

CHAPTER 2

The United States Presence in Southeast Asia

*The Forces in Thailand—The Forces Afloat—The III Marine Amphibious Force
Americans Ashore—The Marines in Vietnam*

The signing of the Paris Accords in January 1973 reduced the size and significantly altered the structure of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia even though the majority of Americans had already been withdrawn from South Vietnam. Government statistics reflected less than 25,000 American servicemen in South Vietnam on New Year's Eve 1972, consisting of 13,800 soldiers, 1,500 sailors, 7,600 airmen, 100 Coast Guardsmen, and 1,200 Marines.¹

The remaining field advisors and support units were removed from South Vietnam by the end of March 1973. On 29 March 1973, the United States officially disestablished Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and opened the Defense Attache Office, Saigon. Its members assumed most of MACV's advisory duties and continued to the best of their ability to perform these functions with a significantly smaller staff. The Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam Quarterly Summary graphically depicted the depth and significance of the reduction of forces in its chronology's highlights:

29 March—All USN/USMC personnel (with exception DAO/Embassy personnel) departed RVN. Military personnel remaining in country: Captain R. F. Stadler, Jr., USN, Chief Navy Division; Captain L. Young, USN, Chief VNN Logistic Support Division; Captain C. E. Cuson, USN, Chief Supply Section; Lieutenant Colonel W. D. Fillmore, USMC, Chief VNMC Logistic Support Division; Captain C. N. Conger, USNR, ALUSNA; Captain E. H. Belton, CEC, USN, Director of Construction; Colonel W. B. Fleming, USMC, Chief, Plans and Liaison Branch, Operations and Plans Division; Commander L. D. Bullard, USN, Staff Plans Officer, Plans Section, Plans and Liaison Branch, Operations and Plans Division; Major R. F. Johnson, USMC, Operations Staff Officer, Readiness Section, Operations and Training Branch, Operations and Plans Division. Additionally, there are 156 USMC spaces in the Embassy Security Detachment, Saigon. 29 March strength was 143.²

These changes in force size and function necessitated a restructuring of the American organization in Southeast Asia. Besides advisory duties, the U.S. charged the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, with supervision of the military assistance program permitted by the Paris agreements and shifted coordination and management of military operations to a new joint headquarters at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. By Au-

gust of 1973, the U.S. combat presence in Southeast Asia consisted of Seventh Air Force units in Thailand and Seventh Fleet elements in the off-shore waters bordering the Indochinese Peninsula.³

The Forces in Thailand

During the war, the number of U.S. forces in the Kingdom of Thailand had grown in direct proportion to the number of forces committed to South Vietnam. A complex of air bases had been built to support the U.S. effort in all of Southeast Asia. The principal U.S. component in Thailand, the Seventh Air Force, operated from the Royal Thai Air Force bases at Takhli, Utao, Korat, Ubon, Udorn, and Nakhom Phanom. Seventh Air Force headquarters was at Nakhom Phanom, in extreme northeastern Thailand.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam

Recruiting poster displays the slogan from which Nam Phong's nickname was derived. At its peak, the "Rose Garden" served as home to nearly 3,000 Marines.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A26873

Aerial view of Nam Phong, Thailand, looking from the southeast to the northwest. In the left center of the photo is the parking apron housing the Task Force Delta aircraft.

did not cause a proportionate reduction of tactical air forces based in Thailand. The North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 justified the retention of sizeable numbers of tactical aircraft in the theater, and even resulted in a temporary increase in the number of Thailand-based tactical airplanes.

During the Easter Offensive, Marine Aircraft Group 15 (MAG-15) deployed to Da Nang on 9 April 1972 as a three-squadron fighter/attack group, Task Force Delta. It was moved to Nam Phong, Thailand, on 15 June.⁴ Ironically known as the "Rose Garden," Nam Phong was nothing more than a Royal Thai training base with an airstrip. Its nickname borrowed from the Marine Corps advertising slogan, "We don't promise you a rose garden." Nam Phong was christened by the first Marines of MAG-15 to arrive. They knew immediately what the recruiter meant by that phrase when they set their eyes upon the barrenness of the base and realized the bleak existence that awaited them and their soon-to-arrive reinforcements, All Weather At-

tack Squadron 533 (VMA[AW]-533).^{*} Yet there was little time to concern themselves with accommodations as moments after their arrival, the first strike mission was launched against NVA targets in South Vietnam. Besides, with Marine expeditionary equipment and Seabees' help, Nam Phong was transformed into a fully operational airfield, eventually possessing many of the comforts of home, including showers.⁵

During Task Force Delta's stay at the "Rose Garden,"

^{*}MAG-15, originally configured as a three-squadron fighter/attack group, was comprised of the Iwakuni-based VMFA-115 "Silver Eagles" and VMFA-232 "Red Devils" plus the Kaneohe Bay-based VMFA-212 "Lancers." When the group relocated to Nam Phong, VMFA-212 returned to Hawaii, and was replaced by MAG-15's VMA(AW)-533 "Hawks." The fighter/attack squadrons flew the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom with VMFA-115 employing 12 F-4Bs, VMFA-232 15 F-4Js, and VMFA-212 11 F-4Js. VMA(AW)-533 arrived at Nam Phong on 20 June 1972 with 12 A-6As. By the end of June this organization, called Task Force Delta and commanded by Brigadier General Andrew W. O'Donnell, also operated four CH-46D Sea Knights belonging to H&MS-36 and four KC-130F Hercules aerial refuelers from VMGR-152.

its aircraft flew air support missions under the operational control of the Air Force. On 15 August 1973, the United States officially halted all combat air operations in Southeast Asia and the Marine Corps began the final phase of its withdrawal from Nam Phong. Manned by more than 3,000 Marines at its height in early July 1972, Task Force Delta gradually decreased in size until the mount-out boxes were once again nailed shut and the last Marines departed Nam Phong on 21 September 1973. The task force's aerial refuelers and helicopters returned to Okinawa and MAG-15 returned to Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni.⁹

During MAG-15's assignment to Thailand, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) approved a new command structure in Southeast Asia. In November 1972, the JCS authorized the creation of a multi-service, integrated headquarters to be located at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The approved concept directed the new organization, upon inception, to assume many of the duties then performed by U.S. Military Assistance

Command, Vietnam and replace Seventh Air Force as the manager of aviation assets and the air war in Southeast Asia. In February 1973, the Seventh Air Force, located in Saigon, ceased to exist as a separate headquarters. Its commander, General John W. Vogt, Jr., USAF, received orders directing him to transfer to Nakhon Phanom and assume command of the newly created, combined headquarters. Its shortened title, USSAG/Seventh Air Force (an acronym for United States Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force) soon became known, due to the sensitivities surrounding the combat role of the Seventh Air Force, as just USSAG. General Vogt, USSAG's new commander, also had been MACV's deputy commander since its reorganization on 29 June 1972. In that position, he had been fully responsible for all combat air operations in Southeast Asia, making him the obvious choice for the new billet in Thailand. In addition to the air war, General Vogt assumed responsibility for all military matters not exclusively pertaining to Thailand. Mili-

Aerial view of isolated Nam Phong Air Base, the "Rose Garden," as seen during an approach to Runway 36. Task Force Delta flight line and encampment are on the left side of the north runway, most of it constructed after the Marine Corps' arrival in June 1972.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



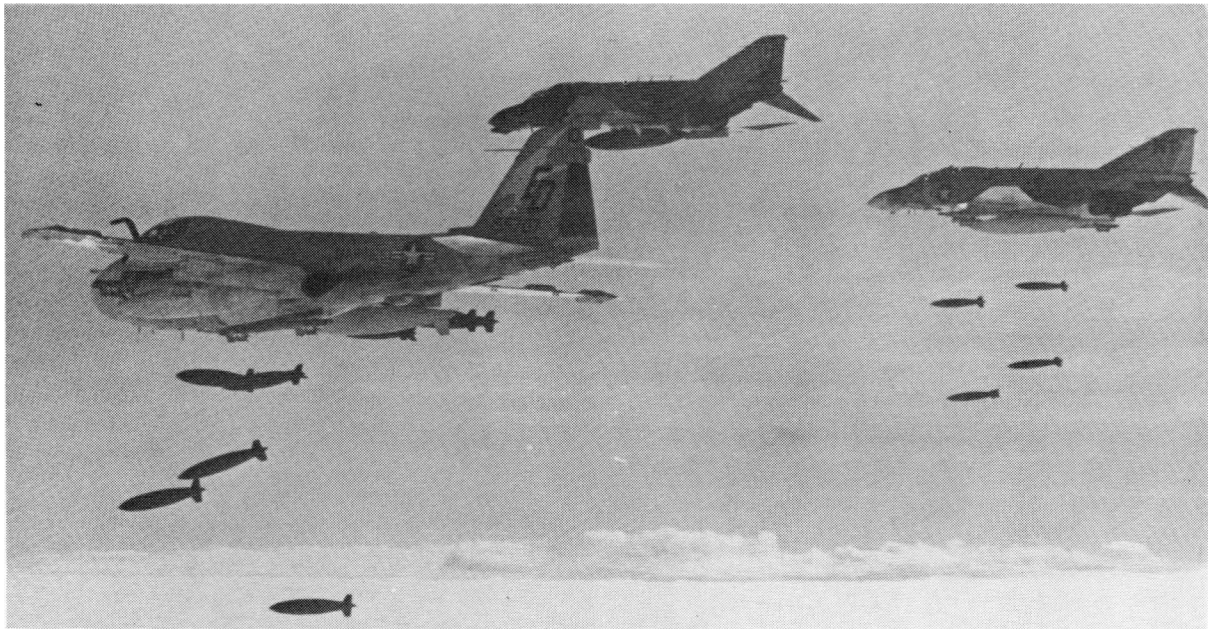


Photo courtesy of VMA(AW)-533

An F-4 Phantom and A-6 Intruder of the Marine Corps, and an Air Force F-4, conduct electronic, Loran-assisted bombing over Cambodia. The U.S. set up a Loran transmitter site in Phnom Penh to provide close air support to the Cambodian government troops.

tary affairs pertinent only to the Royal Thai Government would continue to be handled by the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand (ComUSMACThai).⁷

The Joint Chiefs of Staff designated the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Noel A. M. Gayler, as operational commander of USSAG, but authorized General Vogt as USSAG/Seventh Air Force's commander to exercise control over all Thailand-based aircraft with the exception of Strategic Air Command and Pacific Air Traffic Management Agency units, B-52s and C-130s, respectively. Despite this restriction, USSAG served as tactical manager of the air war until it ended in 1973. Besides Vogt, JCS transferred many other members of MACV's staff to Thailand to fill the nearly 600 authorized billets at USSAG headquarters. General Vogt moved to Nakhon Phanom on 15 February and assumed his new duties while retaining his former title and functions. Those functions officially ceased on 29 March when MACV was disestablished at 1900 Saigon time. At that moment, the commander of USSAG/Seventh Air Force added to his list of duties oversight of all military and intelligence activities in Southeast Asia and operational command of the Defense Attache Office, Saigon. Control of this organization, occupying MACV's old offices, did not extend to defense attache matters, but

it did cover security assistance planning, intelligence collection and analysis, and interfacing with regional military commanders, both American and Vietnamese, as well as the Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS).⁸

The JCS had created the USSAG/Seventh Air Force headquarters to ensure that there would not be a joint command void in Southeast Asia as a result of compliance with the Vietnam cease-fire agreements. The United States felt that the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, could not perform the joint command task and still abide by the spirit of the Accords. As a consequence, USSAG acquired most of MACV's combat-related functions including air contingency planning. Shortly thereafter, Congress mandated a cessation to combat air operations in Southeast Asia (15 August 1973) and USSAG adjusted to the change by shifting its emphasis from combat to preparations for other air contingencies. Planning for the possible evacuation of U.S. citizens from Indochina, in particular Cambodia, began to occupy an ever increasing amount of USSAG's time. In addition to this demanding task, its commander still retained responsibility for a diverse range of Southeast Asian operations. One member of the staff, Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. Grimm, recalled, "USSAG had a lot of other 'irons in the fire' including a vast array of different contingency plans—

the reintroduction of U.S. forces into Southeast Asia, rescue of any POWs found, and coordination of numerous monitoring and intelligence-gathering operations.”⁹

Following the cease-fire in Vietnam in January 1973 and the bombing halt in all of Southeast Asia eight months later, the U.S. Air Force withdrew its augmenting units from Thailand. Some went to the Philippines where they were placed under the operational control of the Commander Thirteenth Air Force, Major General Leroy Manor, who in 1970, when a brigadier general, had been the air commander during the unsuccessful raid to liberate U.S. prisoners of war at Son Tay.* General Manor commanded all Air Force units in the Southeast Asia area of operations, except in those instances when a unit was committed to Thailand to support USSAG. For that specific period, the commander USSAG/Seventh Air Force exercised control.¹⁰

The units comprising the Seventh Air Force provided the same conventional capabilities that the rest of the United States tactical air arsenal possessed. Heavy ordnance and the ability to deliver it on a continuous basis was the province of the 307th Strategic Wing and its B-52 heavy bombers and KC-135 tanker aircraft stationed at Utao. Sharing this seven-year-old, picturesque base (south of Bangkok near the Gulf of Thailand) was the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing. It flew the cargo workhorse of Southeast Asia, the C-130 Hercules. Keeping separate company, the tactical fighters of the 347th and 388th Tactical Fighter Wings (TFW) called Korat Air Base in central Thailand home. Equipped with the oldest fighter in the Air Force, the F-4 Phantom, the 388th shared the field with the newest fighters, the F-111s of the 347th which included the 428th and 429th Tactical Fighter Squadrons.** Additionally, an attack aircraft, the A-7 Corsair II of the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron, used Korat as “homeplate.” The 432d Tactical Fighter Wing located at Udorn Air Base in north-central Thailand also flew the F-4 Phantom.

The remaining units of the Seventh Air Force, specifically the 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW), and the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group

*A tactical success, the raiders found no POWs at Son Tay. For more on the Son Tay operation, see Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1975* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1980).

**The F-111 bomber designed and built by General Dynamics in the mid-1960s was never given a name designation. In recent years, it has been called the Aardvark. Nalty Comments.

(ARRG), were based at Nakhon Phanom Air Base. During most of the war, the 56th SOW had been engaged primarily in covert operations. One of the wing's squadrons, the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) or “Knives,” flew CH-53C helicopters specially fitted with two 750-gallon gas tanks for extended range.*** Collocated at Nakhon Phanom with the 21st SOS and an integral part of the 56th SOW was the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). The 23rd's pilots flew OV-10 Bronco aircraft, callsign “Nail.” Some of the Broncos, “Pave Nails,” were equipped with laser designators which enabled them to fix targets for laser-guided weapons.**** The Air Force also used these aircraft to locate downed airmen, especially in bad weather or at night. The 23d TASS was one of the largest squadrons in any air force, numbering 65 aircraft compared to a Marine Corps squadron of 12 to 18 planes. The third component of the 56th SOW, the 16th Special Operations Squadron, called Korat home-base and operated the AC-130 “Spectre” gunships.***** In July 1974, the USAF administratively transferred the 16th SOS from the 56th SOW to the 388th TFW, but its location remained the same.

The 3d ARRG, a Military Airlift Command unit, had two squadrons under its control. One, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), flew the HH-53, commonly known as the “Jolly Green Giant”; these helicopters were homebased at Nakhon Phanom.¹¹ The other member of this group flew HC-130 Hercules aircraft and bore the title 56th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS). The HC-130s were used to perform a dual mission: in-flight refueling of the HH-53 helicopters and coordination of rescue operations from a command console in the

***Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. Grimm recalled that the CH-53Cs had 750-gallon ferry tanks which USSAG had identified as extremely vulnerable to small arms fire. He said, “An attempt was made by ComUSSAG during the summer of 1974 to ‘foam’ the tanks with Eagle Pull in mind. PacAF turned down the request.” Grimm Comments. The former commander of USSAG, General Vogt, was PacAF commander until 30 June 1974 and General Louis L. Wilson, Jr. replaced him on 1 July.

****A means of accuracy enhancement, the laser-designator illuminated the target with a laser beam which the bomb then followed to its mark if released within a specified time window or “basket.” If delayed too long, the lock would be broken and the bomb would not home on the target. Nalty comments.

*****One of the Spectre models, the AC-130E was armed with 20mm guns, a 40mm gun, and a 105mm howitzer. The U.S. Air Force called this gun system Pave Aegis. Jack S. Ballard, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Development and Employment of Fixed-Wing Gunships, 1962-1972* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1982), pp. 172-174.

aircraft. The 56th's HC-130s, dubbed "King Birds," acquired their name from the squadron's callsign, "King," and they, like the AC-130's of the 16th SOS, had Korat as their temporary nesting place.¹²

The 3d ARRG operated the Joint Rescue Coordination Center at Nakhon Phanom. Known as "Joker," it coordinated the activities of both the rescue aircraft and their supporting escorts. The units required to perform this type of operation were known as a Rescort Package.

Crews and aircraft for the Rescort Package usually came from the 40th ARRS, the 56th ARRS, the 23d TASS, and the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron. The HC-130s coordinated the operation and refueled the HH-53s, who performed the actual pick-up of the downed crewmembers. In addition to the "Jolly Greens," the "King Birds" also controlled the OV-10s, serving as on-scene tactical support for use against any enemy targets near the rescue site which threatened or intimidated the slow, low-flying, rescue helicopters.¹³ The Rescort operation was so well developed that a simulator installed at Udorn trained all newly arriving pilots on Rescort procedures, further enhancing the chances for mission success.

One of the units which redeployed from Korat AB, Thailand, to Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, was the 7th Air Command and Control Squadron. Even though the squadron moved in May 1974, its crews stood ready to return to Utapao, Thailand, at a moment's notice.¹⁴ The squadron's aircraft, EC-130Es, modified to operate as airborne command centers, had served in Southeast Asia since the unit's formation at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, South Vietnam, in September 1965. Each Hercules was specially configured to allow for insertion of an airconditioned command and control capsule containing communications equipment, operator stations, and display boards. Designed to function during major operations as an airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC), the 7th ACCS, call sign "Cricket," performed that mission on a round-the-clock basis by always having a minimum of two aircraft on station. Carrying a battle staff of 12, "Cricket's" crew consisted of a director known as an airborne mission commander (AMC) and three sections: a five-man operations section, a two-man intelligence team, and a four-man communications unit. The aircraft contained 20 air-to-air and air-to-ground radios linking the command and control team to the outside world via 24 radio antennas. Despite all this state-of-the-art electronics equipment, the aircraft lacked a radar capable of identifying all targets in its

vicinity. This type of equipment would have provided the battle staff with a real-time picture of the airborne elements it hoped to command and control. Without it, the AMC had to rely exclusively on the plane's sophisticated communications equipment and other aircraft radio calls for situation updates and display information. *Aviation Week & Space Technology* editor Benjamin M. Elson aptly summarized the consequences of this shortcoming: "Since the EC-130E does not carry search or track radar, the battle staff cannot provide positive control or insure separation of aircraft in a combat zone."¹⁵

The Forces Afloat

During the period January to July 1973, as Operation End Sweep (the removal of mines from North Vietnam's harbors required by the Paris Peace Accords) progressed, the North Vietnamese were reminded daily that the U.S. Seventh Fleet still controlled the South China Sea. In the months following the completion of the minesweeping operation, the Seventh Fleet may have been out of sight, but it was never far from the minds of the North Vietnamese leaders.¹⁶

The Seventh Fleet, largest of the deployed fleets of the United States, operated in an area bounded by the Mariana Islands on the east, by the Arabian Sea on the west, the Sea of Okhotsk to the North, and Australia to the south.¹⁷ In addition to approximately 60 ships, the Seventh Fleet contained a Marine amphibious task force of varying size, consisting of ground, aviation, and support elements, a carrier air wing, and all the crews necessary to man and operate this force. All totaled it comprised a force of 60,000 sailors and Marines and more than 500 aircraft of all types.

Task Force 72 was responsible for antisubmarine warfare and served as the eyes and ears of the Seventh Fleet. Charged with search, reconnaissance, and surveillance, specially-equipped aircraft of this task force operated from Japan, the Philippines, and Guam.

While the fleet depended upon bases for refit and upkeep, as well as stores and supplies of all kinds, its range was extended by the mobile logistic support units of Task Force 73. The oilers, ammunition ships, stores ships, and ships that combined two or more of these capabilities were a vital part of the Seventh Fleet. The fast combat support ship (AOE) became the most valued supply support vessel in the Seventh Fleet because of its enormous capacity to carry critical stores. It carried more fuel than the largest fleet oiler and more ammunition than the largest ammunition ship. The combat stores ship with its refrigerated food



Photo courtesy of BGen William A. Bloomer, USMC (Ret)

Three of the four major helicopters of the Marine amphibious unit are shown in this Seventh Fleet picture. In the foreground on the left is a CH-46 Sea Knight and to the right of it is the AH-1J Cobra. Two UH-1E Hueys sit on the port side of the flight deck.

stocks, aviation supplies, and general provisions was always a welcome sight to sailors and Marines long at sea.

The Seventh Fleet's submarine force was Task Force 74, while cruisers and destroyers made up Task Force 75. Both of these task forces maintained a high tempo of operations.

The amphibious force, Task Force 76, and the Fleet Marines of Task Force 79 were inseparable partners of over-the-horizon power projection.* Task Force 76 was usually composed of one amphibious squadron of eight ships ready to conduct sea-based operations upon call. The task force command ship function was performed by the amphibious force command ship USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) or a flag-configured dock landing platform (LPD). The remaining seven ships of the force were divided into two amphibious ready groups: four ships in Alpha, three ships in Bravo. Normally, Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Alpha consisted of an amphibious assault ship (LPH), a dock

landing ship (LSD), and a tank landing ship (LST). The Bravo ARG usually was comprised of a LPD, an amphibious cargo ship (LKA), and either a LSD or LST. Task Force 79 provided the landing teams for the amphibious ready groups. When not at sea, the Amphibious Force, Seventh Fleet shared Okinawa with the Landing Force, Seventh Fleet as a base of operations.

The main striking force of the Seventh Fleet was its carrier aircraft, the fighting edge of Task Force 77. When the situation dictated, the Seventh Fleet drew on other task forces for the supporting ships and aircraft needed to form carrier task groups. Roving the seas in company with Task Force 72 units, elements of Task Force 77 patrolled as far west as the Persian Gulf, south to Australia, north to the Sea of Japan, east to the Marianas, and everything in between including the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

The magnificent base at Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, provided needed repairs, supplies, and recreation facilities for the Seventh Fleet. Yokosuka and Guam followed in order of importance as bases for the fleet. Some support was also available at Singapore and Sasebo. Aircraft of the fleet were based at Cubi Point

*An operation conducted at sea out of sight and danger of enemy ground fire, but within close enough range to deliver force, project power, and, if necessary, make a forced entry by surface or air.



Photo courtesy of BGen William A. Bloomer, USMC (Ret)

An RF-4 of VMCJ-1 lands on board the USS Midway (CVA 41). One of the many Marine Corps supporting units then serving in the U.S. Seventh Fleet, VMCJ-1 and its aircraft possessed both aerial reconnaissance and electronic counter-measures capabilities.

(part of the Subic Bay complex), Kadena on Okinawa, and at Misawa and Atsugi on the island of Honshu, Japan. Although the bases were not subordinate to the Commander, Seventh Fleet, base commanders were required to give priority support to the fleet and fleet aircraft.

Most of the ships and aircraft of the Seventh Fleet were detached from the California-based First Fleet for periods of six months, but one attack carrier, the USS *Midway* (CVA 41), two cruisers, including the flagship USS *Oklahoma* (CLG 6), a destroyer squadron, and two combat stores ships were home-ported in Japan. A submarine, the USS *Grayback*, and a tactical air support squadron called the Philippines home, while a reconnaissance squadron based its planes at the naval air station on Guam.¹⁹

In an emergency, the Seventh Fleet could be augmented by other units. In March and April of 1975, just such an emergency occurred when the Seventh Fleet was forced to concentrate its ships in the coastal waters near Saigon, ready for any eventuality. By the end of April, when evacuation of U.S. nationals was imminent, the Seventh Fleet realized the benefits of augmentation. The task force's size reflected the fact that it had been reinforced by a full carrier task group and an amphibious squadron.

The III Marine Amphibious Force

During the 1973-1975 Paris Peace Accords "cease-fire," the Marine Corps had three Marine amphibious forces within its Fleet Marine Force structure. Two of

them, I MAF and II MAF, were based in the continental United States while the third was in Japan. The III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) maintained its headquarters on Okinawa. The Commanding General, III MAF was also the commander of the landing force of the Seventh Fleet, Task Force 79. As commander III MAF, the units subordinate to him were the 3d Marine Division, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW), and the 3d Force Service Regiment.* Additionally, when wearing his Seventh Fleet "hat," the commanding general controlled the two deployed Marine landing forces with Amphibious Ready Groups Alpha and Bravo.

With most of its air units at Iwakuni, collocated with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and U.S. Navy patrol squadrons, the Marine Corps regularly had to rotate units out of Iwakuni in order to avoid overcrowding. As a result, normally two of the wing's five fixed-wing tactical squadrons were deployed for training, one to Naval Air Station Cubi Point, and the other to the Naval Air Facility Naha, Okinawa.²⁰

*The 1st MAW's home base was Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan. In addition to its basic headquarters and support and control groups, the wing was comprised of three aircraft groups, an aerial refueling and transport squadron (VMGR), and a composite reconnaissance squadron (VMCJ). With the exception of Marine Aircraft Group 36 (helicopters and OV-10s), VMGR-152, and Marine Air Support Squadron 2, which were based at Marine Corps Air Station, Futema, Okinawa, all of the wing's subordinate elements were at Iwakuni. In March of 1976, the spelling of Futema was changed by the Japanese to its present form of Futenma. 1st MAW ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun73.

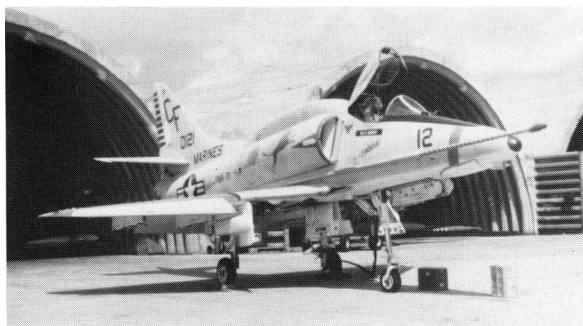


Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret) *A-4 belonging to VMA-211 of MAG-12 sits in revetment at Bien Hoa, awaiting maintenance. MAG-12 departed Bien Hoa at the end of January 1973 in conformance with the recently signed Paris Accords.*

The problem of space was somewhat relieved when in May 1972 some wing units deployed to Vietnam to meet the threat of invading North Vietnamese troops. Marine Aircraft Group 12, whose attack squadrons flew the A-4E Skyhawk, was sent to Bien Hoa Air Base, 16 miles northeast of Saigon, where it remained for almost a year, while Marine Aircraft Group 15 deployed to Da Nang.²¹ On 29 January 1973, the "Tomcats" of Marine Attack Squadron 311 (VMA-311) and the "Wake Island Avengers" of VMA-211 began leaving Bien Hoa. Piloting KC-130Fs based on Okinawa, the air crews of VMGR-152 assisted MAG-12 in transporting its gear back to Iwakuni. By day's end on 30 January, all of VMA-211's aircraft had landed at the joint-use airfield on the southern end of Honshu island. VMA-311's retrograde progressed almost as fast and on 31 January its last aircraft returned to Iwakuni. When that A-4E touched down on runway 01, it marked the conclusion of a tour of duty in South Vietnam for "311" which spanned eight years and included 54,625 combat sorties.*²² Seven months earlier, MAG-15 had departed South Vietnam, but instead of returning to Japan, it redeployed to Nam Phong, Thailand, to continue the air war. After 16 months of combat operations in Southeast Asia, the 1st MAW commander, Major General Frank C. Lang, directed MAG-15 to cease all activities and depart Thailand. Upon receiving the order, the three squadrons at the Rose Garden redeployed. On 31 August VMFA-115 went to Naha and the following day VMFA-232 departed for Cubi Point. While those two units mapped out a training schedule, Major Ronald E. Merrihew and

*First Lieutenant Charles G. Reed flew the squadron's 50,000th combat sortie on 29 August 1972. VMA-311 ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec72.

his squadron, VMA (AW)-533, flew back to Iwakuni. Shortly after his flight of eight A-6s touched down on the Iwakuni runway on the last day of August 1973, the MAG-15 commander, Colonel Darrel E. Bjorklund, administratively and operationally returned control of the "Hawks" to MAG-12. Three weeks later, on 21 September, Marine Air Base Squadron 15 (MABS-15) officially returned control of the Royal Thai Air Force Base, Nam Phong, to the Royal Thai Government and departed, ending another chapter in a long history of advanced base operations.²³

Between Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) General Robert E. Cushman's visit to Iwakuni on 29 and 30 September 1973 and the end of September 1974, the wing underwent several more organizational changes. On 14 October 1973, MAG-12 transferred control of VMJ-1 back to MAG-15, and in August 1974, CMC administratively transferred VMA-311 to MAG-32. On 29 August in a ceremony at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, VMA-324, an A-4M squadron, was officially redesignated VMA-311. The Marine Corps balanced MAG-12's loss by replacing the "Tomcats" with VMA-513, the first AV-8A Harrier squadron to deploy overseas. The "Nightmares" joined MAG-12 on 1 September 1974.²⁴

Based at Futema, approximately 500 miles south of Iwakuni, MAG-36 was one of the largest aircraft groups in the Marine Corps. It consisted of five helicopter squadrons and an OV-10 Bronco-equipped observation squadron. In addition to these units, MAG-36 administratively controlled VMGR-152, which received its operational orders directly from the wing commander via his G-3 and the Air Transportation Control Officer (ATCO). One of the group's transport helicopter squadrons was always assigned as a component of the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) on board Amphibious Ready Group Alpha ships. The assigned unit actually was a composite squadron, usually either Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 (HMM-164) or the "White Knights" of HMM-165, both flying CH-46Ds augmented by detachments of CH-53Ds from the "Heavy Haulers" of Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 (HMH-462); UH-1E Hueys of Marine Light Helicopter Squadron 367 (HML-367), call sign "Scarface"; and AH-1J Cobras of the "Gunfighters" of Marine Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 (HMA-369).²⁵

The combat service support element of III MAF, the 3d Force Service Regiment (FSR) was based at Camp Foster, Okinawa. The regiment was at reduced strength, reflecting the cutback in personnel immedi-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

KC-130Fs of VMGR-152's four-plane detachment assigned to support Task Force Delta await maintenance on the Nam Phong flight line. During the bombing of Cambodia, VMGR-152 aircraft provided aerial refueling support by flying a four-plane formation in a racetrack pattern over Tonle Sap, using the Angkor Wat ruins as a rendezvous point with Marine F-4s laden with bombs and enroute from Nam Phong to Phnom Penh.

ately following the war, but remained organized as a typical FSR with a headquarters and service battalion, supply battalion, and a maintenance battalion. Task-organized, logistical support units of the 3d FSR supported the two landing forces embarked in amphibious shipping.

The ground combat element of the MAF, the 3d Marine Division, was also located on the island of Okinawa. One of its regiments, the 3d Marines, was detached and stationed at Marine Corps Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, as the ground combat element of the separate 1st Brigade. The brigade's air element, MAG-24, consisted of three fighter squadrons, three helicopter squadrons, an observation squadron, and a support squadron. Units from the 3d Marine Division combat support and combat service support organizations normally attached to a regiment to constitute a regimental landing team were, in the case of the 3d Marines, attached to the 1st Marine Brigade. For example, Company A of the 3d Shore Party Battalion was assigned to the 1st Brigade. Since the 3d Marine Division was minus one of its regiments, the separate battalions of the division were each minus one company.*

*A division without all its regimental landing teams is referred to as a division "minus", written (-), but since the 3d Marine Division had organizations normally organic to Force Troops, FMFPac, attached to it, e.g., the 3d Tank Battalion and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, it was also a division reinforced (Rein). So the 3d Marine Division was a division (-) (Rein). For simplicity, it will be referred to as the 3d Marine Division.

The 3d Marine Division's elements were housed within five separate camps on the island of Okinawa. The division headquarters and headquarters battalion were at Camp Courtney overlooking scenic Kin Bay on the eastern shore. The division's artillery regiment, the 12th Marines, was located at Camp Hague, just south of Courtney. The 3d Reconnaissance Battalion was on the western side of the island at Onna Point. The largest camp on the island, Camp Hansen, sandwiched between Kin Bay and the Kin River, was home to the 4th Marines and most of the separate battalions of the division. Situated on the northeast coast of Okinawa adjacent to Ora Wan Bay was Camp Schwab, where the division billeted the 9th Marines, the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, and the 3d Motor Transport Battalion.

After its return from Vietnam in 1969, the 3d Marine Division maintained and improved its combat-ready posture to fulfill its mission as a "force in readiness" in the Western Pacific. Primary emphasis was placed on providing well-trained battalion landing teams to the III MAF for deployment as the ground combat elements of the Seventh Fleet amphibious ready groups. One BLT of the division always was assigned as the air contingency BLT, prepared for quick deployment on board Air Force or Marine aircraft to accomplish contingency missions within the Seventh Fleet's area of operations.²⁶

By 1974, the 3d Marine Division had gained as much stability as could be expected for an organiza-



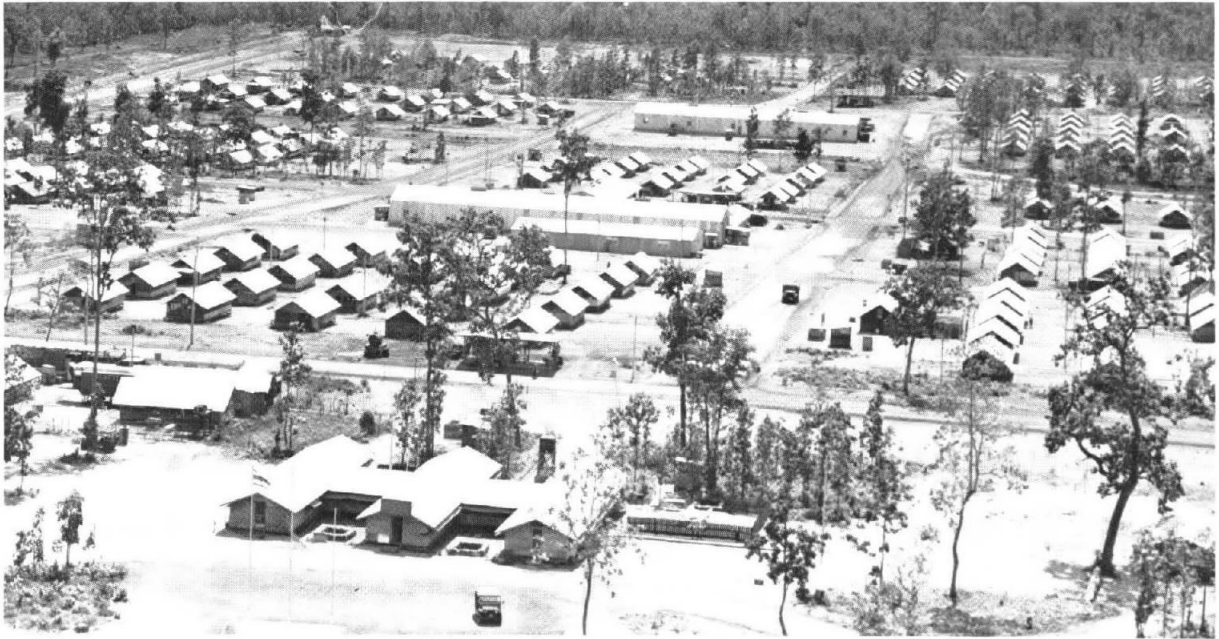
Marine Corps Historical Collection

VMFA-232 F-4s undergo maintenance in preparation for a bombing flight in support of the Lon Nol government. VMFA-232 later redeployed from Nam Phong to Cubi Point.

VMA(AW)-533 A-6 awaits arming on a Nam Phong Air Base taxiway prior to a bombing mission against the Cambodian Khmer Rouge. The squadron, commanded by Maj Ronald E. Merrihew, departed the Rose Garden for Iwakuni on 31 August 1973.

Marine Corps Historical Center





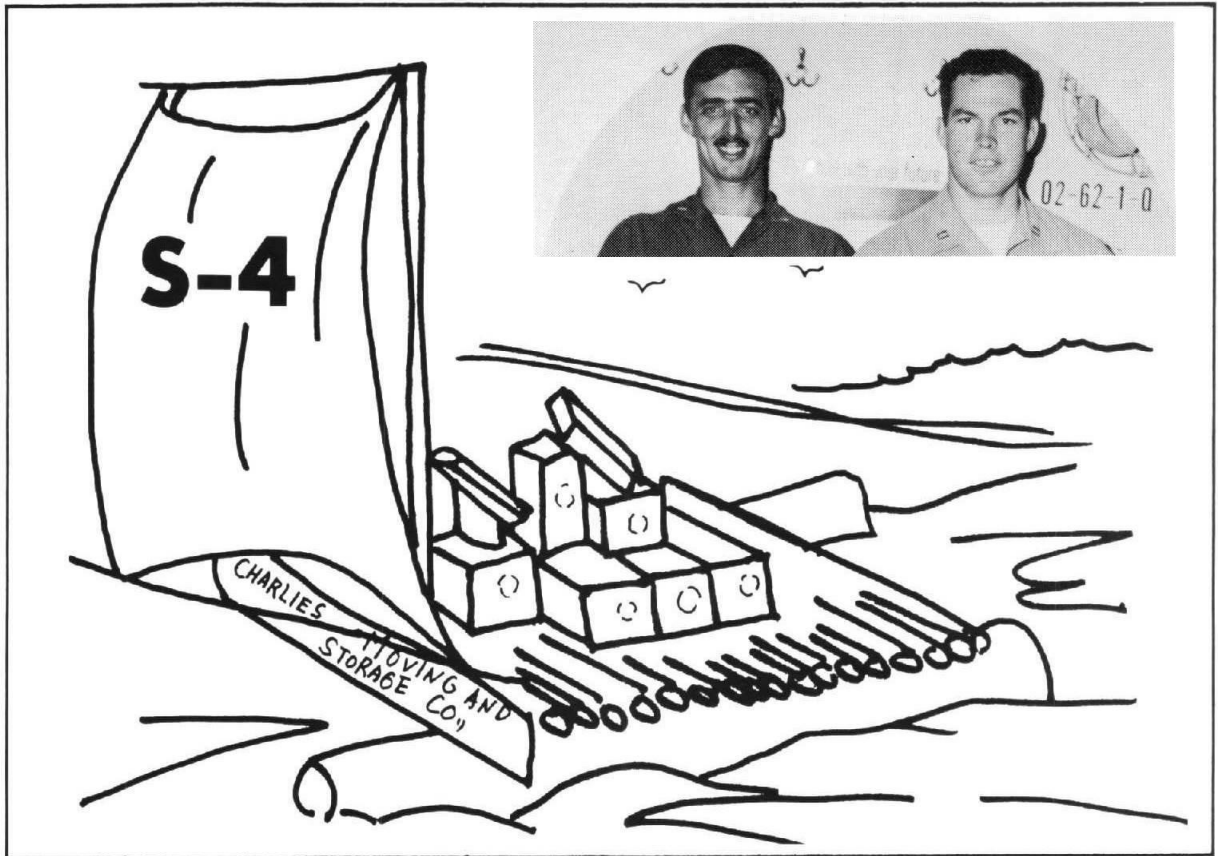
Marine Corps Historical Collection

An aerial view shows the Task Force Delta headquarters and the mess hall at Nam Phong, Thailand. Task Force Delta ceased air support of the Lon Nol government in Cambodia in August 1973 as a result of a Congressional ban on flight operations in Southeast Asia.

A CH-46D of a H&MS-36 detachment parked on the ramp at the Nam Phong Air Base. These helicopters, which used the call sign "Green Bug," provided sea and air rescue support to Task Force Delta and the base. During its tour at the Rose Garden, the detachment flew 2,356 hours and 2,956 sorties, of which 80 were active SAR missions.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

Embarkation was significant in the rapid deployment of Marine helicopter squadrons in MAU turnovers. Pictured is a salute to HMA-369 S-4, Capt Charles A. Dittmar, top right.

tion whose members served only one-year tours of duty. To simplify personnel assignments, the 4th Marines was charged with the ARG Alpha commitment, and the 9th Marines was tasked with providing Marines for ARG Bravo.

Amphibious Ready Group Alpha, with the helicopter-equipped 31st MAU embarked, was capable of conducting sea-based, over-the-horizon, forced, surface, and vertical amphibious entry anywhere in the Western Pacific area. Amphibious Ready Group Bravo was configured to perform a forced, surface, amphibious entry in the same region. The combat efficiency of the embarked BLTs was maintained by conducting amphibious landings, training, and exercises at Camp Fuji, Japan, in the Republic of the Philippines, and on Okinawa.²⁷

To meet these commitments, III MAF had to institute a system of controlled personnel inputs for the infantry battalions and the combat support and service support platoons, the units constituting every new BLT. Beginning in 1973, these changes resulted in a

four-phased BLT Readiness Program [Input, Pre-deployment Training, Deployment, and Post-deployment]. The building of an organization, normally from zero strength, took place during the 60-day input phase. During this period, individual combat and physical skills were stressed, and by the end of the input cycle the battalion was at 100 percent of its manning level, the maximum strength authorized. At any given time, there was one and occasionally two battalions in the input cycle. This meant that the Commanding General, III MAF sometimes had four, and usually had five, of his six infantry battalions ready for contingencies and deployment.*

As the date for the opening of Expo 76 (Japanese exposition and World's Fair built on land in northern Okinawa near the Marine Corps' training area) ap-

*The status of battalions and BLTs as of 31 December 1973 was: 1st Bn, 4th Marines—Input Phase; BLT 2/4—Deployment Phase; BLT 3/4—Deployment Phase; 1st Bn, 9th Marines—Post-Deployment Phase; 2d Bn, 9th Marines—Input Phase; and 3d Bn, 9th Marines—Predeployment Phase.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The 3d Tank Battalion, here leading the column of M-48 tanks in a combat review at Camp Hansen, was one of the many units housed at this largest Marine camp on Okinawa.

Forming up for a predeployment inspection at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, are the ground combat and combat service support elements of the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit. After 1973, all units before deploying would undergo a four-phased BLT readiness program.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Photo courtesy of LtCol George E. Strickland, USMC (Ret)
*LtCol Strickland and VNMC LtCol Luong observe
 NVA positions across the Thach Han River near Quang
 Tri. Later, in 1975, the 258th Brigade was deployed
 on the southern bank of the river, west of the city.*

proached, training for the III MAF elements on Okinawa became more difficult. The Japanese government had imposed more stringent regulations to ensure the safety and success of Expo and adherence to these rules forced the Marine Corps to restrict its training on Okinawa. As a result, Korean practice areas and the Zambales training area in the Philippines came to be used more extensively for III MAF exercises, as did the live firing ranges and maneuver areas located at Camp Fuji, Honshu, Japan, and Subic Bay and Zambales in the Philippines. Ranges in South Korea provided excellent practice areas for deployed BLTs, amphibian tractor and reconnaissance units, and forward air control parties.²⁸

Despite the restrictions and the additional expense of long-distance exercises, III MAF did not suffer from the experience. The situation on Okinawa and the requirement to train elsewhere produced some beneficial results. To get to the other training areas, considerable embarkation planning had to be done, both for air and sea movement, and as a consequence the III MAF agencies responsible for moving Marines and their equipment perfected the techniques to an exceptional degree.

Americans Ashore

The deactivation of MACV and the creation of USSAG obligated the Marine Corps to provide two officers for the new joint staff in Nakhon Phanom. Both staff billets were in J-3, the operations direc-

torate. The first officers assigned were Colonel George T. Balzer, chief of the Operations and Plans Division, and one of his assistants, Major John J. Carty, a plans action officer. In May of 1973, Major Horace W. Baker relieved Major Carty and a month later Colonel Edward J. Bronars replaced Colonel Balzer. The following year, in April, Major Edward A. "Tony" Grimm replaced Major Baker. The official title of his billet was Eagle Pull Action Officer, Surface Plans Division, J-3, USSAG. In June 1974, Colonel James P. Connolly II arrived in Nakhon Phanom as Colonel Bronars' replacement for the designated Marine Corps billet. Instead, because of questions over seniority at this joint command headquarters, the USSAG chief of staff assigned Colonel Connolly to a different position, chief of the Ground Operations Branch.²⁹

With USSAG located in Thailand, over 400 nautical miles from Saigon, the DAO, charged with attache duties, logistics and supply functions, intelligence collection and analysis, and technical support and contracts, became the administrative heir to MACV. Having inherited several of its predecessor's functions, the DAO conducted business and maintained its offices in the former MACV compound, adjacent to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, in the northwestern suburbs of Saigon.

When the DAO was established, the protocols of the Paris Accords limited it to a staff of no more than 50 military and 1,200 U.S. civilian personnel. In addition, the Accords stipulated that there could be no more than 4,900 Department of Defense contractors in South Vietnam. The majority of the DAO personnel worked on the military assistance program, but most of the contact with Vietnamese military personnel was by contractors. There was, however, an exception to this arrangement—the VNMC Logistic Support Branch, at 15 Le Thanh Ton in Saigon consisting of a chief (a Marine Corps officer) and five American civilians. Two of the five men had prior service in the Marine Corps: Jerry Edwards, a Marine Corps captain in WW II, who served as the staff's deputy, and Master Gunnery Sergeant Charles C. Gorman, USMC (Ret), a former supply chief, who used his expertise in the role of supply advisor. All five of them maintained daily contact with their Vietnamese Marine Corps counterparts, often conducting on-site visits, a rare occurrence for American civilians working at the DAO.³⁰

When the ceasefire agreement was signed, it was understood that the civilian DAO employees would be phased out by the end of January 1975, and that



Photo courtesy of MajGen John E. Murray, USA (Ret)

The occasion for this gathering of Marine Corps officers was a 1974 liaison visit by LtGen Wallace H. Robinson, Commanding General, Defense Logistics Agency, to the Defense Attache Office, Saigon to discuss logistical support to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces.

the number of civilian contractors would be reduced to 500 soon thereafter. In June of 1974, in addition to the 50 military personnel, there were approximately 860 civilians in the DAO and 2,500 DOD-sponsored contractor personnel still in South Vietnam. Two interrelated events shelved the implementation of the final planned reduction: ceasefire violations and deficiencies in the technical training program. NVA and VC noncompliance with the Paris Accords presented a problem that could only be offset by enhanced South Vietnamese readiness. The training of South Vietnamese personnel to achieve the necessary skills progressed at a much slower rate than originally anticipated and resulted in them not being prepared to replace the civilian contractors who performed vital support functions. As the tempo of combat operations increased, this situation worsened with the contractors spending more and more time maintaining equipment and less time training their South Vietnamese counterparts.³¹ During the course of the "Vietnamization" program, the United States implemented Project Seven Hundred Million under which an additional \$700 million worth of sophisticated military equipment was to be provided to the South Vietnamese during the 30 days immediately following the

ceasefire. Unfortunately, in planning this project, too little emphasis apparently was given to providing the training needed to make the South Vietnamese self-sufficient in technical fields such as electronics, major aircraft inspection and overhaul, and supply facility and port management. Existing plans called for the reduction of contractor personnel to about 1,100 in the second quarter of Fiscal Year 1975, but it became clear to both the United States and South Vietnam that this support could not be reduced any further and probably needed to be increased. Meeting the original goal of elimination of all contract personnel by 1976 quickly fell into the category of "too hard." Both sides realized by the end of 1974 that American technical support might be needed for an indefinite period.³²

The Marines in Vietnam

Upon establishment of the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, the Marine Corps received three military billets. The first of these bore a strong resemblance to the former military position of Chief of the Marine Advisory Unit. The new position carried the title Chief, VNMC Logistics Support Branch, Navy Division DAO, and Lieutenant Colonel Walter D. Fillmore

served as the first. Later that year (1973) Lieutenant Colonel George E. Strickland reported to the DAO to assume the duties of the departing Lieutenant Colonel Fillmore. In June of 1974, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Lukeman relieved him. The primary responsibility of each of these officers was to ensure that the South Vietnamese Marine Corps received an uninterrupted flow of supplies and equipment.³³

Fillmore, then Strickland, and later Lukeman and the five American civilians who worked in the Logistics Support Branch were not subject to the rigid travel restrictions imposed on most of the DAO personnel. Exempt from this impediment, they made frequent trips to Military Region 1 (Huong Dien, Hue, Phu Bai, and Da Nang) and to other VNMC locations including Vung Tau and Song Than. This kind of contact enabled them to provide "personalized, direct, field support" to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Lieutenant Colonel Strickland recalled, "Most of my tour was spent living with the Vietnamese Marine Corps in a bunker. While in Saigon, I maintained a billet at the Brinks Hotel, three blocks from my office. All of the U.S. civilians [LSB staff] lived in Vietnamese housing close to VNMC headquarters."³⁴

The senior Marine in the DAO then was Colonel Nicholas M. Trapnell, Jr., chief of the Plans and Liaison Branch, Operations and Plans Division. Responsible for planning and liaison on matters relating to support of South Vietnam's military, Colonel Trapnell assumed those duties in April of 1973 from his predecessor, Colonel William B. Fleming. Colonel Paul L. Siegmund relieved Trapnell a year later and departed South Vietnam in March 1975. Colonel Eugene R. "Pat" Howard reported to the DAO in January 1975 as Siegmund's replacement. Colonel Trapnell recalled, "I arrived late March 1973 and had a brief overlap with Colonel Bill Fleming. March 28 was the 'Magic Date' by which all military advisors had to be 'out of country.'"³⁵

During the summer of 1973, Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. Barstow assumed the third Marine Corps billet in the DAO. Lieutenant Colonel Barstow became

*Five American civilians worked in the VNMC Logistics Support Branch. Two members of the staff, the deputy chief of VNMC Logistics Support Branch and the branch's supply advisor, were former Marines. Terry Edwards, a Marine captain in World War II, served as the second in command, while Charles C. Gorman, Master Gunnery Sergeant, USMC (Ret), and a former supply chief, lived up to his own supply motto, "A supply shack is only a sorting place. The supplies belong in the field with the troops." Strickland comments.

the readiness deputy of the Operations and Plans Division, replacing Major Joseph F. Nardo who a few months earlier, in April, had relieved Major Richard F. Johnson. In September 1974, Lieutenant Colonel William E. McKinstry undertook those tasks.

A fourth Marine officer was assigned to a billet created as a result of the ceasefire agreement: Liaison Officer, Four Power Joint Military Commission, RVN. Major Larry D. Richards joined the Four Power Joint Military Commission in 1973 as one of the U.S. representatives tasked with liaison duties. He was subsequently replaced by Major Jaime Sabater, Jr., whose planned but never effected relief was Major Richard H. Esau, Jr.³⁶

In 1974, the number of Marine officers in South Vietnam increased by one when Captain Anthony A. Wood transferred from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) in Nakhon Phanom to Saigon. His official title was Operations Officer (Forward, South Vietnam), JCRC. In February 1975, he joined the Special Planning Group at the DAO headed by Colonel Pat Howard. Colonel Howard, an aviator, had been tasked by Major General Homer D. Smith, USA, the Defense Attache, with the additional, but secret, responsibility of discreetly planning for an evacuation of Saigon.** (Ambassador Graham Martin had refused to entertain any discussion of such an eventuality.) Lieutenant Colonel Strickland observed, "Both Majors Diffie and Bergen of Company E, MSG Bn (Marine Security Guard Battalion) worked continuously on an American Embassy security and evacuation plan in spite of Ambassador Martin's refusal to foresee its importance. They made a superb effort to be prepared."³⁷

Company E of the Marine Security Guard Battalion, commanded by Major Gerald E. Diffie until 15 September 1973 when Major Daniel F. Bergen relieved him, represented the largest group of Marines in Southeast Asia following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. It was charged with the responsibility of providing security for the United States Embassy in Saigon and consulates in Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Bien Hoa. Company E was organized into a headquarters and three platoons. Two platoons accounted for the interior and exterior guards at the embassy and the consulate detachments, while the third platoon

**Colonel Trapnell stated that "The planning that led to the creation of the Special Planning Group began in the DAO under General Murray approximately six months prior to his departure on around September 1973" and that concurrent planning was already underway at USSAG. Trapnell Comments.

provided security for Ambassador Graham Martin's residence. The average strength of the company was five officers and 143 enlisted Marines.³⁸ The Embassy Marines in Saigon began to settle into a less demanding routine during the waning months of 1973. By 1974, the situation in South Vietnam appeared to be sufficiently stable to warrant reduction of the strength of Company E and by 23 April 1974, the Exterior Guard had absorbed the Ambassador's Residence Platoon. On 20 May 1974, the Interior Guard Platoon was redesignated the Marine Detachment, Saigon, and placed under control of the Hong Kong-based regional company, Company C, of the Marine Security Guard Battalion. On 17 June 1974, Captain James H. Kean, the Executive Officer of Company C, arrived in Saigon to complete the reassignment of the Interior Guard Platoon and coordinate the pending transfer of the consulate detachments. Additionally, Captain Kean traveled to the American Consulate at Can Tho to begin planning for the activation of a security detachment there. On 30 June 1974, Major Daniel F. Bergen, the commanding officer of Company E, deactivated it and transferred to Company C the remaining 90 enlisted Marines who comprised the Embassy Exterior Guard Platoon and the detachments at Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Bien Hoa.

Master Sergeant Juan J. Valdez became the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the newly created Embassy Detachment in Saigon. Staff Sergeant Roger F. Painter, the senior Marine at Nha Trang; Staff Sergeant Walter W. Sparks, in charge at Da Nang; and Staff Sergeant Michael K. Sullivan, the detachment chief at Bien Hoa (subsequently relieved by Gunnery Sergeant Robert W. Schlager), all understood that their

primary mission was to protect the American consulates and their classified material. Each detachment trained regularly to improve its readiness and enhance security of its consulate.

On 16 July 1974, Captain Kean, a major selectee, relieved Major Donald L. Evans as the Commanding Officer, Company C, Marine Security Guard Battalion, Hong Kong. Two months later, the company's new commander oversaw the activation of the Marine security guard detachment at Can Tho, the first ever in that city. On that day, 23 September 1974, he placed Staff Sergeant Boyette S. Hasty in charge of the Can Tho Marines. Located in the capital of Phong Dinh Province this detachment would never celebrate its first anniversary of existence.³⁹

While the events in South Vietnam led to a false sense of security in late 1973 and early 1974, the war continued at an undiminished pace in Cambodia. For Gunnery Sergeant Clarence D. McClenahan and his 11-man detachment at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, a continuous series of alerts and quick responses to these crises was the order of the day. As the situation became worse, there was talk of an evacuation; talk evolved to preparation and waiting, but no evacuation.⁴⁰

Thus, American forces in Thailand, forces afloat, and forces ashore were prepared for any eventuality, but predominately they were preoccupied with training and the seemingly unavoidable evacuation of Cambodia. Few Americans possessed the ability to foresee the events in Southeast Asia and what challenges awaited them. The Marine Detachment at Da Nang would be the first to gain that insight.

CHAPTER 3

Contingency Planning

The Plan for Cambodia—Vietnam

The Government of Thailand hosted the majority of American troops (35,000) in Southeast Asia after the last military unit left South Vietnam on 29 March 1973.¹ Accordingly, events in Thailand had a significant impact on American military contingencies in Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia, its neighbor to the east. Considering the magnitude of the effect social and political factors had on military decisions in Southeast Asia, Thailand in 1973 demands examination.

In November 1971, a group of military and civilian leaders, headed by Premier Thanom Kittikachorn* and Interior Minister General Praphas Charusathien, effected a bloodless coup promising “not to change any existing institutions ‘beyond necessity.’” By June of 1973, the council had abolished the constitution drawn up in 1968, dissolved parliament, disbanded the cabinet, and established martial law. In addition, it pledged to continue Thailand’s anti-Communist and pro-American foreign policy.²

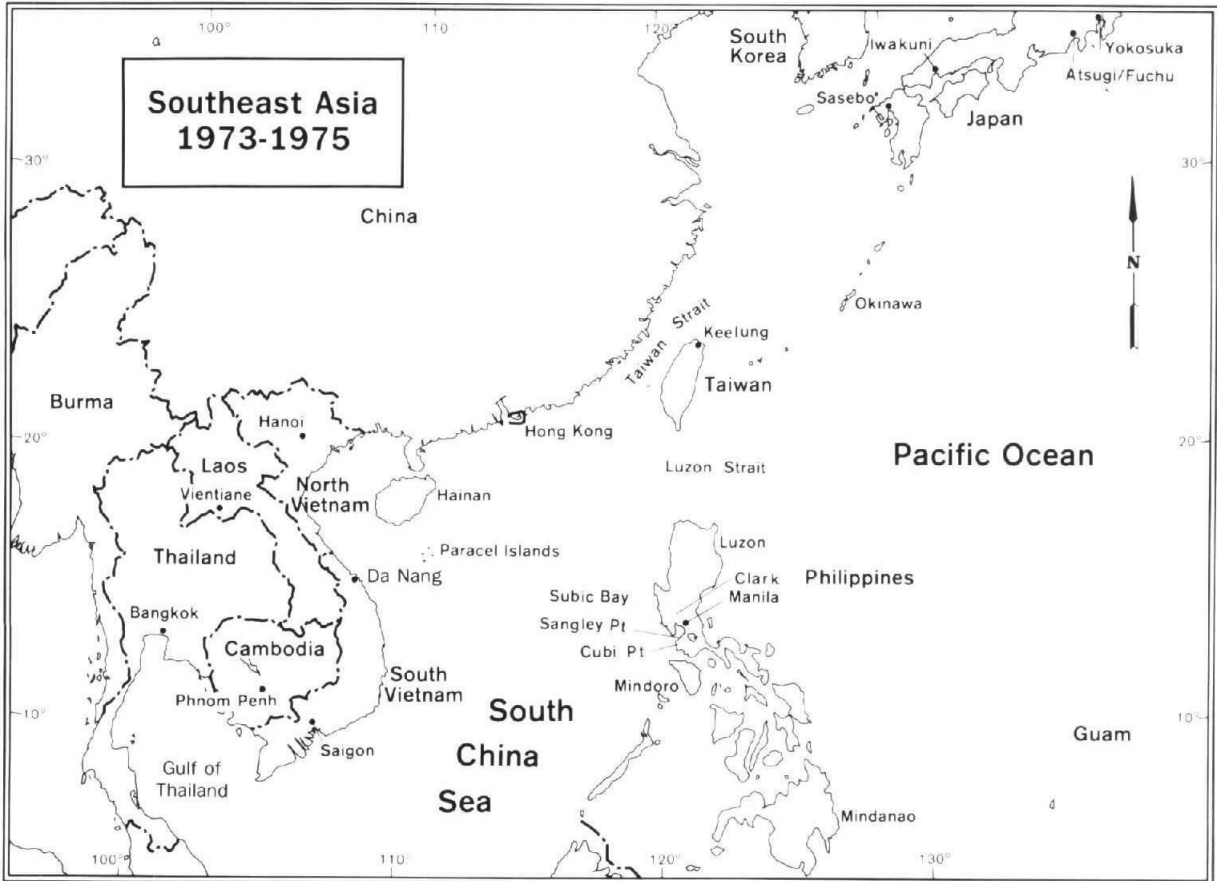
Students dissatisfied by this turn of events protested, staging numerous demonstrations in Bangkok. The student leaders demanded a new constitution and immediate replacement of the military dictatorship with a duly elected democratic government. The critics of the new regime contended that the dictatorship had created more problems than it had solved, and in particular pointed to the state of the economy. The validity of this charge was readily apparent; the economy had worsened and many of Thailand’s problems stemmed from its economic woes, especially its high unemployment.³ The students attributed the extensive joblessness to the government’s inefficiency and corruption. Still, despite the overwhelming argument against the government, the students and protesters lacked a dramatic issue to catalyze their movement. Events outside Thailand seemed to answer that need

*Kittikachorn formerly held the title of field marshal and on 10 August 1966 had participated with the Ambassador to Thailand, Graham Martin, in a ceremony to dedicate the recently completed airfield at Utapao. The new base was built largely with U.S. funds to avoid having American military aircraft use the runways at the Bangkok commercial airport.

when American military operations and Thai politics collided over the use of force in Cambodia.

The issue of whether the United States military should be allowed to use Royal Thai bases to support the besieged government in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, quickly became the hottest topic in Thai political circles. U.S. air operations from bases in Thailand against the Khmer Communist offensive began at the end of March 1973 and by June the students had organized substantial public support against the American military involvement in Cambodia. On 20 June they held a massive protest rally in Bangkok. This upheaval in Thailand coincided with the U.S. Congress’ passage of the Case-Church amendment cutting off all funding for combat operations in Southeast Asia effective 45 days after the start of the new fiscal year. As a result the U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps ceased bombing on 15 August and returned the Royal Thai Air Force Base at Nam Phong to the Thai government on 21 September, and then stood by and watched the students overthrow the military dictatorship on 14 October 1973. King Phumiphol Aduldet immediately appointed Sanya Thammasak as Kittikachorn’s successor, the first civilian premier since 1953.⁴

The overthrow of the military government precipitated an immediate but previously scheduled withdrawal of major U.S. elements from Thailand and a reduction in military assistance funds. It also finalized a reorganization of forces in Southeast Asia, begun with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and consummated by a U.S.-Thai Accord in August of 1973. The joint U.S.-Thai agreement was negotiated as a result of the recently displayed Thai nationalism and a growing need to realign Thailand’s diplomatic affairs to adjust to the reduced American military presence confronting the Communist governments in Southeast Asia. Nearly surrounded by Communist governments and faced with an inevitable regional realignment, Thailand had to display an awareness of its changing security needs and a sensitivity to North Vietnam’s interests. Thailand’s new military arrangement with the United States sent a message to its neighbors that it controlled its own destiny and although its intentions were peaceful it would not



Map adapted from Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: From Military Assistance to Combat*, vol. II (Washington: U.S. Naval Historical Center, 1986)

tolerate intervention by anyone in Thai affairs. In accommodating the new government's diplomatic needs, the agreement confirmed the restructuring of the U.S. presence in Thailand and reshaped its command relationships. The end result was the return of the Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACThai), to its pre-Vietnam function of overseeing logistics, administration, and liaison while the United States Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force (USSAG) headquarters assumed the role of coordinating and supervising military activities of mutual interest to America's Southeast Asian allies. Thailand accepted America's explanation that USSAG was a temporary, nonpermanent organization that would be removed as soon as the transition to peace had been completed. General John W. Vogt, Jr., headed the joint command at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, and although responsible for the air war in Cambodia, avoided any overt action that could be interpreted as a sign that the United States planned to expand hostilities using Thailand as a base of operations. This restriction even included dropping the well known Seventh Air Force's name from USSAG's title. With a 15 August ban on combat flights staring him in the

face, General Vogt, with less than a month left on his tour of duty, had little choice but to begin planning for post-combat contingencies.⁵

The U.S. Air Force and its commander in Southeast Asia were now obligated to effect a transition to a training and standby alert status. Overnight, this became the major function of all Air Force units in Thailand. General Vogt oversaw the initial phase of this evolution while at the same time serving as coordinator of operational air requirements in Southeast Asia. Less than a month later, however, General Timothy F. O'Keefe, USAF, a native of Brooklyn and a well-respected combat veteran, succeeded him. General O'Keefe assumed command of a headquarters without a combat role but still responsible for air contingencies in the region, including possible reentry into South Vietnam or evacuation of Americans from Southeast Asia, particularly war-torn Cambodia. Political instability in Thailand and increased combat losses by America's allies in Cambodia served to make General O'Keefe's new job difficult and USSAG's future role uncertain.⁶

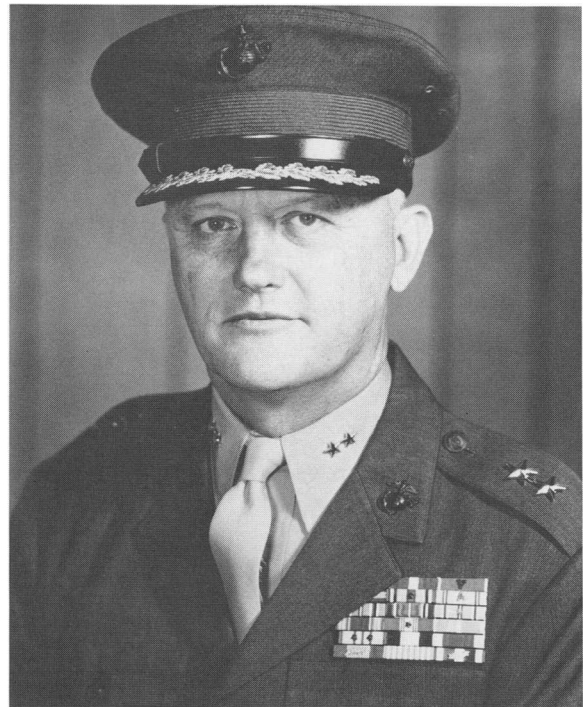
All of these events in Thailand converged in late 1973 to make military contingency planning for Cam-

bodia a highly elusive and confusing proposition. It made all planning circumspect, complicated, and unusually dependent on variables beyond the control of USSAG and the American military. This translated into a realization that any planned military activity involving Southeast Asia might have to originate beyond the confines of the Indochina Peninsula and the next best option was the Gulf of Thailand. This, in turn, necessitated an increased and heavy dependence on Pacific naval forces for the possible implementation and execution of any such contingency plan.

The Plan for Cambodia

On 13 April 1973, Admiral Noel A.M. Gayler, USN, Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CinCPac), tasked General Vogt with responsibility for both the planning and execution of any emergency evacuation of American citizens from Cambodia. The planned evacuation would be codenamed Operation Eagle Pull.⁷ The Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand (ComUSMACThai), was thereby relieved of this responsibility with the justification being that MACThai had already begun the process of dismantling its operational command post. One only had to look at events in Southeast Asia to know the more compelling and immediate reason was the imminent collapse of the Cambodian government.

CinCPac's message assigning General Vogt the evacuation responsibility reflected the sense of urgency prevailing in Pacific Command Headquarters in Hawaii over the developments in Cambodia. The message also specified that pending preparation and approval of USSAG's plan, Major General Andrew J. Evans, Jr., USAF, should be prepared to execute his (MACThai) command's plan.⁸ This was little more than a concept envisioning three options: (1) evacuation by commercial air; (2) evacuation by military fixed wing; or (3) evacuation using Thailand-based Air Force helicopters. If required, U.S. Air Force Security Police already in Thailand would defend the landing zones, and the U.S. Army's Hawaii-based 25th Infantry Division would serve as a back-up. Pressured by the knowledge that battlefield events could precipitate an immediate evacuation of Cambodia, General Vogt's planners at USSAG Headquarters (Nakhon Phanom, Thailand) reacted almost immediately to the new assignment. Within two weeks, they released a message detailing their initial concept of operations, and not surprisingly it duplicated the MACThai plan.⁹ Not satisfied with the initial concept and uncertain when



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A558063
MajGen Michael P. Ryan, Commanding General, III MAF, learned in early April 1973 that senior Pacific commanders wished to use Marines as part of the evacuation security force. He ordered 31st MAU to provide a reinforced rifle company for Operation Eagle Pull.

they would have to activate it, USSAG strategists continued to develop, refine, and update the evacuation plan.¹⁰

Marines participated in the process from the outset. The message that directed USSAG to plan for an emergency evacuation from Cambodia also set forth a requirement for a reinforced company of Marines to be on call and available to USSAG for ground security purposes. In this role, they would supplant the Air Force units, designated as MACThai's landing zone security forces.¹¹

From theory to realization, this change wound its way through the Pacific Fleet chain of command and arrived by message as an order to Major General Michael P. Ryan to provide a reinforced rifle company from his command, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF). On 15 April 1973, he assigned this responsibility to the 31st MAU, which was ashore at Subic Bay. At that moment, the helicopter squadron assigned to Colonel Thomas J. Stevens (the MAU commander) and the ships designated to carry his MAU were already involved in minesweeping operations off

North Vietnam. Despite this shortfall in air assets, the MAU was prepared to conduct a company-size evacuation operation using Air Force helicopters.¹²

Additionally, General Ryan ordered the contingency battalion of the 3d Marine Division to serve as a back-up force. Shortly thereafter, on 20 April 1973, the MAU was relieved of its evacuation responsibilities in favor of the air contingency battalion landing team (ACBLT), which then became the primary source for the special ground security mission in Cambodia.¹³

General Vogt assigned responsibility for Eagle Pull planning to the Surface Operations and Plans Division within USSAG, which then designated Major Horace W. Baker the principal action officer. The senior Marine officers at USSAG, having recognized the necessity for rapid reaction to evacuation requirements, advocated the use of deployed Marine forces. As a result of their influence, the role of Marine forces changed from alternate to primary.¹⁴

With the developing sophistication of the plan came the realization that external and peripheral political, diplomatic, and humanitarian factors could not be ignored. Certainly they would complicate execution of the plan, but inattention to these matters would guarantee failure and portend fatal consequences. Wisely, Major Baker and the Surface Operations and Plans Division incorporated these factors into USSAG's planning.¹⁵

General Vogt's initial concept, like General Evans', entailed three options. Two involved evacuation from

Phnom Penh's Pochentong Airfield by fixed-wing aircraft, while the third envisioned the use of helicopters from the same site. The first choice called for the evacuation of all designated persons from Phnom Penh by commercial planes, with the Ambassador controlling the operation. The second involved fixed-wing military aircraft transporting evacuees from Pochentong, with ComUSSAG in control.¹⁶

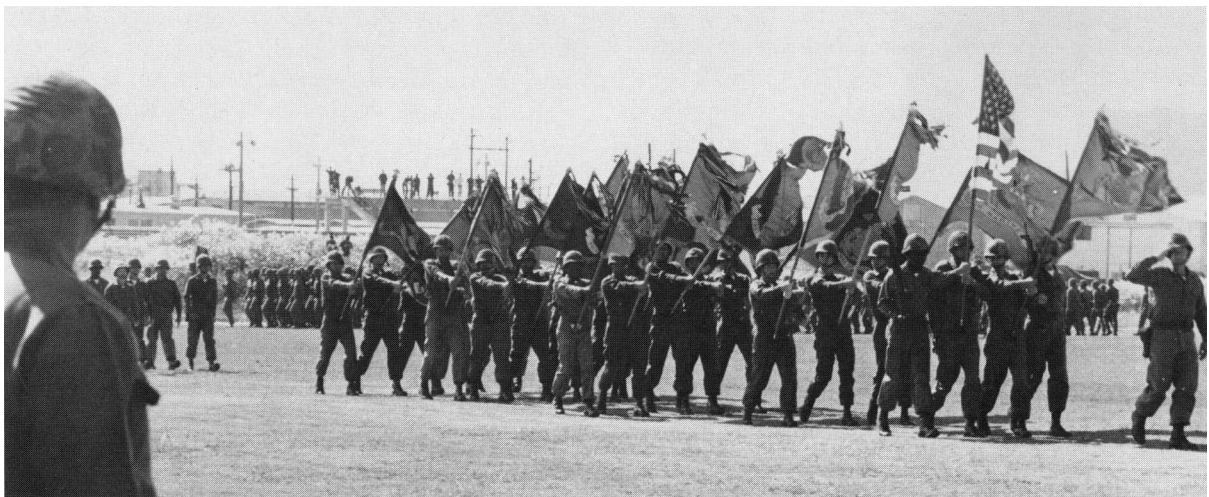
General Vogt correctly and prudently assumed that the U.S. colors at the Embassy would not be struck until the eleventh hour of the Khmer Republic had passed. Similarly, he presumed that the airfield at Pochentong (14 kilometers west of the city) would not be usable by then. Anticipating loss of the airfield at a critical hour, USSAG then concentrated on the third option, exclusive use of helicopters.¹⁷

In studying the details for a helicopter evacuation, two questions loomed larger than the rest. What was the total number of evacuees and where would they be located? This information represented the most critical factor and the one upon which all other decisions hinged. It not only would determine the number of helicopters required, but also the number of landing zones and their location. Additionally, it would dictate the size of the force required to protect those zones.

The time and distance factors related to this operation mandated use of the minimum essential number of security troops. This number would be predicated on helicopter availability rather than tac-

Massed colors of the regiments and separate battalions of the 3d Marine Division lead off a combat review at Camp Hansen, Okinawa. These are some of the troops USSAG planners decided to use as ground security forces if they had sufficient warning time.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



tical integrity of the required ground units.¹⁸ The amount of warning time was yet another unknown factor in the equation to determine what sized force could be used. General Vogt knew he would have to conduct the evacuation on short notice, regardless of other commitments. With sufficient warning time, i.e., 24 hours or more, other forces would also be available, but in the spring of 1973 there was little promise of a day's warning.

USSAG planners recognized that the nearest infantry units capable of serving as security forces were III MAF Marines stationed on Okinawa. Given sufficient warning time, units from Okinawa could be airlifted to Thailand. In the event of insufficient warning time, Seventh Air Force security forces would have to suffice despite the fact that USSAG planners considered this a high-risk, last-resort option.

Helicopter availability loomed as the largest unanswered question confronting the planners. The Seventh Air Force had some helicopters in Southeast Asia as did the Marine Corps, but the distances involved dictated the use of heavy helicopters. The medium load CH-46 helicopters did not possess the required capacity nor the range to complete this mission successfully. Only a heavy helicopter could carry enough fuel for the extended distance and still have room to carry the payload. At this time, in early 1973, all of the Marine Corps' heavy lift helicopters were committed to Operation End Sweep, minesweeping operations in Haiphong Harbor. Consequently, USSAG envisioned for its initial concept of operations the use of Air Force helicopters and, time permitting, Marine security forces located on Okinawa.¹⁹

The Seventh Air Force's 21st Special Operations Squadron (21st SOS), equipped with CH-53 aircraft, and the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (40th ARRS), equipped with HH-53s, would provide the airlift support. Basically identical helicopters, the HH-53 differed from the CH-53 in that a rescue hoist, jettisonable auxiliary fuel tanks, and a refueling probe had been added to enable the HH-53 to conduct its mission of search and rescue. In the spring of 1973, combat veterans manned both squadrons, but with the passage of time many of these airmen were replaced by less experienced pilots.²⁰

The anti-aircraft capabilities of the Khmer Communists posed a serious threat to all aircraft, especially the helicopters. Similarly, the American security forces once in their assigned zones could be subjected to Communist artillery and mortar fire. With these

factors in mind, a detailed air support plan was developed along with stringent rules of engagement.²¹

Operational control of the forces committed to the evacuation rested with General Vogt, USSAG Commander, but would be exercised through a mission commander in a specially equipped C-130 airborne battle command and control center (ABCCC), which would orbit at some distance from Phnom Penh. Meanwhile control of tactical aircraft operating over the landing zones and along the helicopter approach and retirement routes would be handled by the tactical air coordinator airborne, TAC(A), in an OV-10 aircraft. Control of the helicopters was assigned to a separate helicopter direction center (HDC) in an additional C-130. The Seventh Air Force had enough planes to relieve this aircraft on station, thereby providing continuous round-the-clock control of the operation. The commander of the landing zone/security forces also would come under the Commanding General, USSAG, via communications with the orbiting ABCCC.²²

With each passing week during the spring of 1973, the number of potential evacuees grew. The original estimate of 200 to 300 increased to 600-700 by the end of May 1973, a phenomenon directly related to the success of the Khmer Rouge offensive. Noting this, USSAG increased the number of landing zones, which in turn necessitated an enlargement of the security force. In June, III MAF received orders to provide a second reinforced rifle company and a command group to support the operation. This responsibility fell to the 3d Marine Division. From June 1973 until execution of the operation, a battalion of the division always had two companies on call for Operation Eagle Pull. The command group operated independently, preparing for every conceivable eventuality, but sometimes events overcame plans as they did in 1973.²³

In July, without warning, General Vogt received a message from CinCPac to execute Operation Eagle Pull. As Major Baker was incredulously absorbing the text of the message in preparation for placing the evacuation plan into effect, he received a phone call from the CinCPac Command Center, "Disregard the message!" The staff at CinCPac had been so sure that the evacuation would take place that they had prepared an "execute" message and, inexplicably, it had been released. A further touch of irony was added by the coincidental presence of the CinCPac action officer in Thailand. He had arrived at USSAG Headquarters to attend a previously scheduled planning conference