

The Battle for Quang Nam Continues

*Rockets Equal Operations—5th Marines and the Arizona—Securing the Southern and Northern Approaches
Americal Battleground—Operation Oklahoma Hills*

Rockets Equal Operations

As it was standing operating procedure (SOP), both of FMFPac and III MAF, that there be a five-day overlap of commanding generals, Generals Youngdale and Simpson did a lot of talking before the formal change of command. Rather prophetically, General Youngdale told his replacement as Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, that the biggest concern he would have to face when rockets fell on the Da Nang Vital Area, was answering the inevitable question posed by III MAF: "What the hell are you doing about it?" "Well," as General Simpson later recounted, "of course they knew what we were doing about it because we had an SOP which they clearly understood, and we always mounted an operation."¹

The 122mm rocket was an excellent weapon. Using the designated mount and sight from a surveyed position, it was the equivalent of light to medium tube artillery. By 1969, noted General Simpson, "the NVA were firing the 122mm from crossed bamboo sticks. This was adequate for them since the density of the Da Nang complex was such that, for any rocket that got over the surrounding hill mass, a complete 'miss' was next to impossible."²

The psychological damage, and to a minor extent, the physical damage, that rockets could inflict on Da Nang was of major concern. Defense of the Republic's second-largest city and surrounding allied military installations from attack, either by rocket artillery or infantry, was the division's main task. The immediate, and most obvious, response to a rocket attack was counterbattery fire, tapping any number of the division's 178 artillery tubes. But, to prevent the rockets from being launched, daily patrols, numbering 500 or more, were sent out to search the "rocket belt": the great arc, anchored at Hai Van Pass in the north and Marble Mountain in the south with Da Nang at its center, whose maximum and minimum limits corresponded to the maximum and minimum range of an enemy 122mm rocket. In addition, Americal Division IOH observation helicopters swept the area twice daily in search of possible launching sites. A third response was to prevent the rockets and their

crews reaching sites from which an attack could be launched: to move out into the hinterlands and not only sever the enemy's infiltration routes and supply lines, but also destroy his materiel caches and base camps. So mount operations Simpson did.³

Operation Oklahoma Hills

The large mountainous region west of Da Nang, encompassing such well-known areas as Charlie Ridge and Happy Valley, had long been suspected as a region that not only harbored enemy troops, but major base camps and infiltration routes, all of which posed a direct and ever-present threat to the Da Nang Vital Area. Considerable information on those routes had accumulated since October 1968, when the last major Marine operations in the area, Mameluke Thrust and Maui Peak, ended. Defectors and prisoners of war captured during Operation Taylor Common and subsequent operations around Da Nang and throughout the An Hoi basin during *Tet* provided additional information. One such prisoner, the senior captain and temporary commander of the *141st Regiment*, captured by Lieutenant Colonel Quinn's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines during the heavy fighting around Hill 41 on 23 February, furnished intelligence on the major base camps and infiltration routes leading toward Da Nang and An Hoa. During his extensive interrogation, he related that the major supply routes for the *141st NVA Regiment*, and in all probability the *31st Infantry* and *368B Artillery Regiments*, originated far to the west in the Ai Yen area, 20 kilometers east of the Laotian border, and could be traced east along Route 614. At the point where the road divided west of the Song Con, one supply route continued east along 614 into Happy Valley, while the other route began at the meeting of the Song Con and Route 614 and followed the river south to its intersection with the Song Yang at An Dien, eight kilometers northeast of Thuong Duc, and then east to the Song Vu Gia. From there supplies and men were either diverted to Base Area 112 and then into the northern Arizona or north onto Charlie Ridge and into Happy Valley. From the terminus of Route 614 in Happy Valley, the enemy shifted supplies and men to units operating near the Song



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371933

A 2d Battalion, 7th Marines patrol on Charlie Ridge carefully maneuvers through triple-canopied jungle, typical of the terrain found throughout the area of operations.

Tuy Loan, or to other units located in the northeast Charlie Ridge-Sherwood Forest-Worth Ridge area, overlooking Da Nang.⁴

Enemy infiltration and supply routes described by other prisoners of war and ralliers were of a general nature, but two common areas continued to emerge—Charlie Ridge and Happy Valley. Both regions contained not only major enemy supply routes, but also suspected base camps and storage facilities at the terminus of those routes. Both were to become prime targets for the Marines of the 1st Division. As Colonel Robert L. Nichols, who replaced Colonel Beckington as Commanding Officer of the 7th Marines on 7 February noted: “This terrain mass has provided a haven for the enemy in which he could assemble his forces and then institute his infiltration tactic into the Da Nang Vital Area. Of particular concern in recent months has been his tactic of using this infiltration approach to launch rockets into the Da Nang Vital Area.”⁵ Once Task Force Yankee had neutralized Base Area 112 and secured the southern flank of the Thuong Duc corridor as a result of Operation Taylor Common, clearing the hills west of Da Nang and securing both the western approaches to the vital area and northern flank of the Thuong Duc corridor was the next logical step.⁶

First Division Marines would find it difficult operating within the region. Both Charlie Ridge and Worth Ridge were high, narrow ranges, cut by numerous

steep-sided valleys, ravines, and gorges, and covered by multi-canopied jungle, and dense undergrowth. Movement throughout Happy Valley, blanketed by dense underbush and elephant grass seven to ten feet high, likewise would be arduous. The irregular terrain and density of vegetation would thus make foot movement a necessity, but yet impede it. Supporting arms would have to be used sparingly because of the dense overhead cover, and helicopter operations, especially medical evacuations, would have to be restricted due to the lack of suitable landing zones. Although terrain often favored the enemy, in this case, both Marine and NVA soldier would be on equal footing, as Colonel James B. Ord, Jr., noted:

The enemy always has the advantage, as I see it, of operating in the jungle, in the canopy. You only get a point to point contact. You cannot maneuver on a broad front, so you are on a parity with him as far as the infantry is concerned. Since your observation is limited and your fields of fire are limited, it is difficult to make use of supporting arms in which we have a distinct advantage. And the enemy can always break contact and he can always evade. And so this being the case, we are just about equal; we have no advantage.⁷

The initial concept of operations, as outlined by General Simpson, called for two battalions of Nichols' 7th Marines to be helilifted into the southwestern and northwestern portions of the area of operations, one battalion to attack northwest from Hill 52 along Route

4, and the other to attack south from R.C. Ba Na, Hill 467, overlooking Happy Valley. A third battalion was to attack west along the axis of Worth Ridge and Charlie Ridge, placing pressure on the enemy from all directions. As the 7th Marines began planning for the operation, a number of potential problems arose. A landing on R.C. Ba Na, followed by a sweep south from the ridge onto Charlie Ridge would be hazardous and time-consuming due to the rough terrain. In addition, the third battalion would find it difficult to conduct effective search and destroy operations over the broad expanse of terrain formed by Charlie and Worth Ridges. In light of these two problems, Colonel Nichols and his staff presented a revised concept of operations to General Simpson on 27 March, calling for two battalions to attack west along the axis of Worth and Charlie Ridges instead of landing a battalion on R.C. Ba Na. Nichols predicated the revised concept on the assumptions that R.C. Ba Na would act as an effective barrier to north-south movement of enemy troops and that at least two battalions would be necessary to ensure adequate coverage of the two main ridgelines. General Simpson approved the modification to the initial concept, and Nichols proceeded to develop the detailed scheme of maneuver and fire support plan to sustain it.

The final plan of attack into Happy Valley and the surrounding terrain, codenamed Oklahoma Hills, called for the 7th Marines, reinforced, in coordination with the 51st ARVN Regiment, to conduct the phased movement of three battalions into the area of operations, establishing fire support bases and landing zones, and conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations, destroying all enemy forces, caches, and installations. Simultaneously, reconnaissance elements were to conduct screening operations to the north and west, as well as within the area of operations. A fourth Marine battalion would conduct screening operations south of Charlie Ridge, astride Route 4 and the Song Vu Gia, to prevent enemy troops from crossing into the Arizona area and vice versa, while a fifth Marine battalion would be available on two hours' notice as a reaction and exploitation force if needed.

Preparatory operations directly in support of Oklahoma Hills began on 21 March with the advance of Lieutenant Colonel John A. Dowd's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines west from Fire Support Base Rawhide (Hill 65) along Route 4. Assigned the mission of securing the route between Hill 65 and Hill 52, a distance of 10 kilometers, Dowd's Marines also were to establish

a major fire support base, later named Mustang, at the latter site. Early on the morning of the 24th, Company C seized the hill and began local security patrols. The following day, a platoon from Company B and a platoon of engineers from Company C, 1st Engineer Battalion, began sweeping Route 4 of mines and upgrading the roadbed. By noon on the 26th, Hill 52 was secure and the 10-kilometer stretch of Route 4 between Hills 65 and 52 was clear and ready to support the heavy logistical traffic necessary to sustain Mustang. Engineer work on gun positions began on 28 March and by the 30th, Mustang was ready to receive Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, and a platoon of 8-inch howitzers.

It also would be necessary to relieve the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines of their normal responsibility of patrolling the rocket belt west of Da Nang. On the 29th, the 26th Marines assumed responsibility for the area controlled by the two battalions, as Colonel Nichols ordered a number of final preparations for the operation. Among them was the establishment of an automatic retransmission site on R.C. Ba Na to provide adequate communications throughout the area of operations. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines initially provided a security element for the relay station, but as the operation progressed, and various battalions phased out, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines followed by the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines provided this support.

Shortly after sunset on 30 March, Lieutenant Colonel Neil A. Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines departed Hill 10 (FSB Stallion), and began moving on foot into the area of operations. Concurrently, the 3d Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel James O. Allison, who had relieved Lieutenant Colonel Quinn on the 23d, initiated a similar advance to the west from Hill 41. "This was a very unique move," recalled Captain Paul K. Van Riper, Company M's commanding officer, "in that we took the whole company well up into the jungled mountains during the nighttime. We moved out at 2000 and by early the next morning we were up under the canopy and the NVA forces in the area had no idea that we had moved this far and of our present location." As both battalions pushed westward, "searching out base areas, looking for caches, fortifications, any enemy that we could locate and destroying all of the same," Operation Oklahoma Hills began.⁸

Events moved smoothly on the morning of the operation's first day, with all landing zone preparations, delivered by tubes of the 11th Marines, the *Mullinmix* (DD 994), and later *Newport News* (CA 148), com-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

MajGen Ormond R. Simpson, center left, discusses movement by foot into the area of operations by 2d Battalion, 7th Marines with its commanding officer, LtCol Neil A. Nelson.

pleted on schedule. The lift by HMM-165 helicopters of the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment into LZ Hawk (three kilometers northeast of the Thuong Duc CIDG Camp), and the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment into LZ Eagle (three kilometers northwest of Thuong Duc), began at 1100 and was accomplished without incident within an hour. The following morning, Lieutenant Colonel Edward W. Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines (BLT 3/26) assaulted, along with a 4.2-inch mortar battery from 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, into LZ Robin, overlooking Happy Valley. These landings, coupled with the overland movement of the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines on the night of the 30th, completed the introduction of all major allied units into the area of operations.

Confronted with the ever-present problem of helicopter availability, Colonel Nichols deliberately decided to establish fire support bases initially around the periphery, instead of throughout the objective area. Additional bases would be established as the maneuver battalions moved beyond the range of their artillery support, and on prominent terrain features in anticipation of future operations in the area.⁹

Once established, Nelson and Allison's battalions

attacked to the west along Worth and Charlie Ridges, while the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines and the two 51st ARVN Battalions attacked to the southeast and northeast into the high ground. Movement was slow, and as Colonel Nichols related, "very tiring on the troops; the progress was so slow that it became very apparent that there was not a real benefit to be obtained in attempting to maneuver in any basic skirmish-attack formations through the thick jungle canopy. Accordingly, it became the standard practice to restrict movement to the trail networks." Once on the trails, it also became apparent that not more than a platoon could maneuver with any degree of efficiency. Thus, noted Colonel Nichols, "it became the general practice to . . . establish a temporary company base camp and then maneuver with platoons from that company base camp, largely restricting the maneuver to trail networks." Only when searching a specific target area did Marines move "cross-compartment, through the virgin jungle."¹⁰

The capture on 1 April of an enemy soldier and the rallying of another was to have an immediate effect upon the five maneuver battalions. In widely separated engagements, a reconnaissance insert detained

a master sergeant from the *8th Company, 2d Battalion, 141st NVA Regiment*, and Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines captured a warrant officer from the *18th Company* of the *31st NVA Regiment*. Both enemy soldiers identified specific sites within the area of operations where their regimental base camps were located; the master sergeant being most definite in locating his base camp during a helicopter reconnaissance flight. This firm and timely information posed two alternative courses of action: the attacking units could continue their present movement toward the central high ground, conducting a thorough search of draws and ravines within their areas of responsibility; or the maneuvering battalions could advance rapidly toward the base camps, bypassing other suspected camps and caches, in order to quickly exploit the specific intelligence, trapping enemy troops in the camps or, at least, preventing them from evacuating materiel. Colonel Nichols decided to pursue the latter course and directed Lieutenant Colonel Allison and Snelling's battalions to close as rapidly as possible on the area believed to contain the base camp of the *141st Regiment*. Concurrently, he initiated planning for a second phase of the operation in order that all units might reverse their direction of advance, and conduct detailed searches of the areas bypassed.

After completing FSB Rattlesnake (Hill 749), two kilometers southwest of Robin, Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines moved as quickly as terrain and vegetation would permit up the long ridgeline towards Hill 1166 and the base camp of the *141st*. As Company I, with L in trace, swept up the ridge using the enemy's trail network, small groups of NVA soldiers repeatedly attempted to slow the Marines' advance without success.

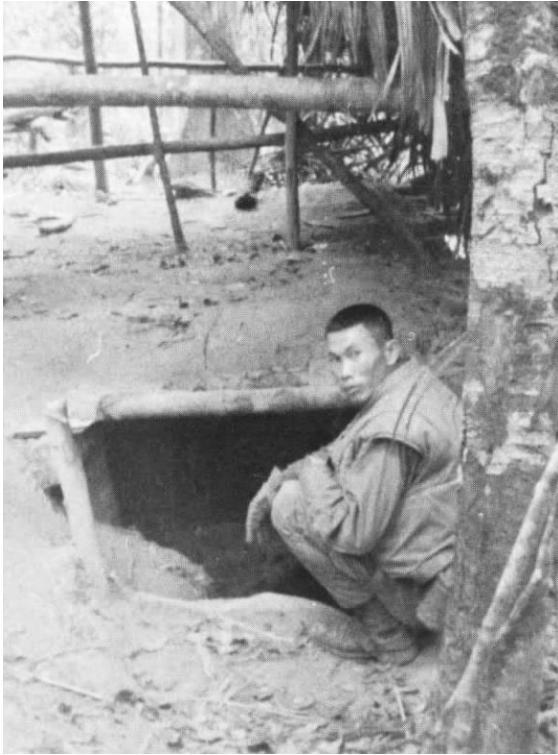
To the northeast, Allison's battalion accelerated its movement to the west along Charlie Ridge in an effort to reach the enemy base camp while it was still occupied. At the same time, Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines reached the western extreme of its 105mm howitzer coverage from FSB Stallion, and was forced to halt and begin construction of FSB Buckskin (Hill 502) to support its move further west.

By late afternoon on 7 April, Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines reached its intermediate objective, Hill 1062, with Company L a kilometer behind. Simultaneously, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines reached its objective, Hill 1166, with Company L not far to the rear. The forward elements of both battalions continued to close on the deep ravine below both objectives, believed to contain the base camp of the *141st*. At first light on the 8th, it appeared that

LtCol Edward W. Snelling's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines boards a Marine CH-46 helicopter, as elements of the Special Landing Force were called upon to support operations ashore.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374209





Courtesy of Col Fred T. Fagan, Jr.

A Kit Carson Scout pauses at the entrance to a tunnel within the base camp of the 141st NVA Regiment, that led to an extensive underground medical facility.

Snelling's Marines were in the best position to close rapidly on the main objective. Consequently, Lieutenant Colonel Snelling assumed operational control of Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and led the battalion on a coordinated attack on the enemy base area.

As Company L moved down the ravine, its lead element uncovered the first of what were to be many enemy base camps. Advancing into the camp area, subsequently identified as the *Q-79 Dispensary*, they observed and engaged approximately 20 North Vietnamese soldiers attempting to flee to the southwest. The camp, like those later discovered, was "cleverly put together," Colonel Nichols noted:

It was not uncommon to go into a bunker which was reinforced with logs, eight to 15 inches of earth, another layer of logs, well-covered, . . . and find in turn a trap door and a subterranean space below that, dug into the earth, providing additional individual protection. These generally would accommodate anywhere from four to ten enemy soldiers, and in some instances tunnel complexes connecting these, running very extensively throughout the camp. Very careful preparations were made to ensure that cook houses were well-camouflaged and that smoke conduits to abort any evidence

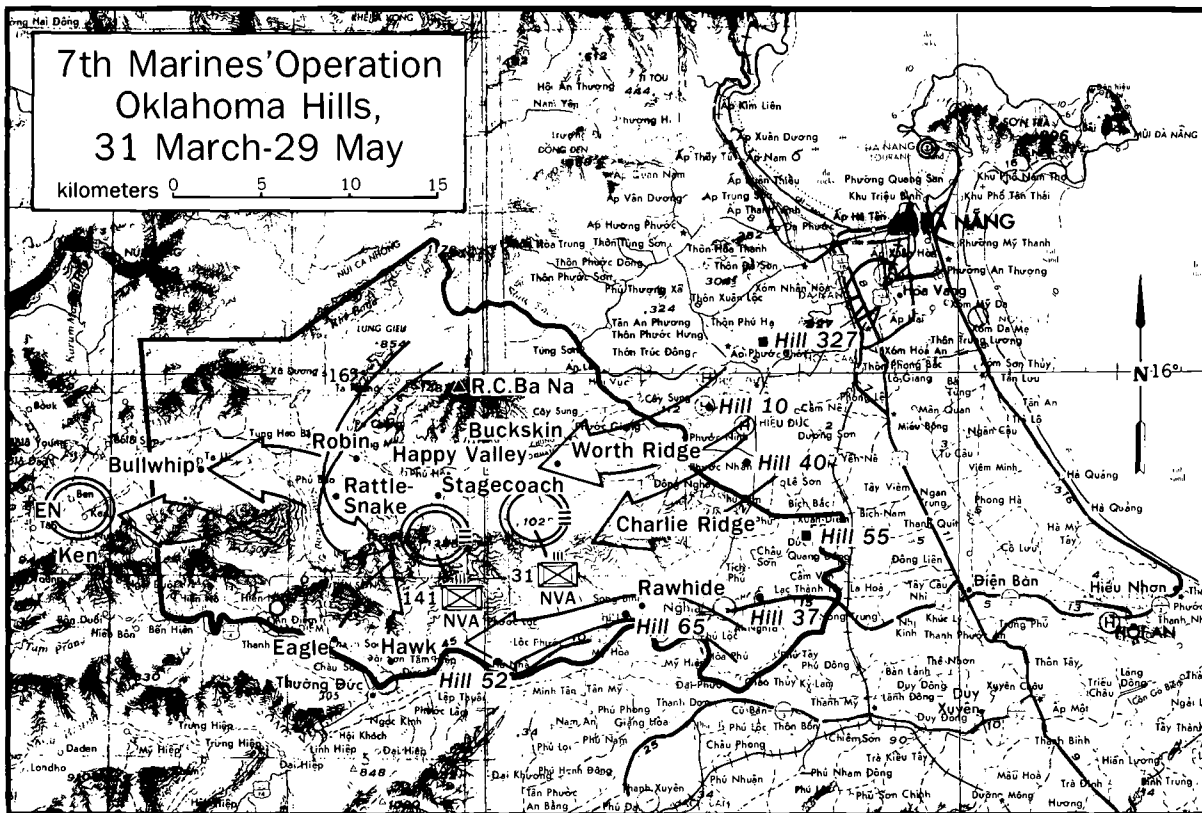
of smoke from coming up through the jungle had been laid throughout."¹¹

The following day, Companies I and L, on line with squads in column, swept deeper into the complex from the north and west, while Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines remained above, on Hill 943, prepared to block any enemy escape to the south. Movement during the next several days was exceedingly slow due to numerous skirmishes with small bands of enemy soldiers, the oppressive heat, rugged terrain, and the number of separate camps to be searched.

While Lieutenant Colonels Allison and Snelling's battalions combed the base camp of the *141st*, Lieutenant Colonel Nelson's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued to search the valley floor north of Worth Ridge. Once completed, Nelson's Marines then moved up the ridge toward Hill 745, into an area suspected to harbor the base camp of the *31st Regiment*, as revealed in the interrogation of the warrant officer captured on 1 April. On the 11th, Company E discovered the base camp, approximately four kilometers southwest of FSB Buckskin. As the lead platoon entered, it received a burst of machine gun fire as the residents departed. Initial reports indicated the camp to be the largest yet discovered, containing well in excess of 200 structures.

The next several days represented a period of relative stability in the movement of all major units, each having essentially reached its final objective. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued its search of the *31st NVA* base camp, engaging small pockets of tenacious defenders. Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion occupied Hills 1235 and 1062 and conducted local patrols which produced no significant results, and Snelling's Marines continued to sweep through the base camp of the *141st Regiment*, discovering a massive network of interconnected enemy facilities. By 15 April, engagements with enemy forces remaining within the areas assigned to the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 26th Marines had evaporated, while the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines encountered a number of small groups of enemy contesting its advance.

Materially supporting the operation throughout this period, as Marines worked deep under the canopy, proved to be a challenge. Tiny holes were cut in the jungle into which skillful Marine helicopter pilots lowered supplies and extracted those in need of medical attention. On at least one occasion, the pilots brought a surprise—ice cream and beer packed in large styrofoam containers, previously used to ship aviation ordnance. "You can imagine," Colonel Nichols report-



See Reference Map, Sections 25-27

ed, "the shouts of joy from some weary Marines who received this surprise."¹²

On 19 April, Nichols directed Nelson's Marines to withdraw to Hills 785 and 502 (FSB Buckskin) in preparation for a helilift out of the area of operations, since the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines was to rejoin the Special Landing Force, and a battalion would be needed to cover that portion of the vacated Da Nang TAOR. With the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' withdrawal, coordination was made with the 51st ARVN Regiment in order that a relief in place might be conducted between Nelson's battalion and a battalion of that regiment. Two days later, in a combined effort involving Marine and Vietnamese helicopters, Nelson's Marines and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines withdrew and were replaced by the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and a supporting 105mm howitzer battery. The ARVN battalion assumed a mission similar to that of 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; one company protecting the battery on Buckskin, while the remainder of the battalion patrolled the surrounding terrain.

On the southern edge of the area of operations, Dowd's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines maintained patrols along the Song Vu Gia, and provided security for the

fire support bases on Hills 52 and 65, while securing Route 4, ensuring its viability as a main supply route. Major emphasis continued to be placed on interdicting enemy movement between Charlie Ridge and the northern Arizona area. Among the assigned tasks was the setting of daily ambushes at known river crossings. This tactic produced results on the night of 13 April when a platoon from Company B, set in along the northern bank of the river, observed 30 NVA soldiers entering the water from the opposite bank. The platoon withheld its fire until the enemy had almost crossed before releasing a heavy volume of small arms and machine gun fire, catching 14 NVA soldiers in the water.

With the relief of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines by 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, Operation Oklahoma Hills shifted into a second phase. Instead of the specific objectives which characterized phase one, battalions were now given general zones and ordered to conduct coordinated and systematic searches to destroy enemy forces, uncover caches and installations, and at the same time construct helicopter landing zones and a series of mutually supporting fire bases.

In anticipation of phase two, Colonel Nichols directed Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines to move the

four kilometers eastward from Hill 1062 to Hill 866 on foot, and there construct FSB Longhorn. Arriving at midday on 20 April, the company began local search operations in the nearby draws and ravines while providing security and assistance for the engineers constructing the base. On the 25th, with Longhorn completed but unoccupied, Company L rejoined the battalion in a general sweep to the east.

Lieutenant Colonel Allison's Marines, during the second phase of Operation Oklahoma Hills, conducted a detailed and methodical search of their assigned zone from west to east, retracing their original move along Charlie Ridge. While Company L searched areas near FSB Longhorn, Companies I and M moved from Hill 1235, three kilometers to the southeast, searching ravines as they progressed on foot. On 24 April, Company I helilifted four kilometers further to the northeast, to Hill 722, and Company M and the battalion command group moved by helicopter an equal distance, but further north. Spaced two kilometers apart, both units began a thorough search of the new areas. The following day, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines released Company K which rejoined its battalion. Engagements with enemy forces within the zone assigned to Allison's battalion were almost nonexistent during the second phase of the operation.

The 3d Battalion, 26th Marines continued search operations within its primary objective area assigned during the first phase of Operation Oklahoma Hills; it being necessary for the battalion to ensure that all base camps in the vicinity of the 141st were discovered and destroyed. With the release of Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, Company M, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines concentrated on conducting combat patrols in the draws and ravines near FSB Rattlesnake, while Company K conducted extensive patrol and search operations from Hill 1066. Contact with small groups of enemy troops remained sporadic, consisting of harassing sniper and mortar fire within the North Vietnamese camp complex. Toward the end of April, the battalion made preparation to withdraw, and on 2 May Companies K and L, with their supporting artillery, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, lifted out of the area of operations. The following day, a platoon from Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines moved into Rattlesnake and then pushed southwest toward Hill 1166 to secure a landing zone for the remainder of the company. Four tubes from Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines lifted from Mustang to Rattlesnake to provide 3d Battalion, 7th Marines with



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Infantrymen of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines move cautiously across a small enemy bridge through an area containing the base camp of the 31st NVA Regiment.

direct artillery support, and by nightfall, as the remaining company of Lieutenant Colonel Snelling's command withdrew, the area was turned over to Allison's Marines.

The area assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion witnessed considerable troop realignment and enemy activity during the second phase of Oklahoma Hills. In standby reserve since the operation began, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Bulger's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines was called upon to conduct a search and clear operation south of Camp Muir (Hill 55), an area void of friendly forces since the end of March. The operation, which began on 26 April, was the first step for the battalion in assuming responsibility for the eastern portion of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines' area, enabling Dowd's Marines to move west and begin further work on Route 4. In addition, the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, operating above Thuong Duc in an area northwest of Dowd's battalion, withdrew on 1 May, leaving a void on the western flank.

In coordination with the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines,

or alone, Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's men conducted numerous ambushes in the low ground at the base of Charlie Ridge and along the Song Vu Gia in the continuing effort to prevent the north-south movement of enemy forces. Early on the afternoon of 21 April, intelligence sources reported the movement of enemy troops south of the Song Vu Gia, in the Arizona. The mission of the concentrated enemy force was unknown, but suspected to be an attack on friendly forces and outposts north of the river, or to sever Route 4 between Mustang and Hill 65.

After assembling and assessing the intelligence reports, First Lieutenant William L. Culp, the battalion S-2, alerted the patrols and ambushes established by Companies B, C, and D of possible enemy movement south of the river. Shortly after dark on the 21st, patrols from Captain Joseph M. A. Romero's Company C reported sighting a number of North Vietnamese troops on the southern bank of the river, who appeared to be moving from west to east. Company B, under Captain James W. Huffman, Jr., and elements of Company D, led by Captain Brian J. Fagan, located

in heavy hedgerows skirting the water's edge, were alerted, but instructed not to fire due to the lack of information concerning the location of the enemy's main forces. At 1945, the 2d Squad, 2d Platoon, Company B observed seven NVA soldiers on a sandbar directly opposite its ambush site, located near Ban Tan (1). Approximately 1,000 meters in length and 200 meters in width, the sandbar was 3,000 meters east of the earlier sighting by Romero's company. Based on the information provided by Company C, Huffman instructed his Marines to withhold their fire, even if the small group should attempt to cross the river, while preparing to interdict the sandbar with organic and supporting arms. A second squad, located in the same area, moved to reinforce the already positioned ambush, and Huffman's 3d platoon, located 600 meters to the west, was ordered to set up a 106mm recoilless rifle and a .30-caliber machine gun so as to direct enfilade fire along the sandbar in front of the two squads. Direct and general support artillery batteries plotted fires to the south and southwest on other possible crossing sites, and along avenues of approach and es-

Despite an oftentimes abundance of rations, Marines frequently foraged off the land, as in this case where a group of Marines prepare to roast and eat several snakes.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A371941

A 1st Battalion, 7th Marines machine gunner and his assistant, in the continuing effort to secure Route 4 to Thuong Duc, assault a hut from which they had received enemy fire.

cape. In addition, the companies alerted a reconnaissance team located south of the river to the situation and instructed it to keep the area under observation.

At 2025, Huffman's ambush lost sight of the original seven, but continued to wait. About 30 minutes later, a large enemy force, divided into several groups of 40 or more, suddenly emerged from the underbrush along the southern bank of the river and took up positions on the sandbar previously occupied by the seven. Carrying small boats, the NVA force moved to the water's edge and began crossing. Using starlight scopes, Huffman's Marines watched as the NVA placed 17 boats into the water; each contained three to five troops guided by two or three wading soldiers. An additional group of 25 brought up the rear.

As the craft approached the center of the river, Huffman called for illumination and as they passed mid-stream, Company B opened up with all the organic and supporting arms at its command. During the ensuing ambush, elements of Companies C and D moved to the flanks and rear of Huffman's company in order to assist if necessary.

Caught completely by surprise, the enemy scattered. The 25 composing the rear guard continued to cross,

while others broke and ran for cover, dragging the dead and wounded. Huffman's Marines caught the troops in the river with small arms and 81mm mortar fire, while the preplanned artillery barrage cut down those running south. At the height of the ambush, Company B reported 150 to 200 troops attempting to cross, and of that number, 57 were later found floating in the water or scattered along the opposite shore. Unfortunately, illumination was not continuous throughout the night, and the enemy was successful in removing a majority of the dead and wounded.

In order to exploit the ambush and ensure the integrity of Route 4, Huffman requested tanks and LVTs. During the remaining hours of darkness, Romero and Fagan's companies advanced to relieve Huffman's Marines, who began preparation for a river crossing at first light the following morning. Artillery fire continued throughout the night, while the tanks, when they arrived, were placed along the northern shore, their tubes directed at the opposite bank.

Shortly after dawn, Marine fixed-wing aircraft struck the treeline south of the sandbar, and at 0930 Company B boarded the LVTs and, under cover of supporting arms, crossed the river and began a sweep of the

southern shore. Once on the opposite shore, Huffman's men found 14 more bodies, clad in new uniforms and equipment. Although Marines of Company B counted less than 100 bodies, they estimated that the actual number of enemy killed was much higher. Two Marines received minor wounds during the successful blocking ambush on the Song Vu Gia.

The large enemy crossing of the Vu Gia on the night of the 21st confirmed numerous intelligence reports received during April, indicating a strong enemy presence south of the river, in the northern Arizona area. During this period, reconnaissance teams and 1st Battalion patrols made 14 separate sightings. Reacting to the threat against Mustang, Hill 65, and Route 4, the battalion planned a quick thrust south of the river into the Arizona to find and destroy the enemy forces. On the 29th, the 5th Marines granted the 7th Marines a seven-kilometer-wide by two-kilometer-deep area of operations extension into the northern Arizona, south of the Song Vu Gia.

That night, Huffman and Fagan's companies and the battalion command group crossed the river opposite the village of My Hoa and, at first light, began to attack east-southeast when Company B, on the right flank, became heavily engaged. The remaining attack force immediately swung to the northwest toward the river, assaulting into an estimated two NVA compa-

nies. Fighting was fierce as the enemy directed heavy small arms and mortar fire at Dowd's advancing Marines. After again reaching the river, the two companies turned left and continued the attack to the southwest along the shore. Company A, deployed along the northern bank of the Song Vu Gia as a reserve force, maintained its assigned blocking positions. Both Companies B and D continued their attack throughout the day and into the next, fighting through a series of hedgerows and treelines, supported by artillery, air, and CS gas.

On the morning of 1 May, heavy enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire drove off helicopters attempting to resupply the two companies, forcing Company A to resupply the companies by LVT. The resupply complete, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, then operating to the northeast of Liberty Bridge, moved overland by truck and amphibious vehicles, made a river crossing, and established blocking positions to the west of Dowd's Marines, near the village of Minh Tan.

While Bulger's Marines moved toward the Song Vu Gia, elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines resumed the attack to the west, meeting heavy resistance from each enemy-infested treeline, and succeeded in covering only 200 meters. By late afternoon, the 3d Battalion had crossed the river and turned east, attacking toward Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion.

Capt James W. Huffman, Jr., takes time to enjoy a bath. The "tub" was one of several boats captured by his Marines, who caught close to 200 enemy troops crossing the Song Vu Gia.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



Darkness found the two battalions one kilometer apart.

During the night, the two battalions made preparations for the next day's attack. The mutually agreed upon plan called for Dowd's Marines to hold their position, while Bulger's Marines drove to the east. Once the 3d Battalion closed with the 1st, Dowd's battalion was to turn about and both battalions were to attack to the east-northeast, destroying enemy forces suspected to be east of Dowd's position.

At 0600 on 2 May, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines began its drive to the east toward the 1st Battalion. The attack proceeded as planned without contact, and Bulger's Marines closed with Dowd's about midday. Both battalions then began a methodical drive to the east-northeast, prepping each successive treeline with artillery as they moved. Both battalions reached the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia by late afternoon, and by dark had crossed the river without incident. The four-day, two-battalion incursion into the northern Arizona cost the North Vietnamese at least 60 killed, and the Marines nine dead and 60 wounded.

On 3 May, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines began operations along Route 4 to the west of Hill 52. To facilitate the move, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines assumed responsibility for the eastern portion of the 1st Battalion's TAOR, enabling Dowd's battalion to shift its attention west toward Thuong Duc. Concurrently, the 1st Engineer Battalion began the long-awaited improvement of Route 4 from Hill 52 to Thuong Duc, while elements of the 7th Engineer Battalion began reconstruction of the bridge at the CIDG Camp. Lieutenant Colonel Dowd's battalion assumed responsibility for the security of both engineer efforts; Company C was to occupy the high ground north of Route 4 and Thuong Duc, while Company A deployed along Route 4 to provide close security. The remainder of the battalion continued to provide security for FSB Mustang and Route 4 east to Hill 65. Dowd's Marines maintained these general deployments until 9 May, by which time both Route 4 and Thuong Duc Bridge had been upgraded and were in use by the local Vietnamese. On 9th, the 1st Battalion shifted companies to the east, relieving the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which returned to the operational control of the 1st Marines the following day. With the departure of Bulger's Marines, Dowd's battalion reassumed its originally assigned mission of providing blocking forces along the Song Vu Gia and security for FSB Mustang and Route 4.

Phase three of Oklahoma Hills found one ARVN

battalion, 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, and one Marine battalion, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, the only units remaining within the area encompassing Charlie and Worth Ridges. While the South Vietnamese conducted operations in the northeastern portion of the area of operations, around Hills 785 and 502 (FSB Buckskin), the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines continued searching the remainder of the high ground. The concept of maneuver during the third phase was for Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion to conduct widespread operations throughout the area in order to establish contact with the enemy, believed to have reentered. Consequently, when Company K returned after a period of rehabilitation on 3 May, it lifted onto Hill 1166, within striking distance of the *141st Regiment's* base camp. The following day, Company L joined K around Hill 1166 and began patrolling the high ground to the east, while Company K advanced southeast into the enemy complex. The remainder of the battalion provided security for the direct support artillery battery at Rattlesnake.

Reconnaissance teams operating along the western and northwestern periphery of the area of operations reported not only an increase in the number of enemy sighted, but also an increase in the number of small engagements. This rise in enemy activity during early May provided the catalyst for inserting Company I along the Song Tan Khong, west of Happy Valley on the 6th. Lieutenant Colonel Allison directed the company to land at LZ Dry Gulch, conduct a reconnaissance-in-force, and then advance south to the high ground, providing security for the construction of FSB Bullwhip, designed to project a 7th Marines presence further west. In a similar move three days later, Company L helilifted from Hill 1166 to Rattlesnake, relieving Company M, which assaulted into the northern portion of the area of operations, eight kilometers north of Rattlesnake, and began to search north of Happy Valley. This move, like that of Company I, was in direct response to the recent reconnaissance reports indicating an enemy presence in the area.

Events in the Da Nang TAOR again dictated the loss of another unit from the operation due to the need for increased security in the area then patrolled by the 26th Marines. On the morning of 12 May, Company I pulled out of Bullwhip, where it had operated for six days, and returned to Hill 10, ten kilometers southeast of Da Nang. To replace Company I, Allison shifted a platoon from Company L to the western fire support base from Rattlesnake.



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A Marine with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, grenade launcher in hand, pauses for a rest outside a partially destroyed temple in the village of Ban Tân (1), south of Route 4.

The period between 12 and 20 May was one of relative stability as Company M continued to conduct reconnaissance-in-force operations north of Happy Valley, while Companies K and L searched the base camp of the 141st and surrounding hills. At the same time, the 7th Marines began preparations for yet another shift westward, specifically, an assault into the Ken Valley. The valley, southwest of Bullwhip, had long been mentioned in prisoner interrogations as a main arms and ammunition storage facility. Prisoners reported making trips to the area to pick up 140mm and 122mm rockets, which would eventually be launched at Da Nang. With the establishment of a widespread system of fire support bases during Oklahoma Hills, an assault into the Ken Valley was now possible.

Between 18 and 20 May planning proceeded for the operation; coordination was carried out with the 51st ARVN Regiment and arrangements made for the use of the regiment's reconnaissance company. Attached to the company would be a Vietnamese-speaking Marine officer, an artillery forward observer team, and a helicopter support team from the 3d Battalion. Companies L and M plus the battalion command group were to make the assault. On 20 May, Company K as-

sumed responsibility for securing both Rattlesnake and Bullwhip, and a provisional battery of four 105mm howitzers helilifted into the westernmost fire support base.

At 0930 on the 21st, Company L boarded CH-53s at Rattlesnake, and then assaulted into the valley. Following the company into the objective area were the 51st ARVN Reconnaissance Company and Company M. From the several landing zones, Company L began reconnaissance-in-force operations to the northeast, while the ARVN reconnaissance company advanced to the southeast and Company M conducted search operations to the southwest. Over the next five days, the three companies conducted a thorough search of the valley with little contact. Evidence of enemy presence in the area proved scarce, and the companies engaged NVA troops only on two occasions with minor results; they discovered no supply facilities or caches. As a result, on 25 May, all units withdrew by helicopter.

With the completion of operations in the Ken Valley, Lieutenant Colonel Allison's battalion command group and Companies K and L lifted to Hill 785 to assist the 2d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment in the

final destruction of the *31st NVA Regiment* base camp. The effort continued until the withdrawal of the ARVN battalion on the 26th, and that of the two Marine companies on the 28th. Company M, following operations in the Ken, returned to Rattlesnake and began the destruction of the fire support base. Battery G, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines withdrew from Rattlesnake on the 28th, followed by Company M the next day. With the evacuation of all units, Operation Oklahoma Hills came to an end.

Although the enemy had avoided major confrontation, Marines of the 7th and 26th Regiments, in coordination with troops of the 51st ARVN Regiment, drove him from his base camps, destroying the sanctity of Charlie Ridge and inflicting a total of 596 casualties. "Had he chosen to fight," noted Colonel Nichols, "hold his position and defend, . . . he could have done so and levied a very severe price on us in our efforts to take it."¹³ "The relatively low level of enemy initiated attacks from the southwest against the Da Nang Vital Area" since the end of May, continued Colonel Nichols, "must in part be attributed to the disruptive effect of Operation Oklahoma Hills." As the city and its military installations would continue to be of prime importance, he suggested that "similar operations be conducted into this area periodically in the future."¹⁴

Operations in the rough terrain and heavy vegetation took its toll on the Marines. Forty-four lost their lives and another 439 received wounds requiring medical evacuation. The number of nonbattle casualties reported, a figure usually forgotten, was high during Operation Oklahoma Hills, exceeding the number of those wounded in action. A total of 456 nonbattle injuries occurred, most, if not all, attributable to the rugged, often slippery terrain and thick jungle vegetation. These injuries consisted of broken bones, sprains, and lacerations, of which a majority were sustained during the first two weeks of the operation as units maneuvered into the area and began construction of the needed fire support bases; 93 percent of the casualties returned to duty within six weeks.

5th Marines and the Arizona

With the termination of Operation Taylor Common and the passing of direct control of Task Force Yankee, under Brigadier General Samuel Jaskilka, to the 1st Marine Division on 8 March, Colonel Ord's 5th Marines returned to the Arizona and An Hoa basin and normal operations designed to provide security for allied military installations and the South Vietnamese

industrial complex, the pacification effort, and the approaching rice harvest. In the eastern portion of Duc Duc and western section of Duy Xuyen Districts, Lieutenant Colonel Richard F. Daley's 1st Battalion continued operations begun during Taylor Common, concentrating its efforts on protecting Liberty Bridge and the nearby Seabee battalion compound, and securing Liberty Road between the bridge and An Hoa Combat Base. Daley's Marines, in seemingly endless patrols, ambushes, and sweeps along the road and near the bridge, endeavored to blunt the enemy's attempts at counteracting the growing allied presence in the area. In mid-March it was learned that the primary target of the enemy effort would be Liberty Bridge, at that time well on its way toward completion. At approximately 0245, under cover of mortar and rocket fire, an estimated battalion of NVA launched a coordinated attack against the bridge and then against 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and Battery D, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines positions at Phu Lac (6), south of the bridge.

Using flamethrowers, satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes, and AK47 fire, the enemy penetrated both the infantry and battery positions, methodically destroying most above-ground structures and inflicting a number of casualties.¹⁵ A reaction force, hastily organized, halted further enemy penetration and prevented a link-up of the attacking forces within the perimeter. Confused and disorganized, the enemy then attempted to withdraw and were destroyed, as Captain Wayne A. Babb, commanding officer of Battery D, later noted:

The reaction group, growing in strength and without the previous uncertainty and confusion caused by the violent enemy assault, was everywhere, emphasizing the destruction of enemy in ammunition bunkers. The battalion command post to the east had effectively contained the enemy forces located there and had further canalized them into the mess hall complex. Here, the remaining enemy within the battalion command were destroyed.¹⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Daley's Marines killed over 75 of the enemy attackers, while sustaining 16 casualties.¹⁷

As with Liberty Bridge, the enemy maintained constant pressure against An Hoa Combat Base, defended by elements of Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Atkinson's 3d Battalion, primarily employing attacks by fire rather than attempting an all-out infantry attack. During the month, the base received some 430 rounds of mixed rocket, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire, far more than reported during any month since III MAF established the position in April 1966. The enemy effort achieved little effect other than harassment,



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Aerial view of strategic Liberty Bridge under reconstruction by Seabees of the 3d Naval Construction Brigade shows, in the center, the temporary vehicle ferry, and to the left, guarding the bridge's southern approach, the 5th Marines' compound at Phu Lac (6).

as his gunnery was not distinguished by a marked degree of accuracy.

Throughout the remainder of the 5th Marines area of operations, east of An Hoa in the Phu Nhuans, the 2d Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple until 14 March when relieved by Lieutenant Colonel James H. Higgins, continued land-clearing operations. Employing T18 bulldozers and an Eimco tractor with an attached Rome plow, engineers with the battalion concentrated on clearing treelines, trenches, bunkers, and fortifications, in an effort to reduce the number of enemy harboring sites. Although engagements with enemy units were few, Higgins' Marines discovered and disarmed numerous surprise firing devices before they could do their damage. Later in the month, the battalion crossed the Song Thu Bon into the Arizona and began search and clear operations to the west.

In response to intelligence information garnered from captured documents exhorting enemy units to step up the campaign to replenish diminished rice stocks, the 5th Marines initiated Operation Muskogee Meadow on 7 April, a combined search and clear and rice-denial operation in the fertile An Hoa basin. Expanding upon techniques developed during the Golden Fleece operations of 1966, the Marines coordinated their search and clear efforts with the rice harvest,

cooperating closely with district officials involved, in this instance with those of Duc Duc and Duy Xuyen.

While division reconnaissance teams maintained a screen along the southern and western approaches into the area, Colonel William J. Zaro's three battalions ranged across the basin's lowlands.* The Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Daley's battalion were given the task of providing security for the Vietnamese rice harvesters of Duy Xuyen District, and transporting the rice, once harvested. The 2d Battalion performed a similar task within the Arizona, while the 3d Battalion secured the rice harvest of Phu Nhuan and Thu Don Districts, south of the Song Thu Bon. Generally, both NVA and VC forces avoided Zaro's Marines; however, during a sweep of the Arizona, three of Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' companies engaged a large enemy force on the 13th, five kilometers north of An Hoa.

Company E, advancing toward blocking positions established by Companies G and H, flushed an estimated company of NVA out of hiding sites on the morning of the 13th and pushed it toward Company H. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, then engaged in Operation Oklahoma Hills, supported the

*A Texan by birth and former Chief of Staff, Task Force Yankee, Colonel William J. Zaro replaced Colonel Ord as Commanding Officer, 5th Marines on 23 March 1969.

action from positions across the Song Vu Gia to the north, as did elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. All three of Higgins' companies remained engaged until darkness, when units of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 1st Marines ambushed the enemy company attempting to cross the river, killing 14 troops. At daybreak on the 14th, Company E closed the trap, encountering only sporadic resistance. Results of the combined 1st, 5th, and 7th Marines engagement were over 100 NVA killed and a considerable number of weapons captured, including seven individual rifles, a 12.7mm antiaircraft machine gun, and a short-range rocket launcher.¹⁸

Operation Muskogee Meadow ended on the 20th with the successful conclusion of the rice harvest, which added in excess of 171 tons to South Vietnamese storage bins. In comparing the two district harvests, security operations were more successful in Duy Xuyen than in Duc Duc. Under the watchful eyes of Zaro's Marines, Vietnamese farmers harvested 271,150 pounds in Duy Xuyen District against only 67,600 pounds in Duc Duc; unharvested rice was napalmed to prevent it falling into enemy hands.¹⁹ The reason for the wide variance in harvested rice between the two districts, was due, as Colonel Zaro noted, to Duc Duc District officials, whose "planning began late, and the Duc Duc plans were neither well-thought-out nor well-executed," nor were they coordinated with 5th Marine units.²⁰ Despite the shortfall, both allied and South Vietnamese officials considered the harvest operations highly successful.

Combat action by Marines of Colonel Zaro's regiment in the An Hoa basin during May centered on the increased use of small unit patrols and ambushes along that well-used and preferred approach to Da Nang. With the end of Operation Muskogee Meadow, the regiment retained responsibility for a majority of the basin, including the Arizona, west and north of An Hoa Combat Base, across the Song Thu Bon. Deploying companies independently, Zaro saturated the area with platoon- and squad-size patrols and cordons. In one such cordon on 2 May, Company B, 1st Battalion and Company M, 3d Battalion joined in a well-concealed and skillfully executed night movement on the La Thap village complex, south of Liberty Bridge. Approaching the village from all directions, the company caught the La Trap Village guerrilla force, killing 36 of the enemy and capturing 14 prisoners and 18 weapons.

A sharp rise in the tempo of enemy activity in the Arizona during the first week of May, coupled with in-

formation gleaned from various intelligence sources suggested that one NVA battalion and elements of an undetermined number of other enemy units were using the northeastern portion of the area as a staging point for attacks on Marine installations both north and east of the Song Vu Gia. This intelligence information was to force an immediate shift from independent small unit operations to a regimentally controlled, five-company operation.

Following a careful review of the intelligence estimates, Colonel Zaro directed that a plan of attack into the northern Arizona be formulated. Drafted by Lieutenant Colonel Higgins, the scheme to destroy enemy troops in the area called for three of his companies to sweep from southwest Arizona into blocking positions established by two companies of 1st Battalion in the northeast Arizona. The sweeping companies would then turn north and attack toward the Song Vu Gia where elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, in blocking positions on the north bank of the river, would cut off the enemy's escape.

All units involved in the operation moved to their attack positions prior to first light on 9 May. Designated to attack east and then north, Companies E, F, and H, accompanied by the battalion command group and a heavy section of tanks took up positions just north of the Song Thu Bon, following a deceptive move to the east as if to vacate the central and western portions of the Arizona. Also on the night of 8 May, Companies A and D began their night advance from the battalion command post at Liberty Bridge to prearranged blocking positions. By 0200 on the morning of the 9th, Company D had established a three-platoon block on Football Island, with Company A to the north, forming a two-company block in eastern Arizona.

At 0645, a tower lookout at Liberty Bridge spotted approximately 200 enemy troops moving to the north, apparently flushed out by the maneuvering companies. Within an hour, the enemy force had grown in size and split into two groups of about 200 each, one moving to the northeast and the other to the northwest. Subsequently, both groups broke into smaller units which were joined by additional enemy forces.

Preceded by alternating artillery fires and napalm drops by F-4 Phantoms, Companies E, F, and H began their attack shortly after dawn. As each company took a series of objectives, supporting arms fire was shifted from one to another with the intention of

softening the new objective and inflicting heavy casualties on the retreating enemy troops. As the intensity of the operation increased, Colonel Zaro, with a hastily assembled command group, moved to a vantage point near Liberty Bridge in order to better control the commitment of other units of the regiment.²¹ During the day's battle, the carefully coordinated Marine ground assault and air attack not only surprised the enemy, but also sent him reeling into the guns of one Marine unit after another, as First Lieutenant Victor V. Ashford reported:

As the friendly elements began their push, the cowpokes [air controllers] virtually took over completely all coordination of supporting arms. They called in continuous artillery barrages in front of the friendly elements while they were on the move, and at the same time the cowpokes were running continuous air strikes to the north, pushing the enemy into a disorganized retreat toward our ground units. Information from POWs indicated that the enemy communications structure broke down quickly under the hundreds of tons of ordnance dropped on them and this apparently resulted in a chaotic and a completely disorganized enemy withdrawal in all directions As the enemy broke down into groups of five to twenty, the cowpokes kept all friendly elements advised of their movements, resulting in what must be called a "turkey shoot" as the day wore on.²²

By 1800, Companies E, F, and H, with the assistance

of Companies G and K, brought in during the day by amphibian vehicles and helicopters from Liberty Bridge, had established a cordon anchored on the southern bank of the Song Vu Gia, encompassing the My Hoa village complex.

On the morning of the 10th, following an evening during which the enemy probed but did not penetrate the positions of all four companies on the cordon, the companies renewed the assault by sweeping through the cordon and destroying or capturing the remaining enemy troops. Again, air observers played a key role as forward air controller Ashford noted:

Throughout the day on numerous occasions, the cowpokes became airborne platoon commanders as small units assaulted enemy-held treelines and heavily dug-in machine gun bunkers. They were passing on tactically sound information concerning the positioning and type of fire maneuver best to be employed against a variety of enemy objectives, based on their excellent observation capabilities. This undoubtedly lessened the number of friendly casualties and increased the number of enemy killed.²³

The area was again saturated with small unit patrols on the 11th, as elements of both battalions searched out the remaining pockets of enemy resistance and directed supporting arms fire toward their destruction. The heaviest fighting of the day occurred when Com-

Infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines guard local rice-gatherers in the continuing effort aimed at preventing the twice-yearly harvest from falling into enemy hands.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374230





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A374224

Preceded by tanks, riflemen of Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines push toward an enemy-infested treeline during the battalion's sweep and block of southwestern Arizona.

pany H sent a platoon-size patrol to the southeast in order to link up with a platoon from Company D, which had secured a disabled tank. At 0930, the patrol made contact with an enemy force located in mutually supporting bunkers encompassed within a treeline. Artillery and mortars were called for as the platoon closed on the enemy position. The ensuing firefight, which lasted throughout the day, was fought at close range as Marines, sometimes fighting hand-to-hand, moved from bunker to bunker until the position was neutralized and enemy fire finally silenced.

By the 12th, enemy resistance had diminished sufficiently for the 5th Marines to return the assembled units to their parent organizations, where they again took part in independent small unit operations. Later intelligence indicated that a planned enemy attack on Marine positions at Hill 65 was aborted because of the heavy losses the enemy suffered in northeastern Arizona. Lieutenant Colonel Higgins' 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation for its outstanding performance in the action, which resulted in over 230 enemy casualties.

The first half of May saw allied installations within the 5th Marines area of operation again come under

enemy indirect fire attacks. While An Hoa Combat Base experienced a number of rocket and mortar attacks, resulting in only minor damage and light casualties, on the night of 11-12 May, enemy sappers attacked the eastern portion of the base's defense perimeter. Fourteen enemy troops penetrated the outer wire, but were killed before moving further. Marine snipers equipped with night observation devices or starlight scopes had been moved into the area soon after the sappers were discovered cutting their way through the wire. According to Colonel Zaro, "they were 'dead ducks' when they reached the final strands, having been under observation the entire time. Much was learned about their wire penetration techniques and the value of the starlight scope was enhanced." Night observation was improved to such an extent that during a subsequent use, Colonel Zaro noted, "a number of Marines were observed enjoying the coolness of the water in the base's water supply tower. They were much surprised that they were detected on such a dark night and subsequently apprehended."²⁴

During the same night, sappers using small arms, automatic weapons, grenades, rockets, and flame-throwers also attacked Liberty Bridge. Marines met the

attack with a strong counterattack, resulting in 12 enemy killed and numerous weapons captured.

With 5th Marines successes in the Arizona, and at An Hoa and Liberty Bridge, the enemy shifted tactics, concentrating his effort instead on an intensified mine and boobytrap campaign throughout the area of operations, particularly in western Go Noi and Phu Nhuan along Liberty Road. Despite the effort, all 5th Marines units continued their aggressive search and destroy operations within the basin.

Securing the Southern and Northern Approaches

As Operation Taylor Common ended, units involved resumed their conventional posture; each regiment returning to its regimental area, and each battalion to its distinct battalion area. "We had, in the Division," reported General Simpson, "what I called a 'blue line' syndrome and—blue meaning our own boundaries—every battalion had an area and every battalion was committed." As a result, there was no division, nor regimental reserve upon which to draw. Boundaries had become so fixed, that, as Simpson observed, "a battalion would begin to think that their piece of ground was the whole war as far as they were

concerned. If the enemy was in that area, they were engaged, but if he was in somebody else's area, that wasn't any of their business." This situation had to be corrected, and, due to the urging of its commanding officer, the 1st Marines would be the "guinea pigs."²⁵

Under Colonel Charles S. Robertson, a troop commander during World War II and Korea, who had replaced Colonel Lauffer on 24 February, the mission of the 1st Marines had changed little since the beginning of the year. Emphasis continued to be placed on company- and platoon-size combat patrols and ambushes, security of allied lines of communications, and small search and destroy operations, all aimed at the destruction of enemy forces and the support of the pacification and hamlet upgrading programs so as to secure the southern approaches into the Da Nang Vital Area. During February, the regiment conducted nine cordon, block, and search operations, four of which were joint 1st Marine and ARVN ventures conducted on the Man Quan Peninsula, near the villages of An Tu (1), An Tra (1), Bich Nam (2), Giang Dong, and Tanh Hanh, south of Da Nang. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Glasgow's 2d Battalion initiated a land-clearing operation within its area of

Employing a variety of supporting arms, including 106mm recoilless rifles, here directed by SgtMaj Clifford M. Burks, the 5th Marines crushed the enemy's attempt at Hill 65.

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operation. With the cooperation of the Hoa Nam District Headquarters, Glasgow's Marines assisted the civilian population of Tra Khe and Tra Lo in their move to the new resettlement village of Xuan Tre, and then began, and successfully completed, a clearing operation of the vacated area with the intent of turning the previously contested village complex into a "free fire zone," denying the enemy yet another primary infiltration route.

With little enemy activity in the 1st Marines area of operations, Colonel Robertson put the experimental realignment of forces into effect in early March. On the 12th, Lieutenant Colonel Alphonse A. Laporte, Jr.'s 1st Battalion assumed responsibility of the 3d Battalion's TAOR, relieving the 3d to become a reserve force, thus providing increased flexibility within the entire regimental area of operation. The realignment resulted from a number of factors, as Robertson noted:

Lieutenant Colonel Hal Glasgow had initiated a platoon reinforced training program in 2/1; I had observed serious deficiencies in the performance of small units, reflecting training requirements; and, Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Div G-3, had informed me that the 1st Marines would be required to furnish one battalion for Oklahoma Hills. Further conferences with Colonel Schwenk also revealed that the 27th Marines, while occupying present 1st Marines TAOR had utilized only two battalions and retained a reserve. All of these facts, and the results achieved by Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's modest training program, led to the presentation and General Simpson's approval of the plan for a mobile battalion in the 1st Marines.²⁶

The designation of the 3d, under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Bulger, as the mobile battalion, now made it unnecessary to shift units from one command to another, forming a composite fighting unit when special operations were to be conducted. It also provided a reserve battalion which could swiftly respond to regimental orders. Additionally, the mobile battalion was to carry out a concentrated two-month training program, rotating all rifle companies through a series of courses with appropriate support weapons attached. Ideally, at the end of eight weeks, the mobile battalion would have not only conducted several effective operations, but also would have accomplished progressive unit training in subjects vital to its assigned mission. Assignment as the mobile battalion would alternate among the three battalions of the regiment every eighth week.

Strings were attached. The mobile battalion could not be committed without General Simpson's knowledge, and he would also be free to move it from one regimental area to another. Eventually, Simpson ex-

panded the realignment to include all regiments within the division, and as he noted, "we became considerably more fluid and the [regimental and battalion] boundaries didn't make that much difference."²⁷

On 3 April, Lieutenant Colonel Bulger's 3d Battalion was put to the test, when Colonel Robertson ordered the battalion to conduct a detailed search of northern Dodge City, centering on Phong Nhat, an area within the Korean Marine TAOR. After Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, established blocking positions on the northern bank of the Song La Tho, Company K moved by foot and established another block along the north-south railroad berm, south of the river. Companies I and L, with the battalion command group, assaulted by CH-46s east of the berm and began searching south to north, then east to west, finally reassembling with Company K near the railroad berm.

To this point, the enemy proved elusive, and Bulger decided to resweep the area. Utilizing maximum deception, Company K swept west and then north out of Dodge City, while Companies I and L counterswept to the east. This maneuver caught the enemy force, later identified as comprising elements of the *Q-82d Local Force Battalion* and *36th NVA Regiment*, unawares. Company L engaged the combined VC and NVA force, not expecting another search, as Company I and the battalion command group maneuvered north across the Song La Tho, flanking and then destroying over 70 troops. As Robertson later noted, intelligence largely obtained from a captured NVA captain "revealed that 3/1 had chanced upon a conference of VC local force commanders and had succeeded in destroying the local VC leadership. The captured NVA captain had been sent to Quang Nam to reorganize and reestablish the VC Infrastructure."²⁸

On the 9th, while the remainder of Bulger's battalion returned to its normal area of operations, Company K remained behind in an area just to the east of Dodge City. As Company K secured its positions by sending out numerous small patrols, remnants of the shattered enemy force responded with ever-increasing amounts of RPG and sniper fire. Preceded by air and artillery bombardments, the full company swept back into Dodge City, through a region peppered with hedgerows and treelines. Sweeping and then countersweeping, the company counted over 30 dead, most of whom had been killed by air or artillery. On the 12th, Company L relieved Company K for the mop-up. During the nine-day sojourn in Dodge City, the battalion accounted for 119 enemy killed and the



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LCpl Robert Redd, a fire-team leader with 3d Platoon, Company L, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, temporarily occupies an enemy spider hole while on one of the numerous daily patrols launched south of Da Nang.

capture of numerous weapons, foodstuffs, and miscellaneous documents, including a sketch plan of attack on the command post of the 3d Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment and enemy codes. The local ARVN commander, noted Lieutenant Colonel Bulger, "was so enthused over the results of this battle that he awarded 30 Vietnamese medals to members of 3/1."²⁹

During the remainder of the month, while regimental combat patrols and ambushes from company- and platoon-size bases continued to be emphasized, a number of hamlet cordon and searches were carried out in coordination with South Vietnamese units in order to capture or destroy enemy infrastructure members. On 22 April, Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, in conjunction with the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit from Hoi An, cordoned the village of Viem Tay (1), capturing 12 suspects, seven of whom were later confirmed as infrastructure members. Again on the 28th, Company H and elements of the newly formed 34th Regional Force Battalion and a platoon of National Police Field Forces converged on Ngan Cau (2), discovering over 4,000 pounds of rice and detaining 17 suspects, most of whom were identified as members of the village enemy infrastructure.

In addition to patrols, ambushes, cordons, and searches, land-clearing efforts continued throughout the regimental area of responsibility in an effort to remove enemy harbor sites and neutralize concentrations of surprise firing devices. Focusing on "No Name Island," which had been used as a staging area for sap-

per attacks on allied positions, Lieutenant Colonel Glasgow's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines expended several hundred bangalore torpedoes in clearing treelines beneath which the battalion found spider and individual fighting holes. Likewise, battalion Marines cleared the vacated areas once known as Cam Le (1) and Cam Le (2) of numerous surprise firing devices. Once reclaimed, the area was to be made available for refugee resettlement.

While the regiment's mission remained unchanged in May, the enemy organized a major effort against 1st Marines installations. In the early morning hours of 12 May, an estimated enemy company, supported by 82mm mortars, B40 rockets, and automatic weapons, attacked the 2d Battalion command post at Cau Ha, five kilometers east of Highway 1. The battalion rallied to a quick defense, returning fire with organic weapons, mortars, direct artillery fire, and gunships. At dawn, 19 NVA soldiers lay dead around the perimeter, in addition to an assortment of individual weapons, equipment, and ordnance.

On the same night, only 10 minutes after the 2d Battalion came under attack, the command post of Lieutenant Colonel Wendell P. Morgenthaler, Jr.'s 1st Battalion (also the regimental command post), astride the railroad between the Son Yen and Song Bau Xau, came under a mortar and RPG-supported ground attack directed at the positions of Battery D, 11th Marines. Bolstered by direct support artillery, combined with that of OV-10s, Huey gunships, and "Spooky" airships, Morgenthaler's Marines repelled the enemy assault with minor casualties.³⁰ In addition to leaving over 30 dead and three wounded, the enemy abandoned a large number of individual weapons, B40 rocket launchers, ordnance, miscellaneous equipment, and documents.

As a result of the early morning attacks, and also information indicating that an enemy force of two companies had moved into Quang Chau, northeast of the regimental command post, three companies of Bulger's 3d Battalion, moving under cover of darkness, launched an attack at first light. Crossing the "Anderson Trail," Bulger's Marines searched from south to north, as far as Quang Chau, when Company I met resistance from an unknown size enemy force entrenched in a treeline bordering the village. Companies K and L moved to the west side of the village, while two companies of the 59th Regional Force Battalion closed the cordon to the north and east. Tanks and amtracs provided additional support throughout



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Elements of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by a tank from Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, take up positions in preparation for the assault on an enemy-held treeline.

the day and into the evening, pounding the cornered enemy force and finally forcing it to withdraw from the area, leaving over 150 dead.

Operations, carried out with and in coordination with ARVN forces, also continued in efforts to pacify hamlets and destroy the Viet Cong Infrastructure. On 8 May, Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, with two companies of the 4th Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, established a cordon of Viem Dong hamlet, resulting in the detention of seven suspects. On the 23d, Company G, 2d Battalion, with a platoon of National Police Field Forces, conducted a cordon and detailed search of Viem Tay (1), between Highway 1 and the Song Vinh Dien, detaining six Viet Cong suspects. Land-clearing operations likewise were carried out, particularly in the Cam Ne area, resulting in the destruction of enemy bunkers, fighting holes, trenches, and tunnels, and the clearing of 967,000 square meters.

The 1st Marines successfully carried out all operations within its TAOR despite the ever-present threat of mines and boobytraps. "In fact," Colonel Robertson noted, "the bulk of casualties resulted from the abundance of surprise firing devices," instead of engagements with enemy forces. As a result of a seminar conducted by General Simpson on the subject, a directive dealing with the threat was developed and implemented by all 1st Marines patrols. Scouts would henceforth be provided sticks or metal rods with which

to probe suspected areas. Upon detonation of a surprise firing device the patrol would freeze in place so as not to detonate additional devices. Marines not wounded, after posting security, would then probe the area of the explosion in search of other boobytraps, provide emergency treatment and evacuation of the wounded, and then proceed with their mission.³¹

While Colonel Robertson's 1st Marines covered the south and southeastern approaches into the Da Nang Vital Area, to the northwest of Da Nang, the 1st Battalion of Colonel Ray N. Joens' 26th Marines, continued small unit patrols and ambushes aimed at preventing enemy rice gathering operations and infiltration into the villages of Kim Lien and Quan Nam. Along Highway 1, and throughout the Hai Van Pass, the extensive patrolling of Company B prevented NVA units from delaying or halting allied convoys on the main north-south line of communication.*

On 1 April, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Kliefoth's battalion was reinforced to become BLT 1/26, but remained in its defensive positions along the

*Throughout most of March, BLT 2/26 was controlled by the 5th Marines, participating in Operation Taylor Common, Eager Pursuit I, and Eager Pursuit II, and search and clear operations on Go Noi Island. On 29 March, the battalion landing team assumed responsibility for the 2d and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines area of responsibility, relieving the two battalions for Operation Oklahoma Hills. On the 31st, BLT 3/26, following Bold Mariner and Defiant Measure, joined Oklahoma Hills.

northwestern portion of the Da Nang perimeter until 25 April when it loaded on board ships of the fleet's amphibious ready group. During the month, the 1st Battalion assisted in the rice harvest, and cordon operations in the Nam O village area. Also on the 1st, Battalion Landing Team 2/26 lost its attachments and became 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, but continued to occupy former 7th Marines areas of responsibility west of Da Nang. On 25 April, Lieutenant Colonel George M. Edmondson, Jr.'s battalion moved into the area formerly occupied by the 1st Battalion.

The 1st of May found the 26th Marines with operational control of the 2d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, reinforced by Company M, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. Occupying a TAOR formerly assigned to three infantry battalions, the regiment continued to conduct extensive patrols and night ambushes in an attempt to halt enemy infiltration. The regiment remained in this posture until the 29th, when Operation Oklahoma Hills was terminated, resulting in the return of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines to its parent regiment, and the realignment of the regimental areas of operation.

Americal Battleground

With the end of Operations Fayette Canyon, Hardin Falls, and Vernon Lake II on 28 February, the Americal Division moved into a short period of force and boundary realignment throughout southern Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Provinces.* Previously, the Americal and 2d ARVN Divisions had operated in separate areas in which they had unilateral responsibility. After 18 March, as a result of the realignment, "combined planning, combined operations, and combined responsibility" was, as Major General Charles M. Gettys noted, "the rule throughout the TAOI. It is expected that this concept will give ARVN greater responsibility . . . and will upgrade the operational capability of the 2d ARVN Division through constant operation with U.S. units and more ready access to Americal combat support and combat service support assets."³²

*In February, the division was reorganized under the infantry division MTOE to standardize it along the same lines as the 1st, 4th, and 25th Infantry Divisions. The division had evolved from Task Force Oregon which was composed of the 11th, 196th, and 198th Infantry Brigades, deployed to Vietnam as separate units. They were organized into the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division on 25 September 1967. The reorganization under standard MTOE reduced the combat service elements of the division, which were redistributed to other units within USARV.

Tactically organized, the Division's Tactical Area of Operational Interest (TAOI) was divided into combined operational zones. Within the northern sector, the 196th Infantry Brigade shared an operational zone with the 5th ARVN Regiment. In the center sector, the 198th Infantry Brigade operated with the 6th ARVN Regiment, while south of Quang Ngai City, the 11th Infantry Brigade cooperated with the 4th ARVN Regiment in its operational zone. The division cavalry squadron, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, occupied a large zone in the northern sector along the coastal plain. With the creation of the four operational zones, the Oregon, Duc Pho, and Chu Lai areas of operation were discontinued.

During the 12-day realignment period, the only major division operation to continue was Russell Beach. Initiated in January in an effort to cleanse the Batangan Peninsula, the combined Army, Marine, and ARVN force maintained a constant series of search and security operations. With the building of new roads and hamlets, and following a careful screening to eliminate elements of the local infrastructure, the population was moved back onto the peninsula in April along with South Vietnamese governmental authority. Allied security operations were maintained throughout the remainder of April and into May to protect the newly established village and hamlets and prevent the reintroduction of Viet Cong units into the area.

Following the realignment, three new operations were initiated simultaneously within the combined Americal and 2d ARVN Division area of interest on 18 March. Within the northern sector, the 196th Infantry Brigade, 5th ARVN Regiment, and elements of the 1st Cavalry began Operation Frederick Hill designed to secure population centers in the coastal plain and to destroy enemy troop concentrations, base camps, and infiltration routes in the adjacent mountains. Engagements were few as Cavalry and ARVN troops began operations against enemy staging areas, notably Pineapple Forest and Barrier Island, in the coastal lowlands and would remain so. In the mountains to the west, the 196th Brigade and elements of the 5th ARVN Regiment launched two successive preemptive strikes. The first against Antenna Valley and the surrounding mountain ranges was designed to neutralize the *1st Viet Cong Regiment*, and the second, launched on 25 April, was against elements of the 2d NVA Division believed to be harbored within Base Area 117 in the Ba Su Mountains. Fighting was light throughout both areas searched.

In the center sector, the 198th Infantry Brigade and 6th ARVN Regiment launched operation Geneva Park in order to secure major lines of communication and to locate and destroy enemy forces attempting to attack Quang Ngai and Chu Lai. In addition to small unit patrols, ambushes, and roving sweep teams, a number of preemptive strikes were launched against suspected enemy concentrations in the Nui Ne Mountains, along the Song Tra Khuc, and on all approaches to the Batangan Peninsula. As in the northern sector, skirmishes were few as enemy forces avoided engagement with Americal and ARVN troops.

Operation Iron Mountain, conducted by the 11th Infantry Brigade and 4th ARVN Regiment, was initiated in the southern sector, and was designed to protect coastal population centers and to destroy enemy units operating in the western mountains before attacks against population centers could be launched. To accomplish this mission, three large-scale pre-

emptive operations were carried out against Base Area 121, mountainous areas northeast of Duc Pho, the Song Ve Valley, and bordering Nui Hoat Mountains. All three operations accomplished their mission, and prevented the enemy from massing in order to attack major coastal population centers during the spring.

Despite the enemy's continued capability to surface for harassing attacks within southern I Corps Tactical Zone, troops of the 1st Marine and Americal Divisions, and their ARVN counterparts, continued to operate along enemy lines of communication and within his staging and assembly areas, scoring substantial gains against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese efforts to attack major population centers. Small unit counter-guerrilla actions, focusing on approaches to the coastal lowlands, denied the enemy access to rice and other supplies, sorely needed by forces occupying the sparsely populated hinterlands. Within southern I Corps, the enemy's capacity to initiate large-scale offensive operations during the spring deteriorated substantially.

PART III
THE THIRD'S FINAL MONTHS

Redeployment: The First Phase

Keystone Eagle — “A Turning Point”

Keystone Eagle

Post-hostilities planning by MACV began shortly after the seven-nation Manila Summit Conference of October 1966. The communique released at the close of the conference contained the conditions under which it was envisaged that Free World forces could be withdrawn from South Vietnam: “allied forces . . . shall be withdrawn, after close consultation, as the other side withdraws its force to the north, ceases infiltration, and the level of violence thus subsides, those forces will be withdrawn as soon as possible and not later than six months after the above conditions have been fulfilled.”¹ Although the communique stipulated that the withdrawal of forces would take place not later than six months after the necessary conditions had been met, it did not specify a length of time during which the conditions would be assessed and numerous preparatory actions accompanying a major withdrawal of U.S. forces would be accomplished; nor did it address the question of a residual U.S. presence.

With the announcement of a number of bombing halts and the initiation of discussions with the North Vietnamese in Paris in May 1968, the development of detailed plans for the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces was given increased emphasis. In addition to general planning based on the Manila Communique, a number of plans, identified as T-Day, were developed to support specific withdrawal alternatives. Once the essential conditions for a cessation of hostilities had been met, either as a result of formal agreements at the Paris negotiations, informal mutual understandings, or the enemy’s unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, U.S. and allied forces would be phased down and then withdrawn over a six- or twelve-month period, depending upon the progressive expansion and modernization of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. Two major considerations would determine the sequence of redeployment: those units slated to reconstitute the Pacific Theater’s reserve would be withdrawn first; and, the phasing out of the remaining units would be governed by the objective of maintaining a balanced force posture. In addition, the alternative plans specified that the withdrawals could be suspended at any stage should the situation change, and that the residual force would vary from

a military advisory assistance group to a group with a combat force of two divisions.

While both MACV and I Corps Combined Campaign Plans for 1969 assumed that there would be no major increase in United States force strengths in Vietnam “beyond those provided in existing programs,” neither addressed the question of troop withdrawals during the year.² However, the changing political environment would point up the possibility that selected U.S. forces might be withdrawn from South Vietnam prior to the cessation of hostilities and not under the terms of the Manila Communique.

In January 1969, a new administration took office committed to finding a solution to the nagging question of Vietnam. In order to maintain public support, as well as carry on the war in the face of imminent Congressional cuts in defense appropriations, the administration had to reduce substantially or end American involvement in Vietnam. Ideally, President Richard M. Nixon hoped to achieve a negotiated settlement and the mutual and simultaneous withdrawal of all outside forces from South Vietnam. Failing this, the option remained for the orderly, progressive withdrawal of American forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese troops. Proceeding with ongoing efforts toward a negotiated mutual withdrawal, the administration also began consideration of unilateral United States force reductions should the negotiations fail.

The idea of withdrawing American combat forces and replacing them with South Vietnamese troops was not new. The intent of the RVNAF improvement and modernization program, launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in mid-1968, was that the South Vietnamese would eventually relieve U.S. and allied forces of the combat role. In his New Year’s address, President Thieu also raised the prospect.³ In Washington, the possible replacement of American troops by South Vietnamese was seriously considered at a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) in late January. Again taken up at a February meeting of the NSC, it was proposed that Vietnamese forces replace U.S. troops as soon as possible, but faced with the possibility of yet another enemy offensive similar to the one launched during *Tet* 1968, the administration chose



Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC649484

President Richard M. Nixon, accompanied by Melvin R. Laird, center, Secretary of Defense, and Gen Earle G. Wheeler, USA, right, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, visits the Department of Defense for an orientation briefing shortly after taking office in January 1969.

to postpone action until after Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's visit to Vietnam in March.

Among the purposes of the Secretary's visit was not only to observe the situation, but to inform both U.S. military commanders and South Vietnamese officials of the new administration's desire that a greater share of the fighting be assumed by the RVNAF. Assured by both General Abrams and President Thieu that the Republic's armed forces were improving, Laird returned to Washington convinced that the United States could prepare to replace American combat troops with Vietnamese. Accordingly, he recommended that plans be drawn up for the redeployment of not only 50,000 to 70,000 troops from South Vietnam in 1969, but of additional forces the following year. As the Secretary's plane took off on the return flight to Washington, General Abrams ruefully remarked that he "certainly had not come to Saigon to help us win the war."⁴ Based on the Secretary's recommendation, MACV began planning for a tentative force

reduction of 50,000, or two divisions, during the latter half of 1969.

In March meetings of the National Security Council, the question of Vietnam again arose. With regard to the withdrawal of U.S. forces, it was the consensus of those involved that the combat effectiveness of the RVNAF had been improved to such a degree as to justify the initiation of redeployment planning; the actual decision would be delayed until mid-year. At the direction of the President, the Secretary of Defense was given the responsibility for overall planning which was to cover all aspects of United States involvement and would be grounded on the following assumptions: a starting date of 1 July 1969; continuation of current NVA and VC force levels; use of current projections of South Vietnamese force levels; maintenance of the current level of allied military operations, except for drops resulting from the phased withdrawal of American and other allied forces not fully compensated for by the South Vietnamese; and, the equipping and

training of South Vietnamese forces which would be assigned the highest national priority. Based on these assumptions, timetables were drawn up for the transfer of the United States combat role and the restriction of the American effort to combat support and advisory missions, with alternative completion dates of 31 December 1970, 30 June 1971, 31 December 1971, and 31 December 1972. As was done with all force-level planning, input was sought from MACV, CinCPac, and other concerned agencies within the Federal Government.

Although there was neither official announcement nor comment that a troop reduction was under consideration, public speculation had become so prevalent by mid-March, that the President was forced to dampen it. On the 14th, he publicly stated that there was "no prospect for a reduction of American forces in the foreseeable future," listing three factors upon which any decision to reduce the American troop commitment would have to be based: the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves; the level of hostilities imposed by the enemy; and, the progress of the Paris talks. A month later, Mr. Nixon said he saw "good prospects that American forces can be reduced," but noted that "we have no plans to reduce our forces until there is more progress on one or all of the three fronts that I have mentioned."⁵

Speaking to the nation on 14 May, the President gave his assessment of the Vietnam situation. While reiterating his call for a phased mutual withdrawal based upon a negotiated settlement, he did indicate that a unilateral reduction of American forces might be possible. He noted that General Abrams had informed him of the excellent progress made in training South Vietnamese forces, and that, "apart from any developments that may occur in the negotiations in Paris, the time is approaching when South Vietnamese forces will be able to take over some of the fighting fronts now being manned by Americans."⁶

In late May, an initial plan for the phased withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam was submitted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense. Calling for the transfer of the U.S. combat and support roles to the South Vietnamese to the maximum extent possible, the plan provided timetables for a total reduction of 244,000 personnel from the current authorization of 549,000, leaving approximately 306,000 in South Vietnam. For reductions to be carried out during the latter half of 1969, the plan provided four alternatives: 50,000 (two divisions, one Marine,

one Army, plus limited support); 50,000 (one Marine division plus support); 100,000 (three divisions, one Marine, two Army, plus limited support); and, 100,000 (two divisions, one Marine, one Army, plus support). In order to avoid the redeployment of a major combat unit from I Corps, where the enemy threat was still considered greatest, a fifth alternative involving a countrywide cut of 50,000 was suggested.

Should any forces be withdrawn during 1969, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the first alternative be adopted. In addition they urged that any reduction be in two increments, with a pause between to assess the results. The Joint Chiefs also favored the reconstitution of the Pacific reserve, in favor of the redeployment of combat forces to the United States and their subsequent demobilization, and opposed any reduction in 1969 of out-of-country forces supporting the war.

The Secretary of Defense forwarded the JCS proposals to the President in early June, recommending an initial withdrawal of 20,000 to 25,000 troops beginning in July with the total reduction for the year limited to 50,000. Composition of the initial redeployment was to be determined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in coordination with CinCPac, MACV, and the South Vietnamese. The President made no immediate decision, but took the plans to Midway where he was scheduled to meet with President Thieu on the 8th to assess the progress of the war.

Troop reduction planning by MACV was carried out concurrently with that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A number of conditions, suggested by planners in Saigon, would bear directly on the feasibility of any reductions: pacification to continue to make definable progress; improvement in the performance of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces to continue to achieve programmed goals; enemy troop strength in or near South Vietnam not to exceed present levels; no new weapon systems to be introduced into South Vietnam or be capable of reaching the Republic; infiltration rates from North Vietnam to remain constant, as was enemy logistical support; and, current levels of B-52 sorties, tactical air, helicopter, and nondivisional artillery support were to be maintained. By mid-April, MACV planners produced a tentative plan, with the concurrence of III MAF, specifically suggesting the redeployment of the 9th U.S. Infantry and 3d Marine Divisions. The divisions were selected because they were both considered "first-rate" combat units and as such would make the reduction credible to both the enemy and

U.S. and South Vietnamese publics. The 3d, according to General Abrams, was selected "because it could go to Okinawa; because it would be leaving the area to the 1st ARVN Division, recognized by all as the strongest and best ARVN division; and finally, because northern I Corps has one of the best security environments in the country for the people." As for the 9th Infantry Division, it was picked because "the war there [in the Delta] has been largely fought by the Vietnamese and has been going well for several months."⁷

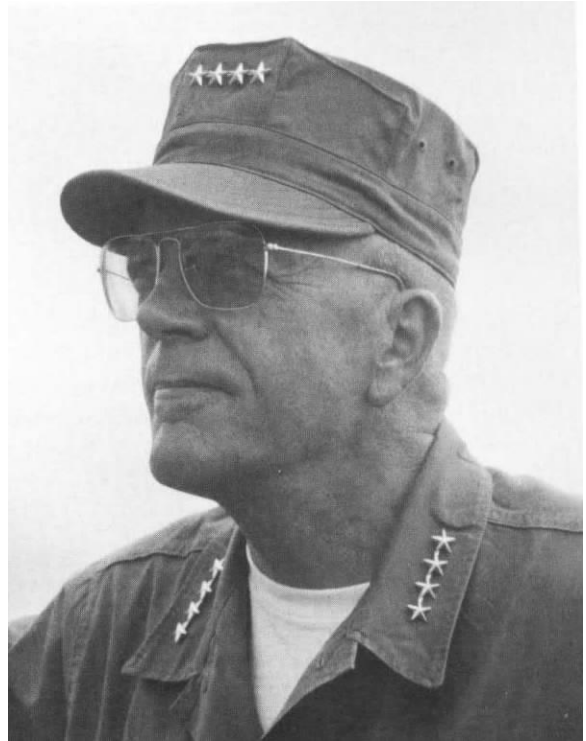
Although MACV planners suggested alternatives, in every case the first unit deployed out-of-country would be the 3d Marine Division, reinforced, combat-loaded on board amphibious shipping destined for Okinawa, where it would constitute the most readily available strategic reserve.⁸ The plan provided for the redeployment of the division in the following phases:

Phase	Unit	Date of Deployment	Strength
1	RLT	1 July 1969	7,132
2	RLT	1 August 1969	6,803
3	RLT	1 September 1969	6,823
4	SvcBn (-)	15 September 1969	916
5	MarDiv(-)	30 September 1969	574
		Total Strength	22,248

The MACV proposal, however, did not reflect the desire of Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., Commanding General, III MAF, nor that of Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse, Jr., Commanding General, FMFPac, that it embody the relocation of a typical Marine air-ground team. As General Buse later noted:

The initial troop lists on all this super-duper planning for withdrawal, didn't have any Marine air in it. The initial guidelines were that no air would come out-of-country and no heavy artillery. We took up the cudgel, and first of all we had to have helicopters go out; they were not even in it at all. Secondly, in order to reconstitute the Strategic Reserve we wanted air with our package that came out. So we had it actually put in there, and we didn't get too much opposition.⁹

In addition to air, Nickerson and Buse suggested other modifications. In order to support the division, once on Okinawa, a full-strength service battalion would have to be created from the 9th Provisional Service Battalion, with the augmentation of approximately 150 men from Force Logistic Command at Da Nang. Also, as the mount-out blocks of supplies carried by each regimental landing team were low or nonexistent, both Nickerson and Buse recommended that current operating stocks be used to replenish the 30-day blocks. General Abrams approved both suggested



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A419099
As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, lobbied for the maintenance of the Marine air-ground team during initial planning for redeployment.

modifications.¹⁰ The question as to whether Marine air would accompany the 3d Division remained unresolved for the moment.

The MACV proposal gained quick approval from Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., following which both CincPac and MACV representatives journeyed to Washington where they presented it to the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff. During the briefing of the Joint Chiefs, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., again pointed out the fact that although Marine helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were not organic to the 3d Division, as in the Army, they were essential if the division was to be used in reconstituting the Pacific reserve. In addition, Marine air would be necessary from a training standpoint. The MACV plan was given tentative approval by the Joint Chiefs; however, it was suggested that one helicopter group and two jet fighter squadrons, together with supporting detachments, be included in the final troop list, in case the division was to be deployed elsewhere within the Pacific Command.¹¹

With debate raging in Congress over troop withdrawals, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird expressed concern that "political realities may force a decision on troop withdrawals sooner than anticipated."¹² By 5 June, after extensive discussion of a number of additional alternatives, and incorporating Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland's suggestion that the complete removal of the 3d Division was dangerous, in that an attack by the NVA would escalate the war, and recommendation that the division be withdrawn in increments, a plan for the two-phased pull-out of the division was approved. Phase one was to include one 3d Marine Division regimental landing team with air and support units, and two brigades of the 9th Infantry Division, while phase two would encompass the remaining two landing teams and their support units, both air and logistics.¹³

On 8 June, President Nixon and South Vietnamese

President Thieu met on Midway Island. Thieu, initially opposed to any proposed plans for a large American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1969, as it would signal the beginning of an irreversible policy, was persuaded to accept the immediate redeployment of approximately 25,000 men. In a brief statement following the meeting, both Nixon and Thieu noted that further troop withdrawals in the months ahead would be based on the three previously stated variables, periodically assessed: the level of North Vietnamese infiltration and enemy battlefield activity; the ability of South Vietnam to carry the burden of fighting its own war; and, progress at the Paris peace negotiations.¹⁴ With the decision to begin unilateral redeployment, a number of conferences were held at CinCPac Headquarters in order to plan the actual movement of men and materiel.

The initial redeployment, codenamed Keystone Ea-

President Richard M. Nixon welcomes South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to Midway Island in the Pacific where they discussed and decided upon the withdrawal of 25,000 American combat forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese units.

Department of Defense Photo (USN) K74369



gle, would involve the incremental deployment of a 3d Marine Division regimental landing team: one-third to be pulled out on 15 July and the remaining two-thirds by 31 August. A problem soon developed. The number of men in the RLT, its direct support elements, and the two air squadrons, did not meet the 8,388 spaces finally allotted by MACV. As a result, III MAF was forced to "add-on" another 1,294 men from a wide variety of engineer, headquarters, and logistical support units to meet the MACV allocation. By mid-June all was ready.¹⁵

"A Turning Point"

III MAF selected Colonel Edward F. Danowitz's 9th Marines as the first regimental landing team to redeploy. "We drew out the 9th Marines," recalled Major General William K. Jones, "because they were the Swing/Ready regiment; the regiment that was sort of a Division reserve, or not occupying a fire support base. The 4th and the 3d Regiments were occupying [positions] so we drew back the 9th Marines and they started the process, a battalion at a time."¹⁶ The regiment's supporting artillery, the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, would accompany it, as would small engineer, motor transport, reconnaissance, shore party, headquarters, medical, and logistical detachments. III MAF also designated the 3d Anti-Tank Battalion; the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; Company C, 3d Tank Battalion; and the 1st Searchlight Battery for withdrawal.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would relinquish one jet and one helicopter squadron, in addition to the 1st Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion and Marine Air Traffic Control Unit 68 (MATCU-68). Lieutenant Colonel Edwin C. Paige, Jr.'s Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 (VMFA-115), with its 15 F4Bs ("Phantoms"), would be deployed to the Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan, while Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Raines' Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (HMM-165), with its 14 CH-46s, would accompany the 9th Marines to Okinawa.

"On the 14th of June," noted Colonel Danowitz, "I was apprised about 1000 by General Jones that it would be the regiment that would be moved out. I knew that someone was going out of the division, but certainly not the regiment until that time."¹⁷ The following day, III MAF Operational Plan 182-69 was issued which prescribed procedures for the withdrawal of units during continuing hostilities. Under the plan, each redeploying unit would cease combat operations, move to a designated base camp well before the actual date of departure, and prepare men and equipment

for sea and air transportation out of country. Although its mission and area of operations would be assumed by other organizations according to prearranged plans, each redeploying unit was to "retain sufficient combat ability for security and self-defense."¹⁸

While Marine units were to leave Vietnam as "balanced combat units," fully organized and equipped, they would rarely leave with the same men who had served with them in combat. Instead, with each redeployment, a system of personnel transfers, nicknamed "Mixmaster," was put into effect. In this process, the departing unit would be manned with Marines from all III MAF units who had completed more than one tour in Vietnam and were nearing the end of their current one-year tour, or were nearing the completion of their first tour. Those Marines with the most months left in-country would be transferred to units not designated to redeploy. Those units whose final destination was the United States were to undergo "Mixmastering" to a greater extent than the 9th Marines, which experienced little shift in personnel. "We endeavored," as General Buse later stated, "to avoid any mixmaster approach in this move; that is, any extensive intra-III MAF personnel shuffles. There will be some exceptions, but in the main, all units and detachments are redeploying with their on board personnel in order to minimize confusion and to retain unit integrity for contingency readiness."¹⁹

The troop and equipment movements of Keystone Eagle began on 15 June when the *Iredell County* (LST 839) departed Vietnam for Okinawa with the first increment of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion's equipment, accompanied by a nucleus of maintenance and headquarters personnel. The shipment, which General Buse characterized as "jumping the gun," included 14 LVTP-5s and three forklifts.²⁰ On the 23d, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, following its participation in Operation Utah Mesa, stood down at Vandegrift Combat Base. On 12 July, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Culkin's battalion moved by truck to Quang Tri and then by C-130s to Da Nang.

At Da Nang's Deep Water Pier, two days later, with the *Paul Revere* (LPA 248) standing by, Lieutenant General Nickerson thanked the officers and men of the 1st Battalion for their performance and dedication. "But," as General Nickerson noted, "this day goes beyond honoring the officers and men of the 9th Marines. It represents a turning point . . . when victories on the battlefield and progress in the pacification struggle now permit the GVN/ARVN to say to their



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800469

The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines waits to board the amphibious transport Paul Revere at Da Nang, initiating the first phase of the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam.

LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., left, and LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam, right, talk with 1stSgt James L. Langford of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines prior to the battalion's departure.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



The MACV List: Composition of Keystone Eagle

Unit	Strength	Departure Date	Destination
1st Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	14 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co B (Rein), 3d Med Bn.....	42	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co A-C (Rein), 3d Motor Trans Bn.....	167	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co D (Rein), 11th Engr Bn.....	175	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
3d Anti-Tank Bn (C).....	19	29 Jun.....	Okinawa
Co C (C) (Rein), 3d Tank Bn.....	74	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Shore Party Bn.....	144	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, 3d Dental Co.....	1	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st AmTrac Bn.....	135	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st Armed Amphib Co.....	42	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Hq Btry, Fld Arty Gp.....	24	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
Btry D, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
107 Btry, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	84	19 Jul.....	Okinawa
Co C, 11th Engr Bn.....	180	13 Jul.....	Okinawa
1st Search Light Btry.....	116	14 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, Mar Air Traffic Control Unit.....	23	15 Jul.....	Okinawa
2d Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	1 Aug.....	Okinawa
Hq Co (-), 9th Mar.....	234	1 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Engr Bn.....	257	30 Jul.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Btry, 12th Mar.....	21	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
Btry E, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
Hq Btry, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	161	31 Jul.....	Okinawa
3d Bn, 9th Mar.....	1,166	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Btry F, 2d Bn, 12th Mar.....	139	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Btry L, 4th Bn, 12th Mar.....	112	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Bn, 3d Mar Div.....	354	5 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co C (Rein), 3d Recon Bn.....	120	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Force Log Comd.....	150	12 Aug.....	Okinawa
Det, Hq Co, 9th Mar.....	20	13 Aug.....	Okinawa
Co A (Rein), 9th Motor Trans Bn.....	130	14 Aug.....	Okinawa
1st Light AA Missile Bn.....	661	16 Aug.....	Okinawa
Mar Atk Sqdn 334.....	388	30 Aug.....	Japan
Med Helo Sqdn 165.....	279	14 Aug.....	Okinawa

American friends, 'We can do more. We ask you to do less.' " With the conclusion of General Nickerson's remarks, the battalion, by company, boarded the *Paul Revere*, and then sailed for Okinawa.²¹

On 6 July, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Modjeski's 2d Battalion concluded its participation in Operation Utah Mesa, and moved by air to Vandegrift, where it stood down in preparation for redeployment. The battalion then moved to Quang Tri Combat Base, where on 25 July, tribute was again paid to the men of the 9th Marines. Following remarks by General Jones, the honored guests, General Creighton Abrams, Lieutenant General Nickerson, Lieutenant General Mel-

vin Zais, and Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, watched as representative Marine, Army, Navy, and ARVN forces massed colors as they passed in review. Colonel Danowitz, the regiment's commanding officer, invited Colonel Robert H. Barrow, who had commanded the regiment during Operation Dewey Canyon, to join him in this final honor.²²

During the last two days of July, the battalion moved to Da Nang, and on the first day of August, accompanied by the regimental headquarters and colors of the 9th Marines, departed Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Wood's 3d Battalion followed on the 13th. With the standdown and departure of the



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Personnel of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 334 board C-130 transport aircraft at Chu Lai, destined for Iwakuni, Japan, where they would join Marine Aircraft Group 15.

9th Marines, Task Force Hotel was disbanded and the area of operations formerly occupied by the regiment, as well as its missions, divided between the 3d and 4th Marines which were placed under the direct operational control of the division.

The loss of one-third of the division's combat power resulted not only in a tactical realignment of forces, but in a series of administrative moves designed to consolidate the remaining units and to provide for greater efficiency and control. The 3d Marines extended its area of operations westward to include Elliott Combat Base. The area assigned the 4th Marines now included Fire Support Bases Russell and Cates, Hill 950, Vandegrift Combat Base, and the Ba Long Valley. The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) continued to maintain control of the coastal lowlands, while the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) extended its boundary northward into Quang Tri Province to include all of enemy Base Area 101. The division designated the extreme western portion of its area of operations a reconnaissance zone, and in early August, Detachment B-52 (Project Delta) began surveillance operations in the area. In order to increase unit integrity and control, the rear echelons of the 3d and 4th Marines and various combat support and service

support units, which had long been maintained at Quang Tri Combat Base, moved to Dong Ha and Vandegrift Combat Bases.

The jet aviation redeployment of Keystone Eagle posed a problem. Lieutenant Colonel Paige's VMFA-115, with its F4Bs, was originally selected for withdrawal, but subsequently replaced by Lieutenant Colonel John R. Braddon's VMFA-334, with its 13 F4Js. The problem revolved around the use of the two aircraft. Both Headquarters Marine Corps and the Navy were concerned about the high usage, attrition, and cost of the F4J, equipped with the Westinghouse AWG-10 pulse Doppler radar (data link) fire control weapons system. Both recommended the maximum utilization of the F4J in an air-to-air role in Japan, instead of air-to-ground, more suited to the F4B and combat in Vietnam. In addition, as the F4J required special support equipment, readily available in Japan, it was suggested that instead of splitting resources between Vietnam and Iwakuni, the F4J be based at a single site, Japan, thus enhancing Marine Aircraft Group 15's air-to-air commitment with the improved weapons system.²³

On 13 August, VMFA-334's equipment left Chu Lai by sea, followed by its personnel and avionics van on

the 30th by air. On 24 August, Lieutenant Colonel Braddon led the command echelon of 13 F4Js from Vietnam to Naha, Okinawa, with a refueling stop at Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines. All 13 Phantoms arrived at Iwakuni, Japan, on the 27th. In a move unrelated to redeployment, but bearing upon the Marine Corps and Navy's desire to replace all F4Js in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph J. Sorensen's VMFA-232 (F4J) turned over its slot in MAG-13 at Chu Lai to Lieutenant Colonel John K. Cochran's VMFA-122 (F4B) in early September.

Meanwhile, in mid-August, Lieutenant Colonel Raines' HMM-165 embarked its 14 CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters on board the former carrier, now amphibious assault ship, *Valley Forge* (LPH 8), for

shipment to Okinawa. During the same period, the 1st Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion, under Major Edward L. House, Jr., boarded the *Belle Grove* (LSD 2), *Tortuga* (LSD 26), and *Tulare* (LKA 112) at Da Nang, ultimately destined for Twentynine Palms, California.

By the end of August, all units of III MAF scheduled for Keystone Eagle had left Vietnam. The 3d Marine Division now consisted of the 3d and 4th Marines with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) under its operational control. The strength of III MAF was reduced by 8,388 to 72,355. With the addition of 14,000 Army troops from the 1st and 2d Brigades, 9th Infantry Division, and 2,000 reservists and Navy personnel, the goal of 25,000 out-of-country by 31 August was met.

CHAPTER 9

'A Strange War Indeed'

Company Patrol Operations—Idaho Canyon—"A Significant Step"—Specter of Anarchy

Company Patrol Operations

With the standdown and redeployment of the 9th Marines Regimental Landing Team, Major General William K. Jones' 3d Marine Division, composed of Colonel Wilbur F. Simlik's 3d Marines and the 4th Marines under Colonel William F. Goggin, embarked upon the final four months of combat operations in Quang Tri Province. Despite the loss of one regiment and the resultant shrinkage of the division's tactical area of responsibility, its mission changed little. As stated in a revised letter of instruction, issued in July, the 3d Marine Division, in cooperation and coordination with the 1st and 2d Regiments, 1st ARVN Division, was to:

Conduct offensive operations to destroy NVA/VC main forces, VCLF [Viet Cong Local Forces], and VCI [Viet Cong Infrastructure] within AO, and to interdict enemy LOCs [Lines of Communications] and neutralize enemy base areas within AO; conducts surveillance and interdiction of DMZ and Laotian border; assists GVN forces in the defense of Dong Ha and Quang Tri cities; provides support for the Pacification Development Plan, other civil activities, and the GVN resources control and denial program within the AO; be prepared to provide forces in support of CIDG and resettlement areas within the AO; be prepared to assume 101st Airborne Division (AM) task as Corps Reserve on order.¹

Tactically, the division moved away from the large multi-battalion search and destroy operations in the Khe Sanh Plateau, Song Da Krong Valley, and other areas of far-western Quang Tri Province, characteristic of its operations during the first six months of 1969. In attempting to maintain its mobile posture, the division began to concentrate instead on company search, patrol, and ambush operations that would still provide protection for all lines of communication within the area of operations and for virtually 100 percent of the population without tying down an excessive number of companies from any one unit to fixed positions. With fewer troops to practice "much economy of force" throughout the province, noted Colonel Robert H. Barrow, former commanding officer of the 9th Marines, and III MAF Deputy G-3, "Charlie is going to be able to stick his logistics nose in country with less chance we will find it."² And that he did.

As a result of the numerous beatings inflicted on

the NVA during the first six months, enemy activity of battalion-size or larger throughout the province decreased markedly in mid-summer, and company-size ground and indirect fire attacks became more common. Of approximately 30 battalions available, only elements of the 9th, 24th, 27th, and 31st Infantry, and the 84th Artillery (Rocket) Regiments remained consistently active. These units, in conjunction with minor elements of the 7th Front, not only continued selective attacks by fire over a wide front in eastern and central Quang Tri, favoring such targets as Vandegrift Combat Base, Elliott Combat Base, Route 9 strongpoints, and the Alpha and Charlie outposts south of the DMZ, but also increased infiltration of men and supplies with the aim of interdicting Route 9. In an effort to halt these attempts, the 3d Marines continued Operation Virginia Ridge and launched Operation Idaho Canyon.

Idaho Canyon

The first day of July found Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines engaged in Operation Virginia Ridge. Enemy activity within the area of operations, south of the DMZ, was relatively light, consisting of sporadic rocket attacks against Marine installations at Alpha-4 and Charlie-2, north of Cam Lo, point and sniper contacts, and attempts at interdicting Routes 9 and 561 with mines and other surprise firing devices. Countering the enemy, Lieutenant Colonel David G. Herron's 1st Battalion continued search and destroy operations in the vicinity of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, north of Fire Support Base Fuller, while the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle, generally deployed to the southwest, provided security for Khe Gio Bridge, Route 9, and conducted extensive search and destroy operations within the northern portion of the Mai Loc TAOR to the south. Lieutenant Colonel Richard C. Schulze's 3d Battalion occupied and provided security for fixed positions along Route 561, from Alpha-4 to the Cam Lo District Headquarters on Route 9, conducted search and destroy operations west of 561, and deployed Company L for one week along Song Rao Vinh, south of Route 9.

Although Simlik's Marines caught an ever-increasing number of enemy troops, small groups of



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193197

Infantrymen of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines patrol the hills surrounding Khe Gia Bridge and Route 9, the vital road linking Dong Ha with Vandegrift Combat Base.

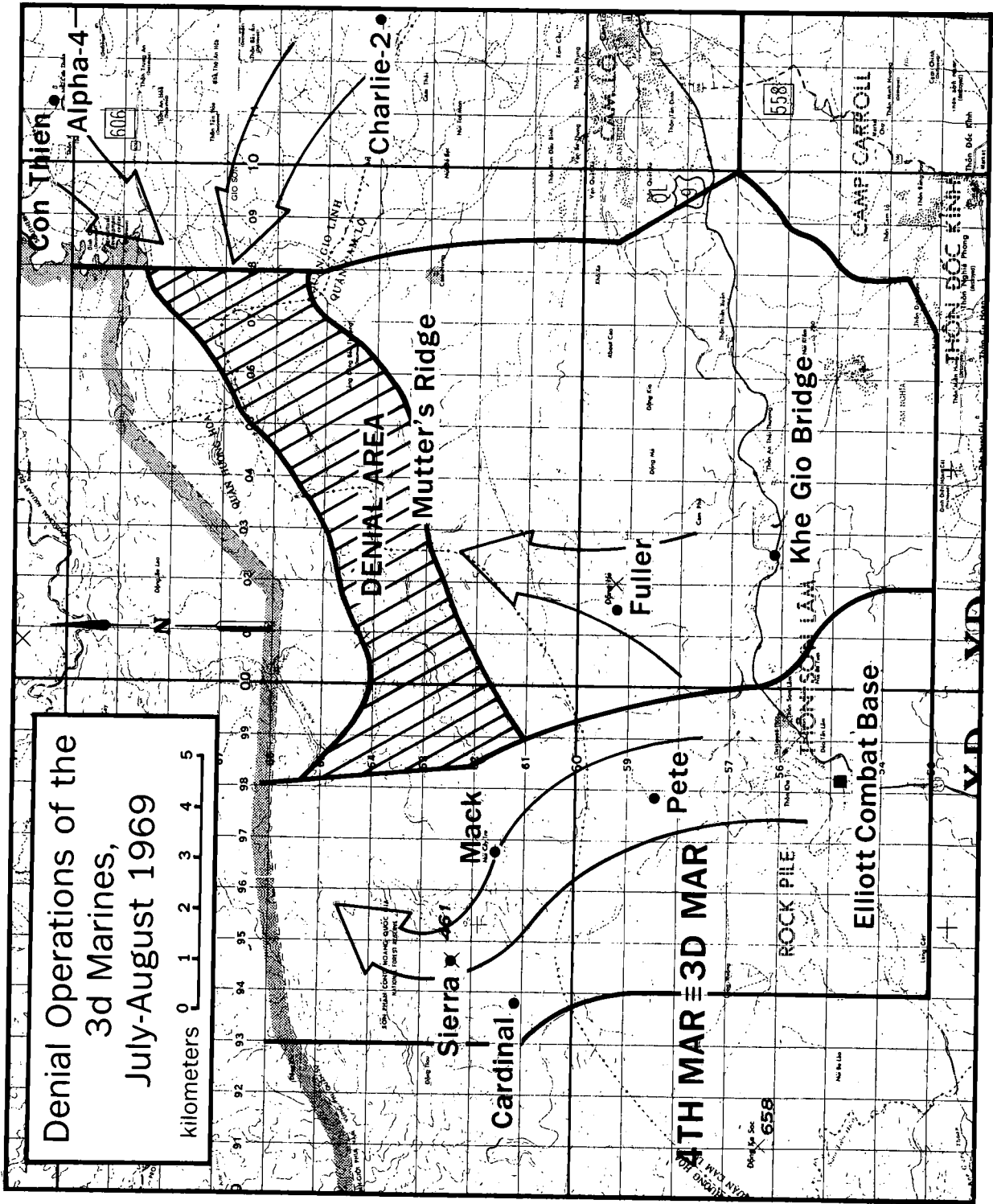
NVA continued to infiltrate the DMZ and move south. Aggressive 1st Battalion patrols north of Fuller, in the Mutter's Ridge-Helicopter Valley area, however, discouraged any attempt to bring in larger units. When engagements did take place, hit-and-run and attacks by fire remained the enemy's main tactic. In order to limit this small but steady stream of infiltrators, the 3d Marines adopted a new technique, the Denial Stingray Concept.

Under the concept, the regiment established a denial zone centered on Mutter's Ridge, three kilometers south of the DMZ. Seismic intrusion devices then were implanted along known infiltration routes, and beginning on 7 July, CS gas crystals dropped along streams, in valleys, and on any possible redoubt area within the zone: an average of three gas drops were made per day. The enemy, upon encountering the gas, would, it was thought, be forced to use well-known infiltration trails, along which the sensor devices were planted. As the seismic instruments were activated, massive air and artillery fires would be brought to bear. To detect infiltration through or around the denial zone, squad-size "hunter-killer" or Stingray patrols, possessing the capability of operating in the field for four days without resupply and of directing air and

artillery, would be deployed, one per 1,000-meter square, south of the zone.

Simlik's Marines employed the denial technique for approximately two weeks, beginning 9 July. Although there were no sensor activations indicating enemy attempts at infiltration within the zone, Lieutenant Colonel Herron kept Captain James M. McAdams' Company A and Captain Gary E. Carlson's Company C continually engaged in checking the zone for any signs of enemy activity, and in measuring the persistency of the gas. With the discovery, on 22 July, that the air-delivered gas was lightly persistent CS1 instead of the requested, more persistent CS2 crystals, it became imperative that the denial zone and the area north, between it and the DMZ, be physically searched by Marines on foot to determine if an enemy build-up had taken place. Consequently, the following day, Colonel Simlik ordered the two companies to move north, through the zone, toward the DMZ. This shift resulted in a number of significant engagements, during which the companies killed a total of 43 NVA troops.

Moving west toward Mutter's Ridge at dusk on the 26th, McAdams' 2d Platoon observed five enemy soldiers approaching its position through the thick stands of elephant grass which covered the region. The pla-



See Reference Map, Sections 1, 2

toon halted its advance, and took the five under fire with small arms and grenades, driving them into a ravine approximately 100 meters southwest of its position. Moving in squad blocking forces, the platoon commander then directed 60mm mortar fire on the enemy position. The platoon maintained its positions throughout the night in an effort to halt any enemy attempt at escape.

The following morning, as the 2d Platoon resumed its southwestward advance toward the 1st Platoon, it engaged an enemy force of undetermined strength. Batteries of Lieutenant Colonel Morgan W. West's 1st Battalion, 12th Marines fired missions to the north, blocking possible escape routes, while fixed-wing aircraft strafed the enemy position, "blowing bodies apart."³ By noon, the 1st Platoon had killed five and the 2d three; the dead were clean shaven, with close haircuts, and dressed in fresh green uniforms, indicating recent infiltration from the North. Preceded by two additional flights of fixed-wing, both platoons then pushed north in pursuit. During the next two days, McAdams' company searched a six kilometer-square area bordering the DMZ, counting 40 NVA killed—17 by small arms, 10 by air, and 13 by artillery.

Having successfully searched the denial zone and the area lying between it and the DMZ, the two companies then reoriented their advance toward the southeast in order to serve as a mobile blocking force for a combined search and destroy operation through the Cam Hung Valley. At month's end, Lieutenant Colonel Herron's 1st Battalion remained split; two companies saturated the northern portion of the area of operations with patrols and ambushes, while two companies provided security for FSB Fuller, Khe Gio Bridge, Route 9, and Seabee road construction crews.

With the end of Operation Virginia Ridge on 16 July, Simlik's 3d Marines moved immediately into Operation Idaho Canyon. Although the concept remained essentially the same as that of Virginia Ridge, a number of changes were made within the area of operations. Due to the redeployment of the 9th Marines and the assumption of its area of operations by the 4th Marines, an extension of the regiment's western boundary took place. The expanded area of operations resulted in the minor realignment of the regiment's three battalions: while the 1st Battalion continued its role in the Denial Stingray Concept, the 2d Battalion began search and destroy operations north of Elliott Combat Base, and Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's 3d



Marine Corps Historical Collection
The point man with a rifle squad from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines carefully moves through the jungle while on patrol south of the Demilitarized Zone.

Battalion continued operations west of Charlie-2 along Route 561.

Enemy activity within the eastern third of the area of operations at the beginning of Operation Idaho Canyon was generally small in scale and brief in duration, consisting of encounters with NVA reconnaissance teams of two to three men. In the latter part of July, NVA soldiers became more daring, launching strong attacks against elements of Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's 3d Battalion, operating in the Cam Hung. On 25 July, while searching four kilometers west of Charlie-2 for a reported large enemy force, First Lieutenant Terry L. Engle's Company I received fifteen 60mm mortar rounds, RPG, and small arms fire from a treeline north of its position. Engle's Marines countered with small arms while batteries of the 12th Marines shelled and then three fixed-wing flights raked the area with napalm, 750-pound, and Snakeye

bombs. Coordinating with Company C, 1st Battalion to the west and Company K, supported by Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, to the north, Engle moved his platoons out in a systematic search of the area following the brief but fierce exchange. "The whole area," reported Lieutenant Engle, "reeked of burning flesh and the stink of dead. We could find only small bits of flesh and guts laying in all the trees," grim testimony to the ferocity of the air attack. As the company moved through the area, hindered somewhat by "still burning timber and napalm," the Marines counted 20 NVA dead, possibly more, killed by air; large amounts of mortar ammunition; and two complete 60mm mortars.⁴

The following morning, as Company I swept west and then east toward Charlie-2, Captain Paul B. Goodwin's Company K, supported by tanks, moved south, encountering heavy 82mm mortar fire on the 27th, and strong enemy resistance the following night. Shortly after midnight, while occupying sites south of the destroyed village of Gio Son, a platoon from Goodwin's company ambushed a small group of NVA moving down a trail, killing six and capturing two AK47 assault rifles. Two hours later, in presumed retaliation for the beating two days before by Engle's company, 35 to 40 NVA attacked the night defensive position of Goodwin's company. Concentrating their heaviest fire on the tanks, the attackers hit three, killing an equal number of Marines while wounding six. Goodwin's Marines repulsed the attack with strong machine gun and small arms fire, suffering few additional casualties. A search of the perimeter the following morning revealed numerous blood trails and drag marks, but only two enemy dead.

On 28 July, the 3d Marines assumed operational control of the 1st Brigade's 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, supported by Company C, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor. In addition to providing security for Con Thien and Route 561, elements of the two Army battalions moved west, conducting search and destroy operations in the northern reaches of the Cam Hung Valley. As the infantry progressed, searching within one to two kilometers of the DMZ, the number of engagements with increasingly larger groups of NVA infiltrators rose. On 7 August, while Company D, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry searched through an extensive bunker complex, 1,000 meters south of the zone's southern boundary, an estimated two enemy companies attacked. Although the intensity of combat varied throughout the day, a number of sharp exchanges of small arms and automatic weapons fire did take place, resulting

in a total of 56 NVA killed and 26 weapons captured. Three Army infantrymen lost their lives and 13 received wounds in the daylong engagement.

With the beginning of a new month, the enemy shifted his effort away from the eastern portion of the Idaho Canyon area of operations to the western third. While enemy rockets and mortars intermittently pounded Con Thien and Charlie-2, and as elements of Lieutenant Colonels Herron's and Schulze's battalions continued their aggressive patrols, Marines of Lieutenant Colonel William S. Daniels' 2d Battalion engaged an ever-increasing number of fresh, energetic NVA troops.*

Operating northwest of Elliott Combat Base, Daniels' battalion centered its attention on Mutter's Ridge: Company H operated south of the ridge; Company E moved to the northwest; Company F searched to the northeast; while Company G provided security for Elliott. Each company in the field established a primary patrol base and then sent out squad-size patrols, ensuring maximum coverage of the area to be searched. Enemy activity during July had been extremely light as the NVA avoided contact and appeared to be skirting the battalion's area of operation; all was to change in August.

On the 7th, Captain Shawn W. Leach's Company F, while moving onto high ground two kilometers east of LZ Mack, atop Nui Oay Tre, encountered an estimated two companies of NVA in fortified positions. Aided by fixed-wing and artillery, Captain Leach ordered his 1st and 2d Platoons to seize the terrain. But with each heavily fought Marine gain, the enemy counterattacked with at least a reinforced platoon, forcing both Marine platoons to again withdraw. Although additional artillery and air strikes softened the enemy position, Leach's Marines could not make headway due to shortages of ammunition, high casualties, and a napalm-ignited brush fire which eventually drove the 2d Platoon into a heavily wooded area devoid of landing zones for the evacuation of wounded and resupply. Prior to dusk, a platoon from Company A, 1st Battalion helilifted into a landing zone several kilometers to the rear of Company F to reinforce the company's advance the following morning.

Company F resumed the attack on 8 August, meeting unexpectedly light resistance. By dusk, Leach's Marines seized the high ground, counting 46 NVA dead

*Lieutenant Colonel William S. Daniels replaced Lieutenant Colonel James J. McMonagle as Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines on 2 August.



Marine Corps Historical Collection
A Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 crew chief and Navy corpsman aid a wounded rifleman, who within minutes would be flown to a division medical facility or Navy hospital ship offshore.

and capturing 10 weapons. Documents found on the battlefield indicated that the NVA were members of the *1st* and *3d* Battalions, *9th* NVA Regiment, *304th* NVA Division, units new to the area of operations.

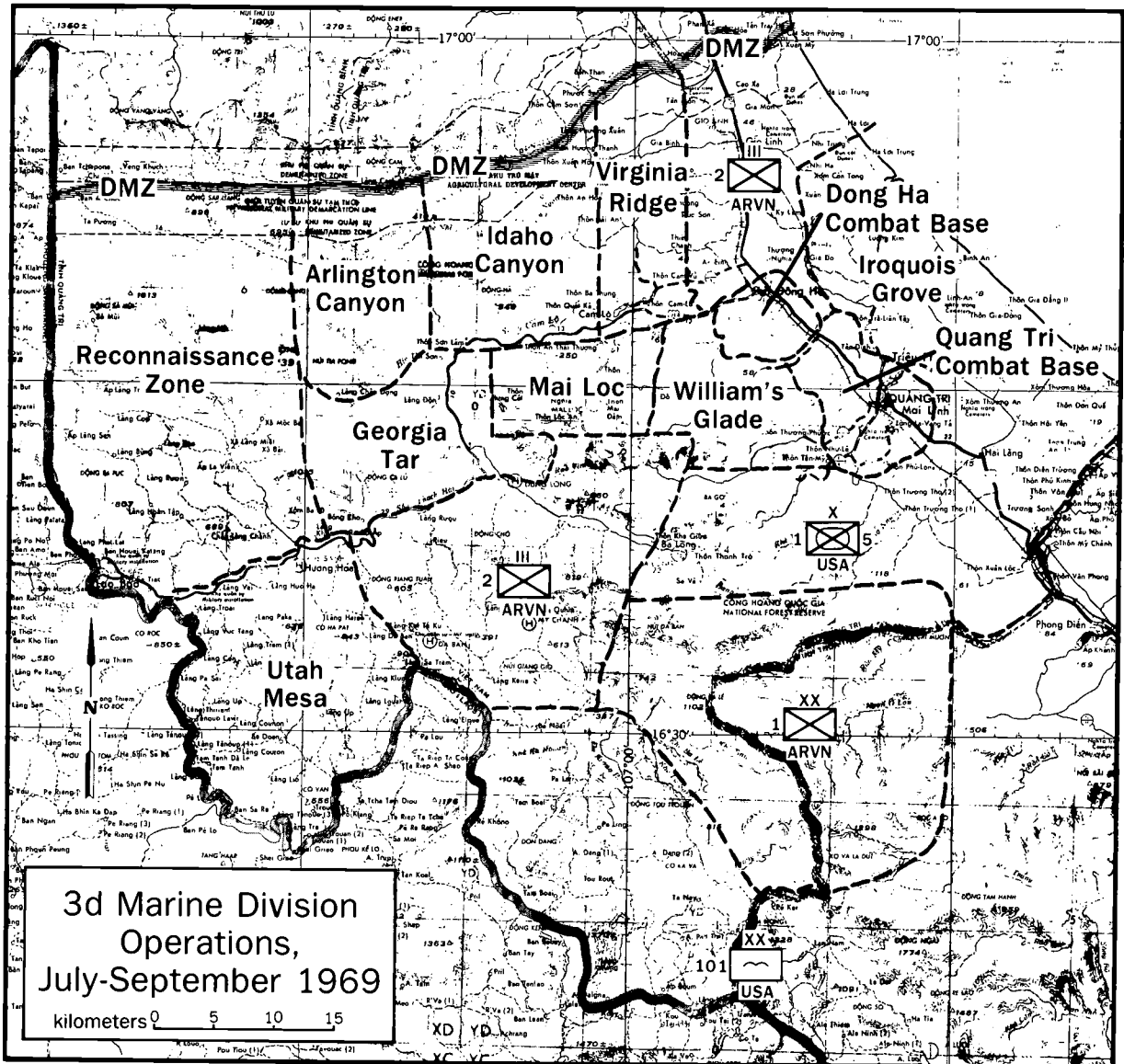
Two days later, while in night defensive positions northwest of LZ Sierra, a second reinforced company of the *9th* Regiment attacked the battalion's 81mm Mortar Platoon and 3d Platoon of Captain Paul J. Sinnott's Company E with grenades, satchel charges, and small arms fire. All communication with the platoons was lost for approximately an hour, forcing Batteries A and B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines at Elliott to cease fire. Although the enemy company penetrated that portion of the perimeter manned by the mortar platoon, Sinnott's Marines staged a vicious fight, finally reestablishing their lines at sunrise. Within the perimeter lay 13 Marine dead and 58 wounded along with 17 NVA bodies.

Meanwhile, less than 1,000 meters to the southwest, other elements of the *9th* hit Sinnott's 1st Platoon with a heavy ground and mortar attack from the west. The platoon returned fire, held its position with the assistance of accurate artillery and air strikes, and, accounted for 19 NVA dead. During the firefight, the platoon reported observing women removing enemy wounded from the battlefield. The 1st Platoon suffered six killed and 17 wounded in the predawn attack.

Soon after sunrise on the 10th, Lieutenant Colonel Daniels ordered Company A, 1st Battalion to link up with the three beleaguered platoons. But a number of problems were to delay the consolidation. Medical evacuation helicopters, given priority over those to be used in the troop lift, suffered a number of mechanical difficulties forcing them to return to Vandegrift. At the same time, accompanying Huey gunships repeatedly ran out of fuel and left station prior to the arrival of backup medical evacuation helicopters, again prolonging the evacuation of casualties. The shifting of landing zones due to incoming mortar rounds and the aircrafts' need to refuel delayed the lifts another six hours. It was not until late afternoon that Company A arrived in the objective area. During the interval, Sinnott consolidated his 1st and 2d Platoons, and with the arrival of Company A, the company, with the remnants of the 3d and Mortar Platoons, established a night defensive position in preparation for a coordinated attack the following morning.

Before an assault could be launched, the division ordered the battalion to withdraw. Under cover of darkness, the battalion moved south, leaving Company A to ensure the evacuation of the dead. The following morning, helicopters extracted Sinnott's company, lifting it to Cua Viet for a period of rest, reorganization, and subsequent security duty under the operational control of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The remainder of Daniels' battalion continued moving south on foot. Several days later, it shifted its operations to the eastern portion of the Idaho Canyon area, west of Cam Lo.

As a result of the attacks on Companies E and F and the increased enemy activity in the western sector of Idaho Canyon, Colonel Simlik issued an order which prevented any but platoon-size day patrols within the area three kilometers south of the DMZ, and also ordered that within five kilometers of the zone, company night defensive positions would be established after dark with all platoons physically consolidated. There were no size requirements placed on



See Reference Map, Sections 1-8, 10-13, 16-18

movement south of the five-kilometer line. Simlik's orders later were incorporated into a division regulation which also directed all companies to move at least 1,000 meters per day and prohibited independent platoon operations. The forced movement of 1,000 meters was not well received by Marines in the field, as First Lieutenant Engle noted: "this got to be quite tiring. I believed it helped a few times, but many times it put my company in jeopardy, because I was starting to form a routine . . . I felt it was stupid tactics, but this came all the way from the top."⁵

In mid-August, Lieutenant Colonel Schulze's battalion moved north and west of Charlie-2, its security mission at the outpost having been assumed by elements

of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). On the 11th, prior to the move, while sweeping west of the base, Company K engaged a small group of NVA. The enemy immediately broke contact. Continuing its sweep, the company, a short time later, surprised two NVA sapper platoons in the process of constructing bunkers. While artillery, gunships, and fixed-wing aircraft strafed the area, Captain Paul B. Goodwin's Marines fought the enemy sappers with mortar and small arms. A reaction force, consisting of one platoon from Company I with tanks, moved out from Charlie-2 and linked up with Goodwin's Marines, as elements of Company M secured blocking positions. The combined force assaulted and then searched the

enemy redoubt, the battle raging throughout most of the day. Goodwin's Marines eventually found 19 enemy dead and large stocks of enemy equipment, while suffering 23 wounded in the engagement.

Following the brief but heavy fighting west of Charlie-2, Schulze's battalion shifted its operations into the western portion of the Idaho Canyon area on the 13th, replacing Lieutenant Colonel Daniels' battalion. The 3d Battalion, in addition to being ordered to conduct search and destroy operations in the area of Mutter's Ridge, assumed responsibility for securing Elliott Combat Base and Route 9. Daniels' battalion, once again consolidated, moved into the southeastern portion of the area of operations and provided security for the Cam Lo District Headquarters, Charlie-3 Bridge, engineer construction crews on Route 558 south of Cam Lo, and portions of Route 9. The 1st Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Heron, remained in the center third of the area of operations conducting search and destroy operations east of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, while providing security for Khe Gio Bridge, Fire Support Base Fuller, and its portion of Route 9. The 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, along with the northeastern portion of the area of operations centered on Con Thien, was returned to the Army's 1st Brigade.

Few engagements took place throughout the area of operations following the mid-August shift in battalions. Although Herron's Marines sighted large groups of enemy infiltrators west of Dong Ha Mountain (Fire Support Base Fuller), and artillery and fixed-wing strikes were called, subsequent searches revealed comparatively few bodies in view of the numbers reported. As a result, Colonel Simlik increased the number of patrols and ambushes north of Fuller in order to lessen the possibility of enemy troops filtering down to interdict Route 9.

While Daniels' Marines engaged few enemy troops once they left Mutter's Ridge and moved east, 3d Battalion Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Ernest E. Evans, Jr., who had replaced Schulze on the 20th, were not as lucky. On the 22d, Company L, operating near LZ Sierra, 1,200 meters west of the 2d Battalion's encounter earlier in the month, came upon two reinforced NVA platoons occupying well-constructed, camouflaged bunkers situated in extremely steep, heavily vegetated terrain. Although one platoon of First Lieutenant James A. Burns' company was pinned down for a short time by two enemy .30-caliber machine guns, AK47s, and grenades, aggressive at-

tacks by the remainder of the company, aided by air and artillery, enabled the platoon to withdraw with few casualties. The next day, following air and artillery fires, the company swept through the extensive complex, destroying the enemy redoubt along with 10 troops and an equal number of weapons.

Toward the end of the month the level of enemy activity again rose in the western two-thirds of the area of operations. On the 28th, Captain Gerald H. Sampson's Company B, 1st Battalion began a five-day-long series of engagements, resulting in 13 enemy killed. The first occurred approximately two kilometers north of Fuller when a reinforced NVA sapper platoon probed the company's night position. A vicious grenade, RPG, and small arms battle then ensued, during which the Marines of Company B repulsed the attack at a cost of three casualties—among them Captain Sampson. Three days later and 700 meters further north, Marines manning the perimeter observed seven to 10 NVA moving toward the company's night position, preparing again to attack. The Marines took the enemy under small arms fire, killing three and capturing their weapons. As the company swept north near the crest of Mutter's Ridge on the 1st of September, four more enemy troops were caught by Marine sharpshooters.

As Company B and the remainder of the regiment settled into night defensive positions on 2 September, Typhoon Diane swept ashore with 50-knot winds, wreaking havoc throughout the province. Despite little warning, the companies weathered the two-day storm. As First Lieutenant Terry Engle, Commanding Officer, Company I, 3d Battalion, later reported: "Somebody had failed to inform us that a typhoon was on the way Being ill prepared and not having any time to set up good hootches or dig real good holes, I suffered some casualties, mainly eight cases of trenchfoot, and felt I was going to suffer a lot more because of the cold, the rain, and the people standing in the water all night long The weather also hurt the NVA quite a bit, so I didn't worry about being attacked, at least during the typhoon."⁶

Installations, however, suffered most; roofs were blown off buildings, tents leveled, and there was extensive water damage to supplies and equipment. Fortunately, casualties were few throughout the regimental area: one Marine was seriously injured in a bunker collapse, and one killed when a watchtower at Cua Viet in which he was standing toppled to the ground.

After the short hiatus caused by Diane, enemy activity around LZ Sierra and LZ Mack in the western



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Despite rough terrain and suffocating temperatures, men of Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines were required by division order to cover 1,000 meters per day while on patrol.

third of the Idaho Canyon area of operations again increased, although incidents were generally small in scale and brief. On the morning of 5 September, as First Lieutenant Engle's Company I occupied a night position near LZ Mack, company Marines detected movement beyond the perimeter. One NVA, thought to be point for a larger unit, was taken under fire. The call then went out, "we have movement on the lines," and Engle's Marines immediately went to 100 percent alert, donning their flak jackets, helmets, and manning the perimeter. Engle then called artillery, 61mm mortar, and three flights of fixed-wing within 400 meters of the company's position. The 3d Platoon then swept the area, finding three wounded enemy soldiers, two of whom were evacuated. During later interrogation of one of the prisoners, it was learned that he was part of four 10-man teams from the *1st Company, 1st Battalion, 9th NVA Regiment* who were under orders to attack and overrun Company I. The prisoners, whose ages ranged from 14 to 16, had spent one month training in Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam, and one month in combat below the DMZ. He also stated that morale in his unit was low due to the lack of food and supplies, destroyed by American air strikes, and that few of his comrades were willing to fight because they had received no mail from home in months. As later events would show, the prisoner spoke only for himself.

Another pause occurred between 8 and 11 September due to a ceasefire agreement, in observance of Ho Chi Minh's death on 3 September. A division order directed companies in the field to continue to move at least 1,000 meters per day, maintain a "defensive attitude," and not to call for artillery or air unless engaged. With his company on Mutter's Ridge, First Lieutenant Engle felt the order unjustified due to the "dangerous" location. His fears for the safety of his men proved accurate for on the 10th, as Company I swept through a site below LZ Sierra where several enemy troops had been observed, his 1st Platoon unknowingly walked into a typical "U"-shaped ambush, initiated by command detonated mines, small arms, and automatic weapons fire. Returning fire, Engle's Marines withdrew and called for artillery, but due to the truce, they were informed they would be limited to two rounds per gun, after three adjustments to register on target. Huey gunships, although under similar truce restraints, pounded the area with rockets, killing six NVA. Sweeping the ambush site, Engle's troops found an extensive complex of fighting holes and one additional NVA, all of which they des-

troyed. Company I then moved east, "that continual click, . . . to get out of the area," off Mutter's Ridge and south to Elliott Combat Base, where the Marines received beer, got haircuts and shaves, and relieved Company L on the base perimeter.⁷

Three days later, as Company L moved towards Mutter's Ridge to replace Company I, a scout dog alerted to enemy troops ahead, and First Lieutenant James A. Burns ordered a machine gun brought to the front. An unknown size NVA force then opened fire with small arms, RPGs, and grenades. The point platoon immediately withdrew after taking a number of casualties, including the company's commanding officer, Lieutenant Burns, and artillery, 81mm mortars, and a fixed-wing C-47 "Spooky" gunship was called on the enemy position. A sweep the following morning revealed eight enemy killed and numerous weapons scattered about the ambush site. Later the same day, Company L, now under Captain William D. Wester, moved south to LZ Bird where it joined Company M, and picked up a section of 81mm mortars for whom the company was to provide security.⁸

Meanwhile, a reinforced NVA platoon waylaid First Lieutenant Richmond D. O'Neill's Company K, while it moved toward LZ Sierra from Mack on the 15th, with claymore mines hung in trees, .30-caliber machine guns, grenade, RPG, and small arms fire. Initial casualties among O'Neill's Marines were two killed and 11 wounded. Forty-five minutes after the first firefight, the company began receiving 60mm enemy mortar fire which lasted approximately four hours, adding two more killed and 25 wounded. Lieutenant O'Neill then pulled his Marines back and allowed artillery, mortars, gunships, and fixed-wing to pound the ambush site and suspected enemy mortar positions. The Marines of Company K, in a sweep of the area, found eight NVA bodies, most killed by air.⁹

Shortly after midnight two days later, on Hill 154, adjacent to LZ Bird, a reinforced NVA company firing RPGs, small arms, and throwing grenades struck at Company L, now under the command of First Lieutenant Richard C. Hoffman. After two hours of vicious fighting, the enemy penetrated the 2d Platoon's lines, but soon were pushed back. Although Hoffman's Marines reestablished the perimeter, they continued to receive a heavy volume of RPG and machine gun fire from the northeast, despite the accurate support of five batteries of the 12th Marines, two "Spookys," and three flights of gunships. The assault and subsequent attack by fire lasted until first light when Hoffman sent out patrols to clear the field. As



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800600

Swollen by heavy monsoon rains, one of the many streams in the zone near Mutter's Ridge is forded by the men of 3d Battalion, 3d Marines during Operation Idaho Canyon.

the company's executive officer, First Lieutenant James P. Rigoulot, reported:

The whole area was littered with chicombs [grenades], pieces of flesh, skin; we found a leg down the trail. There were quite a few of them out there. One machine gun hole had 13 gooks stacked up in front of it; the nearest one was about ten feet away. That one machine gun probably saved us from being overrun; they were right on us. The area was literally infested with them all over the place. We had numerous sightings from our position on the high ground; we could see them crossing rivers and milling around the area below.¹⁰

Hoffman's men killed a total of 41, while suffering 13 dead and 23 wounded.

At 0805 the following morning, a "Bald Eagle" reaction force, Captain David M. Jordan's Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, helilifted from Vandegrift Combat Base into LZ Cardinal, southwest of Sierra. Moving out of the landing zone and then along a ridgeline to the southeast toward the beleaguered company near LZ Bird, Jordan's point element spotted and then took two enemy troops under fire. Once engaged, the NVA blew a claymore mine, forcing the rest of the company to withdraw a short distance, set up a 360-degree perimeter defense, and lay down a heavy base of fire in support of the marooned point. Gain-

ing immediate fire superiority, Jordan ordered a squad to bring the 11-man point element, nine of whom were casualties, back into the company position. Gunships and artillery strafed and bombarded the suspected enemy position and a helicopter arrived to evacuate the dead and wounded.

The exchange continued throughout the day as Jordan's Marines countered the hail of enemy grenades, heavy automatic weapons, and accurate sniper fire. Late in the afternoon, before the company could again move, enemy mortar rounds began impacting on the company's position, killing four more Marines. At dusk, another medical evacuation helicopter removed the second group of casualties, after which the company settled in for the night without the requested ammunition resupply, denied by the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. With a "Spooky" gunship on station and artillery on call, Jordan's Marines spent an "extremely quiet" night; not a shot was fired. It was so quiet that Jordan figured the 3d Marines "wrote us off the books; they thought they had lost another Marine company up there" on Mutter's Ridge.¹¹

The following morning, the company swept unopposed through the evacuated enemy position, finding nine bodies, numerous arms, and a large quantity

of equipment. As Captain Jordan later reported, "the enemy had a tremendous amount of Marine 782 gear [packs, cartridge belts], or at least U.S. issue-type, whether it came from Marine units is unknown. But they had so many Marine-type haversacks that they were using them for sandbags. They would fill the haversacks with dirt and were using these for sandbags around their positions." Not wanting to retrace its previous route of advance, Company I moved southeast along the ridgeline and then onto Hill 154, from where it lifted to Vandegrift. During their two-day sojourn with the 3d Marines, Jordan's Marines suffered nine killed and 38 wounded.¹²

After the heavy ground attack on the 17th, First Lieutenant Hoffman's company and a 63-man reaction platoon from Company H, 2d Battalion, moved off Hill 154 and onto a small hill, 300 meters southeast of LZ Bird, overlooking the Song Cam Lo. Early on the morning of the 19th, Hoffman's Marines awoke to the sound of explosions, signaling yet another attack. Shortly after 0400, an estimated NVA platoon hit the company with a heavy volume of grenades and RPG rounds; the enemy employed no small arms. Although Hoffman requested artillery, there was no illumination to adjust the rounds; "they hit all over the place." The company, even though heavily engaged for more than an hour, took no casualties in the attack. However, later that morning, after observing and then killing three NVA crossing the river below, the company took two RPG rounds, one of which detonated a friendly mortar round, killing one Marine and wounding eight. These nine proved to be the last casualties the company took. That night the company moved to LZ Pete, linked up with Company M, and the next morning, lifted out of the area of operations. "When we left LZ Pete," the executive officer reported, "we lifted out with a fighting strength, counting attachments, of 92 people, and we walked in [on 13 August] with 156."¹³

Although a majority of the activity within the area of operations centered around Landing Zones Sierra and Mack during the last weeks of Idaho Canyon, the 1st and 2d Battalions persisted in their pursuit of the NVA. Working north of Fire Support Base Fuller, Lieutenant Colonel Herron's 1st Battalion continued to conduct aggressive search and destroy operations east of Mutter's Ridge and Helicopter Valley, meeting light enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Daniels' 2d Battalion, occupying the easternmost portion of the area of operations, saturated the Cam Lo District with

patrols and ambushes, and like the 1st Battalion, it too had little contact. Both battalions continued their efforts until mid-September when the regiment alerted Daniels' battalion and then directed it to relieve the 3d Battalion at Elliott Combat Base and on Mutter's Ridge on the 19th. But before the shift could take place, the division ordered the 3d Marines to cease all offensive operations and to stand down in preparation for redeployment from Vietnam.

During the 68-day operation, a marked change occurred in the character and tactics of the enemy. At the outset, the NVA operated in small units, concentrating on ambushes, stand-off attacks by fire, and minelaying along roads, all under the cover of darkness. By the 23d day, 7 August, Colonel Simlik's Marines faced well-equipped, well-trained enemy units of battalion size, later determined to be the three battalions of the *9th NVA Regiment*. Surprise, use of heavy firepower, and a violent determination to maintain contact now characterized enemy initiated attacks. Engagements, previously terminated at sunrise, continued into daylight, where the enemy would be most vulnerable to Marine supporting arms. To counter the effects of these tactical changes, the 3d Marines employed deliberate, careful, and methodical search and destroy techniques, coupled with the intelligent use of artillery and air power, which left the NVA only three options: move to a new position, thereby exposing troops; remain in position and fight; or attack. And as the final totals, 563 enemy killed and 201 weapons captured, indicated, the 3d Marines proved ready and eager to meet the NVA in whichever course of action the enemy chose.

"A Significant Step"

The standdown of the 3d Marines signaled the beginning of the second phase of redeployment. In the midst of the first United States troop withdrawal from South Vietnam, consideration was given to further troop reductions. At Midway in early June, President Nixon had suggested that a decision on future withdrawals would be made in August or shortly thereafter. Others recommended an accelerated withdrawal. Writing in the summer issue of *Foreign Affairs*, former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford proposed the withdrawal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year and all ground combat troops by the end of December 1970.¹⁴ On 19 June, in commenting on Clifford's proposal, President Nixon stated: "We have started to withdraw forces. We will withdraw more. Another decision will be made in August." Refusing to indicate

a specific number, the President did note that “as far as how many will be withdrawn by the end of the year, or the end of next year, I would hope that we could beat Mr. Clifford’s timetable.”¹⁵

As a result of the President’s comments at the June news conference, planning for additional troop reductions began at all levels. MACV was to assess progress and submit a proposal on further reductions together with a detailed troop list by 10 August in preparation for a presidential announcement on the subject around the 15th, and withdrawal in September. Both MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff assumed that the second withdrawal would be 25,000, although the President and Secretary of Defense Laird had expressed a desire that the total reduction for the year was to exceed the Clifford figure of 100,000.

On 30 July, President Nixon paid an unscheduled visit to South Vietnam during the course of a trip to the Pacific and then to Europe. There he talked with both President Thieu and General Abrams not only

Two riflemen of Company M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines pause for a rest and cigarette during a heavy thunderstorm while on patrol just below Mutter’s Ridge.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800598



about the current situation, but also about further United States troop reductions.¹⁶ In Abrams’ conversations with Nixon, the general noted that while a second withdrawal of 25,000 was feasible, considering the improvements made by the RVNAF, he was opposed to a larger figure. Nevertheless, the President returned to Washington convinced that the next reduction could be more than 25,000 combat troops, with headquarters and support forces making up the difference.

Early in August, MACV and CinCPac submitted their assessments of the initial troop withdrawal and their views on future reductions. Both recommended a maximum reduction of 25,000. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, likewise, recommended a withdrawal of 25,000 which could begin in late September and be completed by the end of November, barring a significant change in the enemy situation. They could not recommend a higher figure due to current enemy disposition throughout South Vietnam and status of the RVNAF, still overly dependent on extensive American support.

Unwilling to limit the reduction to 25,000, both the President and Secretary Laird asked the Joint Chiefs to reconsider their recommendations and to propose an alternative that would reduce the troop ceiling well below that of 499,500 proposed by MACV. What emerged at the end of August was a revised Phase II package that reduced the Vietnam authorization to 484,000 by 15 December. Of the 40,500 spaces included, 9,500 would not be filled, meaning an actual reduction of 31,000. In submitting the revised package to the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that such a reduction without substantial decline in the enemy threat placed not only the remaining troops, but the Government of South Vietnam at serious risk and was without justification on military grounds.

Planning for redeployment went hand-in-hand with that of Vietnamization. On 25 August, the Joint Chiefs submitted the final Vietnamization, or T-Day plan to the Secretary of Defense, completing the exercise begun with the preparation of the initial plan in May. In addition to the objectives set forth in the initial plan, the final plan included a number of military guidelines: emphasis was to be placed on combined military operations, protection of populated areas, pacification, and improvement of the RVNAF in accordance with the “one war” concept; combined United States-South Vietnamese operations would

continue out of necessity and in order to improve the effectiveness of the RVNAF; as feasible, as United States units and then South Vietnamese were withdrawn from selected areas, Regional and Popular Forces and then internal security forces were to assume responsibility; American residual forces were not only to furnish the South Vietnamese with combat and service support, but to relieve South Vietnamese forces of responsibility for pacification and be prepared for emergency reinforcement; as combat responsibility progressively was transferred to the RVNAF, U.S. forces would be redeployed; and current programs whose goal was to expand South Vietnamese forces would be continued. Incorporating the timetables included in the initial plan, the Joint Chiefs proposed a reduction of 264,000 in 18 months and 282,000 in 42 months. As in the initial plan, they concluded that Vietnamization should proceed on a "cut-and-try" basis, with periodic assessments of the situation determining the pace.

By early September, President Nixon had reviewed both the final plan for Vietnamization and Phase II redeployment recommendations. On the 12th, he met with his political and military advisers and informed them that he had accepted the Joint Chiefs of Staff revised redeployment package and that he would announce it formally on the 16th. As to the final plan for Vietnamizing the war, the President made no decision, but he did specify that any further troops withdrawals would be based on full consideration of the three previously set-forth criteria. By postponing a decision, the President in effect adopted the Joint Chiefs' "cut-and-try" approach to redeployment.¹⁷

In a televised statement on the night of the 16th, the President announced that "after careful consideration with my senior civilian and military advisers and in full consultation with the Government of Vietnam, I have decided to reduce the authorized troop ceiling in Vietnam to 484,000 by December 15." Under the newly authorized ceiling, he noted, a minimum of 60,000 troops would be withdrawn by mid-December. It was, he concluded, "a significant step" in which "both sides turned their faces toward peace rather than toward conflict and war."¹⁸ With the President's announcement, movement planning within the Pacific Command got underway.

Planning by FMFPac and III MAF for Phase II, code-named Keystone Cardinal, of the division's redeployment had been carried out simultaneously with the deployment of the 9th Marines and was completed

with the departure of the last elements of the regimental landing team. The timing and composition of the Marine contingent of the 31,000-man reduction, however, remained unresolved until the President's announcement, despite the fact that only two choices existed: Colonel Simlik's 3d Marines or Colonel Goggin's 4th Marines. Once FMFPac and III MAF had made the decision, it remained closely held, as Colonel Simlik later remembered:

We were in the ridiculous situation of the Division commander being forbidden to tell the Regimental commander that his regiment would be deployed out of Vietnam. But there were rumors, and I let the Division staff know that I knew that my regiment would be moving. There were some comic-opera exchanges. I guess the administration, Washington that is, was afraid the press would break the news before the event took place. But the press was not fooled. I recall reporters coming to my CP and saying, "Well, what is your reaction about the withdrawal?" And I had not been informed, officially, and I had to play it awfully dumb. And of course rumors got down to the troops, and this had an impact upon the fighting morale of the troops because nobody, of course, wanted to be the last man killed. And I'm convinced the enemy had some wind of it, too, because during that time they staged a couple of vicious local attacks against our patrols.¹⁹

With the president's announcement on the 16th, III MAF ordered the 3d Marines and its direct support elements (1st Battalion, 12th Marines; Company B, 3d Engineer Battalion; Company B, 11th Engineer Battalion; Company C, 3d Medical Battalion; Company B, 3d Motor Transport Battalion; Company B, 9th Motor Transport Battalion; Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion; Company A, 3d Shore Party Battalion; and the 3d Bridge Company), making up the regimental landing team, to stand down in preparation for redeployment on 1 October to the United States.

On 20 September, elements of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines lifted out of the field to Vandegrift Combat Base, and then moved by truck to Quang Tri Combat Base. "It was not an ordinary withdrawal from lines," noted Colonel Simlik, "no unit came on-line to relieve us. Other on-line units extended their lines in order to fill the large gap when we pulled out. And it was a large gap."²⁰ During the next two days, the remaining elements of the regiment and its support units withdrew from combat and moved to either Dong Ha or Quang Tri Combat Bases, where, because of the weather, they found themselves "hip high in mud."²¹

As elements of the 3d Marines withdrew, the 4th Marines shifted east, occupying Elliott Combat Base and Fire Support Base Fuller, and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) moved west, closing

the gap. A large portion of the 4th Marines area of operations was then redesignated a reconnaissance zone, and Fire Support Bases Russell, Cates, Shepherd, and Hill 950 leveled. After a short period, Vandegrift Combat Base, too, would be closed, as both the 1st ARVN Division and the 101st Airborne Division, which was to assume the mission of screening the western portion of Quang Tri Province, rejected the offer of occupying the vacated Marine bases, wishing instead to build new ones, as Major General William K. Jones later recalled:

We started closing back on Vandegrift. That meant closing down fire support bases, and it became obvious that the last one we wanted to close was Fuller because that was defending Vandegrift from the north there, of course, and Cates which was a brand new one that we'd built that overlooked Khe Sanh that was controlling Route 9 coming from west to east. At that stage of the game, the 101st Airborne was directed to take over. They were to have a screening mission in front of the 1st ARVN Division which was to take over the 3d Division headquarters at Dong Ha and the whole

area that we were vacating in Quang Tri. So, the 101st took a look and they decided they didn't want to keep any of our fire support bases. I don't understand why because they opened up some new ones and they weren't as good. It didn't make sense, but it was just one of those things. So we had to close down these bases.²²

Although preparations for the regimental landing team's redeployment went well, despite the limited time available, a number of problems arose. During the few days at Quang Tri and Dong Ha before either being flown to Da Nang for departure or transferred to another Marine unit under the "Mixmaster" program, 3d Marines tempers flared. "Marines who had fought a common enemy just a few days earlier, now fought each other." "I'm convinced," Colonel Simlik later recounted, "that part of the problem was caused by a group of journalists who came up while we were on-line and asked to interview troops I later learned that they asked a number of racially inflammatory questions. They segregated some black Marines,

President Nixon and South Vietnamese President Thieu, accompanied by, from left, Special Advisor Henry Kissinger, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and American Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, descend the steps of Independence Palace during the American president's unannounced visit to Saigon in July, when troop withdrawals were again discussed.

Department of Defense Photo (USA) SC651157





Department of Defense Photo (USA) C55922

Discussing the planned withdrawals, Gen Earle G. Wheeler, left, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen Creighton W. Abrams, center; and Adm John S. McCain, Commander in Chief, Pacific, meet at MACV Headquarters in Long Binh, outside of Saigon.

for instance, and asked, 'Isn't it true that you've done more than your share?' and this sort of thing. This eventually planted seeds of discontent which erupted in violence in the rear areas," resulting in the murder of one Marine.²³

With Simlik's ability to control the regiment "lessening rapidly in the fast moving events," the division requested that the troops be moved "out of the explosive environment as quickly as possible." Although FMFPac complied with the requested change in movement schedules, many continued to question the underlying reason. In answer, Colonel Raymond C. Damm, chief of the division's Redeployment Planning Group said that he "thought the Marine Corps could ill afford a racially inspired riot in the middle of a redeployment that the world was watching." With that response, all questioning ceased.²⁴

One of the most aggravating problems proved to be passing Department of Agriculture inspection. All gear, all equipment, and all vehicles being returned to the United States had to be spotless, so as to prevent the introduction of any foreign insect or plant disease. But with "the mud of Vietnam, with vehicles that had been in combat only a few days before, this was a very difficult task to accomplish." As a result, Marine engineers quickly set up hosing-down facilities at the Cua Viet embarkation point where all equipment was scrubbed before being loaded on board ship. It "was one of those little things which you don't ordinarily think of that gave us headaches," noted Colonel Simlik, "but it created all sorts of scheduling problems and initially slowed down our operations quite a bit."²⁵

Five days prior to the embarkation of the equipment and troops, III MAF informed the regiment that President Nixon was interested in journeying to the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro to welcome the 3d Marines. As Colonel Simlik later recounted:

We wiped the mud from our boots, and took 150 Marines eligible for rotation to the States down to the airbase at Da Nang. The word was that when we disembarked from the airplane at El Toro we were to be in starched utilities, bright new helmet covers, and spit-shined boots. FLC [Force Logistic Command] somehow rounded up the gear for us, and for three days we practiced getting on and off a 707 airplane so we would look sharp for the President We brought 150 from Dong Ha to Da Nang, and pared this down to 135, a 707 load When we landed at Okinawa, the first stop on the way back, we confounded the air controllers by staging a dress rehearsal. And so we flew back to the States, changing into new uniforms 15 minutes from El Toro. Of course, the President was not there; [Under] Secretary [of the Navy] John Warner was It was a strange war indeed.²⁶

Colonel Simlik, having not completed his tour, flew back to the 3d Marine Division and the mud of Dong Ha.

On 1 October, the rest of the 3d Marines departed Dong Ha for Da Nang where, on the 5th, they boarded the *Washburn* (LKA 108), *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2), and the *Bexar* (LPA 237). The majority of the regimental landing team's support elements remained behind, being scheduled to depart from Cua Viet. The following day, as the amphibious ships departed Da Nang Harbor, III MAF passed command of the 3d Marines to the 5th Marine Amphibious Brigade, Camp Pendleton, California. Of the 3d Marine Division's infan-

try regiments in Quang Tri Province, only the 4th Marines remained.

Specter of Anarchy

The incident of violence which erupted among the Marines of Colonel Simlik's regiment was symptomatic of the gradual deterioration of discipline and unrest affecting all the Armed Services. By late 1969, riots and acts of sabotage had occurred at a number of military bases and on board ship; officers and enlisted men alike had refused assignment to Vietnam; small groups of troops had refused to fight; drug abuse and minor defiance of regulations had become commonplace; and officers and noncommissioned officers had faced the threat of assassination ("fragging") by their own men. In addition, an ever-increasing number of servicemen had joined radical groups whose aims included ending the war and revolutionizing the Services, and militant blacks had set themselves apart by the use of "Black Power" symbols, and had actively challenged authority citing alleged discrimination as the basis of their discontent.

These problems facing the military resulted not only from the carrying over of the divisions and tensions then existing within American society, but from the nature of the Vietnam War itself. Unlike other conflicts, active combat in Vietnam was not continuous, resulting, as the war progressed, in increasing periods of boredom and restlessness. This boredom and restlessness oftentimes manifested itself in excessive drinking, drug abuse, and violence, especially among those troops occupying secure rear areas. Length of assignment, frequent personnel turnover, and inadequate training also had an affect, as did the prospect of redeployment. Men found it increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of purpose in a war that was unsupported at home and coming to an end without decisive results.

For III MAF Marines in 1969, the most disruptive and difficult to understand problem was that of violence among their ranks, violence toward officers and NCOs and violence among white and black Marines. "This war has produced one form of felony that no other war has ever had; more despicable and inexplicable thing [than] in any wars that I have ever seen," noted Colonel Robert H. Barrow. "And that is the felonious attack of one Marine against another, very often with a hand grenade." During World War II and Korea, he recalled, "you always heard these stories about somebody allegedly said that if so-and-so didn't

do such-and-such in the next battle, he would get it in the back. I don't think this ever happened. I don't think anyone ever recalls some officer or some NCO being killed in combat by his own troops intentionally. In Vietnam, yes. We had several of these."²⁷

The number of "fraggings," the attempted murder of an officer or NCO by an enlisted man, often by means of an M26 fragmentation grenade, increased dramatically in 1969. During the first five months of the year, the 3d Marine Division reported 15 such incidents.²⁸ Similar incidents also occurred in the 1st Division, 1st Aircraft Wing, and Force Logistic Command.* Of the 15 fraggings which took place in the 3d Marine Division, most occurred in secure rear areas such as Vandegrift and Quang Tri Combat Bases, and were committed by enlisted men against NCOs and junior officers. Motives varied from drug disputes and racial hatred to the desire to rid the unit of a particularly aggressive commander.

Of the 3d Marine Division incidents, the most indicative was that of the murder of First Lieutenant Robert Timothy Rohweller, Commanding Officer, Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines on 21 April. As Lieutenant Colonel Elliott R. Laine, Jr., commanding the battalion, recalled:

[Lieutenant Rohweller] was a mustang and, as a matter of fact, had a previous tour in Vietnam as a sergeant in Recon. He was a hardcharger and widely recognized as a superior leader As it happened, there were six Marines in the rear who didn't care to go forward and the 1stSgt was apparently unable to force them to do so. This continued for several days until Lt Rohweller left FSB Vandegrift for the company rear. Upon confronting the recalcitrant six, . . . the six conspired to kill the Lt by fragging him. Apparently aware that the confrontation was not finally resolved, Lt Rohweller was wary enough that he went to chow that evening with his .45 stuck in the waistband of his cammies, under his shirt, and later to the club, similarly armed. A frag grenade was acquired and two of the six . . . went to the hut where the Lt was sleeping The fragging itself involved one of the six [who] . . . rolled the grenade into the hootch Though he was quickly evacuated by jeep, [Lieutenant Rohweller] died within an hour or so.²⁹

The company executive officer immediately held a formation and the accused were apprehended. Of the six Marines involved, four were charged with the murder and of the four, one was granted immunity in exchange for his testimony against the others. The re-

*Records are nonexistent or incomplete as to the number of fraggings which took place in 1969 among the Marine units of III Marine Amphibious Force.

maining three were tried by courts-martial and two convicted and one found not guilty.

Procedures to deal with the apprehension and conviction of the perpetrators varied. Whether out of fear or friendship, Marines hesitated to turn in their peers, despite appeals which pointed out that it was "against their family upbringing, against their religion, against their concept of America and fair play, and of the Marine tradition." Initially, each individual commander had his own "pet idea" of what should be done, ranging from an immediate response to any intimidation, no matter how minor, to looking the other way. But by mid-1969, Major General William K. Jones, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, felt that the problem had grown to such an extent that a formal response was necessary, even demanded. "Basically," he recalled "it was that you just don't put up with this stuff and you go after these guys and you don't allow them to utilize the technique of intimidation to hide behind and to terrorize their fellow Marines."³⁰

In July, Jones issued a set of procedures to deal with the apprehension of individuals involved in acts of violence against Marines of the command. Under the procedures, any fragging or other act of violence would be met with a swift, massive reaction which was to be thorough, serious, and determined in detecting and apprehending violators. Military police or an infantry reaction force immediately would isolate the area of the incident. Commanders would assemble their men and conduct a roll call, so as to determine who was missing and who was in that area that should not be. All sergeants and below would then be ordered to their living quarters and directed to stay there until called for, while teams led by an officer searched the incident site and each tent or hut. Meanwhile, an interrogation area would be set up where Criminal Investigation Division personnel, assisted by the unit legal officer, would question each Marine about the incident privately, assuring him of the commanding general's promise to protect those who would identify the guilty and testify. This process would continue until

Marines of Headquarters and Service Company and Maintenance Company, Logistic Support Group Bravo meet in an intramural football game at Dong Ha. An active intramural sports program was one of many means used to defuse rising tensions in rear areas.

Abel Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center



all suspects had been identified and arrested. All leave and personnel rotations were to be postponed until the process was complete.³¹ In addition to the SOP, Jones also ordered all division clubs closed by 2130 and imposed a 2200 curfew; the Military Police Company to be carried overstrength; the creation of an intramural athletic program; and institution of regularly-held commander's conferences on the subject.³²

These changes had an effect, as did the redeployment of the division to Okinawa, later in the year. Jones' SOP would be used as a basis for developing Operation Freeze, instituted by III MAF the following year. The operation and its associated measures produced not only a decline in the number of fraggings, but a rise in the number of cases solved.

Equally troubling to Marine commanders was the problem of racial tension. Since the integration of the Services in the late 1940s and early 1950s, all military specialties were open to Marines of all races; formal discrimination in promotions and assignments was forbidden; and the command structure, on-base housing, and recreational facilities were completely desegregated. While white and black Marines lived and worked together in integrated units, *de facto* segregation remained. On and off duty, Marines resegregated themselves. In dining facilities, recreational areas, and clubs, Marines tended to break up into small groups along racial lines. In spite of the formal abolition of discrimination in duty assignments, black Marines tended not to be assigned to the more highly technical military specialties because of educational and social disadvantages, and possibly prejudice. In liberty areas near Marine bases, there were facilities which catered exclusively to one race or the other, as did a majority of off-base private rental housing.

By the late 1960s, after years of civil rights agitation and progress, a large proportion of blacks entering the Marine Corps were unwilling to accept these remaining vestiges of real or perceived discrimination and prejudice. Imbued with a feeling of racial pride, they requested "soul" food in the messhalls and "soul" music in the clubs, wore "Afro" haircuts, and used "Black Power" salutes. A small minority, however, aggressively challenged the chain of command by attempting to form an alternative power structure and actively created or intensified racial grievances. These groups of militants also singled out whites and non-conforming blacks for retribution. Typically, quarrels broke out in enlisted men's clubs and culminated in groups of blacks roaming the base attacking white Marines. In retaliation, whites assaulted blacks.

Such outbreaks of racial violence by late 1968 were common to most major Marine bases throughout the world. In October, III MAF experienced a series of incidents with racial overtones, varying in degree of violence from large-scale riots to individual fights, muggings, and robberies. In response to the serious situation, General Cushman established a system of committees to monitor and recommend appropriate action on racial tensions, the rising number of incidents, and to serve as focal points for problems in race relations. The I Corps Tactical Zone Watch Committee, composed of representatives of each major subordinate and component command, was to meet to discuss incidents and the proposed responses. Subordinate command committees were to receive, discuss, and take action on reports received from "Action Committees," composed of junior officers and NCOs of varying ranks and races. The local action committees were to advise the command on race relations, serve as a focal point for the collection of information bearing on racial activities, and act as a sounding board for possible injustice and prejudice.³³

The III MAF committee structure remained in effect throughout 1969. Although meeting regularly, the local action committees soon seemed to degenerate into debating platforms for militants or into general "gripe" sessions on nonracial issues. As a result, the local committee system was revamped in 1970 to deal almost exclusively with race relations and not with "gripes," which could better be handled through the normal chain of command.

In an effort to deal with the problem Corps-wide, General Chapman, on 2 September, issued ALMAR 65, a directive to all Marines on "Race Relations and Instances of Racial Violence within the Marine Corps." Prefacing his remarks with the admonition that acts of violence between Marines "cannot be tolerated, and must stop," the Commandant declared:

It is now and has long been our policy in the Marine Corps that discrimination in any form is not tolerated. It has similarly been our policy that a fighting organization such as ours must have a solid foundation of firm, impartial discipline. It is in the context of these two basic policies that we must take measures to dispel the racial problems that currently exist.

Chapman instructed all Marine commanders to make "positive and overt efforts to eradicate every trace of discrimination, whether intentional or not." He directed them to identify the "causes of friction, rather than the symptoms," to discuss them frankly and openly, and to eliminate them wherever possible. Chapman

urged all officers and NCOs, in their roles as leaders and instructors, to combat racial strife and ensure that every Marine understands that the Marine Corps "guarantees equal rights, equal opportunity, and equal protection, without regard to race, and will continue to do so." In what was to become the most controversial portion of the directive, the Commandant instructed commanders to permit the wearing of the "Afro/Natural haircut provided it conforms with current Marine Corps regulations." In addition, he forbade any "actions, signs, symbols, gestures, and words which are contrary to tradition" to be used during formations or in rendering military courtesies to the flag, the national anthem, or individuals. However, he declared that "individual signs between groups or individuals will be accepted for what they are—gestures of recognition and unity; in this connection, it is the Marine Corps policy that, while such actions are to be discouraged, they are nevertheless expressions of individual belief and are not, in themselves, prohibited."³⁴ Chapman's sanctioning of "Afro" haircuts and "Black Power" salutes was to draw immediate criticism from many Marines who viewed the approval as divisive and constituted the granting of special privileges to a minority.³⁵

In addition to ALMAR 65, Headquarters Marine Corps established the Equal Opportunities Branch to deal with minority group problems affecting the entire Corps and began a concerted drive to recruit more black officers.³⁶ Although progress in resolving racial conflicts was slow in 1969, III MAF's committee system and ALMAR 65 established the basic framework upon which the Corps could build in the area of race relations into the 1970s.

Next to fraggings and racial tension, the rapidly increasing use of drugs troubled Marine commanders. In 1967, MACV identified 1,713 military personnel who possessed or used illegal drugs out of a total troop strength of 468,000. The problem at that time was considered minor; "there is no epidemic of marijuana use," reported III MAF.³⁷ By 1969, the opposite was true; drug abuse among American troops had reached crisis proportions. As Colonel Peter J. Mulroney, Commanding Officer, 12th Marines, told a group of his peers at FMFPac Headquarters in July 1969, the use of drugs, especially marijuana, "is more widespread than anyone would care to admit. Every one of my battalions has investigations going on all the time. It is almost impossible to keep somebody that wants to get marijuana from getting it. [It is] sold

at every roadside ville and peddled by all the civilians."³⁸ Unit commanders conservatively estimated that half their men were involved with drugs.

Among III MAF Marines, marijuana was the most prevalent narcotic, followed by illegally obtained stimulants and barbiturates. Heroin use remained rare. Marines from all racial, social, economic, and education levels used drugs in about equal proportions. Troops in the field commonly avoided drugs, while among those in rear areas and support units drug use at times raged out of control. "To keep it out of the boonies is easy enough," noted Colonel Barrow, "I don't know who the hell is going to bring it to them unless the helicopter drivers get into the business of pushing. But in the rear is the real problem. It is kind of very easy to come by. The rear produces a certain amount of boredom; it's a way of looking for excitement, or they think so."³⁹

In an effort to deal with the problem, III MAF, like other Vietnam commands, relied heavily on troop education. Commanders were to impress upon the individual Marine the moral evils, legal consequences, and physical hazards of drug use. When education failed, as it often did, III MAF resorted to the strict enforcement of Naval Regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice which prohibited the possession and use of narcotics. "There is no need to talk about if it is a drug, habit forming, or injurious to the health," noted Colonel Mulroney, "these are medical considerations that most people, and I am one of them, are not qualified to talk about The way it has to be attacked, I feel, is that there is a military regulation that prohibits the possession and use; . . . that has to be enforced."⁴⁰

Commanders and noncommissioned officers routinely searched vehicles as well as troop living quarters and work areas. Strict controls were placed on the movement of personnel in rear areas and increased emphasis was placed on troop supervision; "you have to have the officers, staff NCOs, and the sergeants constantly checking, knowing what their men are doing, and supervising them, so that there is a constant fear that somebody is looking over your shoulder when you go to pull out that marijuana cigarette."⁴¹ Whenever possible, pushers and users were arrested and prosecuted. Finding the offenders, however, proved difficult. Peer pressure, threats, and "misplaced loyalty" hampered the collection of evidence and successful prosecution. Some young officers and staff NCOs excused drug use during off-duty hours by Marines needed in the unit. Those caught received courts-martial or were