

PART VI  
OTHER PERSPECTIVES:  
PACIFICATOIN AND  
MARINES OUTSIDE OF III MAF

## CHAPTER 29

# Pacification

*Prelude—The Tet Offensives and Operation Recovery—III MAF and Pacification*  
*Homicide in the Countryside—Changing Attitudes*  
*The Boys Next Door: The Combined Action Program—The Accelerated Pacification Plan*

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### *Prelude*

From the beginning of the III MAF expansion of its base areas during the spring and summer of 1965, the Marine command was involved in a pacification campaign. Employing the “ink blot” or “spreading oil spot” theory, the Marine strategy was to build upon success in one area to reinforce that in another to provide momentum for the linking together of the Marine enclaves. During their first year in country, both through trial and error and possibly a residual institutional memory of their early 20th century Caribbean interventions, the Marines developed several pacification techniques that showed some promise.\*

In one of its first efforts, III MAF established a civic action program which emphasized village and hamlet self-help projects and medical assistance. Marine units provided materials and equipment to local villagers in the building of schools and other local improvement facilities. Navy corpsmen and occasionally doctors visited nearby hamlets where they would dispense soap, hold sick call, treat minor injuries and diseases, and teach basic hygiene to the inhabitants. The idea was to win the good will of the local populace, gain intelligence, and hopefully enhance the prestige of local government officials, especially the village and district chiefs.

As the Marines expanded their area of operations into the populated area south of Da Nang, they soon realized that security from the Viet Cong guerrillas was

a decisive factor if the South Vietnamese government were to retain or establish control of the countryside.\*\* In this connection, the Marine units employed relatively innovative tactics that they called “Golden Fleece” and “County Fair.” Golden Fleece operations were basically rice protection missions. A Marine battalion would provide a shield behind which the villagers harvested and kept their crops from the VC tax collectors. The County Fair operations were cordon and search affairs with psychological overtones. A Marine battalion would surround a hamlet, bring its population into a large clearing where the troops had erected large tents. While the division band and Vietnamese drama groups provided entertainment, the Marines would search the village and provide medical and dental assistance. Local officials would conduct an informal census and hold any suspicious persons for further questioning. By the end of 1967, however, while the Marine units continued to use County Fair and Golden Fleece tactics, III MAF no longer kept a statistical account of these types of operations.\*\*\*

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\*\*Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson, who in 1967 headed the Marine Combined Action Program and helped to articulate Marine pacification concepts, commented that pacification was not the equivalent of giving the Vietnamese in the countryside “the Great Society War on Poverty” and hoping that they in return would give “their hearts and minds to those who provided them with the dole.” Corson defined pacification as a condition rather than merely a series of processes: “In the case of the hamlets in South Vietnam, it was the belief and perception of the Vietnamese people that they were safe in their own homes. This idea, or feeling of safety was the sine qua non without which there was no ‘pacification purpose’ or potential gain simply from providing the humanitarian assistance that the indigenous government had never provided.” The people needed to believe that they “at least would be protected.” LtCol William R. Corson, Comments on draft, dtd 30Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Corson Comments.

\*\*\*As in most aspects of the pacification campaign, there are varying views of its impact in the local hamlets and villages. William D. Ehrhart, a Marine veteran who served as an enlisted intelligence specialist with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in 1967 and early 1968 and participated in County Fairs, wrote, “my experience was that ‘County Fairs’ worked much better in the telling than in the doing; that is, the theory sounded good, but the reality fell far short of the theory.”

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\*See also the discussion in Chapter 1 on the “inkblor” concept. While the link to the Caribbean experience is rather indirect, General Lewis W. Walt, who commanded III MAF in 1965, observed that he was taught the fundamentals of his profession “from men who had fought Sandino in Nicaragua or Charlemagne in Haiti.” Still, as others have pointed out, most Marine officers who served in Vietnam were much junior to Walt and obtained most of their training on counterinsurgency in U.S. Army Schools based on doctrine articulated by the British from their experience in Malaya and adopted by the Army. For the Walt quote and the development of III MAF pacification in 1965, see Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, pp. 133–46. The quote is on p. 133.

Perhaps the most innovative and unique of the Marine pacification programs was Combined Action. Growing out of the security needs of the Marine battalion at Phu Bai in the summer of 1965, the Marines integrated the local Vietnamese militia units, the Popular Forces, with a 14-man Marine squad.\* First called a Joint Action Company, then changed to Combined Action Company, and finally, to avoid unfavorable connotations in Vietnamese by the acronym CAC, the program became known as the Combined Action Program or CAP. CAP also stood for Combined Action Platoon, the basic tactical unit. By the end of 1967, the Marines had formed 79 platoons organized administratively into 14 companies and three Combined Action groups (CAGs). As Ambassador Robert W. Komer, who in 1967 was General Westmoreland's deputy for pacification, later wrote that the Combined Action Program was the "only sustained experiment with encadrement in our entire Vietnam experience."<sup>1</sup>

III MAF was also the first of the MACV commands to develop a systematic measurement of security and other aspects of pacification in its area of operations. Beginning in February 1966, it required subordinate units to submit a monthly analysis of the degree of pacification in each village in its area of operations. Based on supposedly objective quantitative elements, the report gave a numerical grade which could be roughly translated into a qualitative value and provide some basis for analysis. This program later served as the model for the MACV country-wide Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), which used letters rather than numerals for grading purposes. District advisors filled out the HES reports while the military unit completed the III MAF forms. At the end of 1967, both systems were in use in I Corps. Obviously, as one Army historian observed, all such reports and documents were prepared "by Americans for American eyes and ears . . . [and] we don't know really what the Vietnamese thought." Still, as a senior operations analyst concluded, these reports contained



Photo is from the Abel Collection  
*Marine LCpl Edward J. Byrne, part of a Marine civic action team from the Force Logistics Command, shares a soft drink with a small friend at a refugee orphanage near Da Nang. The team was on a visit to the orphanage to distribute clothing donated from the United States.*

"critical patterns" that permitted analysis as long as one did not focus on any specific element.<sup>2\*\*</sup>

\*William D. Ehrhart, Comments on draft, dtd 24Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Ehrhart Comments. In his somewhat fictionalized biographical account of his experience in Vietnam, Ehrhart describes a County Fair operation. See William D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie, A Combat Marine Memoir* (Jefferson & London: McFarland, 1983), pp. 31–38. Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, in early 1968 the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, (CGFMFPac), observed recently about Marine pacification accomplishments, "truthfully, our performance, although much the best, was spotty, because of ignorance, operational pressure, or shortage of means." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft, dtd 31Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Krulak Comments.

\*\*While allowing that there was an element of ad hoc growth of the Combined Action Program due to local security needs, Lieutenant Colonel Corson argued that the basic drive behind the program was the perception of Marine leaders such as General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Marine Corps Commandant, and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, and Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, the III MAF commander, and their emphasis upon the population and pacification in contrast to the MACV large unit strategy. Corson Comments. Despite the refined statistical analysis, many would still agree with Lieutenant Colonel Corson who wrote that "anecdotal evidence" in the villages was "far more accurate than spurious statistics." According to Corson, pacification could not be "expressed as a linear function, nor could it be frozen in time . . ." Corson Comments. Lieutenant General Krulak wrote that the Combined Action platoons knew what was going on in the villages in contrast to the various system evaluation processes. Krulak Comments.



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*Navy Lt Runas Powers, Jr., battalion surgeon of BLT 2/4 (with the stethoscope), bandages a baby's head with the assistance of an unidentified Navy corpsman, as the mother holds the child. Medical assistance was an important factor in Marine civic action.*

III MAF also made extensive use of psychological warfare. By 1967, the Marine command had two specialized Army units attached to it, the 29th Civil Affairs Company and the 7th Psychological Warfare Battalion. With elements of these units, Marine line companies and battalions would employ both air and ground loudspeakers as well as leaflets to influence both the civilian population and the enemy. Specialized South Vietnamese units, such as Armed Propaganda Teams and drama teams, would present and act out themes in the countryside illustrating that the American forces were present to assist the government in making a better life for the individual Vietnamese villager.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, both the Vietnamese and Marines addressed their message to the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese to surrender under a special "Chieu Hoi" (Open Arms) amnesty program, which had been in effect since the early 1960s. The enemy troops that



Photo is from the Abel Collection

*During a County Fair operation, a Vietnamese elder watches enthralled at a magic presentation. County Fairs were cordon and search operations with psychological overtones.*

turned themselves in were called Hoi Chanh (ralliers). III MAF in early 1966 had started a pilot program using the Hoi Chanh. Taking selected and carefully screened former VC, and providing both language and tactical training, the Marines then assigned them to Marine infantry battalions. The Marines employed these former enemy, nicknamed "Kit Carson Scouts," much as the cavalry units in the old American West used Indian scouts. They were to warn the American units against likely ambushes and to locate hidden enemy stores and marshaling areas. By the end of 1967, III MAF had 132 Kit Carson Scouts attached to Marine units. The 3d Marine Division had hopes of assigning at least one scout to every Marine infantry company in 1968.

By the summer of 1966, both Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, then the III MAF commander, and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, the FMFPac commander, became concerned about the cultural

shock caused by the sudden influx of large American combat forces upon both the Vietnamese peasant and the young American Marine. In order to recognize the extent of the problem, the Marine command undertook sample attitudinal surveys among both Marines and the South Vietnamese villagers. A Navy chaplain, Lieutenant Commander Richard McGonigal, who also held a master's degree in sociology, conducted the first opinion survey in September 1966, using two percent of the III MAF personnel and a much smaller percentage of the local civilian populace.<sup>4</sup>

The first findings among the American troops were not surprising. McGonigal discovered nearly 60 percent of the Marines held relatively low opinions about the South Vietnamese. Only 43 percent of the sample stated that they held a positive feeling toward the local populace. Still even the negative reactions among the Americans revealed an ambivalence rather than an intense dislike of the villagers. Among the CAP units, however, possibly as would be expected, the Marines tested much more affirmatively.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the South Vietnamese, if the survey were accurate, showed a relatively positive view toward the Marines. More than 70 percent indicated that they personally liked the Americans. On the other hand, over 40 percent perceived hostility towards them from the U.S. troops.

Chaplain McGonigal refined his testing procedures and conducted two more surveys, the last in June 1967, which more or less confirmed the earlier ones. With this impetus, III MAF initiated a "personal response" program down to the battalion level. Each command at either the G-5 or S-5 level appointed a Personal Response officer, very often the chaplain, whose responsibility was to teach the troops the local customs and culture, largely through group discussions and class instruction. As could be expected, the program met with mixed results. As the FMFPac chaplain, Navy Captain John H. Craven, later observed, he had to walk a "fine line between Marine officers on one hand, who questioned the need for any such project, and chaplains on the other hand, who felt that chaplains should have nothing to do with the project."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>Colonel James L. Black, Jr., who as a lieutenant colonel was the III MAF G-5 for Civil Affairs in 1968, commented that the 29th Civil Affairs Company should have had the responsibility for the Personal Response Program rather than the Chaplains. Col James L. Black, Jr., Comments on draft, n.d. [Nov94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter James Black Comments. William D. Ehrhart, who served in Vietnam with the 1st Marines from mid-summer 1967 until February 1968 and has written extensively upon his experience in Vietnam and that of

With its large commitment to the pacification campaign, III MAF also implemented the first Corps-wide coordination effort involving not only III MAF and the Vietnamese authorities, but also the various U.S. civilian assistance programs. As early as August 1965, III MAF and the U.S. civilian operations mission for I Corps formed the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council (ICJCC), an interagency clearing committee to direct both the civilian and military civic action programs in the Corps area. With permanent representation, the council soon began meeting on a regular basis. Before long, General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps commander, also assigned a representative to the committee. By the end of 1967, ICJCC had several subordinate subcommittees and had even extended down to the provincial and district level. General Cushman had made his deputy III MAF commander, Major General Raymond L. Murray, his personal representative to the council.<sup>5</sup>

Despite recognizing the initiatives of the Marines relative to pacification, General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, was unhappy about the emphasis of the Marine Corps. He believed that the Marines, with their concentration on the security of the hamlets, were ignoring the enemy regular forces operating outside of the Marine areas of operations. While supporting civic action on the part of American troops, the MACV commander was concerned about incidents with the civilian population. He desired to place the main responsibility for pacification upon the ARVN forces.<sup>6</sup>

In February 1966, at the Honolulu Conference, which included the leaders of the Vietnamese government and the United States, the emphasis was upon pacification. Still, the conference was not a repudiation of Westmoreland's large unit strategy. He won his point that the main responsibility for pacification and protection of the people would lie with the ARVN forces.<sup>7</sup>

While the Honolulu Conference called for a renewal and reemphasis upon pacification, the reality was largely rhetorical. The actual gains in pacification were fairly modest. The South Vietnamese did expand their Revolutionary Development (RD)

other enlisted Marines, observed that in the several months between the institution of the program and his departure that he "never heard of, let alone participated in, any such program." Ehrhart Comments.

Program\* and increased the number of Revolutionary Development teams in targeted hamlets and villages. Actually, the government had hoped to place about 300 of these specially trained pacification teams in the countryside by the end of 1966. It succeeded in achieving only about a third of that goal. While by the end of 1967 the number of RD cadre numbered over 32,000, they had one of the largest attrition rates of all the forces in Vietnam. The overall attrition rate among the cadre was 32 percent per year with a desertion rate of 21 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Unsatisfied with the progress and coordination in Vietnam among the various component civilian agencies within the U.S. mission in Saigon, the Johnson administration initiated an entirely new approach. One of the chief architects was Presidential advisor Robert W. Komer. Nicknamed "the blowtorch" by former Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Komer had the support of the new Ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker. An articulate and forceful man, Komer convinced President Johnson and General Westmoreland to place the formal American pacification effort under the U.S. military chain of command in Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

In May 1967, the former Office of Civil Operations under the direct control of the American Embassy became Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) under MACV with Robert Komer as its head. With the rank of Ambassador, Komer was Westmoreland's deputy for pacification. According to the MACV commander, he assigned

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\*Here too, much of the change was rhetorical. While changing the name of their pacification program from Rural Reconstruction to Revolutionary Development in English, they retained the old name for the program in Vietnamese. The Revolutionary Development Ministry was headed by Vietnamese General Nguyen Duc Thang. Later, he assumed the title, Commissioner General for Revolutionary Development, and additional responsibility as Assistant to the Chief, Joint General Staff for Territorial Affairs and Pacification. These additional duties provided him with authority in both civilian and military aspects of pacification and jurisdiction over the Popular and Regional Forces.

The heart of the Revolutionary Development Program was the so-called Revolutionary Development cadre or teams. Started under a pilot program by the CIA in late 1964, the U.S. had assisted the Vietnamese in training at Vung Tau some 16,000 Vietnamese pacification cadre by 1966, which were then formed into what were called Political Action Teams. These teams consisted of approximately 40 of these anti-Communist indoctrinated cadre, who like the Communist guerrillas dressed in black pajamas. After Honolulu, the teams were renamed Revolutionary Development Teams, but still retained their Vietnamese designation *Can Bo*. See Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 1966, pp. 254–55, and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie, John Paul Vann and America in South Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 608.

Army Major General George Forsythe to Komer as his assistant "to keep Komer out of my hair." Still, while describing Komer as "volatile" and "abrasive," Westmoreland agreed he "was the man for the job."<sup>10</sup>

For his part, Komer had a clear idea what changes he wanted to make. He believed that for too long there had been no unified management structure concerned with pacification. He argued that the solution was "to require the U.S. and ARVN military to take on most of the pacification job." Up to this time, it was his opinion that when the U.S. entered the war in Vietnam, "we further 'Americanized' it—on an even grander scale—by playing out our military repertoire." He perceived Westmoreland's search and destroy and attrition strategy as a natural response of an American commander "against an elusive enemy who could not be brought to decisive battle in a classic military style." In so doing, however, Komer contended that both the Vietnamese and Americans had neglected the only means of attaining their goal—the establishment of local security and the extension of government administration into the countryside. He wanted to place more resources in civilian administration, the Revolutionary Development cadre and program, and to build up local defense forces, especially the Popular and Regional Forces. Under CORDS, Komer formed unified U.S. civilian-military teams that operated in all 250 districts and 44 provinces. Later, he would write that not until CORDS was formed, "did a major sustained pacification effort begin to take place."<sup>11</sup>

Still, in many respects, CORDS carried forward what was already in place. Beginning in 1966, the South Vietnamese and their American advisors had established the basis for a nation-wide pacification plan. While not developing an overall plan for 1967, they together with the Revolutionary Development Ministry designated four National Priority areas and developed the guidelines for Revolutionary Development. Each province was to develop its own plan. The 1967 pacification plan, then, if it could be called such, consisted of the aggregate of the 44 provincial plans.<sup>12</sup>

In reviewing the progress of Revolutionary Development during 1967, the CORDS planners determined that the so-called designated National Priority Areas and 26 priority provinces "did not produce demonstrable progress." According to the CORDS'

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\*\*Lieutenant General Krulak observed that from his perspective at FMFPac, "at bottom, Westy [Westmoreland] did not believe in pacification. He created CORDS to decentralize the worries. He didn't care for Komer, and vice versa." Krulak Comments.

point of view, blame for the slowness of RD largely lay in the "inefficiencies" of the respective South Vietnamese ministries. The Americans asserted that the "most serious—and telling—flaw was the conspicuous shortage of good Vietnamese leadership." In CORDS, the Americans began a systematic collection of dossiers on "incompetent or venal" province and district chiefs. Komer later claimed that the agency had a "respectable batting average" in placing pressure on the Vietnamese government to remove the worst offenders.<sup>13</sup>

The CORDS leadership convinced the South Vietnamese that a new tactic was necessary. They decided that there was a need to "concentrate resources in carefully chosen areas which met criteria for current progress plus the capacity to achieve greater results with more resources." Planners selected only a few priority provinces and priority areas based upon "their relative importance to the overall pacification effort." The emphasis was to be upon III and IV Corps. In fact, in I Corps, only Quang Ngai became a designated priority province where a 50 percent increase in pacification resources would be made. The authors of the MACV 1967 history claimed that the Combined Campaign Plan for 1968 contained "the first fully integrated treatment of pacification within the framework of a campaign plan."<sup>14</sup>

In Washington, Marine Corps leaders wondered about the new priorities and whether the III MAF pacification effort in Vietnam was to receive even less support. In October 1967, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., then Commandant of the Marine Corps, voiced his concerns to Lieutenant General Krulak at FMFPac headquarters in Honolulu. He observed that the omission of I Corps provinces with the exception of Quang Ngai "has an ironic twist in view of the historic fact that only in the III MAF area of responsibility has the target of pacification, civic action, and Revolutionary Development been accorded primary emphasis from the outset of U.S. major involvement in Vietnam."<sup>15</sup>

General Krulak tried to assuage the Commandant's concerns. He observed that the reason for the change in priority was that I Corps had become "the battleground and that RD has the best chance for success in areas most remote from the battle." He mentioned that Ambassador Komer had conveyed this idea to him during recent discussions. Krulak then stated that, although I Corps was to have only one priority province, this was misleading. There was not to be any diminution of the pacification effort in the Corps area, and, in fact, there was to be an increase in Revolutionary Development resources for the coming year. He observed that under the 1968 plan, I Corps was to

receive a 20 percent increase in the number of RD teams and the number of hamlets and villages to be developed. Moreover, the Corps would receive a 49 percent increase in funds over the previous year and could request additional monies if required.<sup>16</sup>

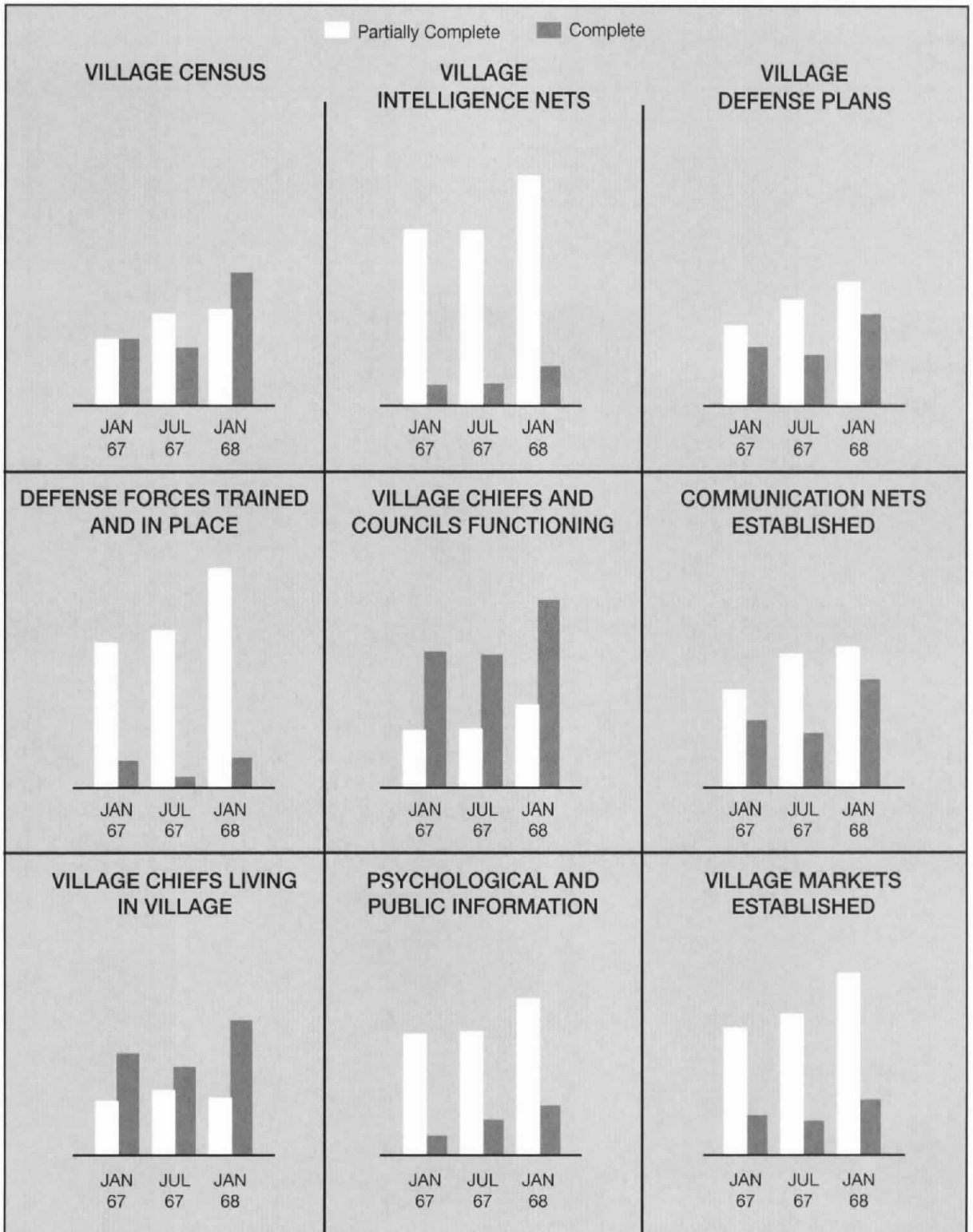
Krulak then compared the degree of pacification resources in I Corps, both presently available and those reserved for 1968, with those for the other Corps areas. He noted that under the 1968 plan, I Corps was allotted an average of 33 Revolutionary Development teams per province, the highest number in all the Corps areas. The next closest, IV Corps, was to average only 19 teams per province. In actual funds, I Corps was to receive 100 million piasters, only slightly less than II and IV Corps, which were to get 104 million and 103 million piasters respectively, and more than III Corps.<sup>17</sup>

The FMFPac commander then discussed the actual Revolutionary Development plans for I Corps. General Lam, the I Corps commander, had just requested from the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff 31 additional Regional Forces companies, 21 of which would have specific pacification missions. Furthermore, Lam planned to assign two additional ARVN regular battalions to support the Revolutionary Development campaign. This would mean that 16 out of the 28 ARVN battalions assigned to the Corps sector would be in support of Revolutionary Development.<sup>18</sup>

He then detailed the reasons for the selection of Quang Ngai Province as the priority province: "relative population density, economic potential in terms of rice and salt production, remoteness of the NVA threat . . . , and because it is contiguous to the northernmost II Corps Priority Province of Binh Dinh." Krulak then speculated about the real reason for the choice of Quang Ngai. He believed that "the RD planners were mesmerized by the thought of a continuous line of priority provinces along the coast, without jeopardizing the stated concept that priorities rank from south to north."<sup>19</sup>

Despite all the verbiage, Krulak saw little difference between 1967 and 1968 for I Corps, relative to the emphasis upon pacification. He related, for example, that Quang Nam Province was authorized 38 Revolutionary Development teams, more than 23 of the 26 so-called priority provinces. It also received more pacification funds than another 16 priority provinces in other Corps sectors. He concluded: "In the final analysis, the priority listing will not result in degradation of the RD effort in I Corps." Instead, he believed that the "increased emphasis in RD in Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Thua Thien should enhance the chances of RD success

## PACIFICATION PROGRESS IN III MAF AREAS JANUARY 1967-JANUARY 1968



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.



in 1968 . . .” This would occur “without the heat of the spotlight, absent because of the lack of priority status which exists only in a concept, not in practice.”<sup>20</sup>

By the end of 1967, progress in pacification in both I Corps and country-wide was very much in the eye of the beholder. According to the latest HES ratings more than 60 percent of the population country-wide lived in relatively secure areas. In I Corps, III MAF reported that more than half of the people in that sector lived in “secure hamlets.” Both of these figures, nevertheless, needed to be taken with several grains of salt. Thomas Thayer, a senior Defense Department analyst, later wrote that there were several factors that may have caused the increase. These included the fact that the secure population included urban regions, refugees, and not the least, “optimistic evaluation of programs.” The statistics also underestimated the strength of the VC control in Communist-dominated hamlets. Given all that, Thayer believed that the extension of allied protection into the countryside accounted for most of the hamlet security gains.<sup>21</sup>

Other factors at the Saigon level reinforced this initial optimism. According to the MACV historians, the momentum of 1967 progress “gave hope to all concerned that a workable solution to the problem of pacification had at last evolved.” CORDS officials spoke about “Project Takeoff, a management tool designed to bring maximum pacification assets to bear on the most important problems.”<sup>22</sup>

The MACV intelligence estimate also gave impetus to the belief that the war was finally going the allies’ way. In their analysis of enemy strength in the second half of 1967, MACV intelligence officers began to talk about enemy casualties reaching the “crossover point,” where the gaps left in enemy strength could not be filled by new replacements and recruits. Westmoreland then approved a controversial decision to omit from the MACV order of battle two whole classes of so-called Communist irregulars: Self Defense Forces and the VC infrastructure. This reduced the estimated total number of guerrillas, irregulars, and cadre from 114,348 to 81,300. All of the 81,300 irregulars carried in the proposed new MACV estimate were under the category of guerrillas. Under the classification spaces for Self Defense Forces and VC infrastructure were two footnotes. According to the MACV rationale, “the self-defense forces provide a base for recruitment as well as for political and logistical support, but are not a fighting force comparable to the guerrilla.” While acknowledging that local VC hamlet self-defenses “cause some casualties and damage, they do not represent a contin-

ual or dependable force and do not form a valid part of the enemy’s military force.” Relative to the enemy infrastructure, “the political cadre (infrastructure) has no military function.”<sup>23</sup>

As could be expected, the proposed revised MACV order of battle caused a furor among the various intelligence agencies, especially the CIA. In an eventual compromise, essentially everyone agreed to disagree. The new estimates carried the MACV changes, but with the footnotes explaining that Self Defense Force and VC figures were not included in the new figures. MACV HES estimates, however, continued to show an enemy guerrilla force of about 155,000 rather than the 81,000 published by the MACV-J2 or intelligence section. Furthermore, MACV through CORDS supported the newly initiated CIA-sponsored Phung Hoang (All Seeing Bird) or “Phoenix” program as it was known in English, aimed at the elimination of high-ranking VC cadre.<sup>24\*</sup>

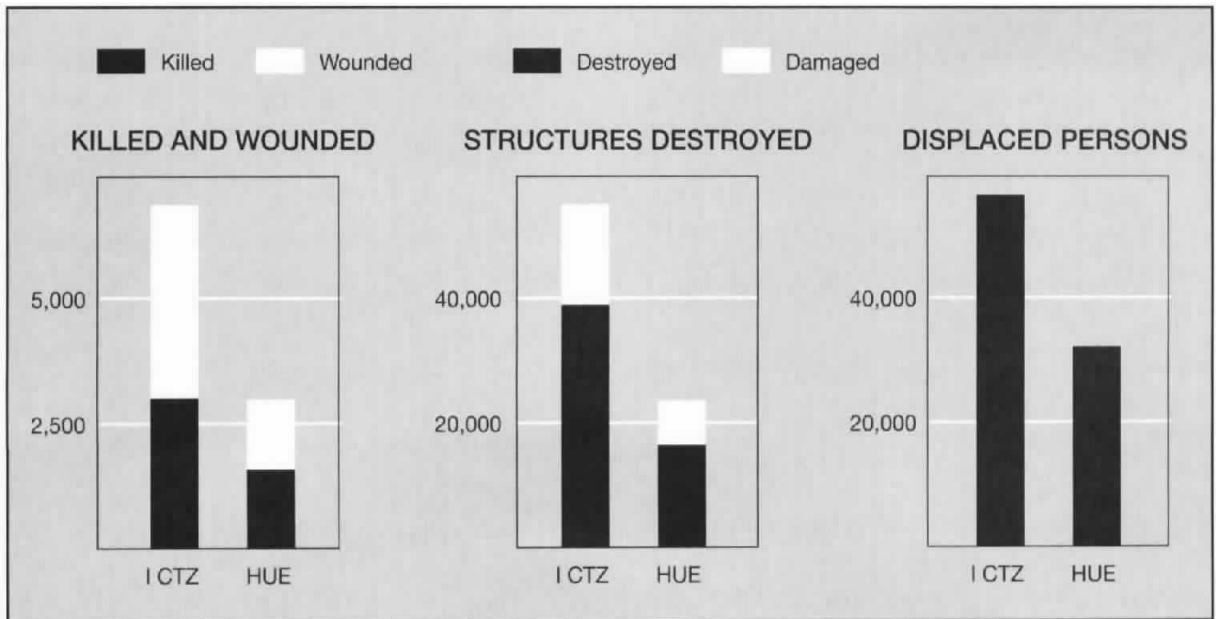
At the end of 1967, despite some feeling of optimism, there were continuing doubts about progress in pacification both in I Corps and the country at large. From both American and South Vietnamese sources came indications of increased enemy offensive intentions. This was especially true in I Corps where the allies expected another large enemy push in the north. At Da Nang, also, there were reports of a major enemy attack on the base and the number of enemy small unit actions had increased.\*\*

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\*Although later alleged to be an assassination campaign, the stated purpose of the Phung Hoang was “to enlist and coordinate the efforts of local leaders police and paramilitary groups to identify and dismantle the subversive apparatus.” Based upon the newly created District Intelligence Operational Coordinating Committees, consisting of police and village and hamlet officials, the idea was to target by name and arrest the local enemy ranking cadre, employing force if necessary. Various Vietnamese agencies carried out the actual campaign, including the national police, military security teams, armed propaganda teams, Census Grievance cadre, RD cadre, and an especially CIA-trained group called Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU). Colonel Black, who was responsible for III MAF civil affairs, recalled that because of its classification, not even the III MAF staff was “in the know” on the program, but that the staff “thrived on rumor about Phoenix.” James Black Comments. Major Donald E. Milone, who commanded the 3d MP Battalion in 1968, related that the program “failed to coordinate its activities” with Marine units, especially the Combined Action platoons: “No one knew what was happening in a certain village.” Maj Donald E. Milone, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Corson, who headed the Combined Action Program in 1967, considered Phoenix “a bounty program . . . with little regard . . . for ‘guilt’ or ‘innocence.’” He stated that he reached an understanding that the Phoenix teams would keep away from the Combined Action hamlets. Corson Comments.

\*\*See Chapters 1 and 6.

## CIVILIAN LOSSES DURING TET IN I CTZ AND HUE



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

### *The Tet Offensives and Operation Recovery*

Initially, the enemy Tet offensive was a tremendous setback for both the Marine and country-wide pacification program. With the attacks on the major cities of Vietnam and especially the one-month battle for Hue, the enemy added an entire new dimension to the war. The enemy attacks during the holiday period resulted in an enormous increase of new refugees, ranging from estimates of 750,000 to over a million, with nearly 170,000 in I Corps and, of that number, about 75,000 from the city of Hue. In February 1968, III MAF reported that the number of enemy defectors was the lowest in five months. According to pacification reports, before Tet, the allies claimed 5,331 out of 12,000 hamlets under government control. The number cited after Tet was 4,472, a loss of 859. By April 1968, Ambassador Komer related that the total of hamlets then under government control had risen slightly, reaching 4,559, a gain of some 87 hamlets "back in the fold." Despite the tremendous onslaught of the enemy, the ARVN had not defected and the South Vietnamese government apparatus had not collapsed.<sup>25</sup>

After the first attacks and initial surprise, the South Vietnamese government launched Operation Recovery. At the urging of U.S. pacification officials, President Thieu created, with American participation and support, a high-level task force "to direct and coordinate"

civilian relief activities. Thieu temporarily placed Vice President Ky in charge of the South Vietnamese government endeavor while Ambassador Komer directed the U.S. effort. Both men set up subordinate complementary organizations on the corps, province, and district levels, whose mission was four fold: to provide immediate assistance to the refugees, to get the cities functioning once more, to open lines of communication so the economy could function, and to reestablish order. According to MACV, the major innovation in the project was the "provision of cash and commodities to the people so that they themselves could rebuild." In actuality, III MAF had employed this same concept as the basis for its civic action program since 1965, but with fewer resources.<sup>26</sup>

In I Corps under Operation Recovery, the South Vietnamese apparatus authorized a 57 million piaster (\$485,000.00) budget for a three-month period. The first aim was to provide for food, reconstruction of homes, and some compensation to survivors of those civilians killed and to the wounded as a result of the fighting. In Hue, each displaced person was entitled to 10,000 piasters (\$85.00), 20 sheets of roofing, and 10 bags of cement to begin to rebuild. By the end of March, more than 830 families received reconstruction material and all the displaced received a temporary relief payment. For the most part, the initial phase of the rebuilding of the city had been completed. Relief workers brought in 4,100 tons of rice to feed the peo-

ple, work groups buried more than 6,000 bodies killed in the battle for the city, and other work gangs cleared the debris and rubble from the streets. Municipal employees had returned both water and electricity to "satisfactory operation condition." U.S. and South Vietnamese munitions disposal specialists had disarmed or otherwise disposed of unexploded ordnance. Work had started on the second and third phases, the repair of public buildings and the reconstruction of private homes.<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere in I Corps, the South Vietnamese also had made some inroads on the damage caused by enemy assaults. Outside of Hue, displaced people were entitled to a somewhat lesser sum, 5,000 piasters (\$42.00), but the same amount of roofing and cement to rebuild their homes. By the end of March, more than 1,400 families received all or part of their settlement. III MAF units had provided over 1,000,000 meals to civilians, nearly double the usual amount of foodstuffs provided under civic action programs. Relief workers distributed more than 21,000 tons of rice in the Corps' five provinces. Corps officials

had also taken steps to eliminate abuses and some of the most ineffective leaders in local government. They had dismissed one province chief, two district chiefs, and two village chiefs.

Despite an impressive start, Operation Recovery soon bogged down upon the unusual demands put upon the overburdened and inefficient South Vietnamese administrative apparatus. While acknowledging that the government had begun reconstruction, resettlement, and economic revival programs, American observers reported that by April the strains were beginning to show. They charged: "There was a critical decline in effectiveness when the program should have been gathering even greater momentum." Local officials had overspent their budgets and projects came to a standstill.<sup>28</sup>

Under Operation Recovery, the country also made some starts on mobilization of the populace. Vice President Ky authorized the establishment of special Self-Defense Groups in urban areas so they could defend themselves against any further incursions by the Communists. The idea was to distribute arms to the people

*South Vietnamese civilian refugees gather in a park near Hue University as the fighting continued in the city. In Operation Recovery, the South Vietnamese attempted to help the displaced residents to rebuild their homes.*

Photo is from the Abel Collection



so that they would be able to provide some form of organized protection to their neighborhood or local community to supplement the territorial forces. The Self-Defense forces were divided into two groups: one combat and the other support. Further divided into three groups, the support forces consisted of youth, women, and elders. Membership was voluntary and open to all citizens seven years of age or above. The new mobilization law required all youths between 16 and 17 and men between 38–50 to serve in the combat Peoples Self Defense Corps. Within each of the combat forces were to be specially trained personnel, organized into 35-man teams, each man being armed.<sup>29</sup>

Like the rest of Operation Recovery, after much fanfare and formation and drilling of units, the program lacked cohesion. While a wide variety of units were organized, they received little direction, training, or weapons. American CORDS officials observed aimless drift and almost no coordination. By the end of June, according to the MACV history, “the population was, in effect, ahead of the government in terms of its willingness to participate actively in self-defense.”<sup>30</sup>

The second wave of the Tet offensive in May gave a new impetus to Operation Recovery in both reconstruction and the mobilization of the population. As North Vietnamese officials met formally with the Americans in Paris for the first time, these negotiations reinforced the new sense of urgency. Ambassador Komer later wrote that the South Vietnamese government’s “realization that a far greater effort on its part would be required to survive finally led to

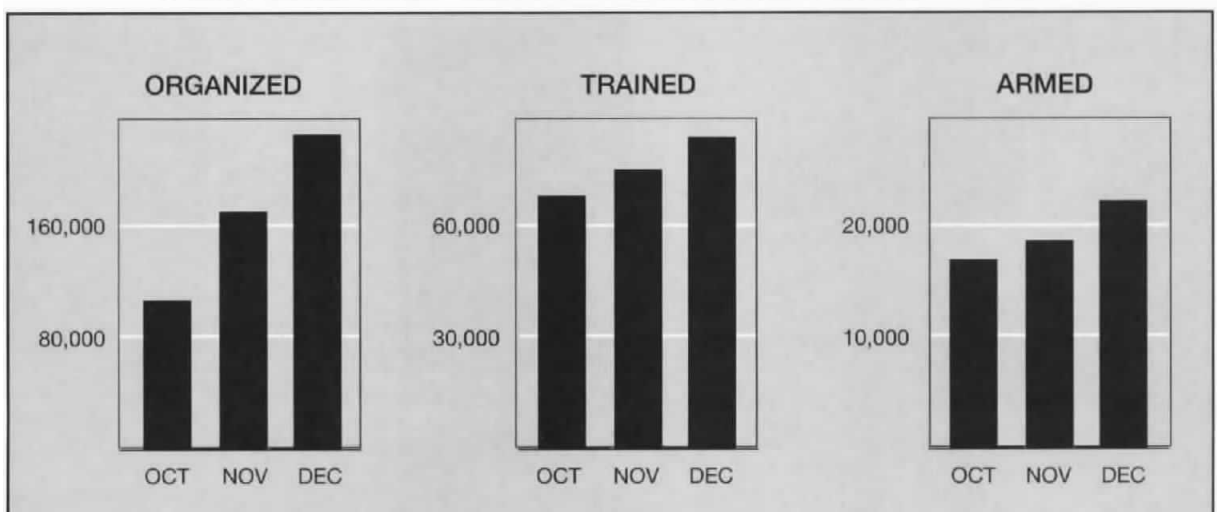
actual national manpower mobilization, extensive training programs for local officials, a major acceleration for pacification efforts, several economic reforms and the like.”<sup>31</sup>

At this point President Thieu called a meeting of his Corps commanders and expressed his unhappiness. He told them in “no uncertain terms that whatever the anomaly involved in exercising authority, recovery was not to wither on the vine.” By July, according to American officials, the reconstruction of the rural economy in I, II, and III Corps had reached pre-Tet levels.<sup>32</sup>

The South Vietnamese president also took the initiative relative to the Self-Defense Corps. In July, he placed the program directly under his prime minister, who formed a National Peoples Self Defense Committee chaired by himself. By the end of the year, some 1,000,000 people were members of such groups and nearly half of them had received training. The government had distributed some 173,000 weapons. In I Corps, for example, at the end of October, nearly 106,000 of the civilian population had joined the Self Defense Corps with 16 percent armed. At the end of the year, the number had increased to 225,162 with 10 percent of them armed.<sup>33</sup>

Operation Recovery itself came to an end in October with the claim of the government that it had accomplished its basic mission, the return of security and extension of public services to the level enjoyed prior to the offensives. The third enemy offensive by this time had petered out and wreaked far less damage than the earlier attacks. The October Hamlet Evalua-

### PEOPLE'S SELF-DEFENSE ORGANIZATION - I CTZ



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

tion figures showed 69.8 percent of the population country-wide living in generally secure areas, a record high exceeding that of the pre-Tet period. According to American observers, the improvement was country-wide and reflected in all four Corps areas. The general mobilization had not only created the Self Defense Corps, but had improved the caliber of the Regional and Popular Forces, most of whom were now equipped with American M16 rifles. In all Corps areas, pushed by the central government, provincial and district chiefs "slowly began to increase their pacification efforts."<sup>34</sup>

The results were equally impressive in I Corps. Although the enemy attacks near Da Nang in August had caused some diminishment in Revolutionary Development, according to the American statistics, both the security and the economy picked up in the following months. From the onset in mid-February of Operation Recovery until its end in October, the Corps provincial and local governments had spent in excess of \$500,000.00 to reestablish "normalcy to the lives of victimized civilians in I CTZ." The government had resettled more than 152,000 or 98 percent of the temporary refugees. Through the funds provided for the purpose, local officials had given more than 131,000 bags of cement and 276,000 sheets of roofing tin for the rebuilding of homes. In addition, the relief groups had distributed nearly 50,000 tons of rice and grain to the devastated areas and medical workers inoculated approximately 500,000 civilians against contagious disease under the program. Yet, as one observer cautioned, these quantitative figures, which he referred to as a "wonderful fertility," did not necessarily measure the qualitative aspects of the war.<sup>35</sup>

While not formally under Operation Recovery, one of the more notable accomplishments during the period was the effort to reopen the national railroad in I Corps from Da Nang to Hue. Part of a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese plan to have unhampered railroad traffic from the capital of Saigon in the south to Dong Ha in the north by the end of 1969, the idea was to work simultaneously on two important sections, the 103 kilometer Da Nang-Hue link and the 375 kilometer segment from Saigon to the I Corps/II Corps border. While the latter had priority, the planners called for the Da Nang-Hue portion to be completed by the end of February 1969.<sup>36</sup>

Despite rail communications between Da Nang and Hue having been cut by the VC in 1964, by 1967, the allies had three trains a week running, but requiring armed escort and subject to frequent delays and sabo-

tage incidents. The enemy Tet offensive disrupted even this small traffic. In May 1968, MACV ordered III MAF in coordination with the Commanding General I Corps and the Vietnamese National Railroad System (VNRS) to "restore to operational condition the railroad from Da Nang to Hue when required security forces are available." On 19 June, General Cushman issued a combined plan to carry out the mission. Navy Seabees were to repair four long-span bridges in the rugged terrain north of Da Nang while Army engineers cleared debris and mines from a vital tunnel north of the Esso depot of Lien Chieu. Two South Vietnamese VNRS work crews would make the repairs of the roadbed and the track, one working south from Hue and the other north from Da Nang. They were to make their junction at Phu Loc in Thua Thien Province. The 101st Airborne Division and 1st Marine Division were responsible for general protection of the workers in their respective TAORs, while RF and PF troops reinforced by a VNRS security battalion provided close-in security.<sup>37</sup>

Starting work on 15 July, the work crews made rapid progress. By 10 October, they had completed repairs of track over half of the distance, 63 kilometers. In the 101st Airborne sector, the crew had reached the Truoi River Bridge while the southern crew had completed restoration in the 1st Marine Division area. As of 10 October, there had been no incidents of sabotage to hamper the work. By the end of November, the northern crew had reached a position about seven miles north of Phu Loc. While the VC blew a bridge just east of Phu Loc, the Seabees immediately started their repairs which were completed before Christmas. This left at the end of the year only 12 kilometers of track to be restored. The project was nearly two months ahead of schedule. As a III MAF report observed, completion of the railroad link would be "a tangible sign of return to normalcy." Thus, country-wide, a MACV historian concluded about Operation Recovery, "efficiency was often lacking but the overall GVN performance in reestablishing over a million refugees and renewing urban viability was one of the bright spots of 1968."<sup>38</sup>

### *III MAF and Pacification*

During 1968, there was to be little of the debate between the MACV search and destroy strategy of attrition and the emphasis on pacification that marked the Marine stance toward the war. There were of course several reasons for this, not the least of which were the Tet offensive and the Mini-Tets in May and September.

At that time there was no difficulty in finding either the NVA or VC. As Ambassador Komer of CORDS later observed, the attrition strategy appeared to work during the offensives because the enemy “abandoned his hit and run strategy” and more or less met the allies on their own terms. Through at least the first nine months of 1968, pacification took a back seat until the Communists apparently reverted to their concept of protracted war at the end of the year.<sup>39</sup>

Still, there were other reasons for the lack of contention between MACV and III MAF over strategy and emphasis on pacification. With the establishment of the Marine base at Khe Sanh and the beginning of the building of the barrier along the DMZ in 1967, the depletion of Marine troop strength from the populated coastal areas, especially around Da Nang and Chu Lai, dashed any hopes that the Marines may have had to push a strong population control strategy. Even the commitment of the Army’s Americal Division to I Corps in 1967 did not provide III MAF with the density of troop strength it required, especially in the Da Nang area. General Cushman, the III MAF commander, later commented that “the threat in the north . . . drained the resources from pacification. I would say it prevented us from doing more pacification.”<sup>40</sup>

Personality also was a consideration. While General Cushman professed to support the pacification concepts of General Walt, he was less the crusader and evangelical believer than his predecessor. According to Major General Norman J. Anderson, the 1st MAW commander, from his perspective, “there was a lessening of emphasis upon the population during the period I was in the III MAF area. I think that General Cushman was very skeptical of that idea.”\* To be fair to the III MAF commander, in 1968, there were several issues that competed for his attention, not the least of which were Khe Sanh, the Tet Offensive including the battle for Hue, the insertion of Army units under his command, the establishment of MACV Forward later to become XXIV Corps, and Single Manager.<sup>41</sup>

\*General Earl E. Anderson, who as a brigadier general served as the III MAF Chief of Staff, disagreed with Major General Norman Anderson, and contended that General Cushman supported Marine pacification efforts especially the Combined Action Program, “even though III MAF had to contribute quite a bit of infantry to the program, he thought that it was well worth the effort.” Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter E. E. Anderson Comments. Lieutenant General Krulak on the other hand agreed with Major General Norman Anderson that General Cushman was “more skeptical” about the possibility of pacification than General Walt. Krulak Comments.

Another factor that played a role in lessening tension over pacification with MACV was the expanding role that CORDS began to play in pacification. With the advent of CORDS in May 1967, Henry Koren, an experienced foreign service officer and diplomat, became the CORDS chief in I Corps. With the CORDS organization now part of the military chain of command, Koren reported directly to Cushman as well as through the CORDS administrative network. According to the III MAF commander, Koren served as “my advisor so to speak—staff officer [on pacification] . . . he was always at briefings every morning and worked right in with us.” Under Koren, there was a CORDS advisor in each of the five provinces who worked directly with the South Vietnamese province chief in support of the local Revolutionary Development program. Cushman described the I Corps CORDS organization as relatively effective: responsible for logistic and policy support of Revolutionary Development, “it went side by side” with the III MAF Combined Action program and “you could get down to province capitals with supplies and so on and advice.”<sup>42</sup>

This cooperation in support of Revolutionary Development continued for the most part with Koren’s successor, another civilian, C. T. Cross, through 1968, although questions remained about coordination on the local level, especially with the Combined Action Program. The CORDS organization in I Corps reflected the new intermixture of the military and U.S. civilians in the pacification program. For example, in October 1968, the New Life Development program, Revolutionary Development, Psychological Operations, Public Safety, and Refugees were all run by civilians. The Assistant Deputy for CORDS, L. D. Puckett, was also a civilian. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel H. W. Naushuetz, the commanding officer of the 29th Civil Affairs Company, and U.S. Army Major R. D. Becker, who headed the Chieu Hoi advisory office, both came under the I Corps CORDS organization. Of the U.S. five province senior advisors, three were military and two were civilian.<sup>43</sup>

While the CORDS organization may have been a combination of both military and civilian personnel, the new structure actually enhanced General Cushman’s authority in I Corps. As the I Corps Senior Advisor together with his responsibility as Commanding General, III MAF, Cushman already controlled all the U.S. military forces in the Corps sector. Now with the CORDS organization under him, he combined in his person both the U.S. military and pacification responsibilities for the northern five provinces.

As a manifestation of this added stature, the III MAF commander ended some of the redundancies in the Marine pacification program. After the Tet offensive postponed the monthly meeting of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council, he, together with General Lam, abolished the organization in March on the basis that its missions and functions "have basically been assumed by the committees and sub-committees of Project Recovery, under the chairmanship of the CG, I Corps." Finally at the end of the year, General Cushman terminated the FMFPac village evaluation system in I Corps as duplicative and not as accurate as the MACV hamlet evaluation system. As Colonel Ross R. Miner, 1st Marine Division G-5 officer, explained, the FMFPac system was only effective as long as the reporting unit remained in a specific area of operations. As far as the division was concerned, with "these [U.S.] units moving in and moving out . . . the whole report is fallacious." On the other hand, the CORDS district advisor, who

was responsible for making the hamlet evaluation system, was in a much better position to give an accurate assessment.<sup>44</sup>

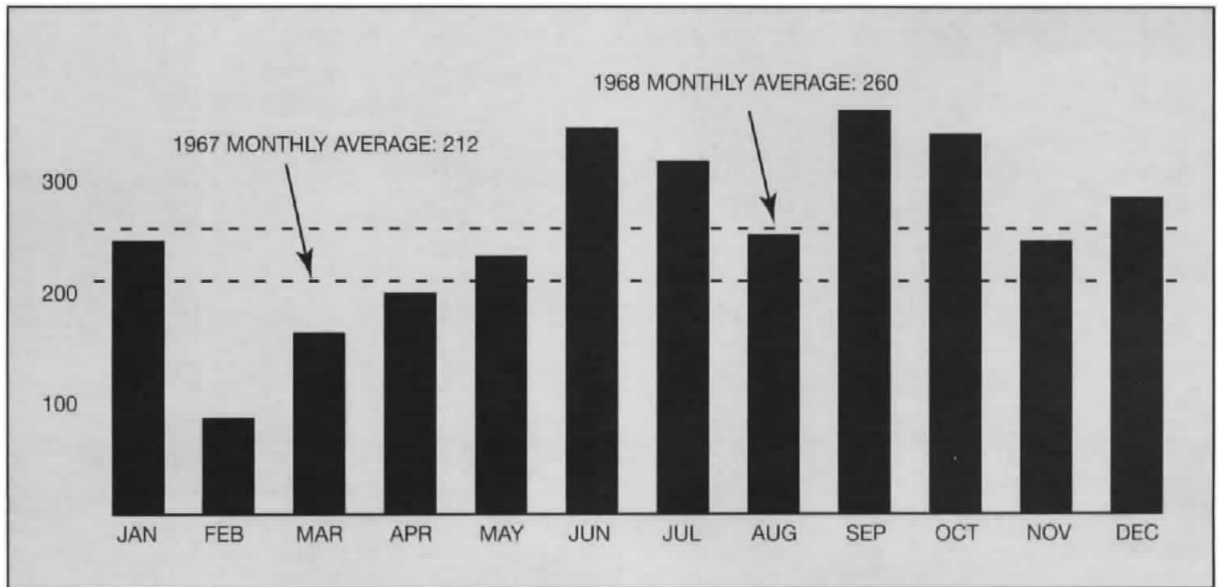
For the most part, outside of the Combined Action and Personal Response programs, the main focus of the III MAF Marine units relative to pacification was on civic action and psychological operations. As part of this latter effort, the Marine command, augmented by the Army's 7th Psychological Operations Battalion, placed a high priority on sophisticated and not so sophisticated communication techniques to get their message to the targeted audiences. For example, after Tet, III MAF made a special effort together with CORDS personnel to reestablish local radio, TV, and newspaper service in Hue. According to III MAF, "special efforts to reestablish these medias were immediately undertaken and the problem solved." Local officials appeared on both television and radio "to make the people aware of what the GVN was doing to allevi-

*A member of the psychological operations team from SLF Bravo throws out leaflets explaining to the local population why the Marine units were operating in the sector. This was part of an overall psychological operation campaign aimed at various audiences, including the enemy.*

Photo courtesy of Col Warren A. Butcher USMC (Ret)



## I CTZ CHIEU HOI RETURNEES - 1968



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

ate the critical situation." In radio broadcasts and propaganda flyers, the command countered a prevailing VC rumor campaign that the U.S. would support a coalition government.<sup>45</sup>

Through the year, the III MAF psychological warfare experts mounted a three-pronged campaign to exploit VC/NVA atrocities during Tet, to publicize to enemy soldiers and possible civilian sympathizers the Chieu Hoi or South Vietnamese amnesty program, and to "encourage nationalism" among the civilians throughout the Corps area. They accomplished this through aerial loudspeaker broadcasts and distribution of leaflets by both ground and air means. During March, the first month of the effort, they distributed over 268 million propaganda leaflets and made more than a 1,000 aerial and ground broadcasts. By the end of December, the number of leaflets distributed per month reached over 280 million and nearly 3,000 aerial loudspeaker broadcasts were made. At that time, the 3d Marine Division experimented with firing artillery "leaflet-loaded rounds" at known enemy positions which, after solving some initial fusing and packing problems, proved feasible.<sup>46</sup>

While impossible to measure directly the success of the psychological warfare campaign, the increasing numbers of Chieu Hoi and Kit Carson volunteers indicated that enemy troops were well aware that there were steps they could take to return or come over to the government side. Despite a dip from 250

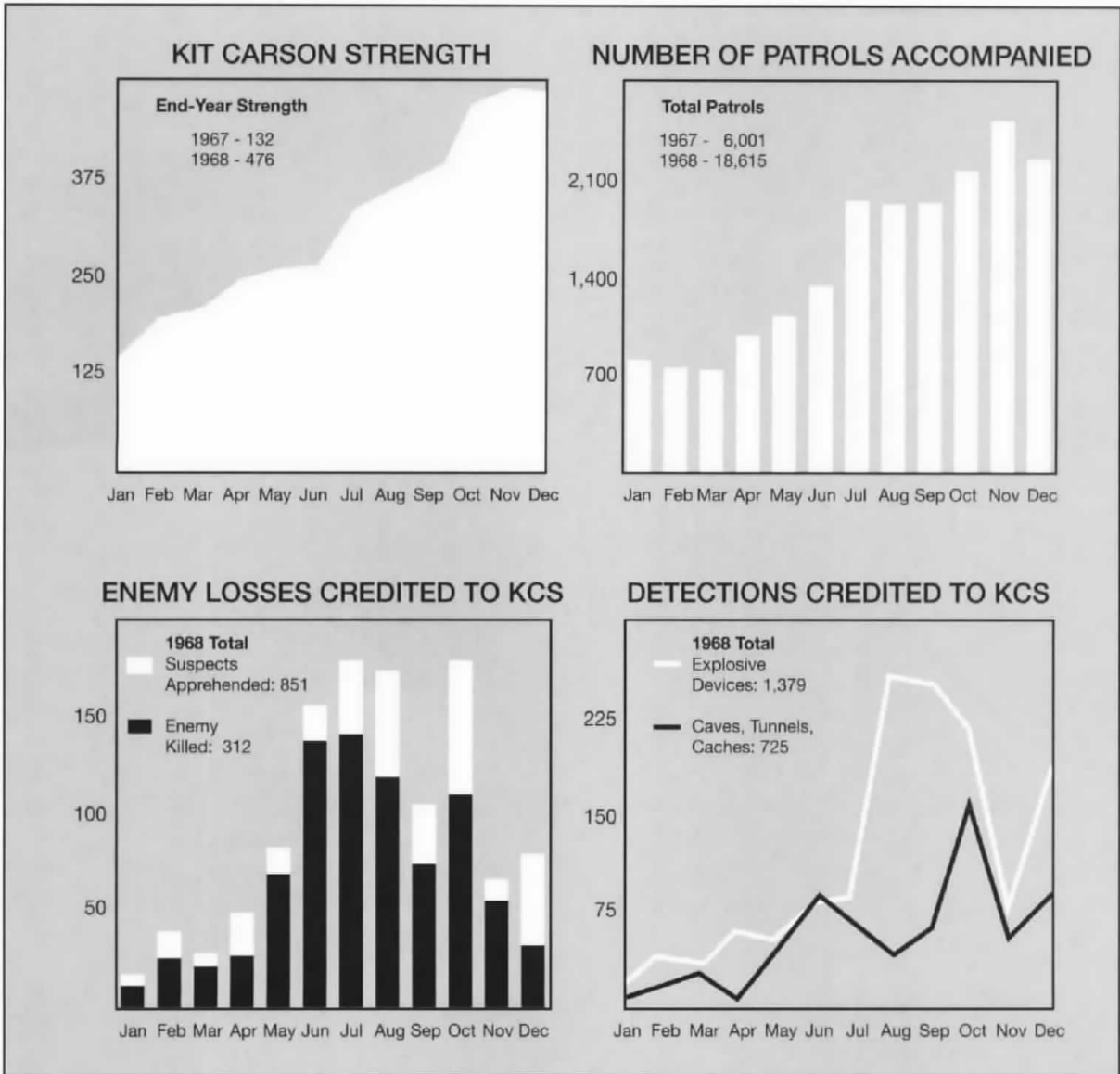
defectors in January 1968 to only 66 in February, the number of Hoi Chanhs in I Corps at the end of the year reached 3,118, exceeding the total for 1967 by 759. The Kit Carson Scouts showed an even more impressive expansion, increasing from 132 in 1967 to 476 in 1968. In December 1968, 102 served with the 1st Marine Division, 106 with the 3d Marine Division, 153 with the 101st Airborne Division, and 115 with the Americal Division. Another 22 former VC or NVA were undergoing training in the various division Kit Carson schools.<sup>47</sup>

In February, after two of the scouts were identified as "suspected penetration agents for the VC," III MAF improved and augmented its initial screening and also provided "for continuous evaluation and observation of individual KCS." Still, by the end of the year, the Marines credited their Kit Carson Scouts with apprehending 851 suspects and killing 312 of the enemy. They also helped the American units uncover some 720 enemy caves, tunnels, and caches. More importantly, the scouts discovered more than 1,300 explosive devices, many set as boobytraps (surprise firing devices) to catch the unwary. As Major General Donn J. Robertson later stated about the entire program: "Every time you got a few Chieu Hois and could convert them into Kit Carson Scouts where they could give you some assistance that was a plus that could save the lives of Marines."<sup>48</sup>

For 1968, III MAF civic action had much the same gradations as the overall pacification effort.



### KIT CARSON SCOUT (KCS) PROGRAM: 1968



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

The enemy Tet offensive hampered many civic action projects as the allies turned most of their effort into repulsing the Communist attacks. For example, in February 1968, the only increase in civic action was in two categories, the number of pounds of food distributed and number of persons fed, nearly double in both cases over the previous month. The obvious reason for that expansion was the pressing need to feed those displaced by the Communist onslaught. During the next two months there was a steady growth in all the civic action classifications. Again there were dips in May

and September during the Mini-Tets and a final push in the last quarter of the year.<sup>49\*</sup>

Most civic action largely consisted of programs that had a quick impact on the local populace such as the distribution of clothes, food, and soap to local vil-

\*Colonel James R. Black, Jr., who was the III MAF G-5 officer and responsible for the coordination of civic action among his duties, recalled that when he first arrived in September 1967, "it was difficult to comprehend what the G-5 role really was, particularly after the III MAF had a Deputy for CORDS. It was difficult for me to find out who I was really working for, except [Brigadier General] E. E. Anderson [the III MAF Chief of Staff] made it quite clear, and that provided me with the impetus to overcome all personal and professional objections. . . ." James Black Comments.

lagers; medical assistance patrols; and assisting with various construction efforts. The Marines, nevertheless, also supported some long-term projects. In January 1968, the 3d Marine Division in Thua Thien Province near Phu Bai sponsored 15 experimental fields devoted to the cultivation of improved strains of rice. With the assistance of local CORDS officials and the South Vietnamese Ministry of Land Reform and Agriculture, the division civic action team had introduced a higher yield rice developed in the Philippines, called "IR-8," which the Ministry immediately relabeled Thon Nong 8 (literally meaning "God of Agriculture" in Vietnamese). According to the Marine division account, "the psychological impact of attaching a Vietnamese name to an improved rice variety may have considerable influence upon its acceptance by the farmers of Vietnam."<sup>50</sup>

The 1st Marine Division also had similar projects. In January, it sponsored four schools and two breeding farms, and assisted in the building of five wells, two dispensaries, two maternity hospitals, and one Buddhist temple. Just prior to Tet, the Marines at Da Nang had overseen the giving away of more than 16,000 toys to children in the area. The 7th Engineer Battalion at the Da Nang base had one of the most active civic action programs. It sponsored a soil brick factory in its cantonment which provided affordable building material for local civilian projects approved by the village, district, and provincial councils. Employing about 25 workers and eight simple hand block presses, the factory could produce 1,760 bricks daily. While somewhat curtailed by Tet, these enterprises continued through the rest of the year.<sup>51</sup>

From the beginning, the civic action effort was larger in the 1st Marine Division sector, which included in the Da Nang area one of the richest farming and heaviest populated regions in all of South Vietnam. This disparity between the two divisions grew during the year as the 1st Marine Division took over the responsibilities of the 3d Division in Thua Thien Province. In the last two months of the year, the 1st Marine Division had completed 56 civic action projects. In December, the division was working with local authorities and villagers in the building of 2 schools, a dispensary, a market place, and 2 wells, as well as sponsoring 15 agricultural plots and 2 pig projects. In the 7th Engineer Battalion, for example, the engineers had begun an agricultural education program on improved farming techniques for the local villagers and introduced stronger types of produce seeds to be used on an experimental basis.<sup>52</sup>

While assigned to the less populated Quang Tri Province, the 3d Marine Division made a significant contribution to the Marine civic action projects. The division rented some 50 rice threshing machines to local farmers in Quang Tri who had the option of purchasing them. To demonstrate the advantages of the machine, the civic action officer sponsored a threshing contest in one hamlet between a water buffalo and the machine. The machine threshed about twice the amount of rice as the animal. In May, 10 of the farmers bought threshers. Both the rental and purchase proceeds went into the 3d Marine Division civic action fund.<sup>53</sup>

While introducing mobile helicopter and firebase tactics into the 3d Marine Division, Major General Raymond G. Davis was proud of the civic action exploits of the division. After reviewing his accomplishments as division commander in the spring of 1969, Davis remarked on his efforts in Cam Lo and joint efforts with the 2d ARVN Regiment. The ARVN and Marines conducted a series of cordon and search "County Fair" operations which succeeded in identifying the local VC infrastructure in coastal Quang Tri Province. With the defeat of the NVA divisions in the north, according to Davis, the division could concentrate on pacification and civic action.<sup>54</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bryon T. Chen's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines with its Companies F and H played a large role in the Cam Lo Campaign. In Cam Lo District, Captain Donald R. Myers who commanded Company H remembered, "I had squads or platoons in nearly every hamlet along the Cam Lo River . . . [and that] we even had the RFs go on patrol with us across the . . . River. They hadn't done that in years." In nearby Huong Hoa District, First Lieutenant Justin M. Martin's Company F adopted similar tactics. Operating in the villages of Mai Loc and Doc Kin, the company supported a Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) operating with the U.S. Special Forces and the 220th Regional Forces Company. According to Martin, he had two bosses, "I not only have to report to my colonel but also an [U.S.] Army major," the District Advisor. While somewhat critical of his South Vietnamese Regional Force counterpart, who ran his operations from a small cafe in Mai Loc, he believed "we have given the Vietnamese some muscle that they have not had in this area." Both Myers and Martin viewed the pacification campaign as a welcome change of pace from the war of maneuver against the North Vietnamese regular units. Myers observed "we made an impact, but it was not noted in the number of body



Photo Courtesy of LtCol Justin M. Martin USMC (Ret)

*Photograph presents a street view of the village of Mai Loc in Huong Hoa District, Quang Tri Province. Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines operated in the village together with a Regional Force Company whose commander made his headquarters in a cafe on this street.*

counts. What did not happen is a better indication of our success. Incidents dramatically went down while we operated and trained the RFs.”<sup>55</sup>

Yet, one of the most ambitious of the division civic action projects, the establishment of a children’s hospital in Quang Tri, proved how ephemeral such undertakings could be. With much fanfare and publicity, the division announced in August the scheduled opening of the 30-bed Dong Ha facility of what was planned eventually to be the “3d Marine Division Memorial Children’s Hospital” dedicated as a “lasting memorial to 3d Marine Division Marines and Sailors killed in action in Vietnam.” In addition to providing medical care for children, the hospital was to be a training center for Vietnamese medical personnel and serve as a symbol of American and Marine concern for the Vietnamese people. According to the division plans, the Marines were to finance the facility from troop donations, Marine Corps Reserve Civic Action funds, and by fund raising appeals to community and veterans organizations in the United States. The estimated cost of the finished modern hospital complex was \$75,000 which was to be located in the Quang Tri Combat

Base. Despite the high hopes and auspicious beginning, the hospital never expanded beyond the small Dong Ha facility. When the division left Quang Tri Province and Vietnam in 1969, the hospital remained largely on the drawing boards except for six unfinished buildings. With the assistance of III MAF, the South Vietnamese turned these into a combination of clinic, orphanage, and dormitory, a far cry from the initial ambitious plans. As Colonel Clifford J. Peabody, the III MAF civil affairs officer in 1970, later commented, “a project which was outstanding in its humanitarian ideal of providing help . . . has proved to be a real albatross in the long run.”<sup>56\*</sup>

Like much of the pacification effort, the effectiveness of the III MAF civic action program was difficult to determine. It often challenged the best in many

\*Colonel William E. Kerrigan, who served as the G-5 of the 3d Marine Division in the latter part of 1968, observed that “although never operated as a Children’s Hospital, one wing became an infirmary and several were used as youth hostels for high school students who lived in areas too remote to be able to commute to schools in Quang Tri City.” Col William E. Kerrigan, Comments on draft, dtd 14Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Marine enlisted men and officers, but also could bring out the worst. Captain Merrill L. Bartlett, a former Marine intelligence officer, remembered one regimental S-5 officer "already 'in his cups' by late afternoon," ordering the scores of Vietnamese civilians employed on the base, into a formation. According to Bartlett, the Marine officer "would then parade the lines with a club, looking for contraband. Finding something like a package of C-ration cigarettes, he would assault the luckless person with the club. My last memory of this officer is . . . seeing him passed out in a mud puddle in front of his hooch on New Year's Eve." On the other hand, Charles R. Anderson, a former Marine lieutenant assigned to the 3d MP Battalion at Da Nang during the latter part of 1968, described his battalion's S-5 officer as one who "wore his commission better than most who carried one" and who had volunteered for the S-5 job with the hopes of transferring into a combat unit. After a brief time in his new position, "he soon became seriously interested in the Vietnamese people and forgot about going into the bush." According to Anderson, despite cynicism on the part of other officers in the battalion, "those in S-5 labored on, determined to show the Vietnamese that America was trying to do things other than burning and killing."<sup>57</sup>

### *Homicide in the Countryside*

In a sense, the civic action program was part of the larger effort to win the so-called "hearts and minds" of the local populace, but this called for a special interaction between different and often alien cultures. For example, the deployment of the Korean Marine Brigade from the relatively unpopulated Chu Lai area into the Da Nang sector in January 1968 caused a deterioration of relations with the local villagers. According to General Cushman, he never really had control of the Koreans. Cushman stated our relationship was "operational guidance . . . [and] they didn't do a damn thing unless they felt like it." Cushman's deputy, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins,\* observed that the Vietnamese feared the Koreans more than anyone else and Cushman later confirmed that the South Vietnamese "people don't like them." According to the III MAF commander, General Lam, the South Vietnamese I Corps commander "hates their guts . . . He smiles, he's polite, but he'd just as soon they'd go the hell

home or some other Corps area." Tompkins later related that if the Korean Marines received fire "or think they'd get fired on from a village . . . they'd divert from their march and go over and completely level the village . . . It would be a lesson to them." Cushman concurred with Tompkins, remarking several years afterwards, "we had a big problem with atrocities attributed to them which I sent on down to Saigon." According to the III MAF commander, "I don't know how that ever came out . . . I doubt if anything ever came out of it." He stated the Koreans "of course denied it, so I don't know exactly what went on. I had some heart to heart talks with them, but I didn't really get anywhere."<sup>58\*\*</sup>

Of course, incidents with the local population were not confined only to Korean or to ARVN troops. In March 1968, in the hamlet of My Lai in Quang Ngai Province, a platoon from the Army's Company C, Task Force Barker, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, led by 1st Lieutenant William L. Calley, murdered over 120 villagers including old men, women, and children.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> It would be nearly a year later before the details of the massacre surfaced. A Department of the Army special board, headed by Army Lieutenant General William R. Peers, discovered that the 11th Brigade and Americal Division held only perfunctory investigations into the killings and failed to report any suspicions through the chain of command to either III MAF or U.S. Army, Vietnam. When asked about My Lai several years later, General Cushman answered, "the administrative chain to which these reports had to be made in no way went through III MAF. It went from [Major General Samuel] Koster [the Americal Division commander] to [Lieutenant General Bruce] Palmer, the Army [deputy] component

\*\*According to Igor Bobrowsky, who served with Combined Action Platoon Delta 2 in the Thanh Quit sector, this incident occurred in the nearby Phong Ni hamlets "when the Koreans made their way north from Dien Ban to relieve our units." He wrote it was "a very serious incident of that particular type (even *we* [italics in original] felt it was above & beyond acceptable bounds)." Igor Bobrowsky, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment Files). General E. E. Anderson, then the III MAF Chief of Staff, remembered that the incident occurred on 12 February 1968, "and a very close hold confidential investigation was held by a III MAF investigating officer. Since the ROK Marine brigade was not a subordinate of III MAF, the investigation was limited. It was completed and typed by my stenographer and hand carried to MACV in an "Eyes Only" sealed envelope on April 16, 1968. Rather revealing photographs were enclosed. A few weeks later, the package was returned to my office without any comment whatsoever." E.E. Anderson Comments.

\*\*\*See also Chapter 13.

\*MajGen Tompkins was the 3d Marine Division commander until 21 May when he relieved MajGen William J. Van Ryzin as Deputy Commander, III MAF. See Chapter 15.

commander in Vietnam. It was an Army chain, and I had nothing to do with it.”<sup>59\*</sup>

While nothing as horrendous or on the scale of My Lai, the Marines had their own incidents with the local populace as well. Obviously, when the battlefield was the village or the rice paddy, civilian casualties occurred, wittingly or unwittingly. While cognizant of the difficult circumstances, the Marine command attempted to hold Marine units to the highest standard. General Cushman remembered that while there were a number of atrocities, “we tried them by court-martial.” He related that, in most instances, they usually involved only a few victims and Marines and “we really came down on them . . .”<sup>60</sup>

From 1965–1973, Marine or Navy court-martials convicted 27 Marines of the murder of noncombatant South Vietnamese. Additionally another 16 were convicted of rape and another 18 of assault “with intent to commit murder, rape, or indecent assault.” Another 15 Marines were found guilty of manslaughter and one of attempted murder. The most notorious Marine court-martial of 1968 involved seven men from a squad of the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines. Accused of participating in the execution style murder of five Vietnamese men on 5 and 6 May, the seven were brought to trial and five of them convicted within five months of the incident.<sup>61\*\*</sup>

Obviously, while convictions provide some basis for judging the effectiveness of the Marine discipline system, as one Marine lawyer/historian, Lieutenant Colonel Gary D. Solis, wrote: “Acquittals can be as revealing as sentences imposed, because acquittals may indicate the reluctance of a court to convict.” In an analysis of the 43 Marines brought up on murder charges of South Vietnamese civilians, Solis observed

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\*General E. E. Anderson observed that while true that III MAF was out of the administrative chain of command for the My Lai investigation, he was “later questioned by members of the Peers Commission about the subject as I had the responsibility, as Chief of Staff of III MAF, of releasing our nightly operations reports. I pointed out to the questioners that the operations report by the Americal Division for the period when the My Lai incident occurred contained nothing that would trigger any suspicion.” E. E. Anderson Comments.

\*\*The Marines later established a Combined Action Platoon in the hamlet where the incident took place. Andrew Lewandowski, who commanded this platoon, recalled that he took over this platoon in November 1968, but “did not learn of this incident until I sat in a doctor’s office in Mt. Penn, Pa” the following year and read an account of the atrocity in *Look Magazine*. According to Lewandowski, if he had known about the situation at the time, he would have altered somewhat his civic action program in the hamlet. Andrew Lewandowski, Comments on draft, dtd 30Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

that 16 Marines, or 37 percent, “were acquitted or had their charges judicially dismissed.” He compared this favorably with the ratio of homicide case acquittals in U.S. District Courts, which for 1969 was 33 percent. Still, in examining the sentences served by the 27 Marines convicted of murdering South Vietnamese noncombatants, he observed that the average incarceration was less than five years.<sup>62\*\*\*</sup>

Despite the best efforts of the Marine command to punish all individuals that may have been guilty of crimes against the local populace, there were deviations. As Lieutenant Colonel Solis would later maintain “there clearly were far fewer prosecutions than there were grave breaches of the law of war.” Much depended upon individual unit leadership and command sensitivity to the needs and predicament of the local civilian population. While never condoned and often condemned by the senior Marine command, there emerged among some troops and perhaps some commanders what was called the “‘mere gook’ rule.” For some Marines, this permitted the “killing of Vietnamese—regardless of age, sex, or combatant status—because ‘after all they’re only gooks,’ a derogatory nickname for an Oriental which was carried over from the Korean War.” As Major W. Hays Parks, in 1968 the 1st Marine Division Chief Trial Counsel, wrote eight years later, while describing the so-called rule as “an unfair distorted description of military attitudes and conduct . . . [but acknowledged that] it was not altogether false, and was a key factor in most of the serious incidents reported.” Lieutenant Colonel Solis in his history of military justice in Vietnam observed that certain Marine defense counsels were aware of this attitude and often tried to use it to their advantage. He described the efforts of one counsel to include senior enlisted men on the court-martial panel, quoting the lawyer to the effect that they “would not be particularly disturbed about the death of another ‘gook’ . . . my hypothesis proved correct.”<sup>63</sup>

As Major Parks pointed out the “mere gook rule” was not original with U.S. troops in Vietnam nor for that matter Korea.<sup>64</sup> He quotes the American writer Ambrose Bierce writing in the 1860s, “The soldier

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\*\*\*Colonel W. Hays Parks, a former Marine lawyer and who has written extensively on the subject, denied, however, “that time served for murder of a Vietnamese was less than time served for a similar crime in the U.S. against a non-Vietnamese victim . . .” Col W. Hays Parks, Comments on draft, dtd 6Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*\*\*According to LtCol Solis, Marines used the term gook in reference to Nicaraguans during the Marine intervention there in the 1920s. Solis, *Trial by Fire*, p. 138.

never becomes wholly familiar with the conception of his foes as men like himself; he cannot divest himself of the feeling that they are another order of beings, differently conditioned, in an environment not altogether of the earth." This obviously reinforced Chaplain McGonigal's observation that it was important that the individual Marine view the individual South Vietnamese peasant as a "*full-fledged human being*."<sup>64\*</sup>

This, of course, was much easier said than done. As strong a supporter of the Marine pacification program as Major General Murray, the III MAF deputy commander, remarked, "I'd visit villages where the village chiefs and the villagers themselves would give every appearance . . . that we were just the greatest people in the world," but there also remained in the back of his mind the fugitive thought "who in this crowd of people would lead us to believe that they love us . . . [but] actually were ready to slit our throats, the first chance they would get." Obviously, the young Marine who took sniper fire from a village or witnessed a comrade either killed or horrendously wounded by an enemy boobytrap or mine set by these same villagers had his doubts about the friendliness of the local population. The attempt to convince him otherwise would take some doing.<sup>65\*\*</sup>

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\*Michael E. Peterson, a former Combined Action Marine and who has published a book on the Combined Action Program, questioned "how could any Marine view the South Vietnamese peasant as a *full-fledged human being* . . . when, from the very beginning . . . we were fed "Luke the Gook" from Boot Camp onward? The enlightenment of the writers of the *Small Wars Manual*, Lew Walt, Victor Krulak, and other pacification commanders simply could not offset the condescension, at best, or vicious . . . racism, at worst—of American commanders and soldiers toward the Vietnamese. And, given the Vietnamese tradition of xenophobia, a single negative act was multiplied manyfold in their eyes; and across the country by many thousands of Americans." Michael E. Peterson, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*In a letter to his parents in 1968, William R. Black, Jr., then a second lieutenant, wrote about some of the contradictory emotions pulling at the Marines as they fought the war in the villages. He wrote about his platoon taking heavy sniper fire in a hamlet. Black permitted some of the men to throw hand grenades into family bunkers before entering them because he "felt the whole place was unfriendly and that enemy were probably hiding in the family bomb shelters." The troops saw "very few civilians," but suddenly they heard a child cry. A family had been in one of the shelters. While sniper fire continued against his forward platoons, he directed his Navy Corpsman, "Doc, do what you can for them *immediately*, [emphasis in original] we can't leave you here." According to Black, this was a "sore spot among many of our troops that the corpsmen spend their medicine and energy helping the VN civilians." He quoted one of his men saying "Damn, man! This is a *war!* [emphasis in the original] We can't go hold'n up for no gook civilians!" The corpsman reported that the civilian wounds were superficial and the troops moved on. 2dLt William R. Black, Jr., ltr to parents, dtd 20-1Apr68, Encl, William R. Black, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 4Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *Changing Attitudes*

Such attitudes were a disturbing factor to the Marine command and lay behind the continuing efforts of the Marine Corps Personal Response Program. The Marine Corps pacification program depended upon the troops understanding the complexity of the situation they faced. While it might be too much to expect all Marines to like the Vietnamese, the command undertook extensive efforts to ensure that the Marines respected the rights and lives of the villagers who depended upon their protection.

Working against the perception on the part of some Marines and even some commanders that it was a "chaplain's program" or a "do-gooder concept," Personal Response officers tried to bring relevance to their message. Each Marine infantry platoon commander received a Personal Response notebook, a 53-page booklet, with examples and suggestions for further discussion with the Marines under him. For example, it offered the case where a CAP Marine by holding hands with a local girl destroyed the existing good relationship within the hamlet between the Marines and the villagers. In a graphic paragraph, the pamphlet observed:

Put it this way. If a foreigner squatted down on a street corner in Chicago and crapped in the gutter we would be offended. Most of us would hardly notice it, however, if a Vietnamese man walked down the street holding hands with an American girl. Here it is just the other way around—only worse. Holding hands with a Vietnamese girl in public is labeling all their women as prostitutes.<sup>66</sup>

Of course, the effectiveness of the pamphlet depended upon the initiative of the individual platoon commander and the command interest of his seniors. Each division, the wing, the Force Logistic Command, and Naval Support Activity had Personal Response contact teams. Each team consisted of a commissioned officer and a senior noncommissioned officer who were responsible for the conduct of schools and orientation in their respective commands.

The emphasis was upon formal and informal instruction. For example, in January 1968, the 3d Marine Division contact team held a two-day division Personal Response course for Personal Response officers at lower echelons. Personal contact teams gave field lectures and held discussion groups with seven infantry battalions which numbered over 970 Marines in attendance. The division teams provided instruction at the Combined Action Group school, the 3d Recon-

naissance Battalion indoctrination Course, and the Division staff NCO leadership course. For the month, the division reported that 104 officers, 139 staff NCOs, and 931 other enlisted men (a total of 1174 personnel) listened to 37 hours of formal school presentations and 24 hours of field lectures relative to Personal Response.<sup>67</sup>

All of the commands would accumulate similar statistics through the rest of the year. Furthermore, the III MAF Personal Response office issued a monthly flyer called "Spice," which was to add "seasoning to presentations," while another periodical called "Viewpoints" was to depict a "'happening' in American-Vietnamese Relations." At the end of September, III MAF placed its Personal Response program under the III MAF Assistant Chief of Staff (Plans) rather than the G-5 Division, Civic Action. This, however, made little difference for the program since all the subordinate commands retained their Personal Response officers and teams in their G-5 or S-5 civic action sections.<sup>68</sup>

Again the question remains, how much difference did the entire effort make? While any conclusion would be conjecture, the evidence implies the effect was positive. In a presentation for General Walt in October 1968, who was then the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, the briefer stated that the 3d Marine Division credited the Personal Response training "as a major factor in the reduction of that command's serious incident rate by more than one-fourth over the past 12 months." He observed that the 1st Marine Division reported an 11 percent decrease in non-operational serious incidents in the past year and also attributed this to its Personal Response efforts. Later in a debriefing at FMFPac, Major General Tompkins, the former 3d Marine Division commander and Deputy CG III MAF, commented that while difficult to assess the effectiveness of Personal Response, he believed the entire effort worthwhile and brought forth unexpected benefits in the form of intelligence about enemy units and infrastructure in the local communities.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the promulgation of all the various directives and the distribution of materials, their impact was uneven. Major Parks later concluded that most serious incidents involved men from units in which:

those directives had not been re-promulgated or implemented. . . . A command which implemented these directives, in which the commander knew what his subordinate units were doing and in which an intolerance of misconduct was manifest, seldom suffered either in the accomplishment of its mission or from serious incidents. Fortunately this was the rule rather than the exception.<sup>70</sup>

In the final analysis, while the Personal Response officer provided assistance and direction, the program's success depended upon the effectiveness of the individual commander, down to the platoon level, to support the policy. As one Marine historian wrote, the best that could be said about the Personal Response program was that the Marines "never gave up the effort to maintain a measure of humanity and compassion in the conduct of an often savage war . . . [but] probably dislike and distrust, tempered by a wary tolerance dictated by self-interest, were the dominant sentiments" on the part of both the Marines and the local populace.<sup>71</sup>

### *The Boys Next Door: The Combined Action Program*

Relationships between Marines and the villagers were most important in the Marine Corps Combined Action Program. While Chaplain McGonigal found attitudes among Combined Action (CAP) Marines more positive than troops in line units, still there was reason for concern even in this supposedly show-case pacification program. As McGonigal later stated, one of the problems of the CAPs was that you had "people with little maturity" and "we got a lot of shitbirds."<sup>72</sup>

During 1967, the program had expanded, but not without difficulty. One matter of concern was the lack of support from some infantry regimental or battalion commanders, who still retained operational control of the individual Combined Action Marines in their sectors. In February 1967, to provide more direct command influence over the program, Lieutenant General Walt, then the III MAF commander, assigned Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson as the Combined Action Company officer in a newly created billet in the G-3 section. Colorful and charismatic, but lacking formal command over the Combined Action Marines, Corson gave structure to the program. He established guidelines, formed a school at Da Nang, provided some initial screening of applicants, and obtained approval of a table of organization for the CAPs. By the end of May, Corson had formed a Combined Action Group headquarters at Da Nang with administrative responsibility over the various Combined Action Companies.<sup>73</sup>

In June 1967, after succeeding General Walt as Commanding General III MAF, General Cushman placed the Combined Action Program under his deputy, Major General Herman Nickerson, the former commander of the 1st Marine Division. As 1st Division commander at Da Nang, Nickerson was an enthu-



Department of Defense (USMC) A192361

*LtGen Herman Nickerson, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower at HQMC, on a visit to Vietnam, talks with South Vietnam Popular Force troops, part of CAP 1-3-5. The Combined Action Program was placed under Gen Nickerson when he was Deputy Commander, III MAF. Col Edward F. Danowitz, the Director, CAP (wearing glasses), is to the left and behind Gen Nickerson.*

siastic supporter of the Marine pacification program, including Combined Action. General Nickerson also knew Corson in that the latter “was my tank battalion commander . . . and did a magnificent job of relating to the people . . .” With confidence in Corson, Nickerson gave him a new title, III MAF Deputy Director for Combined Action, and delegated authority over the program to him. By July, Corson formed two new Combined Action Groups and III MAF distributed a formal standard operating procedure (SOP) that defined the structure, mission, and command relations of the program.\* Once and for all, III MAF assumed direct operational control of the CAPs with line units out of the chain of command, except for occasional combat support and coordination. The 1st CAG, based at Chu Lai, was responsible for Marine Combined Action operations in the southern two provinces,

Quang Tin and Quang Ngai. Similarly, the 2d CAG at Da Nang controlled the CAPs in Quang Nam Province, and the 3d CAG at Phu Bai, the CAPs in the two northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien.<sup>74</sup>

Command relations with the Vietnamese were a little more blurred. The Combined Action Marines did not have operational control of the Popular Force platoons with whom they worked. Instead the relationship was one of coordination and advice. Supposedly the South Vietnamese platoon leader answered to the local district chief, and it was the responsibility of the commanders of the CAGs and CACOs to coordinate with the South Vietnamese provincial and district officials relative to the CAPs. The Marine Combined Action platoon squad leader, in effect, was an advisor to the platoon leader. He could not command the South Vietnamese, but only offer suggestions and advice. Obviously, much depended upon the personal relationship between the individual Marines and the South Vietnamese Popular Force troops for the effectiveness of the program.

The finding of the ideal and idealistic Marines to run such a program would take some doing and by

\*Lieutenant Colonel Corson wrote that “the SOP was totally illegal in that only the CMC can create a new organization. However, with General Nickerson’s support we did it, no matter the legality.” He mentioned that the changes took off very quickly despite the protests of several regimental commanders. Corson Comments.



November, the program had floundered. Generals Walt and Nickerson, who had both strongly pushed the program, had left. In August, Corson also had departed and a few months later, very much disillusioned, wrote a bitter and biting indictment of American strategy in the war.\* His handpicked successor, Lieutenant Colonel Francis R. Hittinger, Jr., was killed by a mine explosion in the Da Nang area of operations. Instead of the 114 Cap units that were supposed to be in place at the end of the year, the Marines only had 79.<sup>75</sup>

According to Lieutenant Colonel Byron F. Brady, he met on Thanksgiving Day 1967 with Major General Raymond L. Murray, the new III MAF deputy commander, who offered him the position of III MAF Deputy Director for Combined Action.\*\* In contrast to the flamboyant Corson, the relatively staid Brady was more traditional in his approach. Joining the Marine Corps in 1938 as a private, he received a commission during World War II. Called back to active duty during Korea, Brady remained in the Corps as a career officer. While knowing very little about the Combined Action Program, Brady immediately began to read what was available about the concept. He was particularly impressed with Commander McGonigal's evalua-

tion of the program and the importance of the relationship between the Marines and the Vietnamese Popular Force troops and the villagers. Concerned about what he considered the degradation of the quality in the training of Marines now coming to Vietnam, Brady established as his first priority the recruiting of good men for the program.<sup>76</sup>

By this time the growing demands and limitations on Marine manpower would have its effect upon the Combined Action Program. An exchange of messages among the Commandant, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Lieutenant General Krulak at FMFPac, and General Cushman at III MAF highlighted this concern. As early as August 1967, General Krulak observed to the Commandant that he had directed General Cushman "to proceed with CAP activations out of his present resources to the extent possible, although realism prompts the conclusion that he may not be able to do much." As the year came to a close these manpower constraints became even tighter.<sup>77</sup>

Even more disconcerting for the Marine Corps was the possible loss of CORDS support for the program, specifically by Ambassador Komer. General Westmoreland always had some skepticism about the Combined Action Program. Although calling the concept "ingenious," he also wrote, "I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet . . . ." Apparently Komer had come to much the same opinion. While asking for an evaluation of the program by CORDS personnel at Da Nang, in early December 1967, Komer canceled a Combined Action briefing by Lieutenant Colonel Brady at an orientation course for Joint U.S. Public Affairs Officers. According to a MACV official at the session, CORDS had concluded that "the Combined Action Program is too expensive to continue." On 5 December, in a message to the Commandant, General Krulak recalled that in a conversation that he had with Komer "some time ago," the latter "spoke with enthusiasm about the idea but said because of its broad interface with civilian affairs, that the program probably ought to be under CORDS." The FMFPac commander believed that the whole matter was one of turf: "It could be, having met no success in the endeavor to take it over, that he [Komer] is now committed to abolishing the program."<sup>78</sup>

As would be expected, Ambassador Komer had a completely different recollection of the events than General Krulak. According to Komer several years later, he remembered that when he asked "Wally Greene and Krulak for more people for the CAPs, their answer was,

\*Corson's book *The Betrayal* was published in July 1968, although the draft was completed by April. Corson in his comments stated that he did not start writing until mid-March 1968. In the book, he condemned both the Johnson Administration and MACV, including Ambassador Komer and General Westmoreland, for their direction of the war and in particular for neglecting the "other war" or pacification. He praised, however, both Marine Generals Walt and Krulak for their efforts, and in particular, the Combined Action Program, although presenting an exaggerated and idealized version of the successes of the program. There was some talk about official reprimands and possible court-martial of Corson because he failed to submit the manuscript for review, according to Department of Defense regulations, prior to publication. It was decided that such a course of action would only give undue publicity to the book. In his comments, Corson stated that a copy of his unedited galley proofs was stolen from a safe in his office. He claimed that his application for retirement to the Secretary of the Navy was first approved then rescinded upon basis that he had violated some Department of Defense administrative rule. According to Corson, his lawyer obtained a writ for the Secretaries of the Navy and of Defense to show cause for the revocation of his retirement, and only after the matter had reached the President was the decision made in his favor. See LtCol William R. Corson file, Biog Files, RefSec, MCHC and Corson Comments. Corson dedicated the book "To the hearts and minds of the CAP Marines, both living and dead." See also LtCol William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1968).

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Brady noted that when he first took over the billet, he only loosely controlled the Combined Action Groups, but that it was "later established as a command billet . . ." LtCol Byron F. Brady, Comments on draft, dtd 30Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422186  
*Marine Cpl Gilbert J. Davis, a member of the CAP Mobile Training Team, trains two South Vietnamese Popular Force troops. MACV pressed III MAF to form Mobile Assistance Teams to supplement the Combined Action platoons.*

Bob we haven't enough people to keep our . . . Marine forces going—we are really people poor." The CORDS chief explained that the CAPs performed well, but the program demanded an "enormous requirement for American infantry which we did not have."<sup>79</sup>

In any event, on 7 January 1968, Ambassador Komer met with the new Marine Corps Commandant, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., who was in Saigon on an information gathering visit. In the meeting, Komer acknowledged that the Combined Action program had value and was proving effective, but that "it was very expensive in manpower . . . [and] is too slow a program to accomplish the pacification ends at an early date." He believed that the Marines should reduce the size of their squads in the hamlets to eight-man teams and experiment with more mobile techniques. Komer especially pushed the newly created MACV program of Mobile Assistance Teams consisting of a five-man team including an ARVN officer, an American officer, and three American veteran combat enlisted men that would move from one Popular Force platoon in a province to another, to teach basic infantry tactics to the Vietnamese militia. General Chapman

remained noncommittal, but promised "to monitor the program and insure that the maximum value is gained from the personnel committed."<sup>80</sup>

From a III MAF perspective, the Marines remained skeptical about the motives of MACV. Although the only true similarity between the MACV Mobile Assistance Teams and that of the CAPs was that they both worked with the Popular Forces, General Westmoreland would later insist that the MACV teams were an adaptation of the CAP concept.\* In April 1968, to ward off possible Saigon tampering with the program, General Cushman and Lieutenant Colonel Brady eventually established Mobile Training Teams (MTT) in the CAP program. These teams, which consisted of regular Combined Action Marine squads, were assigned to a non-CAP Popular Forces platoon for about a two-week period, and would provide a crash-training course in infantry tactics. The teams would then move on to another such Popular Force platoon in the same province and repeat the process. Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, would later state that it was the III MAF belief that Komer wanted to "absorb the CAPs into the RF/PF structure . . . controlled by CORDS," but that General Cushman "resisted this, and he felt that by coming up with some new idea . . . he would get more mileage out of the CAP program and forestall any attempt on the part of Komer and other people at MACV to destroy the CAP program." Ambassador Komer, nevertheless, would later contend, "I was a big fan of the CAPs."<sup>81</sup>

On 30 January 1968, just before Tet, III MAF submitted a revised Table of Organization for the Combined Action Program to reflect the actual command structure. The old tables still retained the authority of the individual battalion and division commanders over the Combined Action Companies. General Cushman objected and declared that since June 1967, control resided with the respective Combined Action Groups. With the redeployment of 1st Marine Division infantry battalions to Phu Bai from Da Nang, the situation in both sectors had become fluid. New units in new TAORs were unfamiliar with the Combined Action Marines, and III MAF worried that the CAPs were vulnerable to enemy attack. Cushman wrote in a letter to General Chapman that, because of the need for close coordination and liaison with the South Vietnamese authorities relative to the CAPs, there was a

\*In his comments, Lieutenant General Krulak called the Mobile Assistance Team concept "worthless." Krulak Comments.



Photo courtesy of Igor Bobrowsky

*Members of CAP Delta-1 are on patrol near the hamlet of Thanh Quit south of Da Nang. One CAP member, Igor Bobrowsky, remembered that prior to Tet the local populace began "making coffins."*

need for "unity of command" on the Marine side. He continued that, with the "increased mobility of infantry units, it is impractical for the infantry unit commander to effect continued and close liaison with Vietnamese officials." This had to be handled through the Combined Action structure itself, pointing out for example, that the 3d CAG at Phu Bai had units in both the 1st and 3d Marine Division area of operations. Earlier, in a telephone conversation with FMFPac, General Cushman observed that he was conducting a study to find the best way to use the CAPs.<sup>82</sup>

The Tet offensive, however, in January and February 1968, would have more effect upon the changes made in the Combined Action program than the jurisdictional battles with CORDS and MACV and out of date tables of organization. Even before Tet, there were strong indications that things were different. Combined Action Platoons, both near Da Nang and Phu Loc, increasingly came under attack.\* One CAP Marine, Igor Bobrowsky, assigned to one of the ham-

lets of Thanh Quit below Da Nang, remembered, "it was just that the intensity of what was going on kept on increasing, increasing, increasing." He observed the contacts with the VC became "increasingly more frequent and stronger ripples turning into waves around us . . . ." Sources of intelligence had dried up but in a macabre way villagers provided an indication that something big was about to occur: "As we'd walk through some place, people were making coffins." Bobrowsky recalled thinking: "Who died? Was . . . there a plague?" The people "were just getting a jump start on the burials to come . . .," but before the Marines realized the import of the situation, "the shit hit the fan, but it wasn't . . . all at once. It was just that suddenly we found ourselves totally isolated . . ."<sup>83</sup>

In any event according to a Department of Defense analysis, from 1 November 1967 through 31 January 1968, nearly half or 49 percent of enemy initiated attacks in I Corps occurred against the CAPs. In February the percentage dropped to 38 percent. According to the report, "It is significant that this period of high activity against the CAPs coincides with the buildup and attack phases of the Tet offensive."<sup>84</sup>

\*See Chapters 6, 7, and 8 for description of the attacks on the CAPs during this period and during Tet.

After the heavy fighting during and after Tet had died down, III MAF reexamined the entire Combined Action structure. Colonel Harold L. Oppenheimer, a Marine reservist on active duty, who was on special assignment to III MAF, prepared a study on the program for General Cushman. Oppenheimer basically called for more centralization of the Combined Action command organization and the consolidation of units into more defensible units.<sup>85</sup>

More importantly, however, Lieutenant Colonel Brady, the III MAF Deputy Director for Combined Action, completed his own report on the program. While aware of Oppenheimer's study, he depended more upon the initiatives of his CAG commanders, especially the 3d CAG commander at Phu Bai, Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Keller. Since the fall of 1967, Keller had advocated less of a "fortified village" concept for the CAP defenses and more of a combat capability based upon night patrols and ambushes. After the overrunning of CAPs Hotel 5, 6, and 7\* in the Phu Loc sector in January, Keller decided to reform these units into mobile CAPs. While assigned to a general village sector consisting of several hamlets, the mobile CAP had no specific base, but moved from hamlet to hamlet. According to Brady, the restructured CAPs had some success "in combat situations." He talked the concept over with Keller and then made a personal staff study.<sup>86</sup>

From his analysis of the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Brady noted that the preliminary evidence would indicate that the mobile CAPs sustained fewer casualties in relation to VC KIA than the CAPs in fixed positions. Still Brady noted that both types of Combined Action units had their advantages. The Compound CAPs were better geared to provide civic action and to obtain intelligence from the villagers. On the other hand, the mobile CAPs formed better relations with their Vietnamese Regional Force and Popular Force counterparts since they were "both living at the same level." At this point, Brady suggested that when III MAF form new Mobile CAPs that they be in the same vicinity of a compound CAP. According to Brady, this would insure that there would be a safe haven for the mobile units. In June, General Cushman concurred with Brady's recommendations.<sup>87</sup>

Following Tet, there were other changes in the Combined Action Program besides the establishment of the Mobile CAPs and the Mobile Training Teams. In April, III MAF changed the designations of all of the

CAPs to numbers. Until that time, the Combined Action Platoons had been identified by a combination of letters and numbers. All of the Combined Action Companies carried letter identifiers, similar to infantry and artillery companies and batteries. The platoons then carried the letter plus a number. For example, the Combined Action Company at Phu Loc was CACO H or Hotel and the individual platoons under the control of CACO H were known as H or Hotel 1 through 8. This made for some confusion as there was no systematic way to identify which platoon or company belonged to a specific Combined Action Group. Under the new system, the Combined Action Companies took the number of the CAG they belonged to while the platoons in turn took the numbers of both the CAG and CACO plus an additional number. For example, CAP 3-2-1 would stand for the 1st Combined Action platoon, of the 2d Combined Action Company, of the 3d Combined Action Group.<sup>88</sup>

Concerned about the results of a survey of CAP Marines following Tet by Lieutenant Commander McGonigal that several experienced a sense of betrayal on the part of the PFs and some of the villagers for not warning them, Lieutenant Colonel Brady continued with both the efforts to systemize the program and to raise the standards for Marines to enter the Combined Action platoons. On 18 April, III MAF issued a Force Bulletin outlining the Combined Action Program and urging "commanders to actively recruit highly qualified personnel as volunteers for duty with the Combined Action Program." It remarked upon the need that every member of a CAP "must be a potential leader, who through professional capability, personal example, courage and dedication can foster the respect of Vietnamese Nationals and lead small unit combined forces in combat." Signed by Major General William J. Van Ryzin, who had relieved General Murray as III MAF deputy commander, the bulletin "requested that command interest be directed towards the recruiting of volunteers and the final selection of personnel . . ." It ended on the high note that the "recruiting of one highly qualified individual is repaid at least three fold in terms of military combat potential alone . . ."<sup>89</sup>

In June, III MAF followed up the bulletin with a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the Combined Action Program. While canceling the SOP of the previous year, it reconfirmed many of the basic tenets of the Combined Action Program. It continued the integration of a Marine squad plus a corpsman with the Popular Forces platoon and the command structure through III MAF exercised by the Director, Combined

\*See Chapter 6 for a description of the fighting in Hotel 6.

Action Program, and the Combined Action Groups. Again, the new SOP emphasized that the command relationship between the Marines and the PFs was on a “coordination and cooperation basis. The USMC squad leader does not command the PF element of the platoon, nor does the PF platoon leader command the Marines.” While the new SOP did not stipulate that new Combined Action platoons should be mobile, it emphasized that the “CAP compound is to be an administrative and logistical headquarters for the platoon and is not meant to be a citadel.”<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the new order was the codification of the standards for CAP volunteers. These were divided into two groups—one for lance corporals and below and the other for non-commissioned officers. For regular enlisted men, the criteria included a minimum of six months remaining on their current tour in Vietnam; to be true volunteers “and motivated to live and work with the Vietnamese people”; to be recommended by their commanding officer and to be a “mature, motivated Marine”; to have had “no non-judicial punishment within the past three months”; and to have had no court-martials during the past year. The selection process preferred high school graduates and those with an infantry military occupational specialty. It limited volunteers to those Marines who had less than two Purple Hearts on their current Vietnam tour. Noncommissioned officers were not only to meet the above standards but in addition were to have had combat experience, “demonstrated a high quality of leadership,” and to be deemed “highly qualified for promotion.” While waivers were permitted for “highly motivated” personnel recommended “with enthusiasm,” these personnel still had to appear before the CAP screening board before any waiver would be granted. All commanders were to maintain rosters of qualified personnel for Combined Action and were to fill quotas for the program from that list. Although not specifically specified in the SOP, it would be assumed that all volunteers had to be approved by the Screening Board.<sup>91</sup>

With the restructuring of the Combined Action Program, there was also a growth in the number of Combined Action platoons and groups. From 79 platoons in January, the number increased to 85 in May, and reached 93 in July. On 20 July, III MAF activated the 4th Combined Action Group in Quang Tri Province. By the end of the month with four CAGs, the Marines assigned to the program totaled 38 officers and 1,913 enlisted men, not including 104 Navy corpsmen with the platoons.<sup>92</sup>

The establishment of the 4th CAG in Quang Tri was not a unanimous decision. Colonel Richard B. Smith, who commanded the 9th Marines until 13 July, objected to the establishment of CAP units in the DMZ sector. Colonel Alexander L. Michaux, who had also just completed his tour as the 3d Marine Division G-3, had his doubts, declaring “we don’t have too much use for the CAPs.”\* Despite these reservations, the 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Davis, believed the Combined Action concept could contribute to the pacification effort in his sector.<sup>93</sup>

With the support of the 3d Division commander, III MAF transferred Lieutenant Colonel John E. Greenwood, Jr., from command of the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, to take over the new CAG. On 9 August, the 4th CAG commander submitted a plan that called for the establishment of one new Combined Action Company and six new Combined Action platoons. While III MAF approved the request except for one platoon, there was a delay of several weeks until the South Vietnamese gave their consent. Finally on 30 September, Lieutenant Colonel Brady informed Greenwood that General Lam concurred. In the interim, the 4th CAG commander took advantage of this interval to organize the new volunteers into platoons and provide them with training. While the delay caused some inconvenience, it resulted, according to Greenwood, in the Marines being better prepared for their assignment. By the end of October, with the activation of the new units, the 4th CAG consisted of three companies, 12 Combined Action platoons, and 2 mobile training platoons. Of the 12 CAPS in Quang Tri, 8 were mobile.<sup>94</sup>

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\*Colonel Robert J. Keller, who commanded the 3d CAG in 1968, recalled that he earlier briefed General Krulak, CGFMFPac, and recommended that a 4th CAG be formed which would take over responsibility for the area north of Hue including those CAPs in Quang Tri Province. While General Krulak, according to Keller, appeared enthusiastic, the Army’s 1st Air Cavalry Division “did not agree and preferred that Marines not operate in their TAOR.” Keller also remembered that Colonels Michaux’ and Smith’s objections were “longstanding” and that he was well aware of them. He believed the two officers failed “to recognize the fighting [qualities] as well as pacification aspects of the CAPs.” Col Robert J. Keller, Comments on draft, dtd 2Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Both Colonel Smith and Michaux reiterated their doubts about the Combined Action Program in their comments. Colonel Michaux wrote, “I can empathize with those Marines involved in the Pacification Program. However, from the standpoint of the one with the combat units, the two programs [the war against the regular NVA units in the DMZ sector and CAP] appear contradictory.” Col Alexander L. Michaux, Comments on draft, dtd 4Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See Chapter 7 for Smith’s objections to the CAPs.

## COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM EXPANSION-1967-1968

### 1ST CAG

UNITS	1967	1968
Group HQ	1	1
Company HQ	3	3
Platoons	15	21
Mobile Training Teams	-	2
STRENGTHS		
USMC	213	364
USN	19	34
RVN	334	664

### 2D CAG

UNITS	1967	1968
Group HQ	1	1
Company HQ	7	8
Platoons	40	38
Mobile Training Teams	-	1
STRENGTHS		
USMC	633	571
USN	42	41
RVN	1,070	1,043

### 3D CAG

UNITS	1967	1968
Group HQ	1	1
Company HQ	2	5
Platoons	15	31
Mobile Training Teams	-	2
STRENGTHS		
USMC	296	546
USN	18	28
RVN	378	809

### 4TH CAG

UNITS	1967	1968
Group HQ	-	1
Company HQ	2*	3
Platoons	9*	12
Mobile Training Teams	-	2
STRENGTHS		
USMC	123	282
USN	9	19
RVN	229	540

\* Includes three CAPs and one company headquarters deactivated at Khe Sanh.

By December, the four Combined Action Groups together totaled 19 Combined Action Companies, 102 Combined Action Platoons, and 7 Mobile Training Teams. During the course of the year, III MAF had activated one Combined Action Group, six companies, 28 Combined Action platoons, and all seven of the Mobile Training Teams. At the same time, one company and five CAPs had been deactivated. According to FMFPac, the number of Marines assigned to the program had increased by nearly 500 over 1967, from 1,265 in December 1967 to 1,763 in December 1968. Almost all of the 28 new CAPs were mobile rather than fixed and a large percentage of the compound CAPs were to be transformed into mobile ones. For example, according to the 2d CAG at Da Nang, 75 percent of its CAPs were eventually to become mobile. By the end of December, 13 of its 39 CAPs, or about 37 percent, were already in the mobile status.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the growth and expansion of the Combined Action Program, many questions remained unresolved. MACV, CORDS, and even some of the Army units in I Corps still kept the Combined Action Program at arm's length. While individual CORDS provincial and district officials looked sympathetically on the program, a III MAF staff officer in a briefing for General Walt, the Assistant Commandant, referred to the CAP concept as an "I Corps exclusive." In personal letters, Brigadier General Anderson, the III MAF Chief of Staff, wrote that U.S. Army Lieutenant General Richard G. Stilwell, the XXIV Commander in northern I Corps, had been "very vociferous to his staff with respect to the CAP Program . . . [and later] voiced strong objections to having them [Combined Action Platoons] placed along the LOCs [lines of communication]." Because of that attitude, III MAF decided not to activate several CAP units between Hue and Quang Tri. According to Anderson, General Cushman agreed since he believed "to put them in an area where they're not wanted, especially when you have to rely on the U.S. unit in the area for supporting fires and reinforcement when under ground attack, would not be wise and that we can better use them elsewhere." The III MAF commander several years later observed, "we had

a basic philosophical difference with the Army on it [Combined Action]. We kept on with it."<sup>96\*</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Brady, the Combined Action Director, declared that as far as he was concerned, the relationship with both MACV and CORDS was "very poor." He later related the frustration that he experienced in attempting to ensure a coordinated U.S. pacification effort in the countryside. Brady had convinced General Cushman in July, as the Senior U.S. Advisor to I Corps and General Lam, to issue an order that called upon each of the Corps province senior advisors to chair a monthly conference for that purpose. At the conference would be representatives of CORDS, military advisors, and III MAF units including Army units attached to the Marine command, and the Combined Action Group commander. The province senior advisor would then forward through all three channels—CORDS, advisory, and III MAF—a "conference report (to include minority opinions on items of controversy) to CG III MAF." Upon the strong objection, however, of the senior CORDS official, III MAF canceled the order and issued a new one. The new order only stipulated that "province senior advisors may at their discretion convene combined meetings of appropriate military and civilian personnel to discuss and coordinate pacification within their respective provinces." No specific mention was made of the Combined Action Group commander.<sup>97\*\*</sup>

Even in I Corps, the effectiveness of many of the reforms, especially that of screening and training of new volunteers, remains a matter of conjecture. Despite questionnaires, Combined Action Schools, and screening boards, much depended upon circumstances and events. The questionnaires consisted of little more than 20 questions which largely dealt with the volunteer's attitudes. While statistical data remains elusive, anecdotal evidence in the form of oral history interviews would imply that both the initial screening and training of Marines for the program was often haphazard. Lieutenant Colonel Brady, for example, remembered that the school at Da Nang could last anywhere from two weeks to two months, "depending on personnel requirements in the field." Igor Bobrowsky recalled only very vaguely receiving any indoctrination training, but later wrote "there *was* a 'school' at 2d

\*According to General Anderson, there was a difference of attitude among Army units in I Corps towards the Combined Action Program. For example, he wrote that the 1st Air Cavalry Division had "no use for the CAPs" while he had heard that the "101st Airborne Division thinks quite highly of the CAPs and will take any that they can get." BGen E. E. Anderson ltr to LtGen W. J. Van Ryzin, dtd 11Sep68, Encl, E. E. Anderson Comments. Throughout this period, Combined Action Platoons remained assigned in the U.S. Army Americal Division area of operations.

\*\*General Earl E. Anderson, who as the III MAF chief of staff, believed that the problem with CORDS extended beyond I Corps. In a contemporary letter, he wrote: "We still have problems with Komer in Saigon. He is adamant about the CAP Program and wants it placed under the CORDS advisory effort." BGen E. E. Anderson to LtGen W. J. Van Ryzin, dtd 16Oct68, Encl, E. E. Anderson Comments.

CAG. It *did* give instructions on everything from Vietnamese culture to small unit tactics, ambushes, recon, artillery, communications . . . I did not participate in any of it to any extent.”<sup>98</sup>

The selection process was also different for various Marines. Bobrowsky, for example, stated he had little choice and was selected for the program by his company commander. He recollected that his captain told him that it would only be a 30-day assignment, and perhaps was the reason he did not go to the CAG school. It was, however, a permanent transfer. The captain later wrote Bobrowsky, explaining, “I had to pick someone who I felt was . . . a responsible person who knew how to . . . work a small unit . . .” Bobrowsky’s commanding officer, at least, made an attempt to send good men to the CAPs rather than “stick em with anybody.”<sup>99</sup>

This was not always the case. Eugene H. Ferguson, an 18-year old corporal and high school dropout, after completing a Vietnamese language course in the United States, arrived in Vietnam in early 1968. Despite his language capability, Ferguson was assigned directly to a Marine infantry line battalion. Outside of being used to check on the veracity of the Kit Carson Scout with his unit, Ferguson functioned like any newly assigned Marine squad leader. About a month after Ferguson was in-country, the North Vietnamese ambushed his squad which was on a “Sparrow Hawk” mission to assist another Marine unit. Except for his radioman, Ferguson lost all of his squad, either dead or wounded, in the clash. Although physically unscathed, Ferguson went into a deep depression: “I just couldn’t seem to get into the hang of what everybody else was doing.” At that point, Ferguson recalled his company commander called him in and asked, “If I wanted to go into CAG. I didn’t know what it was or where it was or who was doing what and I said ‘sure.’ I need to get out of here.” Ferguson suspected “they [his unit leaders] were anticipating trouble from me and shipped me out to CAG.” After a two-week familiarization course at the 3d CAG School at Phu Bai in April, the young corporal became a member of a Combined Action platoon.<sup>100</sup>

The only thing that can be said of both the Bobrowsky and Ferguson cases were that they illustrated the variegated backgrounds and motives for entering the CAP Marines. Bobrowsky was the son of immigrant Ukrainian parents and was born in a repatriation camp in Europe after World War II with ambitions to attain a commission. Ferguson was the son of a retired 20-year Navy veteran and enlisted in the Marine Corps because his father hated Marines.



Photo courtesy of Col Edward F. Danowitz, USMC (Ret)  
*Col Edward F. Danowitz, Director, III MAF Combined Action Program, presents a certificate and an award (a pair of Marine combat boots) to the outstanding Popular Force graduate of the Combined Action school at the Combined Action Group headquarters. Col Danowitz assumed command of the program in October 1968.*

Sergeant Andrew Lewandowski, a career Marine with a Japanese wife and a veteran of the Khe Sanh siege, volunteered for the CAPs in October, 1968, because he claimed he wanted to help the people. At the same time, he admitted he was having difficulties with both his platoon lieutenant and sergeant. If there was one common factor that all three commented upon in their initial screening process was their attitude towards the Vietnamese people. Lewandowski remembered appearing before a CAP screening board headed by Colonel Edward F. Danowitz, who, in October, had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Brady as Director of the Combined Action program.\* To put the Marine sergeant at ease, Danowitz spoke a few phrases in Polish to Lewandowski.

\*Colonel Danowitz commented that upon his arrival at III MAF on 1 October, General Cushman assigned him as the Director of the Combined Action Program, stating “he wished to have a senior colonel at that post, citing his support for the program and wishing to get better cooperation from the Vietnamese, particularly General Lam.” According to Danowitz, Cushman and Lam agreed to weekly meetings “to coordinate the program.” Colonel Danowitz believed this was a good idea, “but was never fully implemented. My counterpart seldom appeared for scheduled meetings and passed on problems to other officers for resolution. . . . [where there should have been] cooperation and coordination there was little or none.” Danowitz remained as the CAP Director until April 1969, when he assumed command of a Marine regiment. Col Edward F. Danowitz, Comments on draft, dtd 27Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Danowitz Comments.



ki after he learned that the latter understood the language. The concern, however, of the board, according to Lewandowski was his feeling toward Orientals in general and the Vietnamese in particular.<sup>101</sup>

A former CAP Marine, Edward F. Palm, who retained serious reservations about the entire program, observed that in his perfunctory interview in July 1967, the concern of the interviewer was his attitude towards the Vietnamese. Unlike the three previous CAP members listed above, Palm had no combat experience. He had served his first six months in Vietnam as a supply clerk in what he described as a "prosaic, humdrum routine." To break loose from this stultifying job, Palm volunteered for the Combined Action Program. The only qualification for the program, according to Palm, "was the enthusiastic recommendation of my commanding officer, who was probably only too glad to get a disaffected and unmotivated supply clerk off his roles." Like Ferguson, Palm attended the 3d CAG School for a brief two-week period and learned some fundamentals of squad tactics and how to call in artillery. The exposure to both the Vietnamese language and the society's mores was rudimentary at best.<sup>102</sup>

The Combined Action mission was a daunting one for even the most motivated of Marines, and especially for young Marines. With the best of intentions, the Combined Action schools could only provide a modicum of knowledge about South Vietnamese customs, let alone language training. Even ideal CAPs outlined by Chaplain McGonigal in his interim report would have had difficulties adjusting to the conditions of an alien society at war with itself in the countryside. Lieutenant Colonel Brady half seriously stated that the qualification for a good CAP leader was a "tough Marine sergeant, who has a PhD in social anthropology." Obviously the young Marine lance corporals, cor-

porals, and sergeants hardly met that criteria.<sup>103\*</sup>

How well did these young Marines do then in bridging the gap between them and the villagers and the PFs? Again there is no hard evidence except for the anecdotal. Citing the example in his own CAP, Edward Palm later wrote: "The cultural gulf was just unbridgeable out in the countryside." He observed "our PFs eventually refused to patrol with us [and] I never really knew any of the PFs I worked and lived with." On the other hand, another young CAP, James DuGuid, recalled that when, in December 1967, told that he was going home, he replied "but I am home." According to DuGuid, "I felt more love from those people in my village than I had ever prior to Vietnam. I took that back with me."<sup>104\*\*</sup>

Other Marines had different experiences. According to Bobrowsky, his exposure to the village helped him to understand the complexity of the Vietnamese countryside. As a Marine in a line unit, he was only interested if the villagers were hostile or not, otherwise they were neutral. As a CAP Marine, he came to understand that there were all kinds of interrelationships that extended from family to village. While on relatively friendly terms with the villagers, the members of his CAP knew they were outsiders. Bobrowsky tells about his patrol sometime after Tet 1968 coming upon an old woman burying two North Vietnamese soldiers. Half-jokingly, Bobrowsky asked the woman if she would do the same for them. The woman laughed and pointed to the PFs with the Marines and said she would bury them, but "No, the Americans I'd just have to throw them in the river."<sup>105</sup>

\*Arliss Willhite, who served in the same CAP unit as DuGuid, wrote that he "felt a real kinship to the people and a loyalty to my ville. I lived in Ngoc Ngot for 15 months. Longer than I had lived at a single location in my life. . . . To me CAP was Vietnamization in reverse. . . . I didn't let anybody mess with the people, steal chickens, burn hootches or shoot at Buffalo. I'm still more Vietnamese than American. I was watching out for the people on my block." Willhite stated that he was not typical of most of the Marines in his hamlet. He recalled that he was teased by some of his comrades, asking him if he was "going to start voting?" Arliss Willhite, Comments on draft, dtd 28Sep94 (Vietnam Comment File). Former Sergeant John J. Balanco was another CAP Marine who identified very closely with the local population, in his case the Bru tribesmen that he served with in CAP Oscar in Khe Sanh village. Recalling in his memoirs the fate of the Bru refugees including the CAP members who were denied entry into the American base at Khe Sanh, Balanco wrote: "These were the people we were fighting with and for. Now we were abandoning them? It gave me an outraged and hopeless feeling that has never left my heart or soul." John J. Balanco, "Abandoned, Reflections of a Khe Sanh Vet," ms, Encl, Balanco, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). See Chapter 14 for the description of the overrunning of Khe Sanh village and the aftermath.

\*As a former Marine officer, now an Army historian, Charles R. Anderson, observed, "all Marines in the infantry were ill-prepared to serve in CAP, since their training before arrival in Vietnam was combat-oriented." Charles R. Anderson, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 1994] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Danowitz stated that he insisted on obtaining the best available men. He noted that when he took over in October 1968, that he was unimpressed with the "volunteers" being sent from both the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions. He stated that he had good relations with both division commanders and "immediately, the word went out to the regiments and a board was formed at each headquarters where the G-1 'culled' men sent in from the field and only the better ones came to our final selection board." While acknowledging that some "misfits" slipped through the selection process, he noted a decided improvement in the quality of the Marines in the program. Danowitz Comments.

In remarking about the quality of the Marines in his CAP and their qualifications, Bobrowsky remarked that about half had probably been “pressganged” into the unit much the same way he had. At the same time, they worked well together and “I saw them as being guys who knew what they were doing.” Most of the Marines had little language training, but had picked up “rudimentary Vietnamese and fortunately, the Vietnamese picked up a lot more rudimentary English.” Ferguson, who was fluent in Vietnamese, stated that the situation was similar in the CAP platoons that he served in. He estimated that about 50 percent of the Marines in his first platoon were qualified for their role, while the other “fifty percent were just trying to get away from a bad situation they were in before.” One of the Marines in Bobrowsky’s platoon, Lance Corporal Tom Harvey, was an exception to the above. Somewhat older than the other CAP Marines, a college graduate and a civil engineer, Harvey had enlisted in the Marines rather than be drafted into the Army. After serving in an engineer battalion, he volunteered for the CAPs. Having some facility with languages, Harvey had taught himself rudimentary Vietnamese.<sup>106</sup>

Despite anomalies like Harvey, Ferguson, and DuGuid, who had some degree of fluency, most CAP Marines had relatively little Vietnamese language skills. As a former South Vietnamese officer, Lam Ha, who served as a liaison officer with the CAPs, later wrote, the “language barrier was a vital problem” with the program. Without being able to converse with the people or the PFs, it was almost next to impossible for the Marines to have anything but a superficial knowledge of the people they were to protect.<sup>107\*</sup>

Notwithstanding all of these obstacles, there was some statistical evidence that the CAPs were effective. Although based upon American military reports and the hamlet evaluation system, these analyses were completed at the MACV and at the DOD levels, two agencies which at best had shown only lukewarm support for the program. According to periodic reports from January through November 1968, prepared by the Southeast Asia Office of the Assistant Secretary of

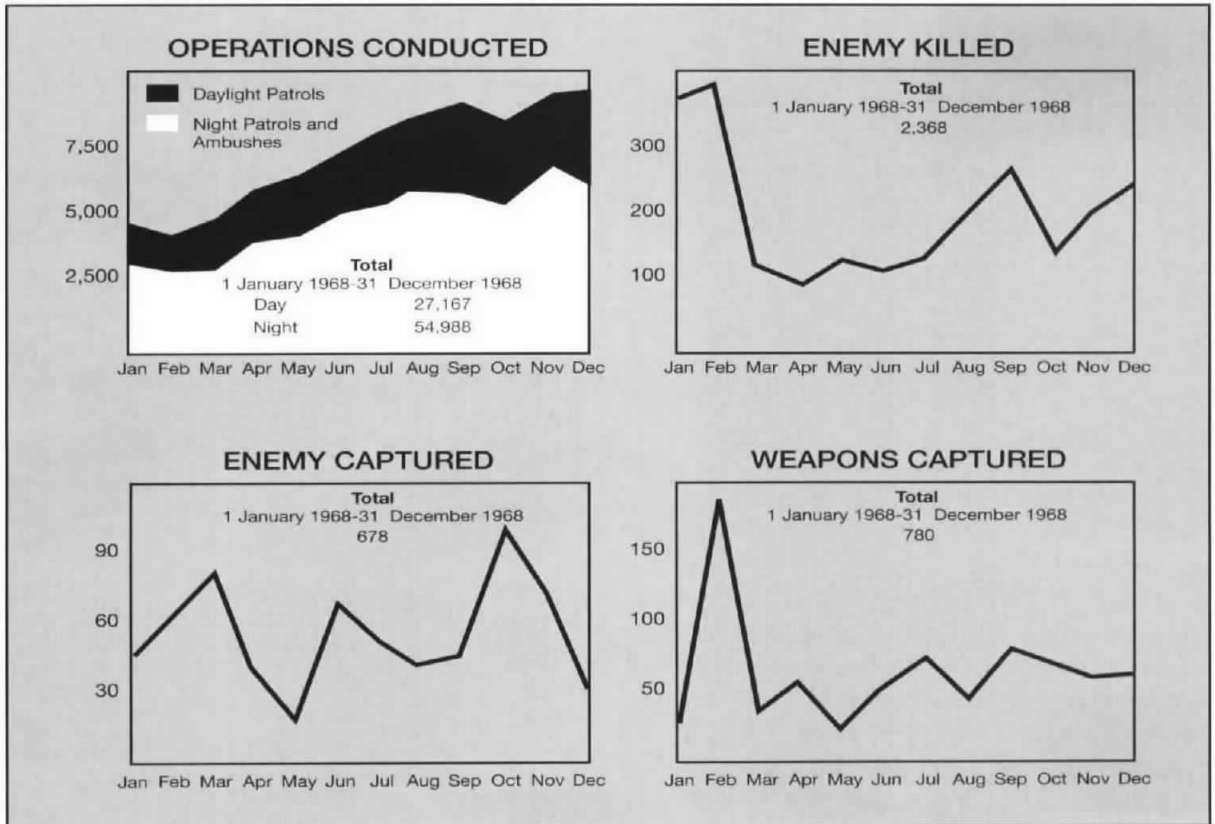
Defense for System Analysis, hamlets with Combined Action platoons assigned to them showed that they fared markedly better during and after the enemy’s Tet offensive than hamlets without them. According to the HES ratings, there was about a 30 percent difference between the security ratings of the CAP hamlets and those without the platoons after Tet. In their November report, the DOD analysts concluded that “the CAP concept may provide a useful way to upgrade security in the short run and to ensure that application of massive allied firepower does not hurt pacification efforts.”<sup>108</sup>

Still, many questions remained. One was the transformation from the stationary or compound CAP to the mobile CAPs. Some former Combined Action Marines including Lieutenant Colonel Corson criticized the change as altering the entire concept of the program. They suggested that instead of providing protection for the hamlets, the CAPs in effect became guerrillas themselves. In their view, the CAPs “had to maintain a demonstrably visible presence in commitment to the hamlet. It had to be an *alternative* to the guerrilla, as well as a tactic *against* the guerrilla.” Others rejected that argument, stating that the compounds were usually outside of the hamlets and, moreover, they were sitting targets for the VC and NVA. Almost all of the Marines agreed that going to the mobile concept probably resulted in fewer casualties. Tom Harvey, who served in both, later wrote: “I think nearly everyone interested in the matter now recognized the advantages of the mobile CAP as opposed to those bound to fixed bases or compounds.” Taking a middle ground, Michael Peterson argued that there was room for the two different approaches depending on the area. During 1968, both continued to coexist.<sup>109</sup>

In their November 1968 report, while in general praising the Combined Action Program, the DOD analysts also pointed out some of the basic weaknesses of the program. Although not accepting the Komer and Westmoreland argument that one needed to place a Combined Action platoon in every hamlet in Vietnam, the analysts showed that the Marines had not met even their more modest goals. Two of the original objectives of the Combined Action program in 1968 were to obtain three effective Popular Force members for every Marine and to improve the PFs to the extent where the Marines could begin to phase out of the program. According to the DOD report, in November 1968 there was a ratio of 1.4 PFs per Marine and that the prevailing trend was downwards. Even more to the point, the Marines were taking about twice the num-

\* Lieutenant Colonel Brady, the CAP Director until October 1968 wrote that “Because of the importance of cross cultural communication an ongoing language program was instituted in mid-1968.” Brady Comments. Each CAP Marine was also provided with a phrase book “designed primarily for use in the Combined Action Program.” It contained such phrases such as “100% alert tonight . . .” to make immediate contact with the PF members of the CAP. The book was also designed for independent study of both English and Vietnamese by the Marines and the Vietnamese. *Vietnamese/English Phrase Book*, n.d., Encl, Brady Comments.

### COMBINED ACTION UNIT ACTIVITY



From Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam 1968.

ber of casualties as the PFs. Moreover, the report concluded, “in over three years of operations no evidence exists that U.S. Marines have been able to withdraw from a CAP solely because their Vietnamese counterparts were able to take over.”<sup>110\*</sup>

How successful were the CAPs? Much depended on the effectiveness of the individual CAP. To a large extent, most improved the security within the hamlets and the village. Some even won the begrudging loyalty and perhaps even affection of the villagers. But few were able to attain the loyalty of the people to the Government of South Vietnam. When asked about the relationship between his Combined Action unit and villagers, on one hand, and with the South Vietnamese authorities, on the other, Igor Bobrowsky answered, “the fewer the better.” Michael Peterson remarked upon the unique elan of the CAPs “although it was a maverick, gone-bam-

boo, anti-brass, kind of spirit.” Lawrence A. Yates wrote in his analysis of the program: “There were good and bad, successful and unsuccessful CAP platoons. Accomplishments varied depending on such factors as time, place and personnel, not to mention a host of other variables that were beyond the control of the CAP Marines.”<sup>111</sup>

One former Defense Analyst, Francis J. “Bing” West, the author of several studies on CAP, wrote that in his opinion the “essential problem” with the program was the “lack of a warfighting strategy” at both MACV and III MAF:

Without a strategy, there was no yardstick for measuring the amount of resources dedicated to Mission X vs Mission Y. So the CAP was seen as a drain of Marine manpower. It, in fact, saved manpower.

He believed that the Marine TAORs should have consisted of “overlapping CAP patrol areas” with the Marine regular battalions making up a central reserve. Instead, according to West, “the CAP was treated as an interesting tactical study in sociology; its strategic cost-effectiveness was overlooked both by III MAF and by MACV.”<sup>112</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Brady took exception to the assertion that the CAPs had not succeeded in turning over any hamlets to the RFs. He stated that in the five CAP units that were deactivated during the year, the Marines were “reassigned to other CAPs leaving trained PFs on their own.” Brady Comments.

### *The Accelerated Pacification Plan*

With the petering out of the last phase of the enemy "Tet" offensive from August into October, the allies began to take the offensive in pacification operations. Claiming that they had reached the goals of Operation Recovery, MACV, CORDS, and the South Vietnamese inaugurated a new campaign, called *Le Loi* in Vietnamese and the Acceleration Pacification Campaign in English. The campaign was to last from November through January 1969. Country-wide it had five objectives: to upgrade at least 1,000 contested villages to relatively secure ratings on the Hamlet Evaluation Scale; to disrupt the Viet Cong command and control system by identifying and capturing if possible 3,000 members of the infrastructure for the next three months; to set a goal of 5,000 Hoi Chanh a month under the Chieu Hoi Program; to continue the organization and arming of the South Vietnamese Self Defense units; and finally to mount a propaganda campaign to the effect that the Government of Vietnam "has seized the initiative and is moving rapidly toward the end of the war." Each Corps area was given its quota in this multi-faceted effort.<sup>113</sup>

By the end of the year, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was in high gear in I Corps. Both the 1st Marine and 3d Marine Divisions as well as the Army and ARVN regular units had launched supporting operations using cordon and County Fair techniques to eradicate both enemy regular units and the guerrilla

infrastructure in their assigned areas.\* In each of the categories of the campaign, the allies had made substantial progress. During November and December, the allied forces had entered all of the 140 hamlets targeted in I Corps. According to Marine Corps measurements the number of government controlled hamlets had risen from 47 on 31 October to 116 on 31 December. A corresponding decrease had occurred both in contested and Viet Cong-controlled hamlets. By 31 December, the number of contested hamlets fell from 73 on 31 October to 46 on 31 December while Viet Cong-controlled hamlets fell from 48 on 31 October to six on 31 December. In other categories of the campaign in I Corps similar progress was shown. For the year, 3,118 former VC had come over to the government side as Hoi Chanh, 4,000 VC infrastructure were "neutralized" under the Phoenix program, close to 225,000 civilians were organized in Peoples Self Defense Organization, and nearly 70 percent of the population of I Corps lived in what was considered secure areas. Enemy-initiated attacks in December fell to the lowest level in over two years. In an obvious change of strategy, probably because of the heavy casualty rate suffered in their various offensives, the Communists reverted to a low-level war. Despite this seeming progress and some guarded optimism on the part of the allies, the enemy remained a formidable foe.<sup>114</sup>

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\*See Chapters 21 and 22 and especially the description of Operation Meade River in Chapter 21.

## Outside of III MAF: The Special Landing Forces, Marine Advisors, and Others

*The 9th MAB and the SLFs—Sub-Unit 1, 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO)  
Embassy Marines—Individual Marines in Saigon and Elsewhere in Vietnam—Advisors to the Vietnamese Marine Corps*

### *The 9th MAB and the SLFs*

In January 1968, Brigadier General Jacob E. Glick commanded the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, the Fleet Marine Force component of the Seventh Fleet, with its headquarters on Okinawa which controlled all Marine forces in the Western Pacific outside of Hawaii and Vietnam. At this time, the MAB contained nearly 8,000 men with nearly half assigned to the two Seventh Fleet Special Landing Forces (SLF) Alpha and Bravo.\* The two SLFs each consisted of a Marine infantry battalion, supported by a helicopter squadron and reinforced by small detachments of artillery, tanks, engineers, and other specialized units, totaling about 2,000 men embarked upon the ships of a Navy amphibious ready group (ARG).<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the year, SLF Alpha, commanded by Colonel John A. Conway, had just returned control of BLT 1/3, its infantry battalion, to III MAF. The former SLF battalion had come ashore during November, operated with the 9th Marines in Operation Kentucky, and was about to take over part of the Operation Osceola sector near Quang Tri from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. On 4 January, the latter battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, in turn, embarked in the ships of the amphibious ready group, Seventh Fleet Task Group 76.4, which included the USS *Cleveland* (LSD 7), USS *Comstock* (LSD 19), and USS *Wexford County* (LST 1168), and the helicopter aircraft carrier the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2) with HMM-361, under Lieutenant Colonel Daniel M. Wilson, on board as the SLF aircraft contingent. Two days later the entire SLF in its amphibious shipping set sail for the Philippines. About a week later, 14 January, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers assumed command of the reconstituted SLF Alpha.<sup>2</sup>

\*The other components of the 9th MAB were the 26th Marines (Rear) headquarters, a communications support company, and a provisional service battalion on Okinawa as well as MAG-15 with squadrons at both Iwakuni, Japan and on Okinawa. Although the 26th Marines (Forward) and its three infantry battalions together with its attached artillery, the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, were in Vietnam under the operational control of III MAF, these units remained under the administrative control of the 9th MAB.

SLF Bravo, commanded by Colonel Maynard W. Schmidt, in the meantime, consisting of BLT 3/1 (Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown) and HMM-262\*\* (Lieutenant Colonel Melvin J. Steinberg), had just completed Operation Badger Tooth. Reembarking on board its amphibious shipping of Navy Task Group 76.5 on 3 January, the SLF deployed to Da Nang where both the battalion and squadron underwent a one week rehabilitation period. On 10 January, HMM-165, under Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Romine, replaced HMM-262 on board the *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) and the ARG/SLF once more put to sea, remaining off the coast of Quang Tri Province for possible insertion into the Cua Viet sector.<sup>3\*\*\*</sup>

Operation Badger Tooth had been a bloody experience for BLT 3/1 and raised some questions about the effectiveness of the SLF and the future employment of Seventh Fleet Marine amphibious forces. In Badger Tooth, BLT 3/1 had operated in the "Street Without Joy" coastal region east of Route 1 in southern Quang Tri Province for about a week from 26 December 1967 until 2 January 1968. After moving through the hamlet of Thom Tham Khe on the 26th, the battalion made another sweep of the area the following day. This time the Marines ran into a well-sprung ambush. Calling the coastal hamlet "literally a defensive bastion," Lieutenant Colonel McQuown in 24 hours sustained 48 Marines killed and 86 wounded. According to their body count, the Marines accounted for 31 enemy dead. By 28 December, the NVA had slipped away and Marines of the SLF began to close out the operation.<sup>4\*\*\*\*</sup>

\*\*Because of the shortage of CH-46 aircraft, a small detachment of HMM-262, HMM-262 Alpha, under Major David I. Althoff, remained embarked on board the *Valley Forge* LPH 8, from 24 November until 4 January, when the detachment was deactivated.

\*\*\*The other ships of the amphibious task group included the USS *Navarro* (APA 215), USS *Alamo* (LSD 33), USS *Whetstone* (LSD 27), and *Vernon County* (LST 1161).

\*\*\*\*In his comments, Colonel McQuown wrote that ARVN forces later found in a draw north and west of Thom Tham Ke the bodies of over 100 North Vietnamese from the 166th NVA Battalion. This count was not included in the report of the action nor in the investigation that followed. Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

*Top, a Navy corpsman from Company K, BLT 3/1 runs across an open paddy carrying a litter to assist a wounded Marine during Operation Badger Tooth. Below, Marines from BLT 3/1 search a hamlet in the same operation. During Badger Tooth, the BLT suffered 48 dead and 86 wounded, which resulted in an investigation.*



Following the end of the operation, higher headquarters wanted to know the reasons for the Marine battalion suffering such heavy casualties. As Brigadier General Glick later stated, "any time that something like that happened, there was a lot of pressure all the way from the White House down of 'what happened.'" On 30 December, General Glick ordered a full investigation of the matter. The investigating officer, Lieutenant Colonel George H. Benskin, Jr., visited the village the next day and began taking testimony from various commanders and staff officers, including Lieutenant Colonel McQuown, the BLT 3/1 company commanders, and the SLF Bravo intelligence officer or S-2. Completing his fact-finding mission on 2 January, Lieutenant Colonel Benskin sent his preliminary findings three days later to General Glick. In this initial report, Benskin emphasized the strength of the enemy positions with "fields of fire" permitting them to "neutralize efforts of all attacking units except Company K when supported by tanks." The enemy had withheld its fire "on all fronts until attacking units were drawn into the killing zones." According to all accounts, the terrain together with the village defenses combined in the favor of the enemy "in every respect."<sup>5\*</sup>

On 15 January, General Glick forwarded the complete report to Lieutenant General Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force Pacific. In his covering message, General Glick observed: "I purposely did not make a recommendation in the investigation report concerning replacement of the BLT commander

because of the channels which the report may go through and the possible political implications of relief of commanders concerned." In that message and in a interview over 20 years after the incident, he insisted that Lieutenant Colonel McQuown "was an exceptionally good battalion commander." He also observed in the interview that BLT 3/1 "was not the first unit that ran into trouble in that 'Street Without Joy.'" Glick's main concern was that MACV would use the casualties sustained by BLT 3/1 as "justification for reopening the entire question of command relations for SLF/ARG operations." He believed that "any relief of the BLT commander at this time might add weight to any implications that serious deficiencies do exist in present arrangement." According to Glick, "the tactical decisions made in Badger Tooth were in no way dictated by the command arrangements in effect."<sup>6\*\*</sup>

Despite the 9th MAB commander's attempt to separate the investigation of Badger Tooth from the subject of general amphibious command relations, there was to be a reexamination of the entire subject. While representatives of MACV, III MAF, FMFPac, PacFlt, and Seventh Fleet had worked out an agreement to streamline the procedures for SLF operations in Vietnam during the spring of 1966, some friction between the in-country and the amphibious commands, especially the 9th MAB, continued to exist. Lieutenant General Krulak the FMFPac commander in October 1967 outlined the various perspectives on the SLF in a long extended message. According to the FMFPac commander, "MACV would like to see Ninth MAB units in-country continually . . . he pretty much sees them as so many battalions, helo squadrons . . . etc." From what Krulak called a "parochial Marine Corps view" the best system would be to maintain the SLFs as a separate organization, but "employed in a manner completely responsive to the will of CG III MAF . . ." While sympathizing and identifying himself with this latter viewpoint, Krulak believed in the necessity of intra-theater rotation of Vietnam-based units between the SLF and rehabilitation for a brief period on Okinawa. He also insisted that "some accommodation with the Navy as essential to preserve our use of the amphibious shipping. . . ." According to the FMFPac commander, unless the Marines worked "hand and glove with them, the Navy

\*Colonel McQuown stated that he reported to General Glick after he reembarked upon the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group shipping and made several observations. He pointed out that the AOA [amphibious objective area] was not a free fire zone and that Company L followed the rules of engagement "to the letter." He noted that when the company was 25 meters from the village, "the lead elements of Lima Company were blown away. This was, in part, a major cause of the heavy casualties of this fight." McQuown related that he had "opposed Operation Badger Tooth from the onset because it was ill conceived and tactically unsound. It failed to use any of BLT 3/1's Task Organization, except the LVT's that would have enabled the BLT to conduct a sustained operation ashore." Furthermore the village was "occupied and defended by a major NVA force. The village had been turned into a well concealed, skillfully constructed—almost impregnable defensive position that withstood heavy air strikes and naval gunfire. To conquer the defenders was an extremely difficult task made more difficult because the BLT landed without its key supporting elements—the tanks, Ontos, artillery, and heavy mortars." According to McQuown, "Badger Tooth was an SLF operation in name only because SLF Marines were involved. In reality it was a water-borne/helicopter landing of a 'bare bones' *unsupported* [emphasis in the original] Marine infantry battalion moving 8 to 10 miles from the waters edge to objectives that lacked even a shred of intelligence to justify the operation." McQuown Comments.

\*\*Colonel Maynard W. Schmidt, the SLF Bravo commander through February 1968, wrote that at the time he did "not realize that Operation Badger Tooth caused that much attention at the higher echelons." Colonel Maynard W. Schmidt, Comments on draft, n.d. [1994] (Vietnam Comment File).

is going to take the amphibious shipping away, and either move it out of the theater or join forces with the Army . . .” Krulak, nevertheless, recognized that there were circumstances where either one or both of the SLFs would have to be committed to an in-country operation for an extended period of time.<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, General Cushman, the III MAF commander, found himself betwixt and between. He answered to both Generals Krulak, the FMFPac commander, and to Westmoreland, the MACV commander. Both of these commanders had differing but equally valid concerns about the SLF. In answer to Krulak’s message, Cushman attempted to explain his predicament. While agreeing in principle with the FMFPac commander’s desire to retain the rotation between in-country forces and Okinawa via the SLF, Cushman declared that at that time the situation in Vietnam was so “fluid and dynamic that I cannot at present in good conscience recommend to Westy [Westmoreland] the resumption of intra-theater BLT rotation to and from Okinawa.” He then suggested an alternative that Krulak had suggested in his message—namely that the SLFs refit out of the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines. According to the III MAF commander, he would hope that “the issue and turn-in at Subic could be so expedited as to permit a short but concentrated amphib[ious] training period . . .” Both Westmoreland and Krulak eventually concurred in this policy.<sup>8</sup>

The matter of amphibious command relations was not only a dispute between Marines and Navy on one side and MACV and the Army on the other, but also caused division within Marine Corps circles. Marine commanders in III MAF shared to a certain extent some of the same opinions as their Army counterparts

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\*Colonel Warren A. Butcher, who relieved Col Schmidt in command of SLF Bravo, wrote that the Marines had anticipated the decision to make Subic Bay the main base for the refitting of the SLF. He noted that “sections of 9th MAB under G-4 cognizance were sent to Subic to contact opposite numbers early on. When the directive came out of FMFPac, we had a completed plan. I had never seen Service troops in operation before, at least to the extent they were used in the rehabs at Subic.” He noted that the first group there did a “masterful job.” According to Butcher, General Krulak complimented the group “for doing in 10 days at Subic, what it had taken 6 weeks to do on Okinawa.” Butcher stated that the Service troops accomplished their technical inspections by first identifying units to be “retrograded. They started in country, continued aboard ship enroute to Subic, and finished at Subic Bay. Flood lights were set up for around the clock operations. Even though the first BLT was pulled out earlier than expected, the completion percentage was in the high nineties, and the BLT reembarked with all equipment in near new condition.” Col Warren A. Butcher, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

and MACV about the SLF. They saw the Seventh Fleet forces largely as a reinforcement for their own forces in Vietnam. With control of the air and landing areas, in-country commanders believed there was little need for many of the amphibious doctrinal procedures relative to amphibious operational area and command.<sup>9</sup> The Navy and the Marine amphibious commanders, on the other hand, regarded the SLFs as the Seventh Fleet or Western Pacific reserve force. While ready to reinforce the forces in Vietnam when needed, they also looked to other possible crises areas in the Pacific. They feared any dilution of their authority might result in the loss of the amphibious forces to the Seventh Fleet for other Pacific contingencies.<sup>9</sup>

Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, later recalled when General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, “was screaming his head off for more troops, there were at least two battalions of well-trained Marines who were floating around on the ships.” According to Tompkins “simply from an operational point of view . . . Better to have two battalions ashore than two battalions floating around, looking at each other.” One of Tompkin’s staff officers, Colonel Alexander L. Michaux carped that the SLF landings were largely administrative and designating them as amphibious was “a joke.” According to Michaux, its only purpose was to give the Navy amphibious commander control of the operation for a day.<sup>10\*\*</sup>

Even while critical of the employment of the SLF, General Tompkins maintained that if one looked beyond Vietnam, the Navy was “well advised to have the two battalions not under the operational control [of MACV].” Both Generals Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, viewed the SLF capability positively. Robertson declared that the “SLF gave us

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\*\*Colonel George F. Warren, who served in 1968 as the executive officer of BLT 2/4, wrote, “in-country commanders had a propensity for breaking up the SLF into its component parts (air/ground) and then further breaking up the BLT into its component parts (combat, combat support and combat service support units). Ultimately the SLF was reconstituted into a single entity and loaded back aboard . . . [Navy] shipping. One can imagine the movement of operational control between commanders in such a situation and the administrative time and effort that was consumed during SLF operations, to say nothing about the confusion such movement generated.” Col George F. Warren, Comments on draft, dtd 28Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*\*Colonel Butcher, the former SLF Bravo commander, conceded the point that most SLF landings were administrative but denies the assertion that the purpose of the landings was to give the Navy amphibious commander control of the operation for a day. Butcher Comments.



a flexibility . . . It added that extra punch that we often needed." Cushman agreed, professing that "It was just like having another couple of battalions."<sup>11</sup>

In mid-December 1967, Cushman reemphasized to his division commanders that "first and foremost" he wanted the "ARG/SLF used in an amphibious role in accordance with current doctrine for amphibious operations." He reminded both commanders that the SLFs were available to III MAF "for employment against time sensitive targets." Not only did he want the SLF operations to be "in consonance with our amphibious doctrine," but that they "be based on best III MAF intelligence estimates."<sup>12</sup>

Concurrent with this Marine emphasis about the employment of the SLF, General Westmoreland's MACV staff was involved in contingency planning for a possible amphibious landing north of the DMZ. With a possible 30,000 enemy in the objective area, the planning for Operation Durango City, the codename for the proposed amphibious assault, by necessity involved both Army and Marine ground forces as well as support from the Seventh Air Force. In this planning effort, General William W. Momyer, the Seventh Air Force commander, raised the subject of air control in the objective area. While the chances of approval of the Operation Durango City plan or any amphibious operation in the north was dubious at best, any discussion over command relations was serious business, especially at a time when the whole question of single manager of air in South Vietnam was about to surface.<sup>13\*</sup>

Thus, in this general context, General Westmoreland wanted another look at the entire subject of the SLF and the results of the Badger Tooth operation only added fuel to this desire. In mid-January, the MACV commander expressed his doubts to Admiral Sharp, CinCPac, and proposed that changes be made. The Pacific commander agreed with Westmoreland that there was justifiable concern over Badger Tooth and was willing to consider transfer of operational control of the ashore forces from the amphibious task force commander at an earlier time in an SLF amphibious operation. Sharp also mentioned that he was thinking about the possibility of basing one of the SLFs ashore as a permanent element of III MAF. While maintaining "that present command relations for the conduct of

amphibious operations in South Vietnam are valid," he stated that he had asked Vice Admiral John J. Hyland, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, to conduct a broad-based study of SLF operations in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

While CinCPacFlt established a study group with representatives from both the Marine and Navy amphibious forces, the whole question about the SLF would be overtaken by events. While the study group reasserted the validity of the basic command and control system for the SLF then in effect, it would, essentially permit ComUSMACV "to prescribe virtually every important aspect of the employment of amphibious forces, from specifying the mission to delineating the characteristics of the amphibious objective area." By the time, the study came out both SLF BLTs were ashore.<sup>15</sup>

With the massing of enemy forces in the north followed by the Tet offensive, the SLF battalions, for all intents and purposes, became part of III MAF for the next few months. In mid-January, both SLFs were in an alert status off the coast of northern I Corps. On 22 January, SLF Alpha's BLT 2/4 initiated Operation Ballistic Armor in which the unit relieved the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Camp Evans which in turn deployed to Khe Sanh. Upon itself being relieved by elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division four days later, the BLT reembarked upon its amphibious shipping. The following day in Operation Fortress Attack, the BLT went ashore near the C-2 combat base, coming under the operational control of the 9th Marines.\*\* In the meantime, the SLF Bravo battalion conducted

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\*\*Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the commander of SLF Alpha, recalled his concerns about the irregularity and departure from normal amphibious doctrine during this period. He wrote that on 26 Jan "op con was passed back to me (CTG 79.4) at noon and we had all elements of BLT 2/4 back aboard our shipping in five hours and 15 minutes (261830)." He was then directed to land his tank and amtrac platoons at the mouth of the Cua Viet at the request of III MAF. On 27 January, BLT 2/4 began Operation Fortress Attack in the 9th Marines operational area and he passed operational control to the 9th Marines at 1500. Meyers declared that he "recognized the exigency of the threat in the Tet offensive, and our immediate response and accommodation to that threat . . ." As the SLF commander, he "was worried that Gen. Westmoreland would pick up on this usage out of our traditional 'amphibious' role . . . It was obvious to both my [Navy] ARG [Amphibious Ready Group] counterpart . . . [and to Meyers] that both Adm. Sharp and Gen. Krulak were both worried about this same aspect of the use of the ARG/SLF . . ." At his debriefing at FMFPac, Meyers referred to "grave reservations and possible implications for the future of the Marine Corps role as a result of what I believed at the time to be bordering on a misuse of the ARG/SLF. In the end, we accomplished what the ground commanders needed—an immediate 'fire brigade' response to a perceived serious threat. In retrospect, it was probably the wisest response to the situation that we could have achieved." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*General Cushman stated that the planning for an amphibious operation "never went anywhere . . . it was just another plan sticking up . . . They wanted to have one up to date, just in case, you know, got lucky or somebody else got to be President or some damn thing." (Cushman intvw, 1982, p. 46.) See Chapters 23 and 24 for discussion of the Single Manager controversy.

Operation Badger Catch in the Cua Viet sector from 23–26 January. Badger Catch became Operation Saline and then Operation Napoleon/Saline. Until June, both SLF battalions remained ashore in the DMZ sector, often transferring from one operational area to another. In effect, both BLTs functioned as any other infantry battalion of the 3d Marine Division in the north.\*

By June, the situation in the DMZ had clarified to the extent that both ComUSMACV, now General Abrams, and General Cushman believed that it was time for the SLFs to be reconstituted. A member of General Cushman's staff, Colonel Franklin L. Smith related that III MAF wanted them back on ship: "Once you get people . . . Nobody wants to leave them go." Complicating the situation was the attitude of the Seventh Fleet amphibious commander, Commander Task Force 76, whom Smith believed had been intimidated by the Operation Badger Tooth experience. According to Smith, "Badger Tooth scared the hell out of the guy. . . . As soon as the battalion goes ashore, he wants to dump it."<sup>16\*\*</sup>

Despite the various reservations, in early June 1968, BLT 3/1, now under Lieutenant Colonel Daniel J. Quick, and HMM-164, under Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Rick, reconstituted SLF Bravo, under Colonel Warren A. Butcher, and reembarked upon the TG 76.5 (ARG) amphibious shipping.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> From 7–14 June, BLT 3/1 conducted Operation Swift Saber in Elephant Valley, a known VC infiltration route just northwest of Da Nang, under the operational control of the

1st Marine Division. At the end of the operation, in which the Marines encountered only slight resistance, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Mueller, and HMM-265, under Lieutenant Colonel Roy J. Edwards, relieved BLT 3/1 and HMM-164 respectively as the infantry and helicopter components of SLF Bravo.<sup>17\*\*\*\*</sup>

Taking a respite, the newly reconstituted SLF Bravo departed for the new SLF training and rehabilitation encampment at Subic Bay in the Philippines. After a brief stay at Subic, the SLF Bravo units returned to Vietnam for a one-week operation, Eager Yankee, lasting from 9–16 July, in Thua Thien Province near Phu Loc. Operating in support of Task Force X-Ray's Operation Houston, the SLF Marines reported killing 9 of the enemy and captured 6 prisoners while sustaining casualties of 8 dead and 34 wounded. On 16 July, BLT 2/7 joined the 5th Marines in Operation Houston and on 22 July reembarked on its amphibious shipping. After reembarking, BLT 2/7 landed the following day at Da Nang in Operation Swift Play which lasted from 23–24 July in the Go Noi Island area.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> On the 25th, the 27th Marines assumed operational control of the BLT which would remain in the Hoi An sector through October.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, BLT 2/4, the SLF Alpha battalion, remained in the DMZ sector as part of Operation Lancaster II.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> On 13 August, BLT 2/26 relieved the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines as the SLF Alpha infantry component. This was largely a paper transfer. The SLF BLT

\*See Chapters 7, 13, and 15 for the description of the fighting and the activities of the SLF BLTs in the north during this period. Colonel McQuown, the former commander of BLT 3/1, wrote that the two "SLFs should have been tremendous assets for III MAF. However, in order to realize their full potential the III MAF Command would have had to insist that the using command select objectives based on hard intelligence, and just as important, follow the Marine Corps Amphibious Doctrine. Properly employed, the SLFs could have responded rapidly to requests from the 1st and 3d Divisions and would have been the '911' forces during the Vietnam War." He believed, however, they were "seldom employed with sound tactics . . ." and that the 3d Marine Division in particular "had a myopic view of the use of the SLFs." He, nevertheless, granted that his BLT's operations in the Cua Viet sector in January and February were a "profitable use of a potent fighting force." McQuown Comments.

\*\*Colonel Butcher, the SLF Bravo Commander, agreed with Colonel Smith about the attitude of the amphibious task force commander. Butcher wrote that while in the "sea cabin of CTF 76 (who was a deep-selected, 'frocked' rear admiral with expertise in the nuclear field), . . . [Butcher] was told the conditions under which the landing force would 'chop' ashore . . . Basically, the Admiral's idea was to toss the ball ashore as soon as the helicopters went 'feet dry.'" Butcher Comments.

\*\*\*The ships of TG 76.5 now consisted of the USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8), *Vancouver* (LPD 2), *Thomaston* (LSD 28), and *Washburn* (AKA 108).

\*\*\*\*In July, USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10) replaced the *Valley Forge* as the helicopter carrier of TG 76.5. On 1 September 1968, HMM-165, under Lieutenant Colonel George L. Patrick, relieved HMM-265 as the SLF Bravo helicopter squadron. On 28 December 1968, HMM-164, now under Lieutenant Colonel Richard T. Trundy, once again became the SLF squadron in place of HMM-165.

\*\*\*\*\*See Chapter 17.

\*\*\*\*\*HMM-363, commanded by Major James L. Harrison, relieved HMM-362 on 6 September 1968 as the helicopter squadron for SLF Alpha. Lieutenant Colonel Walter H. Shauer, Jr., who commanded HMM-362 during this period, noted that "we were fragged to support our BLT 2/4 ashore, and other division units . . ." With its maintenance support on board ship, the squadron was "able to achieve maximum aircraft availability each day averaging over 20 H-34s available for frags. During our SLF A tenure we flew over 46,000 sorties, and set the record on board the LPH 5 *Princeton* for the most shipboard carrier landings, 285 in a 24-hour period and supported 25 major operations." LtCol Walter H. Shauer, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 1Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Warren A. Butcher, the SLF Bravo commander, wrote about the advantages for the Marine Corps to have the helicopters on board ship as the SLF squadrons "benefitted from the more sterile conditions on board the LPH and, from, what the squadron commanders told me, a more responsive supply system." Butcher Comments.



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

*Above, Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from HMM-165 take off from the Phu Bai Airstrip to relieve HMM-265 on board the USS Tripoli (LPH 10). HMM-165 became the SLF Bravo helicopter squadron. In bottom photo, a Sikorsky UH-34D Sea Horse from HMM-362, the SLF Alpha helicopter squadron on board the USS Princeton (LPH 5), lands Marines from BLT 2/4 in a LZ near Camp Carroll.*



had been assigned to the 1st Marines in the Cua Viet sector and returned there in Operation Proud Hunter after a brief period of amphibious training. On the 28th, in Operation Swift Pursuit, the BLT established a new area of operations in the Mai Loc sector in the Operation Lancaster II TAOR. Into October, the battalion essentially operated under the 3d Marines as another infantry battalion in the Lancaster II sector.<sup>19</sup>

Thus by mid-October, the situation with the SLFs had almost reverted to the situation that existed until June. Both SLF infantry battalions had been operating for an extended period with III MAF units ashore. The main difference was that one was attached to the 3d Division and the other to the 1st Marine Division. BLT 2/26, which was still operating in the 3d Marine Division sector, was slated for rehabilitation training in the SLF base at Subic Bay. Concurrently, MACV had directed III MAF to undertake an expanded pacification campaign while at the same time increasing operations against the enemy base areas and main force units. III MAF wanted to use the SLFs in this campaign in "swift short duration operations . . . principally in cordon and search operations to root out and eliminate the VC infrastructure." The principle target areas were to be the Batangan Peninsula just south of Chu Lai and the Barrier Island sector south of Hoi An. At this point, III MAF consulted with the commander of the 9th MAB, Brigadier General John E. Williams,\* who on the basis of these proposed new operations decided to cancel the BLT 2/26 rehabilitation trip to the Philippines.<sup>20</sup>

The SLF Alpha ARG which had embarked BLT 2/26 on 19 October at Quang Tri began to steam for Da Nang.\*\* On 25 October, the BLT landed at Da Nang in Operation Eager Hunter. The following day, the BLT came under the operational control of the 1st Marines and conducted Operation Garrard Bay until mid-November in the coastal hamlets between Marble Mountain and Dien Ban. On 20 November, the BLT joined the 1st Marines Operation Meade River in the "Dodge City" sector north of the Go Noi Island area in the Da Nang TAOR.<sup>21\*\*\*</sup>

\*Brigadier General Williams relieved Brigadier General William C. Chip as CG 9th MAB on 12 August 1968. Brigadier General Chip had relieved Brigadier General Glick on 20 January 1968 when the latter became 3d Marine Division assistant division commander.

\*\*Amphibious Ready Group Alpha (TG 76.4) now consisted of the USS *Princeton* (LPH 5), USS *Dubuque* (LPD 8), USS *Oak Hill* (LSD 7), and USS *Windham County* (LST 1170).

\*\*\*See Chapter 21 for discussion of the *Le Loi* campaign and Operation Meade River.



Photo is from the Abel Collection  
*Marines of BLT 2/26 waded through streams in the Barrier Island area southeast of Hoi An. The BLT, the SLF Alpha battalion, is conducting Operation Valiant Hunt.*

In the meantime the SLF Bravo battalion, BLT 2/7 remained also under the operational control of the 1st Marines until early November when it embarked upon its amphibious shipping.\*\*\*\* III MAF and the ARG/SLF Bravo commanders had planned to mount their first of the new amphibious cordon and search operations on the Batangan Peninsula. While liaison officers from the amphibious task group met with the Americal Division at Chu Lai, General Cushman and his staff decided that a similar operation on the Barrier Island would prove more lucrative. Landing on the coast southeast of Hoi An, just below the Cua Dai River, on 10 November, BLT 2/7 carried out the new operation, called Daring Endeavor, for the next seven days. Although supposed to extend the operation to the south, the battalion encountered significant opposition in the original area. Using cordon and search techniques, the Marines reported killing 39 of the

\*\*\*\*The 1st Marines relieved the 27th Marines in the Da Nang area of operations when the latter regiment redeployed to the United States. See Chapter 21. Amphibious Ready Group Bravo (TG 76.5) now consisted of the USS *Merrick* (AKA 97), USS *Monticello* (LSD 35), USS *Ogden* (LPD 5), USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10), and *Seminole* (AKA 104).

enemy and captured 30 POWs, at a cost of 1 Marine dead and 36 wounded. The BLT conducted no civic action because the population in the area was "considered to be hostile and hard line psy ops [psychological operations] was used." According to the amphibious task group commander, the operation demonstrated the SLF ability "to temporarily deny enemy forces the use of their territory, while destroying their fortification and supplies, was fully realized." On 20 November, BLT 2/7 returned to the operational control of the 1st Marines and prepared to relieve the SLF Bravo battalion, BLT 2/26, in Operation Meade River.<sup>22</sup>

On 8 December, BLT 2/26 reembarked upon ARG/SLF Alpha shipping "conducting rehabilitation and training for future operations."\* One week later, on 15 December, the BLT initiated SLF Alpha Operation Valiant Hunt. Remaining under the operational control of the SLF Alpha commander, now Colonel John F. McMahon, the BLT conducted a cordon and search in the southern Barrier Island sector just south of the earlier Daring Endeavor area of operations. Operation Valiant Hunt lasted until 5 January 1969. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Sparks, the battalion commander, observed that "Operation Valiant Hunt was the first time the BLT was responsible for conducting a total cordon operation. In this respect, the operation was a good 'training exercise' . . . However, there were no significant problems or enemy techniques encountered."<sup>23</sup>

As the year ended, the SLF battalions were in much the same situation as the year had begun. One battalion was bringing a separate operation to a close while the other was ashore attached to a Marine division. In fact the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines was about to relieve BLT 2/7 as the infantry component of SLF Bravo. Even more important, many of the issues over the use of the SLF had not fully been settled. Even as late as July 1969, the 9th MAB operations officer, Colonel Clyde W. Hunter, would remark that the MAB staff believed that the "divisions were using the SLFs improperly, actually ginning up operations just to get them ashore and tie them down to a TAOR, or into some kind of operation, that had no connection to their mission as an SLF."<sup>24</sup>

\*On 7 December, HMM-362, now under Lieutenant Colonel Jack E. Schlarp, embarked upon the USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3) relieved HMM-363, as the SLF Alpha helicopter squadron. Lieutenant Colonel Schlarp recalled that while embarked "we conducted assault landings, put our BLT ashore, supported them completely, evacuated the wounded and extracted them at the completion of the operation." LtCol Jack E. Schlarp, Comments on draft, dtd 21Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). The other ships of ARG Alpha (TG 76.4) were the USS *Duluth* (LPD 6), USS *Fort Marion* (LSD 22), USS *Winslow* (AKA 94).

Still, as 1969 was about to begin, Brigadier General Williams, the 9th MAB commander, was about to embark on board amphibious shipping as Commanding General, Task Force 79, to help oversee one of the largest amphibious operations of the Vietnam War. In Operation Bold Mariner, both SLFs of the 9th MAB would land on the Batangan Peninsula under the command of Brigadier General Wilson. While beginning in this spectacular fashion, the SLFs for the remainder of 1969 would follow much the same pattern as that of 1968. For 1969, there would be 14 SLF operations as compared to 13 in 1968, and 25 in 1967. By the end of 1969, the SLFs had become a moot question for operations in South Vietnam. With the reduction of forces in Vietnam, the SLF could only be committed with the specific permission of the JCS.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Sub-Unit 1, 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO)*

In Vietnam, there was another Marine-Navy connection with both the Seventh Fleet and the in-country forces. Sub-Unit 1, 1st ANGLICO was a Fleet Marine Force, Pacific separate organization whose primary mission was to call in U.S. naval gunfire from ships offshore or Marine and Navy air in support of allied or other U.S. Service forces. In Vietnam, Sub-Unit 1 remained outside of the regular Marine chain of command and under the direct operational control of MACV in Saigon. At the beginning of 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Carlton D. Goodiel, Jr., the unit commander, maintained his headquarters in Saigon, but kept detachments in each of the Corps areas with the largest in I Corps.

In January 1968, the I Corps Liaison Naval Gunfire Team, headed by Navy Lieutenant Commander Philip B. Hatch, Jr., was at Da Nang and provided direct liaison with the South Vietnamese I Corps military establishment.\*\* Under his control were two shore fire parties, one at Hue with the 1st ARVN Division and a smaller one at Quang Ngai with the 2d ARVN Division. Navy Lieutenant Robert A. Keeling headed the naval gunfire liaison team with the U.S. Army Americal Division with four shore fire parties attached to Army units at both Chu Lai and Duc Pho. At this time, the largest ANGLICO detachment in I Corps, and for that fact in the country, commanded by Marine Major Enos S. Olin, was

\*\*No ANGLICO detachments or teams were assigned to Marine units of III MAF since Marine units maintained in their FSCC and DASC organizations the ability to call in their own naval gunfire and air support.

with the 2d ROK Marine Brigade at Hoi An. One of the few detachments in Vietnam with an air control party, Olin had under him over 70 enlisted Marines and usually nine officers, eight Marines and one Navy lieutenant (j.g.).<sup>26</sup>

While smaller and more scattered, Lieutenant Colonel Goodiel's command maintained similar naval gunfire liaison teams in the other corps areas of South Vietnam. In II Corps, Navy Lieutenant William L. Vandiver maintained the headquarters of his naval gunfire liaison team at Nha Trang with five shore fire control parties under his control. Further south, from the III Corps Naval Gunfire Liaison Team headquarters at Bien Hoa, Navy Lieutenant Dale W. Lucas controlled three shore fire control parties in the Corps area. In IV Corps, Marine Captain Ronald K. Roth, commander of the naval gunfire liaison team headquartered at Can Tho in the Mekong Delta, had two fire control parties, one at Ben Tre and the other at Tra Vinh. All told in January, ANGLICO Sub-Unit 1 numbered more than 230 personnel, both Marine and Navy, including about 35 at the Saigon headquarters.<sup>27</sup>

During Tet, one of the most significant contributions of the ANGLICO teams was in the battle for Hue. At the outbreak of the attack on Hue on 31 January, the naval gunfire spot team attached to the 1st ARVN Division under Navy Lieutenant (j.g.) Marvin L. Warkentin, like the rest of the U.S. advisors, remained isolated from their units at the MACV compound in the southern sector of the city and had all they could do to repel the enemy attack on the compound itself. In a short time, however, with the arrival of the reinforcing Marine forces in the city, the team resumed its primary mission.<sup>28</sup>

Through 13 February, all of the naval gunfire was employed against suspected enemy lines of communications outside of the city. Beginning on 14 February, with the initial onslaught of the enemy forces in the city contained north of the Perfume River and the NVA units cleared out south of the river, the naval gunfire support then shifted to targets in the Citadel north of the river with the exception of the former Imperial palace and its grounds. Because of the heavy cloud cover and other hampering weather conditions, the ships depended upon Warkentin's team for ground spotting. On the basis of military necessity and with the permission of the 1st Marines' commander, Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, who had operational control of the Marine forces in the city, the spotting team occupied a hotel which had been the headquarters in Hue of the

International Control Commission\* and supposedly neutral ground. The building, however, provided the best view of the targets. For the first two days, the team directed the fires of the cruiser USS *Providence* (CLG 6) and the destroyer *Manley* (DD 940) against first the Citadel walls, and then on the 17th, against specific enemy strongholds in the old city. After the 17th, the Seventh Fleet gunships during the remainder of Operation Hue City turned their attention once more to harassing and interdiction fires.\*\* According to interrogations of captured enemy troops in the Hue fighting, the naval gunfire inflicted many casualties "and had an extremely demoralizing effect."<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere in Vietnam during Tet, in II Corps, naval gunfire contributed to the defeat of the VC attacks against the cities. According to ANGLICO reports at Nha Trang, prior coordination planning with the installation defense command there permitted Navy Lieutenant Vandiver to call upon the destroyer USS *Mansfield* (DD 728), which was in the harbor, to provide counter-rocket and counter-mortar fires and to interdict avenues of approach to the city. Further south in the II Corps sector at Phan Thiet on 3 February, the naval gunfire liaison spot team there attached to the U.S. Army's 3d Battalion, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division directed defensive fires from the destroyer USS *Frank E. Evans* (DD 754) into the city against the attacking 840th VC Battalion. The following day, the ANGLICO team adjusted the fires within 100 meters of friendly troops. In its after-action report, the team observed that the enemy troops "became disorganized, fled the area, and was soon driven out of the city by ARVN forces." Later in the month, the team once more called upon the *Evans* and another destroyer, the USS *Pritchett* (DD 561), to frustrate a renewed VC assault on Phan Thiet.<sup>30</sup>

Following Tet, naval gunfire continued to play a large role especially in I Corps with its large buildup of forces especially in the north beginning even before Tet. By mid-March 1968, III MAF contained in the northern two provinces of I Corps one Marine division,

\*The International Control Commission was created by the Geneva Agreement of 1954 to ensure the provisions of that treaty. It consisted of Polish, Indian, and Canadian members. Although by this time, the Commission was unable to enforce anything, it still retained facilities and personnel in both North and South Vietnam. See also Chapter 10.

\*\*Two other destroyers and the cruisers *Canberra* (CAG 2) and the *Newport News* (CA 148) supported Operation Hue City. See CinCPacFlt, "Pacific Area Naval Operations Review," Feb 68 p. 29, (OAB, NHDD).

elements of a second, and two Army divisions, and in addition a new command structure. Although subordinate to III MAF, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, commanded by Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, had operational control of U.S. forces in Quang Tri Province and Thua Thien Provinces including the 3d Marine Division, the 1st Air Cavalry Division, and the 101st Airborne Division.\*

These changes in command relationships and the arrival of the new Army divisions in northern I Corps had an effect upon the ANGLICO organization in the corps sector. Since 26 January, Marine First Lieutenant Pasquale J. Morocco headed the ANGLICO fire control party with the 1st Air Cavalry Division at Camp Evans. Prior to the establishment of Provisional Corps, Lieutenant Hatch, the I Corps Naval Gunfire Liaison officer, also doubled as the MACV (Forward) Liaison officer when that command was temporarily installed at Phu Bai under General Creighton W. Abrams in early February. He remained in that dual capacity until 10 March when Provisional (Prov) Corps came into existence and General Abrams returned to Saigon. On 16 March, Navy Lieutenant Dale W. Lucas became the Provisional Corps Naval Gunfire Liaison officer. At about the same time, Navy Lieutenant Warkentin transferred from Hue to Camp Eagle outside of Phu Bai to head the shore fire control party attached to the 101st Airborne Division. On 23 April, ANGLICO spotters called in a Marine close air strike in support of the 101st marking "the first time" during the war that non-Air Force personnel controlled a close air support mission for the division.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the period from February through June 1968, the tempo of naval gunfire support increased throughout Vietnam with the bulk going to support U.S. and allied forces in I Corps. For example, in February, Navy ships off the coast of South Vietnam fired more than 94,000 rounds. Of this total, ANGLICO teams in I Corps controlled missions firing nearly 18,000 of those rounds, which did not include the missions fired in support of the 3d Marine Division along the DMZ. By June, while somewhat reduced from February, the U.S. Seventh Fleet fired more than 79,000 rounds in support of all forces, with ANGLICO in I Corps controlling missions which provided

over 18,000 of those rounds. Again, the figures for I Corps did not include the missions fired in support of the two Marine Divisions in the corps sector. For the first half of 1968, Navy gunfire support exceeded that of the entire previous year.<sup>32</sup>

In perhaps the largest demonstration of joint supporting arms of the war, Operation Thor in July 1968, naval gunfire ships and naval air played a large role in the aerial, ground, and ship bombardment of the North Vietnamese batteries in the Cap Mui Lay sector of the DMZ. Although Provisional Corps exercised command and coordination, Navy Lieutenant Dale W. Lucas, the Prov Corps ANGLICO naval gunfire liaison officer, and his team at the Dong Ha forward headquarters, processed all naval gunfire and then passed the direction to the 3d Marine Division naval gunfire section for action. All told, for the first seven days of July, nine gunships (three cruisers and six destroyers) fired over 19,000 rounds of 5-inch, 6-inch, and 8-inch ammunition against the enemy gun positions. In addition, Navy aircraft from four carriers flew 512 sorties and dropped 812 tons of ordnance upon the NVA positions. According to aerial photography and observation, the joint bombardment created extensive damage and hampered for the time being the NVA artillery support and coastal defense ability in the Cap Mui Lay area.<sup>33\*\*</sup>

About this time, the Navy prepared to add a powerful new arsenal to its naval gunfire capability, the recently refurbished battleship *New Jersey* (BB 62) with its 16-inch guns. On 16 July, I Corps and Prov Corps ANGLICO liaison teams participated in a targeting planning conference for the ship which was to arrive off the waters of Vietnam at the end of September. On 30 September, the battleship fired its first observed mission against NVA positions in the DMZ which "was spotted by an ANGLICO spotter flying in a Marine TA-4F from MAG 11 . . . ." According to the ground data assessment (GDA), the *New Jersey's* big guns silenced 1 antiaircraft site, destroyed 1 truck and 4 bunkers, and caused 11 secondary explosions. During her first month off the coast of Vietnam, the warship steamed back and forth between I and II Corps and off the coast of the DMZ. Through the end

\*The Prov Corps command did not include the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray which operated in Phu Loc District and the Hai Van area of Thua Thien Province. In August 1968, Provisional Corps became XXIV Corps. For the changes in the military structure in I Corps, see Chapter 13.

\*\*See Chapter 26 for a detailed account for Operation Thor. The Navy ships that took part in the operation were the cruisers *Boston* (CAG 1), *Providence* (CLG 6), and *St. Paul* (CA 73); the destroyers *Banner* (DD 807), *Boyd* (DD 544), *Cochrane* (DDG 21), *Turner Joy* (DD 951), *O'Brien* (DD 725), and *Henry B. Wilson* (DDG 7); and the carriers *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA 31), *Constellation* (CVA 64), *Ticonderoga* (CVA 14), and *America* (CVA 66).

of the year, the *New Jersey*, in the words of one Navy report, moved from one offshore position to another, "wreaking havoc on the enemy wherever she employed her might." For ANGLICO and Lieutenant Colonel Frederick K. Purdum, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Goodiel as the commander of the Sub-Unit in August, the battleship provided a convincing argument to allied and Army commands of the capabilities and uses of naval gunfire and the services of ANGLICO naval gunfire liaison teams.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the year, the ANGLICO Sub-Unit 1 in Vietnam was somewhat smaller than in January, but it had become more self-sufficient. Until November, although its headquarters was in Saigon, it drew its supplies from III MAF at Da Nang. With approval of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the Sub-Unit obtained its own supply account and more importantly through an inter-Service agreement, it was now able to obtain common item supplies from the U.S. Army 1st Logistic Command in South Vietnam. By the end of the year, the Sub-Unit contained 217 personnel, but had expanded its operations in IV Corps. While the final six months did not require the extensive naval gunfire support of the first half, this support was more dispersed and employed more evenly in all four Corps areas.

### *Embassy Marines*

Another special Marine detachment in Vietnam was the Marine Embassy guard. In 1968, although somewhat larger than the usual Embassy security guard, the Saigon detachment performed much the same missions as their counterparts elsewhere: protected classified material and U.S. government officials and property, especially the Ambassador and the Embassy. From 1965 through 1967, the detachment in Saigon had shown only sporadic growth. While more than doubling in 1966, it had remained the same size for over a year and was subordinate to Company C, Security Guard Battalion (State Department) headquartered in the Philippines capital, Manila. In January 1968, the detachment consisted of one officer, Captain Robert J. O'Brien, and 67 enlisted men.<sup>35</sup>

Until the Tet offensive in January 1968, except for increased security watch, the war had largely bypassed the Marines assigned to the Saigon Embassy. On the afternoon of 30 January, however, a State Department security officer met with Captain O'Brien and informed him about the possibility of a VC attack that evening or sometime during Tet in the Saigon area. The Marine captain immediately increased the alert

status and put a second man on all one-man posts. He also placed a rooftop watch on the Embassy's chancery building and assigned two men to the Norodom compound next to the Embassy compound. That night he and one of his sergeants visited all of the posts, finding nothing out of the ordinary, and about 0130 on the 31st, returned to Marine House, which doubled as the headquarters and barracks for the guard. O'Brien then stretched out on a sofa and gave orders to wake him in time so he could make another tour at 0300.<sup>36</sup>

The Viet Cong disrupted the captain's schedule. At 0245, a group of approximately 20 members of the VC *C-10 Battalion* armed with satchel charges, automatic weapons, and grenades, blew a hole in the wall surrounding the Embassy compound near the northeast gate. The two U.S. Army Military Police (MPs) from the 716th Military Police Battalion raised the alarm, but were gunned down by the intruders. Two more MPs in a jeep patrol tried to come to the assistance of their comrades, but also died in a burst of machine gun fire.<sup>37</sup>

At the time this occurred, Sergeant Ronald W. Harper, one of the three Marines posted in the Embassy Chancery building, was visiting and drinking coffee with the Marines in the guard shack by the Norodom compound. He suddenly looked up and saw a strange Vietnamese and then heard rocket and machine gun fire. Harper made a dash back to the chancery, finding the main entrance door still unlocked. He found Corporal George B. Zahuranic at the front receptionist desk on the telephone calling for help. Sergeant Harper immediately locked the door and then ran to the armory inside the building to obtain additional weapons.<sup>38</sup>

At that point, the VC fired several B-40 rockets at the front entrance. The rockets knocked out the windows behind the steel bars and penetrated the door, but failed to unlock it or force it open. Although knocked to the ground by the initial blast, Harper was unhurt. Corporal Zahuranic was not as fortunate—he was hit by a piece of metal and was bleeding profusely from the right side of his head and ear. Sergeant Harper provided what first aid he could for Zahuranic and then answered the phone from another post. He relayed the information about the wounded Zahuranic and pressed upon his caller the urgency of the situation.

On the roof of the Chancery was Sergeant Rudy A. Soto, armed with a shotgun. Like Harper, Soto witnessed the VC blasting their way into the Embassy courtyard. He tried to take the VC troops under fire, but his weapon jammed. Sergeant Soto had a radio



with him, but was unable to contact either Harper or Zahuranic and presumed that the VC had entered the building. He then radioed Marine House and informed them of the situation as he knew it.

By this time, Captain O'Brien was on his way. The duty noncommissioned officer at Marine House had awakened him with the news about the attack almost as soon as it had occurred. The Marine captain with Sergeant Richard G. Frattarelli, his driver, jumped into the sedan that had a radio and departed for the Embassy, some five blocks away. Three other Marines, two sergeants and a corporal, followed in a jeep. Reaching a South Vietnamese police check point about a block away from the Embassy and hearing that the VC were still there, O'Brien decided that the Marines should leave the two vehicles at the police station.<sup>39</sup>

Covering the rest of the distance to the Embassy compound by foot, O'Brien and his small entourage arrived at the northeast gate unseen by any of the VC attackers. He called out to the MPs who were supposed to be there, but instead of the Americans, he saw five or six of the VC who still had their backs to the Marines. Captain O'Brien remembered being, "momentarily stunned by the abrupt . . . confrontation with the VC," but quickly recovered, ordering the one Marine with the Beretta submachine gun to open fire. As the Beretta gave a long burst, the other Marines shot their .38-caliber pistols at the enemy inside the gate. A sudden automatic weapons fusillade forced O'Brien and his men to take cover behind the compound wall and some nearby trees.

At this point, Captain O'Brien directed Sergeant Frattarelli to return to the sedan and radio Marine House for reinforcements. Frattarelli ran down the street about a half a block, when some frightened South Vietnamese police opened up upon him. The Marine sergeant took cover in an entrance way and "called out American" and the police let him through. Reaching the radio, he requested the additional men and ammunition and then retraced his route back to O'Brien.<sup>40</sup>

Back at Marine House, Gunnery Sergeant Allen Morrison had taken charge of the situation there. Although not in contact with Captain O'Brien until Frattarelli had radioed him, Morrison had communicated with both Sergeant Soto and the Marine sergeant with the Ambassador. The Ambassador was safe and had moved from his residence to the house of one of the Embassy security officers. According to Morrison, the Ambassador had delegated the defense of the Embassy

to him in that he not been able to reach anyone else. Even before hearing from Sergeant Frattarelli, Gunnery Sergeant Morrison had sent a reaction team consisting of Staff Sergeant Leroy J. Banks and five other Marines in a vehicle to the Embassy.<sup>41</sup>

On the way, U.S. Army MPs stopped the Marines about 300 yards from the Embassy compound and told Staff Sergeant Banks to take his men out of the area as the VC were attacking. Banks told the MPs that they were Embassy Marines and "our job and orders were to get to the Embassy and save it." The Marine staff sergeant then directed his men to leave their vehicle and the team went the rest of the way on foot reaching the Norodom building, housing the Consulate and other U.S. government offices, on the southwest side of the Embassy. Banks' Marines then tried to maneuver north using the compound wall to find an entrance into the Embassy compound itself. They almost reached the police station where the first group had left their vehicles, but like Sergeant Frattarelli, came under fire from the edgy Vietnamese policemen. Unable to advance any further, Banks led his men back to the Norodom Building and joined the Marine guards already there.<sup>42</sup>

In the meantime, at the northeast end of the Embassy, Captain O'Brien and his group placed as much fire upon the VC inside the compound as best they could. They tried unsuccessfully to shoot off the locks of one of the gates. Joined by six MPs about 0330, the Marines continued to lay down a base of fire and two of the MPs took positions in a nearby building. The Marine captain also told Sergeant Frattarelli to return to the sedan and radio for more assistance and weapons. The Vietnamese police again shot at Frattarelli, who once more yelled out that he was an American, but "this time it didn't work, they just kept firing." While taking up new positions, O'Brien and his Marines would remain out of radio contact until daylight.<sup>43</sup>

At the Norodom, Staff Sergeant Banks positioned his men in defensive positions and placed several on the roof where they could fire down on the VC in the compound. Banks and a small group made an unsuccessful attempt to enter the Embassy compound through the Norodom gate, but were forced to fall back as the VC had all the gates covered with automatic weapons. Although reinforced by an Army MP lieutenant with seven MPs under him, the Americans with a few M16s, three Beretta submachine guns, and .38 caliber pistols, were badly outgunned by the VC armed with machine guns, rocket launchers, and

grenades. Unlike Captain O'Brien, however, Sergeant Banks was able to maintain radio contact with Gunnery Sergeant Morrison in Marine House and remain in telephone communication with Sergeant Harper inside the Embassy. After consulting with Gunnery Sergeant Morrison and Harper, Banks and the Army lieutenant thought it best to wait until daylight and more reinforcements before making any further moves. With American MPs and Marines surrounding the Embassy and the continuing harassing fire, the VC had little chance to escape and no prospect of reaching the Chancery itself.<sup>44</sup>

The waiting until daylight proved to be a sound tactic. At about 0630, a U.S. Army helicopter alighted on the Chancery roof and evacuated both Sergeant Soto and the wounded Corporal Zahuranic. Shortly afterward, Captain O'Brien was able to reach his radio and radioed Gunnery Sergeant Morrison for additional weapons and a few more men, both of which were forthcoming. With the additional reinforcements and with strong covering fires, the Marines and MPs by 0730 finally forced their way into the compound from both over the northeast wall and through the Norodom compound gate. The VC only offered a desultory resistance and took what refuge they could. At 0800, another Army helicopter landed troops from Company C, 502d Infantry, 101st Airborne Division on the roof of the Chancery. All that was left was the moping up. At 0900, Captain O'Brien grouped his Marines together and made a floor to floor sweep of the Chancery to make sure none of the attackers had somehow taken refuge there. It would be another two hours before the building would be clear. The Marine captain estimated that there were about 200 people swarming around the Embassy grounds and the building itself including "reporters, writers, cameramen, MPs, 101st Airborne troops, and civilians." People were "taking pictures, asking questions, and picking up anything in sight, everything was up for grabs." Finally by late morning, the crowd had thinned out and the Marines had effected some "semblance of order." From the onset of the attack until the last Viet Cong was killed by retired Army Colonel George Jacobsen, the Mission Coordinator for the Embassy, in his house on the grounds, was about seven hours. Most of the VC attackers were dead except for two prisoners and the Americans suffered casualties of five dead and five wounded. One of the dead, Corporal James C. Marshall who had been killed by a sniper bullet while on the roof of the Norodom Building, and five of the wounded were Marines.

While one of the most dramatic events of the Communist Tet offensive, especially considering the play it received upon American television, the attack on the Embassy was in reality a sideshow. The attack had failed miserably, and the attackers never reached the Chancery building, but largely milled about in the compound until finally killed or taken prisoner. Despite its futility, the assault on the Embassy compound provided a propaganda coup for the enemy and pointed out the need for further security at the Embassy. By the end of the year, the Marine Security Guard had expanded by 39 men with plans to form the detachment into a separate company. On 1 February 1969, the Saigon detachment became Company E, Marine Security Guard Battalion (State Dept).<sup>45</sup>

#### *Individual Marines in Saigon and Elsewhere in Vietnam*

At the beginning of the year, outside of I Corps and mostly stationed in Saigon were some 200 individual Marines almost evenly divided between officers and enlisted men. Most were assigned to the MACV headquarters staff, but others served on the MACV radio and television staff, with the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), and other special groups. On the MACV staff, the senior officer was Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, who as MACV Deputy J-3 for Operations, ran the MACV Combat Operations Center, and developed a very close relationship with General Westmoreland, the MACV commander. To a certain extent, Chaisson became Westmoreland's informal advisor on Marine matters. A frank, outspoken officer, Chaisson was perhaps best remembered for his press conference on 3 February 1968, when he admitted that the Viet Cong had surprised the MACV command with the intensity and coordination of the Tet offensive.<sup>46</sup>

In mid-1968, Marine Brigadier John N. McLaughlin relieved Chaisson in the same capacity. By the end of November, for whatever reason, there was some reduction in the Marines assigned to MACV, now consisting of 77 officers and 53 enlisted men.<sup>47</sup>

In I Corps, there was another group of Marines who served individually as advisors under MACV to South Vietnamese Army units. In late 1967, 20 Marine officers and 23 enlisted men served in that capacity. Another 129 Marine enlisted men provided security to the I Corps Advisory Group at Da Nang. By the end of 1968, the total number of Marine advisors was 27, 15 officers and 12 enlisted men. The enlisted Marines for security were no longer needed.<sup>48</sup>

*Advisors to the Vietnamese Marine Corps*

The largest Marine advisory effort was with the South Vietnamese Marine Corps. Beginning with one U.S. Marine advisor in early 1955, the U.S. Marine Advisory Unit (MAU) to the South Vietnamese Marine Corps had by January 1968 grown to an authorized strength of 33 personnel consisting of 27 Marine officers, a Navy doctor, four enlisted Marines and a Navy corpsman. Commanded by Colonel Richard L. Michael, Jr., who held the title, Senior Marine Advisor, the MAU was part of the Naval Advisory Group in the U.S. MACV advisory organization. In Saigon, Michael maintained a small headquarters which consisted of the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Glenn W. Rodney, and a small administrative staff. The rest served in the field with the deployed units of the Vietnamese Marine Corps.<sup>49</sup>

Outside of the supply, ordnance, artillery, and amphibious specialist officers, the remaining 16 U.S. Marine advisors served with the two South Vietnamese Marine task force headquarters or the six infantry battalions. Each task force was allotted a U.S. Marine major and captain as an advisor and assistant advisor. A U.S. Marine captain and first lieutenant were assigned to each of the battalions as the advisor and assistant advisor to the commander. For the individual Marine infantry individual advisor, it meant a continued "nomadic lonely life." As one Marine officer wrote it was not "unusual for a Marine advisor to report aboard; undergo in-processing of two or three days; and join a deployed unit not to return to the Advisory Unit for months at a time." A senior advisor to one of the Vietnamese battalions, Captain Jerry I. Simpson, commented that while serving with the Vietnamese he subsisted "on the same rations" as the Vietnamese Marines and would not see any Americans, including his assistant advisor, "for several days at a time."<sup>50</sup>

As could be expected, the South Vietnamese Marine Corps attempted to pattern itself after the U.S. Marine Corps model. It consisted of a Lieutenant General Commandant and a small central headquarters in Saigon, two combat task forces, Task Force Alpha and Task Force Bravo, six infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, an Amphibious Support Battalion, and a training center. Most of the Vietnamese Marine field officers and many of the company grade officers had attended at least the U.S. Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico, Virginia. A few of the more senior officers also graduated from the more advanced U.S. Amphibious Warfare School at the U.S. Marine base. By Janu-

ary 1968, the Vietnamese Marines numbered over 7,300 men and prided itself like its sister service in the United States on its elan and its reputation as one of the country's elite fighting force.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the similarities between the two Marine Corps, there were important differences. While its officers and some of its enlisted men had received amphibious warfare training, the South Vietnamese Marine Corps actually participated in very few amphibious operations. Having its origins in the Vietnamese commando and riverine companies under the French, the Vietnamese Marine Corps at first operated much in the French tradition after its establishment in 1954. In fact until May 1955, a French officer remained in command of the Vietnamese Marines. With the growing American influence, the Vietnamese Marine organization tended to reflect the U.S. Marine Corps with a growing emphasis upon the amphibious mission. Still, from the very beginning of their existence, the Vietnamese Marines were committed to campaigns against the Viet Cong. While still continuing riverine operations, especially in the MeKong Delta and in the Rung Sat sector south of Saigon, there was little call for assaults across a defended beach.<sup>52</sup>

The basic advantage that the Vietnamese Marines offered was their national character. Recruited from the nation at large, rather than from any one region as most of the South Vietnamese Army divisions were, they could be deployed anywhere in Vietnam when the situation demanded. Together with other specialist units such as the South Vietnamese rangers and airborne, the Vietnamese Marines formed the National General Reserve. Operating directly under the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), these units became in effect fire brigades to rush to the most urgent hot spots and put out the flames. In one sense, the most important quality of the Vietnamese Marines was their demonstrated loyalty over time to the central government and the Joint General Staff.<sup>53</sup>

Given the dominance of the Vietnamese military in the central government, no South Vietnamese military organization could be entirely divorced from internal politics. In the coup against then-President Diem in 1963, Vietnamese Marines played a decisive role in toppling the regime. While the Vietnamese Commandant, Le Nguyen Khang, did not take an active part in bringing down the government, he was aware of the plot and took no action to prevent it. Following the coup, Khang became the South Vietnamese military attache in the Philippines, but in three months he once more resumed his duties as Commandant of the Viet-



Both photos are courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd, USMC (Ret)

*Above, U.S. Marine advisors to Vietnamese Marine Task Force Alpha in 1968 are from left: Capt Thomas B. Bagley, Jr., Assistant Advisor, TF Alpha; 1stLt Larry S. MacFarlane, Assistant Advisor, 1st Bn, VNMC; Capt Ronald D. Ray, Assistant Advisor, TF Alpha; 1stLt Louis Garcia, Senior Advisor, 1st Bn, VNMC; an unidentified U.S. Marine warrant officer; and Maj Talman C. Budd, Senior Advisor, TF Alpha. Below is the main gate to the South Vietnamese Marine headquarters in Saigon. The Vietnamese Marine Corps symbol is clearly visible on the sign above the gate.*



name Marine Corps. In 1966, Khang and his Marines sided with the central government against the "Struggle Movement" in I Corps and helped to subdue those ARVN units loyal to the former I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi.<sup>54</sup>

By January 1968, Khang, now a lieutenant general, not only was Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, but according to his count, wore as many as six different "hats." In addition to his Marine Corps command, he was the Commander of the Capital Military District which included the city of Saigon and its immediate vicinity; he was the commanding general of the South Vietnamese III Corps Military Tactical Zone; and also was a member of the National Leadership Council, which "in effect ruled the country." Moreover, as III Corps commander, he was the "governor-delegate for administration" or III Corps administrator, and as commander of the Capital Military District, he was the military governor of Saigon. Despite these various responsibilities, Khang considered that his "main job was still command of the Marines."<sup>55</sup>

While Khang still held overall control of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, he relied on his assistant and chief of staff, Colonel Bui Thi Lan for the day to day running of the headquarters. The two task force commanders, for the most part, had direct operational control of the infantry battalions. In January 1968 prior to Tet, Task Force Alpha consisting of two infantry battalions and an artillery battalion was committed to the Bong Son area in II Corps, encountering only light and sporadic resistance. The other task Force, TF Bravo, also with two battalions, was attached to the 7th ARVN Division in the IV Corps sector. Of the remaining two Marine infantry battalions, one remained under the direct control of the Capital Military District just outside of Saigon and the other had retired to its base camp at Vung Tau.<sup>56</sup>

This all changed in the early morning hours of 31 January, when the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army launched their country-wide Tet offensive. In Saigon, Viet Cong sappers had entered the Embassy compound while other Communist units struck the Vietnamese Joint General Staff headquarters, the adjoining Tan Son Nhut airbase, and other military bases on the outskirts of the city. After the

initial surprise, mixed U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in and around the city regrouped and began the counterattack.<sup>57</sup>

The Vietnamese Marines quickly became enmeshed in the fighting. At the outset of the enemy offensive the only Marine unit anywhere near Saigon was the 3d Battalion, attached to the Capital Military Command, but committed to an operation several thousand meters west of the city. When the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff began to realize the intensity of the enemy effort, they immediately called upon the Marine units to reinforce the ARVN units already in Saigon. At 0430 on the 31st, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff alerted the 4th Battalion, which was "more or less [in] a standdown" at its base camp at Vung Tau for air movement into Tan Son Nhut Airport on the outskirts of the city.<sup>58</sup> Because of ground fog and enemy ground fire near Tan Son Nhut, the aircraft carrying the Marines did not land until 0930. After an initial briefing, the battalion then moved to reinforce the Joint General headquarters south of the airbase. Although killing a reported 20 Viet Cong but sustaining 9 wounded, the battalion was unable to close with the enemy out of concern of "inflicting excessive civilian casualties." Engaging in a desultory fire fight until 1430 with Communist troops who had penetrated the JGS compound, the battalion received orders to move north in the Gia Dinh sector of Saigon to relieve the ARVN Phu Dong armored base that was under attack.<sup>59</sup>

The battalion arrived at its destination, 4,000 meters north of its previous position, about 1630. It immediately mounted a two-company assault, supported by ARVN tanks, and two U.S. helicopter gunships providing limited air support against the ARVN compound, now held by an estimated NVA battalion. The enemy commander warned the Marines that his troops would kill the South Vietnamese civilian dependents, being held as hostage. After the supporting tanks in the lead "blew a large opening" in the surrounding wall, the Vietnamese Marines entered the armored compound headquarters "with machine guns blazing" and found the charred bodies of the dependents heaped in a large pile. Among the dead were the wife and eight children of the base commander, an ARVN lieutenant colonel, who also had been murdered. With enemy forces still in strength in the sector, darkness coming on, and the inability to provide continuing air support, the South Vietnamese JGS ordered the battalion commander to withdraw to more defensible positions. For the day, the battalion had sustained

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\*Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hainsworth, who as a captain served as an assistant battalion advisor to the Vietnamese Marines, noted that "many of these VNMC Battalion assignments were politically sensitive and motivated within the VNMC hierarchy and the Joint General Staff." LtCol John J. Hainsworth, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Hainsworth Comments.

casualties of 7 dead and 52 wounded and claimed to have killed 100 of the enemy.<sup>60</sup>

In the meantime, the JGS had brought Task Force Bravo headquarters and the 1st and 2d Battalions into Saigon. At 1500, the 1st Battalion began arriving in an improvised helicopter landing zone inside the Joint General Staff headquarters compound from Cai Lay in IV Corps. With the completion of the helilift a half-hour later, the battalion occupied the positions vacated by the 4th Battalion when it deployed north to relieve the armored base. U.S. C-130 transport aircraft brought the task force headquarters and the 2d Battalion into Tan Son Nhut Airport with the last elements landing at 1930. The task force headquarters and the 2d Battalion then joined the 1st Battalion near the Joint General Staff compound.<sup>61</sup>

While making his overnight command post outside of the JGS compound, the Marine task force commander

received new orders for the next day. He was to turn over operational control of his 2d Battalion to a nearby South Vietnamese airborne commander and then move with the 1st Battalion to the positions of the 4th Battalion near the armor base. After taking command of the 4th Battalion, the task force, once more, was to reassume the attack.<sup>62</sup>

On the morning of 1 February, however, the North Vietnamese launched a counterattack on the Vietnamese forces near the armored compound. The NVA overran a neighboring ARVN artillery base, but the Vietnamese Marine forces in defensive positions, supported by air repulsed the enemy in fighting which even involved "some hand to hand combat." The two battalions of Task Force Bravo then mounted their own offensive. In heavy seesaw fighting that lasted until 3 February, the Vietnamese Marines finally cleared the sector. The costs, however, had been heavy on both sides. For the three days, the Vietnamese

*Vietnamese Marines are seen with a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon during the Tet offensive. In one of the most memorable scenes of the war, captured by Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams, a few minutes after this scene South Vietnamese National Police Chief BGen Nguyen Ngoc Loan, would personally execute the prisoner.*

Photo courtesy of Col John W. Ripley, USMC (Ret)



Marines suffered casualties of 17 dead and 88 wounded and reported over 220 enemy dead. In the fighting, three of the U.S. Marine advisors were among the wounded. These included both the senior and assistant advisors of the 4th Battalion, Major William P. Eshelman and Captain John J. Hainsworth, and the senior advisor to the 1st Battalion, Captain Jerry I. Simpson. All three of the Americans recovered from their wounds although only Major Eshelman returned to his battalion.<sup>63\*</sup>

Beginning on 3 February, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff began its official counteroffensive in Saigon, codenamed Operation *Tran Hung Dao*, and General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, took personal command. According to the plan, Vien divided Saigon into five zones and gave them letter designations A through E. He later added a sixth zone, Zone F, in the outlying southern suburbs that became the responsibility of U.S. forces. South Vietnamese Airborne, Army, police, and Ranger units were given Zones A, C, D, and E to clear. Task Force Bravo assumed control of Zone B, containing the Gia Dinh sector which included the northeastern part of the city and its suburbs. The 2d Battalion remained under the operational control of the Capital Military Command going wherever it was needed until 18 February when it rejoined Task Force Bravo.<sup>64</sup>

Task Force Bravo remained committed to Operation *Tran Hung Do* in the Gia Dinh sector until the operation came to an end on 11 March. While action flared up occasionally during this period, by 7 February, the Vietnamese forces supported by U.S. forces had broken the back of the enemy offensive. Never fewer than two battalions, more often with three, Task Force Bravo and the individual Marine battalions in the operation reported over 700 of the enemy dead, captured 54, and detained over 2,000 suspects. They recovered 44 crew-served and 241 individual Communist weapons. The cost to the Marines was also high, 49 dead and 227 wounded.<sup>65</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Simpson remembered that the enemy could have used "the 105mm howitzers in the artillery compound . . . to shell the entire Ton Son Nhut area." He recalled that in the enemy attack on the artillery compound, the Vietnamese Marine 1st Battalion closely coordinated fires with the only American in the artillery compound, a U.S. Army major. The ARVN artillerymen lowered their howitzers "to 0 elevation and were firing point blank at the VC." The resulting shelling hit a gasoline station north of the 1st Battalion and provided "excellent illumination of the entire area." LtCol Jerry I. Simpson, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Hainsworth noted that he had just joined the 4th Battalion. Hainsworth Comments.

While Task Force Bravo and at least one other Vietnamese Marine infantry battalion attached to the Capital Military Command remained in Saigon, Task Force Alpha deployed to Hue and took part in the retaking of the Citadel in that city. From its initial commitment to II Corps, at the start of Tet, Task Force Alpha and its battalions had returned to Saigon to be in position to reinforce Task Force Bravo if needed. After losing operational control of two of its battalions, on 9 February, the task force headquarters and the 1st Battalion departed Tan Son Nhut Airport by air for Phu Bai. By 14 February, the initial units were reinforced by two more battalions, the 4th and 5th. After some initial misunderstandings, the commander of the 1st ARVN Division, General Ngo Quang Truong, assigned Task Force Alpha to clearing the western Citadel. Taking part in some of the heaviest fighting in the war, Task Force A remained under the operational control of the 1st ARVN Division and in Hue or its environs until 27 March when it relieved Task Force Bravo in Saigon. In the fighting for Hue, the Vietnamese Marine task force sustained casualties of nearly 90 dead and 350 wounded.\*\* All told, for the period 30 January through 27 March which included the battles for both Saigon and Hue, Vietnamese Marines reported killing over 1,300 of the Communists and captured another 82 while detaining nearly 2,000 suspects. The entire VNMC suffered 128 killed, 588 wounded, and 1 missing in action.<sup>66</sup>

For the rest of the year, the two Vietnamese Marine task forces and individual battalions would be committed to combat situations without hardly any reprieve. While encountering little of the ferocity of Tet during most of the remaining months, the intensity of the fighting that flared up in Saigon again in May and June for the Vietnamese Marines almost matched that for the earlier period. For the entire year, including Tet, the Vietnamese Marine Corps conducted 196 battalion-size operations or larger which resulted in 2,761 reported enemy killed, 352 prisoners, and 1,150 captured weapons. While on operations 98 percent of the time, the Marines sustained losses of 369 killed, 1,651 wounded, and 4 missing in action. According to Lieutenant Colonel James T. Breckinridge, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Rodney in April, "the Vietnamese Marine Corps is the best unit in RVN for the amount of money spent to support it. If these Marines are

\*\*For description of the battle for Hue City see Chapters 9–12.

properly employed and supported and given a target, they can and have outperformed other RVNAF ground units.”<sup>67</sup>

Despite such praise, the Vietnamese Marines had come under significant criticism during the course of the year. Frustrated at what he considered the slow progress of Task Force Alpha in the Hue Citadel, General Creighton W. Abrams, then Deputy ComUSMACV, radioed General Westmoreland that he was considering recommending to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff the dissolution of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. In perhaps an even more delicate political situation for the Vietnamese Marines Corps, General Khang, the Vietnamese Marine Commandant, resigned all of his positions in June except his command of the Marine Corps after an American helicopter gunship accidentally hit a friendly position, killing several supporters of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky. While Khang had been identified as a supporter of Ky, he claimed that Ky and his supporters blamed him for the incident.



*Above, a Vietnamese Marine lieutenant artillery forward observer calls for a fire mission during street fighting in Saigon during the Tet offensive. Below, Marine infantrymen supported by armor advance in Saigon fighting. Note that the lead Marine has his gas mask open and ready to put on.*

Both Photos are courtesy of Col John W. Ripley, USMC (Ret)







Photo courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd, USMC (Ret)

*A Vietnamese tank protects the Vietnamese TF Alpha command post in Gia Dinh in renewed fighting in Saigon during May 1968.*

According to Khang, to avoid all suspicion, he retained only his post as Marine Corps Commandant. Lieutenant Colonel Breckinridge observed that there apparently was a rumor campaign to discredit Khang in October, claiming that he was about to bring in Marine battalions into Saigon to topple the government. By the end of the year, however, Khang accompanied President Thieu on a ceremonial trip to IV Corps. Breckinridge interpreted this fact to show that Khang was not in disfavor.<sup>68</sup>

While the U.S. Marine advisors for the most part respected their Vietnamese counterparts and the fighting qualities of the Vietnamese Marine, they also recognized several of the shortcomings of the Vietnamese organization. According to Breckinridge, who reviewed all of the American advisor after action and monthly reports, there was a constant theme of lack of staff work and refusal of commanders to delegate authority, lack of tactical coordination, poor employment of mortars, and poor caliber of the noncommissioned officers. During the battle for Hue, for example, the 1st Battalion was heavily engaged for two days while the “two other battalions of the task force watched the fighting from a distance of about one kilometer.” The Marine advisor to the battalion attributed some of the heavy losses of the

Marines during the fighting on the failure of the task force commander “to commit all or part of his watching idle battalions.”<sup>69\*</sup>

Despite such obvious weakness on the part of the Vietnamese Marines, Breckinridge, who was serving his second tour in Vietnam, the first being in 1955 with the first advisory group, also saw much improvement. The Vietnamese took several steps to improve both tactics and leadership. The Marines opened up a school for noncommissioned officers and a school for the use of mortars. In March 1968, after a review of the entire organization with the Joint General Staff, MACV agreed to support the transformation of the Marine Corps into a Marine light division. In October the Vietnamese Marine Brigade officially became the Vietnamese Marine Corps division consisting of two brigades. With the potential of continued growth and an earned combat reputation, the Vietnamese Marine Corps had become an even more integral part of the Vietnamese General Reserve.<sup>70</sup>

\*Colonel Breckinridge noted in his comments that his “after-tour report was a compilation of many such reports submitted by previous advisors and was an attempt to assist both advisors and Vietnamese. Areas wherein . . . [it] was reported that the VNMC made mistakes, in many cases, are the same areas that Americans would also have fallen short.” Col James T. Breckinridge, Comments on draft, dtd 1Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

## 1968: An Overview

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The year 1968 had been a momentous one in the Vietnam War, possibly the defining year, for the U.S. effort in that conflict, including the Marine Corps role. As the year began, III MAF, the Marine Corps command in Vietnam, had one of its two Marine divisions, the 3d, strung out along the eastern DMZ in largely fixed positions tied to the strong point obstacle system (SPOS) or barrier. While pressing the 3d Marine Division forces in eastern Quang Tri, the North Vietnamese succeeded in isolating the Marine regiment, the 26th Marines, at Khe Sanh in northwestern I CTZ, near the Laotian border. The enemy had cut Route 9, the main east-west land artery, and forced the Marines to rely entirely upon air for resupply. Even in southern I Corps, there were portents of growing enemy strength. The newly formed U.S. Army 23d or Americal Division continued to engage NVA and VC forces. Furthermore, U.S. commanders obtained intelligence that the *2d NVA Division* planned attacks aimed at both the fire support bases of the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division in the Que Son Valley and the 1st Marine Division positions in the Da Nang sector.

As with most aspects of the Vietnam War, the message was mixed. Together with the intelligence about the expansion of the war, there were continuing rumors about new peace initiatives by the North Vietnamese. Earlier, MACV published intelligence estimates that claimed enemy total strength had declined. Moreover, General William C. Westmoreland, the MACV commander, in November 1967, had proclaimed that the end of the war was in sight and issued directives calling for a full offensive by allied forces on all fronts. According to American pacification measurements, more and more villages were supposedly under allied control. In I Corps, for example, at the end of December, III MAF reported about 55 percent of the population living in so-called secure areas.\*

Yet as January progressed, MACV and III MAF focused more and more upon the north. The buildup of enemy forces around Khe Sanh could no longer be denied. Originally planning deep penetration operations into enemy base areas in the Do Xa and A Shau areas in I Corps, General Westmoreland decided

instead to reinforce the Marine forces in the north with two more Army divisions, the 1st Air Cavalry and 101st Airborne. The MACV commander expected the enemy major thrust either to be directly across the DMZ, or more likely at Khe Sanh, while launching diversionary attacks throughout South Vietnam.

III MAF also prepared for the onslaught, with its focus also on the north. Beginning in December 1967, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, the MAF commander, directed the 1st Marine Division at Da Nang to take over the 3d Marine Division area of operations in Thua Thien Province. In a massive relocation of units between the two Marine Divisions during December and January, appropriately called Operation Checkers, the 1st Marine Division assumed responsibility for the Phu Loc area and established its Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai, as well. The increasing enemy strength around Khe Sanh in mid-January forced the 3d Marine Division to reinforce the garrison with yet another battalion. With the arrival of the 1st Air Cavalry Division in northern I Corps and the establishment of its base area at Camp Evans, about the same time, made the original Checkers plans obsolete. All eyes were now on Khe Sanh.

As General Westmoreland prepared for what he thought would be the decisive battle of the war, his relationship with the Marine command had grown rather tenuous. From the beginning of the commitment of Marine forces to Vietnam, there had been differences between the MACV approach and that of the Marine. From the start, the Marines emphasized pacification and population control while the MACV commander had stressed the large unit war against the VC and NVA regular units. The commitment of large Marine forces to the barrier project along the DMZ also had placed a strain upon the relationship. Although irreverently referred to as the "McNamara Wall," Westmoreland fully backed the venture and believed the Marines to be dragging their feet. Finally there was the subject of Khe Sanh, itself. Only under MACV pressure did III MAF garrison the isolated outpost in the first place and Westmoreland was concerned that the Marines tended to underestimate the threat to the base. Given these circumstances and what he considered Marine inflexibility about control of its own avia-

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\*See Chapter 1.

tion, the MACV commander gave some consideration about a change in command relations in the north. He finally decided, as a half measure, to establish a MACV (Forward) headquarters at Phu Bai under his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, and prepared the way for single management of Marine air under his deputy for air, Air Force General William Momyer.

While, on 21 January 1968, the Communists initiated a massive bombardment on Khe Sanh, their main offensive thrust was not the Marine base nor the DMZ forces, but the cities and lines of communication throughout South Vietnam from the MeKong Delta in the south to Quang Tri City in the north. Khe Sanh would remain under siege from 21 January until early April. Although making several strong probes, overrunning the Special Forces at Lang Vei, and maintaining large troop formations around the base, the North Vietnamese never launched a full-fledged ground assault against Khe Sanh. Speculation and controversy still dominate the discussion about the siege and the motivation of the North Vietnamese. Did the enemy hope for a replay of Dien Bien Phu, its successful campaign against the French in 1954, or merely use Khe Sanh as a feint for his Tet offensive? Given the number of troop resources that the enemy placed around Khe Sanh and the pounding they absorbed from artillery and air, there can be no doubt that the North Vietnamese would have taken the base, if they could have done so. On the other hand, there was a limit on the price they were willing to pay, and in all probability, Khe Sanh was only one objective among many. The Communists hoped and possibly believed that their Tet offensive would bring about a true people's revolution against the South Vietnamese regime, resulting in the defection of the ARVN and the fall of the government.

Arguably, however, the Communists may never have realistically expected their Tet offensive to cause an uprising throughout South Vietnam and probably had in mind a more limited and attainable goal. A case could be made that at least in I Corps, their main objective was not Khe Sanh, but Hue. They perhaps hoped that the capture of Hue would result in the defection of the South Vietnamese forces and the loss of other population centers in the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. Such a result would have cut the allied lines of communication and left the 3d Marine Division suspended without support in the northern regions bordering the DMZ and Laos. This would have left the Communists in a strong position for obtaining their own terms. Given both the

resources that the North Vietnamese put into the battle and the tenacity with which they fought, it was obvious that the Hue campaign was a major component of the entire Tet offensive. According to an enemy account, the North Vietnamese military command in planning the offensive took into consideration that the U.S. and South Vietnamese had concentrated their forces in the north, expecting an attack along Route 9. It viewed Hue as the weak link in the allied defenses in the northern two provinces.

The battle for Hue was a relatively near thing. Only the failure of the North Vietnamese to overrun the *Mang Ca* and MACV compounds permitted the allies to retain a toehold in both the Citadel and the new city. With the holding of these two positions, the Americans and South Vietnamese were able to bring in reinforcements to mount a counteroffensive. Even then, if the enemy had blown the An Cuu Bridge across Route 1 on the first day, the Marines would not have been able to send in their initial battalions and supplies into the city. If the enemy had made a stronger effort to cut both the water and land lines of communications, the outcome of the struggle for Hue would have been less predictable. The Marine rapid response and quick adaptability to street fighting together with the fact that the South Vietnamese forces did not defect permitted the allied forces to attain the upper hand. Fortunately, the 1st Air Cavalry Division had arrived in northern I Corps prior to Tet and was eventually able to commit four battalions to the battle. By the end of February, the allies controlled Hue.

With the securing of the city of Hue, the enemy's countrywide Tet offensive had about spent itself. While the enemy offensive failed, public opinion polls in the United States revealed a continuing disillusionment upon the part of the American public. President Johnson also decided upon a change of course. On 31 March, he announced his decision not to stand for reelection, to restrict the bombing campaign over North Vietnam, and to authorize only a limited reinforcement of American troops to Vietnam.

Notwithstanding the mood in Washington and ready to begin his counter-offensive, General Westmoreland altered again his command arrangements in I Corps. On 10 March, he disestablished his MACV (Forward) Headquarters. He replaced it with Provisional Corps, later XXIV Corps, whose commander, an Army lieutenant general, was directly subordinate to III MAF. At the same time, however, General Westmoreland designated the Seventh Air Force commander, as "single manager for air" and gave him "mission

direction" over Marine fixed-wing aircraft. Despite Marine Corps protests, Westmoreland's order prevailed. While obtaining major modifications to the ruling, Marine air in Vietnam would operate under the single manager system to the end of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

With the end of the enemy offensive, the allies planned to breakout from Khe Sanh. While North Vietnamese ground forces did not follow up on their Lang Vei attack, they incessantly probed the hill outposts and perimeter. Employing innovative air tactics, Marine and Air Force transport and helicopter pilots kept the base supplied. Finally on 14 April, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division reinforced by a Marine regiment relieved the base. On 14 April, the 77-day "siege" of Khe Sanh was over.

The North Vietnamese were far from defeated, however, and in early May launched their "mini-Tet offensive." Except for increased fighting in the capital city of Saigon and the heavy fighting in the eastern DMZ sector, the North Vietnamese May offensive was largely limited to attacks by fire at allied bases and acts of terrorism in the hamlets and villages. In I Corps, the major attempt was to cut the supply lines in the DMZ sector which led to the very bloody fighting at Dai Do and around Dong Ha. The result again, however, was the defeat of the North Vietnamese forces.

By mid-1968, the allied forces were on the offensive throughout I Corps. General Abrams had succeeded General Westmoreland as Commander, USMACV. Unlike Westmoreland, Abrams had little or no commitment to either keeping a garrison at Khe

Sanh or to the barrier. The closing out of the base at Khe Sanh in July 1968 permitted the 3d Marine Division under Major General Raymond G. Davis to launch a series of mobile firebase operations ranging the length and breadth of the northern border area. Long neglected, the barrier concept was officially abandoned in October.

In the late summer of 1968, the Communists launched another "mini-Tet" offensive, but were again bloodily repulsed. By the end of 1968, both the 3d Marine and 1st Marine Divisions were conducting large mobile operations. After a standstill for most of the year, Marine measurements of pacification showed progress in regaining the countryside. In December, enemy-initiated attacks fell to the lowest level in over two years.

Still, no one was about to predict victory and the Communists were far from defeated. The various "Tet" offensives had provided a benchmark for both sides, forcing both to reassess their strategies. After the last "mini-Tet," the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong scaled down their large-unit war, probably out of both weakness and the expectation that the Americans would eventually withdraw. While Tet was a military setback for the Communist forces with the decimation of the Viet Cong and many of their political cadre in the South, the American government, people, and military establishment also realized that there was a limit to American participation in the war. As Marine Lieutenant General John R. Chaisson, later stated, the Marine Corps "had adopted from 1969 on, the idea that we were in the postwar period."<sup>1</sup>