

rine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 (HMH-463), prepared to join the contingency operations in the South China Sea. The *Hancock*, homeported in Alameda, had not been included in the MABLEx. While enroute to Pearl Harbor, it received instructions to load HMH-463 and carry it to Southeast Asia.

Naval forces scheduled to participate in MABLEx 2-75 and also available for any contingency that might arise in that area of the Pacific were either undergoing repairs or completing pre-exercise preparations (for more specific details see the chart below). In addition, the Air Force in the Pacific could support, if requested, 9th MAB's exercise or, if required, any Western Pacific operation by employing its aircraft and airmen stationed at bases throughout Thailand: Utapao, Korat, Ubon, Udorn, or Nakhon Phanom.

As originally planned, MABLEx 2-75 included the use of an entire MAF, but the commitment on 28 February of the 31st MAU and ARG Alpha to an indefinite deployment in the Gulf of Thailand (possible evacuation of Phnom Penh) altered that plan. It made necessary a reduction in the size of the exercise force, from a MAF to a MAB.³⁸

The Brigade

General Hoffman chose the assistant commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, to command the 9th MAB. General Carey, an aviator, had a previous combat tour in Vietnam as the commanding officer of VMFA-115 from 5

Naval Ship Disposition, March 1975

—ARG Alpha, consisting of the amphibious assault ship *Okinawa* (LPH 3), the amphibious transport dock *Vancouver* (LPD 2), and the tank landing ship *Peoria* (LST 1183), was on station in the Gulf of Thailand.

—ARG Bravo, composed of *Dubuque* (LPD 8), the amphibious cargo ship *Durham* (LKA 114), and the tank landing ship *Frederick* (LST 1184), was undergoing in-port repairs. The *Dubuque* was at Yokosuka while the *Durham* and *Frederick* were alongside the pier at Subic Bay.

—The amphibious command ship *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) was in port at White Beach, Okinawa.

—Amphibious Squadron 5, containing the *Denver* (LPD 9), *Duluth* (LPD 6), *Anchorage* (LSD 36), *Mount Vernon* (LSD 39), *Mobile* (LKA 115), *Barbour County* (LST 1195), and *Tuscaloosa* (LST 1187), was preparing to get underway for its impending Westpac tour.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

BGen Richard E. Carey, pictured here as a lieutenant general, assumed command of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on 26 March 1975. Gen Carey enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1945 and served in the Korean War at Inchon and the Chosin Reservoir before his designation as a naval aviator in 1953.

October 1967 to 16 January 1968. His new command would take him back to Vietnam, this time not as an F-4 pilot, but as the commander of an evacuation force.*³⁹

Within 48 hours of the reactivation of the 9th MAB, the South Vietnamese situation had deteriorated to such a degree that modifications had to be made to the newly completed plans. The rapidly changing state of affairs in Southeast Asia had begun to affect 9th MAB planning and even its assembly. These events had the greatest impact on courses of action involving Military Regions 1 and 2. The Marines had been chosen to help evacuate their fellow citizens from northern South Vietnam. Operation Gallant Journey, later redesignated Fortress Journey, attempted to move Americans and some of the general populace, including the Viet-

*In his previous tour in South Vietnam, General Carey also had served as the 1st MAW's operations officer during the 1968 Tet Offensive and the siege of Khe Sanh. During Tet, he participated in the planning for air support and resupply at Khe Sanh, providing him with multi-service, large-scale, operational experience in South Vietnam. Carey Comments.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Before-and-after pictures show USS Hancock (CVA 19), assigned to Task Force 76 just prior to Eagle Pull and carrying HMH-463, having shed most of its air wing, right. Most of the fixed-wing aircraft, above, were flown to Cubi Point during the middle of April.

namese military, from the overrun northern provinces to safe haven in the south. This had to be done using Marines currently available in the 9th MAB. For the Navy, it signalled a call to immediate action. ARG Bravo quickly embarked the Marines of BLT 1/4 in Ora Wan Bay, Okinawa, and made a hasty departure for South Vietnam to assist in the evacuation of the northern region.⁴⁰

At the same time (during the last week of March 1975), General Hoffman sent the primary MAB staff to the South China Sea to join Admiral Whitmire and Task Force 76. These Marines would serve as control headquarters (a defacto 9th MAB forward headquarters) for BLT 1/4, soon to have its mission changed to ships' security guards. The Navy used the BLT 1/4 Marines to maintain law and order on refugee ships. Colonel Dan C. Alexander, while still retaining his position as Chief of Staff, 9th MAB, also was charged with the responsibility of overseeing these Marines. They would be known as the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group (see Chapter 6).⁴¹



The Chief of Staff, 9th MAB and his core of officers were normally collocated with the commander of Task Force 76, the commander of amphibious forces in the Seventh Fleet, where they functioned as a headquarters with representatives from each operational area. For contingencies and exercises, the full brigade staff was activated by drawing previously designated officers from III MAF, 3d Marine Division, and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and integrating them into the original nucleus to form the tactical MAB headquarters. Ground combat, aviation combat, and service support forces were then attached to the brigade as mission or operational requirements dictated.

When General Carey arrived at III MAF Headquarters at Camp Courtney, Okinawa, on 3 April, he found only a handful of officers there. The *Blue Ridge*, with the MAB's nucleus staff officers already embarked, had left Okinawa for Subic Bay and the South China Sea. As soon as the advance staff reported on board, it began preparing for the evacuation of Military Regions 1 and 2.

After determining the whereabouts of his forward staff, General Carey conferred with General Hoffman. Both agreed that the MAB commander should consolidate his headquarters and join Admiral Whitmire and the task force as soon as possible. Carey decided to join the *Blue Ridge* at Subic Bay where the reconstituted amphibious ready group was forming.

General Carey alerted his remaining staff members to prepare for immediate movement to Subic Bay and further transit to a rendezvous with Task Force 76. On 4 April, General Carey flew to Subic Bay, accompanied by Colonel Alfred M. Gray, commanding officer of the 4th Marines, and the MAB's augment staff. The augmented officers normally worked in the headquarters of the 4th and 12th Marines and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, while Colonel Gray also held the position of commanding officer designate of the 33d MAU, the landing force assigned to ARG Bravo.⁴²

III MAF's liaison officer in Subic Bay, Major Robert M. Reed, quickly arranged for office spaces for the brigade staff at the Subic Bay Marine Barracks. III MAF and 1st MAW Headquarters temporarily provided personnel on a rotational basis to augment the Marine Barracks office, which spent extensive time and effort supporting the numerous Marine units training in the Philippines and operating from Subic Bay. The brigade planners used this office space to begin planning for the real thing, setting aside their MABLEx plans, preparing for the upcoming emergency and a

rendezvous in the South China Sea with Task Force 76.⁴³

On 7 April, III MAF activated the 33d MAU and its attached elements. It consisted of BLT 1/9, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Royce L. Bond, and the battalion's logistical mainstay, Major Donald O. Coughlin's LSU 1/9. Already on alert at Subic, having been flown there on 5 April by the USAF Military Airlift Command (MAC), BLT 1/9 was ready for the word to move out. In a round-the-clock shuttle, the Air Force delivered all of the battalion's attached elements, even the assault amphibian tractor platoon. It unloaded the final elements at the Cubi Point Naval Air Station (situated adjacent to and across the bay from the naval base at Subic Bay) just 27 hours after the initial alert. Perhaps the most difficult part of this movement actually occurred on the ground, on Okinawa.

While Marines readied the assault amphibians for movement to Kadena, Air Force C-5 "Galaxys" prepared to fly to Okinawa to pick them up. By noon on 6 April, 9th Motor Transport Battalion's flat bed "low-boys," loaded with eleven tractors, began their trek from Camp Schwab. They had a 1600 rendezvous at Kadena with the world's largest transport aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph F. Molineaux, Jr., commanding officer of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, led the convoy. Even though he would not make the trip south with his tractor platoon, he had decided to at least go part of the way with his "tractor rats."*

By 1430, as the convoy passed through Ishikawa on the narrow, two-lane, east coast highway, the Okinawa Sunday traffic was literally backed up for miles. The low-boy drivers had their hands full contending with daring Okinawa drivers. These daredevils would dart in and out, dodging among the evenly spaced Marine vehicles, and challenging the oncoming, northbound traffic. Despite these intrusions, the tractors arrived at Kadena on time.⁴⁴

Within two days of BLT 1/9's landing at Cubi, the heightened activity at the MAU camp and the airfield subsided. Its disappearance marked the successful conclusion of the hectic job of reconstituting Amphibious Ready Group Bravo. Likewise, the *Hancock's* (CVA 19) arrival meshed perfectly with the *Midway's* (CVA 41)

*Lieutenant Colonel Molineaux had assumed command of "1st Tracs" six months earlier, 8 October 1974. This organization claimed the distinction of being the longest continually deployed unit in the Marine Corps. "1st Tracs" had shipped out of San Diego in August 1950 with the 1st Marine Division.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150856

USS Okinawa is seen underway with the 16 CH-53D helicopters of HMH-462 embarked. Having just been used for Operation Eagle Pull on 12 April, the helicopters underwent maintenance and repair while at sea in preparation for Operation Frequent Wind.

appearance. Carrying numerous helicopters which had flown on board the carrier as it steamed past Okinawa, the *Midway*, both to observers in Subic and to its own crewmembers, looked unusual with its fixed-wing flight deck covered with rotary-wing aircraft. In order to move these MAG-36 helicopters from the *Midway* to the *Hancock*, which already had HMH-463 on board, deck space had to be found. To accomplish this, *Hancock* sent its fixed-wing contingent ashore. The planes flew from the ship to their new home, NAS Cubi Point. This evolution transformed, in looks at least, the *Hancock* from a carrier to a helicopter landing ship. With the embarkation of the 33d MAU, ARG Bravo stood ready ready to sail. Shortly before the completion of this transfer, the rest of ARG Bravo (the *Dubuque*, *Durham*, and *Frederick*) sailed into Subic, returning from a shortened evacuation stint off the coast of South Vietnam's northern provinces.

On 9 April, the MAB staff, 33d MAU, and ARG Bravo (*Hancock*, *Durham*, *Frederick*, and *Dubuque*) departed Subic Bay for Vung Tau, Republic of Vietnam. At this time, the helicopter squadron on the *Hancock*, HMH-463, and the one on *Dubuque*, HMM-165, were placed under the operational control of 33d MAU. The following day, General Carey requested that HMH-463 be reassigned to 31st MAU to assist in Operation Eagle Pull. At the same instant this was done, Admiral Whitmire transferred operational control of the *Hancock* to ARG Alpha. With HMH-463 on board, the *Hancock's* new mission was to assist in the evacuation of Phnom Penh.

On 11 April, General Carey rendezvoused with Admiral Whitmire and the amphibious task force commander's flagship, the *Blue Ridge*. Finally, two weeks after 9th MAB's reactivation, General Carey caught up with his forward headquarters and merged it with the staff accompanying him. Carey and the full staff immediately began to plan and prepare for the evacuation of South Vietnam, initially called Operation Talon Vise. However, within a week the secret name would be reported "compromised," forcing the assignment of a new codename, Frequent Wind.⁴⁵

Having been alerted on 6 April to react to the new contingency in Southeast Asia, the second BLT of the MAB, BLT 3/9, still at Camp Fuji, Japan, moved from there overland to the Naval Air Facility, Atsugi. In Atsugi, BLT 3/9 boarded Marine KC-130s for a two-hour flight to Okinawa. Once on Okinawa, the Marines embarked in the ships of Amphibious Squadron 5, which had just arrived from California. Aware that his normally assigned shipping was either already off the coast of South Vietnam or preparing to head there, this otherwise cumbersome method of "getting to the action" did much to assuage the land-locked, marooned feeling of BLT 3/9's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Loeh.

The movement was accomplished in its entirety by using aircraft from Lieutenant Colonel Jerry L. Shelton's Marine Aerial Refueling Squadron (VMGR) 152. The entire evolution was completed in less than 72 hours. Due to cargo configuration and weight limitations, the amphibian tractor and tank platoons were

left at Camp Fuji. They would eventually embark in the *Anchorage*, which had been ordered to proceed independently to Numazu, Japan. Of the event, Lieutenant Colonel Shelton said, "Operations went around the clock with minimum ground time, allowing time for fuel and crew changes only."⁴⁶

While BLT 3/9 was in transit from Atsugi, the 35th MAU, to be commanded by Colonel Hans G. Edebohls, was forming at Camp Schwab. Personnel from 9th Marines Headquarters formed the new MAU's skeleton staff. The 35th MAU consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Loeh's BLT 3/9, Lieutenant Colonel James R. Gentry's HML-367, and Major Fred L. Jones' LSU 3/9. Once embarked in Amphibious Squadron 5's ships, now designated ARG Charlie, the MAU would join 9th MAB and support its operations off the coast of South Vietnam. At least, that was the plan.⁴⁷

The inclusion of the 35th MAU created an unusual organization, a brigade with three MAUs. This organization reflected the uncertainty prevalent in WestPac

at the time. No one could predict if or when an evacuation might be necessary, or even if the inbound ships of Amphibious Squadron 5 would arrive in time. Each MAU formed as amphibious ships became available.⁴⁸

To meet both the Cambodian and South Vietnamese emergencies and still maintain mobility, the Pacific command ordered the formation of three MAUs, each assigned to a different amphibious ready group, under the 9th MAB. The brigade thereby possessed the ability to control all these forces with a single headquarters.

On 12 April, the Marines of the 31st MAU and its command element carried out a model emergency evacuation of Phnom Penh. By noon, with Operation Eagle Pull complete, South Vietnam remained the only contingency. The following day, the 31st MAU reported to 9th Brigade for planning and operations. For all practical purposes the 9th MAB was formed, and with the exception of the 35th MAU which was scheduled to arrive within 10 days, was ready for operations.⁴⁹

CHAPTER 9

Planning the Evacuation

*Brigade Planning and Liaison—The Restructured 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade—The Concept
Additional Forces, Plans, and Liaison—DAO Planning: The SPG and Project Alamo*

Brigade Planning and Liaison

South Vietnam in April 1975 offered few opportunities for U.S. Marine planners to control and direct events precipitated by North Vietnam's highly successful invasion. The absence of a strong U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia only compounded this already complicated crisis situation. In the Pacific command, operational forces belonged either to the Seventh Fleet or USSAG/Seventh Air Force, and if any jurisdictional disputes arose, CinCPac would have the final word. The Seventh Fleet's amphibious force included the Navy amphibious task force, Task Force 76 (TF 76); the 9th MAB, designated Task Group 79.1 (TG 79.1); and the MAB's parent organization, III Marine Amphibious Force, Task Force 79 (TF 79).

American Marines in South Vietnam in 1975 came under the jurisdictional control of two persons, the Defense Attache or the Ambassador. The Marines guarding American facilities took their orders from Ambassador Graham A. Martin while those at the DAO received their directions from General Homer D. Smith, Jr., USA, the Defense Attache. As early as February, General Smith had instructed Colonel Eugene R. "Pat" Howard, the senior Marine in South Vietnam and a DAO staff member, to begin planning for the evacuation of Saigon. Both General Smith and Colonel Howard knew that ultimately the final decisions concerning the evacuation would come to rest with the senior military officer in the Pacific, Admiral Gayler. Unless the final evacuation occurred without military support, it would be at a minimum an air and naval event.

To oversee and control such an event, CinCPac, the overall commander in the Pacific theater of operations, designated Lieutenant General John J. Burns, the commander of USSAG, to be his coordinating authority for any emergency evacuations conducted in Southeast Asia. Already the tactical commander of all U.S. forces assigned to Thailand, this additional duty placed General Burns in the position of controlling any evacuation force once that unit entered the Indochinese peninsula. This meant that the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade while afloat served under the amphibious

force commander and the Commander, Seventh Fleet, but once ashore belonged to General Burns.¹

The geographic point marking the change in operational control from the Seventh Fleet to USSAG was the Southeast Asian coastline. Once past that imaginary line, the units were deemed "feet dry" having left their "feet wet" status at the water's edge. Thus the Commanding General, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, operated within a dual command structure, although most of the time the Seventh Fleet exercised control over his forces.²

General Burns' decision on 5 April 1975 to employ Marines of Task Force 79 as a ground security force and Marine helicopters to evacuate South Vietnam actually began the 9th MAB's compressed planning phase. Prior to this, the evacuation options included only the use of either commercial air transports or sealift or the employment of military transport aircraft or sealift. These options anticipated the use of only limited numbers of ground forces, if any, in South Vietnam. After the collapse of Da Nang, however, General Burns realized that he needed some additional alternatives.³

Adding Marine helicopters and ground forces to the plan signified an escalation in requirements. It caused III MAF and the 9th MAB to mobilize their forces, and with the assistance of the Navy amphibious ready groups, to relocate off the coast of South Vietnam. Planning for the use of helicopters in such a large evacuation assumed that the maximum number of helicopters would be available to launch if execution became necessary.

On 5 April 1975, there was only one amphibious assault ship, USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3), in the Western Pacific. The attack carrier USS *Hancock* (CVA 19) had been summoned from the West Coast and was due to arrive off the coast of South Vietnam in the next few days. The *Midway* (CVA 41), homeported in Yokosuka, Japan, also was available.⁴

As the month of April progressed, other changes took place and were reflected in new directives received by the brigade from General Burns' headquarters. Most were amplifying instructions pertaining to the original courses of action, while others simply defined



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A151000

BGen Richard E. Carey is pictured on the bridge of the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock while visiting with BLT 1/9 and HMH-463. Gen Carey, the 9th MAB commander, served on the Hancock many years earlier as a corporal in its Marine detachment.

USS Okinawa with HMH-462 aircraft embarked steams along the coast of South Vietnam on 18 April 1975. At that date Okinawa had been at sea almost continuously since February 1975 and therefore often was underway with only three of its four boilers working.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150855



in more detail the helicopter alternative. Through its "feet wet" chain of command, the 9th MAB received additional instructions from the Navy. These directives for the most part were complementary to USSAG's; however, they did contain additional taskings. The brigade headquarters became in effect a conduit for melding the various plans of the dual chain of command. The 9th MAB staff, in particular the G-3 section, under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. White, was required to examine every minute aspect of the operation, ensuring that the parallel planning cogs did in fact mesh. Where they did not, the brigade assisted in rectifying the differences.⁵

Many of the conflicts arose from the changing assumptions caused by the highly volatile situation in South Vietnam. With the North Vietnamese controlling the action and dictating the tactics, little could really be done in selecting a single best course of action. As a consequence it was necessary for the brigade to develop detailed plans for each course of action, making no assumptions which would place the lives of the evacuees in jeopardy. Thus, USSAG and the 9th MAB had to develop a definitive and comprehensive plan covering a wide range of alternatives which minimized the risk for confusion or conflicts for the participants.

This spectrum of alternatives ranged from the insertion of a handful of small security teams onto rooftop landing zones in Saigon to an amphibious landing on the Vung Tau Peninsula. The latter option required the landing force to secure a major marshalling/evacuation area. Plans for these potential missions had to take into account the requirement to provide landing forces for security of the landing zones. Finally, the idea of providing helicopters for all of these options in addition to the Marines serving as security for the Military Sealift Command ships meant that by committing the 9th MAB to this operation, III MAF would have limited numbers available for any additional commitments.

After its arrival off Vung Tau on 10 April, one of the 9th MAB's first orders of business was to make contact with officials in the U.S. Embassy and the DAO in Saigon. At the same time, III MAF sent a liaison team to Saigon via Nakhon Phanom (USSAG Headquarters) to gather planning information. The next day this team briefed the MAB staff on the situation in Saigon. Before the MAF team left the ship on 10 April to return to Nakhon Phanom, General Carey asked them to inquire as to the possibility of the 9th MAB staff visiting Saigon and conducting a personal



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Col Alfred M. Gray, pictured as Commandant of the Marine Corps, commanded 33d MAU in early April. When the 9th MAB was restructured on 18 April, he assumed command of Regimental Landing Team 4.

reconnaissance of potential evacuation sites. Upon gaining approval of this mission, the 9th MAB sent a delegation of air and ground officers to Saigon on 12 April.⁶

Having spent the entire day in Saigon, the delegation returned to the *Blue Ridge* and reported to General Carey that the primary evacuation sites most likely would be either the DAO/Air America Compound, the Newport Pier, or Vung Tau Peninsula. The officers brought back schematics and photographs of these facilities. Further the group related the concerns that Ambassador Martin had manifested during their visit to the Embassy. In no uncertain terms, he had conveyed to the Marines that he would not tolerate any outward sign of intent to depart the country because he felt it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Ambassador believed an overt vote of no confidence could even speed the inexorable movement toward collapse. Hence, all planning and related evacuation activities would have to be conducted discreetly, while for the purpose of appearance, business would continue as usual, or seem to, for U.S. officials in South Vietnam.

In order to gain a better personal understanding of the situation and visually integrate this new informa-

tion into his planning, General Carey visited South Vietnam. The major purpose of his trip on 13 April was reconnaissance. In the helicopter, he took with him the 33d MAU commander, Colonel Alfred M. Gray. During his stay, he talked with the Defense Attache, General Smith, and the CinCPac Saigon representative, Rear Admiral Hugh G. Benton, USN. General Carey also visited the Embassy and was given a very short but formal audience with Ambassador Martin. The Ambassador tactfully avoided any detailed discussion of the impending evacuation, merely explaining that all operations would be conducted from the DAO where General Smith would coordinate and that Martin's plan called for him to leave the Embassy with a small group of Marines at a time to be determined by him. Years later, General Carey recalled that meeting with Ambassador Martin: "During our discussion he instructed me to coordinate through my appropriate military channels for detailed evacuation information. The visit was cold, non-productive and appeared to be an irritant to the ambassador."⁷

General Carey's other stops on 13 April included the DAO/Air America Compound, Tan Son Nhut Airfield, the Newport Pier, and various LZ's throughout Saigon. While enroute to and from Saigon, he reconnoitered the Vung Tau Peninsula. Although relatively short, this trip provided the MAB commander a first-hand view of the Saigon situation and valuable information for future decision-making.⁸

The Restructured 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade

General Carey's trip to Saigon and the 9th MAB's liaison efforts coincided with the slowing of the North Vietnamese Army's advance toward Saigon. As General Van Tien Dung, the Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Army later noted, the army's campaign headquarters became concerned that the offensive might bog down and miss its opportunity to capture Saigon before the end of April:

We worried in particular about the 10th Division, which still was in the Cam Ranh area and still faced enemy troops along their route into Eastern Nam Bo. With the long difficult road they had to travel, we did not know if they would be able to get down within the appointed time period.⁹

By 15 April, with the North Vietnamese offensive stalled and the 18th ARVN Division successfully defending Xuan Loc and Highway 1's eastern entrance to Saigon, the tactical situation in South Vietnam stabilized, giving the impression that the new defensive perimeter had successfully checked the enemy's

advance. In truth, the Communists had outrun their supply lines, but the United States did not know that. As a result, Task Force 76 requested and received permission to return to Subic Bay for much-needed repairs. The evacuation of refugees by Navy vessels had been suspended and activity on Military Sealift Command shipping was at a lull. Moving away from the South Vietnamese coast at this time was a calculated, but necessary risk. With the brigade returning to Subic Bay, General Hoffman decided to reorganize the 9th MAB.¹⁰

On 17 April, General Hoffman directed that the 9th MAB combine its ground units into a regimental landing team and its squadrons into a provisional air group. To this organization would be added a brigade logistic support group (BLSG). That evening, shortly after arriving in Subic, the task force received news that the NVA had renewed its offensive. Orders to get underway accompanied that update. On 18 April, the III MAF commander flew down to Subic to see his restructured brigade leave for South Vietnam. Colonel Wylie W. Taylor, the commanding officer of the 9th Marines, accompanied him on the trip. General Hoffman had assigned him to the brigade as its deputy commander. Colonel Taylor was to head the advance command element of the 9th MAB, scheduled to fly to Saigon to be the on-the-scene "eyes and ears" of the brigade.¹¹

General Carey believed such an arrangement was essential for coordination and mission success. He also decided that the brigade would be better served if they had a representative in Nakhon Phanom on General Burns' staff.* He chose his plans officer, Major Richard K. Young, to fill the role of liaison between USSAG and 9th MAB. On 18 April as the aircraft carrying General Hoffman, Colonel Taylor, and the advance command element from Okinawa taxied up to the Cubi Point passenger terminal, another aircraft 1,200 miles to the west landed at Nakhon Phanom. Stepping onto the tarmac, one of its passengers, Major "Keith" Young began a two-week stay at USSAG Headquarters during which he continuously passed information to General Carey via the DAO Compound and the *Blue Ridge*.¹²

*Due to difficulty in pronouncing its name correctly, most visitors to Nakhon Phanom called it NKP, the letters emitted in Morse code by the airfield's main navigational aid, its TACAN. Each TACAN had its own set of identifying letters which distinguished it from all others in the region and when collocated with an airfield described that airport as well.

As Major Young settled into his new surroundings in northern Thailand, Colonel John M. Johnson, Jr., the III MAF G-3, briefed Colonel Taylor and his four-man advance command element in Subic. The next morning, they departed Cubi Point with the DAO as their destination. An unexpected change at Tan Son Nhut ended the command party's day (19 April) not in Saigon but in Nakhon Phanom where they joined Major Young and Lieutenant Colonel James L. Cunningham, the III MAF, G-3 Plans Officer, all of them in Thailand for the same purpose: liaison with USSAG Headquarters. In addition to Colonel Taylor, the aircraft's manifest included: Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. Verdon, communications officer; Major David E. Cox, air liaison officer; Captain Raymond J. McManus, explosive ordnance specialist; and Master Sergeant William East, explosive ordnance specialist.

While in Nakhon Phanom, Colonel Taylor and his team received a comprehensive after-action brief on Operation Eagle Pull delivered by its ground security force commander, Marine Colonel Sydney H. Batchelder, Jr. After extensive meetings with USSAG's staff, lasting until lunchtime on the 20th, the advance command element boarded another plane and returned to

Saigon, leaving Major Young behind to begin his liaison duties.¹³

Young's presence at USSAG Headquarters helped alleviate the confusion over jargon and procedure peculiar to each service, and also fulfilled the joint operational requirement for each participating branch to provide a liaison officer. Throughout his tour at Nakhon Phanom, Major Young answered numerous questions concerning size of units, equipment carried, and capabilities. This type of face-to-face contact was almost as critical as the presence of an advance command element in the DAO Compound.

On 21 April, the morning following his Sunday afternoon arrival in Saigon, Colonel Taylor established the 9th MAB forward headquarters in the DAO Evacuation Control Center (ECC) and remained there until the bitter end. His command element's presence at the "Pentagon East" facilitated the critical communications link between General Carey and Major Young.¹⁴ As these events unfolded in Thailand and South Vietnam, General Carey and his brigade continued to adjust to the reorganization. Task Force 76 headed back to its station off the South Vietnamese coast near the Vung Tau Peninsula. While enroute the

BGen Richard E. Carey hosts one of many planning sessions over Saigon contingencies conducted on board the USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19). Seated to Gen Carey's right, from left, are LtCol Royce L. Bond, Col Frank G. McLennon, and Col Alfred M. Gray.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC A150913)



9th MAB staff began to modify the evacuation plan to reflect the recent organizational changes. In addition to ordering the brigade's reconfiguration, III MAF decided to reorganize its shipboard security forces. To accomplish this, the MAF attached a newly created ship security group to the 9th MAB, the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force (AESF). This unit replaced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines as the Navy and Military Sealift Command's shipboard security contingent. The AESF was composed of a control group drawn from the headquarters staff of the 9th Marines and 10 72-man detachments representing various commands within the 3d Marine Division.

Weeks prior to the AESF's activation, the 3d Marine Division Commander, Major General Kenneth J. Houghton, anticipating this requirement, issued a letter of instruction which directed division units to supply him with a list of highly qualified Marines capable of carrying out this potentially dangerous and demanding security task. Upon receiving the word to activate this force, General Houghton instructed his division units to provide the previously designated Marines for transshipment to the Philippines and the South China Sea. At this point, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing directed Marine Aerial Refueler Squadron 152 to respond to this short-fused, logistical requirement. In a round-the-clock shuttle on 17 April, the Marine KC-130s of "Ichi Go Ni" (152) moved the newly formed security force a thousand miles south to the "PI" (Philippine Islands).¹⁵

The restructured brigade consisted of three major elements: Regimental Landing Team 4 commanded by Colonel Alfred M. Gray, Provisional Marine Air Group 39 with Colonel Frank G. McLenon as its commander, and the Brigade Logistic Support Group headed by Colonel Hans G. Edebohls. BLT 1/9 led by Lieutenant Colonel Royce L. Bond, BLT 2/4 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George P. Slade, and BLT 3/9 with Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Loehe as its commander made up the ground combat elements of the regimental landing team. The shipboard, combat-ready, flying units were HMH-462, HMH-463, and HMM-165. Lieutenant Colonels James L. Bolton, Herbert M. Fix, and James P. Kizer were the respective commanders. In addition, HML-367, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James R. Gentry, belonged to Provisional MAG-39, but its headquarters remained at Subic. Colonel McClenon assigned HML-367's aircraft to the other squadrons within ProvMAG-39 as he did the "Cobras" of HMA-369. The logistics support group was composed of LSUs 1/9, 2/4, and 3/9.

Major Donald O. Coughlin, Major James A. Gallagher, and Major Fred L. Jones commanded these individual units, respectively. Major David A. Quinlan served as the officer in charge of the newly attached unit, the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force.¹⁶

On 19 April, the 9th MAB arrived in South Vietnamese waters. As he had during the brigade's earlier afloat period, General Carey immediately reported to the task force commander for operational matters. Prepared and anxious for action, the 9th MAB had suffered little from the interruption. On 20 April, it published Operation Order 2-75, its plan for Operation Frequent Wind.¹⁷ The same day the brigade published its order, Colonel Alfred M. Gray, commanding Regimental Landing Team 4 (RLT-4/CTU 79.1.2), issued the regiment's operational plan. Major James E. Livingston, the regimental operations officer, and his staff's collocation and close coordination with the brigade aided both headquarters in producing plans with detailed annexes in a highly compressed time period.

Close cooperation between the brigade and regimental staff also assisted in relieving some of the communications backlog on the *Blue Ridge*. Delays still occurred because of the large number of staffs using the communications facilities. The various organizations participating in the operation were so widely dispersed that the majority of the orders issued by the various headquarters had to be transmitted in message format. It therefore became essential for the brigade and its subordinate units to implement procedures to minimize or eliminate duplication of communications. The ability to pass instructions and changes without delay faced a crucial test as each command element intensified its dissemination efforts.¹⁸

The Concept

With the communications system nearly overloaded from the exchange of information needed to make last-minute adjustments to the concept of operations, the collection of accurate raw data became critical to the 9th MAB's final planning efforts. Thus the advance command element in Saigon undertook as one of its primary functions, the gathering of intelligence and its analysis. It had to update continuously the information on the evacuation sites, collate it, interpret it, and then transmit it to the appropriate commands. The breadth of the possible evacuation sites and their varied contingencies made this a requisite step. The potential evacuation sites included all of the following:

Newport Pier—This facility was situated adjacent to the Long Binh Bridge on the Saigon



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150969

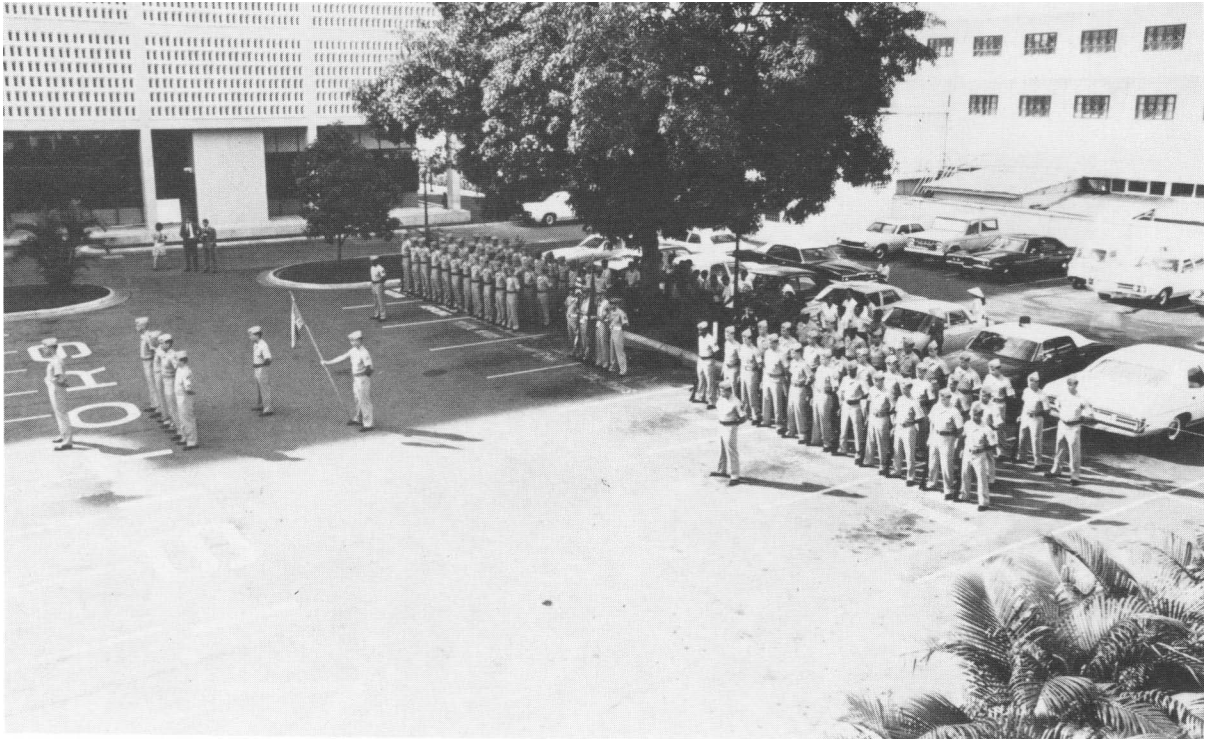
This aerial photo of Saigon and the Newport Pier shows why planners considered using the river as a means of evacuating the South Vietnamese capital. The lightning-quick success of the NVA encirclement made this option unusable by the last week of April 1975.

riverfront. It featured four deep-water berths and a number of ramps and landings for assorted tugs and smaller craft. Parking lots provided nine CH-53 landing spots. Newport was envisioned as a large-scale evacuation site accommodating up to 100,000 evacuees by waterborne means. At a minimum, one battalion would be needed to secure the pier. In addition to special security force detachments to search and screen the evacuees and provide security for the ships, an undetermined number of rifle platoons would be needed to accompany the evacuation ships on the perilous ride down the Saigon River to the South China Sea. Insertion of the landing force could be by helicopter or by ships using the Saigon River. Extraction was equally flexible, thereby making this option viable until the last possible moment.

DAO/Air America Complex—Situated adjacent to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, this complex was considered the primary site should evacuation

become necessary. With a little preparation, numerous landing zones could be made available in the DAO Compound, the Annex, and across the highway on the Air America apron. At least two infantry battalions would be needed to secure this area, and if the scope of the operation were broadened to include security for fixed-wing evacuation flights out of Tan Son Nhut, then as many as three battalions would be required. The DAO Compound was divided into roughly two separate areas, one called the Alamo and the other the Annex. The Alamo housed the main headquarters and the Evacuation Command Center. The Annex consisted primarily of the Exchange, the bowling alley, a swimming pool, and a gymnasium.

Can Tho—The concept for this region involved a movement up the Bassac River to Can Tho, about 50 miles southwest of Saigon, to evacuate as many as 2,000 people. To support this plan, the MAB was prepared to insert secu-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Company E, Marine Security Guard Battalion forms in the American Embassy parking lot which for Operation Frequent Wind was designated as an evacuation site. The tree in the center of the photo was felled on 29 April to permit CH-53 helicopters to land.

The Vung Tau Light stands out as a prominent landmark signalling the end of the Vung Tau Peninsula and, for many, the end of a way of life. Serious consideration was given by U.S. commanders to conducting a MAB-size amphibious landing at this site.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7718975



rity forces either by helicopter or by waterborne means.

Saigon Rooftops—This entailed assembling evacuees for preliminary extraction at approximately one dozen locations throughout Saigon. Helicopters would then transport them to the DAO/Air America Complex for further processing and marshaling. Fireteam-sized elements were envisioned for rooftop security and to serve as landing zone control teams.

U.S. Embassy—With only one rooftop landing zone restricted to a single CH-46 or smaller aircraft, the Embassy was never seriously considered as a mass evacuation site. The maximum extraction total for this location was estimated at no more than 100 people. The possibility of using an additional landing zone existed, but only if a large tree and some lesser obstacles could be removed from the area adjacent to the courtyard parking lot.

Vung Tau—The largest of all the possible evacuation sites, Vung Tau, plagued the planners from the first day. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, as well as the remnants of the South Vietnamese Army and Marine Corps had retreated to the Vung Tau Peninsula by mid-April. Many had hopes of being sealifted from there to safe haven. For this reason, consideration was given to a MAB-sized amphibious landing to secure both the airfield and the port facilities in order to develop a major marshaling and evacuation center. The estimated size of the force necessary to accomplish this ranged from one battalion landing team to the entire brigade. To commit a brigade-sized force to the Vung Tau alternative meant more than just a temporary fix or an emergency evacuation. It meant a full-scale commitment of logistical and personnel assets. With the added confusion each new day brought, this complicated alternative became a planner's nightmare and more of an enigma than a solution. It truly offered more problems than it solved.¹⁹

The majority of the landing sites provided access only via helicopter and as a consequence most of the joint planning focused on making the brigade's helicopter flow plan (movement schedule) mesh with USSAG's operational plan. The forward extension of USSAG's Headquarters, the airborne battlefield com-

mand and control center, would control the helicopters in and out of the landing zone once they went "feet dry" (over land). Until that point they would be under the control of the Navy and thus the two schedules had to be integrated.

The coordinated flow schedule had to support a scheme of maneuver ashore that would include insertion of the landing force, emergency evacuation of the civilians, and extraction of the security force with enough inherent flexibility to encompass all of the potential sites and the use of any or all of the available flight decks. Additionally, the final schedule had to be one that could be controlled "feet dry" by the airborne controller and "feet wet" by the helicopter direction center (HDC) on the *Okinawa*. After achieving this, the planners faced another problem, clarification of L-Hour. To the Marines it meant the landing time in the zone, while to the Air Force it signified mission launch time. The former definition was used in the evacuation from Cambodia. For this operation, L-Hour was defined as the time the first helicopter should touch down in the landing zone.²⁰

Another matter of concern, the weather, represented a significant variable that the 9th MAB commander could ill afford to ignore. Predictions called for periods of inclement weather with ceilings of less than 1,000 feet and reduced visibility. Since the time of the operation was unpredictable, night operations also had to be included in the planning. The resultant scheme of maneuver anticipated performing the mission day or night, and under instrument conditions if necessary. There would be difficulties and operational limitations: no approved helicopter letdown (a tested and approved approach to a landing site for other than visual conditions), limited navigational aids, suspect air defense network, and a makeshift air control system. Even the threat of a tropical storm did not alter the MAB's plan or the timing of its release. This did not mean that higher headquarters was without reservations about the wisdom of attempting an evacuation at night or under instrument conditions. They had reservations, but General Carey believed that if weather conditions permitted takeoff, the Marine helicopter pilots could finish the job.

In evaluating aircraft availability, the staff closely monitored the daily reports and confidently noted that despite an extended period at sea, the Marine maintenance crews, with the support of the Navy supply system, had consistently attained high operational ready rates. Yet variances in the average cycle rate for helicopters in their round trips between ship and shore



Marine Corps Historical Collection

A Marine CH-53 navigates to Saigon by following the Saigon River towards its source. Most deadly obstacle to safe flight was local weather which could not be controlled nor predicted.

had caused a problem in creating a workable refueling schedule. The planners determined that if in their calculations they limited changes in the ships' location in the South China Sea, cycle rate variances would be eliminated, and they could obtain a realistic estimate for turnaround time. To accomplish this, the planners averaged the sum of the anticipated, modified locations and arrived at a point of origin which when combined with the assumed use of the farthest evacuation site (DAO Complex) produced a cycle rate of 90 minutes. With this factor in hand, the planners knew the fueling limits of their helicopters and then devised a viable refueling plan. With this issue resolved, the staff turned its attention to the next critical element, deck availability. The potentially large number of evacuees dictated the use of the largest helicopter in the Marine Corps inventory, the CH-53. By using all the helicopter-capable ships in the task force, the planners could count on 30 CH-53 landing spots. This became even more complicated when additional options were added to the original plan, requiring in each change more security forces or at least a new combination of forces.²¹

As a result of these changes, the increased number of security forces had to be distributed among the amphibious ships. Even though separated, they still would

have to maintain as much tactical unit integrity as possible with the expectation that prior to L-Hour, extensive crossdecking and repositioning would reunite them. The amount of movement in the crossdecking phase would depend on the option selected. The option also would determine the number of helicopters needed.

Additional Forces, Plans, and Liaison

In addition to the movement of HMH-463 from Hawaii on board the *Hancock*, CinCPac also tasked USSAG to provide transport helicopters, both HH-53s, the rescue version, and CH-53s. General Burns directed the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group to send to the *Midway* two HH-53s, call sign "Jolly," and also the 56th Special Operations Wing to provide eight CH-53s. Upon their arrival at Utapao, Air Force Colonel Loyd J. Anders, Jr., USSAG/Seventh Air Force's representative for the mission (executive agent), assumed responsibility for these aircraft. The following day, 20 April 1975, Colonel Anders sent the Air Force helicopters on to the *Midway*. Two of the CH-53s, call sign "Knife," aborted that morning and the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (40th ARRS), which had spares airborne (HH-53s), replaced them with two HH-53s, making the *Midway* complement six CH-53s and four HH-53s.²²

Two days later the 21st Special Operations Squadron (21st SOS) flew two CH-53s to the carrier to replace two of the four HH-53s. The CH-53, a special operations helicopter, was a better choice in this situation, because without the rescue equipment that the HH-53 rescue helicopter carried, the CH-53 could transport more troops. The real problem with the Air Force helicopters on board the *Midway* was that their blades did not fold as did the Navy-Marine Corps version, and as a consequence these 10 helicopters ate up all of the carrier's deck space. Thus, the *Midway's* Air Force contingent was limited to 10 helicopters.

The detachment consisted of eight CH-53s and two HH-53s with Major John F. Guilmartin, Jr., as the ranking officer.* These aircraft augmented the 16 CH-53s of HMH-462 on board the *Okinawa* and a like number of the same aircraft of HMH-463 on board the *Hancock*. In addition to these heavy haulers, the task force also possessed 27 medium transport helicopters, CH-46Ds. Based on their current availability rate, it was reasonable to assume that 40 "53s" and 24 "46s" would be ready to embark two battalions of Marines (1,680 men). Helicopter employment and assault landing tables were developed accordingly.²³

While Marine planners developed helicopter flow tables, General Burn's USSAG staff created a detailed air plan. The Marine Corps resolved the only major question in the plan, a lack of escort helicopters, by providing Cobra gunships. Additionally, the Navy's carrier aircraft would be on alert and available for an immediate air strike if needed. With regard to the use of tactical air, General Carey decided that a strong show of force, using fixed-wing aircraft capable of delivering suppressive fire as needed, would deter enemy rockets and artillery from firing upon the landing zones and at the helicopters.

This idea of combining tactical air for a massive show of force gained instant and unanimous approval. Immediately, CinCPac approved plans to integrate the entire tactical structure of Seventh Air Force with the

*The CH-53s of 21st SOS from Nakhon Phanom replaced the original two rescue helicopters flown by the 40th ARRS squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph McMonigle, and his wingman. They rotated back to Nakhon Phanom, leaving only two HH-53s on board the *Midway*, the backup helicopters. When McMonigle's flight returned to Nakhon Phanom, he left behind the lead pilot of the original flight of airborne spares, Major John F. Guilmartin, Jr., USAF. By virtue of his commander's departure and his field-grade rank, Major Guilmartin became the senior Air Force helicopter pilot on the *Midway*. Guilmartin Comments.

Navy's carrier air wings. The Seventh Fleet agreed to commit all available aircraft from the USS *Enterprise* (CVAN 65) and the USS *Coral Sea* (CV 43) for round-the-clock air support. Included in the Air Force inventory were AC-130 "Spectre" gunships, aircraft specially equipped for night strike and suppression missions. This combined show of force and the air umbrella it represented provided the planners with the best possible countermeasure to the enemy's most significant threat, a belt of antiaircraft weapons guarding the helicopter approach corridors to Saigon. The planners thought that the heavy fire coverage might even deter the daytime use of the SA-7, and the cover of darkness would tend to favor the helicopter rather than the enemy's line-of-sight gunners. To avoid or minimize the effect of small arms fire, the approach called for an altitude of 6,500 feet with the egress route restricted to 5,500 feet.

As events began to unfold and liaison with Saigon became a daily occurrence, certain things became clear. First, that the DAO/Air America complex would probably be the primary evacuation site, and second, that the insertion force would have to be tailored to the existing conditions in and around the complex. General Carey knew that the force had to be large enough to provide adequate security, but not so large that extraction would create even greater problems. With this in mind, the commanding general of the brigade announced four planning options.

The first alternative provided for the introduction of a battalion-sized security force into the DAO compound to meet any hostile threat and provide crowd control and security for a large group of evacuees. Insertion and extraction would be by helicopter, using as landing zones the PX parking lot, the softball field, the tennis court, and the north and south parking lots. All the other alternatives were derivatives of this basic plan.

The second choice envisioned similar security conditions and called for the insertion of an additional battalion command group and one company into the Air America complex, capable of expanding to a full battalion if necessary. The third option involved only two companies and a battalion command group. They would occupy the DAO compound and use the landing zones in the Alamo, expecting little threat and extraction of only a few evacuees. The last option foresaw a totally permissive environment and no need for a landing force.²⁴

Regardless of which alternative the evacuation force selected, communications would play a key part in the

operation's success or failure. Long before the final options were developed, members of General Burns' staff addressed the critical area of communications. Early in February 1975, communicators wrote a plan which, when modified by fragmentary orders, supported any emergency operation to evacuate civilians from Southeast Asia. With this already in his possession, Commander, USSAG only had to make minor adjustments.

The planned nets, assigned frequencies, and call signs were combined with frequency and circuit designators. Married with the organizational structure, they produced a master radio plan. By entering it into a computer, the planners then gained the flexibility they needed to accommodate any last-minute changes. By this means, a fragmentary order could be issued designating what nets to activate and what steps to follow, which in turn allowed the plan to support any of the potential organizations. The computerized communication plan smoothly incorporated the changes precipitated by the brigade's reorganization on 17 April, avoiding a time-consuming rewrite of the original plan.²⁵

Restructuring of the brigade aided the planners in their final concern—logistics. Activation of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade Logistic Support Group on 19 April created a headquarters element and three logistic support units, capable of providing highly specialized logistical support. Everyone in the task force quickly realized the value of this type of supply support as they faced seemingly endless numbers of starving, destitute refugees.²⁶

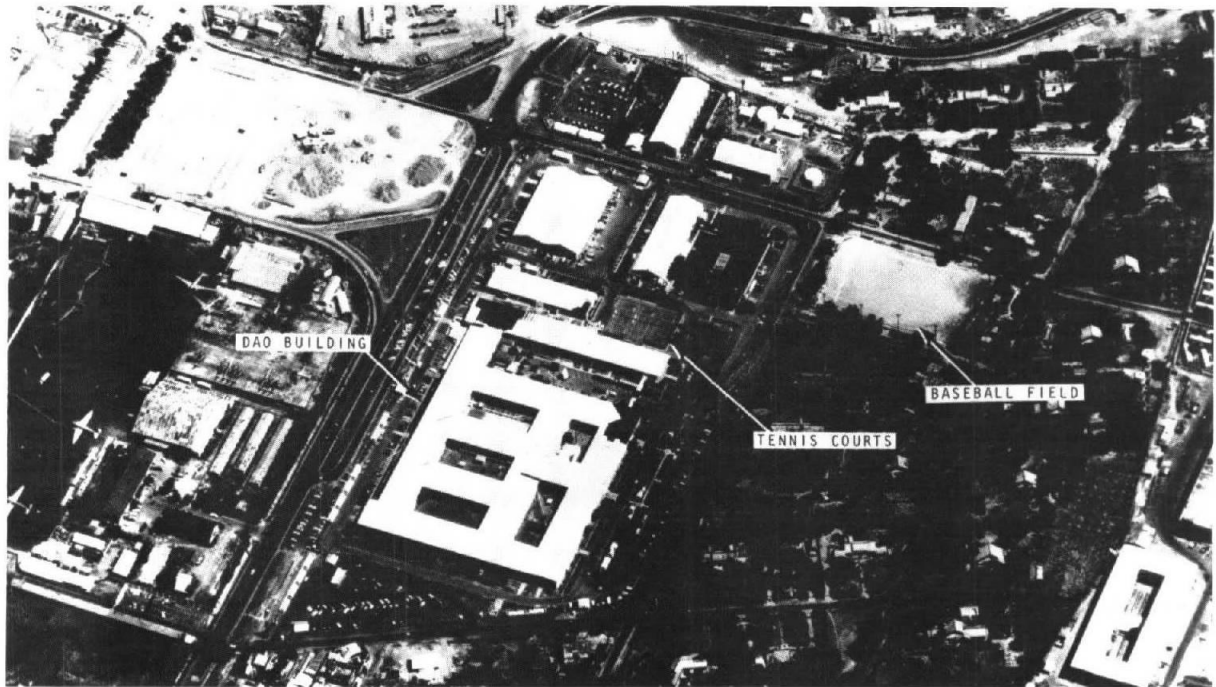
Supply matters took on an added meaning as the task force attempted to provide for thousands of unplanned additions to its ranks. Faced with the threat of a hostile group of evacuees much like those encountered during the evacuation of Da Nang, the 9th MAB staff also had to develop some appropriate rules of conduct to guarantee protection of its own people while still avoiding injury to those it sought to help.

The 9th MAB adopted rules of engagement which restricted but did not restrain the Marines' application of force. To achieve this, the brigade wrote rules which directed the commander to use the minimum amount of force, and empowered him, if the situation dictated, to increase it. With the adoption and

Sitting adjacent to the Defense Attache Office in northwest Saigon was Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the most important airport in South Vietnam and the primary site for evacuation. Parked between the revetments are Vietnamese Air Force C-130As which were used, in addition to transport and evacuation missions, as platforms for delivering BLU-82 bombs.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150968





Marine Corps Historical Collection

An overhead view of the DAO compound with the Air America terminal across the street to the west, at left. Large building at center is DAO offices, formerly MACV headquarters.

inclusion of these rules of engagement, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade concluded its evacuation planning. With a blueprint in hand, everyone's attention refocused on the events in South Vietnam as the brigade staff calculated when they might expect to execute Operation Frequent Wind.²⁷

DAO Planning: The SPG and Project Alamo

During April 1975, while Task Force 76 maneuvered its ships off the coast of South Vietnam and 9th MAB prepared for the evacuation, the Defense Attache Office in Saigon maintained an incredibly busy schedule. One group in particular had been sustaining, since its formation in late February, a furious planning pace. Known as the SPG or Special Planning Group, it consisted of Colonel Eugene R. "Pat" Howard, the senior member; Major Jaime Sabater, Jr., a representative to the Four-Power Joint Military Commission; Captain Anthony A. Wood, the Joint Casualty Resolution Center's deputy for operations in South Vietnam; and Army Captain George Petry, a member of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center.

Years later Captain Wood recalled his mission: "We had to devise a plan to fortify and reinforce the Compound to hold 10,000 people for 10 days should the situation dictate that in order to accomplish evacuation. Immediately I called it Alamo because it seemed

obvious that was what we were doing and the name stuck." Project Alamo included the fortification of the compound for the purpose of safely evacuating from Saigon all Americans and "third country nationals."²⁸

General Smith designated his deputy defense attache, Brigadier General Richard M. Baughn, USAF, as the person responsible for all matters relating to evacuation. To assist General Baughn in coordination of the overall evacuation, General Smith created three other groups and integrated them into the process. For overall command and control, he established the Evacuation Control Center (ECC) and located it in the old MACV bunker, and for processing of the anticipated high numbers of evacuees, he organized the Evacuation Processing Center (EPC) which eventually settled on the DAO Annex as its processing site. As a source of counsel and a conduit for information exchange, he formed the evacuation council whose meetings Captain Wood and approximately 30 other members of the Defense Attache Office attended.

Almost all of General Smith's staff participated in more than one aspect of the evacuation process due to the compressed timeframe and the complexity of the mission. The innumerable tasks undertaken by Lieutenant Colonel William E. McKinstry, operations staff officer in the Readiness Section, Operations and

Training Branch, Operations and Plans Division, DAO, and Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Lukeman, Chief, VNMC Logistics Support Branch, Navy Division, DAO, during April 1975, reflected the magnitude of the events transpiring in South Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Lukeman spent most of his daylight hours in April in Vung Tau refitting and resupplying the Vietnamese Marine units evacuated from Da Nang. In the evenings he would spell Lieutenant Colonel McKinstry in the Evacuation Control Center. That was how he spent his last 30 days in South Vietnam, splitting the 24-hour days equally between the VNMC in Vung Tau and the ECC at the DAO. Sometime in between he might catch a few hours of sleep and something to eat. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel McKinstry almost lived in the ECC. Responsible for controlling the waiting evacuees, McKinstry worked hand-in-glove with the processing center and maintained close contact with the planning group and the evacuation council. Both of these officers also supported the 9th MAB's advance command element and its daily visitors who would fly from the task force to the DAO on Air America helicopters, spend the day, and then return at night. Most importantly, all of the Marines at the "Alamo" dedicated many hours to assisting the Special Planning Group in its mission.²⁹

The SPG viewed the evacuation from Saigon as a three-phase operation, dealing first with the daily removal of selected candidates, especially those South Vietnamese who because of their previous activity or occupation could die at the hands of their would-be captors. The Communist execution of South Vietnamese Air America workers in Ban Me Thuot, after the NVA victory in March, intensified this concern. The DAO soon added Americans working on various agency staffs and similarly employed citizens of other nations to this fixed-wing commercial aircraft extract.

The second phase of the evacuation concerned the surface and air movement of potential candidates from the city of Saigon and the American Embassy to the DAO Compound. Upon completion of this movement, the third and final phase of the operation would begin, the massive air evacuation of all of the remaining personnel occupying the DAO installation.

The SPG and its members focused on the second phase of the evacuation with its primary emphasis on resupply, reinforcement, and retrograde. Major Sabater undertook the task of fortifying the perimeter and reinforcing the DAO's security contingent while Captain Wood concentrated on resupply, surface and air evacuation of the city, and the most important part

of that movement, identification of the evacuation candidates.

From the outset, Colonel Howard, Major Sabater, Captain Wood, and the other planners made three assumptions: the NVA would not interfere with the U.S. effort to fulfill its treaty and moral obligations, removing other nations' citizens from Saigon; the greatest threat would come from the collapsing city and the South Vietnamese; and the South Vietnamese Air Force would remain loyal to the end and defend Tan Son Nhut Air Base and its adjoining installation, the DAO Compound. Aware of the debacle at Da Nang, the SPG knew that the dynamics of a dying city would preclude normal ground transportation and operations. As a consequence, they would need an alternative which could be communicated and controlled under the worst conditions.³⁰

The SPG undertook as one of its first tasks the improvement of communications. General Smith arranged for the delivery of a U.S. satellite communications unit from California, one of only four in the world (all American-owned). Capable of communicating with any installation worldwide, it enabled the Special Planning Group to talk to Travis AFB in California and rearrange flights and flight loads to accommodate its supply and logistical needs.

The DAO used these flights and other aircraft carrying military supplies for the ARVN to remove its personnel designated for evacuation in the "thinning out" process ordered by General Smith. To further reduce the excessive American and other nationalities population (one estimate placed the number at 13,000), the Defense Attache Office encouraged all Americans residing in South Vietnam to leave as soon as possible. General Smith added emphasis to this request by cancelling the exchange privileges of retired American veterans living in Saigon. In addition, in early April, the United States authorized the acceptance of South Vietnamese orphans, especially those of mixed blood. One of the supply flights, a C-5A carrying 105mm howitzers for the beleaguered ARVN, was tapped to support this transfer of children known as Operation Baby Lift. For this particular flight, the DAO sought volunteers to accompany the children, and 37 women from the DAO staff willingly offered their services. Although in consonance with the gradual drawdown of the office's civilian workforce, the reassignment of these DAO members meant a substantial reduction in expertise, experience, and energy.

Shortly after takeoff, the C-5A experienced an explosive decompression during which the rear doors

blew off the aircraft, severing the flight control cables to the tail section. The crippled "Galaxy" crashed while attempting an emergency landing on Tan Son Nhut's runway 25L. USSAG reported to the JCS the pilot's valiant attempt to control the aircraft using only power and ailerons: "At approximately 2,000 feet, pilot saw that rate of descent was too fast and that with a frozen slab he could not reduce it. He applied full power but descent was not halted before impact with the ground. Few, if any, survived on lower deck while most on upper deck survived." This disaster, which counted only 176 survivors out of 314 passengers and only one from the original 37 escort volunteers, ended Operation Baby Lift and seriously affected the morale of the SPG and the remaining DAO staff.³¹

Within days of this accident, which occurred on 4 April, small groups of curious onlookers began to gather outside the large American installation, approaching in size the Pentagon itself, and known as "Pentagon East." The SPG recognized this activity as the first signs of a city starting to question its chances for survival and exploring the alternatives. In the next two weeks, these symptoms of decay accelerated to action as mothers started tossing their babies over the fence to other South Vietnamese standing in the processing lines, and the DAO began what Captain Wood called "The mobile catch-a-baby drill."³²

Many of the Vietnamese in the processing line at the DAO Annex were wives of Americans who worked in South Vietnam or had remained behind after their husbands' military tours of duty ended. Most of these women had never been officially registered, and now in a panicked state, they anxiously attempted to clear bureaucratic hurdles overnight. Captain Wood years later noted that by this time, the compound had started to look nasty because "We just did not have enough people to tend to the abandoned children, process the thousands of evacuees, maintain security, and carry out the daily functions which included keeping the facility clean. The bowling alley had been converted into a nursery and many C-141 flights carried pallets of Enfamil and tons of diapers."³³

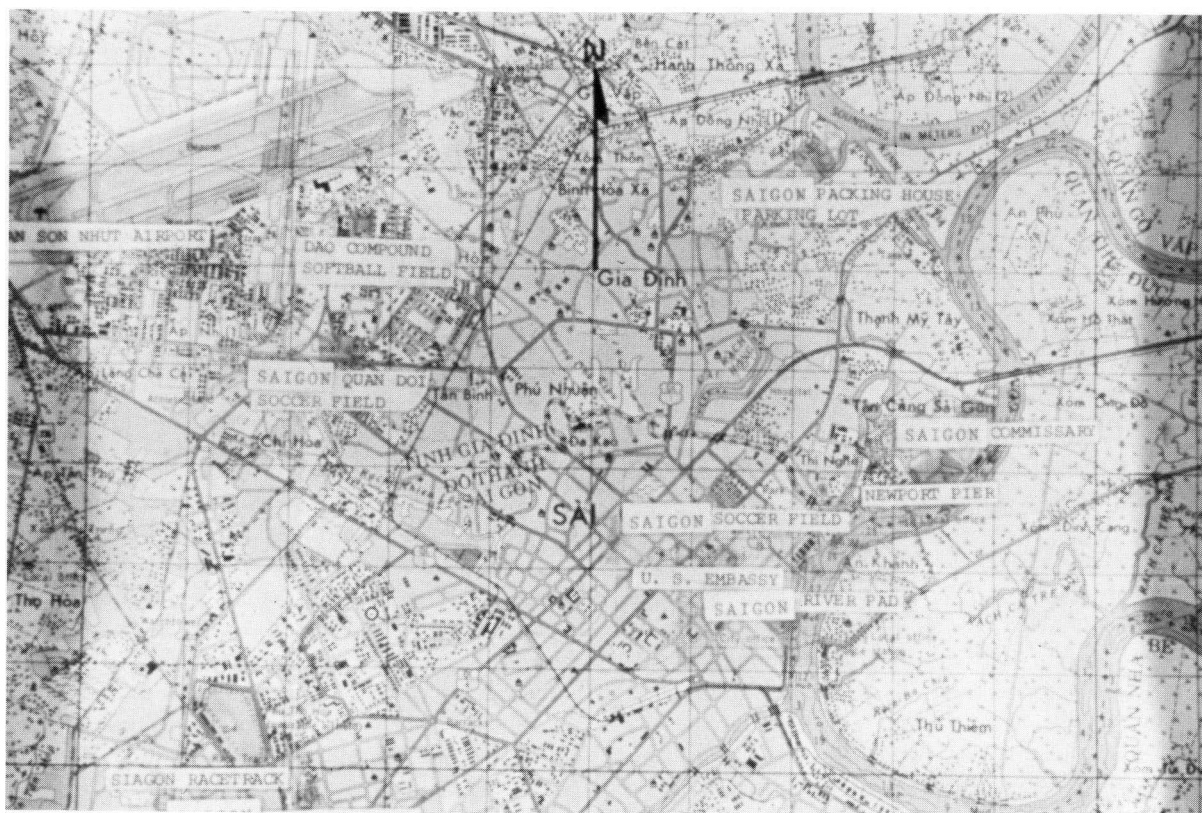
In the midst of this growing unrest outside the gate, General Baughn decided the time had come to reinforce the DAO's security force and sent a message to that effect, requesting additional security guards. Upon seeing this official declaration of evacuation and security needs, the Ambassador directed the deputy defense attache to leave the country. As a result, future decisions concerning preparations of the DAO Compound for evacuation and security were kept secret

from everyone save General Smith and his immediate evacuation planners. Captain Wood remembered the consequences: "From that moment forward everything to do with the evacuation went secret ('black') and the SPG went into deep cover."³⁴

The SPG's efforts soon took form as they used agency reports, taxi records, and some organizational assistance to collect data on the numbers and whereabouts of "third country nationals" in South Vietnam. Using these numbers, the group placed dots on a map of Saigon and then on top of those numbers superimposed private club membership records to arrive at a reasonably accurate picture of the locations from which these individuals would need to be evacuated. Applying that information along with the scant records of Americans still living in Saigon, Captain Wood was able to design both pickup points and surface evacuation routes to get these people to the "Alamo." He named these eight routes after pioneer trails in the American West. Names like Colorado, Oregon, Chisolm, Santa Fe, and Texas became part of the surface evacuation vocabulary. Captain Wood's choice of nomenclature for the surface routes prompted his fellow officers to dub him the "Wagonmaster," and for the duration of the operation that was his call sign.³⁵

To determine if evacuation routes, checkpoints, and plans met their needs, the planners required reliable data on the status of the evacuation population. Acquisition and update of this information posed a serious problem for the SPG because its normal sources were rapidly disappearing as agencies reduced their operations and limited services. Understaffed, with their infrastructure melting away, most organizations provided little or no help to the SPG in its effort to maintain an accurate picture of Saigon's American and other foreign nationals population. Recognizing these problems and using flight records of daily departures, the SPG determined the probable numbers needing surface evacuation would not exceed 5,000 and planned their logistics support with that goal in mind.

From this point, everything rested solely on support, both from American volunteers in Saigon and the supply system. The plan called for the use of DAO buses and 40 American Fords (former DAO vehicles) painted and equipped with blue police lights (flown in from California) to replicate perfectly the cars of Saigon's security police force. The black and white DAO buses escorted by the fake police cars would move through Saigon over the designated western-named trails and pick up all foreign nationals, Americans, and specified South Vietnamese who in the final hours had



Marine Corps Historical Collection

This map of Saigon was used by 9th MAB to depict potential evacuation sites. Note distance from the Embassy to the DAO compound which had to be traversed by vehicles or CIA helicopters. Capt Wood and the SPG were responsible for planning that movement.

been unable to make it to the DAO. Failing pickup by this means, these evacuees would make their way to the rooftops of the way stations (specifically chosen because they could be defended), and gain access either by stairs or via ladders built and installed by volunteers.* Once on the roof, Air America helicopters would extract and deposit these evacuees at the compound. The planners assumed that the ground transportation portion of this plan would only work for one or two cycles before the deception was discovered and then they would have to depend exclusively on the Air America helicopters to rescue any stragglers. Captain Wood recently stated: "The surface evacuation plan for Saigon was based on planning and bluff, mostly bluff."³⁶

One of the reasons the bluff worked was because of the contributions of 40 or so American civilians, men and women whose average age was 48 with the

*Captain Wood designated 12 locations as primary sites and 18 as secondary pickup points.

oldest 62. They volunteered their services to the SPG and ably assisted in the surface evacuation phase. An individual who played a key role in this operation was William D. "Bill" Austin, area auditor for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). This very senior American official not only volunteered to drive a bus through the dangerous Saigon streets, but willingly agreed to help Captain Wood prepare the other drivers. These men and women trained at night under cover of DAO buildings designated by the SPG for the secret evacuation preparations. Each night one or two volunteers would get to sit in the seat, start the black and white civilian bus, and move it back and forth in place. In addition, other volunteers quietly bulletproofed and equipped the buses for evacuation by placing wire meshing in the windows, flak jackets along the sides below the window line, and PRC-25 radios on board. The plan called for these same buses to be staged throughout the city at designated way stations and billet pick-up points prior to the actual surface movement. Lastly, the guides, who would sit

in the right-hand seat of the fake national police cars, driven by former South Vietnamese employees, had to be trained and oriented for this extremely dangerous mission. Employees of Pacific Architect and Engineers (a company contracted by DAO to design and build structures) volunteered for this mission which involved learning the eight surface routes so well that they could almost perform the task blindfolded. In addition to this contribution, members of this company also made possible, through the construction and installation of folding ladders, access to rooftops of buildings selected as way stations, which possessed excellent sites for helicopter landing pads but lacked a way to reach the roof itself.³⁷

The last element of preparation involved what Captain Wood termed night "kamikaze runs" necessitated by the road blocks randomly imposed by the national police on various sections of the city of Saigon. Each night the police would close a different sector, and the SPG constantly had to know the status of Santa Fe, Oregon, Texas, and the other five routes. Personal observation was the only solution. Consequently, each night, beginning around mid-April, either Major Sabater, Captain Wood, or Army Captain George Petry would grab an automatic weapon, jump in a jeep driven by a Marine and ride the streets of Saigon.³⁸

For the remaining days in April, these activities and preparations intensified as did efforts to improve the DAO Compound's defenses. To enhance security there, the Embassy moved some of its Marines to Tan Son Nhut shortly after General Carey's visit in mid-April. Major Sabater further solidified the perimeter by rigging petroleum barrels so that they could be exploded

into a wall of flames should any group attempt to overrun the compound. Major Sabater also trained a small "militia" to use in the event of an "extreme emergency."³⁹

While immersed in these time-intensive tasks of preparation, Major Sabater, Captain Wood, and Captain Petry experienced an unwelcome interruption. Colonel Howard had been notified that a C-141 carrying approximately \$13 million in bills of varying denominations was inbound to Tan Son Nhut. Requested by Ambassador Martin as a final payment to his South Vietnamese employees, the cash had to be picked up by some responsible person. The three officers grabbed their automatic weapons and personally drove a borrowed bread truck to Tan Son Nhut where they met a C-141 on the runway with its jet engines still turning. They proceeded to unload crate after crate of American greenbacks into the truck, stacking it from the floor to the ceiling. Once loaded they returned to the DAO and unloaded their cargo in a secure building.* After losing precious time, Sabater, Wood, and Petry returned to their SPG duties and the planning of the evacuation.⁴⁰

As the last weekend in April 1975 began, the DAO and the 9th MAB concluded their planning efforts. With the DAO ready and the plan for Operation Frequent Wind approved, everyone simply waited for the Ambassador's request to evacuate.

*Many of these same officers helped to burn approximately eight million of these dollars during the afternoon and evening of 29 April, but a full accounting of the undelivered money was never completed. Wood intvw.

CHAPTER 10

The Final Days

*The AESF—Xuan Loc Remembered
Saigon and the Final Preparation Pieces—Consulate Marines*

With the battle for Xuan Loc in Long Khanh Province (40 miles east and north of Saigon) entering its second week, General Van Tien Dung, commander of the NVA's Spring Offensive, evaluated his options. The 18th ARVN Division and other Vietnamese Armed Forces maintained a tenuous hold on Xuan Loc. NVA forces already had intercepted an ARVN armor task force attempting to reach the besieged 18th Division. The South Vietnamese, however, still held and blocked the North Vietnamese advance to Bien Hoa and Saigon. To avoid a stalemate, Dung decided to enlarge the battle area and outflank the South Vietnamese while intensifying the bombardment of the strategic RVN airbase at Bien Hoa. With a significant escalation in pressure, General Dung hoped to turn the tide of battle and get his stalled offensive back on schedule. He had to leave Xuan Loc behind and move on to Bien Hoa if he was going to meet Hanoi's goal of capturing Saigon before the end of April.

As the fighting for the capital of Long Khanh expanded, politicians in Saigon renewed their calls for President Thieu to step aside and allow a candidate more acceptable to the Communists to take power. This political maneuvering only served to make for further insecurity among the people. Increasingly unruly crowds began to gather each day outside the DAO Compound and watch their countrymen line up inside for processing, while flight after flight of commercial and military aircraft departed Tan Son Nhut, loaded with evacuees. This growing threat to security eventually forced the Ambassador to authorize the transfer of a squad of Marines to the DAO Compound. The "Pentagon East" welcomed this addition to its undermanned security force, a handful of retired South Vietnamese soldiers.

With the crowds outside the gate growing larger and more menacing while the DAO began what Captain Anthony A. Wood described as the "mobile catch-a-baby drill," the Special Planning Group accelerated its efforts. The fortification of the compound had to keep pace with the evacuation of South Vietnamese or the U.S. installation would be overrun by citizens seeking refuge. From this moment on, panicked refugees would represent the gravest threat to security and

to the evacuations. Marines would fill this need for security.

The AESF

On 17 April, the III MAF Commander, Major General Carl W. Hoffman, activated a new security force to replace the Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines serving as members of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group. The Amphibious Evacuation Support Force (AESF) was comprised of Marines assigned from the 4th Marines, 9th Marines, 12th Marines, 3d Engineer Battalion, 7th Communication Battalion, 3d Service Battalion, Headquarters Battalion, 3d Tank Battalion, and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion. The specially selected Marines of these units initially were formed into 10 72-man detachments, comprised of a 12-man headquarters detachment, and three 20-man sections (two squads of nine men each plus a two-man section headquarters).

To command these detachments, Major General Kenneth J. Houghton, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, chose Major David A. Quinlan, the 9th Marines operations officer. At the moment General Houghton made that decision, Major Quinlan was, by coincidence, conducting 9th Marines business at the combined headquarters of III MAF and 3d Marine Division. In an office on the second floor of the Camp Courtney headquarters building on Okinawa, Major Quinlan was completely unaware of the activity on the first floor. Not until he returned to neighboring Camp Schwab did he learn of the division's efforts to locate him.

As he entered Camp Schwab, he noticed a flurry of activity around the regimental command post, including a CH-46 sitting in the LZ with its blades idling. Stopping to observe, Major Quinlan spotted the 9th Marines executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Wise, who greeted him with very few but important words:

The [waiting] helicopter is for you. Your gear is on the bird. Marty [Major Martin J. Lenzini, 9th Marines air liaison officer] has packed for you. You are the commander of the ships' guards. Get going!¹

After receiving his .45 automatic and a box of ammunition from Lieutenant Colonel Wise, Major Quin-





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The Amphibious Evacuation Security Force Commander, Maj David A. Quinlan, and his detachment commanders and staff gather for a post-operational debrief. The AESF deployed to Subic Bay on board KC-130Fs of VMGR-152 on 17-18 April 1975.

lan buckled on his web gear and dashed for the helicopter. Already on board were his newly assigned executive officer, First Lieutenant Thomas W. Kinsell, and two radio operators. After the short flight to Fute-ma, the new AESF commander stepped off the CH-46 and walked to the passenger terminal where the mission's significance instantly became clear. There stood Major General Houghton who greeted Major Quinlan with a reminder—the AESF represented the 3d Marine Division. Major Quinlan recalled what General Houghton said that day: “The AESF is a microcosm of the division. Use my call sign, ‘Constitution,’ lest anyone forget who you are.”²

After meeting with General Houghton, Major Quinlan inspected his troops. Later that day, 17 April, the control group and two of the detachments boarded KC-130s. In the ensuing 24 hours, Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 and six of its KC-130 tankers (reconfigured as cargo aircraft) used 21 sorties to transship Quinlan and his detachments to the Philippines. Once there, the Marines of the AESF made their way to the Subic pier by whatever means of rolling stock they could beg, borrow, or procure. Major

Quinlan recalled: “Lieutenant Kinsell singlehandedly coordinated the arriving detachments’ transportation from Cubi Point to the Lower MAU Camp, and then across Subic Bay to the *Dubuque*. By phone, by radio, and sometimes in person, Lieutenant Kinsell was able to mesh a chain of trucks, jeeps, buses, and landing craft into an orderly flow enabling all of the detachments to get on board the *Dubuque*.”³

Time was critical because as Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines exited the *Dubuque*’s “Mike” boats on 18 April, AESF Marines moved to occupy their places. Only hours after arriving in port, the Marines of 1st Battalion, 4th Marines ended their shipboard security role.

Having assumed command of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group only the week before from Colonel Dan C. Alexander, whose duties as 9th MAB chief of staff negated a dual role, Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Hester disembarked his battalion from the *Dubuque* on Friday, 18 April. Actually, the first troops from Quinlan’s AESF already had arrived. The previous evening, Captain Richard L. Reuter and his Detachment Echo accompanied by Captain Richard

R. Page and his Detachment Foxtrot landed along with the control group. Without even unpacking, the detachments deployed the next morning (18 April). They departed Cubi Point on Navy C-2 "Greyhounds" destined for the *Coral Sea* (CVA 43). From the *Coral Sea*, they transferred to the guided missile frigate *Gridley* (DLG 21), which took Reuter and his detachment to their Military Sealift Command (MSC) ship, the USNS *Sergeant Kimbro*, and Page and his Marines to their MSC ship, the USNS *Greenville Victory*.⁴

That Friday, after seeing off Captains Reuter and Page, Major Quinlan made his way to the *Blue Ridge* where he met with the commanding general of the 9th MAB, Brigadier General Richard E. Carey. General Carey advised Major Quinlan that the *Dubuque* would serve as his command post, and stressed the need for rapid embarkation of his forces in anticipation of immediate orders to get underway. Major Quinlan assured General Carey that his detachments would embark on the *Dubuque* as quickly as possible after their arrival from Okinawa.

The AESF commander next met with his predecessor, Lieutenant Colonel Hester, and his staff. Quinlan received an invaluable briefing from them on their experiences and the unusual requirements involved in

this type of mission. Major Quinlan later related, "Lieutenant Colonel Hester's staff told us that the best way to prepare rice for thousands of people was to place the rice in large barrels, connect a hose to the ship's steam line, and hit the rice with a blast of the ship's superheated steam, and in a matter of seconds, you had hot, cooked rice ready to eat."⁵

This simple expedient provided quick nourishment for the starving evacuees and possibly prevented deadly riots over the distribution of food. Additionally, Hester and Colonel Alfred M. Gray, commander of the newly activated Regimental Landing Team 4, advised General Carey to assign the majority of his military police, interrogator-translators, and counter-intelligence people to the AESF. This advice also proved invaluable.

General Carey's decision to include all of these specialists in the AESF, especially the interrogator-translators, paid dividends throughout the deployment. Nothing, not even the show of deadly force, meant more than the ability to understand and communicate with the refugees. Captain Cyril V. Moyher, the India detachment commander, said, "Without the translators, we would have never been able to pick out the leaders and communicate to them our intentions

USS Dubuque (LPD 8) steams toward Vung Tau and the South Vietnamese coastal waters. The Dubuque served successively as the headquarters ship for 1st Battalion, 4th Marines during Operation Fortress Journey; for the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group; and for the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force during Operation Frequent Wind.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



so they could in turn inform the rest of the refugees.”⁶

Shortly after noon on 18 April, as these specialists and the AESF started to arrive at the Cubi Point airfield, it became obvious to senior American commanders that the South Vietnamese would lose the battle for Xuan Loc. To prepare for the consequences, Admiral Gayler ordered Admiral Whitmire and Task Force 76 to return to the waters off Vung Tau. The first ships weighed anchor at 1600, long before the last of Quinlan's detachments was scheduled to arrive from Okinawa. Knowing this, Major Quinlan went to the *Dubuque's* commanding officer, Captain Roy W. McLain, USN, and asked him to delay the ship's departure until 2130. Captain McLain agreed, and Quinlan immediately dispatched First Lieutenant Kinsell to the Cubi Point Airfield with instructions to meet the last detachment and personally escort it to the *Dubuque* so as to arrive no later than the new departure time.

Unaware of the events taking place in Subic in preparation for their arrival, Captain David A. Garcia and his detachment, Victor, began at 0600 what would become an extremely hectic and demanding day. By 1300, he had mustered his Marines in front of the 9th Marines' headquarters for what seemed an interminably long truck ride to Marine Corps Air Station Fute-ma and an awaiting "Ichi Go Ni" (VMGR-152) KC-130. After a two-and-one-half hour flight in the Hercules, which began its taxi just as Captain Garcia buckled the two halves of his seat belt together, the detachment landed at Cubi Point. While Captain Garcia unhooked his seat belt, the ramp and cargo door opened the plane's innards to the pitch-black, tropical night. Suddenly, Garcia and everyone on board beheld a strange sight, a Marine standing on the ramp signalling double time. Before anyone could react to this "apparition," it started heaving gear off the back of the plane. To expedite the transition, First Lieutenant Kinsell, without the approval or knowledge of the aircraft's loadmaster, had begun throwing Garcia's Marines' gear to an awaiting ground crew. Kinsell's unusual conduct moved everyone to rapid action and ignited a chain of events which gained speed as Garcia spied his welcoming committee: Generals Houghton and Coffman, and Colonel Wylie W. Taylor. Their presence and words of encouragement only served to underline the importance of the mission and added urgency to the detachment's impending rendezvous with the task force. Detachment Victor, Captain Garcia, and First Lieutenant Kinsell "enjoyed" a quick ride to the MAU camp landing ramp where their waterborne taxi, a "Mike" boat, shuttled them to their ship,

already underway. Finally, after chasing the *Dubuque* across Subic Bay, they entered its well at 2200.⁷

As the *Dubuque* passed Grande Island outbound to the South China Sea, eight of 10 of the AESF's detachments and all of its attached personnel settled into their new quarters. Included in the group of attached units were: two doctors, Navy Lieutenants Ken Andrus and John Oakland; the 3d Counter-Intelligence Team led by Captain Charles J. Bushey (who would later become the executive/operations officer); a 26-man military police detachment from the 3d Marine Division MP company, with First Lieutenant Joseph J. Streitz in charge; the 17th Interrogator-Translator Team led by Chief Warrant Officer Allen F. Kent; and Lance Corporal Ricardo Carmona, on loan from BLT 1/4 because he knew better than anyone else the disposition of the *Dubuque's* stock of ammunition. Major Quinlan used the nearly five days of voyage to organize and school his Marines. Ordered to provide 14 54-man detachments vice the initial 10 72-man ones, Major Quinlan formed Kilo, Mike, Quebec, and Romeo detachments from the Marines still on the *Dubuque*. Marine first lieutenants commanded each of the new detachments.*⁸

While enroute to South Vietnam, the AESF began its preparations for the impending security mission: "Training was conducted for embarked detachments in key Vietnamese language phrases, conduct of evacuation operations, rules of engagement, security of vital shipboard spaces, and riot and crowd control to include use of 150 psi hoses."⁹ Additional training in the use of the M60 machine gun, the M79 grenade launcher, and the M72 LAW (light antitank weapon) took place after the AESF commander received word that senior commanders seriously entertained the idea of inserting four detachments of his force onto ships docked at the Newport Pier. This option would involve the insertion of 200 Marines into an extremely hostile environment for a dangerous trip down the Saigon River. During this time, the Marines would provide order among thousands of refugees on noncombatant MSC ships which might come under enemy attack.

To carry out this mission and the necessary training, Major Quinlan needed combat arms. Captain McLain,

*A *Coral Sea* helicopter flew a section of Foxtrot Detachment from the *Greenville Victory* to the *Dubuque* in support of this reorganization. On 27 April a contingent of 28 Marines led by First Lieutenant David A. Kratochvil went on board the *Barbour County* (LST 1195), thereby constituting a 15th detachment. AESF ComdC.



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Marines of Detachment Sierra (HqBn, 3d MarDiv) prepare for inspection on board USNS Sgt Andrew Miller off the coast of Vietnam in the vicinity of Vung Tau. The detachment, commanded by Capt Edward R. Palmaquist, Jr., went on board the ship on 22 April.

the *Dubuque's* captain, provided a short-term answer when he authorized the AESF commander to use the shipboard complement of weapons. For a permanent solution to this problem, Major Quinlan sent a message to General Carey requesting additional weapons for his deploying detachments. At the same time, he sought permission to break open the *Dubuque's* supply of ammunition.

On 22 April, the AESF commander deployed three detachments to MSC ships: Sierra Detachment to the USNS *Sergeant Andrew Miller*, Victor on the SS *Pioneer Contender*, and Papa on board the SS *Green Port*. The next day, the reorganization and formation of detachments Kilo, Mike, Romeo, and Quebec became official, and the following day, Captain Cyril V. Moyher took India Detachment on board the SS *Pioneer Commander*. At the same time, Captain Robert D. Amos took the Marines of Tango to the SS *Green Forest*.¹⁰

By the time these transfers were complete, the *Dubuque* and the MSC ships' logs recorded their posi-

The American Challenger, guarded by Marines of the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force, rides high in the South China Sea while it awaits Vietnamese refugees. The AESF November Detachment Commander, Capt Michael T. Mallick, took his Marines on board this Military Sealift Command ship on 25 April 1975.

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tion as 15 miles off the coast of South Vietnam, southeast of the Vung Tau Peninsula. The next morning, 25 April, Captain Michael T. Mallick and November Detachment left the *Dubuque* and embarked in the SS *American Challenger*. Twenty-four hours later their new ship moved to within three miles of South Vietnam, off Long Hai, to load refugees shuttled from the beach in Vietnamese landing craft. Major Quinlan recalled, "This was the first of many instances when our commodore really responded to our needs. Thinking that the *American Challenger* was too far from the task group without protection and close enough to the shore to take fire, I requested a destroyer escort for the ship carrying my Marines." In response, Captain James D. Tregurtha, Commander Task Group 76.5, ordered the *John Paul Jones* (DDG 32) to join immediately with the *American Challenger*.¹¹

To ensure the cooperation and communication desired by Captain Tregurtha, Major Quinlan or a member of his staff preceded each of the transferring detachments to the MSC ship. They met with the ship's master and explained the desired relationship between him and the Marine detachment commander and the rules of engagement that guided the Marines in their shipboard security duties. From 22 to 27 April, the remainder of the detachments, Kilo, Quebec, and Romeo, provided security and working parties for the small boats conducting logistical and administrative runs between the MSC ships and the *Dubuque*. First Lieutenant Johnnie Johnson, the Romeo Detachment commander, oversaw this exchange of logistical stores, including the transfer of "C" rations, which served as the major source of nourishment for the Marines who slept on the decks of the MSC ships they guarded.

On the evening of 27 April, thinking his work done, Johnson retired to his "bed" on the *Dubuque*. His sleep was shortlived as he was awakened by a one-hour alert "to assume evacuation stations." For Johnson, this meant overseeing the Seventh Fleet Service Force's resupply of the evacuation ships, an event critical to the welfare and safety of both the participants and the refugees. The replenishment of ships' stores translated into a 12-hour task using a continuous chain of working parties drawn from the *Dubuque's* detachments. This feat marked only the beginning of an incredibly hectic period of resupply.¹²

By the time Lieutenant Johnson received the order to resupply the Seventh Fleet ships in preparation for the anticipated arrival of thousands of more refugees, his fellow officers and Major Quinlan's AESF was



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 7712175

A pontoon causeway from the Tuscaloosa is maneuvered into position alongside one of the MSC ships designated to take refugees by LCM-6s from the Durham. The pontoons were used as a platform where refugees could be screened before boarding MSC ships.

spread throughout the South China Sea, already assisting in the rescue of thousands of evacuees who had elected the open sea and starvation over Communist hospitality. On 28 April, the disposition of Major Quinlan's forces read more like a cruise novel than a military operation, as most of his detachments were on civilian-run Military Sealift Command ships. Only 12 days earlier, all of these Marines had been on Okinawa. Yet by Monday, 28 April, almost every one of them had shared in the danger and frustration of handling refugees, eyewitnesses to incredible displays, in turn, of courage and cowardice.

Essentially, however, the Marines of the AESF waited for the final act in Vietnam's tragic history and the expected onslaught of refugees that would surely follow. As Captain Charles J. Bushey, the executive officer of the AESF, recorded in his diary: "So far nothing has happened although I expect all of that to change very quickly and on very short notice. Everyone is ready as they are going to be. We have sent some more detachments of about 54 people to the MSC ships to provide security. Now all they do is wait."¹³

Captain Reuter's Echo Detachment, because it was one of the first to deploy, had endured the frustration of waiting the longest. Since 19 April, the Marines on board the USNS *Sergeant Kimbro* had anticipated their first refugees. Ten days passed before, on 28 April, a "Da Nang-Saigon" ferry, escorted by a Navy ship, transferred 150 South Vietnamese to the *Sergeant Kimbro*. Captain Reuter recalled, "The group was comprised of upper-class professional people, including doctors, lawyers, nurses, a province chief, the