

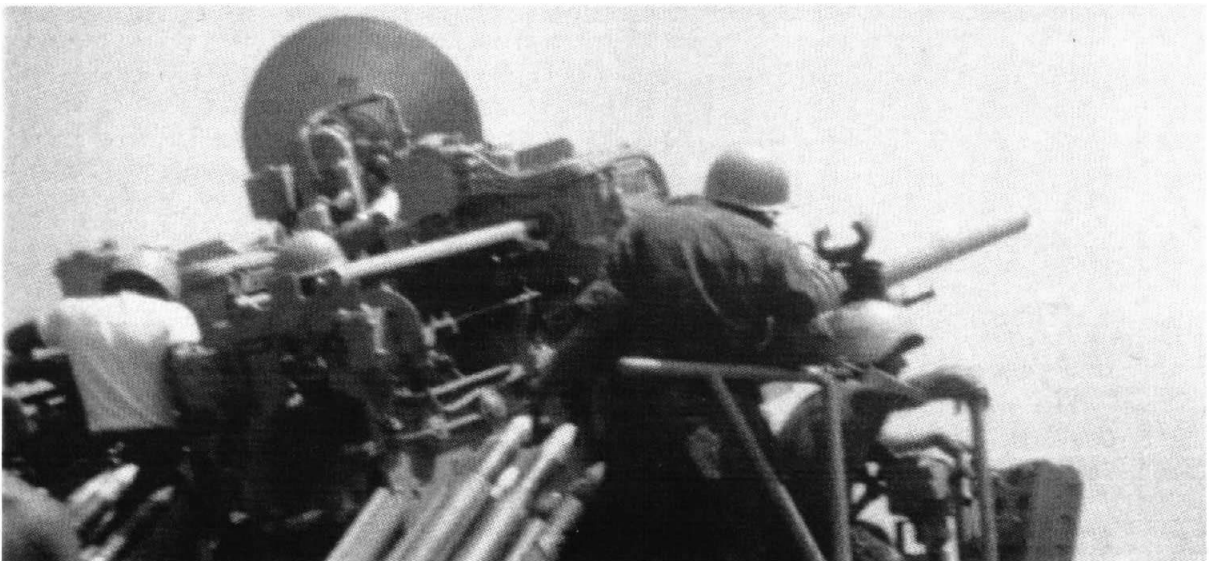


Marine Corps Historical Collection

In a number of instances, command and control facilities were maintained on amphibious ships. In this LPH combat operations center, tasks could have ranged from fire support to logistics coordination. Radio operators and staff officers man positions for the communication nets used to manage amphibious and air operations during landings.

In a traditional role, Marines manned shipboard gun positions alongside naval personnel. Here a mixed crew serves a 3-inch, .50-caliber gun mount. Originally designed as anti-aircraft weapons, guns of this type provided anti-boat and shore fire support.

Photo courtesy of Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800762

Some U.S. Marines worked .50-caliber heavy machine guns during landing operations by the South Vietnamese armed forces. Shown here are South Vietnamese Rangers loading landing craft at Tân Mỹ for movement to amphibious assault ships located offshore.

Force 76 provided command and control facilities).^{*} To counter the threat of Communist small-boat attacks, ships' crews manned deck-mounted machine guns. When sailors assigned to fire .50-caliber machine guns proved unskilled in their use, Marine armored vehicle crews and truck drivers who were trained to use the M2 Browning and M60 machine guns were pressed into service to conduct training for the sailors. As landing operations began, the ships' captains assigned Marines to landing craft to operate machine guns. Embarked Marines continued these shipboard duties throughout the crisis in the gulf.

Seventh Fleet used Admiral Gaddis' ships, with General Miller's Marines on board, to augment other fleet units such as the carrier and naval gunfire groups, for naval gunfire spotting, antiaircraft defense, and electronic support measures. These tasks were concurrent with ready operations, but required independent steaming and sent Marines the length and breadth of the Tonkin Gulf's area of operations. In one instance, the departure of fleet hospital ships from Seventh Fleet had left Admiral Gaddis without major medical fa-

^{*}Marines on board ship were commanded by the senior Marine present, the "commanding officer of troops," who answered to the vessel's captain for their discipline and welfare. Under normal circumstances, requirements for mess, maintenance, and police functions to support the ship came from a "ship's platoon" from which the Marines' share of housekeeping duties was met.

cilities closer than the naval hospital at Subic Bay, Philippines. At the start of the Spring Offensive, surgical teams were established on the USS *Tripoli* and *Okinawa*, and these ships were positioned to provide medical coverage for carrier and gunfire strikes. These same facilities treated Vietnamese Marines wounded during assault landings.⁹ Other amphibious ships were diverted at various times to provide search and rescue platforms, helicopter gunship support, disaster relief operations, and mine clearing—taking their embarked troops with them. These final events were conducted after the combat crisis in MR 1 had passed in mid-1972. The flexibility of the amphibious task force was one of its greatest assets, but had to be employed discreetly. The use of Marines for numerous unexpected duties caused enough concern at Headquarters Marine Corps for staff to observe in a study:

... Some of the functions performed by the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade during the period reported on normally are not assigned to the landing force; for example: mine sweeping missions supported by Marine assets; augmenting ship AA defenses with landing force surface to air missiles; dedicating amphibious lift assets to SAR functions. The Marine Corps position is that landing force assets will not be assigned to perform these functions except in an emergency when other assets cannot be made available.¹⁰

Evacuations

The uncertainty of the military situation in MR 1 made the evacuation of Americans from the region



Marine Corps Historical Collection

During the course of air operations in 1972, amphibious assault ships served as search and rescue platforms for Navy and Marine Corps helicopters. Between air strikes, this Sikorsky SH-3 Sea King on the USS Denver is on SAR standby off North Vietnam.

the most probable mission. General Creighton W. Abrams asked Admiral Mack to support possible withdrawals from Hue, Phu Bai, and Da Nang. Major General Frederick J. Kroesen, Jr., USA, commanding 1st Regional Assistance Command (FRAC), planned for the evacuation of 2,240 American military and civilians and 65,000 pounds of cargo. If movement by USAF aircraft were not possible, this would be accomplished by Task Force 76 and the 9th MAB. Admiral Mack allocated a single Marine amphibious unit—a reinforced infantry battalion and a composite helicopter squadron—to carry out these plans, on the assumption that withdrawals would be sequential. The Da Nang plan required an additional helicopter squadron. Simultaneous withdrawals from Da Nang and Phu Bai would need an additional Marine amphibious unit and naval amphibious ready group.

Existing operation plans dealt with administration, logistics, reporting, and standardized amphibious landings rather than with specific contingencies. As a result, units had to draw up evacuation plans from scratch.¹¹ Responsibility for contingencies rotated with 9th MAB units on “Yankee Station”^{*} and were the

^{*}“Yankee” and “Dixie” were naval terms for specific locations of carrier task force operations in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. In 1972, Yankee Station was used in a more generic sense for any ship location in the Gulf of Tonkin.

subject of continuing coordination with the FRAC through July 1972, even as the North Vietnamese threat to MR 1 diminished.¹² Of major concern was the 8th Radio Research Field Station (RRFS) at Hue/Phu Bai and its 1,000 special-intelligence personnel and their equipment. Plans called for 9th MAB to secure landing sites, provide security, and to withdraw the evacuees by helicopter or amphibian tractor. Marines went ashore to coordinate and conduct required reconnaissance of Hue/Phu Bai for this possible mission. After his reconnaissance, Lieutenant Colonel Von Harten told the 31st MAU commander, Colonel Kelly, that defenses ashore were virtually nonexistent and that a successful evacuation under enemy attack was doubtful. On another visit, a BLT 1/9 helicopter was not allowed to land at the 8th RRFS landing pad because it did not have the proper clearance to enter a “sensitive” area.¹³

Search and Rescue

Amphibious ships from Task Force 76, at one time including both helicopter carriers, were used as search and rescue (SAR) stations in support of Task Force 77 carrier air-attacks. These vessels deployed to positions off North Vietnam rather than remain in the amphibious holding area near the DMZ. The “Big Mothers” of TF 77’s Helicopter Combat Support Squadron (HC)

7, flying Sikorsky SH-3 Sea King helicopters from TF 76 amphibious ships positioned in the Tonkin Gulf were the primary SAR aircraft to recover Air Force and naval crews who went "feet wet." With a motto of "You fall, we haul," Navy SAR crews picked up downed flyers from under the guns of shore-based North Vietnamese forces. Marine helicopters and crews stood by to assist. To support recovery attempts, Admiral Mack had ordered General Miller to have a 300-man helicopter reaction force available on 48-hour standby to rescue downed crews or escaping prisoners from shore.¹⁴

On 14 April, the brigade received a reminder that being offshore was still within the combat zone. The Navy's helicopter direction center (HDC) on the *Tripoli* dispatched an unarmed HMM-165 helicopter to assist in the search for a missing Marine Intruder EA-6A pilot off the coast of North Vietnam. The CH-46, flown by Marine First Lieutenants Lawrence J. "Hal" Paglioni and Michael L. Powell, flew a lazy search pattern in the humid air of the Tonkin Gulf in response to vectors from the ship's HDC. As the aircraft reached Tiger Island (Hon Co), North Vietnamese antiaircraft gunners opened up on the helicopter flying at 500 feet. A single 14.5mm round passed through the front of the aircraft, between Powell's legs, ripping diagonal-

ly through the front and out the side of the armored seat, exploding and wounding him in the face. As they made their way back to the *Tripoli*, the two pilots berated the HDC for the error and pointedly observed that there was "still a war going on."¹⁵

One Marine pilot who flew search and rescue off North Vietnam, First Lieutenant Laurence W. Rush, recalled these operations at general quarters:

... Everyone was sleeping fully clothed and with life vests on. The air strike was due to start at three. The air was tense with expectation We expected to be busy in a very short time Dawn came and a new dimension was added. We could actually see our planes diving in and the smoke trails of the missiles coming up to meet them. We could see the shore line and the ship was ordered to proceed to a new holding area just beyond sight of shore.¹⁶

The Marine and Navy helicopters rescued several American aircrews shot down during the intensified air war over North Vietnam. One Thailand-based Air Force F-4 crew was recovered during an April 1972 strike at Thanh Hoa. The men were floating off the coast when a SH-3 SAR "bird" located them; the downed airmen first thought it was a North Vietnamese helicopter! Despite this misperception, the SH-3 picked them up and ferried them to the LPD

Glad to be back, Navy Lt Randall H. Cunningham and Lt (jg) William P. Driscoll arrive on the USS Constellation after being rescued in the Gulf of Tonkin. They got three MiGs before going down. The CH-46 that brought them is from HMM-164.

Department of Defense Photo (USN) 115713





Photo courtesy of Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC
A Marine UH-1 lands on the USS Denver after flying a naval gunfire spot mission in support of Linebacker and Freedom Train operations. It was flown by the HML-367 detachment with BLT Bravo, whose aircraft provided interim support to the naval gunfire ships.

USS *Denver*. In another instance, Lieutenant Randall H. Cunningham and Lieutenant (jg) William P. Driscoll were picked up by Navy SAR helicopters after shooting down their fifth MiG and becoming the Navy's current leading air aces. A Marine CH-46 from the USS *Okinawa* carried Cunningham and Driscoll to their own ship, the *Constellation*.

NGF Airborne Spotters, Fast and Slow

Admiral Mack requested General Metzger to provide aircraft and Marines to support Task Group 77.1 engaged in naval gunfire strikes north of the DMZ. General Metzger, himself an air observer, proposed using McDonnell-Douglas TA-4F Skyhawk dual-seat jets flying out of Da Nang as "Fast FACs" because the threat of enemy antiaircraft fire over the DMZ and North Vietnam prevented the effective use of anything but jet aircraft. He also proposed UH-1E helicopters off amphibious ships as spotting platforms. Trained personnel to support this were in two naval gunfire spot teams already with General Miller, in an additional team at Subic Bay, and among 16 more air observers rushed out from Okinawa and Hawaii. Additional air observers were with the infantry and artillery units of the brigade.

On 18 April, the USS *Denver* departed the amphibious holding area off the DMZ to join Task Group 77.1 for naval gunfire operations. General Miller established a naval gunfire support element on board the *Denver* using two UH-1E helicopters of Detachment Bravo, HML-367, and two UH-1Es from HMM-165 from the USS *Tripoli*. The element was in-

itially under Major Harrison A. Makeever, but Captain Stephen D. Hill was the officer in charge during most of its existence. The detachment included five naval gunfire spotters and support personnel. On 19 April, a conference was held on the USS *Chicago* (CG 11) to organize the participants. Airborne spotters were used off Vinh on 20 April and then off Hon Mat, Thanh Hoa, and Dong Hoi on succeeding days. Mission effectiveness was marginal and conferences on board the USS *Denver* on 23 April and the USS *Long Beach* (CGN 9) on 27 April were unable to resolve the difficulties encountered in providing effective spotting. Admiral Mack suspended spot missions at the end of the month and directed the *Denver* to rejoin Task Force 76.

In retrospect, the enemy situation did not allow this concept to succeed. As naval gunfire strikes were conducted in daylight, the UH-1E spotting aircraft could not fly over land and still avoid the SAM and AAA threat. The spotters encountered problems in lack of coordination from communications procedures to tactics. The naval gunfire ships, outgunned by shore batteries, made their runs at the coastline in column, turning in line to fire while parallel with the coast, then back to column for withdrawal. They could not wait for subsequent corrections from the spotters. As the threat of North Vietnamese countermeasures increased, the ships conducted their fires at night which made air spotting difficult, if not impossible. These missions also hampered Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich, who found his efforts to prepare BLT 1/9 for contingencies wasted because of the 180-mile separation of his staff and units from the rest of the brigade for a two-week period in support of such operations.¹⁷

Raid and Demonstrations

American planners had long considered the possibility of an amphibious landing at Vinh to cut the Vietnamese panhandle north of the DMZ. The Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia, had presented such a landing as a planning exercise to students in the past. Lieutenant General William K. Jones, commanding general of Fleet Marine Force Pacific, remembered suggesting this option to General William C. Westmoreland in 1965 while Jones was a brigadier general in charge of the MACV operations center. In practice, Seventh Fleet conducted feints north of the DMZ in 1968 and 1971.¹⁸ The availability of the U.S. forces and the vulnerabilities of the North Vietnamese to this course of action were never greater than in the spring of 1972 as authorities in



Department of Defense Photo (USN) 1151455

Daylight naval gunfire operations by destroyers were within range of North Vietnamese counteraction. As a result, night firing was adopted to minimize this risk factor. Here the USS Richard B. Anderson increases speed to avoid shellfire from Hon Co Island.

Washington and CinCPac considered the feasibility of raids and demonstrations by amphibious forces. A Central Intelligence Agency analyst on Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker's staff in Saigon, Edwin W. Besch, observed that an amphibious landing in North Vietnam to the rear of NVA forces would have had a greater operational effect than the tactical landings conducted in South Vietnam.¹⁹

Early on, Seventh Fleet's Admiral Mack proposed an amphibious assault directly at the North Vietnamese mainland, or at least a feint or demonstration.* Soon after arriving in the Tonkin Gulf, Admiral Gaddis issued an order for a Task Force 76 demonstration against the Dong Hoi-Quang Khe areas. Admiral McCain, CinCPac, then directed a demonstration just south of the DMZ. The 1st Regional Assistance Command's General Kroesen objected and did not want the amphibious task force to operate away from its northern holding area. He was concerned that the 325th NVA Division would move into MR 1; he believed that the amphibious task force off the DMZ prevented this by posing a threat to the rear and supply lines of the NVA B-5 Front. Both operations were canceled prior to a proposed D-Day of 24 April 1972.²⁰

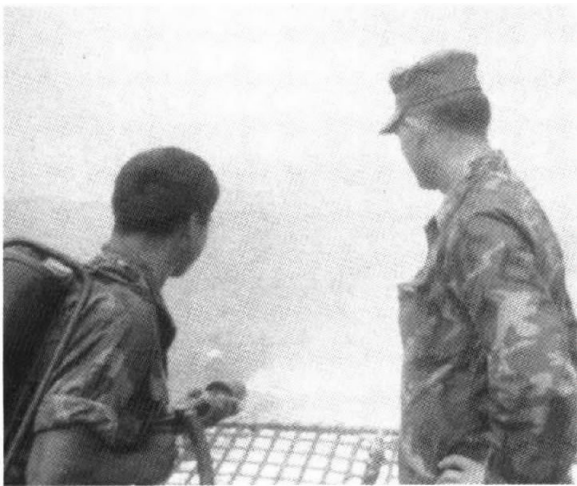
By late April, planning focused on more specific contingencies. Prompted by the need to relieve pressure on South Vietnamese forces in MR 1 and by the possibilities of having to rescue stranded aircrews, General Miller and Admiral Gaddis developed plans

*Amphibious demonstrations were operations conducted as a deception to cause North Vietnamese forces to redeploy or remain inactive in order to deal with a perceived threat. The full range of preparation was conducted to include troop movement, communications, and preparatory and supporting fires. The assault was executed as an actual attack with surface and airborne forces turning away just at the last moment prior to landing.

to land Marines by surface and air assault on several points in North Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel James L. Shanahan, the 9th MAB operations officer, commented that there "was scarcely a single square-inch of the North Vietnamese coastal littoral of any value whatsoever which was not the subject of at least one plan."²¹ Lieutenant Colonel George B. Crist as brigade plans officer considered Vinh, Dong Hoi, Quang Khe, and Hon Mat island as logical targets. Courses of action included a two-BLT demonstration at Dong Hoi, a two-BLT raid at Quang Khe, a one-BLT raid on Hon Mat, a two-BLT demonstration at Vinh, and a raid or a feint at Quang Khe with up to two BLTs. Brigade proposals called for the transportation and support of Vietnamese forces to conduct these same missions using TF 76. General Miller emphasized throughout the planning process the requirement for absolute local superiority in supporting arms.²²

Colonel Robert J. Perrich's 33d MAU joined 9th MAB in the Tonkin Gulf on 28 April. On Okinawa, Major General Joseph C. Fegan, Jr., the 3d Marine Division commander, assigned Lieutenant Colonel John C. Gonzalez' 2/9 as BLT Delta, the division's air contingency unit. On 1 May, ready forces went on two-hour standby for evacuation operations in support of FRAC. Marines and sailors of the 31st MAU, BLT Bravo, and the 33d MAU manned battle stations until MACV Advisory Team 155 withdrew from Quang Tri City in USAF HH-53 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters. The majority of U.S. Marine advisors remained with their Vietnamese units as they retreated south from Quang Tri towards Hue. With the dissolution of the 3d ARVN Division** and the South Vietnamese withdrawals to the My Chanh River, the situation in MR

**The "Ben Hai Flyers" to the Marines afloat, although this was unjust considering the relative strengths of the forces involved.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

In response to demands for special operations, 9th MAB ground units prepared for battle within the confines of shipboard living. Here a man practices with an M2A1 portable flame thrower, discharging water, rather than jellied gasoline, from the ship's side.

1 was critical.²³ American combat forces in MR 1 were reduced to the 11th Aviation Group, the 196th Infantry Brigade, and USAF base defense forces at Da Nang as incremental redeployments continued.²⁴

By 7 May, ARVN units, backed by American firepower, formed a defensive line along the My Chanh River. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong took command of I Corps from Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam and moved into forward headquarters in the Citadel in Hue.** General Truong's immediate task was to defend Hue and stabilize his forces. Supported by MACV's 1st Regional Assistance Command, General Truong moved swiftly to establish his chain of command, designate reserves, and enhance his control of supporting arms. This set the stage for 9th MAB's direct support of FRAC and the VNMC Division in the defense of Hue and the I Corps counteroffensive that followed.²⁵

Redeyes at Sea

Admiral Mack had been concerned since mid-April that the North Vietnamese would try to attack one of his carriers as operations intensified in the Tonkin Gulf. Whether the Communists could tell the differ-

*By 30 April 1972, actual American troop-strength in South Vietnam was at 68,100—compared to the authorized goal of 49,000.

**General Metzger held Truong in high esteem from the period of close work between the 1st ARVN Division and the 3d Marine Division in 1967, considering him "an exceedingly competent and able combat commander." (Metzger Comments)

ence between an aircraft or helicopter carrier was not known and academic to Marines who found themselves going to general quarters on both. At this time, a North Vietnamese MiG-17, Mikoyan-Gurevich Fresco, bombed the USS *Higbee* (DD 806) while engaged in a surface attack on Dong Hoi, highlighting the vulnerability of Seventh Fleet ships to North Vietnamese air attack.*** Because of the lack of effective point air defense weapons**** on some ships, Admiral Mack asked the Marine Corps to provide "Redeye" missiles and forward air defense teams for protection. General Jones, FMFPac, authorized the deployment of missile teams on 7 May after an evaluation by First Fleet showed the feasibility of the concept of employing shoulder-fired missiles on board ship. On 8 May, First Lieutenant James B. Dowling's 3d Redeye Platoon, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, departed MCAS El Toro, California. The platoon of 42 men took with them 44 missile systems, six night viewing devices, and associated support equipment. Arriving in the Western Pacific they were assigned to General Miller for support of the Seventh Fleet. This allowed naval gunfire ships to continue to fire against targets in North Vietnam without diverting carrier aircraft to combat air patrols.

While an American "Thunder Curtain" of supporting naval gunfire, tactical air, and B-52 Arc Lights protected the South Vietnamese in MR 1, Admiral Mack again moved north, issuing an initiating directive for Operation Heroic Action, a raid to seize the Dong Hoi ferry crossings south of Vinh. General Miller said the purpose was "to go into North Vietnam and a whole bunch of other things."²⁶ Wrote a young battalion-level staff officer:

... One morning in May 1972 aboard the USS *Denver* (LPD 9), I was sorting incoming message traffic when I came to an operations order. I turned to the battalion operations officer and said, "This looks like the real thing." He looked at the message and headed for the commanding officer's stateroom muttering about "going to war."²⁷

A week of intense planning followed; orders, maps, and aerial photos were issued to the rifle companies and attached units. The Marines on ship in newly issued camouflage "utility" uniforms focused on cleaning weapons, packing combat equipment, and a series of detailed inspections. Seventh Fleet assigned four destroyers for naval gunfire, two destroyers for escort, and two aircraft carriers for support. Rehearsal and

***This was on 19 April 1972. This MiG was shot down by the USS *Sterett* (CG 31) with a Terrier missile.

****Available 3"50 and 5"54 guns were not designed for use against high-performance aircraft.

communication exercises began on 11 May off Dong Hoi. On 13 May, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, postponed the operation indefinitely, because he wanted amphibious forces to remain in position to back-up MR 1.²⁸ Admiral McCain, CinCPac, then ordered a demonstration for the next day, but cancelled it when he concluded that the absence of both helicopter carriers, supporting other operations, would defeat the purpose of the maneuver. The landing was called off "at the last minute."

A 9th MAB message to General Metzger described Heroic Action as a turnaway landing. General Jones, then FMFPac, remembered the raid "as a fact," but agreed with Admiral McCain's final decision. Records from Seventh Fleet and Fleet Marine Force Pacific indicated it was to be a raid, while records from the Pacific Command and JCS stated for political reasons it was never more than a deception plan. The possibility of landing was valid considering the availability of forces and a situation that lent itself to success, and this was what the North Vietnamese were to believe. Seventh Fleet amphibious forces were now totally committed to the support of American and Vietnamese units in South Vietnam.

Support to Military Region 1

To this point, 9th MAB and TF 76 operations had been unilateral Seventh Fleet actions. This condition changed to meet General Creighton W. Abram's need for direct support to FRAC and the South Vietnamese

in MR 1. General Miller observed that, "... political constraints precluded the reintroduction of U.S. Marine Corps troops into South Vietnam in a land warfare role. Still, there were other alternatives to simply landing U.S. Marines."²⁹ The flexibility and availability to General Miller and Task Force 76 provided the Seventh Fleet with a wide variety of options to support MR 1. The close relationship between the Vietnamese and American Marines, built up over the years, provided for excellent coordination. Direct support to the Vietnamese Marine Corps Division included command and control, staff planning, fire support, assault support, and logistics. Lieutenant Colonel Gerald H. Turley, the G-3 Advisor to the VNMC Division, referred to the amphibious sailors and Marines as "our brothers off shore" for the subsequent contributions by the amphibious forces to the defense and counter-attack in MR 1 from May through September 1972.³⁰

General Truong and FRAC's General Kroesen met with the 9th MAB staff for the ongoing defense of Hue City. This broadened to planning with MACV for amphibious support of General Truong's efforts to regain Quang Tri City. General Abrams forwarded General Truong's request for Seventh Fleet support to Admiral McCain, and subsequent planning conferences in Hue ironed out the planning details and allowed for coordination of supporting arms and communications. Initial plans called for offensive operations in the Hai Lang Forest area.

Early on 13 May, Marines of 33d MAU's HMM-164

As support for Military Region 1 became a priority, Marines afloat put specific plans to work. In the ready room of the USS New Orleans, LtCol Charles H. F. Egger briefs the other pilots and crews of HMM-165 prior to a joint operation with the South Vietnamese.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800697



and BLT 1/4 "stood to" in anticipation of the day's activities. The USS *Okinawa*, *Mobile*, *Cayuga*, *Manitowoc*, *Point Defiance*, and *St. Louis* moved into a holding area 30 miles from the coastline. To allow for a simultaneous launch, helicopters were positioned on all available deck space.* Marines augmented the ships' crews manning battle stations: guns, medical, deck, damage control, and search-and-rescue. The success of this first combined operation began the series of landings used to contain and later to defeat the Communist forces in MR 1.

Fleet Support Continues

The first Redeye missile teams deployed the day after arriving at Subic Bay, Philippines. By 19 May, 10 teams of four men each were on naval gunfire ships in the Tonkin Gulf. The initial assignments found Lieutenant Dowling and a team on the USS *Providence* (CLG 6), with others on the USS *Mullinnix* (DD 944), *Everett F. Larson* (DD 830), *Benjamin Stoddert* (DDG 22), *Eversole* (DD 789), *Berkeley* (DDG 15), *Hanson* (DD 832), *Hull* (DD 945), *Buchanan* (DDG 14), and *Dennis J. Buckley* (DD 808). Lieutenant Dowling's missile teams rotated on board additional ships depending upon their proximity to the North Vietnamese shore defenses. Eighteen two-man teams were organized by the middle of the year to provide additional coverage. Training of navy gunners began at Subic Bay and Twentynine Palms, California, allowing the Navy to take over missile defense from the Marines.** The effectiveness of this expedient antiaircraft defense was never put to the test. The U.S. soon conducted naval gunfire attacks at night and American aircraft bombed the airfields that posed a threat to the Seventh Fleet.³¹

BLT Delta (BLT 2/9) boarded ARG ships and arrived off MR 1 on 22 May. This brought the 9th MAB to its maximum strength during 1972. The brigade consisted of the 31st MAU (Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 10) and 33rd MAU (Regimental Landing Team 4), with 6,042 men and 46 aircraft, a brigade in strength as well as name. This was the largest concentration of amphibious forces during the Vietnam War, and the largest wartime amphibious force since the Inchon and Wonsan landings of the Korean War. The size of this force alone gave the North Vietnamese some concern about U.S. intentions.³²

With the success of Song Than 5-72, the VNMC Division launched Song Than 6-72. The operation was

*Twenty-two aircraft from six ships.

**By 31 July 1972, training and turnover was completed and the 3d Redeye Platoon returned to the United States.

in the same general location as the first, but closer to the coast where the NVA was using small boats to supply its forward units. Again the object was to disrupt North Vietnamese forces and to relieve pressure on the My Chanh Line. The landing plan used a mix of brigade units under the 33d MAU's Colonel Perrich and HMM-164, ARG Bravo, and ARG Charlie supporting the Vietnamese assault force.³³ On 23 May, the 7th VNMC Battalion loaded on the *Cayuga* and *Duluth* in preparation for landing. Helicopters from HMM-164 filled available deck space for a single-wave launch.*** As they had in the previous assault, the Vietnamese Marines carried out this operation successfully. Helicopters brought Vietnamese casualties to the ships, demonstrating the reality of war to the Americans offshore.

On 17 June, General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited with III MAF commanders as part of his Western Pacific inspection trip, which included Vietnam.³⁴ Major David J. Moore, executive officer for HMM-164, flew General Miller into Da Nang, where they met General Cushman and took him to Hue and later to the *Okinawa*. Recalled Moore, "Because of the SA-7 threat, our trip to Hue was a bit more exciting than General Cushman expected."³⁵ By then, the South Vietnamese in MR 1 had regained the initiative over the Communists. Lam Son 72 was General Truong's plan to recapture portions of MR 1 lost at the beginning of the Easter Offensive and he directed the Vietnamese Airborne and Marine Divisions to attack north from the My Chanh River to seize a line along Route 602 from Hai Lang to Wunder Beach.

Across the Beach: The Lam Son Landings

In support of Lam Son 72, Admiral Gaddis and General Miller assembled ARG Charlie with the 31st MAU and ARG Alpha with the 33d MAU in a staging area for preparations for a demonstration just north of the Cua Viet River.**** While in the staging area, the amphibious forces conducted a command post exercise and, at the same time, attacked selected targets in the objective area with naval gunfire and tactical air strikes. The main enemy threat to this operation was from coastal artillery located on Hon (Tiger) Island. On 26 June, the amphibious task group was activated by Task Force 76 and a second rehearsal was

***Twenty aircraft and 20 LVTs from nine ships. USS *Duluth*, *Cayuga*, *Okinawa*, *Schenectady*, *Sumter*, *Juneau*, *St. Louis*, *Mobile*, and *Manitowoc*.

****31st MAU: BLT 1/4, HMM-164. 33d MAU: BLT 1/9, HMM-165.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A142278

Not all hazards to flight were from the enemy. Mechanical failure claimed this UH-1 from the USS Okinawa. The crew was recovered, but the aircraft was lost at sea.

conducted, surface and air attacks continued in the objective area, and South Vietnamese Navy landing craft loaded Vietnamese Marines at Tan My to join the task force.

Following the amphibious demonstration of 27 June, the 9th MAB prepared to continue Operation Lam Son 72 with a VNMC two-battalion helicopter assault into landing zones behind Communist lines on 29 June. At the same time, the remainder of the Vietnamese Marine Division launched a frontal attack from the My Chanh. American amphibious support to this phase of Lam Son 72 allowed the rapid advance of South Vietnamese forces to the outskirts of Quang Tri City. On 30 June, the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, visited the USS *Blue Ridge* to convey his personal thanks to the sailors and Marines of the amphibious forces for "the preservation of Peace and Freedom" in South Vietnam.³⁸

Another opportunity for a helicopter assault on the exposed Communist seaward flank occurred when strong NVA forces entrenched in the outskirts of Quang Tri City and to the south and east along the Vinh Dinh River stalled the South Vietnamese attack. General Troung and a new FRAC commander, Major General Howard H. Cooksey, decided on a two-battalion ground attack from the east supported by a heliborne assault from the west across the Vinh Dinh

River to turn the NVA defenses. General Miller, and the new task force commander, Rear Admiral Wycliffe D. Toole, Jr., used combined brigade helicopter assets and Task Force 76 ships for a maximum buildup of combat power. The 31st MAU of Colonel Donald E. Newton and the 33d MAU of Colonel Robert J. Perrich carried out the new assignment with the experienced HMM-164 on the *Okinawa* and HMM-165 from the *Tripoli*. At the planning conference for this operation at the VNMC division command post, Colonel Perrich pointed out that the use of a single helicopter squadron would require two separate lifts to complete and that a delay was in order until both squadrons were available on 11 July 1972. In the wake of this hard-won assault, General Cooksey requested Seventh Fleet's Vice Admiral James L. Holloway III to provide an alternate means to resupply VNMC units along the coast. The solution was the installation of a five-section causeway at Wunder Beach by the USS *Alamo* (LSD 33), by its Navy beachmasters and Marine shore party.

On 14 July, the VNMC continued its attacks on Quang Tri City in support of the ARVN Airborne Division. On 22 July, Brigadier General Lan conducted a two-battalion ground movement, supported by tanks and artillery, attacking up the coast and linking with a third battalion making a heliborne assault 4,000



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800635
RAdm Wycliffe D. Toole, Jr., Commander Task Force 76, makes remarks to embarked staffs, while BGen Edward J. Miller, Commander Task Group 79.1, looks on.

meters to the north. General Miller and Admiral Toole used the 31st MAU and ARG Charlie ships to support this, and Admiral Mack even ordered the USS *Denver* from operations with Task Force 77 to provide additional deck space for helicopter staging.* After this operation, General Lan said that the 9th MAB and Task Force 76 support enabled the offensive to be launched with success, citing the devastatingly accurate preparation fires by naval gunfire. According to Lan, the 9th MAB supported the multibattalion heliborne assaults with professional skill, courageous performance, and a timeliness "which allowed the VNMC forces to aggressively attack."³⁷

A typhoon in the Philippines in July caused Admiral McCain to direct Admiral Holloway to provide relief to America's longtime Asian ally. The USS *Blue Ridge*, *Tripoli*, *Juneau*, *Alamo*, and *Cayuga* were diverted from combat operations in Vietnam to humanitarian service in the Philippines from 22 July through 13 August 1972. The 33d MAU remained on 120-hour recall to MR 1 while conducting relief activities.** The MAU commander commented that the Matines of Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. F. Egger's HMM-165 flew "their helicopters in near-zero visibility to deliver emergency food supplies to people stranded in villages that were cut off . . . BLT 2/4 Matines worked under equally miserable conditions to provide assistance."³⁸ After a short period of training and an amphibious exercise, the 33d MAU, now commanded by Colonel Charles T. Williamson, and

*See Chapter 13.

**The 33d MAU and subordinate units were awarded the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation for their efforts.

the ARG Alpha ships proceeded to the Gulf of Tonkin to relieve the 31st MAU and ARG Charlie on 24 August.³⁹

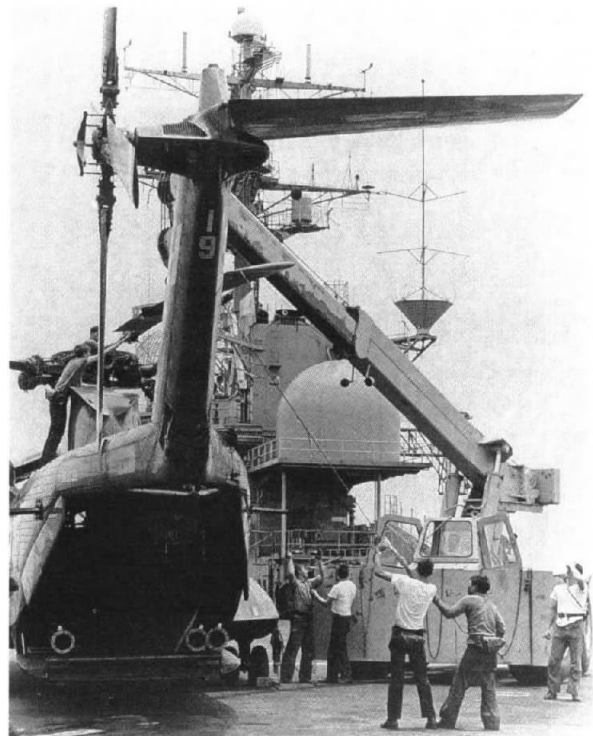
General Miller and the 9th MAB staff remained off the coast on the USS *Paul Revere* (LPA 248) while the South Vietnamese engaged in heavy fighting to retake Quang Tri City. Contingency and support planning continued through the month. Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. "Rip" Kirby, commanding BLT 2/4, made a liaison visit to the VNMC Division command post, in part a reunion with an Amphibious Warfare School classmate—General Lan. Kirby asked Lan about the tactical situation during the tough fighting at Quang Tri City, and the Vietnamese Marine general replied without pause, "I'm still using the yellows," referring to the doctrinal "school solutions" used by Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia.⁴⁰

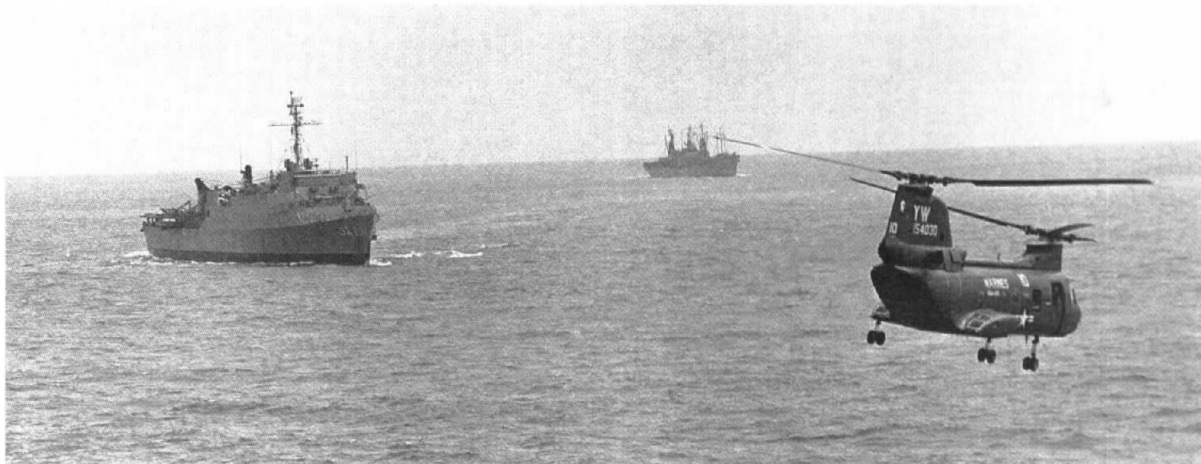
Turnaway at Quang Tri

More specific planning began in August 1972 at the request of General Abrams and FRAC's General Cooksey. The object was to draw NVA units away from Quang Tri City and to the northeast. General Truong

Some hazards came from maritime weather, as with typhoon conditions that required rotor blades to be removed to prevent wind damage on the USS Tripoli.

Department of Defense Photo (USN) 1157103





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800671

The Spring Offensive ended for the Seventh Fleet's amphibious forces as it began, with the amphibious ready groups underway in the Gulf of Tonkin. A Marine helicopter flies past the USS Juneau and USS Paul Revere underway in a holding area off the DMZ.

believed an amphibious demonstration on, or about, 1 September would accomplish this. When this was not approved in time by CinCPac, another amphibious demonstration was requested to take place between the Cua Viet River and the DMZ for the following week. As with deceptions, the fact the landing was to be a demonstration was kept from both American and South Vietnamese participating forces.

On 6 September, Admiral Toole and General Miller using ARG transports with the 33d MAU* occupied the amphibious holding area off the DMZ. They conducted communication tests, fired naval gunfire, and began tactical air attacks in the objective area, including Tiger Island and Cap Lay. On 7 September, Vietnamese ships and the USS *Juneau* (LPD 10) embarked 400 ARVN Rangers from Tan My for the surface assault. Naval gunfire and tactical air continued hitting the objective area. On 8 September the amphibious task group was activated and rehearsals began. Air Force B-52s and naval gunfire struck enemy targets; South Vietnamese field artillery reinforced the American fires. The turnaway was completed on 9 Septem-

ber without incident and the amphibious forces returned to the off-shore holding areas.

Marine and naval officers continued liaison with I Corps, FRAC, and MACV, but the task force provided no further direct combat support after October 1972. Both the North and South Vietnamese units juggled for tactical ground and political bargaining positions during the continuing Paris Peace Talks, while 9th MAB and Task Force 76 remained off the coast. The 9th MAB's backing of the VNMC and FRAC helped to recapture Quang Tri City and denied North Vietnamese military and political objectives in MR 1. Throughout, the Marines and sailors of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, seabased with Task Force 76, contributed their full share to the total naval options available to the Seventh Fleet in response to the North Vietnamese offensive. The Seventh Fleet commander stated the response of all ships and units to the surge in Seventh Fleet operations caused by the invasion of the Republic of Vietnam had been noteworthy in every sense of the word.⁴¹ Added were the comments of General Cushman, CMC, that "I am happy to see that in each instance Marines met the challenges head-on in an outstanding manner."⁴²

*BLT 2/4 and HMM-165.

CHAPTER 11

Any Time, Any Place

*The Storm Breaks—Marine Air Responds—Support to the Air Force, MAG-15 Operations
Support to the Air Force, MAG-12 Operations—Task Force Delta—The Rose Garden Grows*

The Storm Breaks—Marine Air Responds

While the 30 March 1972 offensive affected all Marines in Southeast Asia, especially those with the Seventh Fleet, it directly triggered the movement of major Marine aircraft units back into Southeast Asia to reinforce the Seventh Air Force. Major General Robert G. Owens, Jr.'s 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) provided critical attack, fighter, electronic warfare, and support aircraft needed to augment U.S. air strength in South Vietnam and Thailand. Marine helicopter and fixed-wing units of the Seventh Fleet were already off the coast of Vietnam as other units from the 1st MAW entered the region. The wing first organized a large and potent force at its bases in mainland Japan and on Okinawa.¹ The 3 April dispatch from Japan of a detachment from Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1 to the Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines, marked the beginning of the reentry of Marine high-performance aircraft to combat in Vietnam.

At FMFPac, Lieutenant General William K. Jones had correctly reasoned that while it was unlikely that American ground troops would be recommitted to the fighting, an immediate buildup of tactical air would occur. General Jones, with the CinCPac staff, believed the best response to MACV and South Vietnam's need for more air support would be made by the dual-mission, extended-range, McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom jets of the 1st MAW. The Phantom was used by both the Navy and the Air Force, which made logistical support of these planes easier than for other Marine aircraft types, but as Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMEA) 212's Lieutenant Colonel Richard D. Revie observed, they had "very few compatible parts" and even flew different-model aircraft in his squadron's case.² On 5 April, General Owens received notification from III MAF's Lieutenant General Louis Metzger to deploy, on order from JCS and CinCPac, two Phantom squadrons to Vietnam to support the Seventh Air Force. General Owens directed VMEA-115 and VMEA-232 to deploy for "training" to Cubi Point; from there they were in position to respond rapidly to the developing situation in South Vietnam.³

Overseeing the regional air buildup was CinCPac,

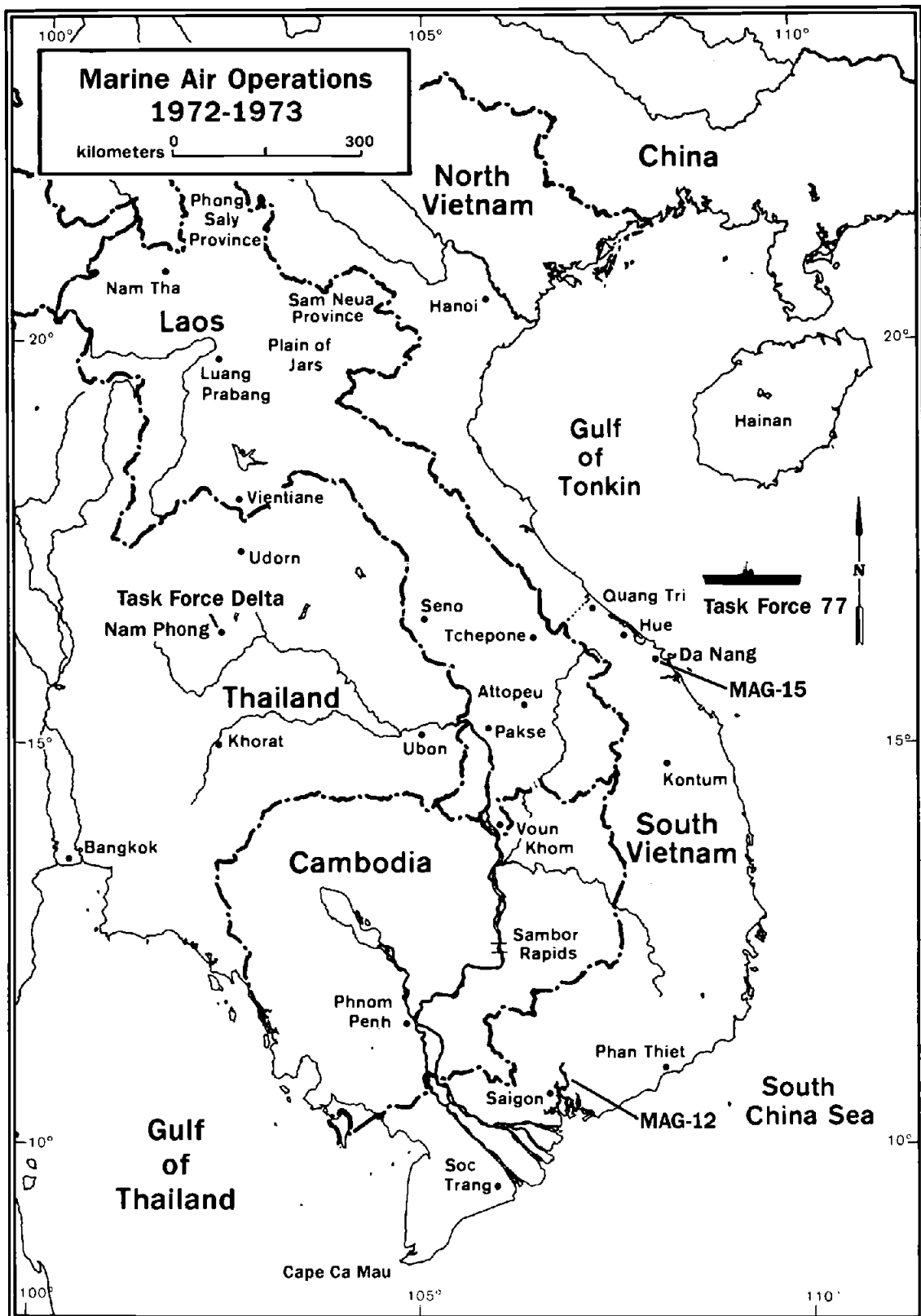
Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., and his staff. Previous air operations against North Vietnam were part of CinCPac's Operation Rolling Thunder, which had begun in 1965 and continued until the bombing halt of 1968. After this date, U.S. aircraft operations over North Vietnam were limited to armed reconnaissance, combat air patrol, and protective-reaction sorties. Air attacks continued on Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam with increased intensity through the 1972 fighting. Marine air was fitted into Navy and Air Force command and control structures evolved over the long course of the war. The Southeast Asia Tactical Data System allowed the Air Force's Airborne Tactical Data System and the Navy's Tactical Data System to exchange information over the whole of Southeast Asia and the Tonkin Gulf. This enabled tactical commanders to control airspace to rendezvous and refuel, and to coordinate with surface and air units.

Together with an interface of aircraft, the Air Force and Navy organized common control measures, with the region divided into tactical control areas or route "packages." General John W. Vogt, Jr.'s Seventh Air Force was responsible to General Abrams' MACV for operations in South Vietnam and into Route Package (RP) 1.* General Vogt reported to Pacific Air Force's General Lucius D. Clay for Route Packages 5 and 6a. On the Navy side, Vice Admiral Damon W. Cooper of Task Force 77 answered to Vice Admiral William P. Mack for Seventh Fleet's Route Packages 2, 3, 4, and 6b. A further division existed between the daytime bombing of point targets by the Navy and Air Force and nighttime area bombing by Strategic Air Command B-52s from Guam and Thailand.

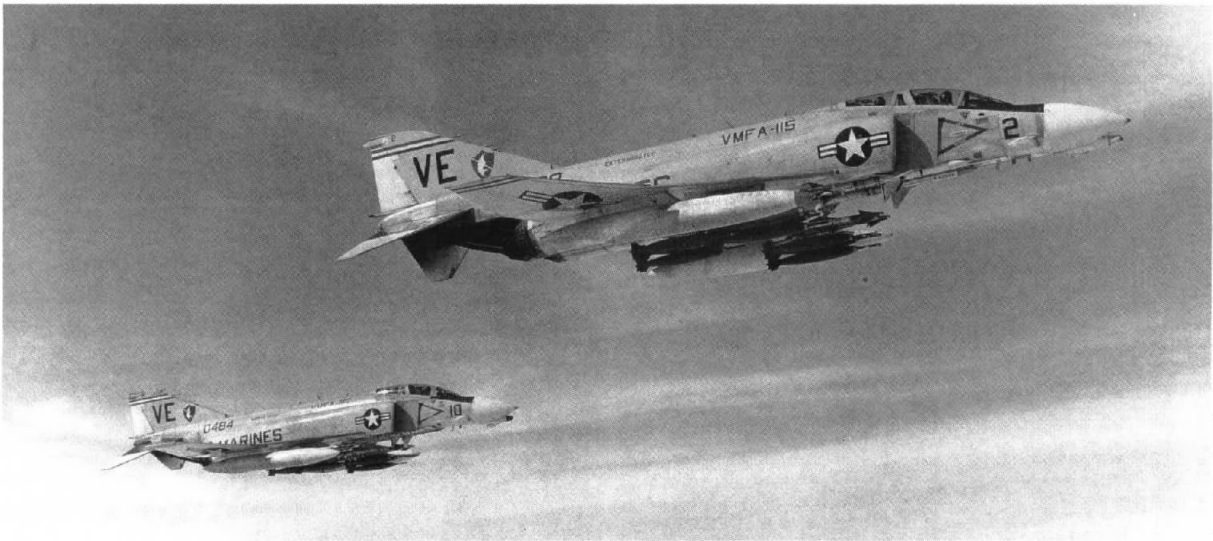
Support to the Air Force, MAG-15 Operations

Reinforcement of Seventh Air Force by 1st MAW began with the movement of air units to Cubi Point and ended with an eventual commitment of an unofficial total of 4,895 Marines and 120 aircraft. The staging of 12 F-4Bs and 15 F-4Js allowed the 1st MAW commander to deploy his units at short notice.⁴ The lead

*General Vogt was "double-hatted" in April 1972 as Deputy Commander for Air Operations, MACV. In June 1972 he also became Deputy Commander, MACV, as well as Commanding General, Seventh Air Force.



Adapted from Naval Historical Center Material



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422878

McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantom fighter-bombers of VMFA-115 were among the initial aircraft from MAG-15 to arrive in Da Nang after III MAF air power was committed in response to the Communist Spring Offensive. A workhorse aircraft, it was used by Marine, Air Force, and Navy squadrons. The tail letters "VE" indicate its squadron.

aircraft touched down at Da Nang on 6 April within hours of the orders from 1st MAW. This rapid arrival in Vietnam drew the praise of The White House, the surprise of the Air Force, and the vexation of the Japanese government for supposedly departing for Vietnam from Japanese bases without prior notification.*⁵

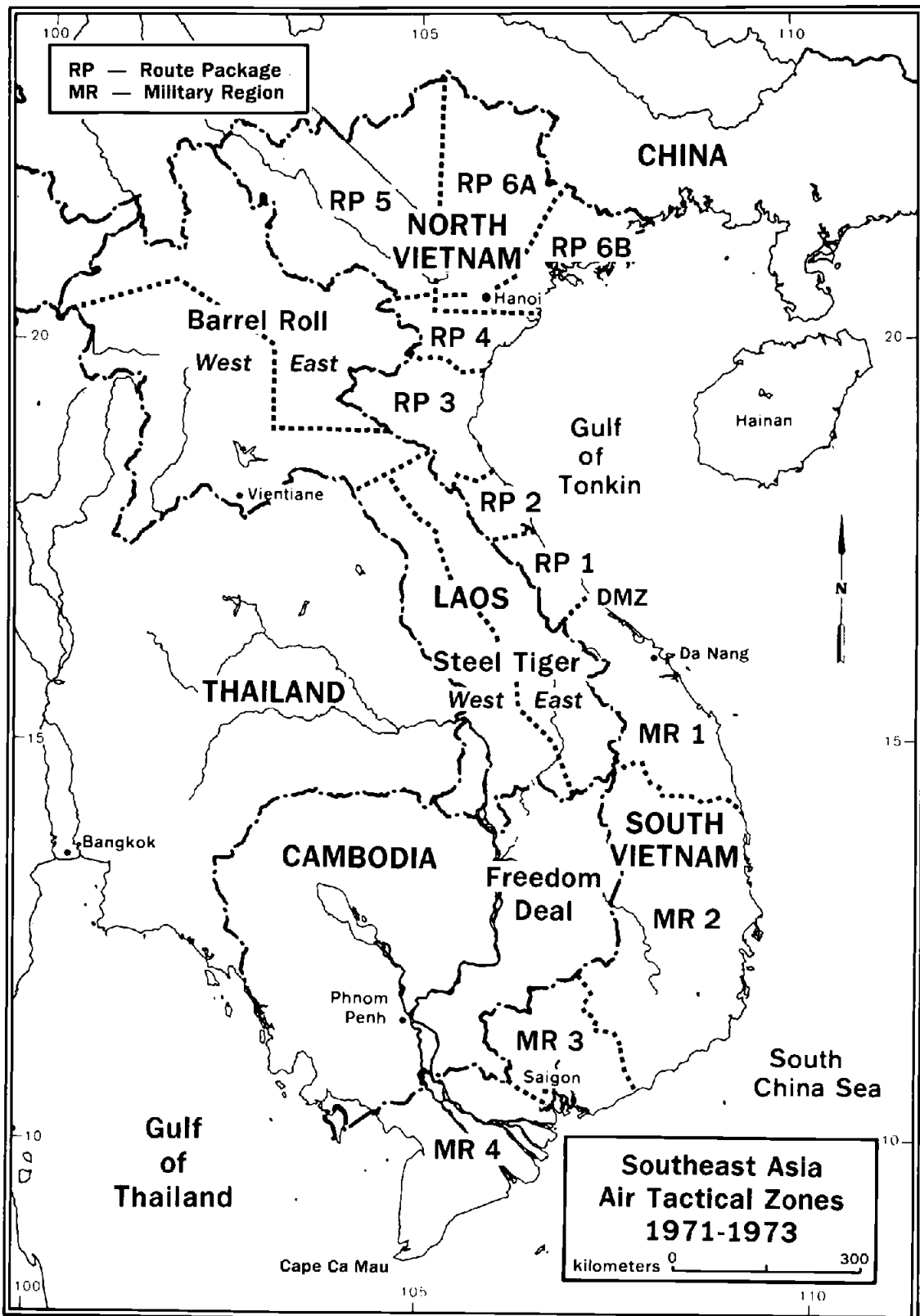
The first Phantoms of Lieutenant Colonel Kent A. McFerren's VMFA-115 "Silver Eagles" and Lieutenant Colonel Joe L. Gregorcyck's VMFA-232 "Red Devils" landed on Da Nang's 10,000-foot runway four hours and 55 minutes after being ordered from the Philippines. The airlift of necessary support personnel and equipment took another four days for a total of 26 aircraft, 984 Marines, and 2,099,702 pounds of cargo. While reinforcing Air Force wings in South Vietnam, the Marine squadrons remained under the control of Colonel Keith O'Keefe's Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 15 (Forward). Subordinate units were Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron (H&MS) 15, Marine Air Base Squadron (MABS) 15, and the two flying squadrons. Marines in MAG-15 met Vietnamization troop levels by being in temporary additional duty sta-

tus while in Vietnam, thus avoiding manpower restrictions.

Colonel O'Keefe found the situation changed in the short 10 months since MAG-15 had departed Vietnam under agreed-upon troop reductions. Weather and terrain remained the same, but the flying required to stem the flow of North Vietnamese forces was quite different. After an initial period of maneuver, battle lines became fixed and identifiable from the air as enemy and friendly areas. In northern MR 1 were the mixed elements of the enemy *B-5 Front*, including the 304th, 308th, and 324B NVA Divisions, and a number of separate infantry and sapper units.⁶ These heavily concentrated men and machines were "troops in the open" targets, but also presented a greater risk to flyers from the massed antiaircraft weapons accompanying them. The North Vietnamese employed antiaircraft weapons in quantity to compensate for a lack of air support. Not only were heavy antiaircraft guns moved south of the Demilitarized Zone, but also a new threat emerged in the form of the shoulder-fired SA-7, the Soviet-produced "Grail," which knocked down 27 allied aircraft in 1972, one of which was a jet plane.** Aircraft near the DMZ were also targets

*General Metzger takes exception to FMFPac records of Japanese vexation, commenting that all deployments from Japanese bases were to areas other than Vietnam. Once underway, or after arrival at intermediate bases, unit movement was then approved to Vietnam. American commanders in Japan "were well aware of this concern and were careful to comply with this policy" of Japan not being involved in U.S. operations in Vietnam. (Metzger Comments)

**The missile was also known by the Soviet designation "Strela" or arrow. Basically, this threat required helicopters to fly lower and fixed-wing aircraft to fly higher than before. Some 27 allied aircraft were downed, compared to a reported 351 SA-7 missile launchings during this period.



Adapted from Task Force Delta Material

for SA-2 "Guideline" missiles launched from just inside North Vietnam.⁷ Flying from Da Nang, MAG-15 lost two F-4s and a TA-4 to these defenses in the struggle to regain lost territory in South Vietnam.⁸

Despite the desperate situation in MR 1, combat operations for MAG-15 did not start until pilots had received in-country indoctrination from the Seventh Air Force in compliance with General Abrams' directives.* Preparations completed, combat flights began on 9 April with close air support missions in MR 1 to defend Hue. In the transition between the northeast and southwest monsoon seasons, the weather hampered the Marine missions. Even so, Marine aircraft flew both close and general support in MR 1 near Dong Ha, Quang Tri, and Hue, and in MR 2 near Pleiku, Kontum, and Phu Cat.⁹ This support included bomb, napalm, rocket, and strafe attacks within 200 yards of ground forces.**

Additional fighter-bombers arrived on 14 April with 12 F-4Js of Lieutenant Colonel Revie's VMFA-212 "Lancers" from Hawaii. On 16 April, five H&MS-15 McDonnell Douglas TA-4Fs came from Japan. These Skyhawks were used for air and naval gunfire spotting missions north of the DMZ. Known as "Fast FACs," the TA-4 detachment flew ANGLICO air observers as naval gunfire spotters and forward air controllers over MR 1 and North Vietnam in areas denied to slower aircraft by antiaircraft fire. Fast-FAC missions soon increased to four each day and continued at that rate until the North Vietnamese shore-based defenses caused the naval gunfire strikes to be conducted at night.***¹⁰

The NVA invasion found the allied air effort in a period of transition from U.S. Air Force to Vietnamese Air Force control. The Tactical Air Control System and Air Ground Operations System operated at reduced levels from the peak of the American involvement, reflecting differences between American and Vietnamese resources. While the direct air support centers and corps-level tactical operations centers were adequate, the tactical air control specialists at division and

*Indoctrination included learning rules of engagement, communications procedures, and escape and evasion plans, and receiving friendly and enemy situation briefs.

**"More like 50 meters," observed Lieutenant General Leslie E. Brown (Brown Comments).

***FMFPac records 87 sorties flown; CNA lists 90. By 3 May 1972, Seventh Fleet and TF 77 felt there was a lack of effective employment to justify the continued use of the TA-4s. Problems encountered were similar to those of helicopter NGF spotting attempts described in Chapter 10.

lower unit levels were "generally unsatisfactory by Marine Corps standards."¹¹ Available ANGLICO personnel and advisors were spread thin on the ground and also had to fulfill the roles of forward air controllers. Mission frugging authority resided with General John W. Vogt, Jr., Commanding General of Seventh Air Force, who also was MACV Deputy Commander for Air Operations. The 366th Tactical Fighter Wing at Da Nang provided tactical control, with terminal guidance and support requests by the USAF 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron and the Vietnamese 1st Air Division, collocated in the I Corps Direct Air Support Center (I DASC) and Control and Reporting Center at Da Nang. Typically, MAG-15 would inform the Air Force of the number of sorties it expected to fly the following day. Lieutenant Colonel Revie of VMFA-212 recalled that the Air Force then scheduled targets and take-off times, as they had for years "with little flexibility." Following normal briefings and aircraft preflight procedures, the aircraft proceeded to the target area where the pilot would "link up" with the FAC who controlled the strike on specific targets. Greater use was made of Air Force and ANGLICO airborne controllers to compensate for the deficiency in ground control. For unplanned requirements, aircraft were diverted from scheduled missions. Under this system the sortie rate remained constant regardless of the ground situation.

A study of this air employment by the Marine Corps Operations Analysis Group of the Center for Naval Analyses in 1973 concluded "that Marine Corps tactical air was not used as effectively as it might have been had the Marines been fully supported with their own command and control system," especially in the close air support role.¹² The Marines felt there was a better way to do business. Colonel O'Keefe believed that close air support target assignments of 1,500 meters from friendly units were being used out of ignorance of Marine capability to hit safely closer to friendly forces. Another difference, under the Air Force system, was that final control remained with the pilot in the aircraft while the Marines placed it with the commander on the ground. All of this was compounded by language difficulties when Vietnamese forces were supported.

At Da Nang, base defense was the responsibility of the South Vietnamese and U.S. Air Force Security Police "ground defense forces." Already, 11 Communist attacks by fire had been launched against four South Vietnamese air bases, inflicting 97 casualties and damaging 17 aircraft. Seven of these attacks were



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A66067

Concerns about enemy action against the Marine aviation units were from standoff and infiltration attacks. These abandoned Soviet-built rockets were found at a launch site five miles southwest of Da Nang.

against the Da Nang Air Base.¹³ MAG-15 was vulnerable to the “standoff” attacks and sapper raids by NVA or VC units. Internal security was MAG-15’s responsibility, but the air and ground crews were working around-the-clock with flight operations. Colonel O’Keefe requested additional support. Concerned with MAG-15 and also the eventual security of MAG-12, General Metzger ordered Major General Joseph C. Fegan’s 3d Marine Division to provide security forces from the division’s alert units or from the 9th MAB. The task of providing combat forces to the air groups in Vietnam was assigned to 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, which was III MAF’s Air Contingency Battalion, then on 24-hour standby on Okinawa. Forces were provided on a “temporary” basis to accommodate personnel ceilings and because “it would be good training.”¹⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Ronald A. Clark’s battalion had been “chaffing at the bit” about being in the rear during the 9th MAB buildup. This new assignment was referred to cryptically as “the mission.” The 3d Battalion was going to Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Major General Leslie E. Brown, the new 1st MAW commander, believed that the Seventh Air Force did not make efficient use of MAG-15 because of adherence to fixed flight schedules that kept the

*This also served to avoid the appearance of “The Marines have landed” for political reasons in an election year, and also demonstrated respect for Thai sensibilities.



Marine Aircraft Group 15 Command Chronology

At the receiving end of a rocket attack, GySgt Floyd J. Beem, of MAG-15, is standing in a 122mm rocket crater near the Marine billeting area at Da Nang. The rocket was one of approximately 12 launched by the Communists which hit the airbase on 24 April 1972.

Marine sortie rate down.** As a result, on 28 April, General Brown proposed to General Metzger that MAG-15 augment the Navy’s TF 77 combat air patrol requirements with four sorties a day.¹⁵ While sortie rate had operational applications, it was also viewed by analysts, especially at the JCS level, as an important indication of readiness and effectiveness. The rate was greatly influenced by other factors such as combat demands, weather, policies for scheduling, and location. General Brown also cautioned against mistaking sortie rate, bomb damage assessments, and bombing tonnage for effectiveness against the enemy, as the air strikes were in high threat areas where post-strike observation was impractical—obscured by smoke and not verified by ground units. And finally, there was a dependence upon airborne forward air controllers who operated under different limitations than did ground-based tactical air control parties.¹⁶

While MAG-15 flew daily combat missions in MR 1 and MR 2, 1st MAW prepared plans in May to move the group to another location. A compelling consideration was the possible loss of MR 1 with the fall of Quang Tri City and the subsequent Communist drive

**Sortie rate is the average number of combat missions flown per aircraft per day.



Marine Aircraft Group 15 Command Chronology

During a command visit, MajGen Leslie E. Brown, 1st MAW Commanding General, speaks with Col Keith O'Keefe of MAG-15 about conditions in South Vietnam at Da Nang.

on Hue.¹⁷ As additional Air Force units arrived from the United States, Marine squadrons were logical candidates for withdrawal from Vietnam.* The situation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, however, did not permit the Marine air units to return to their home stations; most units were redeployed within the region to continue the support of the South Vietnamese. The question faced by General Metzger and the 1st MAW commander, General Brown, was "where?"** When this was decided, the "how" took care of itself.

While this was underway, the situation in Quang Tri and Bien Hoa Provinces required General Metzger to move security forces to South Vietnam. On 25 May, the advance party of the 9th Marines arrived at Da Nang to protect MAG-15. By 4 June, 365 Marines of Companies M and L, 9th Marines were deployed as ground security forces. The Marine infantrymen did

*From the June 1972 ceiling of 60,000 Americans in Vietnam, MACV allocated the Marines 1,383 billets, a number to be reached by 1 July.

**FMFPac's General Jones had been General Brown's battalion commander in World War II, when General Brown had been an infantry officer.

not have long to settle in, as MAG-15 (Forward) was scheduled to vacate Da Nang by 15 June for Thailand.***¹⁸

Support to the Air Force, MAG-12 Operations

The North Vietnamese attack towards Saigon in April resulted in the fall of Loc Ninh and a "siege" of the provincial capital, An Loc. There was a single squadron of Air Force Cessna A-37 Dragonflies to support operations in MR 3, other air support coming from TF 77 aircraft carriers and from Thailand. The situation at An Loc required dedicated close air support aircraft and this requirement was met by the dependable A-4E Skyhawks of Marine Aircraft Group 12 (Forward). Soon after 1st MAW deployed fighters to Da Nang, General Metzger issued a warning order to General Brown to send squadrons to Bien Hoa Air Base north of Saigon.¹⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Willis E. Wilson's "Avengers" of Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 211 and Lieutenant Colonel Kevin M. John-

***Replacement personnel for Companies L and M were made from 3rd Marine Division to MAG-15. Company I remained with MAG-12 at Bien Hoa until its departure from Vietnam in 1973.



Photo courtesy of LtCol Michael S. Kelly, USMC (Ret)

Other Marine aircraft support arrived with these McDonnell Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from VMA-311 with MAG-12. MAG-12 moved onto an existing Air Force base with developed facilities. These included reveted flight line and hangars and prepared defenses.

ston's "Tomcats" of VMA-311 were sent "on a training mission" to forward bases in the Philippines in anticipation of going to Vietnam.²⁰ This began the second major deployment of 1st MAW aircraft on independent operations, providing support to embattled MR 3 and An Loc.

General Brown issued movement orders on 16 May for 10 A-4s at Naval Air Station Cubi Point and 22 aircraft at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS), Iwakuni. Commitment orders were sent on 17 May. That same day Marine Skyhawks came up on TACAN* Channel 73 of "BNH" and began the approach to Bien Hoa's 10,000-foot runway, the first of 32 A-4s to arrive "in country."** Supporting elements of MAG-12 followed with Military Airlift Command (MAC) C-141 and C-130 flights delivering 870 Marines and material of H&MS-12 and MABS-12 Detachments. General Brown remembered the MAC airplanes arriving at Iwakuni literally "from all over the world. It was an absolutely superior performance."²¹

With a crisis at hand, the Marines of MAG-12 found themselves fully committed to the defense of Saigon.²²

*Tactical air navigation (TACAN), ultra-high frequency, pulse-type, omni-directional range and distance measuring equipment used in air control.

**As with the MAG-15 move, MAG-12's sooner-than-expected appearance "in country" was noticed by JCS and others in the chain of command.

Fortunately Bien Hoa Air Base was a fully developed Vietnamese and U.S. Air Force base with support facilities, reveted parking aprons, and rocket resistant "Wonder-Arch" hangars.*** Flight indoctrination by the USAF 8th Special Operations Squadron at Bien Hoa started that day with orientation flights over MR 3 in Air Force A-37s. Lieutenant Colonel Wilson noted the first death of a group pilot "on one of these orientation/strike missions."²³

A gradual buildup of the group's sortie rate began on 19 May and reached 36 flights a day by the end of the month.²⁴ As did their fellow Marines in MAG-15, the aircrews of MAG-12 found themselves confronted by a variety of singular missions and situations. Three NVA divisions were advancing upon the provincial capital of An Loc. Enemy forces included the 5th, 7th, and 9th NVA Divisions, 33d NVA Infantry Regiment, 274th VC Regiment, and the 74B NVA Regiment.²⁵ The Communist use of conventional military forces resulted in a plethora of targets, including fixed positions, vulnerable road and bridge networks, and exposed logistical areas. There were tanks and armored personnel carriers, as well as the ubiquitous SA-7 and other anti-aircraft weapons in locations and densities not experienced heretofore in Vietnam.

***The "Wonder Arch" hangars were constructed from prefabricated metal frames covered with sprayed-on concrete to provide overhead protection to aircraft and maintenance facilities.



Photo courtesy of LtCol Michael S. Kelly, USMC (Ret)

The main threats, after enemy antiaircraft defenses, were from standoff and infiltration attacks. Enemy rockets hit a Butler building used by MAG-12's supply section. The Communist "rocket belt" was located in areas supposedly under South Vietnamese control.

The 3d Regional Assistance Command under Major General James F. Hollingsworth, USA, at Long Binh and the ARVN III Corps and 3d Air Division at Bien Hoa controlled operations. The MAG supported the 5th ARVN Division, 21st ARVN Division, 3d ARVN Ranger Group, and the 3d ARVN Armored Brigade. Air control was by the DASC at Bien Hoa, the TACC at Tan Son Nhut, and by the 21st Air Support Squadron and VNAF flying airborne FACs out of Tan Son Nhut. MAG-12's mission was part of a massive employment of tactical air power that included B-52, AC-130, A-37, A-1E, F-4, and helicopter gunships of the American and Vietnamese forces. This required "superhuman" efforts on the part of airborne air controllers to manage from their light observation aircraft, which, according to General Brown, they did "like real Pros."²⁶

American aircraft provided close and direct air support using bombs, rockets, and cannon. The highly maneuverable A-4, with speed and stability, was the ideal aircraft for accurate and responsive close air support. The ARVN defenders of An Loc and their American advisors praised the Marine air support which

continued until other ARVN units reopened highway QL-13, labeled the "Road of Death" by the Communists.²⁷ Most operations were from 5 to 50 miles from Bien Hoa. MAG-12's Colonel Dean C. Macho recalled at times ". . . it was common to see, hear, and feel air strikes flown by MAG-12 A-4s as close as three to five miles from the field." This served as an incentive to the Marines who kept the aircraft flying.²⁸ Later, air operations expanded to cover MR 4 and Cambodia. Operations were even flown to MR 2 with the addition of a second external fuel tank and a reduced bomb load, or aerial refueling.

Because of the proximity of the fighting and the continued withdrawal of neighboring American units, Colonel Macho considered ground defense of the base to be his number-one problem. The lack of ground forces and the constant threat of rocket attacks could not be adequately countered by his Marines.²⁹ At the request of 1st MAW, General Metzger ordered a rifle company from 3d Battalion, 9th Marines sent TAD (temporary additional duty) to Bien Hoa for 90 days. On 21 May, five officers and 161 Marines of Company K, 9th Marines found themselves part of MAG-12. Captain Nathaniel R. Hoskot, Jr., and his company began their stay by moving the company into prepared

²⁶For example, 1,077 fighter-bomber sorties had been allocated by MACV to An Loc and MR 3 alone from 11 through 14 May 1972.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422968

Air operations require maintenance and support to be effective. Here a Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 12 ordnance man loads a MK82 500-pound bomb on an A-4.

defensive positions, setting up crew-served weapons, and securing the group area. If needed, the South Vietnamese were to provide supporting-arms fire. By way of a welcome, on 23 May, the enemy struck MAG-12 with its first rocket attack.

MAG-12's sortie rate increased to 52 sorties a day in July.³⁰ Generals Abrams and Vogt requested that VMA-211 and VMA-311 be retained in Vietnam despite continuing withdrawals of American forces.³¹ The sortie and availability rate was the direct result of the support and maintenance efforts of MAG-12 ground crews. These Marines kept the planes in the air with a 12-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week effort. Sergeant Warren F. Winn, an ordnance man with VMA-211, explained the accomplishment:

... when we first arrived here and weren't in the groove of working together we had a hell of a time keeping up. As soon as we would load a plane they'd take it away and we'd start all over from scratch. Now working as a team, we are able to stay just one step ahead no matter what.³²

Lieutenant General William K. Jones commented that "Performance of this excellence does not just happen, it results from superior leadership, a high degree of professional competence, team work and a lot of hard work."³³

MAG-12's effort was not lost on the Communists, who subjected the Bien Hoa Air Base to continuing attacks beginning in August in an effort to disrupt

flight operations.³⁴ The heaviest attack consisted of 101 rockets on 1 August 1972 that killed one Marine, wounded six others, and damaged the MAG-12 supply, headquarters, and operations areas.³⁵ The Vietnamese and Americans repaired the runway, and flights, although delayed, continued. Since the rockets had come from the north, the pilots took off and worked over an area five miles north of the base that day. The attack had reminded the group of the value of dispersion and individual security measures and resulted in a major effort to sandbag working and living spaces.*

The group logistics officer, Major Angelo M. Inglis, wrote that it was surprising the attack was not more damaging: "The NVA/VC apparently tried to use the rockets as artillery and aimed for point targets," rather than employing the rockets "as area weapons as designed." He reflected a belief held within MAG-12 that civilian contract construction workers had surveyed the base for the Communists to locate targets prior to the attack.³⁶

On 10 August, the initial elements of Company I, 9th Marines arrived to assume the group security mission from Company K, which was returned to Okina-

*Of the more than 800 rockets that hit Bien Hoa over the nine-month period, 417 rockets hit in the MAG-12 area, killing two and wounding eight Marines; six A-4s were damaged.

wa. Captain Michael S. Kelly, the company commander, understood that this rotation of units would occur every few months, but events proved otherwise and his company stayed with MAG-12 until the end. Base defense was a “tripartite” affair with the Vietnamese Air Force Base Defense Force, the U.S. Air Force Security Police Squadron, and the Marine Security Element of MAG-12. Kelly wrote that “I worked closely with Colonel Dean Macho and our Air Force Security Police counterparts to enhance base security.”³⁷ “India 3/9” brought with them a section of mortars, trucks, and a detachment from the 3d Marine Division’s Sensor Control and Management Platoon. According to Captain Kelly, they “used various types of surveillance devices to enhance base security, specifically outside the ammunition dump.” The mission was tedious, but necessary, and these ground Marines “learned the tough tasks that the ‘air-wing’ Marines had.”³⁸

The adjacent VNAF ordnance dump blew up on 10 September, wounding four Marines and damaging the MAG-12 supply building with the blast and

debris.³⁹ Unable to determine the cause of this disaster, Colonel Macho nevertheless organized additional reaction forces of two 30-man “platoons” made up of maintenance and support personnel. These ad hoc units deployed at night in billeting and flight-line areas. Four A-4s were kept armed and fueled on 15-minute strip alert for support. With these precautions, the air war continued.

For Captain James P. “Waldo” Walsh of VMA-211, 26 September began as other days at Bien Hoa. The 26-year-old A-4 pilot from Hartford, Connecticut, had been flying combat missions with his squadron since arriving in Vietnam in June. His mission was to hit the heart of enemy-held territory near An Loc, the Quan Loi Airfield, an area known by MAG-12 pilots for the density of antiaircraft fire ranging from small arms to 37mm AAA. After preflight and take-off, Captain Walsh and his wingman met the airborne FAC near the operating area and were given a target.

As Walsh pulled out of his bomb run, his A-4E was hit by multiple rounds of gunfire. The Skyhawk shook uncontrollably and the controls went slack. When his

Marine infantry and supporting units were attached to the aircraft groups to provide a degree of security and close-in defense. At Bien Hoa, these men from 3d Battalion, 9th Marines prepared defenses including seismic intrusion devices for early warning.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Michael S. Kelly, USMC (Ret)



instrument panel warning lights went red, Walsh instinctively pulled his ejection handle. According to a Marine report, the "stricken A-4 was emitting sheets of flame from the tailpipe and had pitched violently nose down as the pilot ejected." With a good parachute canopy overhead, he looked around at the rapidly approaching rubber plantation for signs of the NVA and for a "lay-up" position to take until help could arrive. The FAC lost sight of Captain Walsh's parachute as it disappeared through the tree tops. With no visual contact and only an intermittent "beeper" radio signal, the SAR helicopter recovery team had little to go on when it arrived. The lead helicopter was struck by ground fire and turned back from the area and with approaching darkness the SAR effort was postponed. Local thunderstorms even drove the airborne FAC away from Quon Loi that night.⁴⁰

Captain Walsh hit the ground in the middle of a Communist campsite. Shrugging out of his parachute harness, he dodged through the rubber trees for about 100 meters before being surrounded and trapped. In this standoff he had a single choice, surrender or die. Later he made a brief attempt to escape by diving underwater during a stream crossing. A Communist soldier waited for him to surface and took him prisoner. Captain Walsh was listed as missing in action by his squadron. Walsh, however, was neither missing nor dead, he was the last Marine to be captured by the North Vietnamese Communists.⁴¹

Anticipated ground attacks at Bien Hoa failed to materialize, but on 22 October, the Communists fired 61 rockets onto the base. Colonel Macho considered the group's effort at civic action to be a factor in limiting attacks on the base. Based upon MAG-12's previous experience at Chu Lai, the group provided support to a local orphanage and children's hospital at Ke-Sat.⁴²

Fall weather hindered the bombing effort and required using Air Force LORAN, TACAN, and other expedients, to put ordnance on target. Maintenance crews activated a then-dormant avionics component of the A-4E, first in VMA-211 and then VMA-311. A combination of training and maintenance with this system allowed continued support during periods of reduced visibility by enabling the aircraft to pull out of high-angle dives at 6,000 feet.⁴³

Marine Aircraft Group 12 flew its 10,000th combat sortie on 9 December 1972, after having averaged 49 combat sorties a day over a seven-month period. By

*Captain Walsh was released by the Communists in 1973. See Chapter 15.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A703153

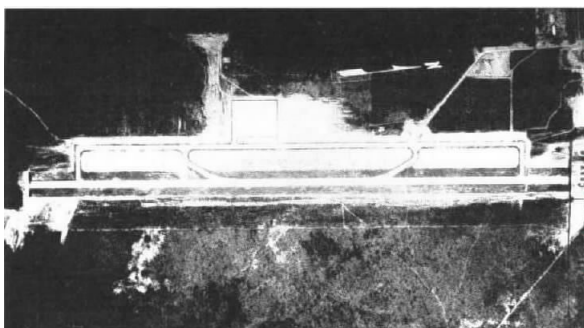
The value of good relations with the local people was a lesson brought back to Vietnam by the returning Marines. SSgt Frank H. Peace of MAG-12 fills the fuel tank of a generator that supplied electricity to the Ke-Sat Orphanage near Bien Hoa. The generator had been reconditioned by the Marines as a good-will project.

year's end, MAG-12 had completed combat operations, flying 12,574 combat sorties totalling 15,214 hours and dropping 18,903 tons of ordnance. Combat losses included three A-4s, and three Marines killed, one missing, and 11 wounded.⁴⁴ Secretary of the Navy John W. Warner cited MAG-12's efforts during the battles to defend Hue, Kontum, and An Loc, when the group "provided close air support within fifty meters of friendly positions, contributing materially to the success of the allied effort in these campaigns."⁴⁵

Task Force Delta

While MAG-15 and MAG-12 conducted operations from Da Nang and Bien Hoa, the 1st MAW completed efforts to relocate a portion of these units outside of South Vietnam. Initial relocation sites included Udorn, Ubon, and Utapao in Thailand. These bases were operating at maximum capacity with Air Force units, and the search also considered other locations. Fifteen miles northeast of the town of Khon Kaen, Thailand, was a 10,000-foot concrete runway built by the U.S. Air Force in 1967. Used as an emergency landing field and little else, it was situated centrally 340 miles west of Da Nang and 300 miles southwest of Hanoi. General Brown recalled:

... when we started gluing this thing together, there were just three or four guys who were in on it from the beginning. Brigadier General [Andrew W.] Andy O'Donnell, who was my assistant wing commander at the time, and a couple of other guys asking each other where the hell is Nam Phong? So we spread out the maps on the floor of my office



Task Force Delta Command Chronology

This U.S. Air Force reconnaissance photograph taken in 1969 was used by 1st MAW to plan MAG-15's move to Thailand in May 1972. It showed the airstrip and parking ramp, which provided the "bare base" from which the Marines operated within the month.

and got down on our hands and knees and finally located the place.*46

Maps and old intelligence reports indicated to General Brown that "there just wasn't anything there." There was no power, little water, fuel would have to come from the ports at Utapao and Sattahip by truck, and it was barely within flying range of MR 1 for MAG-15's fighters. From General Brown's perspective "... All the place had really was a runway and nothing else except a lot of rain, a lot of heat, and a lot of logistical problems to be resolved."⁴⁷ The location did have a greater degree of physical security than Da Nang, was large enough to accommodate the entire MAG, and was usable for operations if aircraft were refueled in the air or on the ground in MR 1.

On 11 May, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer and the JCS approved the plan to move MAG-15 to Thailand, specifying that the opening of Nam Phong would be on an "austere" basis—which was "a gross understatement," according to General Brown. On 14 May, a planning conference was held on Okinawa by General Metzger with 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, 3d Marine Division, and 3d Force Service Support Regiment to consider the task. The immediate result was to send a survey team headed by Brigadier General Andrew W. O'Donnell, the assistant wing commander, to Thailand to determine existing facilities and to coordinate with the U.S. Embassy, the Military Advisory Command, Thailand (MACThai), Seventh Air Force, and other supporting agencies.

General O'Donnell and a Marine and Navy staff arrived in Thailand on 18 May, went to Bangkok, and then on to Nam Phong. There they found a runway,

*Both Generals Brown and O'Donnell later commanded FMFPac.

taxiway, parking apron, six Butler buildings, and an 8,000-square foot hangar. As General Brown had expected, the main challenges to operations were logistical. Nam Phong was a U.S. Special Forces camp for the training of Laotian irregulars, who occupied the existing buildings and had constructed six other structures and training facilities. The 50 or so U.S. Army "Green Berets" and other advisors present found their pastoral surroundings altered by the arrival of the Marines. General O'Donnell concluded from his inspection that Nam Phong had potential for MAG-15 operations, but would require extensive development for the 60-to-90 day deployment envisioned by Admirals McCain and Moorer. While in Thailand, O'Donnell negotiated terms of occupancy, designating Nam Phong a "Royal Thai Air Base" and arranged support agreements with the U.S. Army Support Activity, Thailand, for a logistical base through the port of Sattahip. General O'Donnell then returned to Japan and briefed General Brown on what was needed to support MAG-15.

A special organization, designated Task Force Delta (TF Delta), was formed at Iwakuni, Japan, on 24 May 1972, and it remained in existence until well after the end of the American involvement in Vietnam. General O'Donnell commanded the task force with a mission of opening the base at Nam Phong and assuming control of MAG-15. His initial task was to make the airfield ready to support tactical flight operations. This was undertaken by U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 5, MABS-15, and H&MS-15. General O'Donnell also maintained liaison with Seventh Air Force, the Royal Thai Air Force, and the Military Advisory Command Thailand.

A KC-130 tanker from Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron (VMGR) 152 arrived at Nam Phong on 24 May with 39 Marines, beginning the buildup of forces to more than 3,200 men. The establishment of a U.S. Air Force aerial port detachment triggered the airlift of the advance party of 377 Marines, 94 U.S. Navy "Seabees," 3 civilians, and 1,399 tons of material by MAC C-141s and C-5 transports.**48

Construction began at once on 310 strong-back huts, 128 administrative and maintenance structures, a bomb dump, a 200,000-gallon Tactical Aviation Fuel Dispensing system, and storage for 360,000 gallons of

**The combined movement of MAG-15, MCB-5, Logistics Support Group Delta, and supporting detachments to Nam Phong required 278 aircraft loads to transfer 6,259 tons of material and 2,064 passengers to make the field operational.

bulk fuel.*⁴⁹ Generals Brown and O'Donnell developed a deep respect for the "Seabees," the majority of whom arrived by ship and trucked inland to Nam Phong. Brown recalled "they worked hard and fast and never quit" on the base construction.⁵⁰

The movement of MAG-15 aircraft began on 16 June when 11 F4Bs of VMFA-115 launched from Da Nang, completed air strikes enroute, and landed at Nam Phong. They began flying sorties from Nam Phong on 17 June.⁵¹ By 20 June, VMFA-232 and Marine All-Weather Attack Squadron (VMA(AW)) 533 also arrived at Nam Phong. The A-6A "Hawks" of VMA(AW)-533 provided MAG-15 with an all-weather and night capability of 12 aircraft. Additional aircraft came from VMGR-152 Detachment Delta's four KC-130s for aerial refueling and a H&MS-36 Detachment of four CH-46s for search and rescue. By 30 June Task Force Delta consisted of 17 F-4s, 12 A-6s, 4 KC-130s, and 4 CH-46s.** In view of the JCS-directed "austere" nature of this deployment, General Jones at FMFPac and General Brown at 1st MAW were personally involved with the "somewhat overwhelming" logistics support required, particularly for the A-6s.⁵²

As it turned out, the A-6A proved its worth during this deployment with "full-systems" readiness. Lieutenant Colonel James C. Brown, the A-6 squadron commander, believed the deployment of MAG-15 reinforced the expeditionary capability of the U.S. Marines in an age of sophisticated aircraft and "especially sophisticated" ground support equipment with all its specific power and environment requirements: "The A-6 aircraft required a higher degree of ground-support facilities than either the F-4 or A-4. These requirements were met at Nam Phong after a difficult start-up period." Lieutenant Colonel Brown credited this accomplishment to the innovation, perseverance, and hard work of individual Marines.***⁵³

The deployment and activation of TF Delta accomplished, the Commandant, General Robert E. Cushman, Jr. noted:

... such an achievement was made possible only through the team work of dedicated professionals and numerous per-

*The type and priority of construction are detailed in CNA MarActySEA, pp. 95-96.

**The TA-4 "Fast Fac" Detachment with MAG-15 returned to Iwakuni, Japan, and VMFA-212 returned to Hawaii instead of going to Thailand.

***Lieutenant Colonel Brown, VMA(AW)-533's commander, highlighted the joining of an attack squadron to a fighter group as a classic example of Marine task organization. But, "there were some subtle lessons to be learned from integrating our attack orientation with a fighter oriented aircraft group." (Brown Comments)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A290843
Commanding Task Force Delta in its initial phase in Thailand was BGen Andrew W. O'Donnell, the assistant commanding general of the 1st MAW. His major concerns were as much logistical as operational.

sonal sacrifices. This matter is of considerable pride to me and should be a source of great individual self-satisfaction.⁵⁴

While the activation of Nam Phong stands as an accomplishment in its own right, ultimately its significance rests on the purpose for which it was established, the destruction of Communist forces. General Vogt tasked General O'Donnell with conducting air operations over North and South Vietnam. For General O'Donnell this meant finding out what the Air Force wanted, as well as ensuring that General Vogt understood the capabilities of MAG-15's pilots and planes. What resulted from this interaction with the Seventh Air Force was a variety of new tasks and missions for Marine aircrews. General O'Donnell personally flew F-4 combat missions which earned him credibility both with the pilots of the task force and when discussing operational matters with the Air Force.****

The distance from MR 1 required airborne refueling and landing at Da Nang. The average flight time increased from one to two hours and the ordnance load

****An unspoken consideration was the clear risk of his becoming a prisoner if downed.