

USMC Photo A184276

*Brigadier General Karch (center, 1st row) poses with members of his 9th MEB staff at Da Nang. The 9th MEB was shortly afterwards deactivated and replaced by the newly formed III MAF.*

in the area and report its physical properties so a decision could be made whether to put rubber tired or tracked equipment in the area. The report indicated rubber tired equipment, therefore the "Snafu." I never did find out whether they gave a wrong analysis or took the samples from the wrong site.<sup>46\*</sup>

A temporary impasse occurred on 9 May when the attempt was made to unload the airfield matting. The

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\* Colonel Graham was of the opinion that the markers that the Carl party found during their 3 April reconnaissance of Chu Lai may have been left by the civilian soil party, but General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., suggested that the markers may have been placed there during a reconnaissance of the beach area by the Marine 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. Col William M. Graham, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 18Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File); Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Aug77 (Vietnam Comment File). See Chapter 11, Reconnaissance Section, for an account of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company's beach surveys of the Chu Lai area.

first lift, 68 tons, was placed on flatbed trailers and brought ashore by an LCU. The entire unloading came to a complete standstill; the heavily laden trucks could not move in the deep sand without assistance. The movement of the matting to the airfield site took five and a half hours. To try to expedite the process, the Navy beach group decided to break up the causeway installed on the south end of the beach and use the floating sections as makeshift barges. Approximately 200 bundles of matting could be loaded on one "barge" which could then be floated to a point directly opposite the proposed airfield site, thereby reducing the movement distance. Although this eased the situation, the problem of movement on the beach remained. Finally, on 10 May, the 3d Marine Division provided an additional 2,500 feet of badly needed beach matting which somewhat alleviated the situation.

At noon on 12 May, the amphibious operation

officially came to an end. On this date, the first elements of BLT 3/3, arriving in amphibious shipping from Okinawa, assumed defensive positions on the southern flank, relieving the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. During the five-day period, 7-12 May, more than 10,925 tons of equipment and supplies had been unloaded and moved across the beach.

With the completion of the Chu Lai amphibious landing, seven of the nine infantry battalions of the 3d Marine Division, supported by most of the 12th

Marines, the artillery regiment of the division, and a large portion of the 1st MAW were in South Vietnam. As a result, the 9th MEB was deactivated and replaced by a new Marine organization, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF).\*

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\* In the Pacific, one other change in designation of Marine units occurred during May. On the 25th, the 1st Marine Brigade (Rear) at Hawaii consisting of the brigade support elements under the command of Colonel Jack E. Hanthorn was redesignated the 1st Marine Brigade. Colonel Hanthorn relieved General Carl as brigade commander.

## CHAPTER 3

# Formation and Development of III MAF

*The Birth of III MAF—The Le My Experiment—Building the Chu Lai Airfield—III MAF in Transition—The Seeds of Pacification—June Operations in the Three Enclaves*

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### *The Birth of III MAF*

The birth of III Marine Amphibious Force occurred almost simultaneously with the landing at Chu Lai. On 5 May, the Joint Chiefs relayed Presidential approval for the deployment to Da Nang of a Marine “force/division/wing headquarters to include CG 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.”<sup>1</sup> The following day, Major General Collins, who had remained in Vietnam after the Saigon meeting earlier in the month, assumed command of the Naval Component Command and also established the headquarters of the III Marine Expeditionary Force and the 3d Marine Division in Vietnam. The former 9th MEB commander, Brigadier General Karch, resumed his duties as assistant division commander and left for Okinawa to take over the units of the division remaining there. Brigadier General Carl became Deputy Commander, III MAF after the Chu Lai landing.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force became the III Marine Amphibious Force on 7 May. General Westmoreland had recommended to the Joint Chiefs that the Marines select a different designation for their command because the term “Expeditionary” had unpleasant connotations for the Vietnamese, stemming from the days of the French Expeditionary Corps. The Joint Chiefs of Staff asked the Commandant, General Greene, to come up with another name. Although a III Marine Amphibious Corps had existed in the Pacific Theater during World War II, and was a logical choice for the name of the new Marine organization in Vietnam, several of the Commandant’s advisors believed that the Vietnamese might take exception to the word “Corps.” Consequently, General Greene chose the title III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) for the Marine forces in Vietnam and extended this revision to the Marine brigades.<sup>2</sup>

One other major headquarters arrived at Da Nang during this period. On 11 May, Major General Fontana established a forward headquarters of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam (1st MAW Advance). Four days later, his Da Nang headquarters assumed command of all Marine aviation in the country. The Marine division/wing team was in Vietnam.

The expanded Marine force operated under guidelines provided by General Westmoreland. In his letter of instruction to General Collins, the MACV commander outlined the general mission of the Marines. They were directed to coordinate the defense of their three bases with General Thi; to render combat support to the South Vietnamese; to maintain the capability of conducting deep patrolling, offensive operations, and reserve reaction missions; and, finally, to carry out any contingency plans as directed by ComUSMACV.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. relationship with the Vietnamese military was a sensitive one. Since the Americans were the guests of the Vietnamese, they could offer advice to their allies, but could not compel action. Means had to be devised so that the two military forces could cooperate, but remain independent entities.

General Westmoreland elaborated further on this relationship between the U.S. and South Vietnamese commands in a message to Admiral Sharp. According to the MACV commander the requirement was for cooperation and agreement among senior commanders of different nationality groups. One of General Westmoreland’s more intriguing phrases was that of “tactical direction.” In actuality it was identical to operational control, but the general explained that tactical direction was a more palatable term to the Vietnamese. Westmoreland warned: “U.S. commanders at all levels

must accommodate to a new environment in which responsibility is shared and cooperatively discharged without benefit of traditional command relationship." He emphasized that simple and easily understood plans were a prerequisite for success.<sup>4</sup>

Taking these assumptions into consideration, General Westmoreland observed that American operations would take place in three successive stages: base security, deep patrolling, and finally search and destroy missions.<sup>5</sup> For the Marines in Vietnam at this time base security was of the utmost concern; only at Da Nang had III MAF begun to move into the second stage of operations.

### *The Le My Experiment*

At Da Nang, the most significant development was the beginning of a rudimentary pacification program involving Lieutenant Colonel David A. Clement's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Since its arrival

in April, the battalion had been on the high ground in the northwest fringe of the Da Nang TAOR, overlooking the village complex of Le My. The village consisted of a cluster of hamlets located on the southern bank of the Cu De River in the Hoa Vang District of Quang Nam Province, eight miles northwest of the Da Nang Airfield. According to the district chief, there had been little security in this area for over a year. Although the ARVN had conducted several operations, their forces had never remained to root out the Viet Cong political cadre and to provide security for the people.<sup>6</sup> Security was one thing the Marines could furnish. Lieutenant Colonel Clement explained that the occupation of Le My gave him the needed depth of defense around the Da Nang Airbase to carry out his mission.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning on 4 May, the Marines maintained pressure on the VC in the village complex by repeated patrolling of the area. On the 8th, Lieutenant Colonel Clement, accompanied by his S-



USMC Photo A184123

*In one of the first extensions of Marine positions into a populated area in May, Marines from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines move into the hamlet of Le My. Three villagers watch the troops enter the village gate.*



USMC Photo A184166

*The Marines round up VC suspects in Le My. A South Vietnam Popular Force soldier is in the foreground.*

2, Captain Lionel V. Silva, the district chief, Captain Nguyen Hoa, and the battalion's S-2 scouts, visited the hamlets. They surveyed the neighborhood, talked to the villagers, but then came under Viet Cong fire, which killed one of the scouts. This incident confirmed Clement's opinion that in order to secure Le My, he first had to clear it.

On 11 May, the Marine battalion returned in strength. In an opposed fire fight, Clement's Company E "conducted the assault . . . and cleared the hamlets."<sup>8</sup> This time the battalion stayed and took up defensive positions in Le My. The Marines rounded up the male villagers who were put to work destroying punji traps, filling in trenches, and dismantling bunkers. Fifty of the men were sent to Da Nang for further questioning. Three days later, Vietnamese regional and popular forces relieved the Marines in the hamlets and the battalion moved to positions around the village. The actual eradication

of the guerrillas was left to the South Vietnamese, while the Marines saturated the area with patrols and established ambushes to prevent the enemy from moving or massing forces.

To provide the villagers the means of fending for themselves, Clement's battalion trained the Vietnamese local forces, helped to prepare the defenses, and set up medical aid stations. The Marines emphasized self-help projects such as the building of schools and market places so that the local populace could continue on their own. Captain Silva, who was also Clement's civil affairs officer, stated that the battalion's goal was "to create an administration, supported by the people, and capable of leading, treating, feeding, and protecting themselves by the time the battalion was moved to another area of operations."<sup>9</sup>

The Marines also assisted the villagers in rebuilding two bridges, which, according to the

battalion's operations officer, Major Marc A. Moore, symbolized the spanning of the "broken link in the road which separated territory previously controlled by the VC from the RVN controlled villages immediately south of Le My."<sup>10</sup> Apparently well aware of this symbolism, a VC main force unit attacked one of the bridges on the night of 20 May. According to Lieutenant Colonel Clement, both the VC and the local population discovered the effectiveness of U.S. security: "The attack was repulsed, the bridge unharmed, and four VC were killed and abandoned."<sup>11</sup>

The village held a dedication ceremony the next day at the two newly built bridges. Local government officials made speeches and cut a ribbon strung across the two spans. The festivities also presented grim reminders of the war; the chief displayed the bodies of the VC killed in the attack on the bridges at the gates of the village. This technique had been employed by both the government forces and the Communists to impress on the people what awaited the enemy.

At this early stage of the Marine intervention, the Le My experiment held promise for the future. General Collins stated that the "Le My operation may well be the pattern for the employment of Marine Corps forces in this area."<sup>12</sup> On a visit to III MAF in mid-May, General Krulak described the pacification efforts in Le My as a:

. . . beginning, but a good beginning. The people are beginning to get the idea that U.S. generated security is a long term affair. This is just one opportunity among many . . . it is the expanding oil spot concept in action.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Building the Chu Lai Airfield*

At Chu Lai, the main effort in May was the building of the airfield. On 7 May, Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Goode, the 1st MAW engineering officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Wilson, the commanding officer of MABS-12, and a small advance party from the MABS arrived at Da Nang from Iwakuni. While at Da Nang, they discussed the Chu Lai airfield problem with Colonel Graham, the III MAF/3d Marine Division engineering officer. According to Goode, he brought Graham "up to date on the runway layout and location as I knew it, including the fact that . . . [the civilian contractor] had not yet provided the coordinates of the runway."<sup>14</sup>

The following morning, Lieutenant Colonel Goode



USMC Photo 185766

*A South Vietnamese official stands in front of a bridge at Le My rebuilt by Marines. The VC had destroyed the old bridge.*

and the MABS-12 advance party flew to Chu Lai. There they conferred with Commander Bannister, the NMCB-10 commander, and several members of his staff concerning the initial phases of the airfield construction. Commander Bannister informed Lieutenant Colonels Goode and Wilson that he had received a message from Saigon that listed the coordinates for the runway. The two Marines, with Bannister and his operations officer, then toured the area of the proposed location for the SATS field. According to Goode, "the site was completely unacceptable." It was several hundred yards west of the original site selected by General Carl during the reconnaissance of Chu Lai in April. Goode related:

. . . the line being surveyed at the time was on the west edge of the natural drainage course, which would have placed the cross taxiways, parallel taxiway and the entire operations area in the center of the drainage course. From the signs of water in the area, it was obvious that most of this area would be inundated during the rainy season.<sup>15</sup>

Commander Bannister agreed with Lieutenant Colonel Goode's observations, but stated that he was

only following his instructions. The Seabee commander also told Goode that the message from Saigon indicated that a representative of the civilian construction firm would “be on hand to advise on the specific locations to avoid interference with work on, and operations from, the permanent runway,” which the civilian firm was to construct. This representative never showed up.<sup>16</sup>

To avoid further delays and to settle the question of the location of the SATS field once and for all, Lieutenant Colonel Goode attempted to contact General Carl on board the *Estes*, only to learn that the general had come ashore. Goode finally located General Carl at the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines CP. With Carl and members of the 3d MAB staff, Commander Bannister and Lieutenant Colonels Goode and Wilson returned to the proposed runway site. According to Carl’s Chief of Staff, Colonel Nickerson, “It was spontaneously determined by all that the intended location was not correct . . . .”<sup>17</sup> General Carl directed that a resurvey be made on the basis of the recommendations that he and the original survey group had made in April. The original site was on a plateau, just inland from a tree line and above the flood waterline, paralleling the sandy berm north of the landing beach. Only a shift of 500 yards



USMC Photo A184233

*Navy Seabees with their heavy equipment prepare to start on the building of the Chu Lai SATS field. The area to the right will be leveled for the emplacement of the aluminum matting of the runway.*

to the north was necessary to avoid a low area just south of the mid-point of the runway. According to Goode, “This caused no inconvenience because it was just moved to a point that was to be graded for the overrun in any event.”<sup>18</sup>

Following the selection of the SATS site, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson’s MABS-12 Marines and Commander Bannister’s Seabee construction crews launched an intense struggle against time and nature. The initial planning envisioned an operational airfield by 28 May, 21 days after the landing. The Marines had relocated the 400 civilians who lived on or near the airfield site so that the construction could begin. Heat and humidity quickly sapped the strength of the work crews. Temperatures often climbed over the 100 degree mark and the humidity was not much less. The heavy earth moving equipment could be operated only by alternating crews every 30 minutes. During each 12-hour work shift, at least two full crews were necessary for each piece of machinery, but the work continued on a 24-hour basis.

Sand played havoc with the operation. It worked its way into everything; bearings, brake linings, and clutches were quickly ruined. At times more than half of the tractors and dump trucks were deadlined. Some of the frustrations encountered by the work crews were reflected in an informal log maintained by Lieutenant Colonel Goode:

9 May . . . My general impression of the entire day was that there was much wheel spinning, disorganization, and little work accomplished, all compounded by the fact that three of the C.B. TD-24 tractors went out of com-



USMC Photo

*Seabees lay down aluminum for the SATS field. Two full crews were required for each 12-hour work shift to relieve each other at 30-minute intervals because of the heat and humidity.*

mission—one because of a front PCV clutch and two for master clutches.

10 May . . . MCB-10 has provided MAG-12 (Adv.) with all the necessities. They even provided one jeep which broke down this afternoon . . . . Because of the continued shortage of tractors, TD-24s, I intend to ask C.O. 3/12 tomorrow if he can provide some to help.

11 May . . . Earth moving on the runway is going slowly. Three of the 6 C.B. TD-24's are deadlined. Two are for main clutches, none of which are available.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, the 3d Engineer Battalion at Da Nang contributed nearly all of its equipment to the Chu Lai construction, leaving the Marine engineers with only one bulldozer for their own use.

As the equipment situation gradually improved, the major problem for the construction crews was that of soil stabilization. Initially, it was planned to mix sand and asphalt in order to form a firm base on which to lay the aluminum matting. On 14 May, Lieutenant Colonel Goode wrote: "My biggest concern is the stabilization process. Will the rollers be capable of moving across the asphalt-treated surface? What will be the curing time?" On the 14th, Goode scheduled a test on the asphalt sand mixture in an area adjacent to the MABS command post so that the test site could be used as a helicopter pad after the test. On 15 May, Goode reported: "The test of the asphalt failed completely. Asphalt was shot from a distributor onto the dry sand. There was practically no penetration. Twenty-four hours after the asphalt . . . was put down, it is still not cured." After consulting with Colonel Graham, Lieutenant Colonel Goode decided that the solution for the problem was to stabilize the sand with a six-inch layer of laterite, a red ferrous soil obtained from pits north of the field.<sup>20</sup>

On 16 May, the first piece of runway matting was laid on the north end of the strip. Hauling the red soil was time consuming and it was soon obvious that the runway would not be completed on the scheduled date. The Seabees and Marines were still confident that they could build a usable field by the target date by emplacing the arresting gear for landing and using jet-assisted takeoff (JATO) for the takeoffs. Soon it was evident that even this limited objective was in doubt. On 25 May, Lieutenant Colonel Goode wrote:

As of 1000 this date, there was in place 2,650 feet of matting leaving 650 feet of matting to be placed. One hundred fifty feet of taxiway is in place. A total of 1,200 feet of matting must be placed to meet the goal. Since matting started nine days ago, the average rate was 275 feet per day. The remainder would require that a rate of



USMC Photo A184311  
*Brigadier General Keith B. McCutcheon, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, greets Colonel John D. Noble, Commanding Officer, MAG-12. Colonel Noble had just landed the first aircraft at the newly constructed Chu Lai SATS field.*

400 feet per day be placed in the next three days . . . It is questionable whether the goal can be met.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of the first aircraft had to be postponed.

The delay was a short one. By 31 May, the Seabees had completed nearly 4,000 feet of runway and about 1,000 feet of taxiway and the SATS field was prepared to accept its first aircraft. Colonel John D. Noble, Commanding Officer, MAG-12, who had established his CP at Chu Lai on 16 May, recalled that he "caught a logistics flight from Da Nang to Cubi Point . . . so I could bring the first flight of tactical aircraft to Chu Lai."<sup>22</sup> June 1st dawned bright and clear, and at 0810, Colonel Noble led his four-plane division of Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from VMA-225 into Chu Lai. The other three pilots were Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Baker, commanding officer of VMA-225, and Majors Donald E. Gillum and David A. Teichmann. General McCutcheon, who was at Chu Lai for the landings, recalled, "the NCOIC of the arresting gear cut off the tail of



Noble's skivy shirt, a practice aboard carriers of the Fleet, carried over to our shore-based carrier ops.'<sup>23\*</sup>

Later in the day, on 1 June, four other A-4s from Lieutenant Colonel Bernard J. Stender's VMA-311 arrived at the field. The Chu Lai-based aircraft flew their first combat sorties that same day. At 1315, the four VMA-225 aircraft, with Lieutenant Colonel Baker in the lead, conducted air strikes in support of ARVN units six miles north of the field.

Although the field was operational, it was still unfinished and soil stabilization would continue to be a problem, especially during the rainy season. Eventually the field had to be rebuilt. Lieutenant Colonel Baker observed:

. . . for a week or so before the rains came, this aluminum field was as flat and even as a pool table—the smoothest, bump-free surface I ever flew from. Later with rain cavitation the laterite was pumped up through the matting forming a slipping roller coaster effect.

Baker exclaimed:

But we flew! The Chu Lai operation used every capability my squadron had . . . We were trapped on landings, jato'd on takeoff. Refuelled by our GV's en route to our primary target. Loaded to the hilt with ordnance, we couldn't take off with much fuel. We did close air support . . . in all weather and flew [radar controlled missions] all over the area in foul weather conditions day and night.<sup>24</sup>

The SATS concept worked, but as Colonel Hardy Hay, the III MAF G-3, later remarked: “. . . no one will ever know what the [Chu Lai] project did to men and equipment unless they were there.”<sup>25</sup>

### *III MAF in Transition*

The III Marine Amphibious Force and its ground and air components experienced major changes of command within their first six weeks in Vietnam. Generals Collins and Fontana were near the end of their 13-month overseas tours and the Commandant, General Greene, appointed Brigadier General Lewis W. Walt, newly selected for promotion to major general, to replace Collins and Brigadier General

\*General McCutcheon also told the story that General Krulak had bet Major General Richard G. Stilwell, the MACV Chief of Staff, a case of scotch that a squadron would be operational within 30 days. General Krulak paid off the bet “on the basis that a full squadron was not operating there in the forecast time, only half of one.” McCutcheon, “Marine Aviation in Vietnam,” p. 129.



USMC Photo A184616

*Major General Lewis W. Walt (left) relieves Major General William R. Collins (right) as Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force in an indoor ceremony at Da Nang on 4 June 1965. The ceremony was held indoors because the American colors were not permitted to be displayed outside.*

Keith B. McCutcheon, also selected for promotion to major general, to be Fontana's replacement.\*\* Walt looked the part of the football lineman that he was in

\*\*According to Colonel O'Connor, the 1st MAW chief of staff at the time, the question of who was to be CG III MAF was discussed several times. O'Connor recalled that “General Fontana earnestly desired to have that assignment. He and General Collins were both nearing the ends of their overseas tours, and that General Collins would leave first. He talked to General Krulak about the matter several times . . . He [Fontana] even volunteered to extend his overseas tour one year to take command of III MAF. General Krulak was very understanding, but explained that General Greene had already selected General Walt. This did not stop Fontana. He was senior to Walt, and stressed the doctrinal point that either an aviator or a ground officer could be in command . . . Finally he realized that the Commandant's decision would prevail . . . when he realized his time was limited in the Far East, he decided to take his last opportunity to command a wing in combat . . . he would go to Da Nang to command the wing until he was forced to leave.” Col Thomas J. O'Connor, Comments on draft MS, dtd 27Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File).



USMC Photo A184614

*Major General Walt speaks to troops of the 4th Marines at Chu Lai in June 1965. The new III MAF commander toured all three Marine bases shortly after taking command.*

his college days. Upon promotion, he would be the junior major general in the Marine Corps and was one of the Corps' more decorated officers, two Navy Crosses and the Silver Star and combat service in both World War II and Korea. He had just completed a tour as the Director, Landing Force Development Center at Quantico.

In contrast to the physical bulk of Walt, McCutcheon was a short, slim man in appearance, but held equally imposing military credentials. Decorated with the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross and a veteran of both World War II and Korea, McCutcheon was one of the pioneers in the development of close air support and helicopter tactics. In April 1965, he arrived in Japan as the 1st MAW assistant wing commander after completion of his duties as the CinCPac J-3. On 24 May, he assumed command of the wing's headquarters at Da

Nang. Two weeks later, McCutcheon assumed command of the entire wing, upon General Fontana's departure for the United States.

After an informal promotion ceremony in the Commandant's office in Washington and a ceremonial battalion parade at Quantico, Major General Walt left for Vietnam at the end of May.<sup>26</sup> On 5 June, he officially relieved General Collins as Commanding General, III MAF and Commanding General, 3d Marine Division.

During this period, there were other command changes. Upon his arrival, General McCutcheon also became Deputy Commander, III MAF, relieving General Carl, who then departed Vietnam as Commander, Task Force 79. On 12 June, General Carl, as assistant wing commander, assumed control of the wing's rear headquarters in Japan after General Fontana's departure. Six days later, General

Karch returned to Vietnam as assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division while Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson assumed command of the 3d Marine Division (Rear) on Okinawa. These changes at the top were followed by rapid adjustments in staff assignments. The new layers of command contrasted sharply with the almost spartan simplicity of the old 9th MEB and could not help but cause some initial confusion. One former member of the 9th MEB staff, Major Ruel T. Scyphers, remembered:

Two full staffs arrived in Vietnam and superimposed authority over the brigade in a very short time. In this connection there wasn't a single moment of liaison or coordination between or among either staff. There was at one time 13 colonels roaming around headquarters without assignments or functions. With the limited space for billeting, messing, and working space—it was a nightmare.<sup>27\*</sup>

Perhaps these growing pains were most dramatically reflected in the field of communications. During a visit to Vietnam in May, General Krulak remarked: "I have never seen a worse situation than at Da Nang where a message which has immediate precedence has taken as long as 30 hours to get out of country, some incoming messages do not arrive at all."<sup>28</sup> According to Colonel Hardy Hay, the III MAF G-3:

We were totally unprepared for the communication load that included an outrageous number of classified messages. Higher echelons simply did not have time to send letters by regular mail. Consequently, letters came by electronic means.<sup>29</sup>

Colonel Nickerson, who had become the III MAF

G-4, later explained that much of the message backlog was due to periodic power shortages "with the down-time of generators" exceeding "up-time." He commented that the number of classified "dispatches that had not been encrypted or decrypted often exceeded 5,000" and that "manual processing was tedious." Nickerson also remarked on the fact that "higher, comfortable, well-staffed headquarters were firing questions or assigning responsibilities at a prolific rate . . ."<sup>30</sup> Colonel Nickerson praised the efforts and ingenuity of Colonel Frederick C. Dodson, the III MAF communications officer, and the communications section for reducing the backlog to manageable proportions. Finally Nickerson observed:

Reading, analyzing, answering, dodging, eliminating these dispatches was a tremendous load. Colonel Regan Fuller, MAF Chief of Staff, challenged, cajoled, and led the staff in his cantankerous manner on a crippling schedule in order to catch up. . . . After many weeks he was successful and he accomplished all of this while ill with a bleeding ulcer.<sup>31</sup>

Communications was only one of the trouble areas caused by the transformation of the command. The troops sent into Vietnam had to be supplied and maintained, and MACV had planned to establish a Da Nang Support Command under the Army's 1st Logistic Command to provide common item supply for III MAF. At the Honolulu Conference in April, this plan was modified and Admiral Sharp directed that the Commanding General, III MAF, in his capacity as Naval Component Commander, would assume the responsibility for common item supply from Marine and Navy sources, as well as the operation of the ports in I Corps. Since the Navy had not yet established a support activity in Vietnam to run the ports, the job had to be done by Marine Corps personnel and equipment. This placed a heavy burden on III MAF.<sup>32</sup>

Following the Chu Lai landings, Colonel Nickerson, the III MAF G-4, held nightly meetings "as the hectic problems spanned the logistic spectrum." These meetings were "designed for liquidating problems, coordinating efforts and insuring that all had the necessary information to do their jobs."<sup>33</sup> On 16 May, Nickerson presented a logistic support concept for the Marine command. While assuming that the Navy would eventually establish a support activity, the concept directed the III MAF to run the ports and at the same time make

\* Colonel Rex C. Denny, from the III MAF G-3 Section, recalled that the fact that General Walt was both the 3d Marine Division and III MAF commander "caused some humorous and often confusing staff work. MAF staff and division staff working on same project or MAF staff doing work division staff rightly should." Col Rex C. Denny, Comments on draft MS, dtd 10Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Leo J. Dulacki, who in 1965 was the III MAF G-2, remarked that "when III MAF was deployed to RVN, it was assumed that the Hqs would be a skeleton Hqs, dependent on the Wing and Division Hqs for *substantial* personnel support and, *in fact, for many of the operational functions.*" Dulacki pointed out that this concept of organization, which had been accepted as standard for years, was for the first time "put to the test." He noted that the subsequent, "*necessary, but agonizingly slow,* growth of the III MAF headquarters in order to perform its tasks would indicate that this concept lacks vitality *especially in a commitment of forces of long duration.*" LtGen Leo J. Dulacki, Comments on draft MS, dtd 24Oct76 and [Jul] 77 (Vietnam Comment File).



USMC Photo A184622

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines cross the Cu De River in amphibian tractors. The troops later evacuated villagers from the hamlet of Pho Nam Thuong to Le My.*

distribution of its supplies through its own force logistic support group (FLSG).<sup>34</sup>

The III MAF FLSG, commanded by Colonel Mauro J. Padalino, was built around the nucleus of the 3d Service Battalion from the 3d Marine Division and reinforced by support elements from the 3d Force Service Regiment on Okinawa. Colonel Padalino, a veteran supply officer who had served in both World War II and Korea, maintained his headquarters at Da Nang while two force logistic support units, FLSU-1 and -2, serviced Chu Lai and Phu Bai. Despite shortages compounded by breakdowns in equipment and a complex peacetime supply system, the FLSG managed to meet the most urgent requirements of

the fully operational MAF.\* The logistic situation gradually improved after the Defense Department permitted the Commandant of the Marine Corps to release the emergency FMFPac mount-out supplies for shipment to Vietnam on 5 June.

In spite of the logistic strain, more than 9,000 personnel had been added to the Marine force in Vietnam by mid-June. They were spread over an area of 130 square miles and engaged in a wide variety of tactical, support, and combat support activities. Both the 3d Marines and the 4th Marines

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\* See chapter 12 for a more detailed account of the logistic situation.



USMC Photo A184799

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines cross a stream in the northern sector of the Chu Lai TAOR. The Marine in the foreground appears to be able to smile despite a cigarette in his mouth and water up to his neck.*

had established their command posts in Vietnam. Elements of the 12th Marines, the division artillery regiment, were located at all three enclaves. The 1st Battalion, 12th Marines under Major Gilbert W. Ferguson supported both Da Nang and Phu Bai, while Lieutenant Colonel Arthur B. Slack, Jr.'s 3d Battalion, 12th Marines provided artillery support for the 4th Marines at Chu Lai. Other supporting units, spread throughout the three enclaves, included major elements of the 3d Motor Transport Battalion, the 3d Engineer Battalion, and the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion. The wing consisted of two aircraft groups, MAGs-12 and -16 with five helicopter squadrons, an equal number of fixed-wing squadrons, and ancillary ground components.

Upon taking command, General Walt had toured the three base areas and familiarized himself with each. Based upon his own observations, supported by available intelligence, he concluded that the VC were building up their forces in the areas contiguous to the

Marine enclaves. Walt decided that the Marines had to extend their TAORs and at the same time conduct deeper and more aggressive patrolling. Colonel Hardy Hay, the III MAF G-3, recalled that shortly after Walt's arrival:

He asked me one night, 'What is our major G-3 problem?' My answer—We have got to convince Saigon that by trying to establish a ring around Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Phu Bai—we will never have enough men and material to adequately do it.

Yet as Hay observed, the Marines were unable to undertake offensive operations because their "hands were tied by ComUSMACV directives."<sup>35</sup>

On 15 June a significant change in the role for the Marines took place when General Westmoreland permitted General Walt to begin search and destroy operations in the general area of his enclaves, provided that these operations contributed to the defense of the bases. The MACV commander further directed that the Marines at Chu Lai conduct operations to the west of their TAOR into the suspected Do Xa VC supply complex.

With this new authority and with the concurrence of General Thi, the I Corps commander, General Walt enlarged the TAORs at all three enclaves. The enlargements gave the units of the division more room for offensive operations and provided distinguishable lines of demarcation on the ground since the trace of the new TAORs followed natural terrain features. At Da Nang, the area occupied by the 3d Marines consisted of 172 square miles and contained a civilian population of over 50,000 persons, but the populated region directly to the south and east of the base still remained the responsibility of General Thi's forces. Within the new Chu Lai TAOR of 104 square miles, there were 11 villages, containing 68 hamlets, and a civilian population of over 50,000. The area of responsibility for the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Phu Bai was much smaller, consisting of 61 square miles, but within that area civilian population numbered almost 18,000.

### *The Seeds of Pacification*

Shortly after General Walt assumed command of III MAF he had a survey made which revealed that over 150,000 civilians were living within 81mm mortar range of the airfield, and consequently, the "Marines were into the pacification business."<sup>36</sup> In fact, General Greene later observed:

From the very first, even before the first Marine

battalion landed in Da Nang, my feeling, a very strong one which I voiced to the Joint Chiefs, was that the real target in Vietnam were not the VC and the North Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese people . . .<sup>37</sup>

Other than the Le My experiment, in June 1965 Marine pacification consisted largely of an embryonic civic action program which had begun a few months earlier as an offshoot of the former Marine task element's "people to people" medical assistance program. In April, the civil affairs officer of the 3d Marines, 1st Lieutenant William F. B. Francis, in cooperation with local officials, established a dispensary in the village of Hoa Phat, known to the Marines as Dog Patch, on the western perimeter of the Da Nang Airbase. A Vietnamese nurse ran the facility, while a Navy hospital corpsman and a lab technician paid occasional visits. Lieutenant Francis begged and borrowed medicines from various U.S. agencies, both military and civilian.

Medical assistance programs of this type expanded throughout the Marine TAORs. Lieutenant Colonel Clement's battalion at Le My established another dispensary and opened sick call to the civilian population every other day, while the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines did the same in its area of operations. The artillery battalion at Chu Lai, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, in conjunction with Company B, 3d Medical Battalion, provided daily dispensary service for the local populace. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Phu Bai established a weekly medical service in three small hamlets nearby. In all three Marine enclaves, hospital corpsmen accompanied Marine patrols into the local villages where they dispensed soap and treated minor illnesses.

Civic action, even at this very early stage in its development, encompassed more than merely dispensing medicine. At Chu Lai, the 400 people who were displaced by the airfield were resettled in a new area with the assistance of the 4th Marines and the local district government. The need of much of the rural population for food, clothing, and shelter was apparent to all. The Marines could not hope to eliminate all of the suffering, but they could furnish some assistance. They made contact with private charitable organizations, such as CARE and the Catholic Relief Society, and were able to obtain over 10,000 pounds of miscellaneous supplies to be distributed within their TAORs. The Marines discovered other means besides charity for making life more pleasant for the villagers. In one instance the 3d Marine Division band, marching through Hoa

Phat, suddenly struck up a gay tune, and then, to the delight of hundreds of Vietnamese who had gathered, the band played an impromptu concert for over an hour.

There was a need for overall guidance and direction since civic action was too important to leave to the good will and natural enthusiasm of individual Marines. On 7 June, III MAF published an order which established civic action policy. Major Charles J. Keever, the III MAF Civil Affairs Officer who prepared the directive, had visited hamlets around both Da Nang and Chu Lai to obtain the details of the home life of the Vietnamese villagers, as well as the civic action programs conducted by the Marines. In the order he defined civic action as the "term applied to the employment of the military forces of a nation in economic and social activities which are beneficial to the population as a whole."<sup>38</sup> On 14 June, General Walt held a meeting with 25 of his senior officers and reiterated III MAF civic action policies. The goal was to stabilize the political situation and to build up the government by providing it with the respect and loyalty of its citizens.

The Marines attained their first measurable success in the struggle for the people when villagers in two hamlets, five and a half miles northwest of Le My, elected to move into an area under Marine protection. Lieutenant Colonel Clement's battalion had conducted several sweeps along both banks of the Song Cu De, up river from Le My. According to Clement:

The movement of the people from these two hamlets, of Pho Nam Thuong and Nam Yen, was very important to me because I did not want to extend my defensive posture to include Pho Nam, yet I did not want the VC to have those people. The people were hesitant to move—reluctant to give up their homes; apprehensive about the rice harvest to come; and fearful that association with government forces would mark them for retaliation by the VC.<sup>39</sup>

Clement then decided to convince the villagers that their hamlets were in a combat zone and that "they would be safer to accept refugee status and relocate near Le My . . . ." The battalion commander, several years later, recalled:

I directed that H&I [harrassing and interdiction] fires be brought close in to the hamlet, night after night. The attitude of the people about relocation "improved" in time and the relocation operation was scheduled . . . not only did I have to "convince" the people of Pho Nam and [Nam Yen] to relocate, but I had to convince the Vietnamese authorities of the necessity of this move since the official policy was to discourage refugees.

On 15 June, Lieutenant Colonel Clement drew up plans for a three-company action in conjunction with the ARVN and Popular Forces. Three days later, the Marine battalion and Vietnamese forces moved through the hamlets and brought out more than 350 villagers, who then moved into the Le My complex. Clement later admitted, "I suppose given a free choice, the people would not have left their hamlet. I influenced their decision by honesty, sincerity, and a hell of a lot of H&I fires."<sup>40</sup>

By this time, Le My had become a show case for pacification. Lieutenant Colonel Clement explained:

... by virtue of their success and notoriety, the Marines at Le My ... were not maneuvered around. ... This permitted the battalion to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign based upon the situation as it appeared to the people on the ground. This privileged position permitted a great deal of person-to-person confidence to develop, and, along with it, a personal commitment to the government cause.<sup>41</sup>

### *June Operations in the Three Enclaves*

With the enlarged TAORs and broader mission in June, General Walt based his concept of operations on the establishment of an elaborate defensive network for the base areas together with forward outposts and extended patrolling in the outlying areas. He envisioned "the creation of a series of dug-in timbered mutually-supporting defensive positions into which infantry units may withdraw in the event of heavy enemy attack" as the main defensive line for each enclave. Some 3,000 to 5,000 meters forward of this line, Walt wanted the establishment of a "lightly fortified combat outpost line" for a more mobile defense. Concurrently, the III MAF commander ordered all units to continue "aggressive patrolling" in all TAORS "as a means of keeping the enemy off balance, forcing him to deploy, and giving early warning of any attempts to concentrate along TAOR boundaries."<sup>42</sup>

At Da Nang, the resulting expanded operations resulted in increasing contacts with enemy small units. The 3d Marine Division for the month reported:

10 June. In the western sector of the Da Nang TAOR, a company patrol uncovered a VC base camp capable of supporting 150 people. The camp was destroyed. . . .

21 June. During the morning, 2 reinforced squads from 2/3 were attacked while on patrol in the Da Nang TAOR by an estimated 8 VC, using small arms and grenades.

One Marine was KIA and 3 WIA, while the VC lost 4 KIA and 2 women captured. . . .

22 June. In a brief fire fight at an outpost manned by Company C, 1/3, in the southern portion of the Da Nang enclave, two VC were killed with no Marine casualties.

24 June. Elements of 1/9, under operational control of 3d Marines, and the 1st Bn, 4th ARVN Regiment conducted a combined sweep and clear operation south of Da Nang Air Base along the Song Cau Do. . . 1/9 apprehended 19 suspected VC and the ARVN 1/4 had killed 2 VC. There were no Marine casualties.<sup>43</sup>

The 4th Marines at Chu Lai was equally busy. Lieutenant Colonel Fisher's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines provided security for the Seabees while they constructed the airfield. Shotgun riders from one rifle company were assigned to every vehicle day and night. Two of Fisher's other rifle companies and his headquarters and service company manned the main defensive line, while his fourth rifle company manned forward outposts and conducted patrols.<sup>44</sup> The other infantry battalions at Chu Lai, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, made similar dispositions.

With the consolidation of the Chu Lai base area, Colonel Dupras gradually extended the 4th Marines TAOR so that the air facility was out of range of enemy mortars and light artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Fredericks, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled that initially the Marines had to operate in a very restricted zone and that the enemy was aware of this restriction.<sup>45</sup> With a combination of extended patrolling and civic action within the villages in the TAOR, by the end of June Colonel Dupras was confident that his troops had eliminated the ability of the Viet Cong to mass and attack the airfield. Enemy action was limited to small probes against outposts, sniping, and occasional hand grenade incidents. At the end of the month, the 4th Marines and its supporting units had killed 147 VC while suffering four dead and 23 wounded.

In the Marines' northernmost enclave at Phu Bai, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines faced a large challenge. General Krulak commented that although the unit was operating aggressively throughout its TAOR, it was too much to expect the base to be safe from enemy mortar attack. He believed that the Marines would require two more battalions and probably a regiment to defend the base properly.<sup>46</sup> The low rolling hills and swampy gullies in the area were divided just to the right of center of the TAOR by a prominent north-south ridgeline dominated at the north end by Hill 180. More disturbing was the fact



USMC Photo A185701

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines take cover near Phu Bai. Their patrol had just been fired upon by the VC.*

that the area directly to the north and east of the airstrip, designated Zone A, was not included in the Marine area of responsibility.

Lieutenant Colonel William W. "Woody"

Taylor,\* the battalion commander, was unhappy with the tactical arrangements and commented that the VC could apparently come in and shoot up the villages with impunity while the Marines were not permitted to operate in Zone A.<sup>47</sup> On 21 June, General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st ARVN division commander, incorporated the sector into the Phu Bai TAOR, and at the same time gave Lieutenant Colonel Taylor limited operational control of the five South Vietnamese Popular Force platoons in Zone A. This eventually led to the development of the highly successful Marine and South Vietnamese combined action company. (See Chapter 9)

By the end of June, the stepped-up activity in all three Marine enclaves had placed a heavy strain on III MAF, in terms of both men and material. During the month, General Walt requested the remaining battalions of the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa.\*\* It was now obvious in both Saigon and Washington that more American forces were needed and the entire subject of the total U.S. troop commitment to the war in Vietnam was undergoing reconsideration.

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\* LtCol Taylor relieved LtCol Jones when the latter suffered a heart attack on 28 April 1965.

\*\* On 11 June, 1/9 arrived and relieved 3/9, which returned to Okinawa for transfer back to the United States. This exchange of units was in line with the peacetime battalion transplacement system then in effect and could not in any sense be considered a reinforcement.



## CHAPTER 4

# Reinforcement and Expansion

*The Need for Further Reinforcements—The Establishment of the Qui Nhon Enclave—The Attack on the Airfield—Expansion to the South—Further Reinforcements*

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### *The Need for Further Reinforcements*

Despite increasing U. S. involvement, the major Viet Cong effort bypassed American concentrations during the spring of 1965. Most of the contacts between the Marines and the VC were the results of American initiative. Other than sporadic harassment, the Communists generally left the U.S. troops alone, and reserved their major efforts for the Vietnamese Armed Forces. Apparently the Communist strategy was to finish off the South Vietnamese before more American forces could be deployed to South Vietnam.

In many respects, the moment for concentrated VC action appeared opportune; the South Vietnamese government's war against the Communists was in disarray. According to the government's campaign plan for 1965, the South Vietnamese had established as their objectives the defense of bases and lines of communications, the harassment of VC bases and lines of communications, surveillance of border and coastal areas, and most important, support of the *Chien Thang* ("Struggle for Victory") pacification program. Promulgated in early 1964 and based on the "spreading oil" concept, the *Chien Thang* program placed priority on the consolidation of the secure populous area by a combination of military, paramilitary, police, economic, and social reform activities. At the heart of the program was the "New Life" hamlet, a variation of the planned community. Although similar in many respects to the abortive "Strategic Hamlet" program of the Diem regime, the *Chien Thang* campaign was supposedly better planned and more realistic, in that security was to be "restored in one area prior to going to another." These secure areas were then to serve as "springboards to pacify the areas" which were insecure.<sup>1</sup>

Once more the South Vietnamese pacification plans proved to be too ambitious. In I Corps, for example, where the 1965 campaign plan called for pacification of the coastal plain inland to the railroad in Quang Nam and Quang Ngai Provinces, the situation had deteriorated by the end of March 1965 to the extent that the government controlled only the areas surrounding the provincial capitals. Only in the Saigon region, where the South Vietnamese had begun an intensive pacification campaign in 1964, code named HOP TAC, did the government enjoy a modicum of success in its efforts against the Communists during the spring of 1965.<sup>2\*</sup>

Compounding the difficulties for the South Vietnamese, the government, at the end of May, was in the throes of another internal crisis. Head of State Suu and Prime Minister Quat disagreed over the makeup of the cabinet and were unable to resolve their differences. They both stepped down and handed the reins of power to a military directorate presided over by Generals Thieu and Ky. As one study on pacification concluded, this entire period was marked by governmental instability and "as a consequence, Saigon's military efforts and related pacification programs sputtered both at the national and local levels," and there was "neither the time nor the inclination on the part of the various

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\* Coincident with the *Chien Thang* program, the South Vietnamese, at the urging of MACV, launched the HOP TAC (Working Together) campaign in mid-1964 with the aim of linking together the six rural provinces surrounding Saigon. Using Saigon-Cholon as a hub, the provinces were divided into four concentric zones. The idea was to first pacify the closer zones and then move outward until all six provinces were pacified. A special HOP TAC directorate was formed with U.S. advisors to coordinate the military, police, social, and economic activities of the program. In 1965, an effort was made to use the HOP TAC example in other Corps areas. See the Ngu Hanh Sonh section in Chapter 9 for the effects of this effort in I Corps.



USMC Photo A194964

*Major General Walt provides Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, with an inflight briefing on III MAF operations in Vietnam. The trace of the Marine area of operations can be seen on the briefing map.*

governments in Saigon to deal with anything but the most urgent military threats.’<sup>3</sup>

The VC spring-summer offensive, which opened on 30 May, caught ARVN units widely dispersed in support of the *Chien Thang* campaign. As a result, the enemy was able to chew up the ARVN battalions piecemeal. In I Corps, the *1st VC Regiment* ambushed the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment outside of the small hamlet of Ba Gia, 20 miles south of Chu Lai. Of the 500 men in the battalion, only 65 soldiers and 3 U.S. advisors were able to break through the Communist lines. General Thi threw in his last reserves, the 39th Vietnamese Ranger Battalion and the 3d Vietnamese Marine Battalion. Marine F4Bs from VMFA-531 flew close support for the South Vietnamese units. When the battle ended on the 31st, the South Vietnamese had lost 392 men killed and missing, as well as 446 rifles and carbines, and 90 crew-served weapons. They claimed to have killed 556 Viet Cong and captured 20 weapons. Two battalions of U.S. Marines had been alerted, but were not committed.

The question arose concerning the circumstances under which U.S. combat troops would go to the aid of the South Vietnamese. It was answered on 8 June

when the White House issued the following statement:

If help is requested by the appropriate Vietnamese commander, General Westmoreland also has authority within the assigned mission to employ these troops in support of Vietnamese forces faced with aggressive attack when other effective reserves are not available and when in his judgment, the general military situation urgently requires it.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his new authorization, there was little General Westmoreland could do to alleviate the situation. Other than III MAF in I Corps, he could only call on one other U.S. infantry formation, the U.S. Army 173d Airborne Brigade, which had arrived at Bien Hoa near Saigon in May. During June, the South Vietnamese Army was losing the equivalent of one infantry battalion a week to enemy action.

General Westmoreland had come to the conclusion that the South Vietnamese, by themselves, were incapable of holding back the Viet Cong, who were being reinforced by North Vietnamese regulars. In a message to the Joint Chiefs on 7 June, the MACV commander painted a stark picture depicting enemy strength and corresponding ARVN weakness. Westmoreland told the JCS, ‘I believe that the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] will commit whatever forces it deems necessary to tip the balance and the GVN cannot stand up successfully to this kind of pressure without reinforcement.’ Specifically, General Westmoreland asked for the immediate approval for the deployment to Vietnam of those forces already being considered in various plans. These forces included the remaining two battalions of the 3d Marine Division, as well as two Army brigades and an airmobile division. In addition, Westmoreland requested the deployment, already under consideration, of a Republic of Korea division to South Vietnam, as well as the possible deployment of more American forces at a later date.<sup>5</sup>

In an exchange of messages between MACV, CinCPac, and JCS, units were added and deleted to the ‘shopping list’ that MACV had proposed in the 7 June request. By 22 June, the Joint Chiefs, in a message to Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland, cited an eventual 44 battalion-size force in South Vietnam exclusive of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. These 44 battalions were to be largely U.S. Army and Marine Corps, although supplemented by units from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. In this same message, the Joint Chiefs

discussed the immediate approval of a 23 U.S. battalion commitment to South Vietnam, but failed to mention the two battalions of the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa. They also remarked on the possibility of returning the 173d Airborne Brigade to Okinawa after the scheduled July arrival of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Finally, the JCS wanted to know if Westmoreland and Sharp thought that the 44-battalion force "would be enough to convince the DRV/VC they could not win."<sup>6</sup>

In his reply two days later, General Westmoreland opposed any decision to withdraw any U.S. units and objected to any suggestion that 23 U.S. Army and Marine battalions were the upper level of the U.S. commitment. In response to the JCS inquiry on the adequacy of a 44 battalion-size force, Westmoreland answered, "I saw 44 battalions as no force for victory, but as a stop-gap measure to save the ARVN from defeat." In his message to the Joint Chiefs, he stated: "The premise must be that we are in for the long pull . . . it is time all concerned face up to the fact that we must be prepared for a long war which will probably involve increasing numbers of U.S. troops."<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the month, the Joint Chiefs informed ComUSMACV and CinCPac that the U.S. forces that Westmoreland had asked for in his 7 June and subsequent requests had been approved. This decision allowed for the movement of 8,000 more Marines to Vietnam including the 9th Marines headquarters. It also permitted deployment of the airmobile division, then being formed at Fort Benning, Georgia, as well as the already approved deployments of the 101st Airborne Brigade and a brigade from the 1st Infantry Division.

The same time that he requested more troops, General Westmoreland also asked for the authority to employ American forces in offensive operations against the enemy. He claimed that the:

. . . enemy's shift to big unit war was drawing ARVN troops away from the heavily populated regions . . . American and Allied troops . . . would have to assume the role of fighting the big units, leaving the . . . ARVN free to protect the people. No more niceties about defensive posture and reaction . . . we had to forget about enclaves and take the war to the enemy.<sup>8</sup>

This concept was soon to be known as the search and destroy tactic, with the aim of searching out and destroying the main force units. On 26 June, Westmoreland received permission from Washington to commit U.S. forces to battle "in any situation . . .

when in ComUSMACV's judgment, their use is necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces."<sup>9</sup> This in effect gave the MACV commander a relatively free hand to employ his forces.

General Westmoreland's particular concern at this time was the military situation in South Vietnam's II Corps. Intelligence reports indicated that North Vietnamese regular units were infiltrating through the Central Highlands in the western provinces of Kontum and Pleiku, while the coastal provinces of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen remained major sources of enemy manpower and food. Westmoreland placed the highest priority on preventing the linkup of the North Vietnamese regulars in the mountains with the VC on the coast. The key to the entire area was Route 19, which runs from the city of Qui Nhon to Pleiku City where it joins with Route 14 which continues north to Kontum.

In making his plans to counter the expected Communist offensive, General Westmoreland relied heavily on the arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) which had been specifically designed as a mobile force "that could be moved from one trouble spot to another."<sup>10\*</sup> As early as April, Westmoreland contended that such a division was ideally suited to conduct helicopterborne operations in the Central Highlands. The MACV commander maintained that the division could be supplied overland from the coastal logistic bases at Qui Nhon and Nha Trang via Route 19, and augmented by aerial supply. Finally, Westmoreland argued, "If the VC choose to mount a major campaign against Highway 19, this is a better place than most for a showdown."<sup>11</sup>

\*During the spring of 1965, the Army formed the 11th Air Assault Division (Test) at Fort Benning, Georgia, for final testing and evaluation. "The decision to activate the test division as part of Army force structure and to subsequently deploy it to Vietnam required the reorganizing, retraining and reequipping of the division in a period of 90 days. Activated as the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) on 1 July 1965, the division was composed of the men and equipment of the air assault division and the 2d Infantry Division, plus aviators procured from Army units worldwide." As reorganized for deployment to Vietnam the newly formed 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) consisted of three brigades which included eight infantry battalions, an air cavalry squadron, an aerial artillery battalion, three helicopter battalions, and three 105mm howitzer battalions. The division had a strength of over 15,000 men and was equipped with 1600 vehicles and 434 helicopters. CMH, Comments on draft MS, dtd 15Nov76 (Vietnam Comment File).



USMC Photo A185286

*General Walt greets Marines from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines at the newly established Qui Nhon enclave. The 2d Battalion had just relieved the SLF battalion, BLT 3/7.*

Within the defense establishment, there was some opposition to the deployment of the airmobile division so far from its logistic bases. Admiral Sharp, supported by Ambassador Taylor and some members of the Joint Chiefs, wanted the airmobile division based in the Qui Nhon area:

Until both Route 19 and the vital coastal area had been secured, primarily out of concern that the logistical backup for the Division, 600-800 tons per day, would severely overtax the existent limited airlift and airfield facilities if the ground supply route should be closed off.

After further study, according to Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland agreed to base the division at An Khe, 35 miles west of Qui Nhon. From this base, which could be resupplied by road, the airmobile division could launch operations "into the Pleiku Highlands as well as into the surrounding countryside of Binh Dinh Province." Despite this

compromise, the deployment of the airmobile division so far inland would be a departure from the earlier Marine deployments in secure coastal enclaves.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The Establishment of the Qui Nhon Enclave*

Because of the serious situation in II Corps in June, General Westmoreland had to make difficult decisions. Faced with the fact that the 1st Cavalry Division would not arrive until September, he considered, but finally rejected, moving two III MAF Marine battalions into the Central Highlands. Moreover, the MACV commander was concerned that the security for the Army's Qui Nhon logistic base was no longer adequate and so informed

Admiral Sharp on 21 June. In his message, he stated that he could not divert units from III MAF, or from the 173d Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa, for base defense in II Corps. Although a brigade from the Army's 1st Infantry Division was to arrive at Qui Nhon in mid-July, Westmoreland feared that the existing U.S. Army logistic buildup there offered too lucrative a target for the VC. Consequently, he requested that a Marine battalion be flown to Qui Nhon from Okinawa as soon as possible.

Admiral Sharp agreed to the request for reinforcement, but suggested a modification to the deployment of the Marine battalion. During June, the 7th Marines, a 1st Marine Division regiment, had arrived at Okinawa from Camp Pendleton with all three of its battalions. The regiment's arrival permitted the Navy and Marine Corps to embark one battalion on amphibious shipping and reconstitute the special landing force (SLF) of the Seventh Fleet. Sharp proposed that the SLF land at Qui Nhon, rather than redeploy another battalion by air. This alternative would allow the Marines to reembark in their own shipping when they were relieved by the Army's 1st Division brigade. The Joint Chiefs agreed with Sharp and ordered him to land the SLF at Qui Nhon on 1 July.

During the period 24-26 June, Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley's BLT 3/7 and Lieutenant Colonel Norman G. Ewer's HMM-163 embarked on board the amphibious ships *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2), *Talladega* (APA 208), and *Point Defiance* (LSD 31).<sup>\*</sup> The ships sailed for Vietnam on the 26th. Lieutenant Colonel Bodley, who had been on a staff visit to the Philippines and to Vietnam, recalled, "our return flight to Okinawa arrived just in time to permit us to wave down a local helicopter and still be able to catch the departing SLF at sea."<sup>13</sup>

On 30 June, the amphibious task group arrived off Qui Nhon; ashore General Westmoreland was on hand to greet the Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Bodley flew ashore by helicopter to meet Westmoreland, who, according to Bodley, "wanted to personally brief me and resolve on the spot any landing/operating problems existing or anticipated." The MACV commander offered to support the SLF

<sup>\*</sup> There had been no Seventh Fleet SLF since mid-May. The helicopter squadron, HMM-163, had just returned from Vietnam on 21 June where it had been replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Mervin B. Porter's HMM-261. See Chapter 13 for a further discussion of the SLF.



USMC Photo A184870

*Captain Michael F. Welty, Commanding Officer, Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, (kneeling) discusses the tactical situation with his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter, (seated) at Qui Nhon. Master Sergeant E. J. McCarthy, the Company F First Sergeant, is seated in the middle.*

battalion with rations, ammunition, and other common items of supply. Bodley recalled that when General Krulak was notified of this offer, he "disapproved declaring that Marines would be self-sufficient."<sup>14</sup>

According to plan, on 1 July, Lieutenant Colonel Bodley landed three of his infantry companies and the attached 107mm Mortar Battery from the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines. The fourth infantry company, Company L, and other attachments remained on board ship as the BLT reserve. By 1700 the amphibious phase of the operation was over and the battalion had established positions on the high ground south of the city.

The SLF battalion's stay at Qui Nhon was shorter than anticipated. On 2 July, General Westmoreland advised Admiral Sharp that, with the mounting enemy offensive in II Corps and northern III Corps, he believed it was necessary to release the 173d Airborne Brigade from its static mission of protecting the Bien Hoa airfield and use it as a mobile reserve. He recommended that the 1st Infantry Division brigade scheduled for Qui Nhon be diverted



(Courtesy of Major Gary W. Parker) USMC Photo A707619

*Marine helicopters from HMM-161 approach Qui Nhon airfield from the northwest. The base area of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines was located four miles to the west of the airstrip.*

to Bien Hoa and that one of the Marine battalions slated to reinforce III MAF relieve BLT 3/7 at Qui Nhon so that the SLF could once again function as a floating reserve. The incoming Marine battalion would remain at Qui Nhon until relieved by Republic of Korea (ROK) troops scheduled to arrive later in the year. Admiral Sharp approved the request and General Krulak assigned Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's BLT 2/7 for the Qui Nhon mission.<sup>15\*</sup>

The Marines of BLT 2/7 had been embarked in the

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\* 2/7 was substituted for 3/9 to go into Vietnam because the latter battalion had just arrived on Okinawa from the U.S. under the battalion transplacement system. Under this system, a battalion from the 1st Marine Division in California relieved a battalion of the 3d Marine Division in the Western Pacific, exchanging designation and mission. Thus the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines when it arrived in Okinawa at the end of June became the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. In the movement of the 7th Marines battalions there was no change in designation since they actually reinforced the 3d Marine Division.

dock landing ship *Alamo* (LSD 33) and the attack transport *Okanogan* (APA 220) at Okinawa since 30 June, awaiting permission to deploy to South Vietnam. When the battalion received its new mission, the ships sailed, arriving off Qui Nhon on the evening of 6 July. The selected landing area, GREEN Beach, was south of the city and had been secured by Bodley's battalion. At 0800 the next morning, the first troops landed and the relief was completed by that evening. Supplies and equipment of Utter's battalion were brought ashore during the night and the entire operation was over by daybreak. BLT 3/7 reembarked in its own shipping on the afternoon of the 8th, but the amphibious squadron remained off Qui Nhon for several days in position to reinforce BLT 2/7 if the need arose.

Upon arriving at Qui Nhon, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion came under the operational command of III MAF. General Walt directed the battalion to deploy its forces about "the key terrain

in Qui Nhon in order to reinforce the RVNAF and to defend the airfield, port, logistic facilities, and U.S. supporting installations."<sup>16</sup>

To fulfill the requirements of his mission, on 6 July Lieutenant Colonel Utter issued his three-phased concept of operations; the first phase was completed on the afternoon of the 7th with the relief of BLT 3/7, the second began on the 8th with the occupation of Hill 586, the dominant ridge line running north and south, while the third phase was to consist of aggressive patrolling of the TAOR. The defensive perimeter consisted of three concentric areas: close-in defensive positions around the airfield, a defensive zone out to mortar range, and an outer zone to the limit of organic artillery range.

The establishment of the Qui Nhon enclave made General Walt's mission in I Corps more difficult. Not only did he lose the services of one infantry battalion, which could have been used either at Phu Bai or Da Nang, but also he had to position a detachment of 10 UH-34s from HMM-161 at Qui Nhon to provide helicopter support for the Marines there. The need for still more Marines in I Corps became disturbingly evident in July.

### *The Attack on the Airfield*

On 1 July, a Viet Cong mortar and ground attack on the Da Nang airfield exposed the vulnerability of the base to enemy hit-and-run tactics. The Communists had carefully planned and rehearsed this operation for over a month, taking advantage of the fact that the entire area south of the perimeter fence was the responsibility of the South Vietnamese forces. On the night of 30 June, an 85-man enemy force, armed with automatic weapons, demolitions, grenades, one 57mm recoilless rifle, and four 81mm mortars, crossed the Cau Do River south of Da Nang. The attack force, a VC special operations company and a mortar company, reinforced by a 13-man North Vietnamese sapper team reached the southeastern perimeter of the base by midnight.

The enemy mortar company divided into two sections; the first section was to fire on the helicopter parking area, the other was to support the demolition team. Two rifle squads took up blocking positions to counter any reaction force, while the recoilless rifle team backed up the mortars. At approximately 0115, the 13 men of the demolition team tunneled under



USMC Photo A194609

*Marines from Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines stop a Vietnamese civilian bus on Route 1, 12 miles south of Da Nang in a search for VC guerrillas. The troops are checking civilian ID cards and looking for unauthorized weapons and ammunition.*

the outer defensive wire, crossed the open area, and cut a hole in the inner perimeter fence.<sup>17</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Verle E. Ludwig's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was responsible for airfield defense. All four companies and the battalion CP had been located on the airfield, but "there were continuing talks and plans between and among myself [Ludwig], Colonel Wheeler, and General Walt to use 1/9 to increase the offensive capability in the Da Nang area." As a result, Companies B and D, the CP, and most of Headquarters and Service Company had been moved to a more forward base area to begin a series of sweeps south of Da Nang. Two companies, A and C, augmented by MAF Logistic Support Group troops and Ontos [106mm recoilless rifles] strong points, provided the defense of the airfield proper. Ludwig later observed that these two companies were responsible for the same area that the entire battalion had previously covered and "This meant, of course, that our positions were spread out, with the spaces between covered with roving sentries. This was the situation in the area penetrated by the sappers."<sup>18</sup>

The night of 30 June had been quiet, with the exception of two minor probes on the extreme western portion of the Marine TAOR. About 0130 on 1 July, one of the Marine sentries near the fence heard a suspicious noise and threw an illumination grenade. At the moment the grenade burst, the enemy opened fire. Under the protection of concentrated covering fire and grenades, ten sappers ran

onto the field. The 3d Division journal contains the following description of the initial confusion at the base:

0130—Heard incoming at the airfield

0142—Counter-mortar radar is oriented toward BTOO-77

0143—Counter-radar is working but we don't have anything yet. Sounds like we are getting more incoming now.

0150—Called G-3. Major Foster said a F-102 and C-130 are burning. Lieutenant Colonel Muir said incoming all seemed to be on Air Force side of field in area of F-100s and C-130s.

0208—3d Marines just got permission to fire 81mm illumination.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the infiltrators managed to throw their satchel charges on the Air Force aircraft, destroying a Convair F-102 and two C-130s, and damaging two F-102s and one C-130. Company C immediately sent two squads to the vicinity of the attack to reinforce the sentries on post. In the minutes it took for the additional Marines to arrive, the sappers were already withdrawing in the same direction from which they had arrived. As the reinforcing squads approached the southern fence, enemy small arms fire wounded two of the Marines; a 57mm shell hit the top of a concrete bunker and wounded the guard inside.

The Marines could not cut off the demolition team, but the enemy had not escaped unscathed. Troops of Ludwig's battalion found blood trails leading from the airfield, and Lieutenant Colonel Muir picked up a pistol at the cut in the wire during his early morning reconnaissance. Fifty minutes after the attack, Marine artillery opened fire on suspected enemy avenues of escape. Company D and a platoon from Company B arrived to reinforce the defenders. Two companies of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines deployed along Route 1 to block any attack from the west and northwest.

General Walt, several years later, recalled that from the time the attack began that he was:

... in an amphibian tractor out in the rice paddies west of the Air Base. This tractor was my combat command post where I slept at night. I had both wire and radio communication capability. I directed Colonel Wheeler (CO 3d Marine Regiment) to commit our Air Base reserve company and to personally go to the Air Base and direct the defense, which he did immediately.<sup>20</sup>

Colonel Wheeler called in Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig at 0300. They outlined a plan to find the retreating enemy force. Assisted by ARVN units, Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was to sweep

the northern bank of the Cau Do, under operational control of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion which would search the area south of the river. The commanders planned to start the mission at first light, but all units were not in place until 0700. One platoon of Company B, in LVTs, patrolled the river and remained ready as a mobile reserve. The other platoons of the company deployed along the road north of the Phong Le Bridge, a mile and a half south of the airbase. At 1700, the operation ended. The Marines returned to the base with 14 suspects, but none proved to have been involved in the attack. The South Vietnamese were more fortunate. They found a wounded North Vietnamese who turned out to be the intelligence officer of the sapper team. He identified his parent unit as the *3d Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment*.

Although the damage on the airfield was not extensive and there were a few casualties, the spectacular nature of the VC attack caused worldwide publicity and renewed command attention to the vulnerability of the American bases. General Walt, in 1977, remarked:

During the period of 0200 to 0400 I received phone calls from MACV Hq, CinCPac Hq, FMFPac Hq, Headquarters US Marine Corps, Secretary of the Navy's Office, Secretary of Defense Office and from the White House "Watch Officer" *not* President Johnson. All of the callers wanted to know *all* about the attack and *what* I was doing about it. Fortunately I had given instructions to Colonel Wheeler before the phone started ringing. This points out one of the hazards (for a commander) of having present day instantaneous communications to the battlefield, all over the world.<sup>21</sup>

General Walt ordered Brigadier General Karch to conduct an investigation concerning the circumstances surrounding the attack. In his findings, Karch concluded that the counter-mortar radar installation failed to function properly, thus hampering the Marines in their effort to locate the enemy mortar position. Nevertheless, the reaction force from Ludwig's battalion had responded rapidly.<sup>22</sup> Ludwig, himself, later wrote:

It was my understanding all along that the division of my battalion . . . was a bit of a calculated risk with Colonel Wheeler and General Walt. Yet both believed that the need for more sweeps and offensive action justified this thinning of the airfield defense.<sup>23</sup>

Colonel Hardy Hay, the III MAF G-3, later remarked:

I believe what really got us going and extending our patrols was the attack on the Da Nang air base. We then



began to seriously hunt and destroy the enemy before he could bring his weapons to bear on our enclaves.<sup>24</sup>

Reinforcing Colonel Hay's observation, General Krulak remembered: "I landed at Da Nang at 0800 that day, and it was already acknowledged that we had better get moving off the airfield perimeter, or there would be more of the same kind of attack."<sup>25</sup>

### *Expansion to the South*

The basic weakness in the airfield defense remained that the Marine TAOR at Da Nang did not extend south or east of the airbase. General Walt later acknowledged that the enemy's sapper assault had been a "surprise," but that he and his staff members had been "worried about such an attack." Walt stated that General Thi, the I Corps commander, "was concerned about incidents" between Marines and South Vietnamese civilians in the densely populated areas south and east of the base. The III MAF commander repeatedly had asked General Thi "for permission to put some type of defense outside the airbase on the east and south side," but each time the I Corps commander had



USMC Photo A184790

*A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines moves through a Vietnamese hamlet south of Da Nang. The Marines found war in the hamlets to be difficult and frustrating.*

answered "that action be delayed until the people of Da Nang become more used to the Marine presence."<sup>26</sup>

Despite General Thi's reluctance to have American troops operate in populated areas, General Walt, accompanied by General Krulak, met with the I Corps commander on 2 July, to renew his request to extend the Da Nang TAOR. Recognizing that the present defense arrangements gave every advantage to the enemy, General Thi gave his tentative approval for the expansion, but asked that General Walt put his request in writing. The I Corps commander still had reservations about the presence of Marines in the populated area and remarked to General Krulak, "You are still not ready to try and search out the VC."<sup>27</sup>

On 5 July, General Walt, in a letter to General Thi, formally asked that the Marine boundary be expanded approximately four miles south of the Cau Do and that it include as well, the Tiensha Peninsula east of the airbase. At the same time, Walt requested that the Marine reconnaissance zone be extended to Hai Van Pass, 19 miles north of Da Nang.

The Vietnamese general then directed his staff to study what effect the enlargement of the Marine TAOR would have on the following:

- (1) The "anti-Communist spirit" of the local population.
- (2) Administration and territorial security.
- (3) Coordination with ARVN forces in the area.
- (4) The lack of experience on the part of the U.S. Marines in distinguishing the civilian population from the Viet Cong.

This last qualification apparently was uppermost in the minds of the ARVN officers. On 20 July, realizing the importance of the security of the Da Nang base and the limited capability of the South Vietnamese to provide this protection, General Thi officially approved the boundary extensions in a letter to General Walt. The Vietnamese general cautioned that the Marine occupation of the new area should be divided into several phases and urged that the Marines thoroughly coordinate their planning and operations in the area with the Vietnamese military forces.<sup>28</sup>

III MAF designated the territory between the Cau Do and the southern boundary of the base as Zone A, and the area to the south of the river as Zone B. The Marines were to occupy Zone A immediately, and, at the same time, begin combined operations with ARVN forces south of the river. As in most



USMC Photo A185018

*Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines are seen in Operation BLASTOUT I southwest of Da Nang. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines conducted its search of the Cam Ne village complex, four miles to the north, in conjunction with this operation.*

operations emphasis was on coordination and cooperation; the Americans were to be careful not to give the appearance of occupation troops. General Thi remarked that he hoped the expansion would be carried out "by both parties in a spirit of friendly cooperation in order to obtain good results."<sup>29</sup>

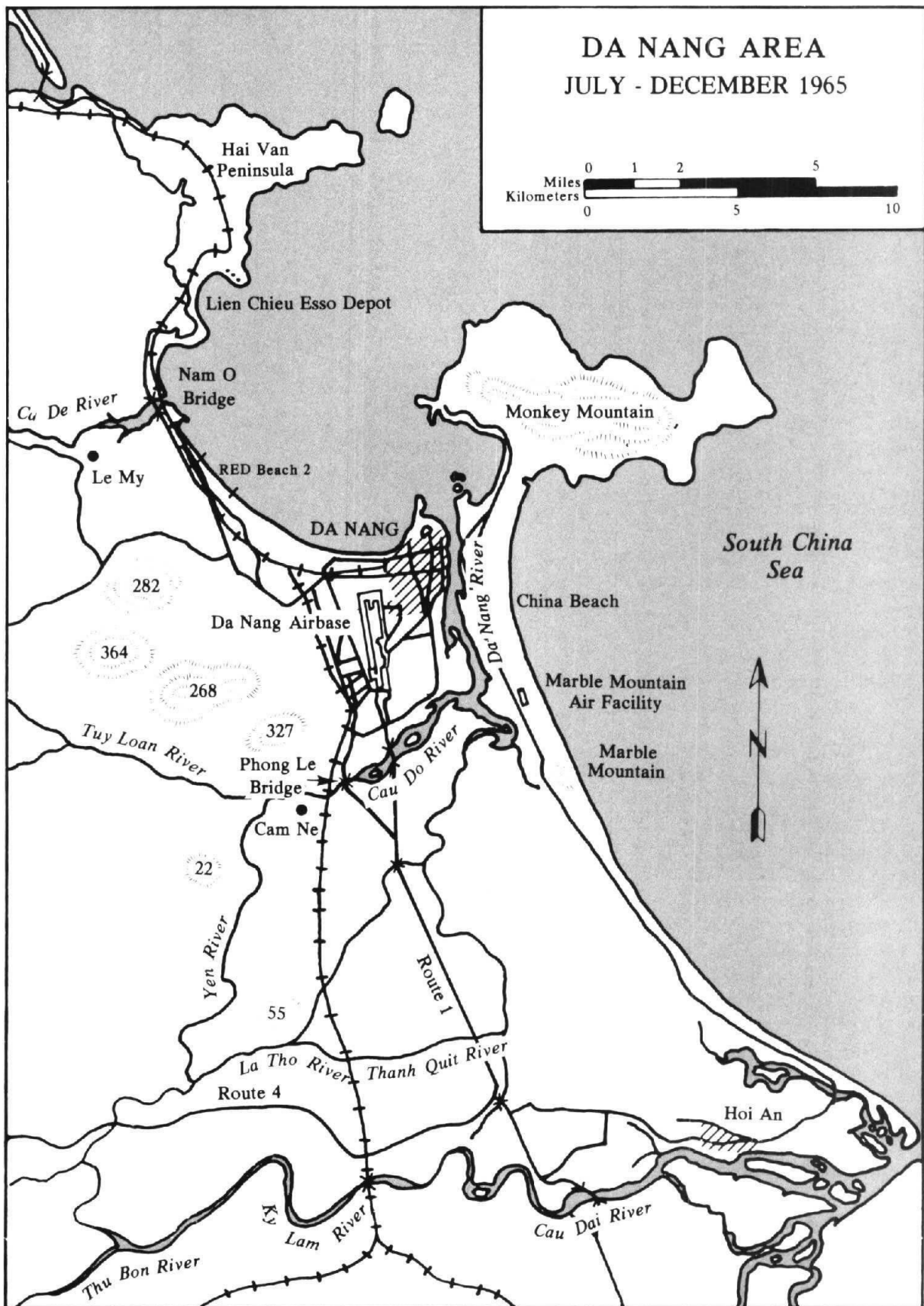
Even the smoothest of relations could not disguise the need for more Marines at Da Nang. The increased demands for airfield security and the expanded Da Nang TAOR, as well as the deployment of BLT 2/7 to Qui Nhon, forced General Walt to scrap his original plans to reinforce Phu Bai with a regiment. Instead, most of the Marine reinforcements authorized by the JCS, with the exception of BLT 2/7 at Qui Nhon and the 4th Marines (Rear) which was slated for Chu Lai, arrived at Da Nang on 6 July. These included all of RLT-9 headquarters, BLT 2/9, the remainder of the 12th Marines, and support units of the 1st MAW and 3d Marine Division.

With the arrival of the last units of the 3d Division, General Walt made some adjustments in the disposition of his infantry at Da Nang. While the 3d Marines retained operational control over the battalion at Phu Bai and responsibility for the defense of the western and southwestern perimeters of the Da Nang Base, Walt assigned the defense of the airfield and the southern portion of the TAOR to Colonel Frank E. Garretson, the 9th Marines commander.

Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was retained as the airbase defense battalion, but reverted to parent unit control, while the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel George R. Scharnberg, was given the responsibility of expanding Marine control to the south.

To free the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from a static role on the airfield itself, General Walt ordered the establishment of a provisional airbase defense battalion to be formed from the personnel of the various service units at Da Nang. Lieutenant Colonel William H. Clark, the executive officer of the 9th Marines, was assigned as the provisional battalion commander. The provisional battalion was to be organized as a conventional infantry battalion with a headquarters and service company and four infantry companies and a total strength of 38 officers and 911 enlisted men. On 19 July, Clark activated his new command. Three days later his newly formed Company A relieved one of Ludwig's companies on the airfield perimeter, and on 1 August, Company B relieved another 1st Battalion company.

The formation of the provisional base defense battalion released infantry companies from the airfield security mission, but the organization had a debilitating effect on the support and service units of III MAF. Too many specialists needed on their own jobs were serving as infantrymen. As early as 17 July, Lieutenant Colonel Clark had recommended



against activating his own command, arguing that "The overall effect of the creation of the Provisional Base Battalion is uneconomical from personnel, equipment, and airfield security viewpoints."<sup>30</sup> Although this recommendation was rejected, it soon became apparent that he was right. Clark later recalled that during General Walt's 7 August morning briefing, Colonel Edward Cook, the commanding officer of the 3d Motor Transport Battalion:

Reported a significant number of vehicles deadlined for lack of drivers or for required maintenance. Seems the drivers and mechanics were TAD [temporary additional duty] for their 60 days with the ADB [airfield defense battalion]. General Walt said deactivate.<sup>31</sup>

Although the order to deactivate came on 7 August, the provisional battalion remained in existence for two more weeks, sharing the airfield defense mission with the two companies of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and later with the newly arrived 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The 3d Battalion assumed the entire mission of base defense on the formal deactivation of the provisional battalion on 22 August.

The provisional battalion had served its purpose, in that the 9th Marines was able to begin the occupation of its new TAOR. Of particular concern was the area to the south of the Cau Do. The 9th Marines area of responsibility now extended to the South China Sea on the east, the Yen River on the west, and approximately three and a half miles to the south of the Song Cau Do, about 30 square miles in all. This entire region was densely populated with innumerable clusters of villages and hamlets. The term "village" in Vietnam denoted an administrative unit, while the true local community was the hamlet, several hamlet clusters making up a village. An example of the confusion this caused for III MAF staffs was the fact that in the 9th Marines TAOR there were six hamlets with the name of Cam Ne and three Duong Sons, identified only by a parenthetical number after the hamlet name. Often the hamlets had different names from that of their administrative village, while clusters had no names at all, or none that the Americans could determine.

Prior to the extension of their TAOR, the Marines had only limited contact with the Vietnamese civilian population and then only in areas such as Le My where the people had shown basic loyalty to the government cause. This was not the case in the

region south of the Cau Do. It was difficult to build loyalty to the Government of South Vietnam where fathers, brothers, and relatives were part of the VC structure and had been for a generation. A Buddhist priest who lived in one of the Duong Son hamlets furnished the Marines with some basic intelligence of the VC strength and organization, typical of the area. He revealed that the Viet Cong maintained a roadblock near the railroad tracks between Duong Son (2) and (3) manned by a four-man squad. A 40-man VC force which lived in his village was constructing bunkers, foxholes, punji traps, and setting in booby traps. Enemy political cadres were also active and VC tax agents collected 270 piastres annually from each family living in the area. The priest laconically summed up: "The attitude of the people is generally friendly to the VC and unfriendly to the government forces."<sup>32</sup>

With General Thi's concurrence, the Marines entered the new TAOR on 12 July; Lieutenant Colonel Scharnberg's 2d Battalion moved into the vicinity of Duong Son (1), a mile south of the Phong Le Bridge. While two companies formed a perimeter defense around the hamlet, Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, moved through the hamlet. The Marines from Company B met strong resistance; three men were killed and four wounded. Further south, Company D, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, attached to the 2d Battalion for the operation, came under sniper fire; eight were wounded. Most of the enemy fire appeared to be coming from the direction of Cam Ne (1), approximately 1,800 to 2,000 yards northwest of the jumping-off point. The Marines pulled back and called for close air support. F-4Bs from MAG-11 answered the request and blasted the enemy positions. An aerial observer in an O-1B confirmed six VC dead and secondary explosions in a minefield.

With Duong Son (1) secured, Lieutenant Colonel Scharnberg established a forward command post under his executive officer, Major John A. Buck, in "the old French reinforced concrete bunker at the northwest end of the Phong Le Bridge," to control the two companies remaining in the hamlet. Buck recalled that he maintained "almost daily contact with . . . [the] village chief of Duong Son," believing this "liaison was essential in order to obtain raw information . . . and in general to develop a rapport without which the Marines could not achieve their full potential."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the two Marine



USMC Photo A184783

*A Marine searches for caches of VC weapons in a hamlet south of Da Nang. The five small children in the background appear to be unconcerned about the presence of the American Marines.*

companies in Duong Son (1) continued to receive fire from Cam Ne (2) directly to the west and from Duong Son (2) to the south. Throughout July and into August, the Marine units encountered resistance in the area.

An incident that perhaps best mirrored the perplexities which faced the 9th Marines was a mission conducted in the Cam Ne village complex on 3 August by Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. It was planned in conjunction with a 3d Marines' operation, BLASTOUT I, carried out by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and an ARVN battalion four miles south of the Cam Ne complex along both banks of the Yen River. The 3d Marines battalion would provide a blocking force to the south while Company D cleared the Cam Ne complex.

Cam Ne was a well-known VC stronghold and its residents were long-time Communist sympathizers, dating back to the time of the French. American intelligence officers estimated that VC local and main force troops were present in company size in the village complex.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines commander, his orders were "to search out the VC and to destroy them, their positions, and fortifications." Captain Herman B. West, Jr., the Company D commander, briefed his platoons to the effect that if they received fire from a "a position, hedgerow, trench line, bunker, spider trap, hut, or any other location," they were "to overcome and destroy."<sup>34</sup>

The company was to embark in a platoon of LVTs at the northern end of the Phong Le Bridge, navigate the Cau Do to its junction with the Yen River, and land opposite the Cam Ne complex, 1,200 yards downstream. The Marines were to attack east and occupy Cam Ne (1) and Cam Ne (2), two and a half miles from the line of departure. A forward battalion command post was to be established on the northern bank of the Song Cau Do. The attack was to begin at 1000 with the Marines scheduled to reach their objectives at 1500 that afternoon.

Complications arose at the very beginning. Three of the LVTs stuck in the mud of the Cau Do. Two tractors were able to get free, but the troops in the third had to transfer to another vehicle. The entire company did not arrive at its line of departure until 1040.

The objective area consisted of a maze of open rice paddies, tree lines, hamlets, and hedgerows. When the Marines dismounted from the tractors, they were greeted by occasional small arms fire from the tree line in front of the buildup area to the southeast. The troops quickly advanced on a 1,000-foot front, all three platoons were on line. It took the company approximately 10 minutes to cross the open paddy land and reach the cover afforded by the nearest treeline. One Marine was wounded during this phase of the attack. As the Marines edged forward, the VC withdrew into the hamlets. The hedgerows around the hamlets caused other difficulties. As the LVTs bore forward and crushed the thick hedgerows they set off several booby traps. No one was injured and the Marines proceeded into the cluster of thatched huts. The VC, however, refused to fight and disengaged. These tactics added to the frustrations of the Marines who were spoiling for a fight.

The entire Cam Ne complex favored the enemy hit-and-run methods. The innocent looking collection of crude structures harbored punji sticks, spider holes, interconnecting tunnels between houses, and an uncooperative civilian population.



USMC Photo A184852

*Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara (center) and General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (right), discuss the situation in I Corps with the I Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi (back to the camera), in July 1965. Secretary McNamara was in Vietnam to review the U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam with General Westmoreland.*

The Marines would search one hut, only to have a VC sniper turn up behind them, shoot, and disappear. Troops from one of the platoons began to burn the huts from which they had received fire. The platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Ray G. Snyder, claimed that Cam Ne was an "extensively entrenched and fortified hamlet." Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig explained, that "in many instances burning was the only way to ensure that the house would not become an active military installation after the troops had moved on past it."<sup>33</sup>

By midafternoon, Captain West realized that his men would not be able to reach their objective area by nightfall. The company uncovered 267 punji stick traps and pits, 6 Malayan whips,\* 3 grenade booby traps, 6 anti-personnel mines, and 1 multiple booby-

trapped hedegrow. The troops demolished 51 huts and 38 trenches, tunnels, and prepared positions, yet they had only progressed a quarter of the distance to their final objective.

Not knowing the strength of the enemy and realizing that the situation could deteriorate after dark, Captain West ordered a withdrawal to the Yen. When the Marines were once again in the open, the Viet Cong returned to the tree line and opened up with automatic and small arms fire upon the Americans. This time the Marine company called on Battery D, 2d Battalion, 12th Marines and the battalion 81mm mortar section for cover. Twenty-four 105mm shells and 21 mortar rounds struck the VC positions in four-to-five minutes. The troops were not able to observe the results, but the Viet Cong fire stopped and the Marines boarded their tractors.

During this engagement it had been impossible for

\* A Malayan whip is a bent bamboo fence which, when tripped, whips pointed stakes into the intruder.

the Marines to determine accurately how large an enemy force they had encountered. Estimates of the size of the Viet Cong unit varied from 30 to 100; the Marines believed they accounted for at least seven enemy. The withdrawing VC had carried off their dead, wounded, and weapons, leaving no vindication for the four Marines wounded in the day's fighting.

When the tractors entered the Cau Do they were fired on from the southern bank. The Marines returned fire and the enemy rifles were once again silenced. Some thought had been given to going back to the Phong Le Bridge and again attacking southward into Cam Ne (1) and (2), where the company could be supported by the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, but Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig knew it was too late to accomplish the mission in the remaining daylight. He called off the operation.

The company had not attained its final objective, but the Marines had learned some valuable lessons. They realized that one company could not cover the area and reach its target in the time allotted. Beyond the tactical lessons learned, Cam Ne forcibly brought to the attention of the American command both the political and military dilemmas inherent in the Vietnam War where the enemy could and did use the civilian population as a shield. Among the casualties at Cam Ne were a dead 10-year-old Vietnamese boy and four wounded villagers, who were caught in the crossfire between the Viet Cong and the Marines.

The nastiness of the village war was dramatized for millions of Americans on their television screens. A CBS television crew had accompanied the Marine company into Cam Ne and American viewers saw a Marine casually set a hut on fire with his cigarette lighter while an old woman pleaded for the preservation of her home. The CBS film version of the action showed the Marines meeting little or no resistance, and indeed, Morley Safer, the CBS reporter, who narrated the film, bluntly stated that "If there were Viet Cong in the hamlets they were long gone." Taking exception to the CBS report, the Marine Corps argued that Cam Ne was a fortified Viet Cong village and that Captain West's Marines had received small arms fire, including automatic weapons, from an estimated VC platoon as Company D attempted to enter the hamlets. The editors of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, perhaps best stated the Marine Corps position:

War is a stupid and brutalizing affair. This type of war perhaps more than others. But this does not mean that

those who are fighting it are either stupid or brutal. It does mean that the whole story should be told. Not just a part of it.<sup>36\*</sup>

Realizing that extending the Marine TAOR into the heavily populated hostile area south of the Cau Do would cause trouble, General Walt, as early as 10 July, had issued a written directive to keep non-combatant casualties to a minimum. He stated:

It is imperative that all officers and men understand the nature of the Vietnamese conflict, the necessity of winning the support of the people, and the primary importance of protecting and safeguarding civilians whenever possible . . . the indiscriminate or unnecessary use of weapons is counterproductive. The injury or killing of hapless civilians inevitably contributes to the Communist cause, and each incident of it will be used against us with telling effect.

But the general made it clear that this order was not to infringe upon "the inherent right of an individual to defend himself from hostile attack."<sup>37</sup> Rather, the emphasis was on discretion by the Marines to employ the necessary force to accomplish their mission. General Westmoreland, also concerned about civilian casualties, reiterated his interest on 5 August with an order to all commands for increased emphasis on the subject.

On 18 August, the Marines returned to Cam Ne, this time in greater strength. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines established its command post south of the

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\* In 1977, General Walt remembered that he gave Morley Safer a lift into the Cam Ne area in his personal helicopter on 3 August. According to Walt, he gave permission to the battalion and company commanders "to burn those thatched houses which hid or camouflaged pill boxes," and that Mr. Safer heard him give this permission. Walt considered that the television account of the incident was a misrepresentation of the facts. Gen Lewis W. Walt, Comments on draft MS, dtd 10Aug77 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ward, who in 1965 was the 9th Marines S-2, recalled that in a conversation about the Cam Ne incident with *Newsweek* correspondent Francois Sully in 1968, Sully told him that "the Marines' orders and efforts to avoid antagonizing and to try to win the cooperation of the local populace were misplaced in regard to the people of Cam Ne, and breaking up the group and levelling of the village structures were the only feasible actions short of a military assault." Ward concluded his comments with the observation that the Marines operated in the area south of Da Nang with "salient gaps" in their knowledge "regarding the people" and very often without the cooperation of the local authorities stating, "too often the Marines had to blunder their way through the early critical encounters with the people as well as with the enemy." LtCol Charles Ward, Comments on draft Ms, dtd 27Oct76 (Vietnam Comment File).

Cau Do and prepared to reinforce the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines which sent two of its companies from Duong Son (1) westward into the Cam Ne complex. For two days, the Marines searched and cleared the entire village without encountering difficulties; the Viet Cong were not to be found.

During this period the 9th Marines also took over the new TAOR on the Tiensha Peninsula east of the airbase, extending from Monkey Mountain south to the north face of Marble Mountain. The Seabees had begun construction of an helicopter air facility there for MAG-16 to relieve congestion at the main airbase. Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig had begun to move his battalion into this area at the end of July. By the end of August he had secured the entire peninsula. Ludwig's 1st Battalion then tied to the west with the 2d Battalion whose area extended to the Yen River.

#### *Further Reinforcements*

During July, the Johnson Administration concluded its internal debate concerning the manpower level of U. S. forces in Vietnam and made some far-reaching decisions for the future. Secretary of Defense McNamara decided to visit Vietnam to discuss with the field commanders the various alternatives. The Secretary, accompanied by the outgoing U. S. Ambassador to RVN, Maxwell D. Taylor, and his successor, Henry Cabot Lodge, who was beginning his second tour as U. S. Ambassador, arrived in Saigon on 16 July. During a four-day

period, McNamara and the MACV commander made a complete review of the military situation. Westmoreland stated that the ARVN troops were no longer able to hold critical rural areas and were unable to cope with the VC threat and that it was obvious that unless further American and allied forces were deployed, "there was little chance of arresting the trend." Apparently the MACV commander convinced McNamara, for, on 28 July, President Johnson announced to the American people that the U.S. force level in Vietnam would be raised to 125,000 and that General Westmoreland would receive reinforcements as needed.<sup>38</sup>

During the first week in August, another conference was held in Honolulu, attended by representatives of the Joint Chiefs, CinCPac, and ComUSMACV to determine what units would be deployed and when. The troops to arrive in Vietnam during 1965 were referred to as Phase I forces. For the Marine Corps, the immediate result of the conference was the decision to reinforce III MAF with the 7th Marines regimental headquarters and the remaining two battalions on Okinawa, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The arrival of the 7th Marines at Chu Lai on 14 August was to signal the beginning of the first major Marine offensive against a main force Viet Cong unit.\*

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\* The regimental headquarters and BLT 1/7 landed at Chu Lai on this date. BLT 3/9 arrived at Da Nang and relieved the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines of the responsibility for airfield defense.





PART II  
THE BIG BATTLES



## CHAPTER 5

# STARLITE: The First Big Battle

*Intelligence and Planning—The Battle—The Aftermath*

### *Intelligence and Planning*

Throughout July evidence had accumulated showing a VC buildup in southern I Corps, especially in the area south of Chu Lai. By the 21st, General Westmoreland's intelligence staff, assessing enemy capabilities, stated that the Viet Cong could attack Chu Lai with as many as three regiments. The American command doubted that the enemy was ready to risk such a large concentration of forces against American firepower; a more likely course of action would be a sudden hit-and-run attack against the Marine base in regimental strength.

On 30 July, General Westmoreland told Walt that he expected the Marine commander to undertake larger offensive operations with the South Vietnamese against the enemy at greater distances from his base areas. General Walt reminded Westmoreland that the Marines were still bound by the 6 May Letter of Instruction that restricted III MAF to reserve/reaction missions in support of South Vietnamese units heavily engaged with an enemy force. The MACV commander replied "these restraints were no longer realistic, and invited General Walt to rewrite the instructions, working into them the authority he thought he needed, and promised his approval."<sup>1</sup>

On 6 August, General Walt received official permission to take the offensive against the enemy. With the arrival of the 7th Marines a week later, he prepared to move against the *1st VC Regiment*. In early July, the *1st VC Regiment* had launched a second attack against the hamlet of Ba Gia, 20 miles south of Chu Lai. The garrison had been overrun, causing 130 casualties and the loss of more than 200 weapons, including two 105mm howitzers. After the attack on Ba Gia, American intelligence agencies located the *1st VC Regiment* in the mountains west of the hamlet. Disturbing reports indicated that the enemy regiment was once more on the march.

According to Colonel Leo J. Dulacki, Walt's experienced intelligence officer:

Early in August, we began receiving countless low-level reports from the numerous intelligence collection organizations concerning the movement of the *1st VC Regiment*. The sources for most of these reports were of doubtful reliability and, indeed, many were contradictory, nevertheless, it was decided to plot all of the hundreds of reported movements, regardless of credibility, on a map, and an interesting picture developed. When the many "aberrations" were discounted, it appeared that the *1st VC Regiment* was, in fact, moving towards Chu Lai. Although most of the intelligence experts, including ARVN and the U.S. Army I Corps Advisory Group, discounted such a possibility, I briefed Colonel Edwin Simmons, III MAF G-3, on what appeared to be developing and suggested the consideration, if further indicators developed, of an offensive operation in the area south of Chu Lai.<sup>2\*</sup>

Acting on this intelligence, the 4th Marines conducted a one-battalion operation with the 51st ARVN Regiment in search for the *1st VC Regiment* south of the Tra Bong River. Code-named THUNDERBOLT, the operation lasted for two days, 6-7 August, and extended 7,000 meters south of the river in an area west of Route 1. The ARVN and Marines found little sign of any major VC force in the area and encountered only scattered resistance. In fact, the Marines suffered more from the 110 degree temperature than at the hands of the enemy, sustaining 43 heat casualties and only two wounded. Nevertheless, Colonel James F. McClanahan,\*\* who had relieved Colonel Dupras as commander of the 4th

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\*Both Colonels Dulacki and Simmons had arrived in Vietnam and assumed their new duties in July. Colonel Dulacki, who served in World War II and commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in Korea, had an extensive intelligence background, including two tours with the Defense Intelligence Agency. Colonel Simmons, also a veteran of World War II and Korea, and holder of both the Silver and Bronze Stars, had just finished a tour with the Strategic Plans Branch of the G-3 Division, HQMC.

\*\*Colonel McClanahan was a veteran Marine of nearly 30 years of enlisted and commissioned service. He was commissioned in June 1942 and was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on Guadalcanal. He came to Vietnam after serving as Commanding Officer of Camp H. M. Smith in Hawaii.

Marines on 25 July, remembered that at the time the "operation was considered a successful experiment in command and control."<sup>3</sup>

Eight days after THUNDERBOLT, the allies finally confirmed the location of the *1st VC Regiment*. On 15 August, a deserter from the enemy regiment surrendered to the South Vietnamese. During his interrogation at General Thi's headquarters he revealed that the regiment had established its base in the Van Tuong village complex on the coast, 12 miles south of Chu Lai. It planned to attack the American enclave. The prisoner told his interrogators that the *1st VC Regiment* at Van Tuong consisted of two of its three battalions, the *60th* and *80th*, reinforced by the *52d VC Company* and a company from the *45th Weapons Battalion*, approximately 1,500 men in all. General Thi, who personally questioned the prisoner and believed the man was telling the truth, relayed the information to General Walt. At about the same time, Colonel Dulacki's G-2 section received corroborative information from another source. Convinced of the danger to the airfield, Colonels Dulacki and Simmons advised a spoiling attack in the Van Tuong region.<sup>4</sup>

Agreeing that the situation called for action, General Walt flew to Chu Lai and held a hurried council of war with his senior commanders there: General Karch, who had become the Chu Lai Coordinator on 5 August, Colonel McClanahan of the 4th Marines, and Colonel Oscar F. Peatross, the newly arrived 7th Marines commander.\* According to Peatross, "General Walt laid the situation out rather plainly . . ." The III MAF commander remarked that "General Thi thought this was the best information he's had in the corps area throughout the whole Vietnam War." Two obvious courses were open to the Marines: they could remain within their defenses and wait for the enemy to attack, or they could strike the VC before the enemy was ready to move. The latter course of action meant reducing the defensive forces manning the Chu Lai perimeter, but the arrival of the 7th Marines

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\* See Chapter 8 for the establishment of the Coordinator and ADC Command Group at Chu Lai. Colonel Peatross was a veteran of several amphibious operations during World War II including the Makin Island Raid and Iwo Jima. For his actions on Makin Island, he was awarded the Navy Cross. Colonel Peatross had served previously as a battalion commander under General Walt when the latter commanded the 5th Marines in Korea.

and BLT 1/7 on the 14th made the risk acceptable. Walt told the assembled officers:

At most, all we're going to dig up is two battalions. If we dig up as many as two battalions, we've got to have the amphibious means of making a [landing] and our ultimate action depends upon how we come to grips with this thing.

He then turned to Colonel Peatross, and according to the latter stated, "Pete, you're the only one available." General Walt then returned to Da Nang and made the final decision to go ahead with the operation after further consultations with his staff and, "going to General Westmoreland for permission to carry out the plan."<sup>5</sup>

In a hectic two-day period, the III MAF, division, wing, and 7th Marines staffs assembled forces and prepared the plans for the attack. The concept for the operation, code-named STARLITE,\*\* dictated a two-battalion assault, one battalion to land across the beach and the other to land by helicopter further inland. The division reassigned two battalions previously under the operational control of the 4th Marines to Colonel Peatross as the assault battalions, Lieutenant Colonel Fisher's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Muir's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. General Walt, who wanted a third battalion as a floating reserve, requested permission to use the SLF. Admiral Sharp approved immediately. At the time of the request the amphibious task force was located at Subic Bay, 720 miles away. Based upon its transit time to the operational area, the planners selected 18 August as D-Day.

Colonel Peatross, in the meantime, had borrowed General Walt's helicopter and, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonels Muir and Fisher, made an aerial reconnaissance of the 10-square mile objective area. They saw relatively flat terrain occasionally broken by small wooded knolls and numerous streams. The many hamlets were surrounded by rice paddies and

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\*\* Colonel Don P. Wyckoff, the 3d Marine Division G-3, designated the code name SATELLITE for the operation, but as the division plan was being typed, the electrical generators failed and the typing was completed using candlelight. Inadvertently, the clerk typed STARLITE instead of SATELLITE throughout the document. The next morning the error was discovered, but there was insufficient time to correct the error. Many accounts of the operation have mistakenly spelled the code name for the operation as STARLIGHT. LtCol Richard J. Johnson intvw by Hist&Mus Div, HQMC, dtd 24Mar73 (OralHistColl, Hist&Mus Div, HQMC).



USMC Photo A185826

*A Marine Ontos patrols a beach area during Operation STARLITE. The South Vietnamese fishermen go about their business despite the war.*

dry crop areas. The Marine commanders noted two suitable amphibious landing sites, one beach between two peninsulas northeast of the Van Tuong Complex (Nho Na Bay) and another beach 4,000 meters to the south, north of the coastal hamlet of An Cuong (1).

While airborne, Colonel Peatross and his commanders selected the amphibious assault landing site, as well as the helicopter landing zones (LZs). They chose the more southerly beach, later designated GREEN Beach, for the landing. A force there would block VC avenues of escape to the south. Three LZs, RED, WHITE, and BLUE, were selected four to five miles east of Route 1 and roughly one mile inland from the coast. LZ BLUE, about 2,000 meters west of GREEN Beach, was the southernmost of the landing zones. WHITE was 2,000 meters west-northwest of BLUE, while RED was 2,000 meters north of WHITE. From these positions, the Marines were to move northeast to the South China Sea.

Fortunately for the 7th Marines, the ships of Amphibious Squadron (Phibron) 7, which had brought the regiment to Vietnam, were at Chu Lai unloading BLT 1/7 and Da Nang disembarking BLT 3/9. Colonel Peatross later wrote:

On the evening of 16 August the Amphibious Group Commander, Captain W. [William] R. McKinney, USN, under whose command most of the ships operated, had to

be informed of the operation. Colonel Peatross sent his RLT S-4, Major Floyd J. Johnson, Jr., out to Captain McKinney's flagship to inform him of the operation and to brief him on the plans as we knew them. This was a timely move as one of the ships had just sailed from Chu Lai and was on its way to Hong Kong. Captain McKinney was able to turn this ship around and return it to Chu Lai just in time to make the tight schedule laid out for the earliest possible D-Day.<sup>6</sup>

On the morning of the 17th, McKinney's staff joined the Marine aviation and ground planners ashore and the plans were completed. Lieutenant Colonel Muir's 3d Battalion was to land across GREEN Beach at 0630, 18 August with Companies I and K abreast, K on the right. Company L, the battalion reserve, was to follow as the lead companies swerved to the northwest. The remaining company, Company M, was to make an overland movement from Chu Lai to a ridgeline blocking position in the northern portion of the operations area, four miles northwest of the landing beach and one mile inland from the sea, closing off the VCs' retreat. Soon after H-Hour, UH-34s from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadrons 261 and 361 were to shuttle Fisher's 2d Battalion into the three LZs. The two battalions were to join forces when Company H from LZ BLUE linked up with Company I outside the hamlet of An Cuong (2), 1,800 meters inland from GREEN Beach.