

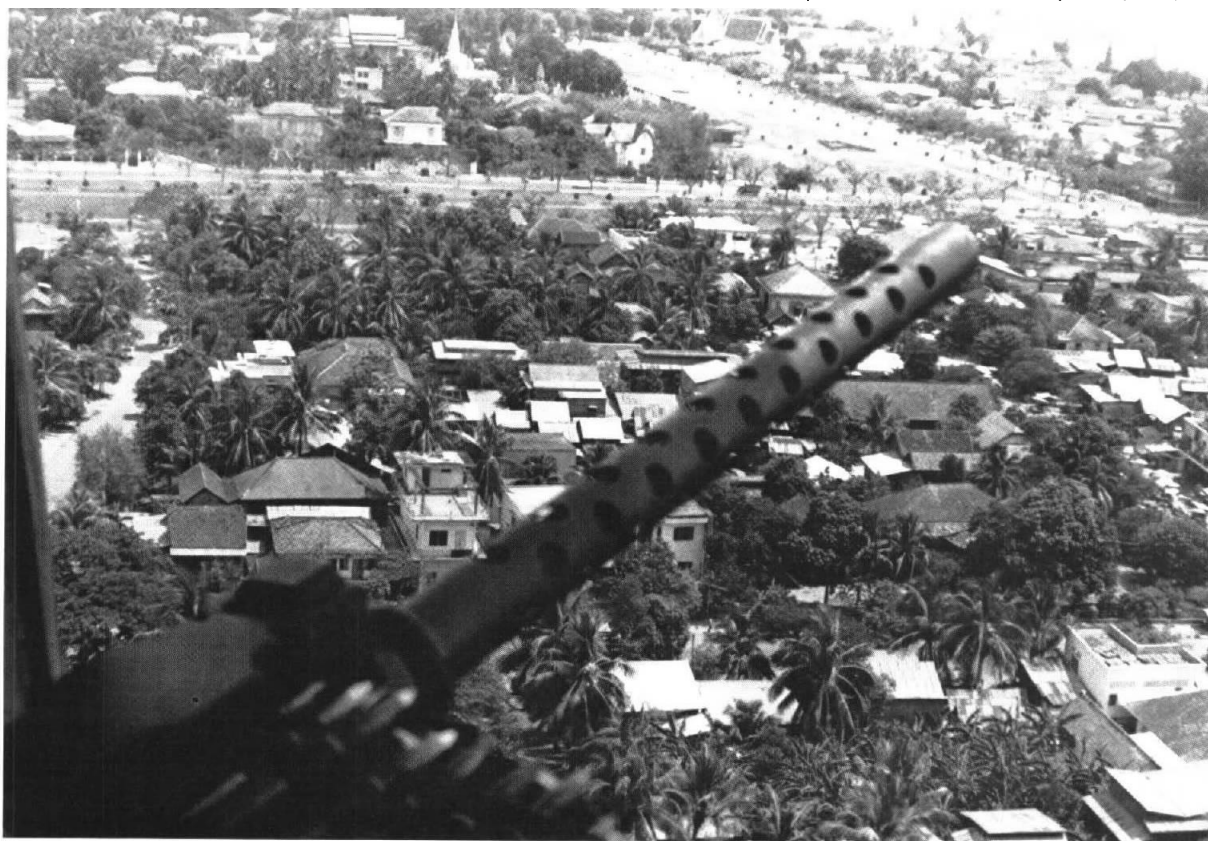


Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

*Heliteams from BLT 2/4 on the portside elevator of USS Okinawa are lifted to the flight deck where they will embark in CH-53s from HMH-462 for Operation Eagle Pull.*

*A Marine helicopter gunner views Phnom Penh. The first helicopter from HMH-462 departed the USS Okinawa at 0607 on 12 April, beginning Operation Eagle Pull.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150857





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150858

*Landing Zone Hotel comes alive with activity as Operation Eagle Pull begins. BLT 2/4 Marines reposition as CH-53Ds from HMH-463 touch down to begin the extraction.*

unit integrity with available deck space, the spread load of BLT 2/4, and the helicopter flow schedule, a compromise would have to be made. Whereas two rifle companies would satisfy the troop strength, it would be necessary because of the need for additional machine guns and mortars to commit elements of three companies. With this factor in mind, Lieutenant Colonel George P. Slade, BLT 2/4 commander, designated as the landing force elements: Company F commanded by Captain Thomas A. Keene and Company H commanded by Captain Steven R. Bland, both located on board the *Okinawa*, and Company G, commanded by Captain William R. Melton, positioned on board the *Vancouver* (LPD 2).

In view of the limited time available to integrate HMH-463 into the planned helicopter flow, 9th MAB Commander General Carey made the decision to use the existing helicopter employment schedule.\* This

\*Colonel Roche stated, "Although General Carey may have made the decision noted here concerning the integration of HMH-463 into the helicopter employment schedule, that decision was not communicated to me. In the event, that was a decision which I made unilaterally on the recommendation of my staff and the respective helicopter squadron commanders." Roche Comments.

meant that HMH-462 would insert the landing force and extract the evacuees, and HMH-463, following in trail, would extract the landing force after all of the refugees had been rescued. The planned elapsed time from beginning until the extraction of the last landing force element would be two and one-half hours.<sup>41</sup>

#### *The Execution of Eagle Pull*

Shortly after 0600 on 12 April 1975, 12 CH-53s from HMH-462 launched from the deck of the *Okinawa* and ascended to their orbit stations above the task group. At 10-minute intervals, the helicopters returned to the deck of the *Okinawa* for loading. Elements of Companies F and H, and the command group embarked from the *Okinawa* while elements of Company G boarded their helicopters on the *Vancouver*. During the loading of 360 Marines and corpsmen, each helicopter topped off its fuel tanks and then waited for its turn to launch. The HMH-462 birds strictly adhered to the sequence set forth in the flow schedule. Once airborne, they formed up in divisions of three looking to those on deck like a swarm of bees ready to enter the beehive. They continued to orbit the ship awaiting their turn to depart for Phnom Penh. After the initial division left on its 130-mile journey to the



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Marines from BLT 2/4 deploy to take up defensive positions around Landing Zone Hotel, a soccer field in an apartment complex on the Mekong River's west bank in Phnom Penh.*

*CH-53Ds touch down in Landing Zone Hotel. As soon as they land they begin extracting ground security forces from BLT 2/4 because all of the evacuees have been rescued.*

Photo courtesy of LtCol William R. Melton, USMC



Cambodian capital, each succeeding one followed at 10-minute intervals. The first helicopters crossed the coast-line north of Kompong Som, penetrating Cambodian airspace at 0743, proceeding along a track parallel to Route 4.\*

Their flight path took them to the final checkpoint, Point Oscar, approximately 30 miles from the capital. It marked the holding area for the final approach to Phnom Penh and while inbound to Point Oscar, the pilots announced their arrival by checking in with "King."\*\* After the first division of helicopters checked in with the airborne HC-130, "King" instructed them to proceed directly to the landing zone, ahead of schedule. Upon completing this transmission, he then radioed the leader of the division, Lieutenant Colonel Bolton (commanding officer of HMH-462), to switch frequency and contact landing zone control, Phnom Penh. At the other end of the new frequency, Lieutenant Colonel Lawson and his landing zone control team waited for their first call. Bolton's helicopter with Colonel Roche (the MAU commander) embarked, touched down in Landing Zone Hotel at 0854. The troops quickly debarked and sprinted to their assigned sectors in the perimeter. Lieutenant Colonel Slade, the battalion commander, immediately reported to Colonel Batchelder, the senior ground force commander. At the same time, his air liaison officer, Captain Kermit C. Corcoran, assumed the duties of landing zone controller.<sup>42</sup>

Large crowds of Cambodians confronted the Marines, but for the most part they came out of curiosity and not to interfere. Having established the perimeter defense, the Marines began the process of moving the crowds back in order to keep the landing zone clear. The teams of Marines designated for evacuee control then began moving their groups to the awaiting helicopters. Once loaded, the HMH-462 helicopters launched for the return flight to the Gulf of Thailand and the waiting ships of ARG Alpha. In the event no

\*In accordance with the War Powers Act, a message with Flash precedence was sent to President Ford through the JCS notifying him of the precise penetration time.

\*\*One of the Air Force helicopter pilots in Thailand at that time, a member of the 40th ARRS who participated in the initial hour of the evacuation, then-Major John F. Guilmartin, Jr., remembered one of the "King Bird's" other contributions that day: "'King' was controlled by 'Joker,' the 3d Aerospace and Recovery Group at Nakhon Phanom. In this operation, the formally prescribed USAF communication channels became saturated and the 'King-Joker' link served General Burns and his staff as the primary source of information." Guilmartin Comments.

evacuees materialized for loading, then that helicopter took off and entered a holding pattern over the zone. This became necessary in order to ensure that succeeding waves of security forces could enter the zone on schedule, thereby guaranteeing a proper build-up of the perimeter defense. With only enough room in the zone for three CH-53s, flights arriving after the initial build-up had to be held at Point Oscar, even though the delay put them beyond their scheduled estimated time of arrival. This decision ensured minimum congestion in the zone and allowed the controller the flexibility of calling in helicopters as passengers appeared. The ability to anticipate allowed everyone more time to adjust to the situation in Phnom Penh. The American Embassy did not officially close until 0945, nearly an hour after the first helicopters landed. As evacuees from the Embassy arrived at the zone, the controller called in the orbiting helicopters, loaded them, launched them back to the ship, requested reliefs from Oscar, and began again the same process. Continuing like clockwork, this operation moved every available evacuee, but almost disappointingly the numbers were far less than anticipated.<sup>43</sup>

The last diplomatic report just prior to D-Day had indicated 590 evacuees, 146 Americans and 444 third-country nationals. HMH-462 actually removed 287, of which 84 were U.S. citizens and the rest, 203, foreign nationals. On the morning of the scheduled extraction, Ambassador Dean's note to key Cambodian officials advising them to be at the Embassy by 0930 ready to leave produced a stinging reply from Sirik Matak, a former prime minister and a driving force behind the formation of the Khmer Republic. He explained to Ambassador Dean that not only would he not leave with him ". . . but mark it well that, if I shall die here on the spot in my country that I love, it is too bad because we are all born and must die one day. I have committed this mistake of believing in you, the Americans."<sup>44</sup>

The paucity of evacuees did not affect the press coverage. Colonel Roche remembered an Associated Press photographer who pestered him the entire time, repeatedly asking what would happen next. The colonel finally stopped, turned to him, and said, "If I knew that, I probably would not have come in the first place."<sup>45</sup>

Twenty-five minutes after the last three HMH-462 helicopters left Oscar for Phnom Penh, Lieutenant Colonel Fix, the commander of HMH-463, launched the first of his four three-helicopter divisions, and a



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A332339

*Marines from Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines protect the perimeter of Landing Zone Hotel. The zone was not selected until summer 1974, but served its purpose as no enemy fire reached it until just prior to the departure of the last Marine commanders.*

section of two as backups. As expected, the controllers held these aircraft at Oscar approximately 30 minutes beyond their scheduled estimated time of arrival. Upon confirmation by the Embassy that the last citizens, including Ambassador Dean and the acting president of the Khmer Republic, Saukham Khoy, had safely boarded a HMH-462 helicopter, the squadron aircraft began extracting the landing force. At approximately 1050, 107mm rocket fire began impacting in the vicinity of Landing Zone Hotel. Less than 10 minutes later, the zone also received some 82mm mortar fire. As soon as the enemy initiated its rocket and mortar attack, the controllers in the zone notified the Air Force forward air controllers (FACs) flying overhead in 23d Air Support Squadron OV-10s. The FACs immediately made low passes over the east bank of the Mekong, but could not spot any fire coming from known enemy positions in that location. At 1059, the last element of BLT 2/4 left the zone and 16 minutes later, two Air Force HH-53s from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), as scheduled, extracted Colonel Batchelder and his command element. As they departed the zone, the helicopters

*HMH-462 Marine sits in a CH-53D at the end of his Phnom Penh evacuation mission. Sgt Ervin E. Breyette, Jr., leans against his .50-caliber machine gun and watches evacuees disembark on the USS Okinawa.*

Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)





Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Air Force HH-53 crews from 21st SOS celebrate the successful finish of Operation Eagle Pull. Air Force helicopters extracted Col Sydney H. Batchelder and his command group.*

received fire.\* Captain Melton, the Company G commander, recalled the extraction of his ground security forces:

I had passed the word to my company to pull in the perimeter; that we were leaving. I expected no problems, but there was a lot of noise from the helicopters. As Company G began embarking I saw Lieutenant Colonel Slade near the last helicopter. He motioned to me and I ran over to him. He asked me how things were going and I said fine. He nodded his approval and said I should get back to my company and make sure that I had everybody. I ran to the one remaining helicopter to be loaded and stood at the tail-gate and watched the platoon sergeant count his people on board. I stood in dismay as the sergeant's eyes grew wide in disbelief and horror. He turned toward me and indicated by mouthing his words and using two fingers that he was missing two Marines. I motioned to the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant to follow me. We ran around the long building on the edge of the soccer field (the LZ) to the entrance gate the platoon had been guarding. We saw two Marines standing in their original positions, almost catatonic. They probably had not moved since being first posted there and they had not heard the order to move out. I ran up to one and slapped him on the shoulder and yelled at them that we were leaving. When they both turned around

\*In his comments, Lieutenant Colonel Guilmartin related that these two HH-53s were commanded by First Lieutenant Donald Backlund and First Lieutenant Philip Pacini who received credit from the USAF for "Combat Support Missions" vice "Combat Missions." Guilmartin Comments.

and saw that the sector was completely void of Marines, their faces whitened in shock and dismay and they then turned and sprinted full speed to the waiting helicopter.<sup>46</sup>

Removal of the ground security force came none too soon because as the last helicopter lifted off Landing Zone Hotel, several rounds found their mark. The Khmer Communists had finally hit the center of the zone, but fortunately for the command element and the Air Force pilots they did so nine minutes too late.

Neither the Marines nor any of the other participants sustained casualties. The *Okinawa* eventually berthed all of the extracted citizens, and in the process of removing them from Cambodia no American, not the Marines on the ground nor the tactical aircraft airborne, fired a shot in anger. The two Air Force HH-53s from the 40th ARRS sustained the only combat damage of the operation. Small arms fire during the final extraction caused minimal damage to the first aircraft, but a 12.7mm heavy machine gun round hit the second chopper's tail rotor as it climbed out of the zone. Escorted by a third, backup HH-53, this Jolly Green Giant, despite severe vibrations, made it safely back to Ubon Air Base in Thailand.<sup>47</sup>

The last Marine helicopter to leave Cambodia landed on the *Okinawa* at 1215. At 1450, a HMH-462 bird with Ambassador John Gunther Dean and his party



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia John Gunther Dean steps off an HMH-462 CH-53 at Utapao. He arrived in Thailand on the afternoon of the day he departed from Phnom Penh.*

on board launched from the *Okinawa*. They requested clearance to Utapao Air Base, the military airfield closest to Ambassador Dean's new destination, Bangkok, Thailand. The next day, Sunday, 13 April, the remaining 270 refugees flew to Utapao on HMH-462's

Sea Stallions. When the last of these aircraft returned to the *Okinawa*, Amphibious Ready Group Alpha set course for the next crisis area, the South China Sea and South Vietnam, where it intended to rendezvous with Task Group 76.<sup>48</sup>

PART IV  
ENDING AN ALLIANCE



## CHAPTER 8

# The Other Contingency

*Marine Security Guard Detachment, Da Nang—Military Region 2: Nha Trang—III MAF and the NVA Onslaught  
9th MAB and Task Force 76—The Brigade*

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Sun Tzu, the great Chinese philosopher on warfare, wrote in 500 BC: “Generally, in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this.”<sup>1</sup>

As the final events unfolded in Cambodia, many experts wondered if the same fate awaited South Vietnam. The disaster which befell Military Region 1 had come as a surprise to many including the Ford administration and Ambassador Martin who was in North Carolina recuperating from dental surgery when the Communists’ spring offensive began. Even the consul general for Da Nang, Albert A. Francis, did not expect the unraveling which followed Ban Me Thuot. The swiftness of the subsequent events required his early return from Washington where he had been undergoing treatment for a thyroid problem. His arrival in Saigon on 22 March was followed closely by Martin’s. The Ambassador was welcomed back by his staff at 0300, 28 March, after a long flight from Andrews Air Force base on Air Force One. Two days later, the NVA entered Da Nang, completing its conquest of all five northern provinces and precipitating a mass exodus of the panicked population.<sup>2</sup>

Few had planned for such a debacle and the chaotic panic which ensued. Most of the South Vietnamese leadership, including President Thieu, thought the Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) could successfully defend at least the MR 1 coastal region: Hue, Da Nang, and Chu Lai.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. Barstow, a member of the DAO staff in 1973-74, in a personal letter to former Commandant General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., captured the essence of South Vietnam’s post-Accords military strategy: conserve resources and whenever possible use artillery and air.\* The Vietnamese seemed to emphasize an avoidance of engagements with the enemy, a husbanding of forces and military equip-

ment, all in anticipation of the big battle during which, at just the right moment, they would strike a fatal blow and defeat the enemy. The “right time” never arrived, but it scarcely mattered. Without a reserve division to move around the battlefield as necessary, any South Vietnamese strategy was suspect.

As a result of the events in the Central Highlands, and the need to implement his plan to save a truncated South Vietnam, Thieu ordered the withdrawal of the Airborne Division from MR 1. This fateful decision set in motion an uncontrolled retreat from northern South Vietnam and the collapse of MR 1 occurred without even a struggle. Both the decision and the subsequent collapse were directly attributable to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces’ most glaring weakness, the absence of a strategic reserve. This serious shortfall, identified in 1973 by Major General John E. Murray, USA, forced Thieu’s hand and in the end precipitated irreversible problems that possibly could have been avoided had they been addressed when the Defense Attache first raised his concerns. In his letter to General Greene, Lieutenant Colonel Barstow wrote: “I am concerned over the deployment of troops and units. The Marine and Airborne Divisions, the country’s two most reliable and well-trained, are deployed in static positions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Any breakthrough in Hue would mean no significant reserve once the two best are overrun.”<sup>3</sup>

The decision to use the Airborne Division to solve the strategic reserve problem contained a very important, but false assumption: defense of I Corps had no relationship to the people living there. I Corps Chief of Staff, Colonel Dang, said, “This [withdrawal of the Airborne Division] had three bad effects. It reduced our fighting strength; it reduced the morale of our troops; and it hurt the morale of the population. It upset the balance of forces.”<sup>4</sup>

The population trusted the forces that had guarded them since the cease-fire in 1973, including the Marine brigades north of Hue. When these units redeployed, the Vietnamese voted with their feet on the wisdom of this strategy by beginning a mass exodus to Da Nang. According to ARVN I Corps officers, “. . .

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Barstow wrote, “My initial impression, General, is that we are still suffering from the ‘Whiz Kids.’ The [South Vietnamese] Army has been fed too much sophisticated equipment without being properly trained as to its employment and maintenance. . . . Further, it appears we have taught the Vietnamese to rely entirely on artillery and air support, as they seldom close with the enemy.” Barstow ltr.

the departure of the Marine Division from the northern provinces [caused] the civilian population . . . to panic and evacuate en masse Quang Tri and Hue."<sup>5</sup>

Those ARVN soldiers who did not desert to assist their fleeing families, but instead chose to stand and fight, were overrun. The troops who somehow managed to escape capture then joined the crazed mob attempting to leave Da Nang on anything that floated. Chaos ruled the streets of Da Nang Easter weekend 1975 as military deserters armed with their combat weapons attempted to dictate the terms of their departure. Before the weekend ended some of the most disciplined members of the armed forces would use their weapons against their countrymen in order to gain passage from Da Nang. Eventually, many of these same weapons would be confiscated by American Marines.

*Marine Security Guard Detachment, Da Nang*

During the confusion and chaos caused by the collapse of the defensive perimeter surrounding Da Nang, six Marine security guards stationed at the consulate played a major part in the successful removal of Americans from the besieged area. Staff Sergeant Walter W. Sparks, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the detachment, and his five noncommissioned officers, although primarily responsible for the safety and well-being of Consul General Francis, moved quickly to provide the consulate staff its support. The five NCOs at the Da Nang consulate who assisted Staff Sergeant Sparks in this task were: Sergeant Venoy L. Rogers; Sergeant Lazaro Arriola; Sergeant William S. Spruce III; and Corporals Leonard A. Forseth and Ronald W. Anderson.<sup>6</sup>

To accomplish the evacuation, the Da Nang Marines had to contend with the bedlam outside the consulate, while attending to the business at hand inside. One of the detachment's gravest concerns was the ever-present threat of uncontrolled crowds, mobs of deserters, and criminals prowling the streets. As a consequence, the Marine security guards spent their final days in Da Nang in the consulate rather than the Marine House. In the opinion of Staff Sergeant Sparks, they needed to protect the consul general and the consulate and not worry about the rest of the compound: "I moved the Marines . . . . The consulate was not getting attacked but there were crowds of people, trying to come in and get tickets."<sup>7</sup> The tickets were for an air and sea evacuation the consulate had set up for past and present employees. This somewhat orderly affair rapidly deteriorated when the rioting, or what Sergeant

Sparks called the "cowboys riding" began. He said, "all [the soldiers] were looting, robbing, and killing people."<sup>8</sup> This problem intensified as more and more ARVN soldiers entered the city either as deserters or stragglers. The deserters had left their units in the heat of battle, many to search for their families. All were armed, desperate, and extremely dangerous.

Messages received by the Marine Corps Command Center in Washington during the last week of March 1975 graphically depicted the difficulties that Staff Sergeant Sparks faced in Da Nang. One on the 27th from the Navy's Pacific headquarters stated, "The [South Vietnamese] Marine Brigade remains the only viable combat force in MR 1. The 1st Infantry Division and the Ranger groups have broken up and are moving more as mobs. Chu Lai fell on 26 March. Public order is breaking down, an atmosphere of panic has begun to spread."<sup>9</sup> Another said in part, "City overflowing with refugees and soldiers. Absence of policemen. Immediate threat is internal, i.e., mob violence."<sup>10</sup>

Having moved the Marines into the consulate on Saturday, 22 March, Staff Sergeant Sparks immediately began destroying all classified records. Four days later, on Wednesday the 26th, Consul General Francis asked Ambassador Martin to consider a helicopter extraction of his 50 people, including the Marines, should the "streets of the city become impassable because of the refugee panic."<sup>11</sup>

The Marine detachment continued to do what Staff Sergeant Sparks saw as its primary duty: destruction of classified material and protection of the consulate and its staff. He assigned one Marine to shred classified documents, and a second to burn them. He posted two Marines as guards at the vehicle gate and permanently secured the pedestrian gate. The sixth Marine joined the staff in the consul general's office. His mission was twofold: security and administrative assistance.

Despite the efforts of the consulate staff and the Marines, considerable confusion and chaos existed at the consulate during the final days of March 1975. Sergeant Sparks placed a large part of the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of members of the American community who refused to leave Da Nang until the last possible moment: "They kept thinking maybe the tide would turn and everything would turn up rosy."<sup>12</sup> The consul general could strongly encourage people to leave, but he could not force them to do so. Many waited, expecting to get on the last flight from the

Da Nang Airfield or better still, on the requested helicopter lift. Staff Sergeant Sparks even said to some of them, "What are you still doing here? Get out of here!" But they would reply, "'You're here.' To which I said, 'Yes, partner, but maybe there ain't going to be room on the helicopter that I'm leaving on.'" <sup>13</sup>

The helicopter option would never materialize because the day after Chu Lai fell, General Burns, the overall operational area commander, learned that the anticipated helicopter lift from Nha Trang was impossible because "Eagle Pull assets on hand now are not adequate to permit this."<sup>14</sup> As the fixed-wing evacuation limped on, nearly overwhelmed by the sea of refugees, U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger sought the assistance of the Military Sealift Command (MSC). The request to use MSC ships to evacuate U.S. citizens and other designated civilian refugees was initiated at 0529 on 27 March. Unfortunately, the earliest estimated time of arrival of any of these ships in the area was the afternoon of 28 March. Until then, the airfield would serve as the only exit for the Americans in Da Nang. Later in the day on 27 March that door slammed shut after crowds of refugees started mobbing aircraft landing at Da Nang.

The panic actually began when waiting Vietnamese spontaneously rushed a World Airways plane loading for a scheduled departure of 0900. After that incident, the crowd could not be controlled and smaller aircraft, like the C-47, were diverted to the helicopter airfield nearby. Located east of the Da Nang airport, Marble Mountain, which earlier in the war had served as home to some of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's helicopter squadrons, possessed a relatively short runway, but offered a luxury the Da Nang airport no longer had, security from the crazed crowds. At 1029 on 28 March, because of the chaos, the Saigon government suspended all airlift flights into Da Nang. Sergeant Sparks remembered a creeping sense of finality: "I was talking to the Air America guy who runs the terminal out there and he wasn't panicked. At least on the radio, he was calm. He said, 'It's all over. We can't get them out anymore; the planes won't land.'" <sup>15</sup>

Fortunately for those Americans who at that moment were waiting at the airport for the next flight, and for Consul General Francis, who was at the airfield checking on the airlift, a CH-47 from Marble Mountain whisked them away before the crowds could react. Later in the day, Francis returned to the consulate in another helicopter, and after some discussion gave the order for all Americans to leave Da Nang. At 2000 that Thursday evening, he halted all U.S.-control-

led flights except those from Marble Mountain. Francis had the few Americans still remaining at the Da Nang airport moved back to town so that they could be evacuated with his remaining staff.

The plan called for a pick-up by an Air America helicopter at the International Commission of Control and Supervision's landing zone. Staff Sergeant Sparks said, "We [those to be evacuated] drove down there, this was about 1830, we got to the LZ and it was very calm and quiet there."<sup>16</sup> The staff, the Marines, and the remaining Americans (Consul General Francis and a few other officials had decided to postpone their departure\*) stayed at the LZ until they received word that there would be no more helicopter flights because the pilots had used up all their fuel and the Vietnamese would not give them any more. By then it was 2100 and the remaining Americans reassembled at Francis' house where they realized, in discussing their options, that the only way out was by tugboat and barge. At 0130 on 29 March (Friday), Consul General Francis requested that Alaska Barge and Transport Company use one of its tugs to push a small barge to the dock in front of the consulate and place another slightly larger one in the open water where it would be visible to the Vietnamese. They were to be in place by 0330. This they hoped would assure the South Vietnamese soldiers guarding the pier that they too had an alternate means of escape, thereby precluding the need for seizure or destruction of the barge docked near the consulate.<sup>17</sup>

Less than two hours later, everyone, including the Marines, American civilians, and the Vietnamese staff, left the consul general's house and climbed into the back of a Vietnamese garbage truck (which was covered) and rode a half mile to the dock. Sergeant Sparks described the horror of what happened next: "We got off the truck and helped the people on this barge. That . . . was one of the most tragic things I have seen in my life, and I have been in combat a few times . . . Women and old people were throwing their babies to that barge for people to catch, and they were missing and falling in the water. Old people crawling up this rope, trying to get to the barge and

\*Consul General Francis eventually escaped Da Nang shortly after midnight on 30 March by swimming from a beach near Monkey Mountain to a South Vietnamese Navy patrol craft. He had remained behind on 29 March to continue to oversee an ad hoc airlift operation at Marble Mountain. (*Fall of the South*, p. 80). Several other Americans who had remained behind escaped Da Nang on board the *Oseola*, an Alaska Barge and Transport Company tug captained by a New Zealander. *Fall of Saigon*, p. 171.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7712975

*Equipment of the Alaska Barge and Transport Company was used to evacuate the consulate at Da Nang. Marines of the consulate security guard spent six hours on 29 March unloading a similar barge tied to the Pioneer Contender, underway for Cam Ranh Bay.*

falling off, and then the barge would come back and crush them.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that South Vietnamese were shooting other South Vietnamese in boats in the harbor, that the barge was overloaded, and that the tug was straining and groaning to push it, the Americans made it to the harbor just as the *Pioneer Contender* arrived in port, at 0800 29 March. The Americans immediately boarded the ship and the Marines prepared to assist the crew in unloading the barge. That task would eventually consume almost 10 hours.

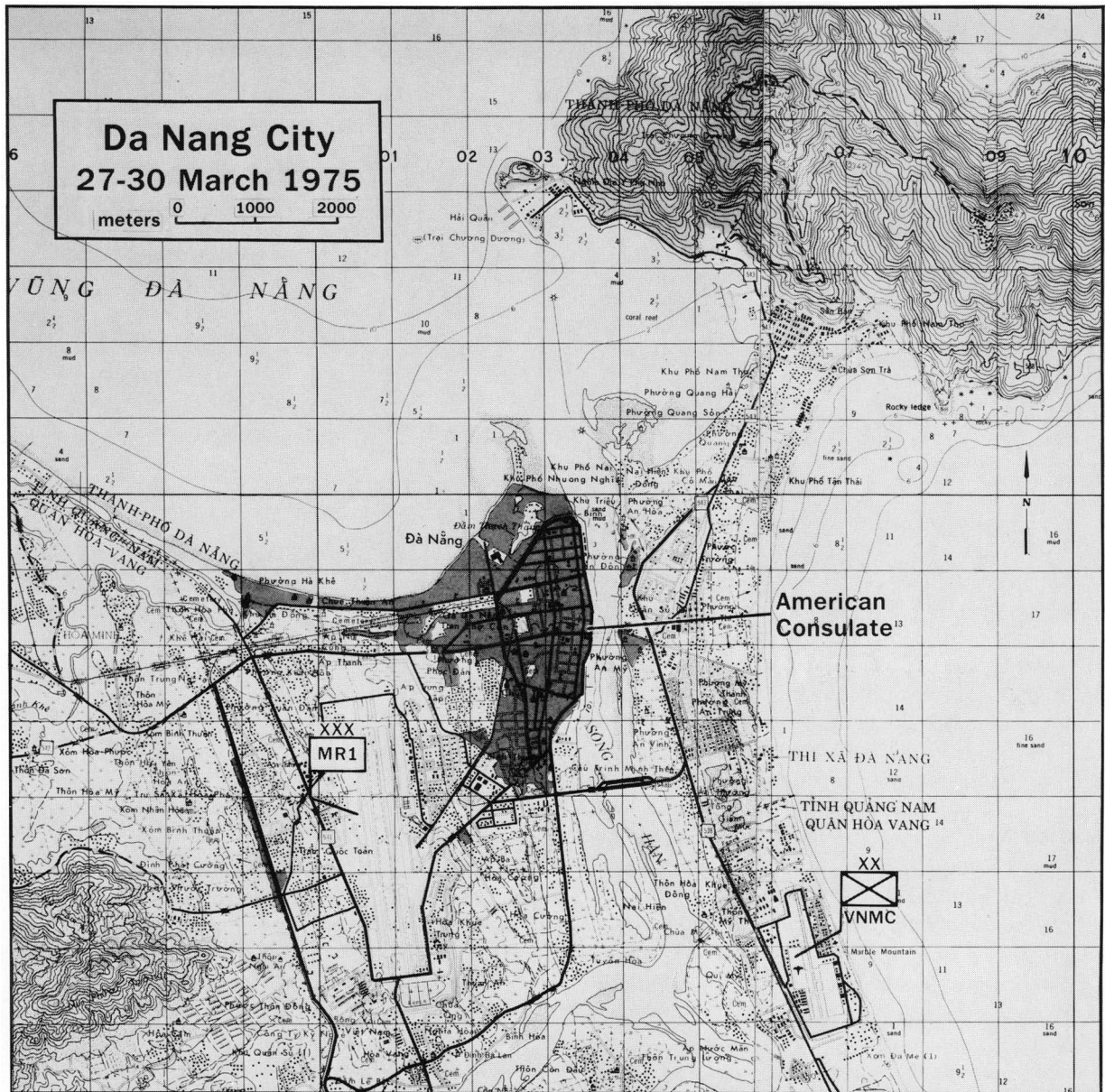
Staff Sergeant Sparks experienced a certain amount of surprise upon learning in his initial inquiry that, “. . . the captain of the *Pioneer Contender* did not know he was coming for refugees. He thought they were coming for vehicles, American vehicles.” The Marines quickly agreed to the captain’s request for assistance in disarming the refugees and in controlling the mass of humanity, a task that did not end until they reached Cam Ranh Bay. The situation on board the barge quickly spun out of control as other refugees in small boats approached the ship and disgorged their panicked cargo onto the barge, making loading of the ship extremely hazardous and very time consuming.<sup>19</sup>

To expedite the process, the barge was lashed to the side of the ship which allowed the *Pioneer Contender* to reach the open sea while continuing to board refugees. Sparks said: “We started loading these people

on . . . They would not behave themselves, they would not sit down, they would not relax. They wouldn’t help themselves. I saw a Vietnamese major stomping on babies to get up the ladder instead of trying to help his people. Fathers pushing their own wives and children out of the way. The old people being crushed and small babies being crushed. [For the individual Marine] . . . it became a question of risking your life.”<sup>20</sup>

With the waves crashing the barge against the side of the ship and under fire from desperate South Vietnamese whose small boats could not catch the swiftly departing ship, Sergeant Spruce and Corporal Forseth passed babies up the ladder and assisted the elderly off the barge. When the barge was finally unloaded, Staff Sergeant Sparks, Sergeant Arriola, Sergeant Rogers, and Corporal Anderson inspected it for bodies. In addition to more than two dozen corpses, they found an elderly man with a broken leg and what later turned out to be his wife crumpled up in a heap. After assisting them on the ship, they cut loose the barge and the *Pioneer Contender* increased its speed and headed for Cam Ranh Bay. It arrived there at noon on Easter Sunday, 30 March 1975.<sup>21</sup>

Despite numerous pleas from the ship’s master and Staff Sergeant Sparks, and the word that some Americans were still on a barge in Da Nang Harbor, the American Embassy would not allow the Da Nang security guard detachment to accompany the *Pioneer Con-*



tender on its return trip to Da Nang. Reports and radio communications with the Americans on the barge indicated that members of the Vietnamese armed forces had control of the barges and were shooting anyone who seemed a threat to their safe rescue. To an undetermined extent, their conduct during the last few days of March included rape, looting, and murder. Military discipline generally had disappeared; in many instances it had become every man for himself<sup>22</sup>

The final act of these desperados was to commandeer one of the MSC ships, the *Greenville Victory*. Seizing this sister ship of the *Pioneer Contender*, the

mutineers forced the captain to sail the ship to Vung Tau and not the destination the Saigon Government had selected for its MR 1 refugees, Phu Quoc Island. Eventually, thanks to the Seventh Fleet commander, the Vietnamese peacefully returned control of the ship to the master but not before it dropped anchor off Vung Tau whereupon they departed. Admiral Steele helped ensure a peaceful conclusion to this incident by opting to "place a cruiser on one side of that ship and a destroyer on the other, with their guns trained on it."<sup>23</sup>

Considering the uncertain effect six American Ma-

lines might have had under the circumstances existing on the *Greenville Victory*, the decision not to allow them to escort additional refugees appeared to have substantial merit. Without another opportunity to return to the consulate, the history of the Marine Security Guard Detachment, Da Nang officially ended at 0330, 28 March 1975. The evacuation of Da Nang ceased at 1930 on Easter Sunday. The National Military Command Center reported, "As of 301130Z, Military Sealift Command has suspended evacuation operations because of unsafe conditions. SS *Pioneer Contender* and three tugs departed Da Nang at 301130Z." Actually the *American Challenger* was still picking up any refugees who could escape by small craft on the first of April. At this time the estimate of refugees evacuated from Da Nang by sea stood at approximately 70,000.<sup>24</sup>

While the last remnants of the Vietnamese Marine Corps' defenders of Da Nang attempted to escape by sea from the advancing North Vietnamese Army, the U.S. Marines being loaded in ARG Bravo shipping in Buckner Bay, Okinawa, still thought that Da Nang was their destination. As the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines embarked on the *Dubuque*, word of Da Nang's capture altered the battalion's orders and in effect changed its organization and mission. This occurred in a matter of six hours on Easter Sunday morning, 30 March, via messages from the JCS to Admiral Whitmire and from him to III MAF and 33d MAU. The change placed Colonel Alexander in charge of a force whose duties would entail maintaining order and discipline on evacuation shipping. With the change in orders, the Marines who left Buckner Bay that Easter Sunday eventually received the official title of Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group as a result of the nature of their mission—to render assistance and support to the Republic of Vietnam in the rescue and relocation of its refugees. Bound for the coastal region between Qui Nhon and Nha Trang, the amphibious ready group arrived off the coast of Khanh Hoa Province on 2 April 1975, just in time to start rescuing the evacuees of Nha Trang and the thousands of refugees from Military Region 2.\*<sup>25</sup>

#### *Military Region 2: Nha Trang*

Having forced the South Vietnamese to effect disastrous withdrawals from Pleiku and Kontum earlier in the month, the North Vietnamese Army remained

relatively inactive until the end of March. All of that changed when the Communists focused their energies on Binh Dinh Province and its defenders, the ARVN 22d Division. The initial pressure on the 22d came from the highlands, but after Quang Ngai Province fell on 27 March, the Communist forces there turned their attention south to Binh Dinh and Qui Nhon. The resultant effect pitted the 22d Division against a force more than double its original size. At this point, amidst the confusion created by sappers attacking its rear area, the division chose to withdraw to Qui Nhon rather than stand and fight. By the end of March, the retreating 22d Division had but one goal, evacuation by sea.<sup>26</sup>

Nha Trang was in no better shape. An attempt to defend it ended when the 3d Airborne Brigade, in a blocking position astride Highway 21, was outflanked. The survivors withdrew to the city down Route 21. Nha Trang was by this time near self-induced chaos, and with the unannounced desertion of its defense by senior commanders who fled by helicopter, "everyone ran."<sup>27</sup>

As April began, with the exception of the two southeastern provinces of II Corps (Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan), the Communists were in control of all of Military Regions 1 and 2. Military efforts to anticipate events in MR 2 fell short as the NVA raced to the coast. An intelligence report on the 1st of April predicted the collapse of Nha Trang within the next two to seven days. That same day Admiral Gayler directed that a helicopter-capable ship move within one mile of Nha Trang for possible rescue operations. Neither message would have any value by the time it reached the addressee.<sup>28</sup>

The date of Gayler's message and the date of the intelligence report, 1 April 1975, was a day Nha Trang's Consul General Moncrieff Spear and the Marines guarding him would not soon forget. For that Tuesday morning, the sounds of NVA artillery awakened them. Although still many miles from Nha Trang, the Communists were informing the Americans that they would arrive in Nha Trang well before the intelligence experts' prediction of "two to seven days." Based on the sound of the concussions, it appeared that the forecast should have indicated hours instead of days. Staff Sergeant Roger F. Painter and his five Marines knew that the distant enemy fire meant the city would be under siege before day's end, and in all probability they would have to evacuate in the next day or two. After a phone conversation with the Embassy, Consul General Spear relayed to the Marines

\*For more information on the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group's operations, see Chapter 6.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Fishing boats rest peacefully in water near Nha Trang prior to the catastrophic collapse of MR 2 and the closing of the American consulate in the city on 1 April 1975. Anything that floated, including tires, was used by thousands of Vietnamese fleeing the NVA.*

his new instructions—to leave Nha Trang immediately. In the confusion of their unexpectedly sudden departure, the Marines left their health and pay records behind. To retrieve them, Staff Sergeant Painter sent Sergeant Michael A. McCormick, his assistant noncommissioned officer-in-charge, back to the consulate. When McCormick returned to the airfield less than an hour later, he noticed that his bag, left with those of the other Marines, was gone. Incredulously, he realized that Painter, and the other members of the detachment, Corporals Robert L. Anderson, John G. Moya, Levorn L. Brown, and Jimmie D. Sneed, had left without him. Later, he discovered that they, along with the consul general and the other Nha Trang-based Americans, had flown to Saigon. Sergeant McCormick quickly found another American in the same lonely situation who said that an Air America helicopter was presently inbound to Nha Trang. The Air America helicopter only had enough fuel to fly them to Cam Ranh Bay whereupon it refueled and then flew on to Saigon. McCormick recalled, “I will never forget the anger, fear, and then relief I experienced that day. I was very fortunate to escape Nha Trang. The enemy was everywhere.” Subsequently, Sergeant McCormick learned that Staff Sergeant Painter had no choice that

day but to leave when he did because of the consul general’s orders.\*<sup>29</sup>

As an epilogue, the Nha Trang Marines spent more than three weeks in Saigon before they moved to the Marine Security Guard Headquarters in Manila. During their interlude in Saigon, Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge arrived in South Vietnam as an Embassy Guard replacement on 24 April. The NCOIC of the Embassy Detachment, Master Sergeant Juan J. Valdez, assigned Sergeant McCormick the responsibility of orienting and acquainting Judge with his new surroundings. A few days after McCormick and the Nha Trang Marines left, Judge, along with Corporal Charles McMahan, Jr., was transferred to the DAO Compound to augment the security force guarding that installation.<sup>30</sup>

### *III MAF and the NVA Onslaught*

For the two weeks preceding the fall of Nha Trang, III MAF Headquarters had been attempting to complete its preparations for a number of contingencies.

\*Sergeant McCormick recalled years later that the Nha Trang Marines did not simply “cut and run.” They were prepared to stay as long as necessary, but were never given the opportunity. McCormick Comments.

The major ones were interrelated and dealt with the potential evacuation missions in Cambodia and South Vietnam. The knowledge that these evacuations might occur simultaneously was further complicated by the lack of reliable information on the number of refugees requiring transportation. How to evacuate the South Vietnamese refugees whose estimated numbers varied significantly from day to day monopolized the discussions at MAF headquarters during the first part of April. A daily evaluation of the war in South Vietnam offered little hope for a cancellation of the requirement to support this contingency. In fact, the early April reports of military setbacks in South Vietnam led III MAF to activate three MAUs, and for a few days, even two MABs. Both alarming and disconcerting was the news from South Vietnam on 3 April that the Vietnamese Armed Forces had abandoned the cities of Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Dalat, giving the NVA control of most of MR 2.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, 3 April produced a number of historically important events. On that Thursday, Brigadier General

*An AH-1J Cobra lands on board the Okinawa. Cobras from HMA-369 were operationally assigned to HMH-462 after USS Midway embarked them on 3 April while enroute to Subic Bay in the Philippines.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150964



Harold L. Coffman, the commanding general of the newly created 11th MAB, departed for Nakhon Phanom, Thailand; Admiral Steele, the Seventh Fleet commander, released a message detailing his plan for the evacuation of South Vietnam's Military Regions 3 and 4; MABLEx 2-75, originally a MAF exercise scheduled for 21 April to 3 May, was officially cancelled; and *Midway*, ordered on short notice to the South China Sea via Okinawa, embarked MAG-36's HML-367(-)(Rein) and 11 UH-1Es, HMA-369(-)(Rein) and 4 AH-1Js, and 14 CH-46Ds belonging to HMM-164 and H&MS-36. Admiral Gayler's intelligence report for that day stated, "The situation continues to deteriorate rapidly. The Communists are expected to take the remainder of MR 2 before the end of the week. Their final attack toward the capital could occur in as few as seven days. Forces are in position with three more divisions enroute from North Vietnam."<sup>32</sup>

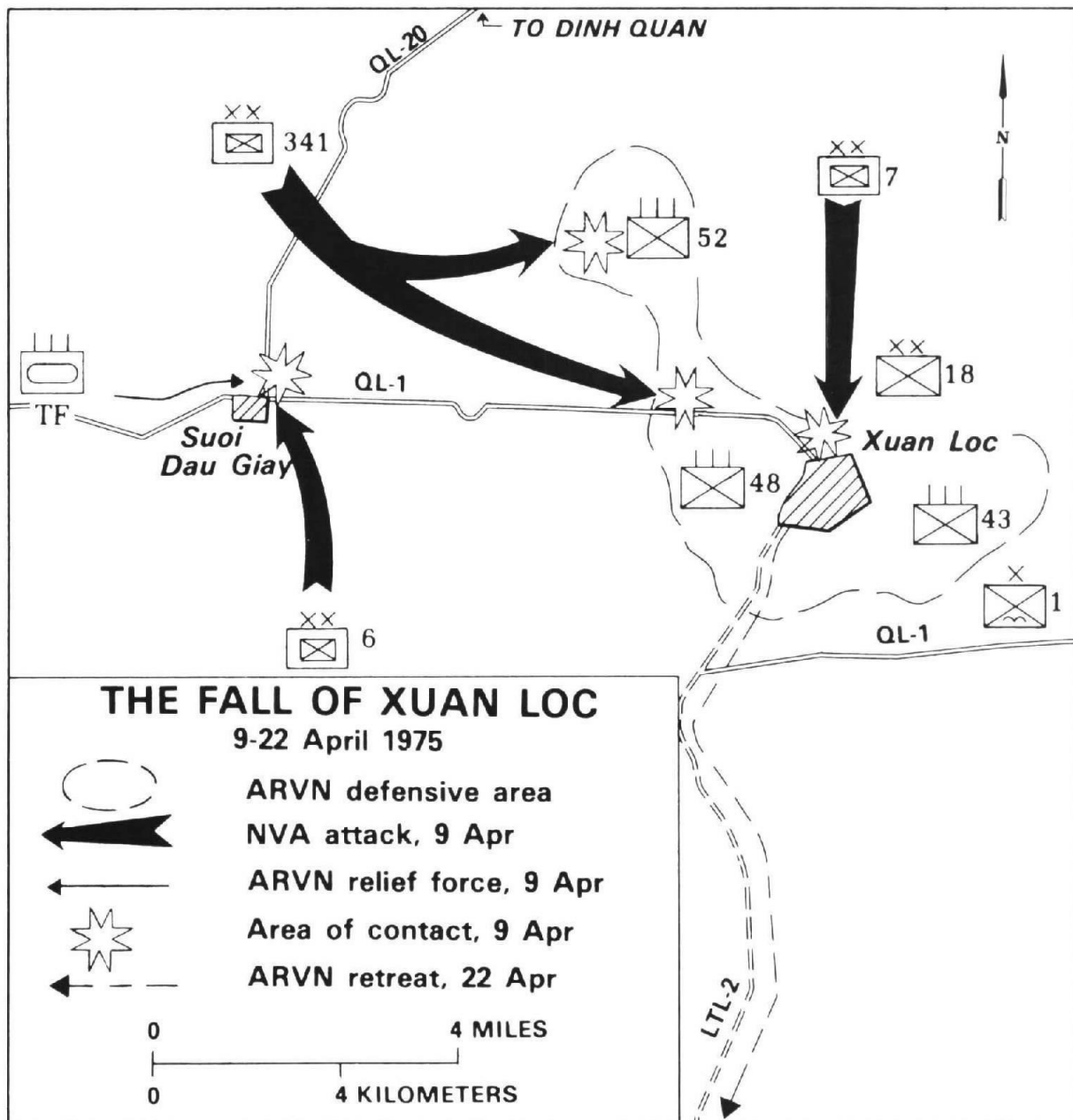
Combat was light for the first few days of April as Communist divisions consolidated their victories and began preparations for the push to Saigon. Those divisions from MR 1 and MR 2 moved south while those in MR 4 moved north and east. They would join forces in MR 3 since recently captured equipment and a newly built road network facilitated rapid movement. Additionally, the North Vietnamese redeployed their antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles, especially the portable SA-7 Grail, to the area. The CinCPac's report of 2 April confirmed this: "Bien Hoa lies within a confirmed SA-7 operating area and will probably be the first base at which the enemy will deny air operations."<sup>33</sup>

The next day Admiral Steele also addressed the enemy's presence in Saigon when he issued Operational Plan 1-75. Sent to all subordinate units, the 3 April message stated: "Bien Hoa is already within range of 130mm artillery as well as 122mm rockets . . . The airfield also lies within a confirmed SA-7 operating area. Tan Son Nhut . . . is only 8km south of a known SA-7 operating area, and is adjacent to targets of known high interest to the enemy. An extensive SA-7 operating area parallels the Saigon River corridor running between Saigon and Vung Tau."<sup>34</sup>

It appeared that the immediate capture of Saigon through the use of armor and infantry supported by extensive antiaircraft cover could occur momentarily. The NVA's final offensive was close at hand. An intelligence report issued at the same time as Admiral Steele's message revealed similar findings. It summarized: "A GVN enclave around Saigon could encom-







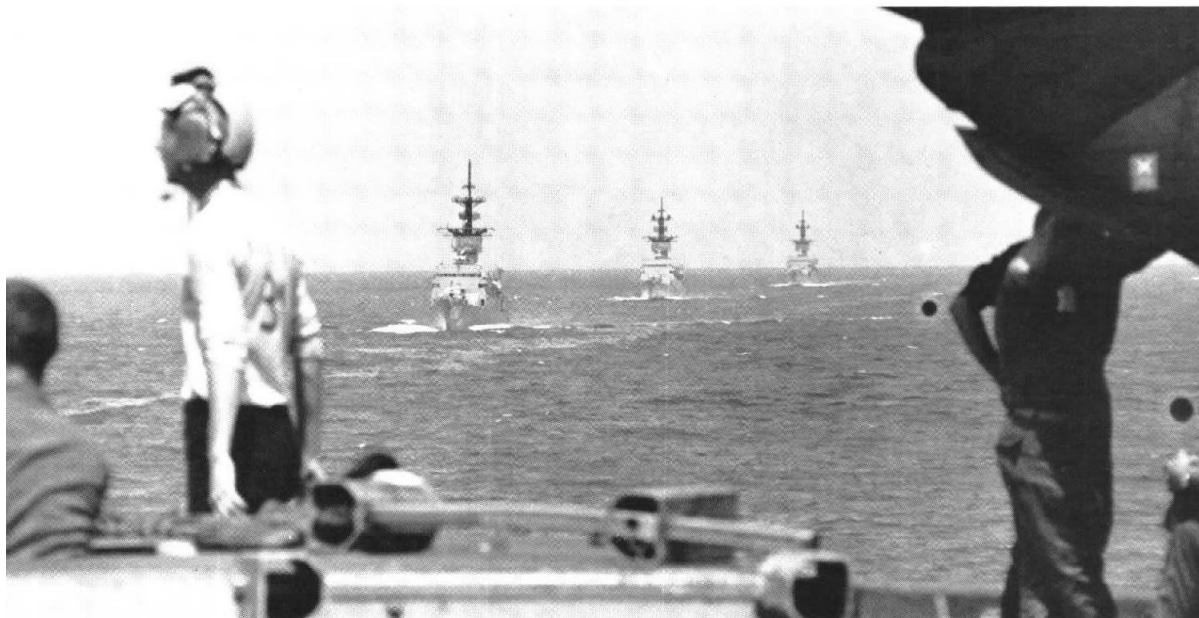
Map adapted from Gen Cao Van Vien. *The Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983)

pass the Saigon-Gia Dinh area with a refugee-swollen population of more than four million civilians defended by remnants of three plus ARVN divisions . . . . The NVA are expected to concentrate on destruction of ARVN combat forces rather than continue a slow war of attrition around an isolated capital enclave.”<sup>35</sup>

Although demoralized, the ARVN attempted to regroup and reorganize in preparation for the Communists’ next strike. Soldiers evacuated from MR 1 and MR 2 formed new units, which when subsequently committed to combat, proved marginally effective. Unfortunately, these units represented 40 percent of

South Vietnam’s combat power. As a consequence, when the fighting resumed, the ARVN soldiers truly ready for battle constituted a force numerically inferior to the enemy’s.

The renewal of fighting and combat activity in Tay Ninh Province quickly revealed this truth. A massive combined arms attack eliminated the ARVN from the area west of the Van Co Dong River. The NVA then launched heavy attacks against ARVN positions along Route 1 and Route 22 in the eastern portion of the region. Fighting soon shifted to Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150931

*U.S. Seventh Fleet ships steam in formation in the South China Sea. These ships would support Task Force 76 and its embarked 9th MAB Marines during most of April 1975.*

On 9 April, the *341st NVA Division* attacked the forces defending Xuan Loc (the *18th ARVN Division*). The Communists wanted to gain control of Highway 1, the main access route into the Bien Hoa/Saigon area. The South Vietnamese quickly moved to reinforce Xuan Loc and thwart the latest and most crucial Communist offensive. The ARVN soldiers, commanded by Brigadier General Le Minh Dao, counterattacked on 10 April and retook a considerable amount of the city they had lost the day before. The next day, they repulsed an attack by the *165th Regiment* of the *7th NVA Division* and regiments from the *341st Division* and the *6th NVA Division*. This victory by the *18th ARVN* renewed hopes that possibly the NVA's spring offensive could be halted and Saigon saved. If the Communist onslaught could be stopped then the *9th MAB* and its units would be able to concentrate on other contingencies and maybe even undertake the cancelled MAF exercise.<sup>36</sup>

#### *9th MAB and Task Force 76*

During South Vietnam's series of defeats in late March and early April and before the ARVN's successful counterattack at Xuan Loc, the U.S. Marine Corps assembled a fighting force capable of aiding that republic once again. The centerpiece of that organization was the *9th Marine Amphibious Brigade* (*9th MAB*). Eventually, it would comprise over 6,000 Marines and Navy corpsmen, 80-plus helicopters of vari-

ous types, and vehicles, supplies, and other equipment normally associated with amphibious operations. Together with the Navy's amphibious ready group, the *9th MAB* Marines would be capable of supporting airlift, sealift, or helicopter evacuation operations, either afloat or ashore.

On 26 March 1975, the Commanding General of III MAF, Major General Carl W. Hoffman, reactivated the *9th Marine Amphibious Brigade*, to participate in a landing exercise in the Philippines, MABLEx 2-75. It had been in the planning stage for 18 months. The order to activate *9th MAB* addressed the exercise at hand, but it also referenced recent events on the Indochina peninsula. Not intentionally designed as such, the MABLEx served as an excellent explanation for the movement of units to the South China Sea.

The Navy supported this exercise by providing the amphibious ships to move these units. Except for exercises or actual operations, amphibious squadrons in the Pacific performed a one-for-one replacement with one squadron of ships leaving station as soon as the relieving squadron arrived from San Diego, homeport for these ships.

The relief of a squadron normally took a day, maybe two, long enough to transfer the landing forces from the outbound to the inbound ships. Built into this long-term schedule was an extended overlap, usually occurring every two years. In those years, the exchange

of duties occupied a two- to three-week period which in turn provided enough ships to conduct a major landing exercise, sometimes involving as many as four battalions. The spring of 1975 happened to be one of those overlap periods. Consequently, in order to provide the Seventh Fleet and III MAF with the means to conduct MABLEx 2-75, CinCPac approved a rotation schedule which doubled the number of amphibious ships in the Western Pacific.<sup>37</sup>

The Marine units that in 1975 planned to join forces to perform the exercise as the 9th MAB were, in late March, still dispersed throughout the Western Pacific. Shortly, events in Southeast Asia would force an early rendezvous. The fighting edge of this Navy-Marine Corps team, the 31st MAU, was already embarked in Amphibious Ready Group Alpha ships, on station in the Gulf of Thailand. The 31st MAU consisted of Battalion Landing Team 2/4 (BLT 2/4), Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 462 (HMH-462), and Logistic Support Unit 2/4 (LSU 2/4). The MAU had

been floating and waiting for nearly two months, expecting on any day to receive orders to evacuate Phnom Penh, the besieged capital of Cambodia.

Other units which eventually would become part of the 9th MAB kept pace by continuing to follow their monthly training schedules. The unit assigned as the landing force for ARG Bravo shipping, BLT 3/9, even deployed to mainland Japan to complete its planned readiness requirements. BLT 3/9 and its logistic support unit, LSU 3/9, went ashore at Camp Fuji, Japan, to conduct routine, infantry training. Two of the four remaining infantry battalions on Okinawa—1st Battalion, 9th Marines and 1st Battalion, 4th Marines—served as the primary and backup air contingency battalions. Supporting them and conducting training of their own on Okinawa were Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (HMM-165) and Marine Light Helicopter Squadron 367 (HML-367). At the same time, 3,000 miles to the east at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe, Hawaii, another helicopter squadron, Ma-

*USS Duluth (LPD 6) of Amphibious Squadron 5 sits off the coast of South Vietnam after its recent arrival from San Diego. The ship was quickly deployed to assist in the operations carried out in the South China Sea during the last two weeks of April 1975.*

Photo courtesy of Capt James D. Tregurtha, USN (Ret)

