



Marine Corps Historical Collection

The desolation of Phu Quoc island is reflected in this scene of the site selected to deposit thousands of MR 1 refugees. The island was known for its production of nuc mam sauce.

pany D led by Second Lieutenant Charles K. "Kenneth" Curcio was placed on board the SS *Transcolorado* (MSC ship) which was already loaded with approximately 8,000 refugees. Following embarkation of the Marines, the ship weighed anchor for Phu Quoc. Just before it got underway, the *Durham*, which had continued to pick up refugees as the amphibious force sailed southward along the coast, transferred its 3,500 people to the *Transcolorado*. This was only one of the many unstable, transient conditions.¹⁶

Almost overnight, control of the original task organization became decentralized. The success of the operation now depended upon the young platoon commanders' leadership skills and their Marines' expertise and judgement in the controlled application of force in crisis situations. Exercising restraint under some very adverse conditions, the Marine security forces achieved their goal despite the fact that they were on board ships scattered over a 500-mile area, from Phan Rang to Phu Quoc Island.

The organization of this task group, TG 79.9, was predicated on flexibility. In the space of 10 days, the task group's squadron, HMM-165, conducted numerous crossdecking troop lifts, provided airborne reconnaissance of the Vietnamese coast, and resupplied refugees with food and medicine. HMM-165 also per-

formed "separate missions," including locating a C-5A flight recorder belonging to a U.S. Air Force transport which had crashed on takeoff from Saigon on 4 April while carrying hundreds of Vietnamese orphans and their American escorts.¹⁷ A post-evacuation Air Force summary reported, "Early on the morning of 5 April, a crew member on the *Durham* heard the "Mayday" signal . . . Directed to the vicinity of the signal, a Marine helicopter from the *Blue Ridge* spotted the recorder floating in the water and notified the *Reasoner* which had a swimmer on board."¹⁸

Also during this period, the helicopter squadron's staff began to draft detailed timetables to use in the event of the evacuation of Saigon. The maintenance problems inherent in a squadron consisting of four separate detachments conducting around-the-clock operations did not prevent Lieutenant Colonel Kizer's HMM-165 from maintaining a 100-percent availability rate throughout the dangerous and demanding ten-day period. Yet despite having every helicopter available, the task group soon discovered that its resources were stretched to the limit and it could not handle the seemingly endless supply of refugees.¹⁹

Its ability to evacuate the fleeing South Vietnamese was further confounded by the threat posed by the

advancing North Vietnamese Army and the indecision of the South Vietnamese government. As one of the participants, Captain Charles J. Bushey, related in a letter to his wife, "I overheard one radio call late this afternoon asking Saigon where they wanted the refugees taken. Would you believe Saigon said they did not know where they could be taken?"²⁰

Operating off the coast of Vietnam, the task force eventually deployed to the vicinity of Phu Quoc as evacuation efforts off Phan Rang and Phan Thiet ceased with the renewed North Vietnamese onslaught. The island of Phu Quoc offered the task group a new challenge. The group's arrival there coincided with the arrival of the Military Sealift Command's refugees.²¹

The events which had occurred earlier on board the *Pioneer Contender* overshadowed a less dramatic, but still important incident at Phu Quoc. No one there

would take responsibility for unloading the refugees for fear they would riot and possibly kill South Vietnamese already on the island. Out of necessity, the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group became heavily involved in this phase of the refugee operation, providing protection and an orderly transition. Marine security forces were on several Military Sealift Command ships in the harbor, and in each instance, Marine lieutenants led the reinforced rifle platoons protecting these vessels. They had full responsibility for their embarked refugee's welfare and that security extended to getting them safely to the island. This required maintaining close control of the evacuees until every last one of them had reached Phu Quoc.

Despite the apparent dangers involved in this task, the clearing of a ship represented a far easier challenge than the initial securing of a vessel. Each Marine unit

Three of the thousands of MR 1 refugees evacuated during the first 10 days of April 1975. Marines of BLT 1/4 and sailors of ARG Bravo conducted Operation Fortress Journey which lifted evacuees from the sea to MSC ships which then took them to Phu Quoc island.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Photo courtesy of Col Carl A. Shaver, USMC

The staff of Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group lays plans for Operation Fortress Journey. Seated at rear are the commanding officer, LtCol Charles E. Hester, right, and the operations officer, Maj Carl A. Shaver, of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.

began its mission by entering a hostile environment with no prior intelligence or reconnaissance, always facing thousands of armed and starving people. Immediately after boarding, the Marines had to secure the ship's vital areas, establish law and order, and then and only then, could they begin the humanitarian work. While the *Pioneer Contender* was an extreme case, all the MSC ships with refugees on board were in distress. Each security force entered its respective ship prepared for combat with the armed refugees already on board. The expected deadly confrontation between the Marines and the evacuees never materialized, but the ever-present threat constantly demanded the security force's attention. In order to preserve human life and avoid major casualties, a delicate balance had to be established quickly through a prompt and solid show of force, tempered by good judgement and restraint. The first few hours on board each ship were

the most critical and, as a consequence, the platoon commanders relied heavily on the expertise of the interrogator-translators. These highly trained Marines were responsible for communicating to the refugees the Marines' purpose. Having accomplished this, the interpreters then identified refugee leaders who could provide information on the internal situation, status of food, medical attention required, and potential troublemakers. Armed with this knowledge, the Marines then could respond more effectively to the evacuees.

The chaotic state of affairs in which the Marines of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group often found themselves was best reflected in Captain Bushey's diary entry of early April: "The scene here is tragic. There are thousands of people fleeing before the North Vietnamese. Many are being picked up by boat but as they are being evacuated, they have no

place to go. As an example many have been fleeing since Hue fell weeks ago. First to Da Nang, then to Nha Trang, and finally Cam Ranh and Phan Rang. Some of the areas south of here are already in enemy hands. Only Saigon and some areas in the Delta are open. But the South Vietnamese do not want the refugees to come to Saigon. In fact at 2030 tonight, there are probably over 50,000 people on various ships with no place to go."²²

Meeting the Needs

To assist the South Vietnamese government in resolving this crisis and mitigating somewhat the chaos, the United States had called upon the task force to provide for the needs of the thousands of starving refugees under its care. Food and medical attention were the most obvious areas and the Navy responded by providing large quantities of supplies which it had gathered from all over the Western Pacific. One of the most readily available supply sources was ARG Alpha, relatively nearby in the Gulf of Thailand and despite preparations for the impending evacuation of Cambodia, this force readily assisted in the massive effort to relieve the evacuees' suffering.²³

Getting provisions into the hands of the Marine security force was one thing, distributing them to the refugees was quite another. Interpreters would announce the serving of meals and their designated distribution points. Armed Marines delivered the food to these locations where refugee leaders then helped distribute it. The sheer weight of numbers continued to present a problem, but this system relieved some of the pressure and, more importantly, made control of the crowds easier and food distribution safer because Marines were able to fulfill their role as security guards instead of acting as food servers.

Medical attention was another critical requirement. Each security force assigned to a ship had its own Navy corpsman. These overworked Samaritans were soon overwhelmed by the scale of the medical problems. To assist them, the doctors attached to the task group from 3d Medical Battalion were quickly pressed into service. Carrying as many medical supplies as could be spared, these doctors ran a traveling MedCap (Medical Civic Action Program) dispensing medical care while rotating between ships. They were confronted with every sort of medical problem; many refugees were simply beyond help, but most benefited significantly from this medical attention. Two Navy doctors, Lieutenant Richard Williams and Lieutenant John Oakland, worked around-the-clock, yielding eventu-

ally to exhaustion, but not before they had reduced substantially the amount of suffering.

Improvement of sanitary conditions was one of the major tasks undertaken by the doctors. Using Marines to assist them, the doctors organized the Vietnamese into clean-up squads. To rid the ship of filth and human waste, the Marines supervised the South Vietnamese and when the refugees had completed their part of the task, the Marines used the high-pressure, high-capacity waterhoses to blast the waste from the ship's deck.

There were many demonstrations of ingenuity, creativity, and compassion in dealing with the refugees. In one case, on board the *American Challenger*, the security force commander, Second Lieutenant Joe Flores, Jr., organized the South Vietnamese Army soldiers into a clean-up force. Using cooperation as a ticket off the ship, he was able to create an enthusiastic response. (In truth, all the refugees would get off the ship, but they did not know when or where, and as a consequence Flores could use this issue as leverage.)²⁴

The total humanitarian and security effort of the task force involved the evacuation, control, and processing of well over 30,000 refugees. Operating from a command center set up on board the *Dubuque*, Major Carl A. Shaver, the battalion operations officer, coordinated and controlled all commitments involving the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Logistical support was a mammoth task of coordination handled by Captain William Harley, the S-4, who seemed equally adept at finding supplies, arranging transport of those supplies, and in anticipating new demands. One of his men, Lance Corporal Ricardo Carmona, an ammunition technician, literally lived in the well of the *Dubuque*. He remained on board throughout the operation, continuously breaking out supplies to support the evacuation.

HMM-165's noteworthy aviation support throughout this operation also was the result of a team effort. Despite the adverse effects from saltwater corrosion and high usage, the Marine maintenance crews and Navy supply clerks combined forces to achieve a remarkable record, no helicopters down for parts or maintenance.* Incredible under any circumstances, this achievement can only be attributed to closely coordinated teamwork. At the conclusion of this phase of the evacuation, when all of the refugees had finally

*Marine Corps aviation squadrons are supported chiefly by the Navy Supply System, from which they obtain their spare parts.

been unloaded at Phu Quoc, everyone in the task force knew that the challenge had been met and that they had taken part in a truly "all hands effort."²⁵

With its work done at Phu Quoc, the task force returned on 10 April to the vicinity of Vung Tau where refugees were still arriving by boat. At this time, Colonel Alexander, formerly 9th MAB's chief of staff and most recently commander of the Marine security force (TG 79.9), reassumed his duties with Brigadier General Richard E. Carey's brigade and returned command of TG 79.9 to Lieutenant Colonel Hester. Evacuation

operations then became the sole responsibility of Hester's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.

As Lieutenant Colonel Hester prepared to assume command of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group, the news from Phnom Penh turned from bad to worse as friendly forces lost another battle to the Communists. Once again, events in that city dominated the minds of every military planner and operator. Barring another miracle, the Government of Cambodia faced certain defeat. Operation Eagle Pull would not be postponed again.

PART III
OPERATION EAGLE PULL

CHAPTER 7

The Evacuation of Phnom Penh

*The Khmer Rouge—The Khmer Communists' Last Dry Season Offensive—The Marines Move into Position
Final Preparations Ashore—Final Preparations at Sea—The Execution of Eagle Pull*

The Khmer Rouge

Throughout the years of major United States involvement in South Vietnam, Cambodia was officially neutral. The nonbelligerent status was, however, a one-sided affair. Cambodian territory served as a vital link in the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Not surprisingly, Cambodia also became a convenient haven for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (NVA/VC) forces worn out from the fighting in South Vietnam. Of particular importance to the North Vietnamese as sanctuary areas were the regions to the immediate west and northwest of Saigon. No change in these arrangements occurred until March of 1970 when a pro-Western coalition under the leadership of then-Marshal Lon Nol mounted a successful coup against the "neutralist" Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Marshal Lon Nol's coup created the Khmer Republic. The following month, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces launched an offensive into Cambodia, with the limited objective of destroying the NVA/VC sanctuaries. They focused their efforts in the Parrot's Beak region, the easternmost area of Cambodia that juts into the heart of southern South Vietnam, at its easternmost point only 50 kilometers from Saigon. As a fringe benefit, the offensive served to bolster the fledgling government in Phnom Penh. Struggling against an internal, Communist-dominated insurgency, Lon Nol's government welcomed such assistance.

The NVA forces, despite their longstanding differences with the Cambodians, supported the insurgent movement, and regardless of their ethnic differences, which occasionally erupted into open warfare, the North Vietnamese aided and even trained Cambodian cadres in North Vietnam. These cadres later joined those already in Cambodia. Their numbers grew to 60,000 hard-core guerrillas. Although their ranks contained a number of smaller factions, they collectively came to be known as the Khmer Rouge or Khmer Communists. Supplied with weapons from Communist China and the Soviet Union, the Khmer Communists for the most part lived off the land.¹

During the first three years of its existence, the Army of the Khmer Republic was an ill-equipped band of soldiers. The Air Force and the Navy proved them-

selves to be the republic's elite forces. Yet despite its lack of equipment and funds, the Cambodian Army, called the FANK (Force Armee Nationale Khmer), was able, with U.S. air support, to hold at bay the better-trained, and initially better-equipped, Khmer Communists.²

The five-year conflict in Cambodia, like the war in South Vietnam, took its cues from the Southeast Asian weather. The southwest monsoon season annually inundated the lowlands adjacent to the government population centers, thereby effectively precluding or at least limiting any offensive action from June through December. During the dry season, January to June, virtually the same scenario occurred each year. At the start of each calendar year, the Khmer Rouge attacked the government enclaves, interdicted the lines of communication and attempted to draw sufficient Cambodian government forces from Phnom Penh in order to strike a mortal blow before the onset of another monsoon season. Neither side gained a clear upper hand during the first years of dry season fighting. Equilibrium was maintained in this see-saw battle of seasons by the American presence. U.S. air support provided the difference between victory and defeat for the Khmer Republic. It initially bought time for the government troops to improve their combat capabilities, particularly the government troops' fire-support coordination. American air support also allowed the Khmer Rouge time to improve, particularly in the area of coordinated offensive actions. Hampered by the confusion attendant to an army composed of diverse factions, the insurgents remedied their deficiencies through trial and error. As each new rainy season began, it became increasingly more difficult to ignore the ominous, inescapable fact that the Communists were gradually gaining control of the river and road network. As each new dry season came to a close, the noose around Phnom Penh shrunk ever tighter.³

To address this issue, the U.S. Congress sent a fact-finding commission to Cambodia in April 1973 to determine if continued American aid was warranted. Two of the Congressional staff members who made the trip, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, authored the report to the chairman of the Subcommittee on



Photo courtesy of Col Peter F. Angle, USMC (Ret)

Various types of transport aircraft are parked on the ramp of Pochentong airfield while a UH-1 helicopter approaches the airfield. Pochentong was the heart of the resupply effort which sustained Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge laid siege to the city in 1973.

U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri. In it they stated that "the immediate concern of U.S. officials [in Cambodia] was simply to find a way to insure the government's survival and . . . to achieve that immediate objective the United States had greatly increased U.S. air operations in support of Cambodian government forces . . ." Moose and Lowenstein contended that the fighting would not stop because there was ". . . no indication that the Khmer insurgents . . . and their North Vietnamese supporters were interested in a cease-fire" and even if they did ". . . eventually agree to a cease-fire they [would] insist on a role in the government, a cessation of U.S. air operations and either tacit or formal acquiescence to continued North Vietnamese transit of Cambodia in support of their forces in South Vietnam." These words sent arrows through the hopes of those who had been seeking to arrange a truce in Cambodia similar to the one concluded at Paris for the war in South Vietnam. Cambodia represented a key piece in the Nixon-Kissinger attempt to bring peace to Southeast Asia. The Moose and Lowenstein conclusion would have far-reaching consequences: "Thus, in the last analysis the key to a cease-fire may be Phnom Penh's willingness to accord the insurgents a role in the government. If the military situation should continue to deteriorate, however, Lon Nol and his colleagues may have no choice but to accept a cease-fire on whatever terms their opponents set."⁴

On 29 June 1973, two months after the senators received the report, Congress placed a rider on the 1974 budget bill requiring a halt to combat air operations in Southeast Asia. The Case-Church Amendment would prove the staff report's assessments correct: without U.S. air support the Cambodian government could not survive and if Cambodia ceased its struggle with the Communists, South Vietnam would face its worst fear, North Vietnamese troops on its flank with no U.S. air support. In the words of the South Vietnamese military and civilian officials with whom Lowenstein and Moose talked, ". . . if this possibility [Cambodia out of the war] were to materialize, South Vietnam would be faced with a serious if not untenable situation on its western flank." Few suspected at the time of the conversation that nothing but a total cease-fire in Cambodia would remove U.S. combat aircraft from Indochina. They were wrong. The Case-Church Amendment and subsequent Congressional appropriations bills removed U.S. combat aircraft from Southeast Asia, permanently.⁵

On 15 August 1973, the day the congressionally mandated halt to air support went into effect, the Cambodian government forces began a slide into oblivion. With each new day of fighting, the struggle became increasingly more violent. The already heavily congested population centers overflowed with new refugees fleeing the advancing Communists. The insurgents held over 80 percent of the countryside, but controlled only 35 percent of the population.

Interdicting the highways, the Khmer Rouge eventually controlled all but two of them. The fact that only two reliable routes of supply into Phnom Penh remained — by air into Pochentong airfield or by ship or barge via the Mekong River and the South China Sea — meant the life of the Khmer Republic hung in the balance. In jeopardy were the government-controlled province capitals which were being resupplied by the numerous “fly anything, anywhere, anytime” airlines operating from Pochentong Airport. Flying supplies in Bird Air Company aircraft (a U.S. contract airline) through Pochentong not only added considerable cost to the supply process, but also significantly reduced the probability of delivery. Under these difficult conditions, the continued survival of the outlying towns was doubtful and, at best, extremely tentative. Day-to-day existence now depended upon Phnom Penh’s air and river resupply system.⁶

Thus, almost by default, the Mekong River, always a significant part of Cambodia, took on even greater importance. Navigable year round by coastal steamer and barge from Phnom Penh to the South China Sea, the river became the country’s lifeline. As the Communists strengthened their hold on the overland lines of communication, including the LOC linking Phnom Penh with the country’s only seaport, Kompong Som, and with aviation support becoming more costly and inconsistent, the Mekong River became the only practical means of supplying the government forces and feeding the swollen population centers. Even rice grown in western Cambodia was supplied to Phnom Penh by way of the Mekong. Because the Communists controlled the highways, the Cambodians first shipped the rice to Thailand where it was loaded on ships bound for Phnom Penh.⁷

At least weekly in the South Vietnamese port of Vung Tau, Mekong convoys formed for the journey to the Cambodian capital. They were comprised of chartered coastal steamers and barges, laden with military supplies and civilian cargo of every variety. After a usually peaceful two-day journey through South Vietnam, they were met at the Cambodian border by Khmer Navy escort craft for the hazardous final day’s steam to Phnom Penh. The FANK lacked the manpower to secure the 62 miles of riverbank stretching from the South Vietnamese border to Phnom Penh. It did, however, possess enough strength to provide sufficient strongpoints and fire bases along this dangerous portion of the waterway to enable them to deny the Khmer Rouge easy access to key chokepoints

around river islands and narrows. The Cambodian Army reinforced this coverage with interlocking artillery fire.⁸

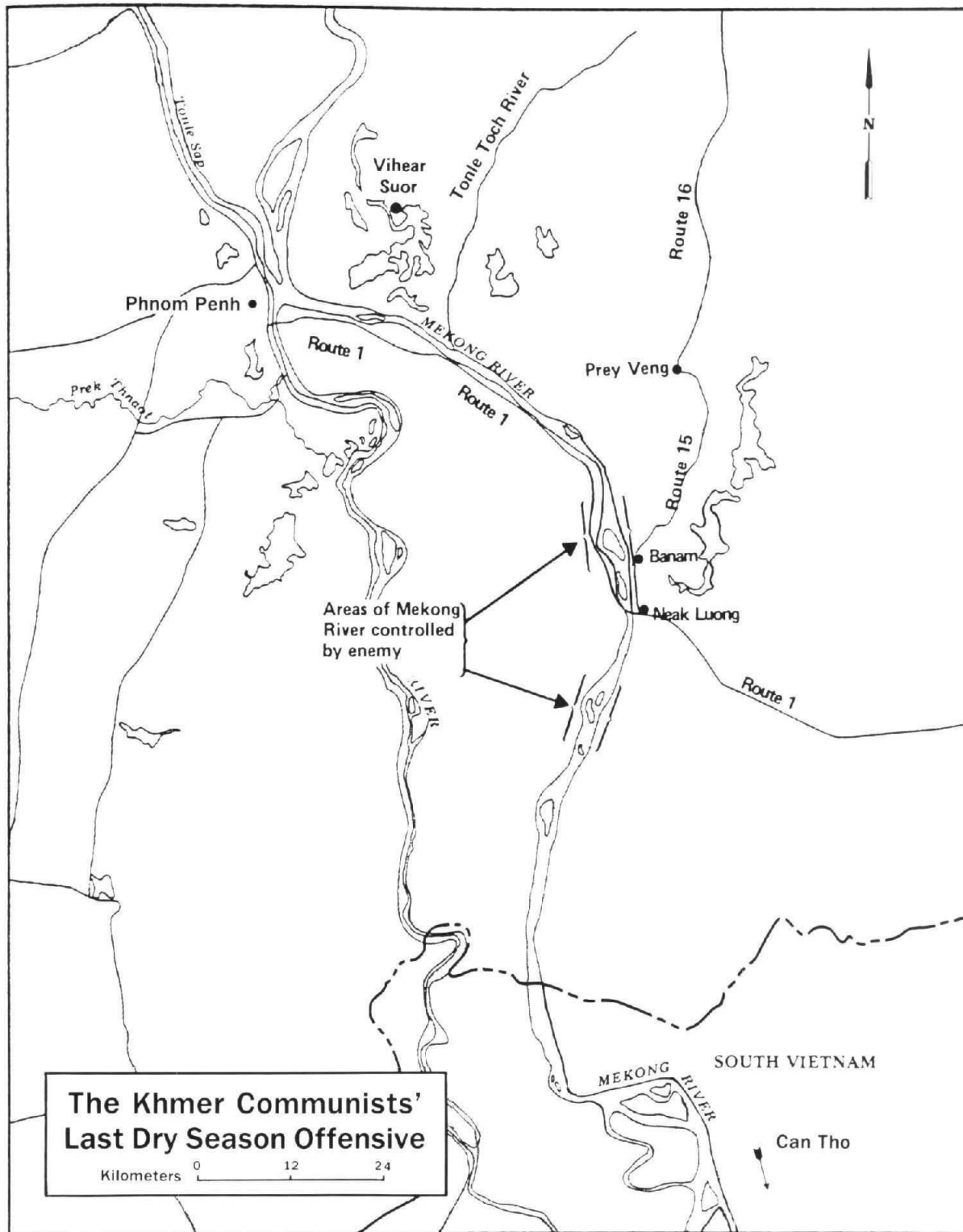
During the monsoon season the convoys were rarely threatened. The rains would inundate the foliated river banks where the Khmer Rouge units always built their gun emplacements. As a consequence the flooding effectively neutralized the Communists’ 12.7mm machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs) for nearly six months out of the year.

The Communist dry season operations of 1973 were successful in periodically interdicting the lines of communication into Phnom Penh. For a short period, all supply routes were cut. In order to continue to block these lines, the Khmer Rouge had to mass its forces, and whenever the Communists did, they usually suffered heavy casualties. FANK counterattacks using U.S. close air support (until August 1973), effectively neutralized the massed Communist forces. Whether the same Khmer Rouge tactic of massing its forces would have worked in 1974 remains a matter of conjecture. The Communists in 1974 altered their tactics. Instead of concentrating their forces in an effort to break or block the lines of communication into Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge attempted to terrorize the capital with artillery fire and 107mm rockets, principally the latter. It appeared for a while that these attacks by fire against the civilian population would succeed. But once again the Cambodian Government confounded the experts and the capital held.⁹

That dry season came to a close in June 1974 with the Khmer Rouge still maintaining a tight stranglehold on Phnom Penh, but without a victory. By not attempting to block the river in 1974, the Khmer Rouge gave the Lon Nol government at least another year’s longevity. An inference could be made that because of the mauling the Khmer Rouge units received during the 1973 campaign, their manpower resources were insufficient to mount an offensive on the same scale in 1974. Regardless of the reason, the Cambodian republic had weathered another storm and the symbol of its strength, Phnom Penh, still housed the American Embassy and its staff.

The Khmer Communists’ Last Dry Season Offensive

The Khmer Rouge opened their 1975 offensive on the last day of 1974. The Lon Nol government had expected a resumption of hostilities sometime in January of 1975 and the Communists did not disappoint them. The Khmer Rouge attack on 31 December seemed to be right on schedule. It immediately ex-



Map adapted from LtGen Sak Sutsakhan, *The Khmer Republic at War and the Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980)

erted pressure on the government positions in and around Phnom Penh, and on the cities located in the surrounding provinces. At first glance, the attack seemed to indicate that nothing had changed in the Communist plan. Capture of the capital was still the ultimate objective and all offensive efforts centered around that purpose. Then gradually over the next few days subtle changes began to emerge. As combat activity intensified, government outposts guarding the Mekong River supply line also came under fire.

On 12 January, the Communists attacked Neak Loung, strategically the most critical outpost, located 38 miles downriver from Phnom Penh. Fighting escalated in the battle for the town, for its loss would seriously jeopardize and possibly end resupply by river.¹⁰

The vital convoys using the Mekong to transit from South Vietnam to Phnom Penh quickly began to feel the effects of the escalation. They suffered from ever-increasing amounts of ground fire directed at them from the riverbanks. During the third week of January, two small convoys reached Phnom Penh. The ships had suffered considerable damage from insurgent fire received during the 62-mile trip from the Vietnamese border to the capital. On 27 January, two tankers and five ammunition barges made it to the docks of Phnom Penh. These ships, the only ones of a 16-vessel convoy to survive the deadly fire incurred during their journey up the Mekong, bore battle scars attesting to the feat. Their superstructures and hulls displayed marks caused by rockets, bullets, and shells.

While the river outposts and convoys endured this harassment, the Communists subjected Phnom Penh and its vital Pochentong Airfield to rocket and artillery fire. Although the volume was considerably less than that experienced during the 1974 offensive, it seemed to confirm that once again a frontal assault on Phnom Penh would serve as the centerpiece of the 1975 offensive. Gradually, the Lon Nol government realized that this assessment was incorrect. The Communists had intentionally reduced the amount of artillery and rocket fire directed at Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge had aimed its latest offensive not at the capital, but instead at its supply lines. Specifically, the Communists had decided to attack the convoys which carried 80 percent of the city's supplies. Siege warfare had returned.

To the government forces a siege did not seem to offer a serious threat because since the short-lived Communist interdiction of 1973, at least three river convoys had always reached the Cambodian capital in any one-month period. Unfortunately, the government

experts were wrong. The convoy which limped into Phnom Penh on 27 January would be its last.

Less than a week later, the Khmer Rouge inflicted the mortal blow. Returning empty to South Vietnam from Phnom Penh, a convoy of supply ships struck a minefield, sown days earlier by Cambodian insurgents. The explosions ripped the ships apart creating a scene of death and destruction which literally made the river impassable. Thus 46 miles from Phnom Penh, in the vicinity of Phu My where the Mekong narrows to gain its strength before a long journey to the sea, a weakened and hungry Khmer Republic suffered a casualty from which it would not recover. The Communists had ended resupply by convoy.¹¹

The laying of mines across a river in and of itself could not have ended convoy resupply. Minesweeping offered an excellent means by which to counter this threat and eliminate the potentially damaging effects of a blockade. Yet in this instance Cambodia became the exception, not the rule, because sweeping the Mekong of mines presented the Cambodian Navy with a formidable task. Normally a complex and dangerous maneuver, Communist control of the riverbanks made minesweeping nearly impossible and, at best, very costly. The Republic's navy did possess a limited ability to sweep minefields, but the Khmer Rouge's use of command-detonated mines significantly reduced that marginal capability. The method of sweep used to eliminate these type mines entailed dragging the river's shallow water near its banks. This action would expose the command wires, allowing them to be severed. Once the wires were cut then the mine could be disarmed. In order to conduct this type of minesweeping operation, it was necessary to have control of the areas adjacent to the river. Without it, the minesweeping forces risked the prospect of being blown out of the water or captured. Neither option was a tactically sound alternative. Left with few choices, the government forces discontinued minesweeping operations. This decision guaranteed the convoy operators an extremely hazardous and nearly impossible journey. The sunken supply ships at Phu My stood as a stark testament to the futility of trying to run the blockade.

The ensuing government attempts to reopen the river only served to diminish its forces and were too little, too late. The isolated garrisons throughout the countryside, already seriously undermanned, suffered additional losses when many of their men were re-deployed and ordered to join the battle to keep the Mekong open. Not only did these actions weaken the

garrisons, but the force constituted to conduct the counterattack was so meager that its attack did not even disrupt the Communists' defenses, let alone overrun them.

On 17 February, the Cambodian Government gave up its effort to reopen the Mekong supply line to Phnom Penh. By the end of the month, the government forces controlled only a small segment of the river. The rebels held all of the Mekong except for a small area in the vicinity of Banam, and the adjoining naval base at Neak Loung, a major military facility and strongpoint, less than 40 miles south of the capital. Daily, these two outposts, now isolated, felt the pressure, enduring repeated attacks from the insurgent forces.¹²

With Phnom Penh under siege, the Khmer Rouge stepped up its attacks. On 5 March, the rebels for the first time effectively used artillery to attack Pochentong Airfield. Until then, they had missed their mark, but on this day their artillery barrage hit and slightly damaged an American aircraft. The plane had just completed ferrying rice in from South Vietnam, providing the Cambodians with a much needed resupply of food. Ten days later, the FANK recaptured the town of Toul Leap, northwest of Phnom Penh. While under their control, the Communists had used Toul Leap as a location from which to shell Pochentong Airfield. Its recapture, if only temporarily, ended the shelling. During the remainder of March, the Khmer Communists continued to increase the pressure on Phnom Penh, particularly in the sectors north and west of the city. These attacks again placed the airfield in jeopardy, which allowed the rebels to interdict by fire the daily supply flights.

Government forces tried but could not stop this new phase of shelling. Consequently, the Communists fired at the exposed airdrome almost at will. On 22 March, they fired rockets at two American supply planes forcing the Embassy to announce the following day that the airlift of supplies would cease until the military situation around the airport improved. Apparently recognizing the conflict of objectives contained in this announcement, the United States resumed the airlift two days later. Instead of improving the situation, the 48-hour suspension of flight activity had had the opposite effect. The Khmer Rouge, instead of waiting for the government forces to follow the American advice and counterattack, went on the offensive. Rather than fall back, they instead made significant ground gains in the vital northwest sector near Pochentong Airfield. The acquisition of this objective by the Com-

munists took on added importance because of its strategic location. When last under their control, this vantage point had served as the location from which the rebels had mounted their most successful rocket attack on the airfield. It would again.¹³

Despite this fact and possibly because of it, the U.S. increased the number of daily airlifts to Phnom Penh. To avert final disaster and defeat due to a lack of supplies, the United States added three DC-8s to its fleet of C-130s. Bird Airways, a private company under contract to the American government, operated the C-130s and the airlift. The addition of three more aircraft enabled Bird Airways to double its daily flights from 10 to 20. By this means, the Cambodian Government's minimum daily resupply requirements were met.

The increased effort of the American airlift notwithstanding, it became painfully obvious to all concerned that if the Khmer Republic was to survive, the Mekong had to be opened. Resupply by air would not ensure success, because each flight encountered an ever-increasing volume of rocket and artillery fire, making the entire process too costly and extremely vulnerable. Any remaining vestiges of hope that the republic would weather another wet season ended on the first day of April 1975.¹⁴

On that Tuesday, the insurgents overran the only remaining government strongholds on the river, Banam and Neak Loung. Almost immediately the sagging morale of the government forces plummeted, knowing that the five enemy regiments previously engaged at Neak Loung were now free to attack them in Phnom Penh. As these units moved north towards the capital, the Cambodian Government simply waited for the inevitable while the American Embassy waited for the Marines, who themselves had been waiting since the first week of 1975.

The Marines Move into Position

Beginning on 6 January 1975, the United States had reacted swiftly to the Khmer Communist offensive. That Monday morning, CinCPac, Admiral Noel A. M. Gayler, via CinCPacFlt, Admiral Maurice F. Weisner, directed Commander Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral George P. Steele, to place the 31st MAU/ARG Alpha in an increased state of readiness in anticipation of executing Operation Eagle Pull. Admiral Steele ordered the MAU and ARG Alpha to assume a 96-hour response time to the Gulf of Thailand and Kompong Som, Cambodia. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel James L. Bolton's HMH-462 was alerted for deployment to Subic Bay to replace Lieutenant

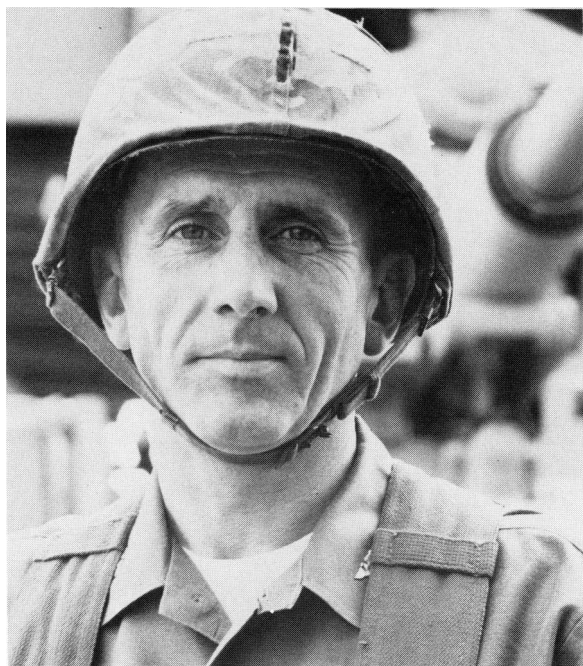


Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)
Col John F. Roche III, 31st MAU commanding officer, awaits orders to execute Operation Eagle Pull. The MAU ground combat element departed the Okinawa on board HMH-462 helicopters at 0607 on 12 April to provide security for the Phnom Penh evacuation.

Colonel Dwight R. Allen's HMM-164 on board the *Tripoli* (LPH-10). On 8 January, HMH-462's 16 CH-53s flew to Cubi Point adjacent to Subic Bay by way of Taiwan Air Force Base, Taiwan, from Marine Corps Air Station, Futema, Okinawa. The 31st MAU was reconfigured once again with a "dry season" mix of helicopters for the pending evacuation (heavy CH-53s, vice medium CH-46s, providing greater lift capability and range in the event of an evacuation). While the "heavy haulers" were enroute, BLT 2/4 moved back on board ship from the MAU camps at Subic. The 31st MAU/ARG Alpha was prepared to get underway should the situation in Cambodia deteriorate further, but with the *Okinawa* (LPH 3) inbound to relieve the *Tripoli* (LPH 10), the amphibious ready group remained at Subic. After completion of the turnover of LPHs on 28 January, ARG Alpha got underway immediately. The MAU's assignment was to respond to events in Cambodia and execute Operation Eagle Pull when directed. In order to accomplish this, the amphibious ready group with its embarked MAU had to operate within a 96-hour radius of Kompong Som. Underway and attempting to maintain the proper distance from Cambodia, *Okinawa* carried 14 CH-53s,

3 CH-46s, 4 AH-1Js, and 1 UH-1E from Marine Aircraft Group 36, all of them assigned to HMH-462.¹⁵

By the last week in January, Lieutenant General John J. Burns, USAF, Commanding General, USSAG, decided it was time to host another planning conference at his headquarters in Nakhon Phanom. Colonel Sydney H. Batchelder, Jr., the ground security force commander; Lieutenant Colonel Curtis G. Lawson, his air liaison officer; Colonel John F. Roche III, the MAU commander; and key members of the MAU staff attended the conference. In addition to these Marines, III MAF and 3d Division staffs sent representatives. With all of the key Eagle Pull commanders present, the conference allowed Colonel Roche and Colonel Batchelder, exercising overall operational control, the singular opportunity of discussing in detail the operation's timing, number of evacuees, use of landing zones, and the tactical situation in Phnom Penh. After an on-site reconnaissance of Phnom Penh, the Marines returned to their respective units except for Lieutenant Colonel John I. Hopkins who remained in Phnom Penh to assist on the Military Equipment Delivery Team, Cambodia, responsible for coordinating evacuation plans.*¹⁶

On 2 February, as the remainder of ARG Alpha steamed west toward the Gulf of Thailand, the *Peoria* (LST 1183) headed east, bound for the San Bernardino Strait and thence to the Trust Territory, Mariana Islands. Prior to its departure, members of BLT 2/4 went on board the *Peoria*. These elements included: Company E, commanded by Captain Matthew E. Broderick; the amphibian tractor platoon, led by Second Lieutenant Joseph C. Lotito; and elements of LSU 2/4. They were to participate in Operation Quick Jab II, a combined civic action-amphibious exercise on the island of Tinian during the period 9-15 February.¹⁷

The U.S. reaction to the Communists' mining of the Mekong placed the evacuation force in a higher state of responsiveness. On 6 February, Admiral Steele reduced the reaction time of the 31st MAU/ARG Alpha to 48 hours. The same day General Burns requested that the Eagle Pull command element report to his headquarters as soon as possible.

*Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. Grimm, the USSAG Plans Action Officer, recalled the normal routine at the end of each Eagle Pull planning conference: "The USSAG Eagle Pull action officer customarily took the new participants to Phnom Penh for an on-the-ground recon of the LZs and to meet embassy planners. The January 1975 on-site recon became particularly important as it included many who would become key players in the actual operation." Grimm Comments.

Colonel Batchelder's command group departed Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, at 0520 on 7 February on board a Navy T-39 aircraft, arriving at Nakhon Phanom at 1235 the same day. In addition to Colonel Batchelder and Lieutenant Colonel Lawson, the party included Major George L. Cates, III MAF liaison officer, and First Lieutenant James L. O'Neill, landing zone control team officer. The group brought with it PRC-75 and -77 radios and one piece of special equipment, a glide angle indicator light (GAIL). The GAIL was designed to enable helicopter pilots to land under conditions of reduced visibility by adjusting their rate of descent and approach angle to a glide path indicated by the lights. The remainder of the command element, six Marine communicators carrying additional communications equipment, arrived at Nakhon Phanom on board a Marine KC-130 the next day. Shortly after arrival, an Air Force medic augmented the command element to provide a degree of medical assistance and expertise.¹⁸

While Batchelder's command element continued its preparations, the ARG, less the *Peoria*, began maneuvers off the coast of South Vietnam. On 20 February, the 31st MAU, with participating elements of BLT 2/4 and HMH-462, conducted HeliLex 1-75. Designed to test HMH-462's ability to execute a helicopter employment and landing table (HEALT) specifically developed by Colonel Roche and his staff, this exercise produced excellent results and provided valuable experience. Based upon HMH-462's performance and its successful execution of the HEALT, the 31st MAU adopted the same helicopter employment and landing table for use in Operation Eagle Pull.¹⁹

Thinking that the Cambodian Government would at least weather the immediate crisis, the mining of the river, Admiral Steele relaxed the response time. On 22 February, he directed the Eagle Pull forces to assume a 96-hour posture. This permitted the amphibious ready group to return to Subic for minor repairs and replenishment and meet its LST, the *Peoria*.

The respite, however, was shortlived. In less than a week, as the fortunes of the Khmer Republic went from bad to worse, the response time was dramatically reduced. Effective 28 February, Amphibious Ready Group Alpha assumed a readiness posture of 24 hours which required a significant modification to its operating area, basically restricting it to the Gulf of Thailand. (These modified locations of the operating area acquired the acronym MODLOC.) For the ensuing 43 days, the Marines of the 31st MAU and the sailors of ARG Alpha became intimately familiar with the



Marine Corps Historical Collection
LtCol John I. Hopkins, pictured here as a major general, was in Phnom Penh from late January to April. He was a member of the Military Equipment Delivery Team Cambodia responsible for supporting and supplying the Cambodian government and its army.

term "MODLOC liberty" while the USSAG staff in Nakhon Phanom, when not preparing for the evacuation, pulled liberty in the "ville." Admiral Steele recalled his concerns with "MODLOC liberty": "It was a continuing worry to me that we had a MAU/ARG going in circles awaiting the execution of Eagle Pull. The amphibious ships were not designed to have so many active young men embarked for such a long time. The Marines needed exercise ashore whether that meant a liberty port or a training exercise. I kept pressing these considerations on all concerned."²⁰

Although permitted liberty, the Marines in Nakhon Phanom found little time for recreation. They faced the demanding and time-consuming task of refining, in concert with their Air Force counterparts, the operational plans for both a helicopter and a fixed-wing evacuation of Phnom Penh. Although excellent in concept and thorough in preparation, the original plan lacked the details to make it completely current. During the draft stages as many as 18 separate courses of action were outlined for helicopter lifts alone. When

these planners published USSAG/7AF OPlan 2-75 on 3 March, the helicopter courses of action had been reduced to four. The published plan for fixed-wing evacuation also listed four options. Both plans specified the use of three possible sources for ground security forces. Tactical air and fixed-wing airlift schedules listed the available ground forces: a 50-man Air Force security police detachment from the Seventh Air Force Security Police Squadron; two reinforced rifle companies from the 3d Division on Okinawa; or two reinforced rifle companies from 31st MAU. Helicopter planning factors were limited by the available assets: 12 Air Force CH/HH-53 aircraft at Nakhon Phanom and 16 Marine Corps CH-53 aircraft from the 31st MAU. In every scenario, the Marine command element, augmented by the Air Force Combat Control Team, was tasked to provide overall command and control of the activities at the evacuation sites.

At Nakhon Phanom, First Lieutenant O'Neil and Lieutenant Colonel Lawson conducted instructional training exercises for the Air Force helicopter crews in the use of the GAIL and standard night lighting and hand signals in the event night operations became a necessity. Additionally, the Marine officers in the command element visited Phnom Penh to confer with Embassy personnel and inspect designated landing zones.²¹

Two factors militated against the use of just one helicopter carrier and its 14 Marine helicopters and 12 land-based Air Force helicopters: First, the number of potential evacuees continually fluctuated. At

Col Batchelder and his command group at Ubon Air Base on 3 April, just prior to their insertion into Phnom Penh. They were the last to be evacuated from the city and rode to safety on Air Force HH-53s.

Photo courtesy of Col Curtis G. Lawson, USMC



times, the projected total exceeded the entire lift capability of the combined USAF/USMC helicopter inventory in Southeast Asia. Second, the contingency at first glance appeared to be a minimum time operation, but upon reexamination, the Eagle Pull command staff classified this assumption as fallacious. They decided that due to frequent and rapid changes in the tactical situation, the duration of the operation could not be determined. Despite unfavorable conditions and a lack of reinforcements, the Cambodians continued to hold the perimeter around Phnom Penh. With the United States determined to remain in Cambodia until the last possible minute, each day that the government forces successfully defended the capital guaranteed additional waiting time and another day on station for the relief force, 31st MAU/ARG Alpha. With the date of execution of the MAU's mission continuously being postponed, the need to create a helicopter-capable, relief/rotation force began to grow in importance. The concern centered around the fact that the only other ARG in the Western Pacific, ARG Bravo, did not possess a major helicopter platform.

On 16 March, as a result of these concerns, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed that an aircraft carrier proceed to Subic Bay with a Marine heavy helicopter squadron embarked, and upon arrival, assume a 72-hour response posture for Operation Eagle Pull. The following day, CinCPacFlt directed the *Hancock* (CVA 19) to unload sufficient Navy personnel and material to accommodate 16 Marine CH-53Ds and associated crewmen, supplies, and equipment, and proceed to Hawaii. Having unloaded the necessary equipment and men, *Hancock* departed Alameda, its homeport, on 18 March. Upon its arrival in Pearl Harbor on 23 March, *Hancock* received further guidance and more specific details on its new mission. Upon completion of the loading phase, the carrier received orders to sail as soon as feasible on or after 26 March at a speed of 20 knots with Subic as its destination.²²

During *Hancock's* 2,000-mile trip from the West Coast, Lieutenant General Louis H. Wilson, Jr., Commanding General, FMFPac, chose HMH-463, a heavy helicopter squadron of the 1st Marine Brigade, as the deploying unit. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Herbert M. Fix, the squadron embarked in the *Hancock* on 26 March and sailed for the Western Pacific. The wisdom of the decision to use the *Hancock* soon became apparent. At this point, the news from South Vietnam was progressively becoming worse with the latest reports revealing that the defense of the northern and central regions had collapsed. The ensuing chaos

and panic had created a military and political crisis in South Vietnam, and as a result the available Western Pacific forces now had two contingencies with which to contend, possibly at the same time. With the *Hancock* steaming west and the situation in Vietnam deteriorating, Eagle Pull planners developed a fifth and final option for the fixed-wing plan.

Throughout the planning phase, the anticipated number and location of evacuees fluctuated. At one point in the planning cycle, 21 March, the Embassy forecast 3,600 refugees, a number far exceeding the original prediction of 400. In the event it became impossible or unfeasible to evacuate such a large number by helicopter, especially if the highly vulnerable Pochentong Airfield suddenly came under attack, an additional course of action had to be available. The fifth option, devised as a "worst case" version, served this purpose. It called for the use of fixed-wing, U.S. Air Force aircraft to effect the withdrawal. Under these circumstances, a ground security force large enough to secure the entire airfield would be needed. The extensiveness of the area to be secured would mandate the deployment of at least two battalions thereby making the event a multi-battalion operation. For this reason, on 26 March, the III MAF Commander, Major General Carl W. Hoffman, reactivated the 11th Marine Amphibious Brigade.²³

General Hoffman selected Brigadier General Harold L. Coffman, Assistant Division Commander, 3d Marine Division, to be the commanding general of the 11th MAB. During December 1974, General Coffman had commanded the 9th MAB while participating in Operation Pagasa II in the Philippines. Upon being designated Commanding General, 11th MAB, he requested that several of the officers formerly assigned to his staff during that exercise be added to the newly constituted MAB's roster. The 3d Marine Division complied with General Coffman's request and temporarily transferred the designated officers to the 11th MAB. The newly assigned Marines quickly formed a planning staff, the nucleus of the new brigade. Staff agencies within the division headquarters readily provided administrative support to this nucleus of 10 officers.²⁴

The planning for participation by the 11th MAB in the evacuation of Cambodia began immediately and the planners used the United States Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force's Operation Plan 5060(C) as a blueprint. In the process, the MAB staff resolved the differences in assumptions, missions, and courses of

action as they arose. The 11th MAB distributed its operational plan on 2 April as the combat activity in Cambodia reached a new level of intensity. To expedite matters and insure immediate delivery to prospective subordinates, the MAB issued the plan in message rather than standard, more formal, format.

As drafted, the planning concept contained a six-phase operation: Phase I—Movement to Ubon Air Force Base in Thailand on board Military Airlift Command aircraft; Phase II—Air assault movement to Pochentong on board Marine and U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft; Phase III—Establishment of a defensive perimeter around Pochentong; Phase IV—Conduct of security and evacuation operations; Phase V—Withdrawal from Pochentong; and Phase VI—Return to home stations. The operation entailed the employment of Lieutenant Colonel Royce L. Bond's BLT 1/9, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Loehe's BLT 3/9, and forces from the 31st MAU (BLT 2/4 and HMH-462). The plan called for initial insertion of one BLT, 2/4, by HMH-462 helicopters in order to secure the runway at Pochentong. Immediately after the insertion, BLT 3/9, including its artillery battery, would be flown to Pochentong on board C-130 aircraft. The two battalions would then press outward establishing a security perimeter around the airfield complex. Evacuation operations would begin approximately 45 minutes after the initial landings. The helicopters would ferry evacuees from Phnom Penh to Pochentong to board C-130s for the flight to Thailand. An estimate of seven hours to evacuate and three hours to extract the security force made this operational plan a complex and involved process, requiring tactical Air Force aircraft on station over Pochentong and Phnom Penh. Additionally, the MAB's reserve, BLT 1/9, would be placed on call at Ubon Air Base, Thailand, for possible insertion should the situation dictate.

Precise timing was of the essence. Critical to the success of the entire plan was the air assault schedule developed by Major Martin J. Lenzini, the brigade air liaison officer, on loan from the 9th Marines. Major Lenzini, an A-4 pilot and former commanding officer of VMA-223, formulated a scheme of movement that meshed the flow of amphibious-based helicopters with a stream of fixed-wing transports. His objective was to achieve a maximum build-up of security forces at Pochentong in the shortest possible time. The complex, critical time-flow charts that he developed made this an exceptional plan.

Before the plan could be tested, its reason for im-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A50903

LtCol Royce L. Bond, commanding officer of BLT 1/9, right, attends a briefing with his executive officer, Maj Burrel H. Landes, Jr. BLT 1/9 served as the 11th MAB's reserve for the six-phase operation to evacuate Phnom Penh, cancelled three days after its 2 April inception.

plementation disappeared. Within two days, the perceived requirement for a major operation involving the 11th MAB had passed. Two factors weighed heavily in the decision to deactivate the 11th Marine Amphibious Brigade. First, the estimate of persons to be evacuated was decreasing daily. The aircraft resupplying the government forces had begun to speed this process by transporting increasing numbers of refugees on their outbound legs. The second reason hinged on the anticipated arrival of the *Hancock* and HMH-463. With the carrier and its embarked squadron only three days steaming time from the Gulf of Thailand, the addition of 16 transport helicopters now seemed a certainty, and so without a mission, the 11th MAB had no military purpose. Effective 0001 5 April 1975, CG III MAF deactivated it.²⁵

Three days earlier on 2 April, in response to the further deterioration of the Cambodian government's defenses around Phnom Penh, Ambassador John Gunther Dean had requested the insertion of the Operation Eagle Pull command element into Phnom Penh. The following day, Colonel Batchelder and his group flew into Pochentong airfield. On 4 April, the United States brought in additional C-130s to speed the fixed-wing evacuation process. Simultaneously, the MAU/ARG Alpha assumed a six-hour response posture. During the week of 4 to 10 April, the additional flights extracted hundreds of Cambodians, former employees of the American Embassy. This mas-

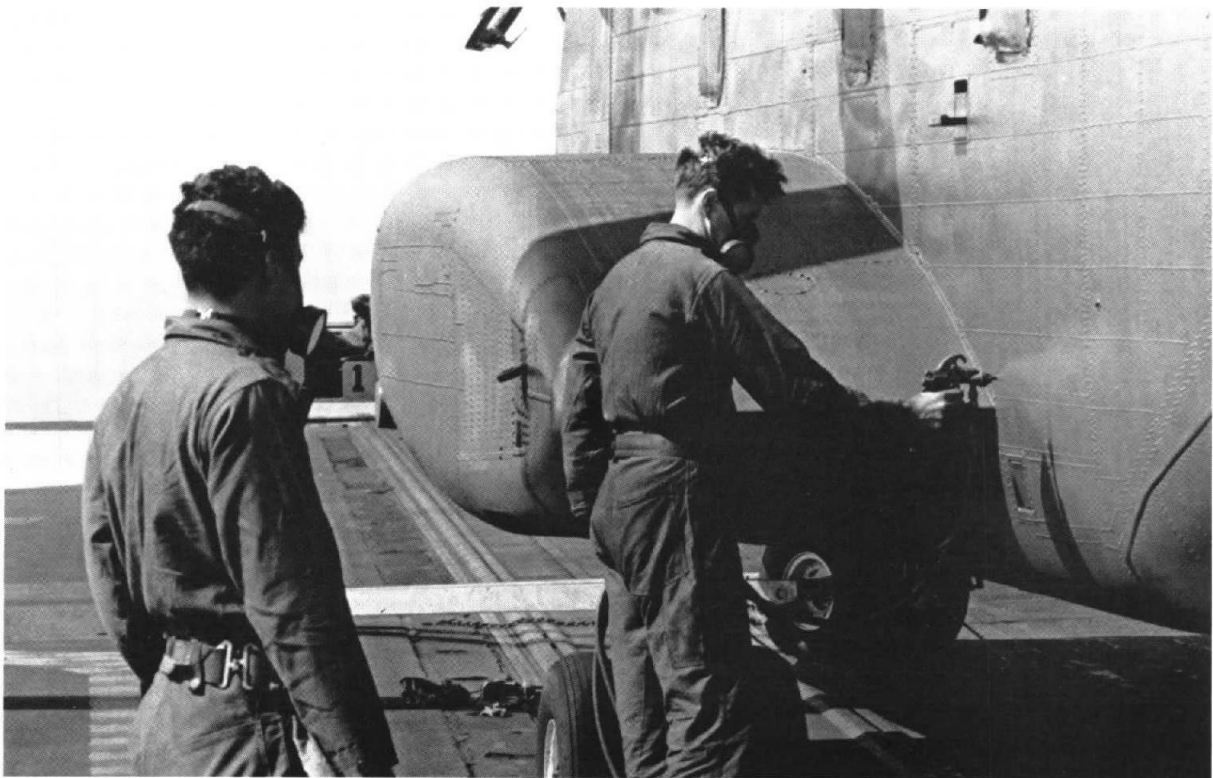
sive removal of Embassy personnel left a staff of only 50 people to manage both daily business and the evacuation. On the positive side, it decreased the estimate of Cambodians awaiting evacuation to a much more manageable level and nearly eliminated the likelihood of using anything other than the helicopter option.²⁶

As the Embassy, the Marines ashore, and the MAU prepared for that option, events in neighboring Vietnam forced ARG Bravo, on 9 April, to sail from Phu Quoc back to Vung Tau. Included in the amphibious ready group were *Durham*, *Frederick*, *Dubuque*, and the latest addition to the Western Pacific evacuation forces, the *Hancock*. Vung Tau, a peninsula in southern South Vietnam near Saigon, looked like it might become the site of the next major evacuation as thousands of South Vietnamese fleeing the Communist offensive took refuge there. Colonel Alfred M. Gray commanded the combat forces (the 33d MAU) designated to provide security should ARG Bravo be forced to conduct evacuation operations. The *Hancock*, the ship designated to support the evacuation of Cambodia using HMH-463, also carried other units of the 33d MAU including elements of Lieutenant Colonel Bond's BLT 1/9. Additionally, while in Subic, the *Hancock* had taken on board additional helicopters, CH-46s, UH-1Es, and AH-1Js, ferried to Subic by the USS *Midway* (CVA 41) expressly for the purpose of augmenting HMH-463 and 33d MAU.²⁷

On 10 April, in order to resolve the conflict in mission, CinCPacFlt detached the *Hancock* and HMH-463 from 33d MAU/ARG Bravo and passed operational control to 31st MAU/ARG Alpha. Late the following day, on 11 April 1975, the carrier rendezvoused with ARG Alpha in the Gulf of Thailand. Despite its late arrival, less than 24 hours before H-Hour, HMH-463 was ready for action.²⁸

From the moment it left Pearl Harbor, the squadron had begun preparing for the operation. In particular, it made modifications to the aircraft to counter the effectiveness of SA-7 surface-to-air missiles. Maintenance personnel installed the ALE-29 flare dispenser

*The *Midway* had been ordered to the area in response to the growing crisis in South Vietnam. Enroute from her homeport in Yokosuka, Japan, to Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, the *Midway*, as it steamed past Okinawa, embarked the helicopters designated for transfer to the *Hancock*. Stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Futema, they joined Detachment 101 of VMCJ-1 already on board the *Midway*. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William A. Bloomer, the detachment consisted of two RF-4s and three EA-6s.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150898

Marine crew of HMH-463 prepares their CH-53 Sea Stallion for Operation Eagle Pull. Since intelligence reports had indicated the presence of SA-7 surface-to-air missiles in Southeast Asia, the heavy helicopter receives a coat of infrared low-reflective paint.

and gave each CH-53 a fresh coat of low infrared reflective paint. The ALE-29 fired flares whose heat would attract, or at least confuse, the homing device of the heat-seeking SA-7. Adding paint to the fuselage reduced the infrared signal transmitted by the helicopter, and likewise decreased the probability of a "lock-on." As an additional means of distraction, the gunners carried flare pistols to fire at incoming missiles.

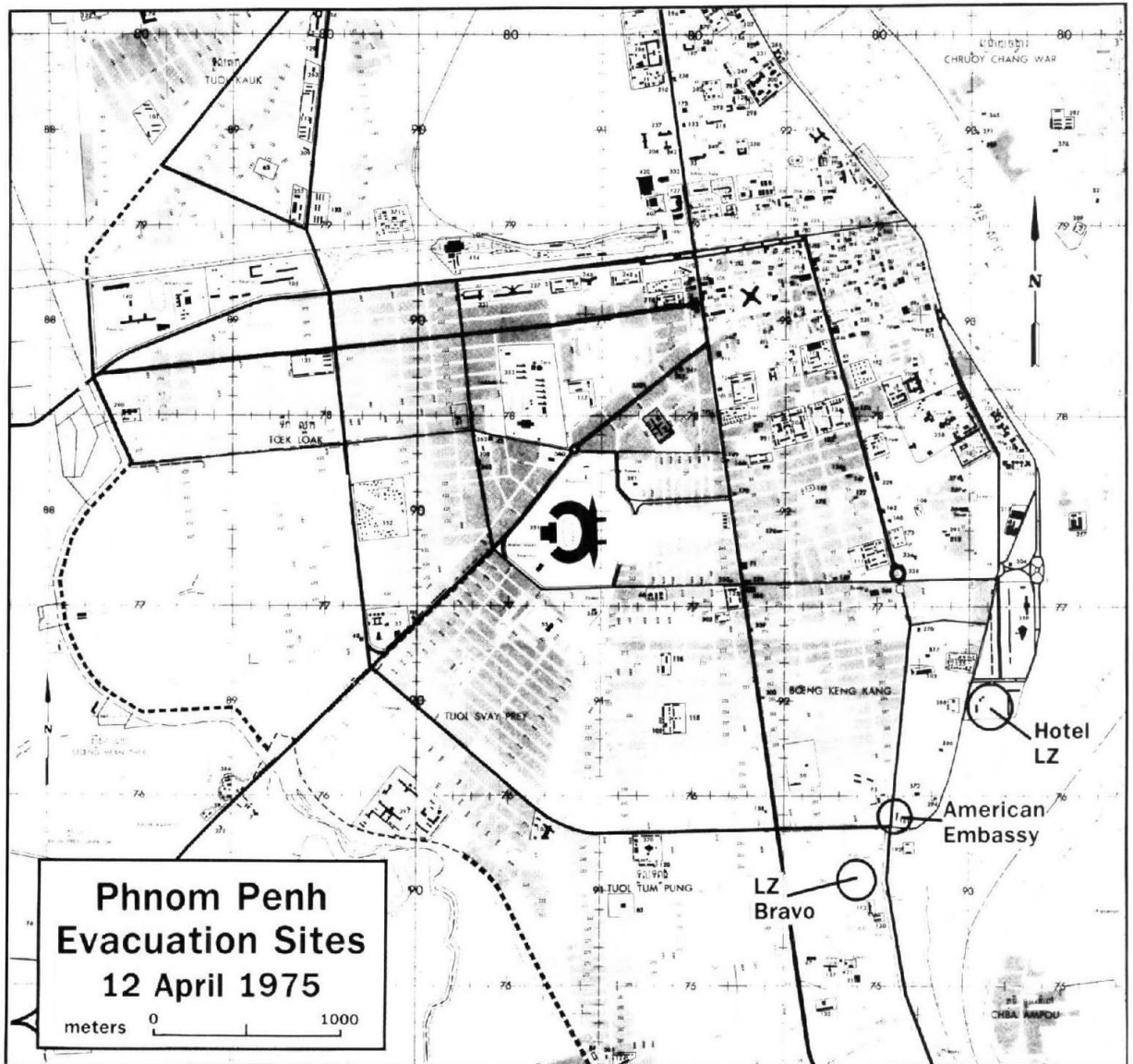
Lieutenant Colonel Fix also decided to use the crew concept. A specific crew was assigned to each aircraft. It flew together anytime its aircraft was launched. In this way, it developed into a tightly knit group, each member familiar with the others' techniques and ways of operating.*²⁹

Final Preparations Ashore

Before departing from USSAG Headquarters for Phnom Penh after having received a request from the

*Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, the 9th MAB commander, recalled that "in spite of the detailed combat preparations of the unit [HMH-463] I was required on the night before the evacuation to certify in writing to Rear Admiral Whitmire that the squadron was combat ready and was capable of performing the mission." Carey Comments.

Ambassador for their immediate presence, the members of Colonel Batchelder's command element completed their final stage of planning for Operation Eagle Pull. Upon their arrival at the Embassy on 3 April, they reviewed and incorporated last-minute changes to the Embassy plan and then began preparing for the actual evacuation. From the outset, beginning with an immediate audience with Ambassador John Gunther Dean, Colonel Batchelder and his command element integrated themselves into the daily routine. They joined the in-country team and assisted it in the execution of the fixed-wing portion of the evacuation which began their second day in Cambodia. Many of the Embassy personnel had departed on earlier evacuation flights leaving a serious gap in the staff and the Marines quickly filled these positions paying particular attention to evacuation-related responsibilities. Lieutenant Colonel Lawson took charge of the evacuation operation at Pochentong Airfield. Coordinating the movement and manifesting of refugees at the airfield, Lawson's crew of Marines were subjected to 80 to 90 rounds of incoming fire a day. The Khmer Rouge treated the command element and one of its



members, upon arrival, to a taste of what their short sojourn in Cambodia would be like. The Communists offered Corporal James R. Osgood, Jr., a special welcome, a preview of the daily artillery bombardment he would endure while in Phnom Penh. As the last member of the command element to exit the Bird Air C-130 after an uneventful landing at Pochentong, Corporal Osgood witnessed close-up one of the incoming rounds as it landed between him and a bunker, his new home. Slightly distracted and somewhat surprised, he made it to safe haven without further incident.

Routinely, the rebels would fire 105mm and 107mm shells directly at the airfield, and whenever an aircraft materialized they would crank up the volume. Despite

this treatment, all the incoming fire did not seem to bother Lawson's airfield Marines, especially Private First Class Daniel N. Catania. One of five radio operators, Catania proved unflappable under fire, providing continuous communication service. As the only American capable of speaking French, Private First Class Catania also passed instructions and directions to the evacuees, most of whom spoke no English.³⁰

In the ensuing seven days, the week just prior to the helicopter extraction, Lieutenant Colonel Lawson's team processed through Pochentong more than 750 Cambodians. As a result of the very close relationship that developed between members of the command element and the Embassy staff, they encountered no problems in completing last-minute refinements and



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Acting Cambodian President Saukham Khoy arrives on the Okinawa. President Lon Nol had left on 1 April after receiving an "invitation to vacation" with the Indonesian president.

modifications to the plans for notification, assembly, and transportation of evacuees.

With each passing day, the situation at the airfield became less tenable. The Communists continued to press their attacks all around the city and with the insurgent reinforcements arriving from Neak Loung, the balance of combat power began to shift. The rebels controlled, uncontested, the eastern side of the Mekong, and by 10 April they so inundated the airfield with artillery fire that the United States ceased all fixed-wing evacuation operations.

With this option eliminated, site selection for helicopter landing zones dominated the command group's planning meetings. Acknowledging Communist control of the east bank of the Mekong River, the planners decided not to use the zone closest to the Embassy because of its proximity to the river. These LZs were situated on the Mekong's west bank. Instead, they selected, as a single landing site, Landing Zone Hotel, a soccer field about 900 meters northeast of the Embassy. Masked from the river by a row of apartment buildings, this LZ could not be interdicted by direct

fire weapons, making it the safest location and thereby the best choice.

The Embassy personnel prepared to depart on 11 April, but instead delayed one more day. The decision to wait assumed as accurate and reliable the estimated arrival time of the *Hancock*. With its presence, the Marine Corps would have available HMH-463. Until this point, the planners had assumed only one Marine Corps squadron would be available and expected to employ an equal number of Air Force helicopters to have sufficient lift capability. The *Hancock's* arrival allowed a modification to this scheme of maneuver and consisted of using HMH-463 in the initial insertion and extraction phase while keeping the Air Force "53s" in reserve. In addition the Air Force helicopters could be employed as sea and air rescue. Planned use of these additional CH-53s also included adding them to the flow as necessary, and recovery of the command element.³¹

On the morning of 12 April, each member of the Embassy staff and the command element prepared for his specific evacuation task. At 0730, Ambassador



Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)

The Marine Security Guard Detachment from the American Embassy in Phnom Penh gathers after its evacuation to the USS Okinawa. On 12 April, HMH-462 CH-53 helicopters removed the Marines led by GySgt Clarence D. McClenahan, standing third from left.

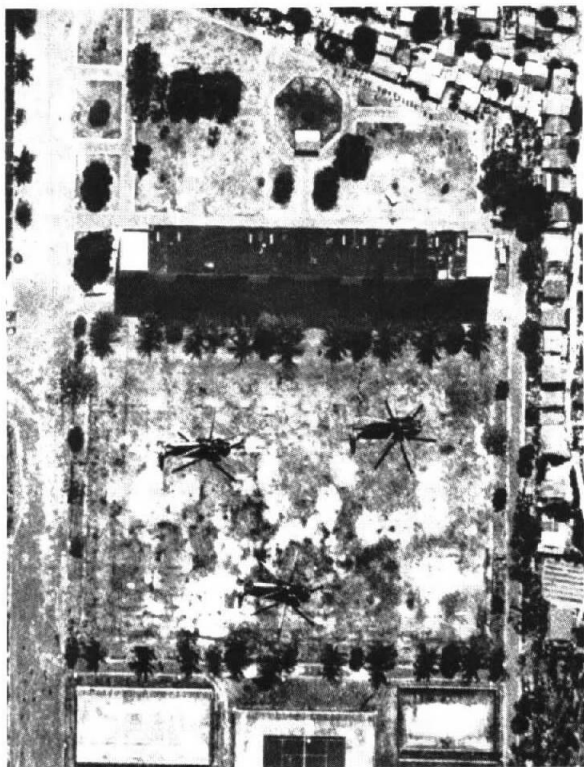
Dean notified the acting Cambodian chief of state, Prime Minister Long Boret, and other Cambodian leaders including Sirik Matak, that the Americans would officially leave the country within the next few hours and inquired if any desired evacuation. All declined except for Saukham Khoy, successor to Lon Nol as president of the republic, who left without telling his fellow leaders.*³²

The Ambassador then alerted designated Embassy personnel to marshal the preassigned groups. At this time, the command element proceeded to its station,

*The Khmer Rouge executed both Long Boret and Sirik Matak within the next two weeks. On 20 April, the Communists physically removed Sirik Matak from the French Embassy where he had sought refuge, purposefully disclaiming it as French territory. Lon Nol, who with the help of Sirik Matak (his deputy prime minister), had overthrown Prince Norodom Sihanouk in March 1970, already had departed Cambodia. Under the guise of an invitation from Indonesian President Suharto to vacation with him on Bali, the ailing Lon Nol left Pochentong Airport at five minutes after noon on Tuesday, 1 April, with his party of 29, thereby escaping the Khmer Rouge bloodbath which followed the government's capitulation on 17 April. *Without Honor*, pp. 198-199 and 265-276.

the landing zone. Each of the 10 members of the command group drove a vehicle to the landing zone. They parked them so as to block access to the zone from any part of the city, and then disabled them. The disabling process had to be done quickly and pulling the distributor cap was easy but rendering the tires unusable was not an easy task. Some way had to be found to flatten the tires without drawing attention by shooting them out. Major George L. Cates found the proverbial needle in a haystack when he located six valve stem extractors, seemingly the entire supply in all of Phnom Penh. Their value so exceeded their worth that Major Cates kept them in a plastic bag suspended from a chain around his neck until the moment of issue, Saturday, 12 April 1975. The vehicle which Major Cates drove had been designated as exempt from destruction, because of its accessory equipment. It was a pickup truck rigged with a winch and cable. It would serve as a means to remove from the landing zone any helicopter crippled by either enemy fire or a mechanical malfunction.³³

The Embassy's Marine security guards, led by Gun-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Aerial shot catches three Marine CH-53D aircraft in LZ Hotel during Operation Eagle Pull. The last helicopter to leave arrived on the Okinawa at 1214 on 12 April with Ambassador John Gunther Dean.

nery Sergeant Clarence D. McClenahan, assisted the drivers in disabling the remaining vehicles which blocked off the southern accesses to the zone. This left only one road open for traffic, the highway leading directly from the Embassy to the airfield. With the zone's access secured by the vehicles, the command element turned to the next task at hand, setting up communications and laying out marking panels. Almost immediately, they established radio contact with "Cricket," the airborne command and control aircraft, and then they contacted "King Bird," the 56th ARRS HC-130 used to control the helicopters. Lieutenant Colonel Lawson provided "King" a landing zone brief and requested that he relay it to the incoming helicopters. By 0830, everything was in place awaiting the first elements of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines whose similar preparations at sea would now merge with those ashore.³⁴

Final Preparations at Sea

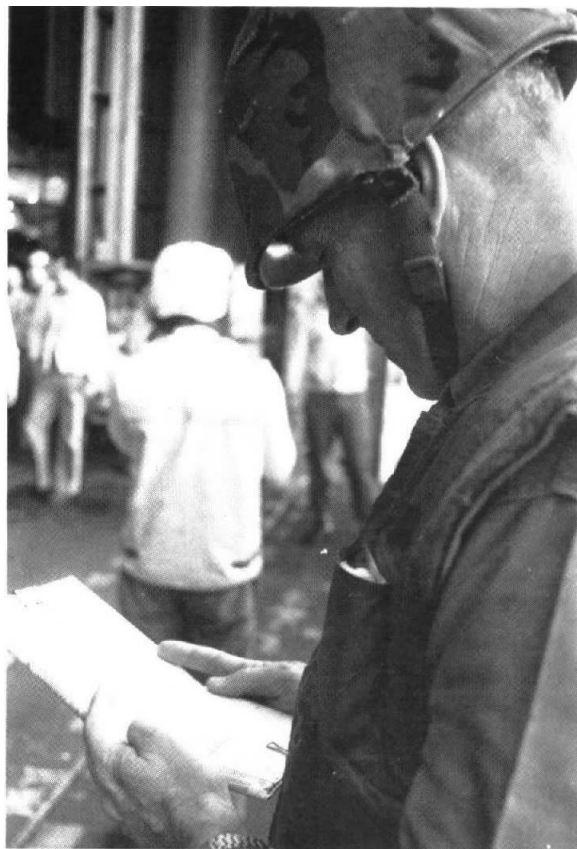
While the situation deteriorated in Cambodia, the 31st MAU continued its preparations at sea. The 3d

of April, the day the command element landed at Phnom Penh, 31st MAU/ARG Alpha recorded its 34th consecutive day at sea. On station in the Gulf of Thailand during this entire period, the Marines and sailors of ARG Alpha expected to execute their mission each succeeding day. Despite the fact that each day ended without results, the anticipation of putting into practice their acquired skills kept the Marines' and sailors' morale high.

Teamwork and coordination would become the intrinsic elements of mission success or failure, and particularly in the aviation maintenance effort. The Navy supply system had to provide the necessary parts, and maintenance personnel had to install them properly or the number of available heavy helicopters would drop below the critical level. Should this occur, either the mission would have to be scrapped or Air Force helicopters would have to be substituted. By prestaging

LtCol George P. Slade, commanding officer of BLT 2/4, studies a map of Phnom Penh in preparation for Operation Eagle Pull. BLT 2/4 participated in both Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind, providing security for evacuation of both capitals, Phnom Penh and Saigon.

Photo courtesy of Capt Russell R. Thurman, USMC (Ret)





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 07760875
Capt Thomas A. Keene, Commanding Officer, Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, briefs his men before embarking in HMH-462 helicopters to launch Operation Eagle Pull in Cambodia. Capt Keene and his Marines were located on the Okinawa along with Company H, commanded by Capt Steven R. Bland.

aircraft parts at Utapao Air Base for pick-up by ship's helicopters, the Navy assured vital spares needed to maintain the Marine CH-53s in top operating condition.³⁵

This spirit of preparation and teamwork spilled over into other areas as well. Especially evident in the junior officers, this willingness to prepare for every eventuality manifested itself in the daily training programs which the officers, along with their NCOs, conducted. During these sessions, the small unit leaders disseminated enough information to keep the Marines apprised of the tactical situation and aware of their operational status. This continuous two-way exchange went a long way toward sustaining morale and maintaining an edge.³⁶

The constant flow of information also meant continually changing data which in turn necessitated alterations in the final guidance. The helicopter employment and landing tables (HEALTS), developed months earlier by the joint effort of the squadron and battalion staffs, facilitated incorporation of last-minute

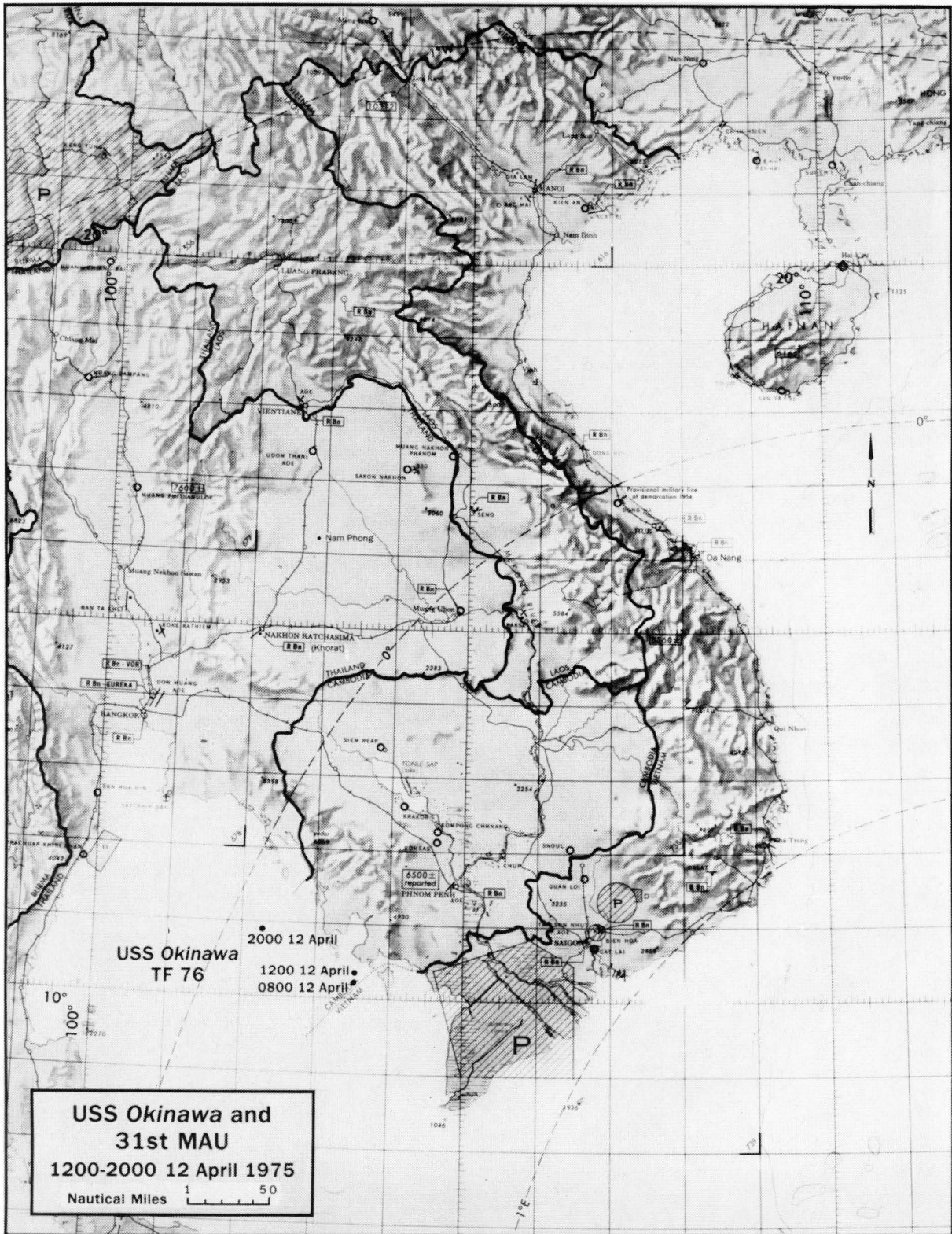
changes and provided the ARG with much needed flexibility. This plan enabled the MAU to deliver to the operational area several different heliteam configurations. The MAU commander commented years later that "the planning considerations concerning helicopter flow and unit integrity . . . were integral to the plan even prior to the allocation of CH-53 assets during February."³⁷

To sustain this flexibility meant quickly acquiring and disseminating the most up-to-date data available. Colonel Roche's numerous liaison visits to Nakhon Phanom provided him an opportunity to access a source of this knowledge. At USSAG Headquarters, an abundance of intelligence, particularly photo coverage of the landing zones, existed. Colonel Roche considered this the most-current and best-prepared information on the tactical situation in Cambodia. As a result, every unit commander, including the fire team leaders, received a detailed briefing on his specific landing zone and the lay of the land around it. In addition, for each course of action, the Marines rehearsed their procedures for both helicopter embarkation and their sector defense deployment. It seemed that no detail escaped inspection or rehearsal and as a consequence, this well-drilled group of Marines represented an assault unit properly prepared to perform an operation requiring precise timing and movement. At the MAU and battalion staff level, the commander and his staff discussed anticipated problems and worse-case situations with the expectation that nothing would be overlooked. Finally, this team effort would be put to the test.³⁸

Beginning 7 April, the 31st MAU went to a one-hour readiness posture, which meant by 0400 each day, all heliteams had to be assembled in their assigned area, fully outfitted and ready to go. At this time, staged ammunition marked with a team's number was broken out for issue. Pending the signal to execute, the flight crews and heliteams waited and the actual issuance of ammunition was placed on hold.³⁹

On the afternoon of 11 April, the MAU received the order to execute Operation Eagle Pull. General Burns established L-Hour as 0900 the following morning. The option selected involved the use of a single landing site, Landing Zone Hotel. At 1930, 11 April on the *Okinawa*, Colonel Roche called a meeting of his subordinate commanders. For the final time, the MAU S-3, Major James R. Brown, Jr., briefed the selected plan of action.⁴⁰

The use of Landing Zone Hotel would require a 360-man security force. To balance the principle of



Map adapted from U.S. Air Force, *USAF Global Navigation and Planning Chart, Southeast Asia*. (10 June 1959); hatched areas and other land notations are a part of the original map.