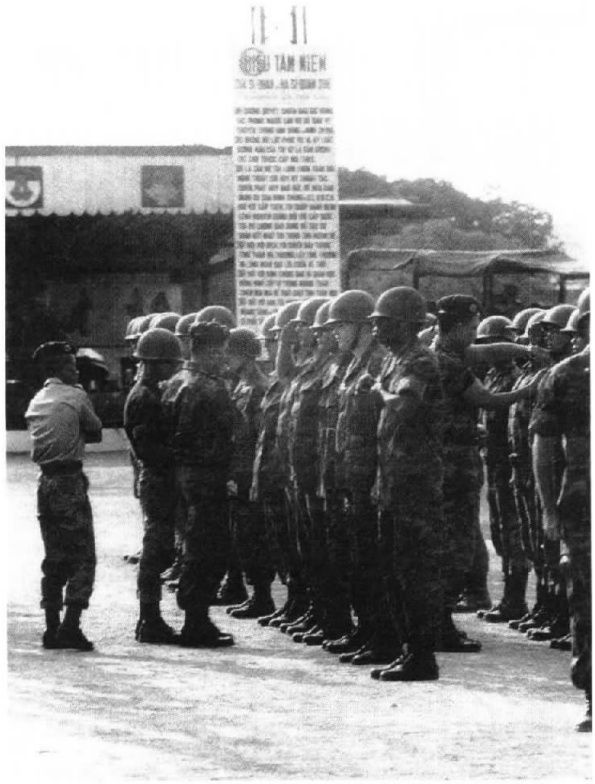


Photo courtesy of LtCol George E. Jones, USMC (Ret)

At graduation from the parachute school at the ARVN Airborne Training Center at Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon, Sub Unit One members are awarded "jump wings" for completing the demanding course, earning prestige while serving with airborne units.

Nang, Chu Lai, and Quang Ngai areas. The communications equipment with the liaison-spot teams was damaged by the weather, while the Marines themselves suffered no injures.

By November 1971, as the adverse weather conditions subsided, suitable targets for naval gunfire increasingly appeared. Still, the employment of naval gunfire ships decreased as ARVN artillery took up more of these fire missions. By 29 November, the Army's 23d Infantry Division had departed Vietnam. As the 2d ARVN Division relocated to Chu Lai to assume that tactical area of responsibility, Shore Fire Control Party "1-3" at Quang Ngai moved with it. The ANGLICO platoon at Hoi An prepared to stand down as the Korean Marine Brigade made preparation for its departure in early December.[24]

On the night of 22 December 1971, MACV Advisory Team 17 personnel observed a sizable enemy troop movement north of Duc Pho village in Quang Ngai. The enemy seemed to be moving in the direction of the town, and the advisors wanted the ANGLICO operators to "do something about it."[25] The liaison team located with the 2d ARVN Division at Chu Lai was called into action. Team commander Lieutenant (jg) Aaron D. Garrett, USN, responded by calling in high-explosive, variable-timed fragmentation, and smoke projectiles into the middle of the enemy's disposition. The Army advisors jubilantly radioed back that the mission was a success. Because of the cover of darkness, the Communists had displayed uncharacteristic boldness and were caught moving across the open terrain. When the rounds hit, the enemy formation was broken, and they quit the field in a rout. An early morning sweep did not reveal any bodies, but blood trails and abandoned equipment were in evidence.

By the end of 1971, Vietnam's navy had four deep-draft ships with naval gunfire capability, albeit limited when compared to the larger, more heavily armed U.S. ships. Nevertheless, an attempt was made toward Vietnamization of naval gunfire support.* Vietnamese fire control personnel readily grasped the rudiments of NGF, but the indirect fire capability of the VNN ships was severely limited by the existing gunfire control system and close-in support of friendly troops was therefore marginal. ARVN officers were trained and did control some fire in the Mekong Delta, but as a whole, the effort was ineffective.[26]

During January 1972, Sub Unit One continued to provide support for ARVN units in MR 4. Naval gunfire provided support during the construction of fire bases in the southern portion of the Ca Mau Peninsula. As the fire bases were completed, ARVN artillery was moved into position. Both naval gunfire and artillery then concentrated on bringing fire to bear on suspected enemy control points, staging areas, and probable base camps. By early March, field artillery was programmed to provide complete coverage of the Delta Region. A gradual and consistent reduction of naval gunfire requirements appeared to be reasonably certain.

In order to extend the range of naval gunfire inland, on 2 February 1972, the American destroyer USS *Morton* (DD 981) sailed into Da Nang harbor to fire into Elephant Valley, an enemy staging area west of the city. Such a mission had been considered previously, but this was the first time it had actually been

*Attempts to organize a South Vietnamese ANGLICO-type unit within the VNMC were turned down by the VNN, ARVN, and VNAF.

carried out. While its operations were difficult to coordinate within the confines of the bay, the destroyer's presence provided moral support in and around the Da Nang area.[27]

By 24 March 1972, there were no U.S. ground spotters on an assigned basis anywhere in Vietnam except along the DMZ. There, Marines remained in the observation tower at Gio Linh Alpha 2 along with their ARVN counterparts. From other ANGLICO personnel, additional spot teams had been organized to respond to an emergency or any unusual situation. Lieutenant Commander Richard M. Kreassig, USN, the ANGLICO liaison officer for XXIV Corps, had even drawn up a contingency plan to cover the possible evacuation of exposed Alpha 2 during an emergency, particularly during the February Tet period. A Tet offensive anticipated by MACV did not materialize, however, and allied forces stood down from their alert. Now, because of Lieutenant Colonel Gray's persistent recommendations, Sub Unit One's authorized personnel strength was reduced from 185 to 89 men, effective 1 May 1972.

It appeared that peace indeed had come to South Vietnam; the market places in the Cam Lo village just south of the DMZ were scenes of active trading. Bru Montagnards were once again planting their crops in the Ba Long River Valley with a reasonable hope of harvesting them without Viet Cong interference. One could drive alone from Quang Tri Province to the bustling capital city of Saigon and southward to Ca Mau in the heart of the Delta without fear of ambush or confrontation. The canals in the U Minh Forest were open to civil use with relative assurance of safety. South Vietnam, with its natural wealth in forests, paddies, and rivers, seemingly had begun to prosper once more.[28]

CHAPTER 2

The Advisors

Naval Advisory Group, Naval Advisory Units—The Rung Sat Special Zone
The Mekong Delta Tactical Zone—Naval Advisory Group, Marine Advisory Unit—'Trusted Friends'
Winding Down—Along the DMZ

Naval Advisory Group, Naval Advisory Units

By mid-1971, the main thrust of U.S. policy inside Vietnam was the advisory effort. Most Marine advisors were concentrated within the framework of the Naval Advisory Group (NAG) under the Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam, Rear Admiral Robert S. Salzer. This included the Marines who served their tours largely unheralded in the Mekong River Delta Region of MR 4. This river plain, to the east, south, and west of Saigon, accounted for almost a quarter of the total area of South Vietnam. A grid of rivers and canals dominated this relatively flat region, where boats and helicopters provided the most practical modes of transportation. Otherwise, a traveler faced an exhausting struggle on foot through a quagmire of murky water, oozing mud, and practically impenetrable tropical vines and roots. Under French colonial rule, the delta was criss-crossed by a well developed road and canal system for ease of regional movement. Because of the importance of this network to the economies of both Vietnam and Cambodia, it was vital to keep these highways open.

From as early as 1954, the thick mangrove jungles of the delta provided a place of refuge for the Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas as they waged their war of terror upon the region's hamlets and river commerce. After each attack, the VC could return to the relative safety and seclusion of their base camps. However, operations conducted by South Vietnam's Regional (RF) and Popular (PF) Forces which began in 1964, over the years had reduced the enemy activity from a major threat to minor harassment. Since July 1964, when Major Edward J. Bronars was assigned as the first U.S. Marine advisor in the delta, Marines had worked with these government troops, assisting in base, village, and hamlet security. Within the delta, Marines were assigned to both the Rung Sat Special Zone and the Mekong Delta Tactical Zone.[1]

The Rung Sat Special Zone

The Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ), southeast of Saigon, was an area of approximately 480 square miles, extending to the South China Sea. Rung Sat, which means "Forest of Death," was an area of great concern to the South Vietnamese government because the Long Tau River ran through its center. The Long Tau, or Royal River, could accommodate deep-draft ships up to 720 feet long. The river banks were low and lined with dense mangrove marsh and swamps. It was the main shipping channel leading to Saigon and much of the logistic and economic support of South Vietnam depended on the river remaining open. The RSSZ command was charged with keeping this waterway open and functioning.

By October 1971, enemy activity had been brought under control. Combined U.S. Marine, Navy, and Army advisors, under the supervision of the Senior Advisor, RSSZ, U.S. Navy Commander Douglas A. Stewart, worked with the local forces in operations designed to keep the enemy off balance. At the same time they assisted the civilians in reconstruction, public health, education, and other aspects of nation-building. With some sense of security, the fishermen, woodcutters, and farmers once again were following the roles of their forefathers as an ominous peace settled over Rung Sat, the Forest of Death.

Major James M. Tully was Commander Stewart's assistant senior advisor and was specifically charged with tactical ground and air operations. The zone was divided into two districts, Can Gio on the east and Quang Xuyen on the west. Each district had a U.S. Marine advisory team assigned to it. The Quang Xuyen District team was headed by Captain Ronald S. Neubauer, while Captain David W. Blizzard headed the team in the Can Gio District. Daily, Vietnamese and Americans shared food, hardships, and work as they patrolled the waterways of the Rung Sat. With his assignment to the swamps of the RSSZ, Captain Neubauer, a lean, red-headed Marine from Norwalk, Connecticut, was far removed from the pageantry of his previous duty station. While assigned to the Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., he had served as parade adjutant and as a social aide at the White House.[2]

To cover their vast districts each captain was assisted by six enlisted advisors and one Navy medical corpsman. The enlisted Marines, on occasion, were called upon to advise Vietnamese officers while the Navy corpsmen were often required to perform functions

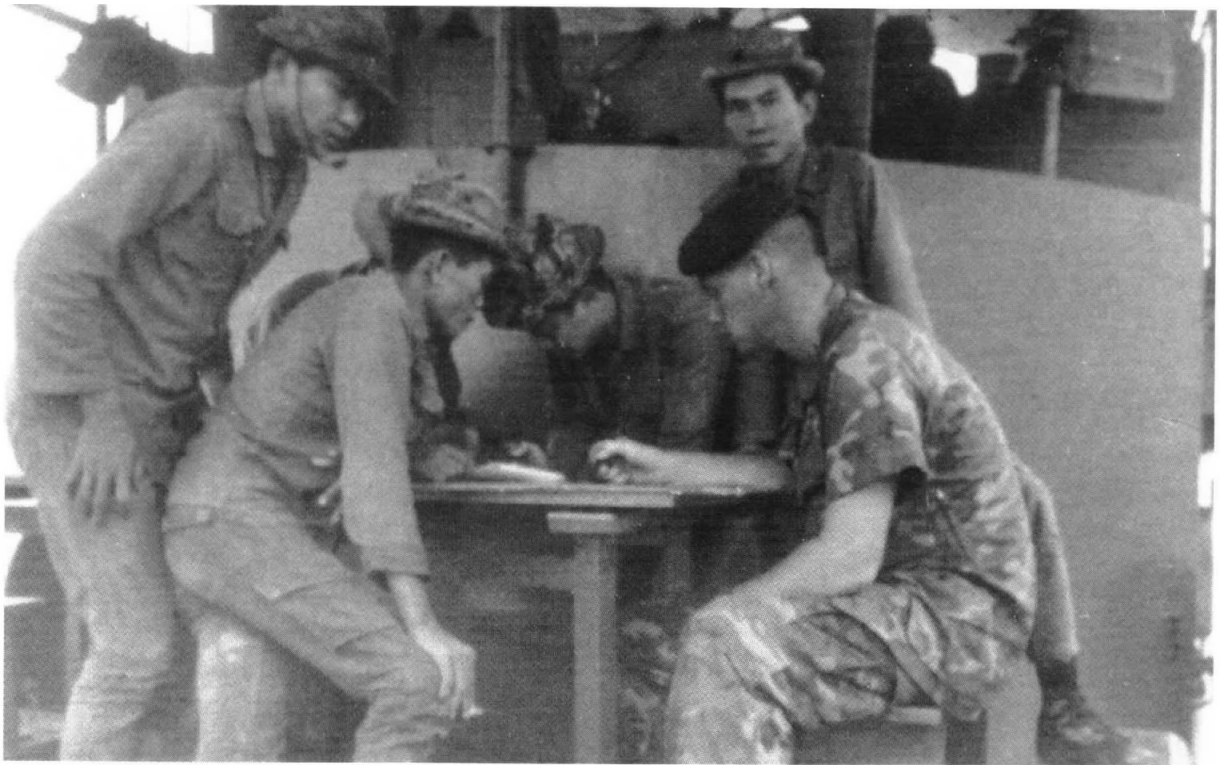


Photo courtesy of LtCol Ronald S. Neubauer, USMC (Ret)

Capt Ronald S. Neubauer reviews a plan with South Vietnamese local forces prior to their insertion into the Rung Sat Special Zone. He wears the black beret of the "junk force" navy.

or to give treatment that normally would be expected of a physician. The enlisted Marines were often communications, intelligence, and engineer specialists. They assisted in all forms of military and civil operations, but the counterinsurgency effort was their forte. Each man on the team worked closely with his counterpart in an effort to develop a comprehensive program to pacify the entire Long Tau shipping channel.

In such an undertaking, each meter of river was as vital as the next. Friendly forces had to be as mobile and as flexible as possible in order to counter the Viet Cong threat. Operations ranging from multi-company helicopter and waterborne assaults down to squad-size interdiction missions were carried out repeatedly and with such effectiveness that enemy activity had been reduced to practically nothing. Advisors accompanied the Vietnamese on operations, assisting the commanders on the ground in talking with the command and communications helicopters, providing aerial observation, close air support, naval gunfire support, troop lifts, and medical evacuation.

Marine Staff Sergeant Freddie L. Murray was assigned to work with the Regional Force militia in late 1971. Murray assisted the Vietnamese with communications between ground units, arranged for boats to move through the waterways, and for U.S. Navy or Army helicopter support. There was not much excitement in the Rung Sat, only the hard, dirty work of slogging through knee-deep mud and swamp under a blistering sun. Murray felt that progress had been made and the advisors no longer went on field operations "unless they have a specific target to hit."[3]

There were times when Marine advisors gave more than just morale or communications support. On 9 November 1971, Captain Blizzard accompanied a Vietnamese PF squad in the Can Gio District that walked into an enemy ambush. One "PF" was hit by the initial burst of small arms fire and fell seriously wounded. While directing the other Vietnamese to secure a helicopter landing zone, Captain Blizzard radioed for a medical evacuation helicopter. With the helicopter on the way, he ran 50 meters to the fallen soldier and, while enemy bullets struck around him, hoisted the wounded man to his shoulders and carried him 300 meters to the secured zone. After the "Medevac," Captain Blizzard rallied the Vietnamese and led them in an assault on the enemy position. For his bravery, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal. Later, he was

to go north to join the fighting in MR 1 with the Vietnamese Marines.

The Mekong Delta Tactical Zone

To the northwest along the Cambodian border, things had not been quiet. Late in 1970 the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had made an effort to isolate Cambodia's Phnom Penh, the capital of the Khmer Republic, by closing all lines of communications including the vital Mekong River between Tan Chau, Vietnam, and the capital. Early in 1971, the oil tanker *Mekong* was sunk while transporting petroleum upstream. After this attack the Cambodian Government asked the United States and South Vietnam to provide protection for the river convoys between Tan Chau and Phnom Penh. This was not to be an easy task, for convoy protection required close cooperation among nine military services of the three nations.

After a request from the Cambodian Government, Operation Tran Hung Dao 18 was initiated for the Mekong Delta Tactical Zone (MDTZ). The primary objective of this operation was to organize and coordinate ground and air support for convoys which carried military cargo and petroleum products from Tan Chau to Phnom Penh. The vital river route passed through more than 100 kilometers of dense jungles, high river banks, and several narrow gorges affording the enemy ideal ambush positions at almost any point.[4] On 18 January 1972, Major Donald R. Gardner relieved Navy Commander Arthur St. Clair Wright as senior

Photo courtesy of MajGen Donald R. Gardner, USMC

American advisor Maj Donald R. Gardner is seen, at left, in front of a typical sandbagged defensive position and Butler Building housing area at the Tan Chau naval operating base in South Vietnam.

South Vietnamese local forces on a Vietnamese Navy rivercraft make preparations for going ashore. They are members of Regional Force Company 999 armed with small arms.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Ronald S. Neubauer, USMC (Ret)

Photo courtesy of MajGen Donald R. Gardner, USMC

Photograph of the naval operating base on the Mekong River and the nearby town of Tan Chau shows the defensive barriers, the interior of the base, and the boat dock at the right.

advisor, Tran Hung Dao 18 (THD-18); area coordinator; and Commander, Task Group 116.15. Major Gardner, wearing a Silver Star Medal from a previous tour of duty in Vietnam and after serving nine months in the Chau Doc Province, was embarking upon an assignment that had political and cultural implications unavoidable even at the advisory level. Traditionally, Vietnamese and Cambodians neither liked nor respected one another. It was Major Gardner's task to minimize this historic antagonism through a continuous liaison and coordination effort. As he recalled, only "the good working relationship, in spite of ethnic differences, between the FANK (Cambodian Army), 4th ARVN Ranger Group, and the THD-18 made this possible."

In addition to the Vietnamese Navy commitment of ships, tankers, tugs, and barges to haul fuel and other supplies to Phnom Penh, there was a constant requirement to support the ARVN ground forces that provided river bank security. Originally, the VNMC had been tasked with these duties, but, ultimately, the ARVN 4th Ranger Group of the 44th Special Tactical Zone was assigned this mission. In cooperation with the Cambodian 4th Infantry Brigade, the ARVN Rangers were successful in preventing the enemy from closing the river supply route.*

Major Gardner's VNN counterpart, Commodore Nghiem Van Phu, a graduate of the U.S. Army's Command and Staff College, had run convoys on the Red River in North Vietnam prior to 1954, before Gardner was old enough to wear a uniform. He was a naval

*MajGen Donald R. Gardner later noted that this "was the only source of supply for Phnom Penh. Had it failed, Cambodia would have fallen in 1971." (Gardner comments)

Photo courtesy of MajGen Donald R. Gardner, USMC

Patrol craft were the essence of riverine operations. Here a Cambodian patrol boat riverine (PBR) docks at the Tan Chau base. This American-made craft used water-jet propulsion to operate in the shallow, restricted waterways. It is armed with Browning .50-caliber guns in the bow and M60 machine guns in the stern.

Photo courtesy of MajGen Donald R. Gardner, USMC

Convoy escort into Cambodia brought about some unusual situations, as in this case where there is a meeting between a local Communist military leader and the Tan Chau district chief, in the center of the picture.

professional in every sense and expected no less from his officers and men. Under the commodore's tutelage, Gardner quickly became accustomed to "brown water navy" techniques.* Major Gardner learned the customs of the delta people, visited their families, and made efforts to improve sanitary and living conditions. The people-to-people effort took on a new meaning one day when on a sampan he helped to deliver a child. Every day seemed to present new challenges.

In February and March 1972, allied forces uncovered caches of arms and supplies near outlying bases along the Cambodian border indicating that Communist infiltrators had prepared for more than guerrilla-type harassment actions. Air strikes by American, Vietnamese, and Cambodian forces provided some convoy protection, but the Communists, however, repeatedly made their presence known. In early 1972 there were more than 60 ambushes against shipping to Phnom Penh. During this time, the enemy sank one barge and damaged other vessels with rockets. Communist antiaircraft fire downed three helicopters providing escort air cover.[5]

Naval Advisory Group, Marine Advisory Unit

While individual Marines served Vietnamese forces within Navy and MACV advisory units, one group of Marine advisors had caught the Corps' popular image as "The Marine Advisors." These were the officers and men of the Marine Advisory Unit** who served with the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The VNMC was formed at the time of the 1954 ceasefire that established North and South Vietnam. An elite unit by any standard and closely associated with the U.S. Marine Corps, the VNMC had been fighting the Communists for more than 20 years. Marines selected to serve as advisors with them were considered fortunate for being among the only Marines in combat and for the exotic nature of their assignment. As advisors, the Americans wore the same distinctive green beret and "tiger stripe" field uniform of the Vietnamese. Under the supervision of a Senior Marine Advisor (SMA), Marines were assigned to VNMC battalions, as well as to brigade and division staffs.

The VNMC had its beginning in October 1954 when Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat helped organize the VNMC from former colonial-era commandos who had come south under the provisions of the Geneva Conference agreements.***[6] A division-sized

*"Brown water navy" is a phrase used to describe riverine and coastal operations as opposed to the "blue water navy" of the ocean-going forces.

**Abbreviated at the time as the MAU, but hereafter MarAdvU to avoid confusion with the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) of the Seventh Fleet.

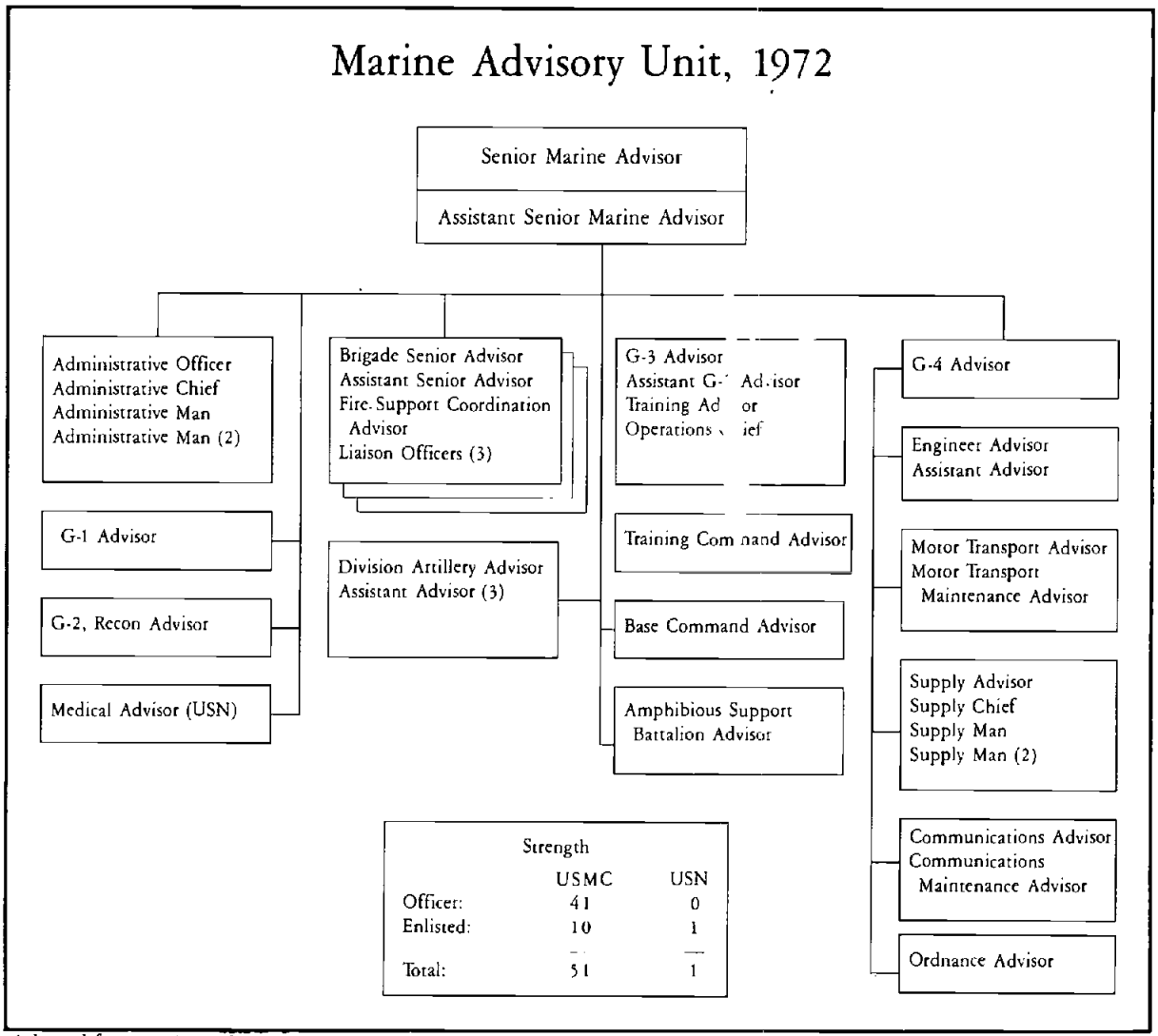
***1st and 2d *Battaillons de Marche*, in accordance with Decree 991-QP/ND of 13Oct54.

service since 1968, the VNMC boasted nine infantry battalions, three artillery battalions, and three brigade headquarters designated Marine Brigades 147, 258, and 369. Each of the brigades was originally formed from the infantry battalions which made up its numerical designation, e.g., Marine Btigade 258 originally had the 2d, 5th, and 8th battalions under its control. In practice, a brigade headquarters controlled whatever mix of units it was assigned. The VNMC, along with the ARVN Airborne, formed the Joint General Staff General Reserve of the Republic of Vietnam, and, as such, was employed in any of the four military regions. Additionally, a VNMC battalion or a task force could be attached to any of the corps tactical zones or army divisions to serve as a reaction force. From April 1971, two brigades operated in Quang Tri Province, first under the operational control of the 1st ARVN Division headquarters and later with the newly formed 3d ARVN Division. The Marine division headquarters and the temaining brigade were located in Saigon.

By now, many of the U.S. Marines reporting to the advisory unit in Saigon for duty were returning to Vietnam for their second and third times. Some had completed the Army's Military Assistance Training Advisor (MATA) Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, or the Marine Advisor Course at Quantico, Virginia. A few advisors were fluent in Vietnamese and most could converse at a basic level. Upon arrival in Saigon, the new advisors could tell that the city was prospering: the open markets were doing a rushing business, street vendors were hawking theit wares, nightclubs abounded, and there was a swarm of people constantly in motion on small but noisy motorscooters. As the advisors made their way north to join their battalions, they were surprised at the peaceful appearance of the countryside. During the latter part of 1971, both Americans and Vietnamese moved throughout the area with little trepidation. No one felt the necessity of wearing a helmet or flak jacket and few Marines actually carried a magazine loaded in their weapons. The Vietnamese seemed happy and in good physical shape; many would greet the Ameticans in English when they passed.

After the initial briefing in Saigon by the Senior Marine Advisor, those Marines assigned to the brigades operating in the north often made their way there by serving as mailmen and couriers to Marines already in the field. While all the advisors' mail came into Saigon, the way it got to the other end of the country was not predetermined. For example, when Captain Ray L. Smith checked in and was assigned to the 4th VNMC Battalion at Mai Loc, he catried four bags of mail with him. It was relatively easy to catch an airctaft from Saigon to Da Nang, but from that point on, the itineraty was erratic. After spending a day at Da Nang, Smith was able to catch a plane to Phu Bai. Because of the monsoon rains, Major Walter E. Boomer, senior advisor to the 4th VNMC Battalion, met Captain Smith at Phu Bai in a Jeep. Smith was wary

The honor guard before the main building of Vietnamese Marine Corps Headquarters in Saigon wears the distinctive "sea wave" camouflage uniforms, insignia, and green berets.
Marine Corps Historical Collection



Adapted from Marine Advisory Unit Material

as the two traveled from Phu Bai through Hue, Quang Tri, and Dong Ha, right up to the position where he was to be stationed. It seemed to be a different kind of tour from his first in Vietnam.

Some Vietnamese Marine officers had been trained in the United States and spoke English. They had been in combat for years and often did not feel the need for an American advisor. Because of this, the American Marines often felt more like a fire support coordinator than an advisor. In fact, during this period Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey III, who had relieved Colonel Francis W. Tief as senior advisor, was making plans to pull the advisors from the battalion level. He wanted to consolidate them at each brigade, thus forming a "liaison team" that could be responsive as the needs arose.[7]

'Trusted Friends'

The Marine advisors with the battalions in the field had a "fairly comfortable" life. They lived in bunkers, slept on cots, and shaved and bathed out of their helmets. There were kerosene lamps for light and gasoline stoves which took the damp chill out of the air, particularly during the monsoon season with its penetrating cold. Rats in the bunkers, however, did nothing for peace of mind. Their number was constantly multiplying, along with hordes of mosquitoes. One Marine advisor killed 34 rats in his area in an evening.

Marine advisors routinely shared the Vietnamese food of their counterparts' mess, which together with attempts to converse in Vietnamese, did more to foster good personal relations than anything else. Eating

Marine Corps Historical Collection

The senior Vietnamese and American Marine leaders, in late 1971 are, from left, LtGen Le Nguyen Khang, Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps; Col Joshua W. Dorsey III, Senior Marine Advisor; and RAdm Robert S. Salzer, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam and the Naval Advisory Group. Col Dorsey wears the Vietnamese Marine uniform with American and Vietnamese rank insignia, as typical for Marine advisors.

Vietnamese food, however, initially could be an unsettling experience. "Nuoc Mam," a fermented fish sauce with salt added, was served with practically every meal as a source of protein. When of poor quality, it had a strong, offensive smell to most foreigners. Luckily, battalion commanders usually had the high quality variety which was quite tasty. Special occasions called for exotic foods such as coagulated duck blood pudding with peanuts on top, a delicacy unknown to most Americans.

Vietnamese Marine methods of food procurement differed from the orderly, industrialized logistical procedures of the USMC. The battalion commander was given an allocation of funds to buy food for his troops. He would do his purchasing in the local markets and from individual farmers. Although the government provided bulk rice and canned goods, the preponderance of the food prepared in the battalion messes was obtained from the local area. When resupply runs arrived, any meat would be cooked immediately in order to preserve it since there was no refrigeration. This would provide meat for the next few days without any problems unless it became flyblown and maggot infested. Occasionally, in the mountain regions, a deer or a wild boar would be shot and find its way into the battalion's cooking pots. If the battalion was operating along the coast, the menu might include crab and other seafoods. Farm produce was also cheaper there than it was inland. The American advisors often made contributions to their counterparts' mess by sharing packages from home. The results could be unpredictable. Captain Ray Smith recalled receiving a large can of lobster meat and turning it over to to his counterpart's cook who was in the process of preparing the evening meal. Eagerly anticipating the rare delicacy, he sat down to dinner to find it on the menu all right . . . submerged in turnip soup.

Although the Americans made every effort to know their counterparts better by living with them and sharing their lot, they took pains not to become involved in certain aspects of Vietnamese military procedures. One such area was the administration of discipline. A Vietnamese Marine found guilty of an offense was

Marine Corps Historical Collection

A major portion of the advisory effort was focused on training. These Vietnamese Marine recruits negotiate an assault course at the VNMC Training Center near Thu Duc. They are equipped with American M1 helmets, individual equipment, and M16 rifles.

awarded punishment that might seem harsh to the observing advisor and certainly would not be found in the Uniform Code of Military Justice or even the "Rocks and Shoals" of the old Corps. It was, in short, immediate and corporal. Strict discipline contributed to the high morale of the closely-knit VNMC battalions. Another positive indicator was the Marines' intense personal loyalty to their commanders, especially battalion commanders. Their relationship was longstanding and it was not unusual for a Marine to have served in the same battalion for as long as 15 years. It was only natural for the Vietnamese emphasis on the family to extend into professional life.[8]

Winding Down

During June 1971, VNMC Brigade 147 defeated NVA assaults during which the enemy had used tear gas and had reached the Marines' fighting holes.* One U.S. Marine advisor, Captain Dennis M. Dicke, was mortally wounded on Operation Lam Son 810 while serving with the 7th VNMC Battalion. The outcome of the battle was doubtful until artillery and close air support turned the tide in favor of the Marines. By July 1971, the situation in South Vietnam seemed quiet enough, although Marine battalions in MR 1 had beaten back enemy attacks during the preceding three months. By mid-year, however, activity had subsided and newly arrived advisors were reporting to their battalions in the field with a feeling that this was going to be a quiet period indeed.

During this time, battalions spent about three months in MR 1 and then rotated to Saigon for refurbishing, training, and rest and recuperation with their families. Each of the battalions had a designated base camp near Saigon which served as a permanent home for the unit where administration, supply, and training activities took place. In addition, many of the Marines' families lived nearby. Upon arrival in Saigon, the Vietnamese Marines were granted a 10-day leave with their families. Often when a battalion was due to return north, men who had overstayed their leave reported in packed and ready to go. After fighting a

*Vietnamese Marines, whose senior officers had come from the north, referred to their enemy as Communists or Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) and did not use the American term NVA (North Vietnamese Army) or the Communist's PAVN (People's Army of Viet Nam).

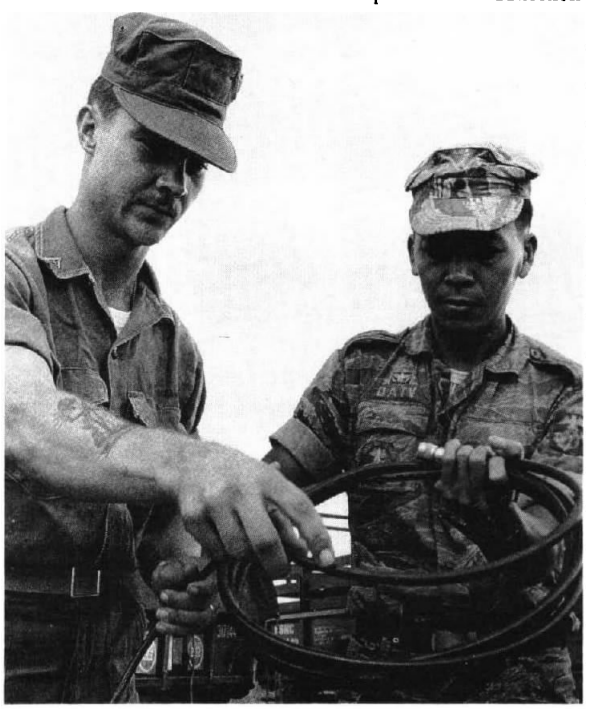
long war, the advisors learned the important thing was to be there when the unit departed for the "front," and they usually were.[9]

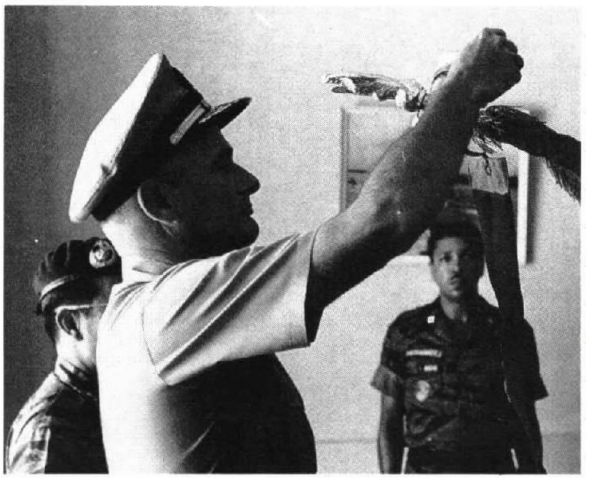
After leave, training was the order of the day. Some of the training was undertaken within the base camp areas, while formal schools were conducted at the Vietnamese Marine Training Command at Thu Duc, northeast of Saigon. This camp included recruit training facilities, ranges, and housing to accommodate 2,000 students simultaneously. Indoor classrooms, a confidence course, infiltration course, mine and boobytrap course, and a 300-meter bayonet course provided individual training.[10]

American Marines were assigned to the training command to assist in the management of the instruction program. With the withdrawal of American units from Vietnam, much U.S. Marine Corps equipment was turned over to the Vietnamese Marines. Marine advisors concerned themselves with teaching the VNMC personnel the use and care of this surplus equipment.[11] On one occasion to assist this training,

Another focus of the advisory effort was on equipment and maintenance training. In this instance a lance corporal from the 3d Marine Division instructs a Marine from the VNMC Signal Battalion in the use of communications equipment that had been provided by direct transfer from American stocks on Okinawa.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

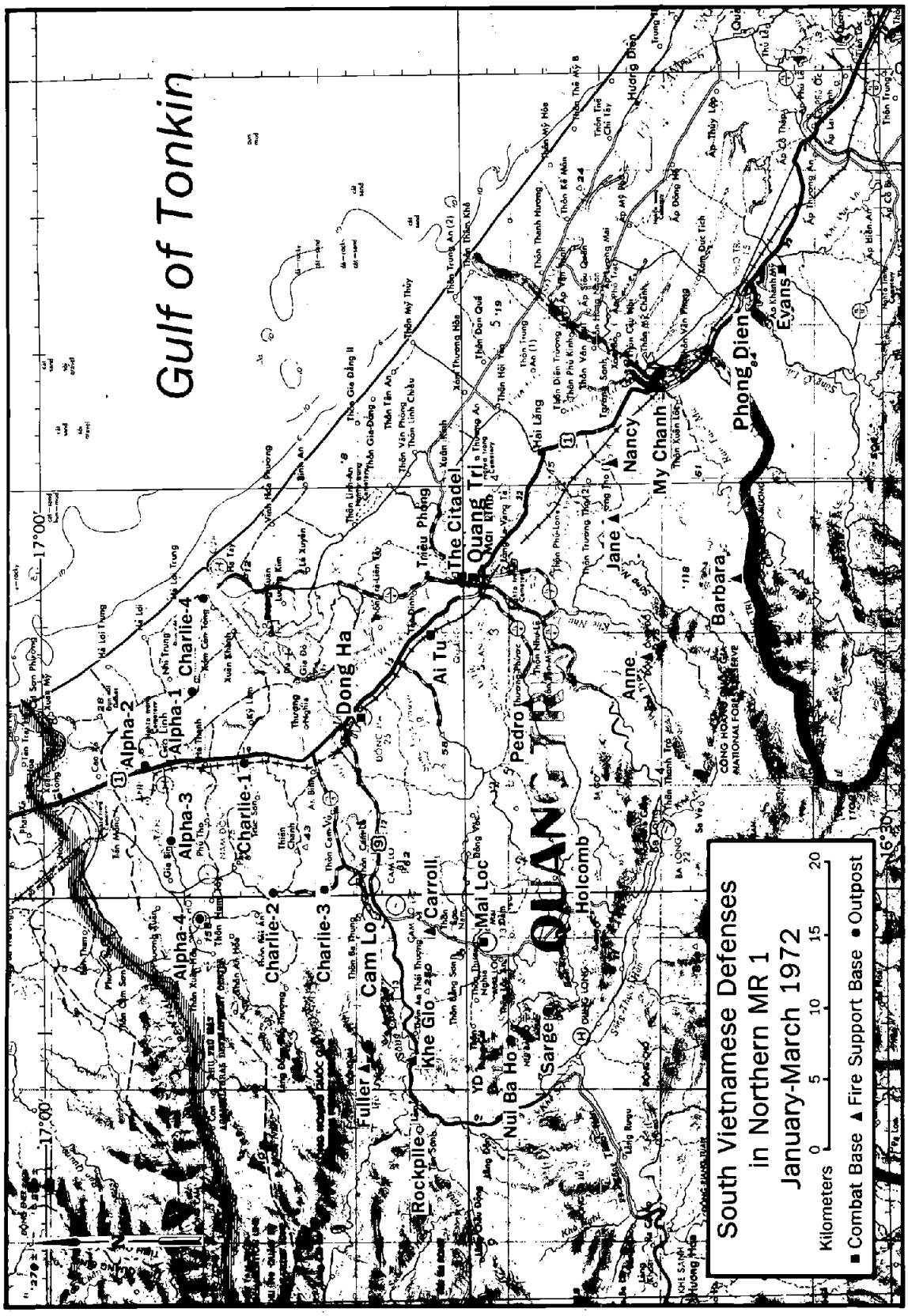
RAdm Robert S. Salzer and Col Bui The Lan, the Assistant Commandant of the Vietnamese Marines, attach the Navy Unit Citation streamer to the organizational colors of the Marine Advisory Unit on 12 August 1971, the second such award to the unit.

the 3d Marine Division sent a mobile training team from Okinawa to Thu Duc. This team spent six weeks instructing the Vietnamese in the use of the equipment left by III MAF, including 106mm recoilless rifles and multi-channel radios, the AN/MRC162s and 163s. These two items of equipment played important roles in the events which were to follow.[12]

On 12 August 1971 at 0900, Admiral Salzer, as Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, presented the advisory unit their second Naval Unit Commendation.* At the same time, a major effort was being made to reorganize the VNMC. Historically, the involvement of American Marines had been on the battalion level, giving tactical advice to their counterparts in the field. Colonel Dorsey wanted to shift the emphasis of the U.S. Marine advisors from one of rendering tactical advice to one of resource management.

Colonel Dorsey hoped to accomplish two major objectives during 1972. Together with Major Donald B. Conaty, the G-3 advisor to the VNMC Division, Colonel Dorsey worked to foster a greater sense of unity between the Vietnamese Navy and the VNMC in order to build a viable amphibious assault team. Their chief aim was to have the division plan and execute a brigade-size landing. They also planned to organize and use tactical operations centers (TOC) at the brigade as well as division level. These centers would

*For the period of 1 July 1969 to 1 July 1971, extended through 31 December 1971 in lieu of a third award.


Gulf of Tonkin
South Vietnamese Defenses in Northern MR 1 January-March 1972
Kilometers 0 5 10 15 20
Combat Base ▲ Fire Support Base ● Outpost
17°00'
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Cam Lo
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Fuller
Khe Gio
Carroll
Mai Loc
Ai Tu
The Citadel
Quang Tri
Pedro
Nui Ba Ho
Sarge
Holcomb
Anne
Jane
Barbara
Nancy
My Chanh
Phong Dien
Evans
Hai Lang
Trieu Phong
QUANG TRI

Photo courtesy of Col John W. Ripley, USMC

A battery of Vietnamese Marine 105mm howitzers in Military Region 1, deployed in support of a VNMC brigade in late 1971. The lack of prepared positions and defenses indicates that this was a temporary position and away from any Communist counterfire.

include a fire support coordination center (FSCC) capable of coordinating artillery, air strikes, and naval gunfire. Finally, a division command post exercise was to be conducted to test each aspect of the reorganization. To this point, the VNMC had not operated as a division-level force and lacked necessary command and control personnel and equipment. Even though a VNMC division headquarters had been committed in Laos during Operation Lam Son 719, there was very little command experience above the brigade level.[13]

Along the DMZ

South Vietnamese defenses along the Demilitarized Zone consisted of a string of positions developed in part from the previous American defenses oriented along the main avenues of approach from the north and the west. These stretched from the coast, inland across National Highway 1 (QL-1), turning south across Highway 9, and tied in with a string of fire support bases guarding the the highland valley approaches from the west. American Marines recalled this as the "Leatherneck Square" bounded by Gio Linh, Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Dong Ha. Now these locations were known by Vietnamese names or more anonymous alpha-numeric appellations. On 6 October 1971, a U.S. Army liaison team from MACV arrived at Alpha 4 (Con Thien) to inspect the position before the newly formed 3d ARVN Division assumed responsibility for the DMZ. The 1st ARVN Division, which had tactical responsibility for the DMZ, was scheduled to displace south in early November. MACV Advisory Team 155, under Colonel Donald J. Metcalf, USA, the senior advisor, was tasked with providing American support to the commanding general of the 3d ARVN Division. Team 155, which was primarily billeted at Quang Tri, consisted of more than 200 men. Of this number, less than 20 U.S. Army advisors were actually in the field with ARVN units. With its hot food, bar, and showers, Team 155 was an oasis to the U.S. Marines serving with the VNMC in northern MR 1.[14]

Throughout this period there had been occasional enemy contact, generally of platoon size, but no major enemy encounters. On 23 October 1971, elements of the 4th VNMC Battalion made contact with an estimated enemy platoon east of Alpha 4. In the resulting action three Vietnamese Marines were wounded. In spite of a raging rain storm, an Army helicopter piloted by First Lieutenant Scott Livingston, USA, flew

in to evacuate the wounded Marines. The weather was so bad that, on the returning leg, the helicopter was forced down at Mai Loc Combat Base where it had to remain overnight. According to Major Boomer, the wounded Marines were evacuated the next morning in spite of the fact that ". . . helicopters don't fly in weather like that."[15] On a lighter note, on 10 November 1971, all the American Marines in the north gathered at Charlie 1 to join with Marines all over the world in celebrating the 196th birthday of the Corps. Birthday cakes were flown up from Saigon and the Vietnamese Marines joined in the big celebration. There was plenty of beer for everyone, but the cake made a number of Marines sick.[16]

Activity along the DMZ was almost at a standstill. It was an ideal time to consolidate the advisors at the brigade level, but as Colonel Dorsey remembered:

> . . . something was going on; particularly up north there was a feeling of foreboding. The fire support bases were at minimum strength, whereas the USMC had these same bases fully manned. The ARVN strength was insufficient, and they were not actively patrolling, although the VNMC did a little—but not enough. I couldn't help but feel that something was going to happen. It seemed like a charade. The weather was bad; it was really cold. The FSBs [fire support bases] were socked in.[17]

The weather was indeed terrible along the DMZ. It was miserably cold and everybody, including the North Vietnamese Army was preoccupied in trying to keep warm and dry. Major Boomer, with the 4th VNMC Battalion, said he never had been so cold in his life. He was having some second thoughts on why, when given a choice of assignments upon arriving at Saigon, he had chosen an infantry battalion instead of a staff job at division headquarters. It was tough, but it would get tougher. Factors other than the weather were slated to deteriorate.

In contrast to the previous picture, along the forward edge of the South Vietnamese defensive arc below the Demilitarized Zone were prepared defensive positions. This is the outpost at Gio Linh, defending QL-1.

Photo courtesy of LtCol George Philip III, USMC (Ret)

A significant attack occurred on the night of 12 December 1971, 3,000 meters to the east of Charlie 3. The NVA failed in their assault of a Regional Force company, losing 17 men in the process. The next morning the dead NVA soldiers were laid out in Cam Lo village. From that time on, the road from Cam Lo to Charlie 2 did not seem quite so secure. On 21 December, just after the 5th VNMC Battalion, with Major Donald L. Price as senior advisor, replaced the 4th VNMC Battalion, the enemy fired more incoming rounds on the newcomers than the 4th battalion had received all that fall.[18] Late one evening, Major Price and Captain Marshall R. "Skip" Wells looked north into the DMZ and observed the sparkle of signal flares, assuming that even the NVA had "to train before an offensive."[19]

Major Robert F. Sheridan, senior advisor to the VNMC Brigade 369, expressed his concern at this time to brigade commander Colonel Pham Van Chung about the lack of mobility resulting from maintaining fixed locations. Colonel Chung, who had a reputation as an outstanding commander who used his staff and appreciated his American advisors, conducted battalion-size operations west of Highway 9. Two consecutive sweeps from the Rockpile south to the Ba Long Valley revealed no sign of the enemy, but they were indeed out there; Major Sheridan even talked to one of them on Christmas Eve.

The Marine advisors had two channels of communications: at brigade, the advisor had an AN/MRC83 radio Jeep which he used for his twice-weekly checks with advisory unit headquarters in Saigon. The other channel was the local "Gunga Din" network which linked the advisors in the local area. Although it was a secure net utilizing the tactical cryptographic device, the KY38, the Marines would usually transmit in the clear mode as they conversed over the "party" line. It was quicker and used less power from the radios' batteries. After the nightly electronic "advisor conference" on 25 December 1971, Major Sheridan wished all a Merry Christmas. To everyone's surprise an Asian voice

Photo courtesy of Maj Charles W. King, USMC (Ret)

In November 1971, the 3d ARVN Division and Vietnamese Marine units were responsible for the defenses along the northern border. The division commander, BGen Vu Van Giai, is shown at Fire Support Base Charlie 1 with the VNMC Brigade 369 commander, Col Pham Van Chung, and two American advisors, on the occasion of the U.S. Marine Corps Birthday.

in perfect English came up on the air and replied, "Merry Chtistmas to you," and this general conversation followed:

S: Who is this?
NVA: Oh, I listen to you all the time. Where are you? Mai Loc? Sarge? or Fuller?
S: I can't tell you where I am.
NVA: You are American Marine. Why don't you go home?
S: I'll go home when you guys go home.
NVA: Well, maybe we will all go home some day. Are you married?
S: Yes.
NVA: How many children do you have?
S: Too many.
NVA: That's good. I have five girls in Hanoi which I haven't seen in nine months.
S: Maybe the next time you go to Hanoi you can make a boy.

Both laughed and then talked about the poor weather. Finally the enemy signed off with, "I must go now. Merry Christmas! I hope the war ends soon." Yes, the enemy was out there, and furthermore he was listening, so deficient communications security took on a whole new meaning.[20]

By January 1972, the 3d ARVN Division had responsibility fot everything north of Highway 9, including Dong Ha and Fire Support Base Fuller. The division commander, Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, visited his troops in the field every day. General Giai's U.S. Army advisors were oriented on training and logistics and were not present at units below the regimental level. Giai also dropped in on the VNMC units, which were under his operational control and oriented to the west of Quang Tri. He seemed to enjoy speaking in English with the Marine advisors.

The 3d ARVN Division, newly formed and occupying unfamiliar terrain, was beset with many problems. The ARVN soldiers, a mix of varied quality, were untrained as a unit. Lieutenant Colonel William C. Camper, USA, a MACV Team 155 advisor with the 2d ARVN Regiment, observed that "we were getting college students who had evaded the draft for long periods, also interpreters who had worked for U.S. forces." These were "big-city slickers" who did not compare to the average ARVN soldier ftom a rural background. Camper concluded, "they definitely had an effect on morale and adequacy of training."[21]

On 27 January 1972, a USAF gun ship, patrolling Highway 9 to Khe Sanh, was shot down at 5,000 feet, right over the Khe Sanh air strip, by an SA-2 missile. During February, enemy activity started to pick up to the west. Fire Support Base Fullet was hit with rocket fire almost daily. Both the outpost at Nui Ba Ho and FSB Sarge, along with Fuller, started reporting ground contacts. South Vietnamese troops in the vicinity of the Rockpile, north of Highway 9, reported hearing tracked vehicles and trucks moving at night. Lieutenant Colonel Camper recalled that he accompanied an air cavalry "Pink Team" in a Hughes OH-6 Cayuse ("Loach") helicopter, landing in several locations behind the Rockpile, finding "fresh tracks from tracked vehicles in a number of locations," but seeing no enemy troops and receiving no enemy fire.*

Ditectives and warnings from Saigon required a high state of readiness during Tet, the national holiday period celebrating the lunar new year. Both MACV and ARVN staffs predicted that the North Vietnamese would challenge Vietnamization in 1972. General William C. Westmoreland, as Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, had visited South Vietnam in early 1972 on behalf of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense. After touring all four military regions and talking with Army General Creighton W. Abrams and Chairman of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, he concluded they were confident "that they can handle the situation" that existed.[22]

Communist troop buildups were identified along

*U.S. Army Pink Teams were composed of five helicopters. Two OH-6 "Loach" light observation helicopters acted as scouts while two Bell AH-1 Cobra gunships provided an attack capability. A UH-1 provided the flight's command and control.

the DMZ and Laotian border areas west of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The North Vietnamese general high command had organized a corps-level headquarters to carryout the attack on South Vietnam's MR 1. Identified as the *Tri Thien Hue Front* with the *702d Command Group Headquarters*, it crossed over previous front and military region boundaries to undertake the Spring Offensive. It was commanded by MajGen Le Trong Tan and his political deputy Le Quang Doa. This coincided with a multidivision threat in the tri-border region west of Pleiku.* Like most intelligence predictions, the questions of when, where, and in what strength were left to local commanders to determine. American commanders and advisors in MR 1 were directed by General Abrams to determine likely avenues of approach and assembly areas to preplan Arc Light strikes, as he wanted "no delays due to targeting procedures when the time comes to go with these strikes."[23]

Other reports indicated that big guns were being moved west of the Marines' positions and groups of 20 to 30 enemy were observed moving openly during the daytime.[24] Incidents of road mining were being reported. Captain George Philip III, advisor to the 1st VNMC Artillery Battalion, narrowly escaped death from a vehicle mine detonation. While returning to the battalion command post and instead of crossing a bridge just south of Mai Loc, he drove his jeep into the stream to wash it. A vehicle full of ARVN artillery officers drove over the bridge Captain Philip had delayed crossing. The bridge exploded, killing them all. This incident was cause for instituting the "two-jeep" policy which made it mandatory for at least two vehicles to move in convoy at all times in case of an enemy ambush or mine incidents.[25]

On 5 March 1972, the South Vietnamese began an operation to clear the area around Fire Support Base Bastogne, east of Hue City, and met heavy resistance from elements of the *324B NVA Division*. This generated a flurry of response by B-52 "Arc Light" bombings and tactical air sorties, but the appearance here of NVA troops was not seen as part of a concerted buildup of forces in MR 1. Indications were that the main

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A193103

The senior South Vietnamese commander for Military Region 1 had both political and military responsibilities. LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam held this position from 1966. His American "advisor" in 1972 was U.S. Army MajGen Frederick J. Kroesen, Jr., commanding the 1st Regional Assistance Command at Da Nang.

threat was directed at MR 2. This was the prevailing view held by MACV and the American Embassy in Saigon.[26] The Vietnamese I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, and his latest American counterpart, Major General Frederick J. Kroesen, Jr., USA, commanding the newly formed 1st Regional Assistance Command, viewed the situation with concern.** Dispositions by the 3d ARVN Division and the VNMC units in MR 1 remained around key terrain and avenues of approach along Highway 9 from the west, from where the North Vietnamese threat had come in the past. Although the positions along the DMZ had always been within range of artillery, they were not considered worthy of a conventional attack by combined arms.[27]

During the last week in March, VNMC patrols in Quang Tri Province began finding caches of mortar and B-40 rocket rounds. People were spotted moving supplies and a Vietnamese was captured in the Ba Long Valley carrying mortar rounds. By this time every friendly location that had an artillery position was

*At the American Embassy was Edwin W. Besch, a medically retired Marine captain, who followed the activities of NVA and VNMC units as an intelligence analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency. He recalled that, "in fact, the first firm indication of the impending offensive in South Vietnam was the infiltration into the western highlands of the *320th NVA Division*" from north of the DMZ in January 1972, followed by the *2d NVA Division* from Laos. (Besch comments)

**FRAC was established on 19 March 1972.

North Vietnamese Army Photo

By this time in the war, the main threat to the South Vietnamese and the Americans came from the full-time soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army. This mortar unit's haircuts, uniforms, and training were those of a conventional force rather than insurgents.

receiving enemy incoming artillery and rocket rounds regularly. The U.S. Air Force and Navy flew support missions every day, weather permitting, but many times during the day visibility was almost zero. The U.S. Army's 8th Radio Research Field Station (8th RRFS) at Phu Bai reported that a NVA artillery headquarters was located only six kilometers southwest of Fire Support Base Sarge.

From Sarge, Major Boomer had briefed General Giai on everything the Marines had been seeing and their concern over the buildup of enemy forces. Boomer proposed offensive action west of Sarge in the belief that this would provide "more accurate information on the enemy's intentions and possibly disrupt his plans." General Giai "casually dismissed" this proposal.[28] Major Boomer, in retrospect, said that it was obvious that the enemy was stockpiling ammunition and supplies at the base of the hill on which FSB Sarge was located. By now, enemy contacts and artillery fire "grew heavier," and it was clear that a major enemy buildup was taking place.

On 28 March 1972, an NVA soldier noted that he was with a unit "in a staging area in the jungle very close to the enemy. In spite of his daily patrols, the latter is unaware . . . . We take advantage of a heavy downpour to cross the Ba Long River." His objective was the cloud-shrouded firebase "Dong Toan," known to the Americans as Sarge.[29]

PART II
THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 3

The Ring of Steel

Turley with Team 155—The Opening Round—Team 155 Under Fire—The Outposts Fall
At the Combat Base at Ai Tu—VNMC Brigade 258 Reinforces—Enemy in the Wire, 31 March 1972
Fire Support Base Sarge Holds On—The Collapse of the Ring of Steel

Turley with Team 155

Recently assigned as Assistant Senior Marine Advisor (ASMA) with the Naval Advisory Group, Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Gerald H. "Gerry" Turley was eager to get to Quang Tri Province to pay a visit to the two VNMC brigades, 147 and 258, under the operational control of the 3d ARVN Division. After two weeks of orientation in Saigon, Turley arrived at the Ai Tu Combat Base on 29 March 1972 by helicopter, drove out to the Mai Loc Combat Base, and spent the night with VNMC Brigade 147. The brigade, with Major Jim R. Joy as senior advisor, was responsible for the western segment of the 3d ARVN Division's area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Nang Bao, brigade commander, told Lieutenant Colonel Turley that Mai Loc had not received any incoming artillery for almost two years. It was a peaceful night and a pleasant change of pace from garrison duty in Saigon.[1]

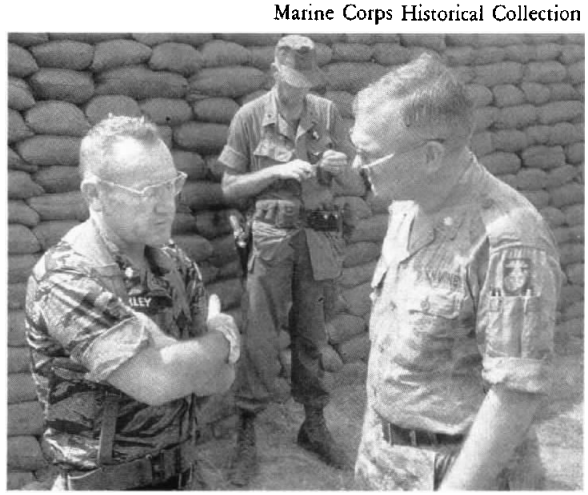
The next morning Lieutenant Colonel Turley was unable to go by helicopter to the brigade's outposts because of poor flying weather and returned to the 3d ARVN Division command post at Ai Tu, accompanied by Major Joy. During the course of the morning Turley received briefings from MACV Advisory Team 155 on the disposition of forces, the state of readiness of division units, and American support available—although practically all American combat units had been withdrawn from Vietnam. The Army briefing revealed that the 3d ARVN Division was a newly constituted and untested organization. It had been in existence for less than six months and did not represent a significant increase of combat power to I Corps. The division, activated on 1 November 1971, had completed the organization of its infantry regiments only the month before. One of its three infantry regiments manning the northern front had been operating as a unit for only the last three weeks. Short of equipment and not fully organized or trained, the 3d ARVN Division was unready for combat. Even so, Brigadier General Vu Van Giai's aggressiveness, professionalism, and depth of combat experience had won him the respect of the U.S. Marine advisors and had created a sense of confidence and self-assurance among his soldiers.

The division, with the 2d, 56th, and 57th ARVN Regiments, had its headquarters at Ai Tu, between Dong Ha and Quang Tri City. In fact, at the very moment of Lieutenant Colonel Turley's briefing, the 56th and the 2d ARVN Regiments were administratively exchanging areas of operations.[2] The 56th was replacing the 2d at Camp Carroll, Khe Gio, and Fire Support Base Fuller, while the 2d simultaneously relieved the 56th at Alpha 4, Charlie 2, and Charlie 3. At Camp Carroll was a composite artillery group of 26 pieces ranging from 105mm howitzers to 175mm self-propelled guns. Included in this group was a battery of VNMC 105mm howitzers. The 57th Regiment's area of operations covered the rest of the northern front extending from Dong Ha, northward to the DMZ. Fire support bases included in its area were Alpha 1, Alpha 2, and Alpha 3, with regimental headquarters at Charlie 1. The area to the east of QL-1 to the Gulf of Tonkin, was nominally under the control of the Quang Tri Province chief and his local forces.

In the VNMC Brigade 147 area were outposts at Nui Ba Ho and Sarge held by the 4th VNMC Battalion, along with two companies of the 8th VNMC Battal-

Marine and Army advisors were present with South Vietnamese forces along the Demilitarized Zone when the Spring Offensive began. On the left, LtCol Gerald H. Turley confers with another Marine advisor. The U.S. Army lieutenant colonel in the background illustrates the different uniforms in use at the time.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



ion operating in the vicinity of Fire Support Base Holcomb, forming the western flank of the defensive arc. All three positions were on dominant terrain features overlooking the natural avenues of approach from the Laotian border. Sarge and Nui Ba Ho overlooked Highway 9, the east-west route which the French had built and the U.S. forces had improved during their stay. Fire Support Base Holcomb overlooked the beautiful Ba Long Valley through which the Thach Han River flows. The other brigade, VNMC Brigade 258, was at Fire Support Bases Nancy and Barbara to the south.[3] General Lam, commanding I Corps, which encompassed the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, had called the disposition of the 3d ARVN Division on fixed combat bases his "ring of steel."[4]

Other familiarization briefings for Lieutenant Colonel Turley included such subjects as sensor placements and reporting, special radio and intelligence networks, and the combat support available from the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force. They were good briefings; Turley was to realize their value a few hours later. He was anxious to return to Saigon, but the briefings and poor flying weather had taken up the morning. His return would have to wait until after lunch at the well-appointed Team 155 dining facility.

The Opening Round

Combat outposts Sarge and Nui Ba Ho, occupied by the 4th VNMC Battalion, stood astride the historic invasion routes into Quang Tri Province and Hue City. Major Walt Boomer was with the battalion commander, Major Tran Xuan Quang, and the "Alpha" group on Sarge and Captain Ray Smith was on Nui Ba Ho with the "Bravo" group of the battalion.* Outpost Nui Ba Ho was actually two positions, Nui Ba Ho and Ba Ho East. The formidable hill mass rose abruptly from the valley floor and its slopes were so steep that, as Captain Smith recalled, "no one ever climbed to the top just for the fun of it." The top of the hill was so small that a UH-1E helicopter could barely land, while larger helicopters could not land there at all. At approximately 1030 on 30 March 1972, a platoon patrol from the 1st VNMC Company on Ba Ho East made contact with an enemy platoon 1,000 meters northwest of Nui Ba Ho. Moments later, the 8th VNMC Battalion, operating in the vicinity of Holcomb, also reported making contact with the enemy.

*It was common practice for the Vietnamese Marine Corps to divide its infantry battalions into two command groups, each controlling two reinforced rifle companies. The battalion commander, with the senior advisor, headed the Alpha group, while the executive officer, with the assistant advisor, was with the Bravo group.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

LtCol Nguyen Nang Bao led VNMC Brigade 147 at Mai Loc. He was promoted to colonel in June and continued as brigade commander. A native of North Vietnam, he was a 19-year veteran, and had attended U.S. Marine basic course and command and staff college.

As these engagements progressed, NVA 120mm and 130mm artillery, firing from positions to the west, struck Mai Loc and Camp Carroll. The fire was so intense that the South Vietnamese were unable to man their guns and provide counterbattery or supporting fires. Under this protective umbrella, the NVA infantry boldly advanced on the Marine positions.

Shortly after 1100, Captain Smith saw three company-sized NVA units advancing on the base of Nui Ba Ho. They were "marching in mass formation, right across Highway 9, at sling arms." These units were acutely vulnerable to friendly artillery fire but none was then available. Heavy cloud cover and accompanying low visibility along the entire DMZ also prevented use of close air support, although airborne forward air controllers were on station.[5] Smith, who was one of the few advisors fluent in Vietnamese, was listening to the enemy artillery fire direction net. Smith determined that the NVA were shooting destruction missions with adjustments to within five meters, some very precise shooting. Since all South Vietnamese locations were well known to the enemy, devastating fire now fell on all positions and particularly on the fire support bases.

Team 155 Under Fire

During his noon meal, Lieutenant Colonel Turley sat with Major James E. Smock, USA, the senior U.S.

Army advisor to the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion of the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade. This was the only operational ARVN battalion equipped with U.S. M48 tanks in South Vietnam. The 20th Tank Battalion had just completed training and had not yet fired a shot in anger.[6]

Coming out of the dining hall at noon on 30 March 1972, Lieutenant Colonel Turley heard the all-too-familiar swishing-sound of incoming artillery rounds followed by their impact in the Ai Tu perimeter. Although he did not realize it at the time, it became evident that the North Vietnamese had launched a well-coordinated, well-planned, three-pronged infantry attack across the entire Quang Tri frontier. More than 12,000 rounds of enemy rocket, mortar, and artillery fire prepared the way for the largest NVA offensive into South Vietnam. Supported by Soviet and Chinese-built tanks and artillery, some 25,000 North Vietnamese infantry attacked across the Demilitarized Zone with such rapidity and shock that the men facing the onslaught were stunned. Every outpost and fire support base along the DMZ under the command of the 3d ARVN Division was taken under accurate and devastating fire. Perhaps it was, as higher headquarters put it, "only a feint," but the quiet period was over and the "feint" was to continue unabated for the next six days. Realizing that he would be unable to return to Saigon with the airfield under fire, Lieutenant Colonel Turley, with Captain John D. Murray—an advisor with VNMC Brigade 147, left behind when Major Joy made his way back to Mai Loc with the opening rounds—ran to the tactical operations center to keep abreast of the situation and to assist Team 155 as best they could.

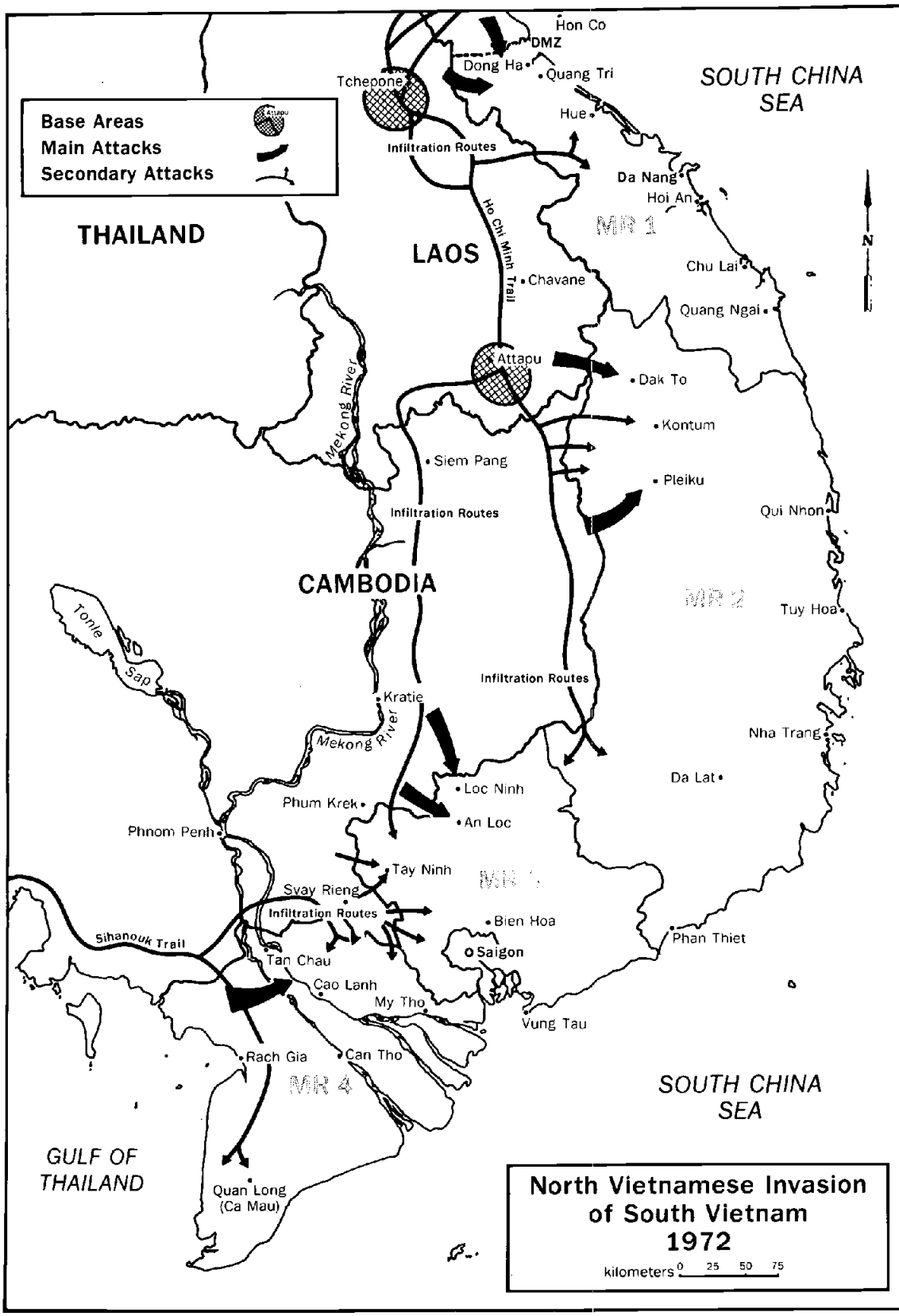
The artillery preparation, which had begun precisely at noon, was followed by infantry attacks involving units of the *304th, 308th*, and *324B NVA Divisions*, five infantry regiments of the *B-5 Front*, three artillery regiments, two tank regiments, and several sapper battalions.*[7] The fledgling 3d ARVN Division met this onslaught with five regiments of infantry, including two VNMC brigades, nine battalions of artillery, armor, and ranger forces. The enemy had a numerical advantage of more than three to one and overwhelmed the ill-trained and equipped defenders.

Although the intelligence agencies of the military commanders, both U.S. and ARVN, had expected a major confrontation during 1972, the bold and sudden thrust directly across the DMZ was neither predicted nor expected.** In fact, when a speculative question of a possible NVA attack directly across the DMZ was posed to General Lam, he replied, "They cannot!" His reply was not one of arrogance, but was based on past experience. This had been, and was, a war of guerrilla activity and attrition, with major confrontations, such as Tet in 1968, occurring only after months of intensive preparation and stockpiling. Besides, it would be illogical for the enemy to attack openly across a coastal piedmont region, fully exposed to American air power, long-range artillery, and all-weather naval guns. In addition, the South Vietnamese forces in that area were firmly entrenched on critical terrain features facing the classic avenues of invasion. In the minds of both the ARVN and U.S. commanders a massive attack by the NVA across the entire DMZ, and especially its eastern portion, was unthinkable.[8]

It did seem feasible that an attack, an end run, could come from the west. The allies had long detected enemy movements in western Quang Tri Province and patrols west of the Rockpile often heard mechanized activity. Additionally, enemy unit movements were covered by an appreciable buildup of supporting antiaircraft guns. On this basis, intelligence evaluators had predicted a limited attack and infiltration from the west and had suggested February 1972 as the likely month. But the allies had no plan to defend against a conventional combined arms invasion and had not fortified their static positions against such an assault. Knowledge of the enemy's past performance and capabilities simply did not point toward such an eventuality. The fixed outposts and fire support bases, although deteriorating to some extent, had served satisfactorily both the U.S. Marines and U.S. Army over the past five years and appeared well-placed to counter enemy infiltration and harassing tactics from the north and west. All this analysis became academic. As

*B5 Front: *27th Infantry Regiment; 31st Infantry Regiment; 126th Infantry Regiment; 246th Infantry Regiment; 38th Artillery Regiment; 84th Artillery Regiment; 202d Armor Regiment; 203d Armor Regiment. 304th NVA Division: 9th Infantry Regiment; 24th Infantry Regiment; 66th Infantry Regiment. 308th NVA Division: 36th Infantry Regiment; 88th Infantry Regiment; 102d Infantry Regiment. 324B NVA Division: 29th Infantry Regiment; 803d Infantry Regiment; 812th Infantry Regiment.*

**The use of the *304th NVA Division* and *308th NVA Division* across the DMZ indicated a major effort. Both commands had fought at Dien Bien Phu against the French in 1954, and were considered "Iron Divisions." A recent North Vietnamese publication stated "Quang Tri—Thua Thien was chosen to be the main focus of the offensive." (*Tap So Do Cac Tran Danh* [Hanoi, Ministry of Defense, 1986], p. 18, as translated by Robert J. Destatte). (Vietnam Comment File)



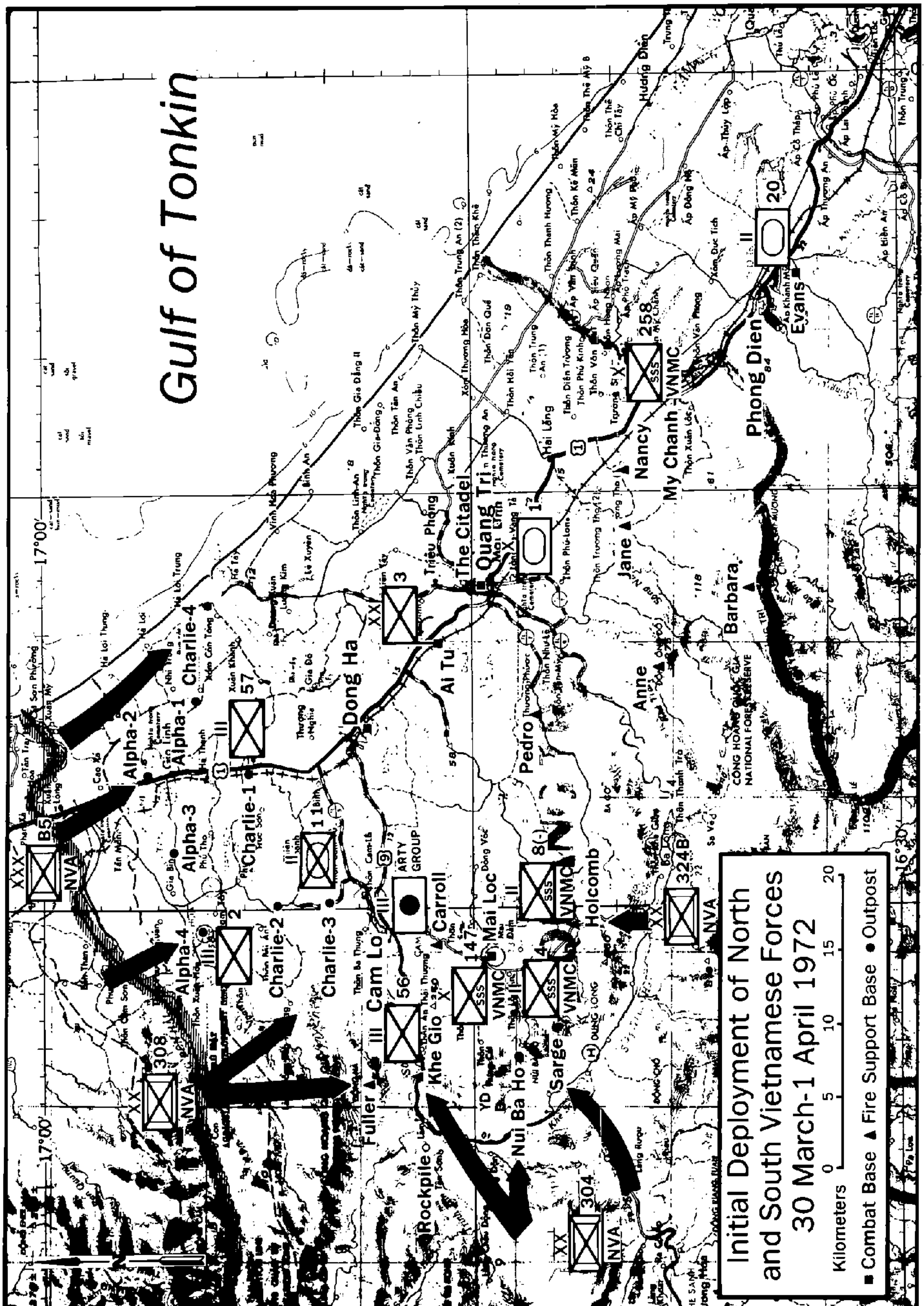
Adapted from Government of Vietnam Material

North Vietnamese Army Photo

Division and front-heavy artillery units prepared the way for the Communist offensive by disrupting the South Vietnamese defenses and command structure. North Vietnamese Army gunners prepare to shoot 122mm field guns that fire as far as 23,900 meters.

The Mai Loc combat base served as Marine brigade headquarters in Military Region 1. When the offensive began, it was occupied by VNMC Brigade 147. The flat, low-lying terrain did not offer protection from the concentrated artillery fire of the Communists.

Marine Corps Historical Collection


Gulf of Tonkin
Initial Deployment of North
and South Vietnamese Forces
30 March-1 April 1972
Kilometers 0 5 10 15 20
■ Combat Base ▲ Fire Support Base ● Outpost
Alpha-1
Alpha-2
Alpha-3
Alpha-4
Charlie-1
Charlie-2
Charlie-3
Charlie-4
Dong Ha
Cam Lo
Carroll
Mai Loc
Khe Gio
Fuller
Rockpile
Nui Ba Ho
Sarge
Holcomb
Pedro
Ai Tu
Quang Tri
The Citadel
Trieu Phong
Anne
Jane
Barbara
Nancy
My Chanh
Phong Dien
Evans
ARTY GROUP
NVA
VNMC
308
304
324B
B5
57
56
147
258
17°00'
16°30'

the thunder of massed artillery smothered the now exposed division headquarters, it also hindered the hasty preparations of the South Vietnamese and American advisors to counter the new threat to MR 1.[9]

The Outposts Fall

While Nui Ba Ho was under attack by the *9th NVA Regiment*, the Alpha command group on Sarge, only 2,000 meters to the south, began receiving a heavy artillery barrage. More than 500 rounds of accurate fire killed 15 Vietnamese Marines the first day. Major Boomer continuously moved along the exposed face of the mountaintop trying to locate the enemy guns firing from across Highway 9 to the northwest. In spite of the heavy fire hitting Camp Carroll and Mai Loc, he was able to call in some counterbattery missions which he credited with the destruction of several enemy gun positions. The adverse weather kept U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers at Da Nang and carrier-based aircraft in the South China Sea from responding in support of the Marines on the battered hilltop.

A direct hit destroyed the bunker which housed special equipment for monitoring enemy radio nets. At the command bunker, losing contact with the two U.S. Army operators, Major Boomer moved outside to discover that the radio facility had collapsed and was burning. He approached the inferno in a vain attempt to rescue the soldiers, but quickly realized there were no survivors.[10]

A Communist perspective of the South Vietnamese outpost Sarge on 30 March 1972. According to them, the position's location and defenses were not an obstacle to North Vietnamese Army "shock fighters."
North Vietnamese Army Photo

Because of the small size of the hilltop on Nui Ba Ho, the enemy's larger caliber guns had difficulty zeroing in on the Marine position. By the middle of the afternoon, however, 82mm mortars had been moved into firing positions by the NVA infantry and were doing heavy damage. The only counterbattery fire came from the battalion's sole 60mm mortar on the position. While engaged in serving this weapon, every member of the Marine mortar crew was either killed or wounded.

At 1700, a platoon outpost 600 meters to the north of Nui Ba Ho came under intense small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire. The Marine defenders repelled three "human wave" ground attacks with small arms, M79 grenade launchers, and hand grenades. Simultaneously, the enemy assaulted the squad outpost on the south side of Nui Ba Ho. A 106mm recoilless rifle on Nui Ba Ho fired a flechette round in support of the southern squad, but the weapon malfunctioned before a second round could be fired.* As darkness fell the enemy, having failed to dislodge the defenders, pulled back and harassed the Marines with artillery. During the night the enemy continued to maneuver into position for an attack the following morning.

At the Combat Base at Ai Tu

Lieutenant Colonel Turley and Captain Murray, anxious to learn the fate of the Marine-held positions under attack on 30 March 1972, had remained at the 3d ARVN Division tactical operations center. The operations center, jointly manned by ARVN personnel and MACV Advisory Team 155 members, was receiving reports of enemy contact throughout its entire area of operations. Naval Gunfire Team "1-2," with First Lieutenant Joel B. Eisenstein in charge, and a U.S. Air Force tactical air control liaison team were situated within the TOC. They provided command and control communications links to the maneuver units, but the artillery fire that slashed through the TOC "antenna farm" rendered the ARVN communications system ineffective.

As Lieutenant Colonel Turley and Captain Murray became more involved in the TOC, coordination problems became evident. Looking toward a weekend with his family in the Philippines, Colonel Donald J. Metcalf, the senior advisor, had left for Saigon as

*Flechette rounds were anti-personnel projectiles which discharged thousands of tiny steel darts. The flechettes looked like finishing nails with four fins stamped on their bases. They were deadly when used against "human wave" attacks.

the initial rounds fell upon Ai Tu. Murray recalled that no contingency plans were implemented, administrative radio messages cut out tactical nets, logs and journals were not maintained, no coordinating efforts were made between Team 155 and its ARVN counterparts, and the senior MACV Advisory Team 155 officer present, Major James Davis, was collapsing from fatigue.[11] Turley and Murray, neither in the ARVN or MACV chain-of-command, but both eager to get involved in the war, moved to help the Assistant G-3 Advisor, Major Davis. The Marine officers noted that by evening on 30 March, U.S. Army support personnel of Team 155 were openly packing their belongings, preparing for departure.

VNMC Brigade 258 Reinforces

At 1400, 30 March 1972, General Giai ordered Vietnamese Marine Brigade 258, with Major Jon T. Easley as the senior advisor, to displace it's 3d, 6th, and 7th Infantry and artillery battalions northward from Fire Support Bases Nancy and Barbara along the My Chanh River. The Marine battalions were moved to reinforce the northern defensive line and to assume overall security for the Dong Ha area and the Highway 9 and Highway 1 road junction. This shift left the division's southwest flank exposed to possible enemy action. Just at dusk, the brigade command group, the 3d VNMC Infantry Battalion, and the 3d VNMC Artillery Battalion headed north up QL-1, unaware of the tactical situation. As they drove through the night, they passed elements of the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion all along the road. The tankers had just completed a command post field exercise and were considered qualified for combat. It was reassuring for the brigade's Marines to move past the newly acquired American-built M48 battle tanks.[12]

On the morning of 31 March, Colonel Metcalf arrived back at the 3rd Division TOC. He asked Lieutenant Colonel Turley to assume the duties of senior American advisor within the operations center in place of the exhausted Major Davis. Colonel Metcalf wanted to stay with General Giai and Lieutenant Colonel Normand Heon, USA, the Team 155 assistant senior advisor, was required to select and prepare a less exposed command post south of the Thach Han River in Quang Tri City. In addition, Turley had already been helping and was abreast of the tactical situation.

Turley initially balked at this request. He realized that he was from a different service advisory chain-of-command, and that his visit had placed him in the Ai Tu TOC strictly as an interested, but detached, observer. Then considering the urgency for continuity in such a rapidly changing and confusing period, he complied with Colonel Metcalf's request. Turley's priorities at the moment were to stop the enemy attack and stabilize a badly deteriorated situation. Consequently, he directed that the TOC query all U.S. combat support units with which it had communications as to possible assistance. Insistent calls went out to the 1st Regional Assistance Command in Da Nang, and to U.S. naval gunfire support ships offshore. Turley also opened a journal to include the events occurring within the 3d ARVN Division's operations area.*

Enemy in the Wire, 31 March 1972

At first light, 31 March, the enemy made a mass assault on the northern section of Nui Ba Ho. A Marine 106mm recoilless rifle on the northern slope, firing flechette rounds into the formation, was instrumental in stopping the enemy at the perimeter. The NVA withdrew leaving an estimated 100 dead on the wire. At 1000, having stopped three more ground probes, the Marines on Nui Ba Ho were hit by 130mm artillery rounds. This time the fire was more accurate. Trench lines and bunkers began to collapse. At approximately 1500 the determined enemy unleashed a massive ground attack up the northern slope from the saddle between Nui Ba Ho and Ba Ho East. The integrity and mutual support of the two positions was destroyed, but not without its price; the outer band of barbed wire was completely covered by NVA bodies. Meanwhile, 75mm recoilless rifles, brought up by the enemy during the previous evening, systematically began to reduce South Vietnamese defensive positions.

The battalion executive officer in charge of the Bravo group was finally able to establish communications with the VNMC 105mm howitzer battalion. He urgently radioed, "We are going to die if we don't get some support." One platoon of two guns responded to this desperate request even though the gunners had to pull their lanyards while lying prone under the intense enemy counterbattery fire. Their valiant effort was credited with killing many enemy soldiers and knocking out two of the recoilless rifles on the northern slope.

At 1730, Captain Smith saw an enemy company moving up the southern slope, hauling a "large wheeled gun." At precisely that moment the weather cleared and a flight of U.S. Air Force McDonnell

*A version of this was used to establish the chronology for the events described.

North Vietnamese Army Photo

Enemy riflemen move through the protective wire at Sarge after the fall of the position. They are dressed in characteristic green uniforms and armed with AK-47 assault rifles.

Douglas F-4 Phantoms provided the sole air strike in support of Nui Ba Ho, knocking out the gun and dispersing the force to the south. At darkness on 31 March, the NVA resumed the attack on the northern slope, tenaciously assaulting the pinnacle. Less than four squads now defended the position. At about 2130, a U.S. Air Force Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunship came on station to support the defenders but could not acquire targets anywhere in the area. The aircraft was unable to fire its Gatling guns but did drop flares. One of the flares, breaking through the haze and casting an eerie glow, revealed the grim fact that the NVA had completely inundated the position. At 2205, one of the surviving command post troops, calling from the perimeter, reported that he had been captured but had escaped. He said the enemy force had control of the hill mass and suggested it was time to evacuate the position.

Smith, grabbing a PRC25 radio and a M16 rifle, was the last to clear the command bunker. As he emerged he did not see anyone he knew, but he did see five NVA about three meters in front of the bunker. He recounted, "The NVA were as confused as I by then. I ran right by them without being detected." At the

back side of the hill Smith heard some familiar voices calling names he recognized. He approached the group of survivors huddled against the southeast corner of the wire:

> I realized they were afraid to go through the wire because of the booby traps. By this time it was obvious that the position was lost. So my counterpart and I began directing the 26 survivors single file through a gap in the first band of wire. As we were doing this, an NVA began firing over our heads no more than five feet to my right rear. I turned and fired, knocking him down."[13]

Realizing that the shot would bring more NVA to their position, Captain Smith moved quickly to the head of the column, which was held up at the outer perimeter of concertina wire. Unhesitatingly, he threw himself backwards on top of the booby-trap-infested wire. Recalling this later, he said that he had foolishly thought that the radio on his back would absorb the blast had he tripped a mine. Quickly the Marines scrambled over Smith and the wire. With severe cuts on his arms and legs, Captain Smith crawled off the wire leaving most of his clothes entangled behind him.

Having cleared the outer perimeter of the wire, practically naked and bleeding profusely, Smith assisted the executive officer in rallying the Marines and moved toward Mai Loc. Evading the NVA along the eastern slope, he continued to call for artillery fire on top of the hill while the harried survivors, chilled by the cold wind and rain, moved into the darkness. Nui Ba Ho, the first position lost to the enemy, fell at 2140 on 31 March 1972. The Communist offensive was less than two days old.[14]

Fire Support Base Sarge Holds On

On 31 March 1972, Fire Support Base Sarge continued to be hit with massive fire and infantry assaults by the *66th NVA Regiment.* Major Boomer was in radio contact with Captain Smith on Nui Ba Ho. Although Smith's voice was steady throughout the day, that night, as the two were talking, Boomer knew the situation was bad when Smith's voice broke a little as he said, "If we make it, it'll just be luck." Major Boomer knew that Nui Ba Ho had to be manned if Sarge was to be held, since Nui Ba Ho dominated the approaches to its southern neighbor. He was dismayed when, at 2150, he heard Smith calling for artillery fire on top of the position which the Bravo group was supposed to be occupying. He was unable to communicate with Smith, apparently because of Smith's evasion tactics. The two Marine officers were close friends and Boomer believed that a last ditch effort to stop the NVA at Nui Ba Ho had failed and that Smith had been killed.

Enemy ground attacks on Sarge persisted through the night of 31 March. By 0200 on 1 April 1972, the NVA had overrun all of the squad outposts to the north, east, and south and penetrated the defensive perimeter. The bad weather continued unabated, but a B-52 Arc Light struck likely enemy staging areas west of Highway 9. Despite the efforts of the Vietnamese Marines, the NVA launched wave after wave of infantry attacks against the hill.

"The enemy is thrown into confusion and his resistance is weakening," reported an NVA cameraman with the attacking *Long Chau Unit.*[15] At 0345, during a deluge of rain and intense enemy fire, what remained of the Alpha command group evacuated Sarge. Moving off the hill between two enemy units, Major Boomer radioed Major Joy at Mai Loc, ". . . we're moving." Shortly thereafter Boomer lost all radio contact with brigade. It was as if the entire 4th VNMC Battalion had been swallowed up into the night.

At dawn, a "Victory" banner was brandished over Sarge's command post by the NVA, with "enemy [South Vietnamese] Marines emerging from their bunkers," while "PLAF men pursue those fleeing southward." Escape from the encircling enemy brought the Marines no respite from chilling rains or from the fatigue brought on by two days of fighting without food and sleep. All through the day of 1 April the survivors of Sarge followed a tortuous route through the jungle, evading a seemingly ubiquitous enemy.

During this period, higher headquarters ordered B-52 strikes against the enemy's resupply and staging areas at Khe Sanh and into Laos. MACV and the RVN Joint General Staff, nevertheless, believed that the NVA would not cross the DMZ with more than a feint and any main NVA attack would be at MR 2. Thus they concentrated the air effort in the Kontum area in order to prevent the NVA from seizing Pleiku.

The NVA's sudden shift from guerrilla harassing tactics to mobile conventional warfare caught both General Giai and the commander of I Corps, General Lam, by complete surprise. Never before had the North Vietnamese struck either military or civilian areas with such a concentration of artillery fire. During the first 48 hours a hail of artillery and rocket rounds struck each of the combat bases and the surrounding civilian areas along the entire buffer zone. In the face of this unprecedented attack, civilians began gathering their belongings and fleeing south to Dong Ha.[16]

Photo courtesy of Maj Charles W. King, USMC (Ret)

The Alpha 2 outpost and the tower from which a naval gunfire spot team controlled American destroyers to blunt the initial Communist attack from the Demilitarized Zone.

By midday of 1 April 1972, members of the 57th ARVN Regiment on Alpha 2, at Gio Linh, abandoned their exposed positions on the perimeter and sought protection in bunkers in the southern portion of the fire base. ARVN artillerymen refused to leave their bunkers to fire counterbattery missions. Naval gunfire from the USS *Buchanan* (DDG 14) and the USS *Joseph P. Strauss* (DDG 16), directed by a five-man ANGLICO spot team at Alpha 2, suppressed enemy supporting arms fire and impeded the advance of the NVA infantry, allowing the ARVN forces to withdraw.

Corporal James F. "Diamond Jim" Worth was a field radio operator with First Lieutenant David C. Bruggeman's ANGLICO spot team with the ARVN 57th Infantry Regiment at Alpha 2. The 20-year-old Worth, from Chicago, Illinois, had been in Vietnam with Sub Unit One since the previous year. According to Lieutenant Colonel D'Wayne Gray, Worth had requested mast to get back into the "field," rather than stay in the relative safety of Saigon. Gray described Worth as "an Irish charmer and not at all above conning his CO."[17] The outpost had been hit with heavy artillery, rocket, and mortar fire when the North Vietnamese attacked. For two days Corporal Worth and the other members of his team called for suppression, interdiction, and counterbattery fires during the critical initial stages of the attack while the 3d ARVN Division had lost most of its artillery and the weather prevented close air support. Communist ground forces had probed Alpha 2 and cut the position off from friendly support. The situation now reached a climax as the enemy launched its final assault supported by artillery. As the fight went against the South Vietnamese, Lieutenant Bruggeman requested helicopter evacuation for his team through Lieutenant Eisenstein at the division tactical operations center.[18]

From his position on the Alpha 2 observation tower, Corporal Worth watched the soldiers of the ARVN 57th Regiment abandon their fighting holes on the outpost's forward slope. As he looked to the rear he saw the ARVN 105mm howitzers also abandoned as NVA infantry closed from three sides of the fire base. An evacuation helicopter was on its way if the Marines could make the relative safety of Alpha 2's southeastern corner landing zone.

After some delay, Worth and the other Marines spotted an Army UH-1. The U.S. Army UH-1 helicopter, piloted by Warrant Officers Ben Nielsen and Robert Sheridan, flew in low and landed. Sheridan, a door gunner, and Lieutenant Eisenstein, quickly jumped out to assist the Marines. With their weapons and gear, Worth and the other Marines prepared to