of that vintage. While this affected nearly half of the Sea Knights in the 1st MAW inventory, the wing accomplished most of the retesting in-country without impacting greatly on the tempo of operations.^{19**}

*These modifications resulted "in added structural strength, and give the pilot a means of monitoring the structural loads imposed on the airframe, reducing the likelihood of overstress." Because of the magnitude of these changes, they were accomplished as the aircraft underwent "Progressive Aircraft Rework" (PAR) or Battle Damage Repair (BDR). There still remained, however, significant differences about the extent of modifications needed between the Boeing Vertol Corporation and the Marine Corps. For example General McCutcheon in a letter to an official of the company insisted that the Phase II modifications be carried out "in order to meet the Marine Corps operational requirements." He also expressed his concerns that a "desynch" device [to avoid intermeshing of the rotors] be added to the list of modifications. While willing to soften his position to the extent that he believed "it is 'highly desirable' vice 'mandatory,'" McCutcheon wrote "No matter how you look at it, the pilots still ask the question, 'How do I get down safely if I have desynch and blade intermeshing?'" The device was never added. McCutcheon to Robert W. Tharrington, dtd 29Jan68, Ltr No. 28, File T, 1968 Cor, McCutcheon Papers; FMFPac, MarOpsV, Dec68, p. 111.

**Another modification was added to the CH-46s in 1968 that had nothing to do with the structural problems. In February 1968, after much hesitation, General Krulak, at FMFPac, finally approved an experiment of General Anderson's, the wing commander, to replace the 7.62mm machine guns on board the CH-46 with the .50-caliber guns. Major General McCutcheon told Krulak after his visit to Vietnam in January 1968 that almost all commanders, including a division commander, were in favor of the replacement and willing to give up troop space to carry the heavier armament with its greater range. According to McCutcheon, the question was which weapon was "most effective in the air, not on the ground. . . . Perhaps if you had a .50 to start with

While the Marine wing remained concerned about the continuing effectiveness of the CH-46,^{***} several minor problems with replacement parts plagued the large heavy-lift Sikorsky CH-53A Sea Stallion helicopter. General Anderson, the wing commander, later observed that strictly because of the lack of spare parts there were times in late 1967 and early 1968 when only three of the aircraft "would be available for flight." In January 1968, HMMH-463, the CH-53A squadron, averaged only a 31 percent availability. During February, General McCutcheon in Washington raised "such a fuss" in Navy aviation logistic cir-

you might not have been forced down." Faced with the almost unanimous opinion from Vietnam, General Krulak relented. He told both Generals Anderson and McCutcheon that while believing the issue was "completely emotional . . . [but] I am no fool where emotion is involved." With the final assent from FMFPac, General Anderson announced that he desired to arm all of the 46s with the .50-caliber guns, but would "leave it to the discretion of the group and squadron commanders, however, as to whether or not they actually mounted the 7.62mm or the .50-caliber." As General Anderson stated later, he did not want "to make a dogmatic rule" but wanted to permit his commanders to determine the best armament according to the particular circumstances. MajGen Norman Anderson ltrs to McCutcheon, dtd 2 and 7Feb68, and McCutcheon to Anderson, dtd 8Feb68, Letter No 50, File A and LtGen Victor H. Krulak to McCutcheon, dtd 2Feb68 and McCutcheon ltr to Krulak, dtd 8Feb68, Ltr No. 39, File K, 1968 Cor, McCutcheon Papers; MajGen Norman J. Anderson, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Norman Anderson Comments.

***Besides the structural problems with the CH-46, Lieutenant Colonel Roy J. Edwards, who commanded HMM-265 which operated with SLF Bravo in the summer of 1968, related problems with fuel filters which were unable to prevent the "super fine sand in this littoral region . . . [from] being drawn into the fuel tanks as the helicopters . . . landed on or near the beaches." After extended use, the sand "worked its way into the fuel controls of the helicopter to prevent it from developing full power." According to Edwards, "this [was] happening to *all* [emphasis in the original] my helicopters even though they had all the routine prescribed maintenance." He recalled two near-accidents caused by the problem: "I had one a/c [aircraft] on a milk run take off from the carrier, climbed straight ahead, lost power and sagged back on the carrier as the carrier ran up under him! He was fully loaded with passengers, supplies, and mail. Not one got their feet wet!" In the second incident, a helicopter on the way to the beach from the carrier also lost power, "the pilot kept the engine running and just flew into the water and taxied the several miles to shore." Again there were no injuries nor damage. He then halted flights of all of his CH-46s until the squadron could determine a "fix". Eventually, they placed additional air filters on "the air intake to the fuel tanks of the helicopter plus judicious monitoring/cleaning of the fuel controls after each flight onto the beach where this 'superfine' sand was being ingested. This didn't prevent the contamination but we learned to live with it." According to Edwards, "it was a 'soul-searching' experience to have to 'ground' my helicopters in the middle of a war, while we found out . . . how to counteract." LtCol Roy J. Edwards, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

cles that he "got a KC-130 load of CH-53 spares . . . under the nickname of Floodtide" sent out to the 1st Wing. Observing that the list of parts included clamps, tubes, gaskets, fasteners and other "mundane items", McCutcheon exclaimed, "I'll be damned if I can understand why this kind of stuff is not available in Da Nang or at least Subic [the Navy base in the Philippines at Subic Bay]."²⁰

While appreciative of the effort upon receipt of the Floodtide supplies on 4 March, General Anderson complained, "One critical item follows another in the history of the CH-53." He stated that during the past week he only had nine of the large helicopters flying for a 33 percent availability rate. According to the wing commander, if only he had replacement windshields to install he could have another 10 of the large aircraft in the air. Adding to Anderson's woes, an enemy rocket attack on Marble Mountain the night before resulted in the loss of one of the CH-53s.²¹

During the following months, the situation improved, but only modestly.* For example, in April, General McCutcheon again had to arrange a special airlift for CH-53 spare parts with "no appreciable change in their operational readiness." Only a third of the large choppers were operationally ready as contrasted to the number on hand. While not overly concerned about those figures, McCutcheon observed that these statistics become "alarming" when the number of operationally ready aircraft were compared to the number of aircraft assigned. The availability for the CH-53s then dropped to about 25 percent. In August, the arrival of HMH-462 at Phu Bai with 10 additional aircraft bringing the total of the Sea Stallions in Vietnam to 43, provided some relief for the other 53 squadron, HMH-463.** According to FMFPac, this improved the lift capability of the wing by 34 percent.²²

*Colonel Roger W. Peard, who commanded HMH-463 in the second half of 1968, observed that he made some changes relative to spare parts procurement. He recalled that when he took over, four aircraft were being used to scavenge parts for other aircraft, but that the MAG-16 maintenance officer did not believe in creating "hangar 'queens' for parts." Instead when an aircraft was scheduled for its annual inspection, good parts were removed to replace parts needed by other aircraft. The other aircraft was then sent back for rework. While this may have increased labor costs, no perennial "hangar queens" were created. According to Peard, "parts shortages persisted, but this system improved availability of the CH-53A in HMH-463." Peard Comments.

**Colonel Joseph L. Sadowski, who commanded HMH-463 early in 1968, recalled that during Tet there were insufficient airframes to send a second CH-53 squadron to Vietnam, "not to mention the training pipe line for pilots/mechanics and the required flight hours state-side to accomplish this task." Col Joseph L. Sadowski, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

While the CH-53 recovered some 167 downed helicopters and one Cessna O-1B light fixed-wing observation aircraft during the year, the aircraft continued to have problems. Near the end of 1968, Brigadier General Homer Dan Hill, the assistant wing commander, provided General Quilter his assessment about the CH-53 limitations. According to Hill, while the helicopter could carry about 9,000 pounds total, even under normal circumstances it could lift no more than 8,000 pounds externally. This load was further curtailed in the heat and mountains of Vietnam. The Sea Stallion was not capable of bringing in heavy equipment for the building of firebases or lifting in the large 155mm guns to these sites. In order to carry out these missions, the 3d Marine Division relied upon nearby Army helicopter companies equipped with the CH-54 Tarhe Sky Crane that could carry an external load of approximately 20,000 pounds. The Army Sky Cranes recovered 41 of the Marine CH-46s. Hill pointed to the fact that the Marines very recently lost three CH-46s that could not be field stripped and "quickly lifted to safety by the CH-53A." He recommended that the Marine Corps try to procure a heavy-lift helicopter that could match the Army Sky Crane.^{23***}

While design factors played a role as did a continuing pilot shortage**** in helicopter availability, the one constant problem was the lack of spare parts, especial-

***General Carey, who in 1968 served on the wing staff, observed that through July the availability of the CH-53 was so low, "we frequently requested use of the CH-54 flying cranes for aircraft retrieval. At one time the situation was so bad we even considered requesting emergency procurement of our own flying crane capability." Carey Comments. Colonel Peard, a former CH-54 squadron commander, observed that relative to the external and internal lift capabilities of the CH-53A Sea Stallion, "weight is weight, wherever you put it in or on the aircraft." He stated, however, that the helicopter could carry an internal load at a higher airspeed, because of the limitations caused by "load motion, that is swinging." Colonel Peard acknowledged that the Army CH-54 Sky Crane was the "undisputed heavy-lift champion . . .," but noted that in contrast to the CH-53, it did not have a trooplift capability. According to Peard, General Quilter, the wing commander, "did not like going to the Army to use the Sky Crane . . . [and directed that] one of the CH-53s in HMH-463 be stripped of all possible equipment to lighten it as much as possible and thus maximize its lifting capability." Peard Comments.

****See Chapter 27 for a detailed discussion of pilot training and shortages. Relative to the helicopter pilot shortage, in October 1968, Major General McCutcheon at HQMC witnessed the first six Marine officers graduate from the Army helicopter school at Hunter Airfield near Savannah, Georgia. He believed that with the inauguration of this training program earlier in the year that "finally got the pilot problem whipped into shape so that from here on in we should be making progress." McCutcheon ltr to E.E. Anderson, dtd 10 Oct 68, Ltr No. 93, File A, 1968 Cor, McCutcheon Papers, MCHC.



Top photo is from the Abel Collection and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Roger W. Peard, USMC (Ret)
Top, a Marine Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion lifts a damaged Marine Sikorsky UH-34D Sea Horse from the landing strip at An Hoa. Below, a crashed CH-53 Sea Stallion, itself, is lifted by an Army Tarhe CH-54 Sky Crane back to MAG-16 at Marble Mountain. The Army helicopter could lift up to 20,000 pounds.



ly for the CH-53s, but also for the 46s, and to a lesser extent the UH-1Es. While noting the low 25 percent availability in April for the Sea Stallion helicopters, General McCutcheon also pointed to a 33 percent and 50 percent availability respectively for the CH-46s and Hueys.* Five months later, in August, the 1st MAW commander, Major General Quilter wrote, "we are in deep trouble on provisioning for engine and airframe spares in the helos—CH-46, CH-53, UH-1E." In October 1968, a senior naval aviation supply officer in a speech to his colleagues stated, "if aircraft are going to fly, we all are going to have to get off our collective butts and manage repairables. There is only one word to describe the job we're doing—lousy." Throughout 1968, the resupply rate for Marine Corps helicopter parts hovered around 70 percent.²⁴

In an exhaustive examination of Marine helicopter support, a III MAF special board in the spring of 1969 blamed the lack of spare parts on unrealistic standard monthly hourly flight maximums set in Washington. It observed that the "CNO monthly hourly flight maximum is the key against which dollars are made available to DOD [Department of Defense] to buy spare parts . . ." The problem was that these established norms had not taken into consideration the demands upon the limited number of Marine helicopter assets in Vietnam and the resulting scarcity. To meet the actual combat requirements, the Marine helicopters constantly overflowed the set maximums.** As the board concluded, the Marines had less "total helicopters available for daily operations and as a result we fly those in commission far in excess of the hour rate required for good maintenance, safety of flight, and dependable availability."²⁵

The statistics of helicopter sorties flown, passengers carried, and tonnage lifted during 1968 set a record pace. From February through July 1968, Marine helicopters flew at an ever-increasing rate, running up the number of sorties, passengers carried, and tonnage lifted. For example in March 1968, the rotary aircraft flew

more than 44,000 sorties and lifted over 53,000 troops and nearly 7,000 tons of cargo. This was an increase of over 10,000 sorties for the previous month, and 3,000 over the monthly average of the previous year. In July, the total number of sorties reached 71,452, a new monthly high for the war.

While the Marine helicopter pilots would fly at a slightly slower tempo after July, they still maintained a monthly average of about 60,000 sorties, with the exception of a slight dip in the numbers for September. In December, the Marine helicopters carried out 59,838 sorties, ferried over 113,499 passengers, and lifted 13,835 tons of cargo. For the year, the totals were 597,000 sorties, 122,100 tons of cargo, and 935,000 passengers. These figures represented a 31 percent increase in sorties, a 39 percent increase in passengers carried, and a 39 percent increase in tonnage lifted over 1967.²⁶

Notwithstanding that most of these helicopter missions were in support of Marine forces, a substantial number, 43,138 sorties for the year amounting to six percent of the total, were for other forces in Vietnam. These included 34,094 sorties for the Koreans, 3,840 for the ARVN, 3,508 for U.S. Special Forces, 1,666 for the U.S. Army, and 30 in support of the Seventh Air Force. While a lower percentage than the previous year, these flights in support of both allied and other Services still caused a drawdown on the scarce Marine helicopter resources.²⁷

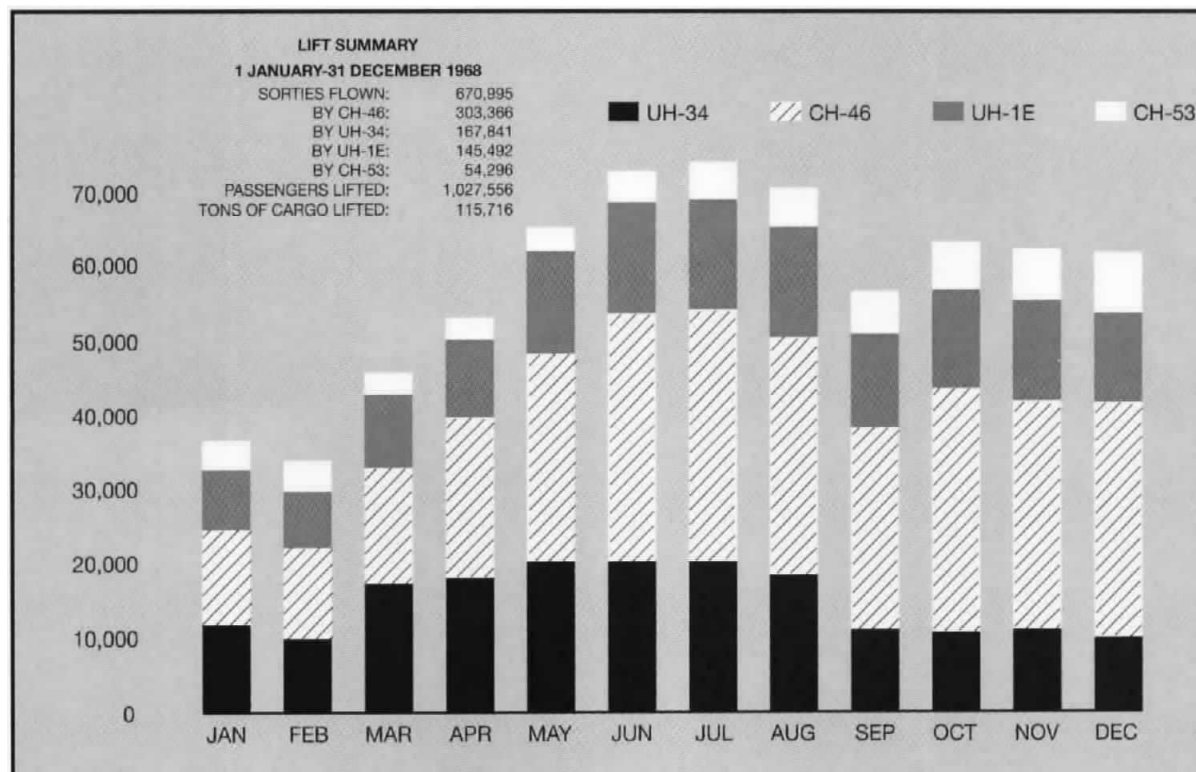
Another Look at Helicopter Air-Ground Relations

During the spring of 1968, in order to meet the increasing demands on its resources, especially in the north, the 1st Wing decided to alter some of its command arrangements. As early as 6 March, acting on a suggestion of his staff, General Norman Anderson recommended the establishment of a provisional MAG at Quang Tri Airfield with three squadrons to reduce the span of control for MAG-36. In the meantime, MAG-36 maintained a forward headquarters and three squadrons, VMO-6, HMM-163, and HMM-262 at Quang Tri Airfield under Colonel John E. Hansen, the group's deputy commander. Finally after securing approval from both FMFPac and Headquarters, Marine Corps, on 15 April, General Anderson ordered the establishment of the new helicopter aircraft group, appropriately designated Provisional (Prov) MAG-39. He detached the three squadrons already at Quang Tri from MAG-36 to form Prov MAG-39 and made Colonel Hansen the new MAG

*According to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Miller, who assumed command of HML-167 in August 1968, the availability of UH-1Es, or at least for his squadron had improved in a few months. Miller stated his squadron "never suffered at a lowly 50 percent to my knowledge. During Sept-Dec68, with 14 aircraft assigned, average operational readiness was 84.7 percent . . ." Miller Comments.

**Lieutenant Colonel Walter H. Shauer, Jr., of HMM-262, wrote that his pilots "continuously overflowed the CNO programmed monthly flight hour maximums (both in aircraft and pilot hours)." He mentioned that his personal log book revealed "in a ten month period 914 flight hours, . . . [averaging] 91 hours per month." Shauer Comments.

MARINE HELICOPTER SORTIES JANUARY-DECEMBER 1968



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

Source: FMFPac, MarOpsV, Dec68.

commander.* General Cushman, the III MAF commander, admitted that “splitting the helicopters was sort of against our philosophy,” but observed that they needed the helicopters near the 3d Division in the DMZ sector: “We had to move them up there so they’d have them.”²⁸

Despite the establishment of Prov MAG-39, the new group was unable to meet the demands of the new 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Davis, who wanted to undertake more mobile operations. According to Davis, the way he wanted to use helicopters “was a whole new learning experience” for both the wing and the division. Davis declared, “instead of sitting down and looking around and saying, ‘Where can we go? Where is it easier to put the

helicopters?’ We never said that.” Instead, Davis insisted, “We said, we’re going to put the helicopters here by making whatever effort is required to prepare the place for the helicopters.” The idea was to be “totally flexible and responsive to the ground commander’s needs.” The new division commander contended that the Marine Corps had given some thought to high-mobility operations, “but we really hadn’t done it.” He stated that he was not advocating the Army Air Cavalry solution which had too many helicopters and not enough control, but a middle course in which his regimental and battalion commanders at least had their own helicopters.²⁹

From the ground commander and especially the division commander’s viewpoint, the main advantage of the Army system was that he owned the helicopter assets. The 1st Air Cavalry brigade and battalion commanders not only had their own personal helicopters, but also could depend on helicopter support almost on call. According to General Davis, in comparison, the Marine helicopter “system was so centralized that you have got to work out in detail the day before exactly

*In May, HMM-161 arrived directly from the United States equipped with the new redesigned CH-46D models and replaced HMM-163, a UH-34 squadron at Quang Tri. According to Colonel Hansen, “this represented a substantial increase in the lift capability of Prov MAG-39 when you consider that HMM-161 arrived with essentially 100 percent aircraft availability versus . . . older [and less lift capacity] H-34s with reduced availability.” Col John E. Hansen, Comments on draft, dtd 17Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo courtesy of Col John E. Hansen, USMC (Ret)

MajGen Norman J. Anderson, CG, 1st MAF, hands colors of new Provisional MAG-39 to its commander, Col John E. Hansen. The new MAG was formed at Quang Tri to provide helicopter support for the 3d MarDiv.

what you want and schedule it." Davis declared: "There's no way a ground commander can work out a precise plan for the next day's operations unless the enemy is going to hold still . . ." ^{30*}

As could be expected this attitude caused immediate problems with both the wing and III MAF. A then-junior member of the 3d Marine Division staff, Major William H. Dabney remembered General Davis telling III MAF: "Look, if I don't get this helicopter support that I'm asking for . . . from you, I'm going to

get it from the Army. The devil take the hindmost." According to Dabney, Davis argued against dividing the helicopter support evenly between the two divisions. The support should depend on the actual situation and requirement, not an attempt to distribute the same number of sorties to each command: "Hey, we need 22 sorties, CH-46s because I got an enemy that I can use them against, not because I'm one division and he's another." ³¹

In personal letters to Washington, the 1st MAF commander, General Anderson, described his perception of wing-division relations. He declared that he had "tried at every turn to get the Marine doctrine of air-ground command structure accepted in III MAF." Anderson believed that "many of our problems have resulted from failure to inject sound air thinking into ground plans in a timely fashion." The wing commander mentioned, however, that he had opened at the Quang Tri Airfield what he called the 1st MAF Aux-

*Major General Norman Anderson commented: "Twenty-five years later the crux of this disagreement still is numbers and types of helos, a fact of life exacerbated then by the proximity of helo-rich Army units. General Davis could not make a valid case at that time because a decision to let him have all the helo support he wanted had to be made at the III MAF level if not higher. At those levels the broader and deeper problems were dominant and they, of course, prevailed therefore at the Wing." He observed, "The Marine Corps remains structured primarily for assault from the sea, which is as it must be." Norman Anderson Comments.



Photo from the Abel Collection

BGen Homer D. Hill, one of the assistant wing commanders, poses at the Khe Sanh airstrip before the evacuation of the base. The wing opened an auxiliary command post at the Quang Tri Airfield under Gen Hill to coordinate helicopter operations with the 3d MarDiv.

iliary CP, under one of his assistant wing commanders, Brigadier General Homer D. Hill. Anderson directed Hill, "to interest himself in all aspects (not only helos . . .)" of the wing in northern I Corps.³²

While Anderson still complained that "Davis is totally insatiable," the establishment of the forward headquarters improved the relations between the wing and the division.* Major General Davis later related that the assignment of Hill to Quang Tri "provided this division with . . . an air/ground team capability . . ." He stated that Hill's presence made his mobile concept work, "so long as he was here we were solving problems." In October 1968, General Hill mentioned in a letter to General Anderson that the division and wing had conducted about 75 "highly

successful helicopter heli-borne assaults in and around the DMZ" since he had been there. Hill's assistant participated in all "3d Division planning and Task Force operations." According to Hill, this was helpful to both the ground and air commanders: "We stay on top of all operational discrepancy reports—both ways moving fast to correct what is wrong from either side—Division or Wing." General Hill wrote that he attended all division briefings with General Davis and went with him "on many of his helo rides to his units talking to our FACs [forward air controllers] and ALOs [air liaison officers] as well as the regimental and battalion commanders." Hill praised Anderson for establishing the forward headquarters and that it had paid dividends in Marine air-ground relations.³³

This short honeymoon between the 3d Marine Division and the wing soon came to an end. In October, the wing decided to close the forward headquarters and bring General Hill south to be part of a joint 1st Marine Division and wing task force to conduct Operation Meade River in the Da Nang area of operations. General Davis, the 3d Division commander, protested, but to no avail. According to Davis, when Hill departed, the situation immediately deteriorated. Davis complained that without Hill, he was left "to deal [with] agents of the wing and agents of III MAF who were not in a position to make any decision short of going to Da Nang. This was unworkable." In an attempt to placate the 3d Division commander, General Quilter would honor specific requests to send General Hill "to come up and stay awhile" until the particular problem was resolved. Davis stated, however, for the most part, "it has not been a good arrangement to attempt to conduct a air/ground team effort up here with the air part of the team having no authority."^{34**}

**Both Lieutenant Colonel Shauer and Lieutenant General Carey praised in their comments the efforts of General Hill in improving relations with the 3d Marine Division. In a letter to Shauer in June 1968, General Hill wrote, "I have noticed a great improvement in UH-34 ops over the last few days as a result of things you have done. I believe relationships have improved considerably between supporting and supported units. This is good. Keep up the fine work. Let me know of any problems we can help on." Shauer Comments and BGen H.D. Hill ltr to Maj Shauer, dtd 29Jun68, Encl, Shauer Comments. General Carey declared that while General Hill was with Davis the relationship with the division "was superior. Simply because he spoke for the wing and worked so closely with the Division commander." According to Carey, Hill "maintained a constant dialogue on both fixed-wing and helo support for the Division. It was not uncommon for him to be on the phone at all hours of the day and night working closely with us on the details of the required support. He certainly took the pressure off the Wing G-3 section. After he left, work had to be conducted through an intermediary, which really slowed down

*General Davis commented on the draft that he was, "amused at my 'insatiable' need for choppers . . . when I had more enemy than anybody else!" Gen Raymond G. Davis, Comments on draft, dtd 4Sep95 (Vietnam Comment File).

While there were two assistant wing commanders, the second AWC, Brigadier General Henry F. Hise, served as the coordinator for air bases throughout I Corps and apparently was not available to take General Hill's place. From the III MAF perspective, Brigadier General E. E. Anderson, General Cushman's chief of staff, believed Hise's function could better have been accomplished by the 1st MAW chief of staff. General Anderson quoted Hise to the effect "that having a second AWC in the 1st Wing is like having tits on a bull."* Anderson supported a move to eliminate the position altogether and convinced both General Quilter, the wing commander, and General Cushman. According to Anderson, Quilter was of the opinion that unless given command of an air-ground task force, a second assistant wing commander was superfluous to his needs. On 19 December, the III MAF commander, General Cushman, officially asked FMFPac that a replacement for the second AWC not be sent. General Buse, the FMFPac commander, concurred. Apparently no thought was given to sending General Hise or his replacement to Quang Tri to replace General Hill.³⁵

Even if an aviation general officer had been sent north, there remained some question whether the deteriorating relations between Marine air and ground officers would have improved measurably. As early as August, Major General McCutcheon in Washington wrote to Major General Quilter about disquieting reports from returning officers from Vietnam, varying "in rank from lieutenant colonel to major general that we do not have the communication and dialogue in existence between air and ground units that we should have." Even Brigadier General Hill commented that the wing would

never "satisfy the [division's] helo appetites." He complained about lacking UH-1Es and being "plagued by the UH-1E gunships syndrome" as well as problems in helicopter availability. According to Hill, the only way the wing could meet the demands of both divisions was by overflying the maximum standards. As he later remarked: "This can only do one or two things; it can get you in trouble real fast, or sooner or later, it can drive you off the deep end."³⁶

In October, at the III MAF staff level, Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson remarked that "Ray Davis has really been shot in the fanny with the Army helicopter system, although I frankly believe that it's more the result of the large numbers of helicopters available to the Army units, together with the fact that the ground officer has greater control over them than does the Marine commander." According to Anderson, the 3d Marine Division general had proposed to III MAF the establishment of an "air cavalry group, similar to the 1st Air Cav." General Cushman had taken the recommendation under advisement and asked for opinions from his staff and senior commanders.³⁷

At about the same time, one of Davis' regimental commanders, Colonel Robert H. Barrow of the 9th Marines, forwarded a memorandum through command channels about modifying procedures on the use and control of helicopters. He wrote that while Marine doctrinal publications "do not clearly express the air ground command relations for helicopter operations," he believed they implied flexibility. He suggested that Prov MAG-39 be placed in direct support of the 3d Marine Division. According to Barrow, "essentially, the helicopter unit commander advises the helicopter-borne [ground] unit commander, participates in planning and, within his capability, provides the helicopter support and performs the tasks required by the helicopter-borne unit commander."³⁸

Colonel Barrow then came to the crux of the matter. He urged that the ground commander be permitted to determine "type and adequacy of landing zone preparation, switching from primary to alternate landing zones, and landing in a high risk situation." Rejecting this idea, Major General Quilter, the wing commander, wrote across the memorandum: "This would overrule air judgment of pilot. Pilot has no authority to do *anything*," At this point, General Cushman decided against

the decision process. We also lost the pulse of the dynamic, fast-moving General Davis." Carey Comments. In a dissenting opinion, Colonel Walter Sienko, who assumed command of Prov MAG-39 in July 1968, commented that "if we had a full-MAG-39 at Quang Tri instead of a Prov MAG with limited resources, we still would not have satisfied the needs of General Davis." He believed "the decision of not inserting a third general officer in the chain of command between air and ground at the MAG level was a correct one." Col Walter Sienko, Comments on draft, n.d. [Nov94] (Vietnam Comment File).

*Brigadier General Hise commented that "the West Texas saying, an area where I originated, is 'as useless as tits on a boar.' A boar has up to ten vestigial tits, a bull has only four. However, as with assistant wing commanders, an increase in their number does not add to their usefulness." BGen Henry W. Hise, Comments on draft, dtd 22Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

implementing either General Davis' or Colonel Barrow's recommendations.^{39*}

The controversy between the air and ground commanders surfaced in February 1969 in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, the Corps' professional journal. In a letter to the editor, Major General Davis publicly vented his frustrations about helicopter usage and control. He stated that he regularly used Army LOH and other light helicopters for scouting and reconnaissance missions. Countering claims by the wing that the helicopters were vulnerable to enemy heavy machine gun fire, the division commander argued that the Army aircraft "have not been hit by ground fire—although they have discovered a number of 12.7 AA [antiaircraft] machine guns near the LZ—nor any of our troop helicopters hit by ground fire." On the other hand, Davis declared that as many as nine Marine helicopters at one time sustained damage in a landing zone when not using scout helicopters. He contended that "these scouts are as important to security of helicopter operations as scouts on the trail are vital to the security of ground maneuver units."⁴⁰

Davis then turned to the matter of command relations between the helicopter and ground commanders. He complained that for the most part, after the initial planning, the infantry commander played a secondary role "in most of the Marine helicopter assaults in Vietnam." The company, battalion, or even regimental commander found himself stranded at the pick-up zone, "while the helicopter leader with his captive load of troops decides where, when, and even if the troops will land." According to Davis, "this is more the rule rather than the exception." General Davis then asserted that if a greater effort was made to include the infantry commander in the process, "we would have less aborts, better preps, and fewer landings made in the wrong LZ."⁴¹

The entire subject came to a head in the spring of 1969. In April, Lieutenant General Herman

Nickerson, who succeeded General Cushman as Commanding General, III MAF, ordered the formation of a board of senior officers, headed by his deputy, Major General Carl A. Youngdale, "to examine the use and command and control of Marine Corps helicopter assets . . ." After holding extensive hearings, the Youngdale Board reported back to Nickerson. While recognizing that the root of the problem "lay in the shortage of helicopter assets in terms of numbers, types (particularly armed helicopters), mix, and lift," it identified several other problems. Chief among them was a lack of confidence between air and ground officers concerning the other's ability to carry out his part of the mission. Other shortcomings included the need for the development of more detailed planning and better coordination between the air and ground components in helicopter operations.⁴²

While making several recommendations, the board realized that many of these questions required long-term solutions. This was especially true about building mutual trust between Marine ground and air officers. In part, the board concluded that there was a lack of common professional experience and socialization between the two groups.** The shortage

**Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Miller described two programs that MAG-16 undertook to promote harmony between the helicopter and ground community. On large operations, the MAG operations officer and "the pre-selected helicopter flight leader to the ground commander's unit for the *initial* [emphasis in the original] planning sessions. These officers familiarized themselves with the ground unit's objectives. At this time they could offer their input to the OpPlan prior to it being 'etched in stone.' The officers returned to the ground unit as alterations or changes occurred." He believed this resulted in the following advantages: "1. . . . [The operations officer would] *thoroughly* [emphasis in the original] brief all helicopter flight crews participating in the assault. The crews were told exactly what the ground units were trying to achieve and where they in helicopters fit into the picture. (2) The selected flight leader knew exactly what the ground commander's objectives, time schedules, and general scheme of maneuver were; and planned his flight accordingly. On D-day the air and ground commanders were on the same page. If a change in landing zones became necessary, the flight leader made his recommendation based on the known ground commander's objectives. This program was very successful." In the second program, "on each Friday numerous company-grade officers were invited and flown 'out of the bush' to Marble Mountain. The officers were guests of the pilots at MAG-16. They were treated to hot showers, great meals, movies, and/or a socializing 'adult' beverage at the club. Saturday they could hit the PX; then toured the helicopter base and participated in a 'give & take' briefing session at the S-3 bunker. These 'give and take' sessions eliminated many of the misconceptions shared by both ground and the air officers who supported them. They made working together much, much easier." Miller Comments.

*According to Lieutenant Colonel Louis J. Bacher, from his experience as commander of the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines at Da Nang until June, 1968, "it was necessary to schedule a helicopter for aerial reconnaissance of an 80 grid square TAOR days in advance. MedEvac requests were assigned a priority category and were filled accordingly, usually hours later. In contrast, Army battalion commanders had light observation and command helicopters (LOACH) either organic or readily available. The KMC [Korean Marine Corps] Brigade had at least three cargo choppers and one Huey assigned daily." LtCol Louis J. Bacher, Comments on draft, dtd 7May95 (Vietnam Comment File).

of pilots had exacerbated these differences. Because of the pressing need for aviators, especially helicopter pilots, many went to their duty stations without attending the Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico, let alone Marine Corps intermediate and senior schools.* The board recommended increased training in the coordination of air and ground and requiring all officers to attend the Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico.⁴³

While rejecting the Army helicopter control system as not applicable to the Marine Corps, the Youngdale board proposed that the wing reestablish its forward headquarters with the 3d Marine Division. It also called for a reexamination of Marine Corps helicopter tactics with an increased emphasis on helicopter gunships. On the other hand, the board also

exhorted ground officers to practice "economy in the employment of helicopters," to be used only "when essential as opposed [to] when they are nice to have."⁴⁴

Even with the implementation of many of the Youngdale Board recommendations, the question of control and coordination of helicopters between Marine air and ground commanders remained to a certain extent unresolved. The departure of the 3d Marine Division from Vietnam in the fall of 1969, however, made the availability of helicopters more plentiful. This muted the debate over control.

Through the latter part of 1968, however, the differences over helicopters dominated the relations between Marine air and ground officers. Much of the tension resulted from the simple fact that there was not enough nor a sufficient variety of helicopters to go around. The Marine wing was supporting two and a third divisions and as one senior Marine aviator stated, "we didn't have two and a third's divisions worth of helicopters." Part of the problem, however, was organization. As another Marine aviation general observed, "we should *never* [italics in the original] try to support two divisions with a single Wing command, no matter how big the Wing is." The question of how much control or influence the ground commander should have over helicopter operations, nevertheless, is still a bone of contention between Marine air and infantry commanders.⁴⁵

*See Chapter 27 for discussion of pilot shortages and Marine aviators attendance at Marine schools. Lieutenant Colonel Daniel M. Wilson, who commanded HMM-361 in Vietnam, related that prior to that assignment he had commanded HMM-162 at New River, North Carolina where, "we were primarily if not exclusively engaged in training Pensacola graduates for Vietnam—a pipeline of about three months." When he took over HMM-361 and commanded "these same pilots in combat it became ap[pare]nt that more operational training was desirable at least . . . so [far] as Quantico schooling." He stated, "there neither were sufficient pilots nor time [for that additional training]." LtCol Daniel W. Wilson, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).