

CHAPTER 4

A New Threat in Northern I Corps

The Buildup at Phu Bai—The Fall of A Shau—The Aftermath of A Shau—Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon

The Buildup at Phu Bai

At the beginning of 1966, the Phu Bai enclave, centered around the airfield located there and eight miles southeast of Hue in Thua Thien Province, was the smallest and northernmost of the three Marine base areas. The Phu Bai forces consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hanifin, Jr.'s reinforced 2d Battalion, 1st Marines supported by a Marine artillery battalion and helicopter squadron. Lieutenant Colonel Edwin M. Rudzis' 4th Battalion, 12th Marines artillery pieces included 105mm howitzers, 107mm howtars (a combination of a howitzer and mortar), and both towed and self-propelled 155mm howitzers.* HMM-163 under Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. House was the UH-34 helicopter squadron at the base. Rounding out the defensive forces at Phu Bai and attached to Hanifin's battalion, were a platoon each of tanks and Ontos, a platoon of reconnaissance troops, and a platoon of engineers. A small logistics support unit provided the material support for the Phu Bai units. Although the 2d Battalion was under the operational control of

the 3d Marines at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, as the base coordinator, was responsible for the 2,000-plus Marines at Phu Bai and the defense of both the airfield and the U.S. Army's 8th Radio Research Unit facility based there.

Hanifin accomplished his defensive tasks by extensive patrolling throughout the 76-square-mile TAOR. The terrain to the west consisted of low rolling hills. Lack of vegetation and very little population permitted easy spotting of any movement in this area. North and east of the airstrip, an extensive built-up area, consisting of a series of hamlets and ricelands, extended to the waterways. Three rivers, the Dai Giang to the north and east, the Nong to the east and south, and the Ta Trach on the west, formed a semicircle around the Marine enclave, roughly defining the boundaries of the entire TAOR. The combined action company, which was formed at Phu Bai in August 1965, provided the defensive force for the built-up area, called Zone A. Six combined action platoons were in this sector, one in each of the hamlets of Thu Duong, Thuy Tan, Phu Bai, and Loc Ban, and two guarding Route 1 and the railroad bridges. Roving combat patrols kept the enemy off-balance and maintained the security of the base.

Through 1965 and into January 1966, the enemy threat in the Phu Bai area was largely guerrilla in nature. Enemy units confined themselves to night harassment of the Marine perimeter, minelaying, and intelligence gathering. According to the Marine enemy order of battle, only one VC battalion was in the area, the 360-man *810 VC Main Force Battalion*, located in the mountains 14 kilometers south of the base. During January, the Marines mounted three combined operations with the ARVN outside of the TAOR, but accounted for only 22 enemy dead, largely as a result of Marine artillery and air. At the end of the month, the Marines' major concern was with the VC's increased use of mines throughout the TAOR, and not with any major buildup of enemy forces.¹

*The 4th Battalion, 12th Marines was made up of Hq Btry, 4/12; 107mm Mortar Battery, 1/11 with six howtars; Battery B/1/11 with six 105mm howitzers; Battery M/4/12 with six M109 155mm howitzers (SP); and Yankee Battery, a provisional battery, with six 155mm towed howitzers. Colonel Rudzis explained the reason for the existence of the provisional battery when he commented: ". . . in September 1965 when the M109s . . . were brought into Vietnam as replacements for the towed 155mm howitzers, nothing was known about their capabilities in combat, such as durability, maintenance problems and ability to fit into the scheme of tactical maneuvers. Therefore by stretching the personnel assets of the battalion, instead of providing just one six-howitzer medium artillery battery, two were provided consisting of the M109s and the provisional battery of six towed 155mm howitzers." Col Edwin M. Rudzis, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

With the relatively small level of enemy activity in the Phu Bai area, General Walt planned to keep the Phu Bai forces at the same strength until July. At that time, he hoped to obtain operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade and position the Korean Marines at Phu Bai. The U.S. Marine reinforcements arriving during the spring of 1966 would either go to Da Nang or Chu Lai.²

General Westmoreland and his staff, however, perceived a much larger threat in the northern two provinces than did III MAF. In January, MACV intelligence estimates placed 22 Communist battalions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces as opposed to nine identified by the Marine command. At the urging of General Westmoreland, III MAF at the end of January, prepared contingency plans to counter any Communist thrust in the north. These plans called for the entire 3d Marines to deploy north in the event of an enemy attack or major buildup in the north.³

In contrast to January, all signs during February pointed to a marked increase in the presence of enemy main force units in Thua Thien Province, especially near Phu Bai. At the end of the month, Colonel Fisher, the 3d Marines commander, reported, "For the first time since the occupation of the Hue/Phu Bai TAOR, there appears to be considerable enemy interest in that area."⁴ He believed a general Communist main force buildup was in progress. Marine intelligence sources in mid and late February identified two VC regiments, the *1st Provisional* and the *6th VC*, reinforced by two separate battalions, the *803d* and the already identified *810th*, within striking distance of 35 miles of Phu Bai. These same reports indicated that the enemy was planning to attack the Marine base at the beginning of March.⁵

Reacting to this intelligence, the Marine command refined its plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai and for the possible activation of a battalion-sized task unit, under Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, at the base. This task unit, designated Hotel, would have the mission of supporting the hard-pressed ARVN 1st Division. Hanifin would be given operational control of two additional infantry companies which were to arrive from either Da Nang or Chu Lai or both. These companies would provide the 2d Battalion commander enough forces to defend the Phu Bai base area in the event Task Unit Hotel was ac-

tivated and committed outside the TAOR. Other plans called for further reinforcement.⁶

With the approval of Brigadier General English, acting 3d Marine Division commander in the absence of General Walt, who was still on leave, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin on 26 February activated Task Unit Hotel, "for the purpose of providing a reserve for CG 1st ARVN Division."⁷ At this time, the 1st Division was committed to three operations and thinly spread. In Lam Son-234, the Vietnamese were operating in Quang Dien District northwest of Hue and called for Marine assistance. On the afternoon of 26 February, Hanifin attended a briefing at 1st ARVN Division Headquarters at Hue and Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st Division's commanding general, assigned the Marine battalion an objective area in the Pho Lai village complex, some seven kilometers northwest of Hue. According to allied intelligence, a 100-man local force VC company was in the vicinity of the village.⁸

Returning to Phu Bai, Hanifin hurriedly made his plans for the operation, codenamed New York. He assembled, under Task Unit Hotel, three infantry companies, Companies F and G from his own battalion, and Company K from the 3d Marines. The 3d Marines company and Company F from the 9th Marines had arrived at Phu Bai that day from Da Nang. This reinforcement permitted Hanifin to leave three companies behind to cover the base area together with most of the Marine artillery. One Marine battery, the provisional 155mm towed-howitzer battery from the 4th Battalion, had already been committed to Lam Son-234 since 21 February and was in position to provide general support to Task Unit Hotel.⁹

The first phase of Operation New York went as planned except the enemy simply was not in the objective area. Companies F and G of the 2d Battalion moved by truck into jumpoff positions southwest of Pho Lai, arriving at their destination in the late afternoon and early evening of 26 February. About the same time, HMM-163 brought Company K, 3d Marines into blocking positions northeast of the village. Establishing his command group with Companies F and G that evening, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin ordered the two companies into the attack. Companies F and G advanced through Pho Lai without opposition and reached Company K's blocking positions at 2215 that night. Task Unit Hotel remained in the Pho Lai vicinity through the next mor-

ning, but failed to encounter any enemy. The Marine units of Task Unit Hotel were back at Phu Bai by 1815 on the 27th.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin and Task Unit Hotel were to have little rest. An hour and a half after his return to Phu Bai, Hanifin received another call for assistance from General Chuan. The 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment and a small group of Popular Force and Regional Force troops had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* on the supposedly pacified Phu Thu Peninsula located almost immediately to the east of the Phu Bai TAOR. After returning from another briefing at 1st Division Headquarters and receiving permission from III MAF, Hanifin decided to order at 2100 a night helicopter landing of the same forces that he had used in the Pho Lai village area to relieve the pressure on the South Vietnamese battalion. He realized that his men were not fresh, "but they were all that was available. The anticipation of engagement with a VC force boxed in on a peninsula overcame physical handicaps on the part of the troops."¹⁰

Lieutenant Colonel House's HMM-163 landed the three infantry companies of Task Unit Hotel into landing zones just north of the peninsula, completing the entire helilift at 0200 the next morning. Supported by the Marine artillery at Phu Bai on 28 February, Companies F, G, and K advanced abreast toward the southeast. While the South Vietnamese blocking forces from the 1st Battalion moved into position on the enemy's flanks, the Marine com-

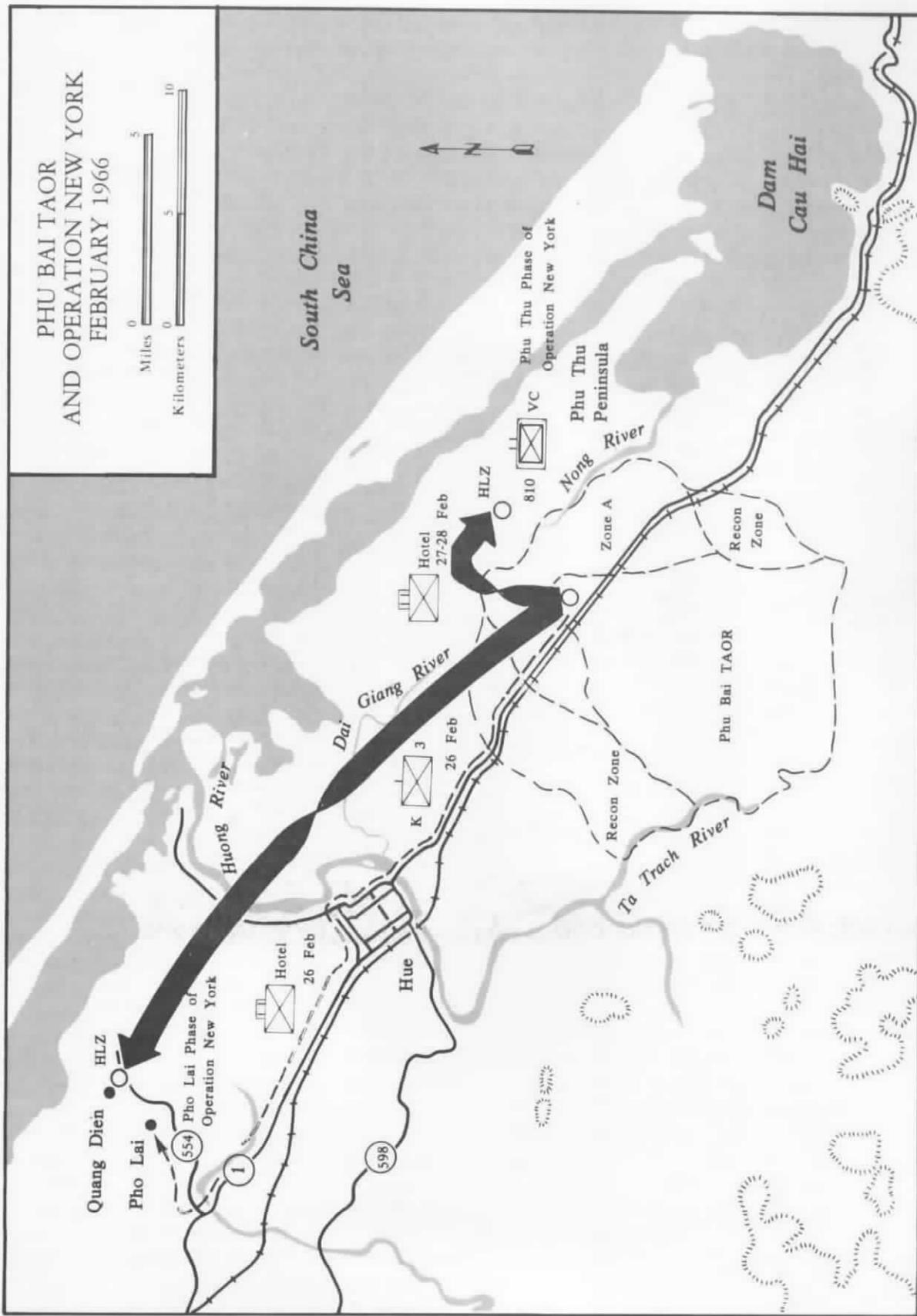
panies made a frontal assault against the well-prepared VC defenses, "at which time the VC broke contact and withdrew in small disorganized groups." The Marines continued the cleanup phase of the operation, meeting occasional enemy resistance, until 3 March. Task Unit Hotel during the one-week operation, also called New York, killed 120 of the enemy, captured 7 more, and seized 69 weapons. The Marines suffered casualties of 17 dead and 37 wounded.¹¹

While the Marines conducted Operation New York on the Phu Thu Peninsula, evidence of a growing enemy presence in southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces continued to mount. In Lam Son-235, 1st ARVN Division units operating east and south of Quang Tri City accounted for over 240 enemy troops, but sustained losses of 23 killed and 158 wounded, including two U.S. advisors, through the end of February. Further south, Communist main force troops on 28 February ambushed a 1st Division unit conducting Operation Lam Son-236 in Phong Dien District of Thua Thien Province, 17 miles north of Hue. As a result of this action, the South Vietnamese suffered casualties of 15 killed and 22 wounded, and lost 56 weapons. Closer to Phu Bai, an ARVN unit reported contact on 1 March with a small Communist force at the Truoi River Bridge on Route 1, six miles south of where Task Unit Hotel had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* the day before. Other intelligence revealed that a VC company from the badly mauled *810th*, carrying its

In Operation New York, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines advances on the enemy under cover of Marine air strikes. The Phu Bai-based Marines engaged the 810th VC Battalion on the Phu Thu Peninsula, located just east of the Marine base.

Marine Corps Photo A186946







Marine Corps Photo 187628

A Vietnamese student places a lei around the neck of a Marine from the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. The Vietnamese awarded their Cross of Gallantry to 32 Marines from the battalion for their participation in Operation New York.

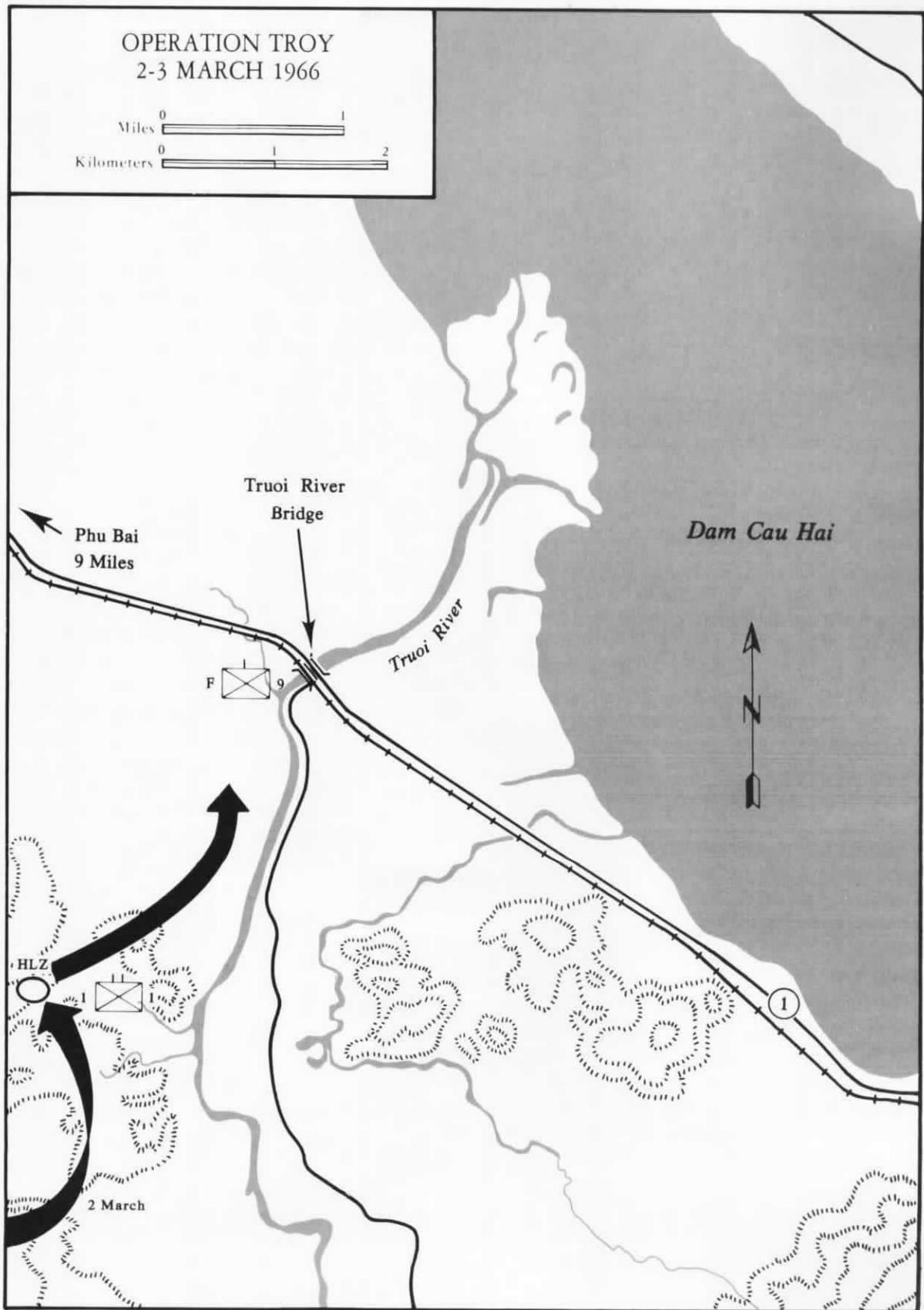
wounded, was moving toward Route 1 just north of the bridge.¹²

Influenced by the general buildup of enemy forces and also wanting to capitalize on the intelligence indicating that the remnants of the 810th were fleeing toward the Truoi Bridge, the Marine command decided to reinforce its northern enclave. While alerting additional units at both Da Nang and Chu Lai and with the concurrence of General McCutcheon, the acting CG III MAF, on March 1 General English ordered the deployment of his reserve battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, to Phu Bai. Company A of the 1st Battalion, which had only been relieved on line earlier that day, departed Da Nang on Marine fixed-wing transports at 1700 on 1 March. The following day, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, his command group, and Company C joined Company A at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher, the

3d Marines commander, also arrived at Phu Bai on 2 March to look over the situation.¹³

Upon his arrival at Phu Bai on 2 March, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch came under the operational control of the 3d Marines. Hoping to trap the retreating elements of the 810th, Colonel Fisher ordered Hatch to conduct an operation in the Phu Loc District of Thua Thien Province, southwest of the Phu Thu Peninsula and south of Route 1 and the Truoi River Bridge. One of the reserve companies of Task Unit Hotel at Phu Bai, Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, already had established blocking positions at the bridge the previous day. Assuming control of the 9th Marines company at the bridge and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch prepared his scheme of maneuver for a three-company operation. At 1230 on 2 March, one and a half hours after the battalion commander first received his orders, helicopters from HMM-163 inserted the 1st Battalion's command group, together with Company E of the 2d Battalion and Company C of the 1st Battalion, into a landing zone 3,000 meters south of Route 1. Remaining west of the Truoi River, the two companies advanced north without encountering any resistance toward the blocking positions of Company F at the bridge. With negligible results, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch closed out the operation, designated Troy, on 3 March, at about the same time Task Unit Hotel secured from Operation New York further north. The remaining elements of the 810th had made good their escape.¹⁴

During this time, Generals English and McCutcheon, after receiving Colonel Fisher's report on the enemy buildup in the area, decided to continue with the augmentation of the Phu Bai defenses. Colonel Fisher returned to Phu Bai at 0815 on 3 March with a small command group from the 3d Marines and established Task Group Foxtrot, assuming responsibility for the Phu Bai enclave. Task Group Foxtrot included both infantry battalions, the artillery battalion, and other supporting forces. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch had only a forward headquarters and two of his own infantry companies at Phu Bai, the rest of his command remaining at Da Nang. Hatch assumed operational control of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin retained control of his four infantry companies and also Company F of the 9th Marines. Rounding out



the new reinforcements, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines arrived from Da Nang with six 105mm howitzers on the afternoon of 3 March and brought the number of artillery pieces under Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis to 30.¹⁵

Although intelligence reports continued to speak of a buildup of VC forces near Hue and the likelihood of an attack against the Phu Bai base, the enemy remained quiescent for the next few days. Task Group Foxtrot spent the time consolidating its defenses and planning the extension of the Phu Bai TAOR.

The Marines were confident that they were in control of the situation. On 4 March, General McCutcheon radioed General Krulak that III MAF in Operation New York and the ARVN 1st Division in Operations Lam Son-234, -235, and -236 had killed over 700 of the enemy. Comparing these operations to the French experience in Vietnam, McCutcheon observed:

This overall campaign took place essentially in the area of the "Street without Joy" where the French in 1953 used about 20 battalions against a Viet Minh Regiment. Contrary to their actions we and the ARVN used about 8 battalions to engage about 6 VC battalions and of these the *806th*, *808th*, and *810th Battalions* were rather severely mauled. Although it was not a perfect operation by any manner or means it did result in victory.¹⁶

McCutcheon concluded:

Furthermore, I believe it substantiates our concept and strategy that the primary battleground is close to the sea because that is where the people are and the people are the primary object for both sides . . . we can act swiftly in strength to good intelligence and engage the enemy on our own terms rather than merely react to his actions or waste our efforts beating the bushes in the hinterlands chasing shadows.¹⁷

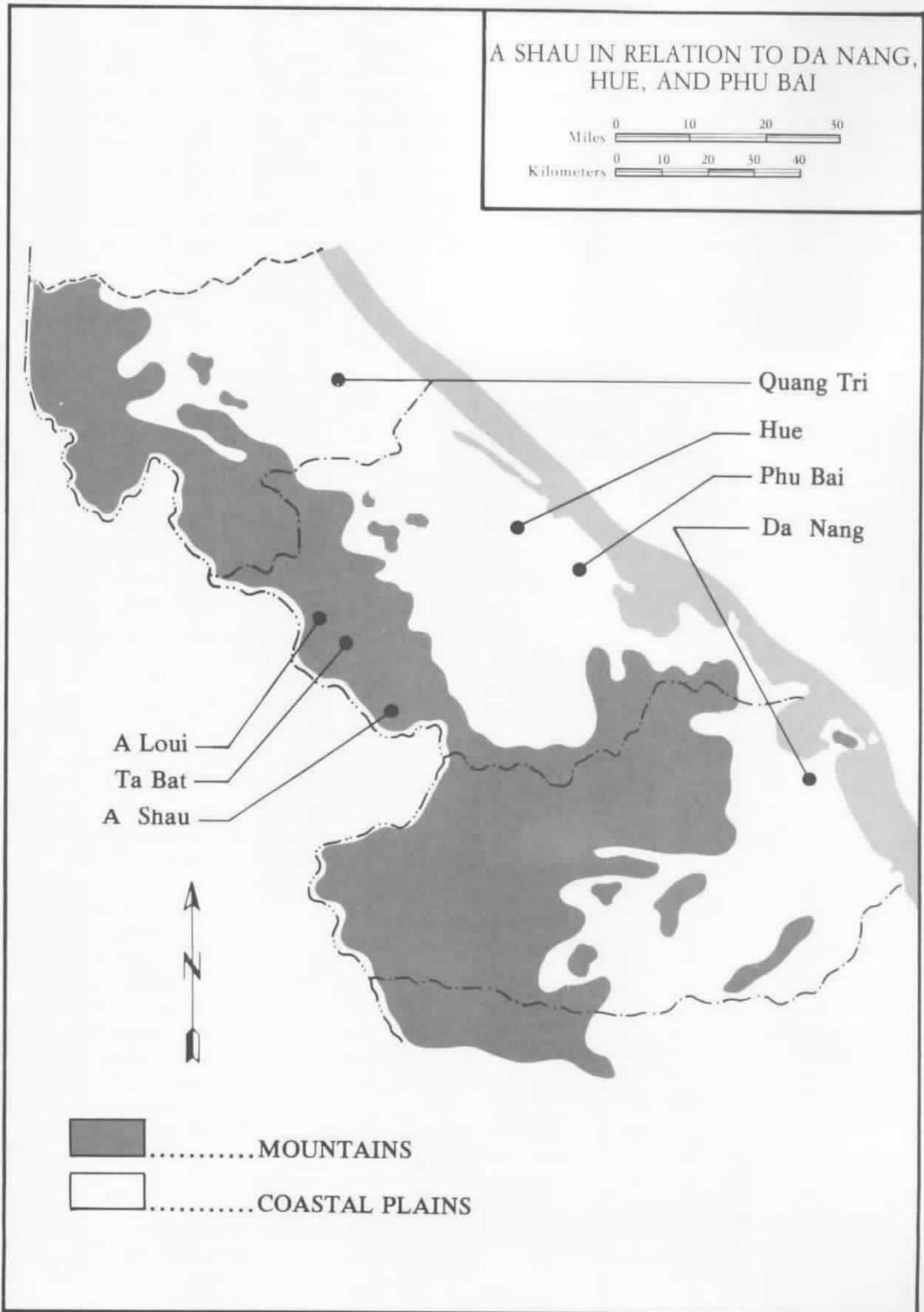
McCutcheon's message touched on the continuing debate between MACV and III MAF concerning offensive operations. Since returning from the Honolulu Conference, General Westmoreland placed even more pressure on his command to take the offensive against the enemy main force units. At a high-level MACV commander's conference on 20 February, Westmoreland told the assembled officers that the U.S. had enough troops in Vietnam to step up the tempo of operations "by going out after the Viet Cong rather than sitting around base areas."¹⁸ On 3 March, Westmoreland visited General McCutcheon at Da Nang and reiterated that 50 to 75 percent of the Marine units should be engaged with the

enemy at all times and to "Leave defense of bases to logistic and headquarters types."¹⁹ McCutcheon succinctly defined the MACV philosophy as "defend less and attack more . . ." ²⁰ On the other hand, the Marines countered that they were "indeed, on the offensive," pursuing simultaneously their antiguerrilla campaign and large unit actions. They promised to redouble their efforts to demonstrate that they were "doing more offensive work per capita than anybody else and, moreover, that it . . . [was] being done on a balanced basis with some tangible results to show" for their effort.²¹ Despite all of the talk of the offensive, the American command, as evidenced by the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, was largely reacting to unforeseen circumstances and the corresponding buildup of the enemy's forces.

The Fall of A Shau

While the Marines reinforced their Phu Bai forces in response to what they perceived as a major buildup in eastern Thua Thien Province, the *95th NVA Regiment* completed its preparations for an attack on the isolated A Shau Special Forces outpost in western Thua Thien, some 33 miles southwest of Phu Bai. Manned by a U.S. Special Forces detachment and a South Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG),* this allied camp was ideally situated to monitor enemy movement through the A Shau Valley. The valley, itself, was a major Communist infiltration route about two miles from and parallel to the Laotian border. Surrounded by steep, jungle-covered mountains, this key artery extended along a northwest-southeast axis for about 15 miles. One branch ran westward and joined the elaborate Ho Chi Minh Trail network. Other tributary trails led eastward from A Shau through the mountains into the populated area around Hue and Phu Bai. During 1965, the allies had manned three CIDG bases in the valley, A Loui, Ta Bat, and A Shau. The South Vietnamese had abandoned two of the camps, A Loui and Ta Bat, on 8 December 1965, leaving only the A Shau base in the southern portion of the valley, 13 miles south of A Loui and eight miles south of Ta Bat.

*The CIDG forces, mostly Montagnards, the nomadic tribes which populate South Vietnam's highlands, normally manned the isolated outposts along the borders and were advised by U.S. Army Special Forces.



In late February and early March, the A Shau garrison obtained intelligence on the presence of the *95th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* in the area. On 28 February, the Special Forces captured an NVA soldier who had maintained a diary. According to the soldier's account, the NVA regiment had left "the friendly country," probably a reference to North Vietnam, on 29 December 1965. Seven days later, 5 January 1966, the unit arrived in the A Shau. Through January and February, enemy patrols reconnoitered the Special Forces camp. The prisoner recorded in his diary that on two occasions, he "had crawled through the first row of barbed wires, surrounding the camp."²² On 5 March, two more North Vietnamese soldiers surrendered to the A Shau defenders. Claiming to be officers from the *325th NVA Division*, the two deserters reported that the enemy planned to attack the A Shau Camp on 11 or 12 March.²³

Reacting to this intelligence, the A Shau CIDG commander asked the South Vietnamese I Corps command for reinforcements. With the 1st Division spread thin in eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and the 2d ARVN Division heavily engaged in Quang Ngai Province, the South Vietnamese had few if any additional forces to send to the isolated outpost. From Nha Trang, the commanding officer of the 5th U.S. Special Forces Group (Airborne) committed one of his mobile strike force companies to A Shau. It arrived at the base on 7 March and increased the allied defenders' strength to approximately 400 men.^{24*}

*Mobile strike forces were small battalion-size units used as reserve or reaction forces. Each mobile strike force consisted of a headquarters and three companies, a total strength of 594 men. The mobile forces were trained to a tactical competence beyond that of a regular CIDG company. A detachment of U.S. Special Forces troops was normally assigned to the strike force. See Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, p. 92. There is no evidence that the Special Forces called upon III MAF for reinforcements prior to the attack and the command relations between the Marines and the Special Forces were rather tenuous. General Simmons recalled: "Westmoreland specifically told Walt that he had authority and responsibility over and for the outposts and the Special Forces. However, the Special Forces covertly resisted this authority." BGen Edwin H. Simmons, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9Sep74 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, recalled in 1978 that he was never overly impressed with the military efficiency of the Special Forces and "never too sure of the accuracy of their intelligence reports or combat action reports." Col Roy C. Gray, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 20July78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Believing that an attack was imminent, the A Shau garrison commander on the night of 8 March placed the camp on a general alert. At 0300 on the early morning of the 9th, the North Vietnamese opened up with a heavy two-and-one-half hour mortar barrage, inflicting 50 casualties on the defenders and destroying several buildings. Under cover of the mortar attack, two enemy companies probed the camp's southern defenses with the apparent mission of cutting through the wire and determining the camp's firepower. Throughout the remainder of the day, the enemy continued pressure on the base, but refrained from launching a full-scale ground assault.²⁵

A Shau was beyond the range of friendly artillery, enabling the enemy to take full advantage of the weather and surrounding mountains. A heavy ground fog shrouded the valley and a 100-foot cloud ceiling limited the effectiveness of allied air support. The nearest Marine Air Support Radar Team (ASRT), equipped with TPQ-10 radar, was at Da Nang, 60 miles away and out of range. Ground controllers could not conduct radar bombing missions around the perimeter. General McCutcheon, the wing commander, directed the Chu Lai ASRT to deploy to Phu Bai, where on subsequent days it was able to provide TPQ support for the camp.²⁶

North Vietnamese gunners, on the 9th, shot down an Air Force AC-47 "Puff the Magic Dragon" ground support plane. An Air Force helicopter was able to rescue three of the crewmen from the wreckage at the crash site north of A Shau.

While weather hampered the fixed-wing pilots on the first day of fighting, a few helicopters were able to reach the camp. Two Marine helicopter crews, on search and rescue alert at the small Quang Tri City airstrip, took off for A Shau to evacuate wounded. The two UH-34s from HMM-363, piloted by Lieutenants Richard A. Vasdias and David E. Brust, respectively, skimmed under the overcast. When it attempted to land at the camp, Vasdias' aircraft was hit in the oil line and crashed within the compound. Brust quickly touched down, picked up the downed Marine crewmen, and flew to Marble Mountain Air Facility at Da Nang. The crashed helicopter was later destroyed by U.S. forces.

Shortly after noon on the 9th, the A Shau defenders radioed: "We suspect we are heavily infiltrated, don't think the camp will last the night without reinforcement."²⁷ At this point, I Corps in-

formed III MAF that a CIDG company would arrive at Phu Bai from Nha Trang to be helilifted into A Shau. The Marines also placed two companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on alert at Phu Bai, but also told the I Corps command not to expect any helicopter support unless the weather conditions cleared up.²⁸

That afternoon, Brigadier General Marion E. Carl, the assistant wing commander and one of the Marine Corps' first helicopter pilots, flew his own UH-1E from Da Nang to Phu Bai. According to Carl, he then discussed the A Shau situation with Lieutenant Colonel House, the HMM-163 commander.²⁹ House later commented that General Carl stopped off at Phu Bai to refuel his aircraft, but did not talk to him. The squadron commander remarked in 1978, "We anticipated commitment, so recon'd the route."³⁰ In any event, General Carl took off from Phu Bai to look over the objective area for himself. He later recalled that the weather "would come down, go up, go down . . ."³¹ At 1500, III MAF informed MACV that the helilift of the CIDG company into A Shau would begin at 1620, but shortly afterward had to postpone the lift because of the weather and the enemy's concentrated anti-aircraft guns surrounding the camp. By 1700, it was clear that the reinforcements could not be flown in that

evening. All the Marines at this point could accomplish was to monitor the radio communications and prepare plans for the next morning.³²

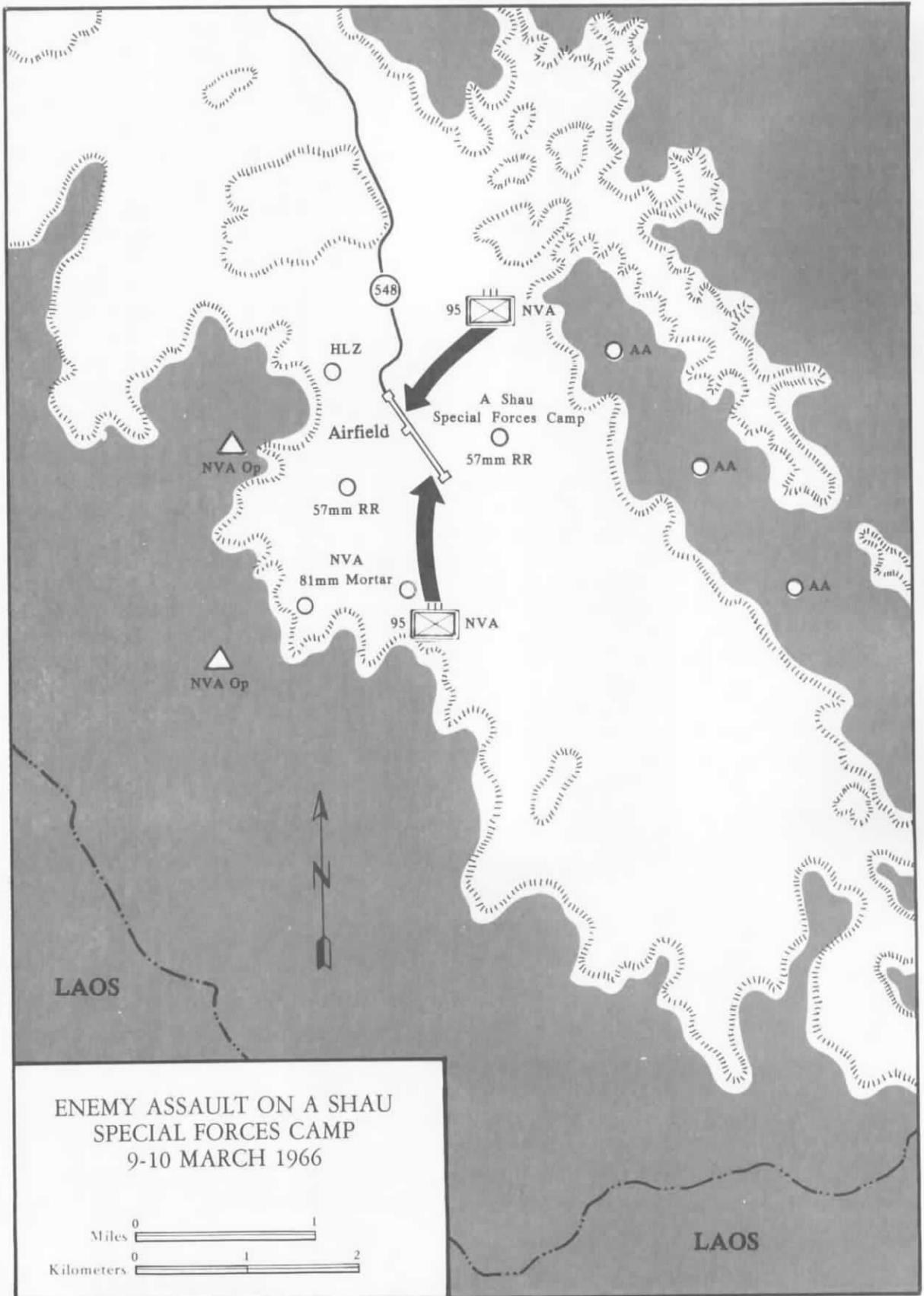
In the early morning hours of 10 March, the North Vietnamese began their final assaults on the besieged camp. Initiating the action at 0400 with an intensive mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment which lasted for about an hour, the enemy followed up with a heavy ground attack which breached the southern and eastern defenses. With the enemy troops surging into the compound, the defenders either retreated across the runway into the communications bunker or into hastily-built fighting positions along the northern wall. Some of the South Vietnamese irregulars fought bravely while others surrendered en masse to the North Vietnamese. According to Captain John D. Blair IV, USA, the Special Forces detachment leader, the CIDG camp commander hid "in various bunkers making no effort to lead or command during the entire battle." At 1000, Blair requested that the camp with the exception of the communication bunker and the northern wall be bombed and strafed.³³

Despite heavy cloud cover and the steep mountains surrounding the valley, Marine and U.S. Air Force aircraft had been providing close air support since the early morning. In one of the missions, the

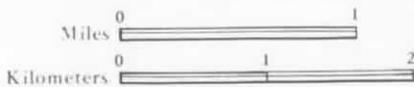
An aerial view of the A Shau Special Forces Camp near the Laotian border in western Thua Thien Province before the assault on the camp by the 95th NVA Regiment. The surrounding mountains combined with heavy clouds to hinder allied relief and evacuation efforts.

U.S. Air Force Photo 96256





ENEMY ASSAULT ON A SHAU
SPECIAL FORCES CAMP
9-10 MARCH 1966



Marines lost an A-4 Skyhawk from MAG-12. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Augusto M. Xavier, the leader of a two-plane flight from Chu Lai, arrived over the camp in predawn darkness and ordered his wingman to orbit above the cloud cover. Xavier descended through the overcast under the glow of parachute flares dropped by an Air Force C-123. He maneuvered his Skyhawk around the mountains and made a low-level bombing pass on the enemy positions. In the face of heavy ground fire, he made a second pass, this time strafing the NVA with 20mm cannon fire. Xavier failed to pull out and crashed into the side of a mountain. For his actions, Lieutenant Xavier was posthumously awarded the Silver Star. The commander of MAG-12, Colonel Leslie E. Brown, later commented: "Xavier's performance on this mission might indeed be termed a classic in an aviator's determination to support the man on the ground."³⁴

An Air Force aircraft was also lost while supporting the camp on 10 March, but the pilot was saved in an unusual rescue. Major Bernard F. Fisher from the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku led a flight of Douglas A-1E Skyraiders over A Shau. One of the Skyraiders, piloted by Major Dafford W. Myers, suffered heavy damage from ground fire. Major Myers made a forced landing on the dirt strip at A Shau and escaped seconds before the plane exploded. Major Fisher immediately called for a rescue helicopter, but then saw that the air strip below him was swarming with enemy soldiers. He then decided to rescue the downed pilot himself. Fisher landed his A-1E on the shell-cratered runway and Myers quickly scrambled into the cockpit with him. While the NVA fired at the aircraft, Fisher gunned his engine and successfully took off. For his action, Major Fisher was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

Despite the heroics of the Marine and Air Force aviators, the situation on the ground for the A Shau defenders continued to deteriorate. Shortly after noon, they radioed "Need reinforcements—without them kiss us goodbye," and 20 minutes later sent the message "Do not have area where they can land reinforcements."³⁵ The options open to the allied command in response to these appeals were limited. Given the miserable weather, marginal flying conditions, mountainous terrain, and concentrated enemy antiaircraft and ground strength in the area, the helilifting of reinforcements into the camp was now out of the question. Two choices remained: to at-

tempt a helicopter evacuation of the trapped garrison, or to tell the defenders to break out and escape the best they could.

Later in the afternoon of 10 March, General Walt, recently promoted to lieutenant general and just back from leave, chaired an emergency meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the A Shau situation. All of Walt's senior officers were present at the conference; Lieutenant General John A. Heintges, Deputy Commander, USMACV, represented General Westmoreland, and General Chuan was the Vietnamese I Corps command representative. Brigadier General Carl, who earlier in the day had made another reconnaissance flight over A Shau in his UH-1E and, in fact, had been 20-minutes' flying time from A Shau when Major Fisher made his dramatic rescue, recommended the immediate evacuation of the camp. Having witnessed the low overcast and heavy antiaircraft fire in the area, he warned that the Marines stood the chance of losing one out of every four helicopters in the evacuation attempt but believed "we could not abandon the troops encircled there."³⁶ Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, who was also at the meeting, remembered:

The weather was lousy and there was not too much daylight left for an evacuation attempt. . . . Everything considered it was decided to have HMM-163 make an attempt to get under the weather into the valley for one last attempt. As I recall we merely called the Phu Bai squadron on the land line phone and asked them to give it a try, explaining the situation as best we could and advising that if the Special Forces types had to "bug out" they would be outside the camp over the north wall.^{37*}

*As previously noted, General Carl and Lieutenant Colonel House have differing recollections on the events that led to the decision to order the helicopter evacuation of the camp. General Carl recalled that on the morning of the 10th he had stopped off at Phu Bai and discussed with Lieutenant Colonel House the feasibility of flying into the Special Forces camp. According to Carl, House responded that the weather had not improved and recommended against any further flights into the valley, but "would make the effort if so ordered." Carl then took off in his UH-1E and made his own reconnaissance of the area. Carl Comments, 1969. Lieutenant Colonel House, on the other hand, denied that he had any discussion with General Carl on 10 March. According to House, "I was told to go by Wing G-3, but said I would only go if ordered by the Wing Commander. Later, I received another call, 'It's an order.'" LtCol Charles A. House, Comments on drafts MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

At A Chau, the defenders on the 10th continued to hold out the best they could. Under cover of the American air support, Captain Blair's forces made several unsuccessful counterattacks on North Vietnamese positions on the southern wall, but finally had to give up the attempt to dislodge the heavily entrenched enemy. At 1415, American aircraft broke up an enemy concentration east of the camp, but the North Vietnamese continued to place heavy fire on the allied defenders on the northern wall and in the communication bunker. By 1500, the end was in sight. According to Blair's account, "Almost all friendly crew-served weapons were destroyed. Very little ammunition remained. No food and water had been available for 36 hours."³⁸ At 1530, the defenders received word that the Marine helicopters would arrive in about an hour and a half to take them out. At approximately 1730, Blair ordered the evacuation of the camp and the establishment of a helicopter landing zone, about 300 meters north of the camp. The plan was for the able-bodied Special Forces troops and the irregulars to fight a rearguard action while the wounded were placed first on the aircraft.³⁹

Shortly after 1730, Lieutenant Colonel House led 16 UH-34s from his squadron, supported by six UH-1Es from VMO-2 and fixed-wing aircraft, into the valley. According to one account, a North Vietnamese machine gun on a hill just north of A Chau opened fire on House's aircraft as he approached the camp. Veering away from the fire, the squadron commander, "noticed the survivors pouring over the parapets on the north side. . . ."⁴⁰ House then turned around and began his descent into the improvised landing zone.

There was chaos on the ground. The South Vietnamese irregulars had panicked and abandoned the wounded. They clambered over one another in order to get into the helicopter. House later stated in a television interview: "So many people wanted to get out, they hung on the cables, almost pulled the helicopters into the zone." Attempting to create a semblance of order, the Special Forces troops clubbed some of the able-bodied South Vietnamese off the aircraft with their rifle butts. When this failed, the Americans fired into the hysterical men. House observed during the television interview:

. . . it was a hell of a thing to have to do; some of them had to be shot in order to maintain control. . . . I know of no other answers in a case of this nature. It was either that or

sacrifice everybody. That's the only decision to be made.^{41*}

As House's aircraft began to rise, a North Vietnamese recoilless rifle round struck its tail section, causing the helicopter to crash 200 meters from the landing zone. House and his crew then joined the Special Forces on the ground. The North Vietnamese also shot down House's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William J. Gregory. Gregory, his copilot, and crew chief survived and made their way to another helicopter, but the gunner was forced to hide in the bush. In addition to the two downed aircraft, three Marine F-4Bs, two A-4s, two UH-1Es, and three other UH-34s sustained damage, but returned to Phu Bai. With approaching darkness and deteriorating weather, the wing halted the evacuation of the camp. Only one flight had been able to get into the landing zone, but the helicopters succeeded in taking out 69 of the defenders, including four of the U.S. Army advisors.⁴²

With the end of the evacuation attempt on the 10th, the survivors of the camp escaped into the jungle to avoid capture. Lieutenant Colonel House took command of a ragtag group, including his crew, the gunner from Gregory's aircraft, South Vietnamese irregulars, and Army advisors. Shortly after noon on the 11th, Marine pilots from HMM-163, searching for the evacuees, spotted House and his men in a small clearing, approximately 3,000 meters northwest of the previous landing zone. As the helicopters landed, there was once more difficulty with the CIDG, who rushed pell-mell to get on board the aircraft. House later claimed that the Special Forces had to shoot about 13 of the irregulars.⁴³ The Special Forces, on the other hand, denied killing any of the South Vietnamese, but declared they and some of the CIDG maintained

*The evidence is unclear who initiated and took part in the shooting of the Vietnamese troops. House declared in the aforementioned interview that the Special Forces troops took the initiative: "They knew the men more and they were well aware that was the only way the situation could be solved." See Transcript of Intvw, Current News, dtd 15Mar66, p. 4. The Special Forces, on the other hand, reported that Lieutenant Colonel House ordered his crew to shoot the Vietnamese. See 5th Special Forces Group AAR, Battle for A Chau, dtd 28Mar66 (Acc. No. 69A729). In a message to Washington, MACV declared that the helicopter crew chief and a Special Forces sergeant were involved in the shooting of the CIDG. See ComUSMACV msg to SecDef OASD PA, dtd 16 Mar66 (III MAF Msg & Jnl Files).

control, "by using butt strokes and firing" in front of the feet of the terror-stricken men.⁴⁴ The UH-34s succeeded in taking out about 60 of the group, including House, six other Marines, and one Special Forces soldier.⁴⁵

On the following morning, seven aircraft from HMM-163 and two from VMO-2 flew through extensive ground fire and evacuated 34 more survivors, including two Marine crewmen and five Army advisors. On the ground, the CIDG panicked and fought among themselves. One of the South Vietnamese threw a grenade, killing 10 of the struggling troops. According to the Special Forces, "U.S. personnel . . . witnessed the action, but did not participate in the shooting."⁴⁶ All of the Marine aircraft returned safely to Phu Bai, but many sustained severe damage. Captain Wilbur C. McMinn, Jr. nursed his crippled UH-34 back to base with 126 bullet holes in the aircraft. According to Lieutenant Colonel House, 21 of the 24 helicopters of this squadron eventually had to be replaced as a result of the three-day evacuation operation.⁴⁷

Following House's return to Phu Bai, CBS Correspondent John Laurence conducted an interview with the squadron commander that appeared on national television and caused some furor. In addition, syndicated columnist Jim Lucas wrote an article relating to the performance of the CIDG troops at A Shau. At the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, MACV and III MAF completed an investigation into the "unfavorable TV and press releases in the U.S. . . ."⁴⁸ Lieutenant Colonel House had the dubious distinction of receiving a Navy Cross and a letter of reprimand for his part in the A Shau evacuation. According to General Carl, who presided over the investigation, House's difficulty arose out of his statement to the press.⁴⁹ Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, commanding officer of MAG-16 and House's immediate superior, wrote in 1978:

I had flown with Chuck House on several missions and knew him to be a dedicated Marine. Unfortunately upon his return from A Shau he made some rather emotionally charged statements to authority about the wisdom and futility of the mission, thus the anomalous results of both a citation and disciplinary action.⁵⁰

Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the wing G-3, recalled that Lieutenant Colonel House in conversation with both reporters and with senior commanders "ex-



Marine Corps Photo A194536
LtCol Charles A. House, the commander of HMM-163, whose helicopter was shot down during the evacuation of A Shau, poses at Phu Bai with U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers and South Vietnamese irregulars who survived the enemy overrunning of the base. Capt John D. Blair IV, USA, who commanded the Special Forces detachment is to the right of LtCol House.

pressed considerable bitterness and criticism of the Wing and how the mission was handled." Gray then declared that House was "probably right, but in retrospect I don't know what else there was to do except either forget A Shau or make an attempt for the pickup of survivors as was done."⁵¹

With the end of the helicopter evacuation of A Shau on 12 March, those survivors who escaped the enemy attack and missed the airlift had little choice but to try to make the long trek over the mountains to friendly lines. For the allies, the battle had been costly. In addition to aircraft lost during the fighting, 248 out of the total garrison of 434 were either missing or dead, including five U.S. Special Forces soldiers. Marine helicopters, mostly from HMM-163, flew 131 sorties from 9-12 March and brought back 161 of the 186 survivors, including 10 of the 12 Army advisors who got out. The fall of the A Shau Camp opened the way for increased enemy infiltration of men and material through the valley into central I Corps.⁵²

The Aftermath of A Shau

During and immediately after the fall of A Shau, the allied commanders in I Corps evaluated the idea of launching a combined operation into the valley. On the morning of 10 March, General Chuan, the 1st Division commander, gave serious consideration to the insertion of one of the I Corps reserve battalions, reinforced by Marines, to relieve the embattled garrison. With one battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on three-hour alert at Phu Bai since 9 March, III MAF on 10 March placed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on one-hour standby at Chu Lai for possible air movement to Phu Bai.⁵³

Despite the decision of the meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the afternoon of the 10th not to send infantry reinforcements into A Shau, the Marines continued to maintain the two battalions on an alert status and strengthened the forces at Phu Bai. At 2000 on the 10th, the rear elements of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang, hampered by rain and darkness, began loading their equipment on 41 trucks for movement to Phu Bai. The truck convoy departed Da Nang at 0630 on the 11th and arrived at its destination at 1330 that afternoon. The following night, III MAF ordered the deployment of the battalion command group and two companies of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, his headquarters, and his Companies A and B arrived at Phu Bai by KC-130 transports on 13 March. Colonel Fisher, Commanding Officer, Task Group Foxtrot, now had the principal elements of three Marine infantry battalions under his command at Phu Bai.⁵⁴

During the next few days, the South Vietnamese pressed for a large search and destroy operation in the A Shau Valley and the reestablishment of a Special Forces camp in the area. On 15 March, General Chuan, who had just relieved General Thi as a result of a falling out between Thi and Premier Ky, urged the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff to intercede with MACV for such a course of action. Explaining that he already had committed most of his reserve forces into strategic areas near Hue that were now threatened because of the fall of the camp, Chuan wanted the Marines to make up the bulk of the attacking forces into the A Shau Valley itself.⁵⁵

Despite Chuan's recommendation, the allied commanders finally rejected the idea of a direct

assault at this time into the valley. Both Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, now at Phu Bai with the two companies of his battalion, remembered that their units remained on alert for several days for an operation into the valley. Sullivan described A Shau "as a place for disasters to occur in . . ." and recalled:

After an aerial recon, and talking to Chuck House and others, I became convinced that if two bob-tailed battalions were to be sent into A Shau, that someone had better have a string on a regiment in case we stepped in defecation. Fisher agreed, and the operation was called off.⁵⁶

American and South Vietnamese intelligence during this period continued to show a buildup of enemy units in the two northern provinces. The U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division reported to General Walt that despite the relative quiet in the division's sector, the available intelligence indicated the movement of enemy units and the possibility of a major enemy campaign in the northern two provinces. He pointed to an enemy regiment with three battalions massing near Quang Tri City and another two battalions, the *802d* and *804th* of the *1st VC Provisional Regiment*, in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area about 15 miles west of Hue, and moving toward Route 1 and the coast. As yet, the allied commanders had no hard evidence of the intentions of the *95th Regiment*, which had just overrun the A Shau Camp.⁵⁷

In order to obtain such information, the South Vietnamese brought into I Corps a special long-range reconnaissance group called Project Delta. The Project Delta forces consisted of six-man reconnaissance teams made up of four South Vietnamese Special Forces troops and two U.S. Army Special Forces advisors; five-man CIDG road patrols, nicknamed "roadrunner" teams; and a reaction force of South Vietnamese Army ranger companies. From 17 March through 29 March a total of 10 Project Delta reconnaissance teams, 3 roadrunner teams, and 2 ranger companies shuttled in and out of an approximately 150-square-mile operating area extending southwest of Hue to the Quang Nam-Thua Thien border. Although not entering the A Shau Valley itself, the teams penetrated the most significant infiltration corridors leading from the valley into the coastal region. Enemy gunners shot down,

during the course of the inserts and extractions, two Army helicopters, and Communist antiaircraft fire forced the aborting of several missions. The reconnaissance teams spotted several enemy concentrations and called either artillery or air strikes on various occasions against such forces. Nevertheless, the teams accounted for only four confirmed enemy dead and one wounded. The results of the extended intelligence operation were tentative. Despite finding some enemy units, the teams obtained little evidence of a major NVA buildup in the area southwest of Hue. The North Vietnamese plans to exploit their A Shau victory remained obscure.⁵⁸

Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon

While the deliberations over returning to A Shau continued and the Project Delta forces operated southwest of Hue, General Walt made new plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai. In a discussion on 12 March with Marine Brigadier General William K. Jones, the director of the MACV Command Center, whom General Westmoreland had sent to Da Nang to discuss the situation with III MAF, Walt declared that he decided to position four battalions permanently at Phu Bai. Two of the battalions would be from the Korean Marine Brigade, slated to arrive later in the spring.⁵⁹ Two days later, the III MAF commander began to implement his decision to build up his northern base. He ordered Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the commanding officer of the 4th Marines, whose headquarters personnel provided most of the staff for the Chu Lai ADC command group, to prepare to move his headquarters to Phu Bai and assume control of the TAOR from Task Group Foxtrot. At the same time, Walt requested the Seventh Fleet to land BLT 3/4, which had embarked on amphibious shipping on Okinawa for return to Vietnam, at Hue/Phu Bai instead of Da Nang as originally scheduled. The same ships would then be used to reembark Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's headquarters group and two companies for return to Chu Lai. When the ships arrived at Chu Lai, the 4th Marines Headquarters would then embark for movement to Phu Bai.⁶⁰

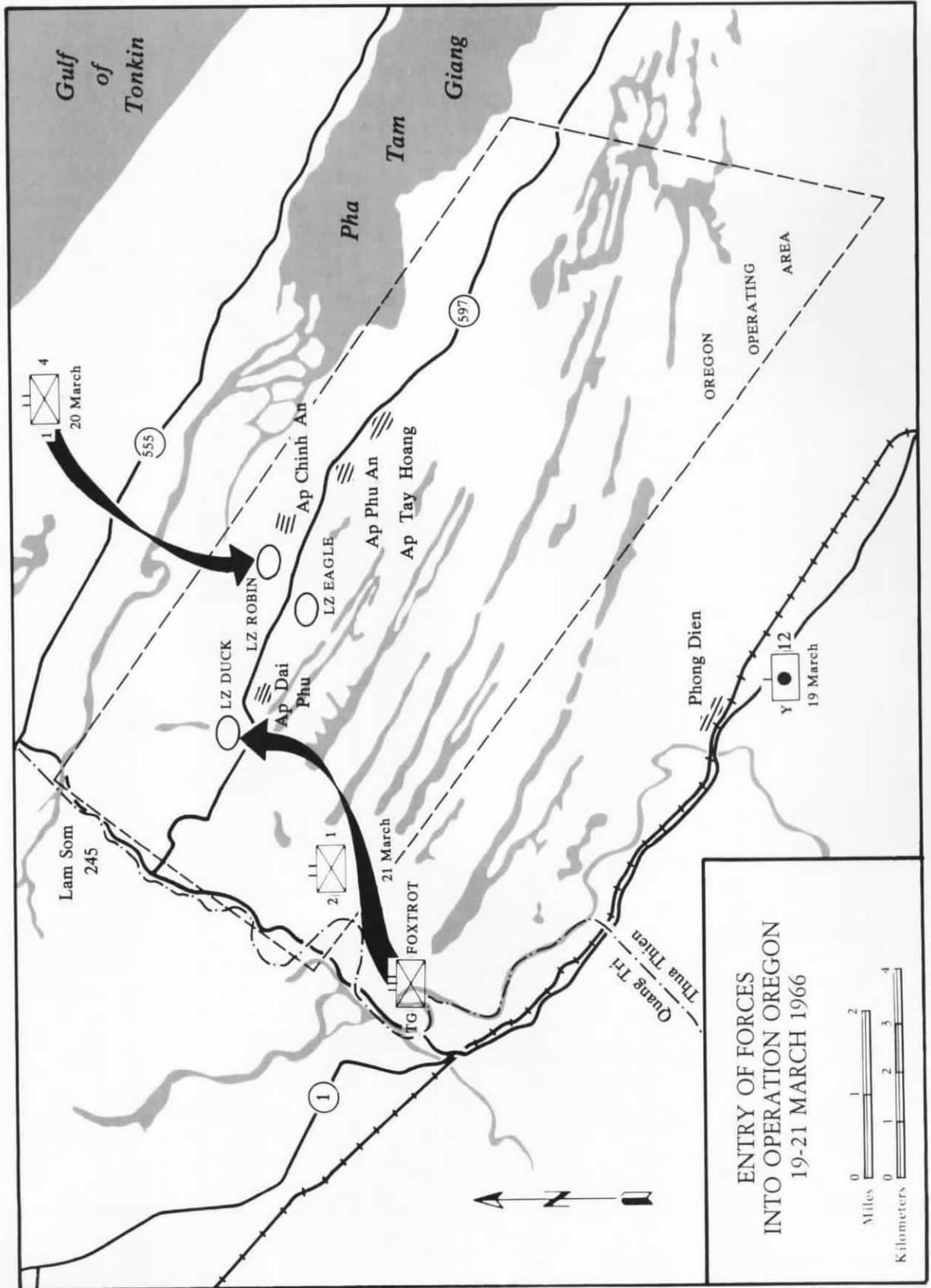
On 19 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sumner A. Vale's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines debarked from amphibious shipping and arrived at Phu Bai, ending for the time being the intratheater battalion rotation

program between Okinawa and Vietnam. But once more events altered Marine plans. Instead of returning to Chu Lai with the arrival of the ships, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command was committed to an operation 20 miles north of Hue.

Earlier, on 17 March, General Chuan had requested III MAF to provide a Marine company for a combined operation with a South Vietnamese unit in an area south of Phong Dien, the district capital where the ARVN had killed about 50 enemy troops from the *804th VC Battalion*. General Walt, on the following day, directed Colonel Fisher, the Task Group Foxtrot commander, to make liaison with the ARVN 1st Division. That afternoon, Fisher visited the division headquarters in Hue where he learned that the target area was in the coastal plain between Route 1 and the sea some 8,000 meters north of Phong Dien, rather than south of the town as originally indicated.⁶¹

With the concurrence of Walt and the South Vietnamese, Colonel Fisher decided upon a battalion-size operation and to hold in reserve both a Marine and a South Vietnamese battalion. His plan for Oregon, as the operation was named, called for the helicopter insertion on the morning of 19 March of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and Companies A and B into two landing zones, designated Eagle and Robin, located north and south respectively of Route 597, which roughly paralleled Route 1. The two Marine companies were to advance to the southeast on either side of the road and clear the hamlets of Ap Phu An and Ap Tay Hoang, some 4,000 meters from the landing zones. Allied intelligence placed two companies of the *VC 802d Battalion* with some VC local force units at an approximate strength of 250 men in the two hamlets. If Sullivan's companies made contact with the enemy, Fisher planned to reinforce the battalion with Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and if need be with the 3d ARVN Regiment. Other ARVN units were conducting Lam Son-245 to the north and west of the proposed Marine area of operations. Marine air and artillery and Navy gunfire were available to support the Marine infantry.⁶²

Delays plagued the operation from the very beginning. Heavy cloud cover, rain, and winds on 19 March forced Colonel Fisher to cancel the helilift of Sullivan's battalion and to reschedule it for the following morning. On the 20th, heavy fog caused the task group commander to hold up the helicopter



assault for two hours. At 1015, the helicopters from HMM-163 arrived in the objective area, but enemy antiaircraft fire prevented the aircraft from landing. Fisher then requested Marine artillery and air to soften up the landing zones. Provisional Battery Y, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines with six towed 155mm howitzers, which had moved by truck the morning of the previous day from Phu Bai to forward firing positions just outside of Phong Dien, responded to the request. Because of the low ceiling, Marine fixed-wing aircraft were not available until 1145. After the artillery and air bombardment, HMM-163, finally, at 1255, started to bring Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and both companies into Landing Zone Robin.⁶³

Based on South Vietnamese intelligence that a large force of VC had moved east from the Lam Son-245 sector into the Marine area of operations and from the location of the enemy antiaircraft fire, Colonel Fisher ordered Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan to clear out the hamlet of Ap Dai Phu, about 1,000 meters to the west of LZ Robin before advancing to the south. After consolidating his positions around the landing zone, Sullivan was about to carry out his new orders when his Company A opened fire on two VC. The enemy soldiers evaded the Marines and escaped into some heavy brush to the east of the landing zone. According to the battalion commander, this action initiated "one of the Battalion's fiercest and hardest fought battles. . . ."⁶⁴

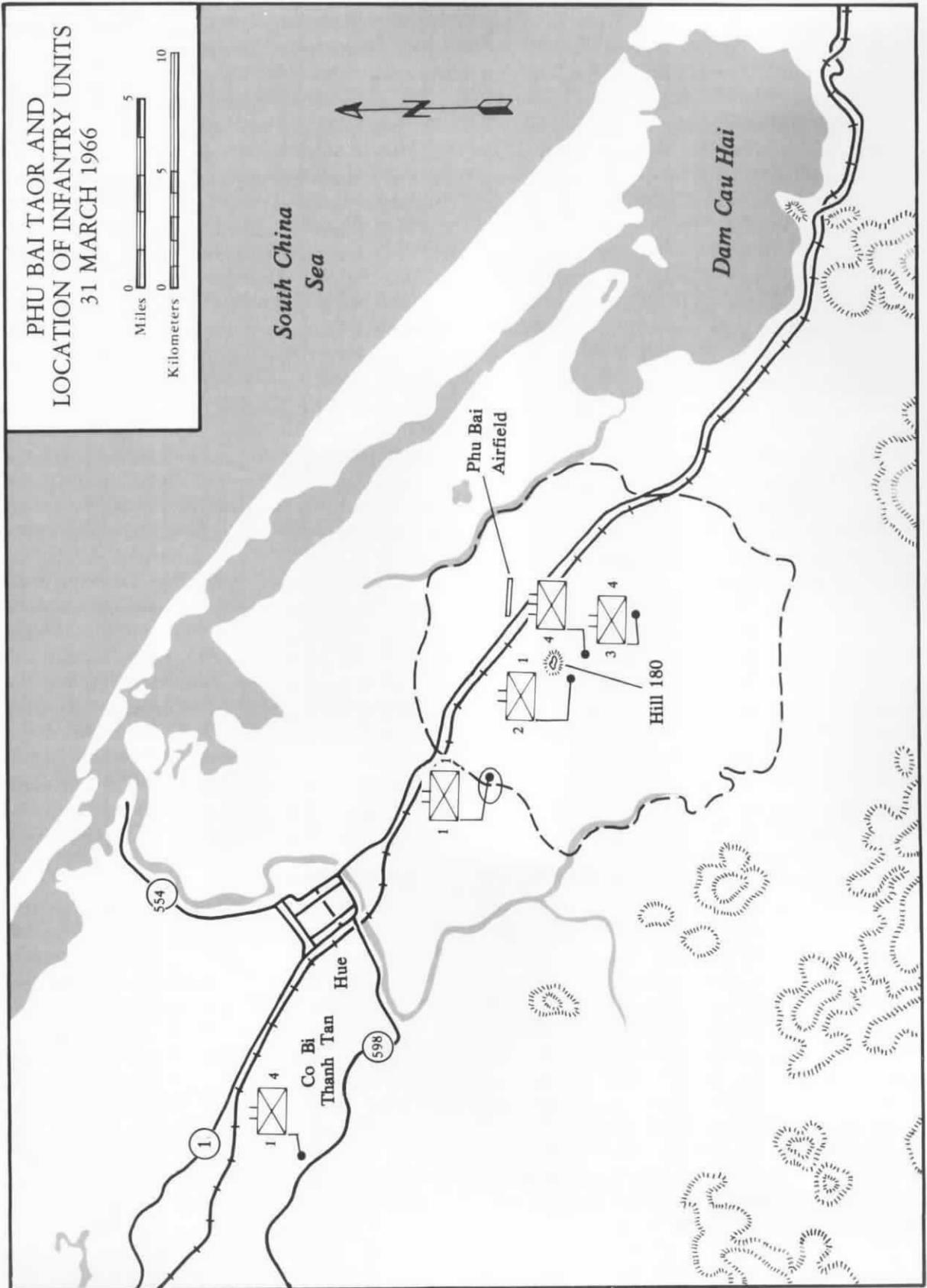
Unknown to the Marines, the *802d Battalion*, with two infantry companies, supported by a heavy weapons company, had fortified the tree-shrouded hamlet of Ap Chinh An, 800 meters east of LZ Robin. Camouflaging their bunkers as simple straw houses, the enemy carefully laid out fields of fire for their automatic weapons. They surrounded the village with barbed wire and a minefield. While extending its perimeter outward from the landing zone, Company B entered the minefield and detonated a mine which wounded one Marine. Still unaware of the extent of the enemy defenses and the size of the enemy force, Sullivan attempted to maneuver both his companies to take the hamlet. The enemy countered with 61mm and 82mm mortars and heavy machine gun fire. Forced to fall back, the battalion commander requested supporting arms. Marine artillery, air, and naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Richard B. Anderson* (DD 786) bombarded the Communist positions, but the

enemy, well dug-in, continued to hold out. At the request of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, Colonel Fisher reinforced the battalion with Company E from the 1st Marines, which arrived in LZ Robin at 1649. After repeated unsuccessful assaults and after sustaining casualties of nine killed and 41 wounded, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan decided to halt the attack that evening and wait for reinforcements the following morning.⁶⁵

Colonel Fisher on the night of 20 March developed his plans for the next day. He directed an artillery command group and a battery of 105mm howitzers to join the 155mm howitzers at Phong Dien. After a massive artillery and air bombardment, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan would renew his assault on Ap Chinh An. Fisher planned to helilift Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines into a landing zone, called LZ Duck, some 3,000 meters west of Robin. Hanifin's battalion would first clear the village of Ap Dai Phu and then reinforce Sullivan's attack on Ap Chinh An.⁶⁶

A dense morning fog prevented air strikes in the objective area on 21 March, but Marine artillery laid down a heavy barrage on suspected enemy positions. After the artillery fire lifted, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion finally took Ap Chinh An against minor enemy resistance. Taking advantage of the darkness and fog, the bulk of the enemy force had moved out of the hamlet, leaving only a small rear-guard to harass the Marines. The fog also delayed the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's battalion into LZ Duck until 1115. Hanifin's battalion met no opposition and was able to clear its objectives without incident. Colonel Fisher arrived in LZ Duck later in the day and established his CP with the two Marine battalions.⁶⁷

For the next two days, Task Group Foxtrot and its two Marine battalions, reinforced on the 22d by two South Vietnamese battalions, remained in the Oregon objective area. The 2d Battalion operated in the northwest sector while Sullivan's battalion advanced to the southeast, as originally planned, toward blocking positions established by the South Vietnamese battalions. Encountering only an occasional straggler, neither battalion met with any serious resistance. The operation officially came to end at 1130 on 23 March. Colonel Fisher and Hanifin's battalion returned to Phu Bai while Sullivan's unit remained in the Operation Oregon sector for a few more days.



For the four-day operation, the Marines sustained casualties of 11 dead and 45 wounded while killing at least 48 of the enemy and taking eight prisoners. Estimates of enemy dead were as high as 100. All of the Marine casualties occurred in the heavy fighting for Ap Chinh An. Supporting arms accounted for most of the enemy dead. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis, the commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, recalled several years later that his provisional 155mm battery during the operation fired on a VC machine gun bunker "and scored a direct hit on the first volley of fire."⁶⁸ In his analysis of the operation, Colonel Fisher observed that the weather was a large factor, denying the Marines the advantage of surprise. Fisher also remarked that the lightness of Sullivan's assault battalion limited the Marines' maneuverability once contact was made.⁶⁹ Moreover, the Marines had encountered a seasoned and well-trained foe. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan grudgingly complimented his enemy, declaring, "The tactics they utilized were not uncommon to good soldiering."⁷⁰

With the completion of Operation Oregon, the new changes in command at the Phu Bai enclave were about to take place. As planned, on 28 March, Colonel Sherman, whose 4th Marines Headquarters had arrived from Chu Lai, opened his command post at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher dissolved Task Group Foxtrot and returned to Da Nang and the 3d Marines. At about the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Headquarters assumed control of the Phu Bai artillery from Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis' 4th Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis and his headquarters personnel departed on 29 March for Da Nang where he established his new CP. The Marines had reinforced Phu Bai with two reconnaissance companies, B and D, from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, which on the 28th formed Provisional Reconnaissance Group B, under the Company B commander, Captain James L. Compton. By the end of the month, the Marine forces at Phu Bai

numbered nearly 6,400 men including four infantry battalions, a helicopter squadron, the artillery battalion, the reconnaissance group, and other supporting units.⁷¹

Responsible for the defense of the northern base, Colonel Sherman assigned three of the battalions within the TAOR, and one outside, protecting the northwestern approaches. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was in the western sector; the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had the defense of the Phu Bai vital area; and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines operated in the southern portion of the TAOR. On 27 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's battalion had moved from the Oregon area to the Co Bi-Thanh Tan region west of Hue. From there, the battalion, together with two artillery batteries located 2,500 meters to the south of its position, was able to support and provide a quick reaction force for the Marine reconnaissance teams operating northwest of Phu Bai.⁷²

Despite the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, III MAF and MACV still differed about the extent of the enemy threat in the northern two provinces. General Walt believed that the successful operations earlier in the month together with the buildup of his northern forces had combined to contain the enemy.⁷³ Although A Shau had fallen, there was no apparent attempt by the *95th NVA Regiment* to move toward the coast. On the other hand, General Westmoreland's intelligence staff spoke of a major enemy offensive in the north, referring to the formation of a new enemy division and other units and a "known plan to attack Phu Bai."⁷⁴ In a meeting with General Walt on 24 March at Chu Lai, Westmoreland expressed his concern that the fall of A Shau exposed the I Corps western flank to the enemy. He also pointed to reports of NVA troops in the DMZ and near the Khe Sanh Special Forces Camp in northwestern Quang Tri Province as evidence that the enemy was on the move.⁷⁵ The Marines continued their close watch over developments in the north.

PART II
CRISIS AND WAR IN CENTRAL I CORPS,
SPRING 1966

CHAPTER 5

A Troubled Spring

The Beginnings of the Political Crisis—Restructuring the Command—The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive—“Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles”

The Beginnings of the Political Crisis

The increasing threat from the north during the spring of 1966 was a major concern, but an internal South Vietnamese political crisis in I Corps overshadowed the Communist buildup. Beneath the outward facade of national unity, several groups were dissatisfied with the military regime in Saigon. Deposed and disgruntled politicians maneuvered to restore civilian authority. Various Buddhist leaders criticized the National Leadership Committee or Directorate and demanded a national assembly. Within the government itself, military factions jockeyed for position. Compounding these rivalries were the traditional schisms between “northerners” and “southerners,” and between Catholics and Buddhists. These elements of disharmony threatened the delicate fabric of South Vietnamese political cohesiveness.

Until the end of February, Premier Ky managed to keep his political opponents off-balance by granting piecemeal concessions. He promised a constitution to be approved by a referendum, followed by creation of a representative government; this reform process would take over a year to implement. The referendum on the constitution was not to be held until October 1966, and elections to any resulting national assembly would not take place until sometime in 1967. In effect, Ky was offering his rivals the possibility of power sometime in the future, while he and his supporters remained at the helm for an indefinite period.

The South Vietnamese Premier viewed General Thi, the I Corps commander, as his most dangerous potential rival. Born of peasant stock and native to the region, Thi was popular with both his troops and the people of I Corps. He capitalized on this sentiment, as well as the population’s traditional distrust of Saigon, and carved out his own power base, centered in Hue where he maintained his residence.

During 1966, Thi continued to consolidate his position in I Corps by appointing officials personally loyal to him, including a new mayor of Da Nang, a civilian physician with little administrative experience, Dr. Nguyen Van Man.

After his return from the Honolulu Conference, General Ky viewed the existing political situation in I Corps with increasing alarm. On 3 March, the premier flew to Hue in order personally to investigate allegations that Thi was directing agitation against the government. In a lively confrontation, Ky and the I Corps commander exchanged charges and countercharges; Premier Ky promptly returned to Saigon and called for a special meeting of the National Leadership Council to settle the dispute.

At the extraordinary session of the Council which assembled on 10 March, Ky asked his military colleagues for a formal vote of confidence. He further

LtGen Nguyen Chanb Thi, the South Vietnamese I Corps commander, presents a captured enemy weapon to Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, during the latter's visit in January 1966. The removal of Gen Thi in March was to trigger the spring political crisis.

Marine Corps Photo A186694

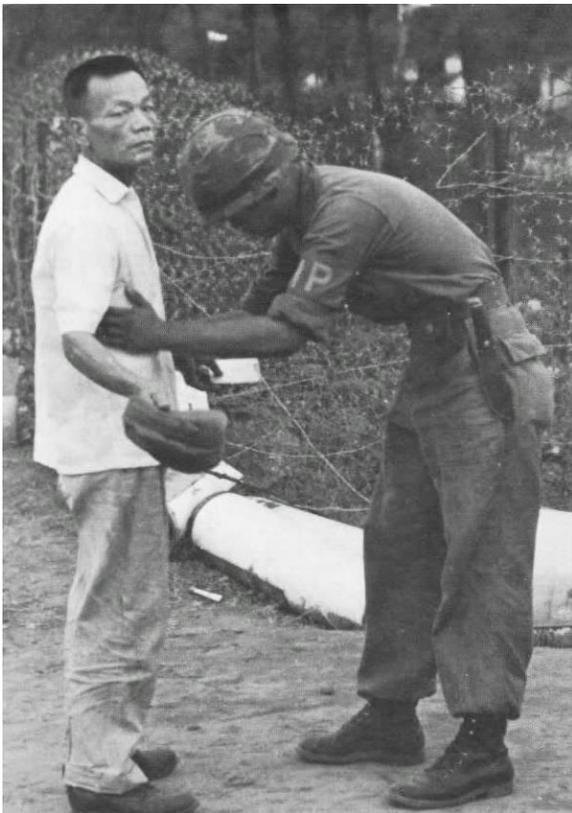


stated that he would resign if Thi was not stripped of his command. In a secret ballot the majority of the Council backed the premier and called for Thi's dismissal on grounds of insubordination. The deposed I Corps commander, present during the proceedings, accepted the decision gracefully. On 11 March, a government spokesman announced that General Thi had requested sick leave because of "sinus trouble." Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st ARVN Division commanding general, became the new I Corps commander and Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan replaced Chuan as division commander.¹

The removal of General Thi caused an immediate shock wave throughout I Corps. On the announcement of his removal, approximately 2,000 persons, including soldiers, marched through the streets of Da Nang in protest. Soon afterward, elements loyal to the ousted general and other factions opposed to the government, including several Buddhist groups, joined forces. A number of anti-Ky coalitions were formed in the northern cities. The one in Da Nang assumed the title of the "Military and Civilian Strug-

A Marine MP searches a South Vietnamese worker employed at the Da Nang Airbase as he departs the base. Political tensions, which included strikes by Vietnamese employees of the Americans, increased security precautions.

Marine Corps Photo A187177



gle Committee for I Corps," while a group in Hue called themselves the "Popular Forces to Struggle for the Revolution."

The "Struggle Force," as the dissident forces came to be known, immediately applied economic and political pressure on the Saigon regime. On 13 March the Struggle Committee in Da Nang called a general strike which practically paralyzed the city. No policemen reported for duty; shops, port facilities, and schools closed; and approximately 90 percent of the civilian workers at the Da Nang Airbase failed to show up for work. Large numbers of protesters held mass meetings and conducted more demonstrations.

On 15 March, Premier Ky made an unsuccessful attempt to placate the insurgents. He allowed General Thi to return to I Corps for a brief visit. Supposedly the former I Corps commander was to announce publicly that he accepted his dismissal as being in the best interest of the country. Upon his arrival, Thi was received by large enthusiastic crowds both in Da Nang and Hue. In his somewhat ambiguous addresses to the throngs, Thi expressed several reservations about the central government. Furthermore, instead of a brief visit, Thi moved into his official residence in Hue for an "extended rest." He remained in I Corps for almost two months, thus adding to the political ferment by his presence.

Restructuring the Command

Despite the internal Vietnamese political crisis, the United States continued its planned buildup in Vietnam and revamped the command structure to accommodate the needs of the growing American force. During March, the Secretary of the Navy approved the establishment of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam while the Air Force moved to transform the 2d Air Division into the Seventh Air Force. These two new MACV component commands were established on 1 April 1966. In the interim, General Westmoreland made some changes in his Army combat forces. On 15 March 1966, he redesignated Lieutenant General Stanley R. Larsen's command in II Corps from Field Force, Vietnam to I Field Force, Vietnam. In III Corps, he established II Field Force, Vietnam under Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman. Generals Larsen and Seaman were responsi-

ble directly to General Westmoreland in his capacity as ComUSMACV for all U.S. ground operations in their respective corps operating areas.

In I Corps, similar changes were occurring in the Marine command. Throughout the first three months of 1966, units of the 1st Marine Division continued to arrive in Vietnam. Major General Fields planned to move his headquarters from Okinawa to Chu Lai at the end of March. The 1st Division was to assume responsibility for the Chu Lai TAOR while the 3d Marine Division was to retain control of the Phu Bai and Da Nang enclaves.

In March, General Walt began to restructure his command to conform to the planned transformation of III MAF into a two-division ground force supported by a large aircraft wing. On the 15th, he established the Force Logistic Command (FLC), which assumed control of the force logistic support groups at Da Nang and Chu Lai and the logistic support unit at Phu Bai. The III MAF commander named his former Chief of Staff, Colonel George C. Axtell, Jr., as the FLC commander. General Walt then abolished the 3d Marine Division command group at Chu Lai. Colonel Peatross, as the senior officer there, temporarily assumed command of the enclave awaiting the arrival of General Fields and the 1st Division Headquarters. The former assistant division commander at Chu Lai, General Platt, then replaced Colonel Axtell as the III MAF Chief of Staff.

On 18 March, General Walt relinquished direct command of the 3d Marine Division so that he could devote more time and energy to his duties as Commanding General, III MAF. Recently promoted Major General Wood B. Kyle, winner of two Silver Stars during World War II, became the new commanding general of the division. Brigadier General Lowell E. English continued as the assistant commander of the 3d Marine Division.* He assumed responsibility for Task Force Delta operations outside the Marine enclaves and later moved his headquarters to Phu Bai.

*Brigadier General English arrived at Da Nang in late December 1965 on very short notice from the U.S. Strike Command as the replacement for Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson. He later wrote that he moved out of the Strike Command "with 48 hours notice to HQMC (16 Dec) and Da Nang (20 Dec)." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Walt also prepared to give up his functions and responsibilities as MACV's Naval Component Commander to Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, who was to head the U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, a command that was to be established effective 1 April 1966. The Naval Support Activity, Da Nang would then come under Ward's operational control although remaining under the command of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and continuing to provide common item supply and other supporting services to III MAF.²

These structural changes in the command and staff had little effect on III MAF's basic mission. It remained all-inclusive. The Marines would continue to conduct military operations in I Corps "in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps and in other areas of RVN as directed by ComUSMACV, in order to assist the GVN to defeat the VC/NVA and extend GVN control over all of South Vietnam."³

The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive

During early and mid-March, the 3d Marine Division units in the Da Nang enclave made some progress in extending government control within the TAOR. Although Colonel Fisher and many of his 3d Marines staff were attached to Task Group Foxtrot at Phu Bai during much of this period, both his 1st and 2d Battalions maintained a high level of small-unit activity at Da Nang.

In the 3d Marines northern sector, Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines conducted extensive patrols throughout its area of operations. One company operated north of the Cu De River while two companies sent out long-range patrols to the western edge of the battalion's TAOR. The remaining company maintained security for the battalion CP.

On 14 March, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey issued his operation order for Golden Fleece II, an operation to protect the spring rice harvest in his TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines had originated the designation for this type operation during the previous fall harvest season.** Under the Golden

**See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, Chapter 9.

Fleece concept, a Marine battalion protected the Vietnamese villagers harvesting their crop "by conducting day and night patrols in areas suspected to be used by VC for access to rice harvest areas; assisting local PF units to guard rice harvesters and rice storage areas as requested by village chiefs."⁴ Dickey's Marines provided protection for the harvesters and the crop through the remainder of the month. Contact with the VC was minimal.

In the regiment's southern area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conducted more than 550 squad patrols and established over 530 night ambushes during the month of March alone. More than half of the patrols were conducted at night. Like Dickey's battalion, Horn's Marines made only limited contact with the VC. The 2d Battalion suffered casualties of six killed and 31 wounded, while killing one VC and capturing one prisoner. Despite the low-grade combat in his area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Horn observed in his monthly chronology, "... numerous reports indicate VC units are moving eastward," into the 9th Marines sector.⁵

Colonel Simmons' 9th Marines was responsible for the southern approaches to Da Nang. At the beginning of March, he prepared plans for offensive operations against local VC forces that were literally entrenched within his TAOR. The regimental commander compared the VC "infrastructure" in his sector to a cancerous growth with its tentacles embedded in the hamlets. Simmons believed that the only way the Marines could root out the "cancer" was to "scrub" the hamlets clean. He observed that mere patrolling and ground sweeps would not do the job. It was:

... not a matter of going from here to there. We can march from Dien Ban to Dai Loc any time of the day we want to. This didn't mean anything. You had to take apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again.⁶

Simmons' concept of operations for his March offensive south of Da Nang required the regiment to continue its "vigorous clearing action down to the La Tho and Thanh Quit River line," employing County Fair search and cordon tactics. Later in the month, the 9th Marines would extend its "scrubbing" operations southward. The regiment first would concentrate its efforts around Route 4 where the ARVN maintained a number of outposts, and then gradually advance south of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. In these phases of the offensive,

the Marines would take a 1,000-meter square or a complex of hamlets as an objective, using one or two companies to "work this area until we find what was there."⁷

At the beginning of March, the battalions of the 9th Marines started their clearing operations south of Da Nang. On the regimental western flank, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines on 5 March established its forward headquarters on Hill 55, which was later to become the regimental command post for the southward advance. The Viet Cong, nevertheless, continued to resist the battalion's clearing efforts on this important site as exemplified in the following excerpts from Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's diary:

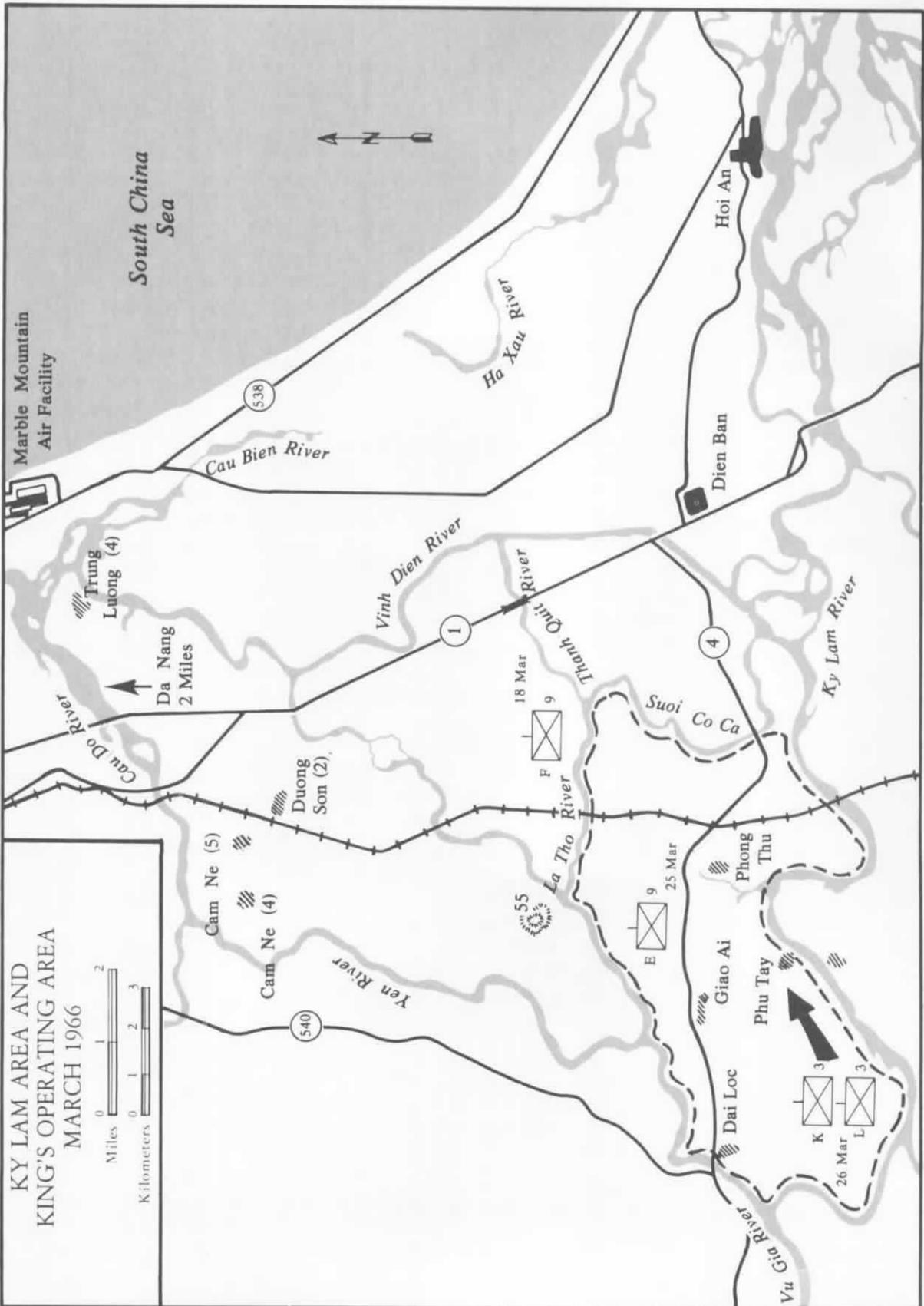
On 10 March two VC killed as they attempted to infiltrate the defensive wire on Hill 55.

On 12 March Hill 55 came under mortar attack.

On 17 March three engineers were KIA at the water point just to the east of Hill 55 (. . . back-to-back chewings by Gen Walt and Col Simmons re security at W.P. . . .)⁸

In the 9th Marines' eastern zone of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, acting on intelligence that a guerrilla platoon was in the vicinity of the Can Bien River, conducted a three-company operation at the Hoa Long village complex south of Marble Mountain. Although the Marines encountered no VC, they found evidence of recent guerrilla activity. The village chief, who accompanied the Marines, pointed out the house of a local VC and assisted in the screening of the villagers. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor observed that the presence of the village chief not only assisted in the questioning of the suspects, but also exposed the population "to a local GVN official." The battalion commander also asked that RFs or PFs be attached to his unit for such operations as these Vietnamese would "... remove the image of 'American occupation,' that is generated by the extended use of U.S. forces only on such operations."^{9*}

*Colonel Carrington recalled an incident involving Lieutenant Colonel Taylor that graphically illustrated the frustrations the U.S. forces faced in telling friend from foe in the hamlets south of Da Nang. Taylor had personally been involved in a "chase to catch some enemy suspects, but had to admit that he could not prove them such after they had abandoned their weapons and were without identifying uniforms." Carrington quotes Taylor explaining to General Walt, "'Yeah. There they were, General, sweating like whores in Church.'" Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the 9th Marines central sector, conducted the month's first County Fair operation on 7-8 March in the hamlet of Duong Son (2), 2,500 meters below the Cau Do and east of the railroad. In this combined operation, the Marines killed five VC. According to a captured enemy document, "The U.S. and GVN forces displaced the villagers to a general area where our cadre were isolated from them. Some of our cadre and guerrilla fighters were forced to emerge from their hiding places. . . ." ¹⁰

After the operation in Duong Son (2), the 9th Marines' battalions conducted three more County Fairs during the next 10 days. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines carried out one in the hamlet of Trung Luong (4), on a small peninsula 2,500 meters southwest of Marble Mountain. In this two-day operation, 14-15 March, Marines and ARVN officials registered 1,397 persons and provided them with identity cards. They held three suspects for further questioning.

Further west, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with the ARVN 51st Regiment, held two County Fairs in the Cam Ne village complex, the scene the previous year of the notorious Zippo lighter incident.* During County Fairs on 17 March, Dorsey's Marines and the ARVN troops netted some measurable results in the hamlets of Cam Ne (4) and (5). They killed two Viet Cong, held 13 persons for further questioning, captured a VC nurse, confiscated over a ton of hidden rice, found several VC documents, and, as an extra bonus, discovered two ARVN deserters. ¹¹

While the 9th Marines was conducting the County Fair cordon and search operations in the hamlets north of the La Tho and Thanh Quit line, the Marine command was perfecting plans for the advance to the Ky Lam-Thu Bon Rivers. General Kyle, who assumed command of the 3d Division on 18 March, was in complete agreement with Colonel

Simmons' desire to "scrub" the area south of Da Nang. He ordered his division staff to prepare an operational order for a regimental operation to relieve enemy pressure on the ARVN outposts along Route 4. The mission of the 9th Marines was to conduct "search and destroy operations in south central Quang Nam Province . . . and to provide Golden Fleece and/or Rural Construction operations as required or requested." Although officially designated as a search and destroy mission to satisfy MACV demands for battalion days in the field, the operation, codenamed Kings, was obviously intended to be a long-term occupation of the area. The Kings area of operations extended from the La Tho-Thanh Quit Line southward to the Ky Lam, with the main target the area south of Route 4. ¹²

On 18 March, Company F, 9th Marines, under Captain Carl A. Reckewell, was conducting a routine search and clear mission on the northern bank of the La Tho just east of the railroad. At 1630 the Marines came under 81mm and 60mm mortar fire. After the mortar bombardment, a VC company launched three ground assaults. Captain Reckewell's men repulsed each of the enemy attacks and later found 10 enemy bodies nearby.

Although it had been scheduled for later in the month, Colonel Simmons decided to begin Operation Kings at once. He designated Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion as the controlling unit. Donahue, whose command post was located in Duong Son (2), asked for permission to move his headquarters to Hill 55 to ensure "a central location and good observation of the area" for the operation. When approval was given, the 2d Battalion established its forward headquarters on the hill, temporarily displacing the command post of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. ¹³

From 19 March through the 23d, the battalion systematically worked over the eastern sector of the Kings area of operations, extending from the La Tho River south to the Ky Lam and from the railroad east to the Suoi Co Ca River. Although reinforced by two companies of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, Donahue employed no more than three companies in Kings at any one time. On 23 March, as the companies moved into the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines sector west of the railroad track, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey assumed command of the operation and also operational control of Company E, 9th Marines and his own Company M. ¹⁴

*See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, Chapter 4. The Cam Ne area continued to be a trouble spot for the Marines. Colonel Dennis commented that the Cam Ne villages were located along the Marine main supply route which "required mine-booby trap clearing at least daily—sometimes twice or three times daily. In fact, one bridge along this route was destroyed four times, including burning and dismantling." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [June 78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187763

Marines of Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines search a house in a Vietnamese hamlet south of Da Nang during Operation Kings. The Marines' objective was to eliminate the VC power base in the area south of Da Nang by taking "apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again."

The heaviest action occurred in the early morning of 25 March. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr.'s Company E had established defensive positions for the night, 3,500 meters west of the railroad and 1,000 meters north of Route 4. At 0030, the Marines at a listening post heard a small force of VC, using water buffalo as a screen, attempting to infiltrate the company's perimeter. In the resulting exchange of small arms fire, the Marines killed two VC. Another listening post reported enemy movement to its front at about the same time and a Marine threw a grenade at the suspected VC. One-half hour later, a 75-round mortar barrage hit the company position. The Viet Cong followed the mortar attack with a two-company assault. Simultaneously, other enemy units placed a heavy volume of small arms fire on night positions of Company M, 9th Marines to the southwest, preventing these Marines from coming to Driver's assistance. Company E bore the brunt of repeated VC ground attacks for the next hour. With the help of 1,000 105mm rounds of supporting fire from the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, Driver's men repulsed the VC with heavy losses. Although the enemy attack ended shortly after 0200, Marine ar-

tillery continued to fire interdiction missions, and a Marine flare plane illuminated the battlefield until 0500. As a result of the fighting, Company E suffered five killed and 19 wounded, but the Marines killed at least 40 of the enemy.¹⁵

The Marines identified the attacking enemy unit as the *R-20* or *Doc Lap Battalion*, which had been harassing the ARVN outposts on Route 4 since mid-February. In its March chronology, the 9th Marines made the following observations about the attack on 25 March:

The preliminary contacts, sequence of attacks, scheme of maneuver, large-scale employment of mortars, use of a diverting force, speed and ferocity of attack once battle was joined and the very evident seeking out of the specific key targets and objectives during the attack, all indicate that this was a well-planned, deliberately executed, and hard fought action conducted by seasoned well-trained Main Force Viet Cong troops.¹⁶

The operation continued for three more days. On the morning of 26 March, Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from newly arrived HMM-164 brought two companies from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines in-

to landing zones south of Route 4.* After artillery and fixed-wing preparation, Captain William F. Lee's Company L landed at 0730 just north of the Ky Lam River and approximately 3,700 meters southwest of where Company E had been attacked by the *Doc Lap Battalion*. Company K under Captain Lyndell M. Orsburn landed two hours later, 1,500 meters north of Company L's landing zone. The two companies then advanced along a northeasterly axis toward Route 4. At about 1400, Captain Lee's company met heavy resistance from VC, who fought from well-prepared positions near Phu Tay (3). Lee asked for close air support; Marine jets from MAG-11 and MAG-12 responded, dropping general purpose bombs and napalm on the VC entrenchments and then strafing them with 20mm fire. Enemy opposition ended.¹⁷

On 27 March, the two 3d Battalion companies renewed their advance toward Route 4, experiencing the same pattern of fighting as that of the previous day. Both companies met stiff resistance from well-entrenched VC and called in air support to destroy the enemy. After the air missions, the Marine companies proceeded with their "scouring" action south of the highway. In the meantime, Companies E and M of the 9th Marines were withdrawn from Operation Kings at midday, after completing a similar operation north of Route 4. The following day, the 28th, the entire operation came to an end when the two 3d Battalion, 3d Marines companies reached Route 4, their final objective. Eight Marine companies had participated in Kings, although no more than four during any given period.¹⁸

The results of Operation Kings were more significant than the resulting kill ratio. The 9th Marines killed at least 58 enemy, while the regiment suffered eight Marine dead and 60 wounded. The most important result was the Marine penetration for an extended period of an area that had long been dominated by the Viet Cong. Colonel Simmons later observed that, "we moved back and forth during Kings with rather good results."¹⁹ According to the

9th Marines monthly report, the regiment cleared out:

... a substantial portion of the ... enemy fortification's defenses, extended the boundaries of the battalion's zones of operation, and went far toward preparing the region for the reassertion of GVN influence and control.²⁰

By the end of March, the 9th Marines had made a significant enlargement of its zone of operations south of the Cau Do and its operations now extended below Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey had moved his battalion command post back to Hill 55 and, on 29 March, Marine engineers had begun constructing the regimental command post there.

The Marines believed they had made vital progress in pacification, both as a result of Operation Kings and the County Fairs conducted during the month. Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, in the 9th Marines eastern sector, began its rice harvest protection mission, similar to the one conducted by the 3d Marines and also called Golden Fleece II. On 4 April, General Kyle issued an operation order which extended Golden Fleece II to all rice harvesting areas in 3d Marine Division sectors.

At this point the bubble of optimism about pacification progress suddenly burst. During the period 5-12 April, the dispute over the removal of General Thi almost caused open combat between armed factions of South Vietnamese forces. South of Da Nang, elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment, including the attached 39th Ranger Battalion, abandoned their Giao Ai and Phong Thu outposts along Route 4. At Phong Thu, the rangers left behind, unguarded, 13 tons of ordnance, including small arms ammunition, mortar rounds, and 700 antipersonnel mines. The Viet Cong helped themselves to this material. Necessarily, the 9th Marines halted all offensive operations and assumed a defensive stance.²¹ The effect upon pacification was readily apparent in the I Corps National Priority Area.

An American civilian official assigned to the sector during this period, Paul Hare, commented that the Marine County Fair operations were one of the most successful security measures and "... probably the only way to break the back of the local VC infrastructure, but to be effective it must be a continuing operation. Needless to say, none have taken place in the last ten days or so." Hare pointed out that other factors, such as the confusing command structure, were also responsible for some of the difficulties in the National Priority Area. He wryly remarked:

*HMM-164, under Lieutenant Colonel Warren C. Watson, arrived in Vietnam on 7 March. It was the first CH-46 squadron assigned to Vietnam. The twin-engine, tandem-rotor Sea Knight aircraft carried almost twice the load of the UH-34s. For further discussion of the 46s, see Chapter 14.

Basic to the problem is the relationship of Major Nhat (. . . Pacification Leader) and Captain Hoa (District Chief of Hoa Vang). Cadre generally speak to Major Nhat; village and hamlet chiefs to both; ARVN to Colonel Lap; RF to nobody; and the PF and (Revolutionary Cadre) to anyone who happens to talk to them. The situation is confusing to the extreme.

This, compounded with the fact that ARVN security forces now "focused on the political intrigues of Da Nang," brought pacification to a standstill.²²

"Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles"

Following General Thi's return to I Corps, the political situation deteriorated. The deposed corps commander's presence in Hue provided the "Struggle Forces" with a living symbol of their confrontation with the Saigon regime. On 23 March, they held crippling strikes in Da Nang and Hue, which seriously impeded the flow of supplies to III MAF. The Buddhist leaders demanded that the military junta resign in favor of a civilian assembly and for the first time attacked Premier Ky by name. Students seized the Hue radio station and used it to support their antigovernment agitation. Statements of dissidents began to take on anti-American overtones. While expressing gratitude for U.S. assistance, they accused the Americans of interfering in internal South Vietnamese politics by supporting the Ky administration.

General Walt attempted to keep his forces out of any involvement in the dispute, but minor incidents between the Marines and the "Struggle Forces" occurred. In one such incident on 26 March, a Marine lance corporal from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, assigned to the Marine security guard at the Hue City LCU ramp, tore down an anti-American banner put up by some students on a nearby wall. The student leader went to the American consulate and warned that if he "did not receive an apology within two hours," the students would destroy the United States Information Service Building. At that point, Colonel Fisher, who was still at Phu Bai as Commander, Task Group Foxtrot, arrived at the consulate to discuss the matter with the student leader, Buu Ton, and consular and other U.S. and South Vietnamese officials there. Colonel Fisher told Buu Ton that he would investigate the affair, and that if Marines were responsible, he would apologize.

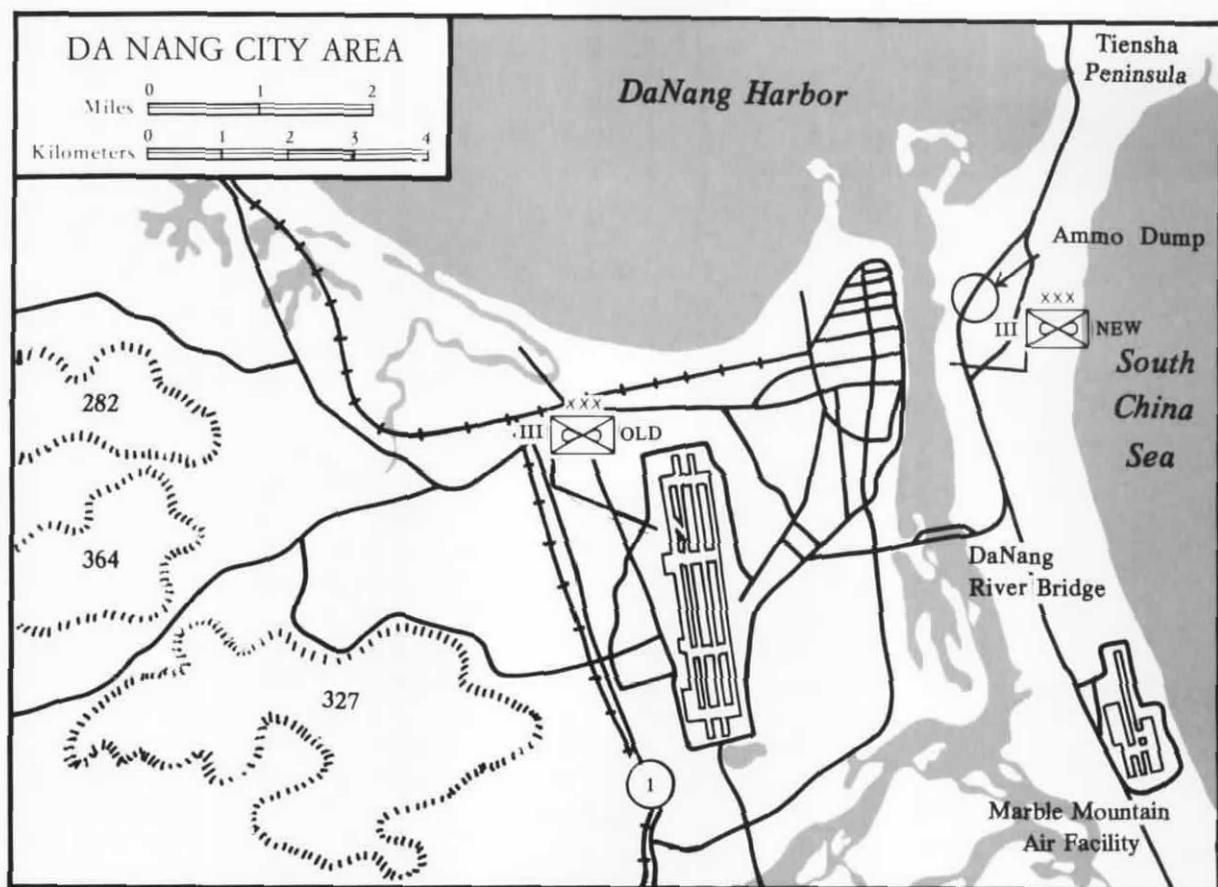
Fisher insisted that the tearing down of the banner in no way reflected U.S. policy. Buu Ton was unwilling to accept Colonel Fisher's explanation and demanded to go to the LCU ramp and identify the Marine.²³

The group at the consulate, including Buu Ton and Colonel Fisher, departed for the LCU ramp area where they confronted the hapless Marine responsible for the incident. The young lance corporal apologized for his action to the student leader, but the latter refused to acknowledge it. Buu Ton had further demands. He wanted the Marine to make his apology publicly over the Hue radio and then replace the banner "in public view." Moreover the American officials were to issue orders to all U.S. personnel not to interfere or participate in South Vietnamese politics. Buu Ton then left the U.S. and South Vietnamese officials and returned to his headquarters.²⁴

After arriving back at the consulate, the American officials received instructions from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon on how to deal with the situation. There was to be "no public apology;" the Marine "would not replace the banner . . . [and] The man would be punished within the framework of U.S. military justice;" but Buu Ton "would be assured that there would be no further occurrences of this nature."²⁵

In another meeting with the student leader and South Vietnamese officials later that day, Colonel Fisher informed Buu Ton that the "Act was by an individual contrary to orders and U.S. policy and that appropriate disciplinary action would be taken by III MAF authorities." Buu Ton was still not satisfied. He stated that he had to have something "in writing to show his followers." At that stage, Colonel Geoffrey H. Boston, the U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division and the subarea coordinator, entered the discussion. He promised Buu Ton "a written assurance that he would do what he could to prevent such acts in the future." Buu Ton received his letter the following day, thus ending this particular episode.²⁶

On 30 March, there occurred another incident which further inflamed relations between the U.S. military and the dissident groups in I Corps. A Marine driver in Da Nang scraped the fender of a civilian vehicle on one of the city's narrow streets. The dissidents claimed two Vietnamese died in the accident and demanded that "top U.S. officials come to Da Nang within 48 hours or we will not be



responsible for the lives and property of U.S. residents." Both the Embassy and MACV ignored the ultimatum, but it was indicative of the increasing militancy of the Struggle Forces.²⁷

Since the dissidents held many of the centers of political power in I Corps, Premier Ky decided to reassert his authority. At a press conference on 3 April, he stated: "I consider Da Nang to be in the hands of the Communists and the government will organize an operation to retake . . . [the city]." The next night, Ky, accompanied by two members of the Directorate and three Vietnamese Marine battalions, flew to Da Nang on board U.S. Air Force transport aircraft. The Marines were held at the airfield and did not attempt to enter the city. General Chuan, the I Corps commander, visited Ky at the airbase on the morning of 5 April and apparently convinced the premier to change his mind about moving against the insurgents. Ky made a radio broadcast that afternoon in which he stated that the city was not under Communist control as he had first believed. Ky left

for Saigon that night, but the Vietnamese Marine battalions stayed behind.²⁸

With the three Vietnamese Marine battalions poised at Da Nang Airbase and the rebels in control of the city, General Walt was in a very uncomfortable position. Although not wanting to appear to be meddling in South Vietnam's internal politics, the III MAF commander wanted to keep the antagonists apart. He feared that the crisis would not only interrupt the war against the Communists, but, more importantly, that U.S. forces would become embroiled if fighting broke out between the two factions.²⁹

The situation came to a climax on 9 April. Colonel Dam Quang Yeu, commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who openly supported the Struggle Movement, led an armored convoy of anti-government ARVN forces equipped with four 155mm howitzers north along Route 1 from Hoi An toward Da Nang. About 1030, General Kyle directed Colonel Simmons to block the highway as

close to Dien Ban as possible. The 9th Marines commander decided that the Thanh Quit Bridge, nine miles south of the airbase, was the best place to stop the convoy. An hour later, Captain Reckewell, the commander of Company F, 9th Marines, stationed one of his platoons supported by two Ontos on the northern side of the bridge. The Marines purposely had stalled a 2½-ton truck on the bridge itself. In somewhat of an understatement, the 9th Marines reported, "This block effectively served its purpose by stopping northbound vehicular traffic."^{30*}

The dangers of a serious confrontation at the bridge remained. Armed American Marines faced the heavily armed South Vietnamese convoy. Colonel Yeu emplaced his 155mm howitzers and trained them on the airfield. When General Walt learned of the situation, he sent the III MAF G-3, Colonel John R. Chaisson, who had relieved Colonel Simmons when the latter assumed command of the 9th Marines, to talk over the situation with Colonel Yeu. Chaisson, a 1939 Harvard graduate, a veteran of two previous wars, and a highly articulate officer, arrived at the bridge site to meet with the South Vietnamese commander. He warned Yeu that if the latter's troops continued their advance or shelled the base, the Americans would consider it an attack upon themselves and would react accordingly. As Chaisson spoke, a flight of Marine F-8E Crusaders, armed with bombs and rockets, circled overhead. General Walt ordered Marine artillery to lay one 155mm battery and two 8-inch howitzers on the rebel positions, but to fire only on his personal command.

While the situation remained tense, Colonel Chaisson apparently convinced Colonel Yeu that aggressive action by the rebels would not be in anyone's best interests. Yeu contented himself with a show of force. Thirty minutes after Chaisson left to report back to General Walt, the ARVN commander



Marine Corps Photo A187321
Marines from the 9th Marines stand outside the Hotel Da Nang as they prepare to evacuate U.S. civilians from the city during the political crisis. Using loudspeakers, radios, and telephones they directed people to the evacuation sites.

ordered his artillery unit to return to Hoi An, but Yeu and the ARVN infantry stayed where they were.³¹

Prior to the confrontation at the Thanh Quit Bridge, the Marines evacuated American civilians, U.S. military personnel, and foreign nationals from the city of Da Nang in accordance with orders from MACV. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines commander, later recalled that he was helilifted at 0200 on the morning of 9 April to the III MAF CP to attend a briefing on the planned evacuation by Colonel Chaisson "and a representative of the State Department."³² At 0740, helicopters from MAG-16 landed two of his companies, E and H, in the northeastern sector of the city. The Marines, using radios, telephones, and loudspeakers, directed the people to the evacuation site. Marine helicopters and Navy landing craft brought 700 evacuees from Da Nang to Marine positions on the Tiensha Peninsula. By 1620, the evacuation operation was over.³³

During the following week, there was a considerable lessening of tension in I Corps. On 10 April, General Ton That Dinh replaced General Chuan as the I Corps commander and the newly appointed officer quickly took steps to defuse the situation. He ordered all ARVN troops back to their units and moved one of the Vietnamese Marine battalions

*According to one Marine officer, Captain Reckewell later told him that Colonel Yeu had threatened to use his howitzers, but Reckewell had replied: "I'll see those 155's and raise you two F-8's." General Simmons recently wrote that not finding the battalion commander, he personally led Reckewell's "company to the bridge that day." Col Paul C. Trammell, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 and BGen Edwin H. Simmons, notation on Trammell Comments, dtd 16Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, had been called earlier to the III MAF CP for a briefing on the evacuation of U.S. nationals from Da Nang.



Marine Corps Photo A421624

A Marine carries a baby for its mother as they hurry to board a waiting helicopter. During the evacuation, the Marines brought out 700 people from Da Nang City.

to Quang Ngai. On 12 April, the remaining Vietnamese Marines returned to Saigon. At the conclusion of a government-sponsored national political congress on 14 April, Chief of State Thieu announced that general elections would be held in three to five months. This decree satisfied many of the dissidents. Even the outspoken Thich Tri Quang, who had led the 1963 Buddhist revolt and was still a key Buddhist leader in Central Vietnam, called for a moratorium on strikes and demonstrations. The head of the Buddhist Institute, the moderate Tam Chau, also agreed that the Ky government should stay on until the formation of a national assembly. In Da Nang and Hue, shops reopened, civilian laborers reported for work, and governmental functions returned to normal.

This uneasy calm was short-lived. On 15 April, General Thi demanded that the Saigon government step down immediately. Mayor Man supported the demand and the rebel-controlled Da Nang and Hue radio stations repeated the verbal attacks against the Ky regime. In a move reminiscent of the 1963 Revolution against Diem, the radical Buddhist leaders announced that 60 monks and nuns were prepared to immolate themselves if Ky did not resign.

At a press conference on 7 May, Ky provided further provocation. He announced that the constituent assembly, which the government had promised within five months, would not be transformed into a national assembly. Instead that body would simply draft a constitution and be dissolved until a national assembly was elected some time in 1967. Ky's statement drew an immediate reaction. Tri Quang led a chorus of protests, and demonstrations once more broke out in Da Nang and Hue. The premier remained adamant and replaced the Director General of the National Police, a Thi supporter, with Colonel Ngoc Loan, a man loyal to Ky.

Early on the morning of 15 May, Premier Ky moved swiftly to put down the revolt in Da Nang once and for all. Charging that the Struggle Forces had committed acts of terror the previous night, Ky airlifted two Vietnamese Marine battalions and two airborne battalions to the Da Nang Airbase in South Vietnamese transport aircraft. The sudden arrival of the four battalions came as a surprise for III MAF Headquarters, especially since the city had been quiet that night. Ky had made the move without consulting any of his American advisors. Whether an actual threat to the inhabitants of Da Nang did exist at that point was immaterial. In short order government forces controlled most of the city. They secured Vietnamese I Corps Headquarters, the police station, the city hall, the ARVN garrison barracks, and the radio station, and arrested Mayor Man and several Struggle Movement leaders. The rebels still occupied the Da Nang soccer field, several pagodas, and most of Tiensha Peninsula across the river from the city. General Dinh, the I Corps commander who had been attempting to negotiate with the Struggle Forces, was not a party to the government's move. In fact, he fled from his quarters only minutes ahead of a government armored column to the asylum of III MAF Headquarters.³⁴

As during the April crisis, III MAF was caught in the middle and General Walt once more attempted to mediate. He radioed Major General William B. Rosson, the MACV Chief of Staff, about the situation in Da Nang since General Westmoreland at the time was visiting CinCPac Headquarters in Honolulu. Walt told Rosson that General Dinh had the support of most of the ARVN forces in I Corps and that he recommended that the government be urged to withdraw its Marine and airborne forces from Da Nang city. Later that morning, III MAF

received the MACV reply; Deputy Ambassador William J. Porter had relayed Walt's message to Premier Ky. MACV directed Walt, to "continue to do what we are doing. . . . Use good offices to prevent bloodshed."³⁵

Several incidents involving South Vietnamese aircraft and U.S. Marine ground units occurred during the morning of 15 May. Two Vietnamese Air Force aircraft strafed ARVN units on Highway 1 north of Da Nang, near Marine positions. Later that morning, a small Vietnamese Air Force observation aircraft buzzed Marine ground positions near the strategic Nam O Bridge across the Cu De River north of Da Nang. It also dropped a cannister near a Marine truck on Highway 1 which contained the message, "Keep out of Da Nang because Da Nang has troubles." In response, General Platt, the III MAF Chief of Staff, radioed the U.S. advisor with the Vietnamese Air Force units at Da Nang, "Tell VNAF from General Walt that these dangerous incidents must cease and desist. VNAF's provocative

actions can lead to bloodshed. III MAF does not want bloodshed." The III MAF warning, for the time being, halted Vietnamese flights over Marine positions.³⁶

The South Vietnamese Government was in no mood to compromise with the dissidents in I Corps. The Directorate rejected General Walt's advice to support the I Corps commander and to withdraw its forces from Da Nang, but on the morning of 16 May, Premier Ky replaced the I Corps Commander, General Dinh, with Major General Huynh Van Cao. Cao was not only a Catholic but had been the IV Corps commander under President Diem. His appointment hardly served to placate the militant Buddhist leaders of the Struggle Force.

The new I Corps commander soon learned the extent of dissident support in I Corps when he visited the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters in Hue on 17 May. Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan, the division commander, had refused to commit himself to the government's side and conveniently was sick

South Vietnamese infantrymen supported by tanks enter Da Nang to put down the "Struggle Movement" in May. They arrested the mayor of the city and several of the leaders of the movement.

Marine Corps Photo A193990



on the 17th so that he could not meet with Cao. After leaving Nhuan's headquarters where he was briefed by the division staff, General Cao, accompanied by Colonel Archelaus Hamblen, the senior U.S. Army advisor in I Corps, and General Platt, prepared to depart for Da Nang. An angry crowd had broken into the division compound so the trio hastily boarded the U.S. Army helicopter waiting for them. As the aircraft lifted off, an ARVN lieutenant fired two pistol shots at it at point blank range. Although not hitting any of the occupants, both rounds struck the helicopter. After the second shot, the U.S. Army helicopter gunner fired a six-round burst killing the ARVN lieutenant and wounding two other Vietnamese soldiers. The Struggle Forces immediately made the dead lieutenant a "martyr" to their cause and accused the Americans of blatant interference in South Vietnamese internal affairs.

The most dramatic confrontation between the American and the dissident forces occurred the following day, 18 May, at Da Nang and involved General Walt himself. By that morning the Vietnamese Marines had pushed to the western edge of the Da Nang River Bridge which connected Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. When they attempted to cross, they were fired on by Struggle Force troops entrenched on the other side. The leader of the dissident forces sent a message to General Cao that he had wired the bridge with demolitions and would destroy it if the Vietnamese Marines continued their advance. Cao relayed the message to General Walt. The bridge was a single span over which III MAF received much of its logistic support.

Indeed, all of the bridges in the Da Nang area were important. Da Nang is essentially an island city. Every exit from the city to the south, east, and northwest is by way of a major bridge and any force that controlled these points, controlled the city. General Walt, therefore, wanted to keep the Da Nang River Bridge intact and ordered Colonel Chaisson to work out a compromise between the government and the Struggle Forces.

Arriving at the bridge, the III MAF operations officer asked the Vietnamese Marine commander to pull back and allow American Marines to occupy their former positions. The Vietnamese commander readily agreed to Chaisson's proposal and Company M from the 3d Marines, then part of the airfield defense battalion, replaced the Vietnamese Marines on that side of the river. Before crossing the river to

talk with the rebel leader, Chaisson asked for a reinforced squad from the 3d Battalion to meet him on the eastern side.

Colonel Chaisson then flew across the river in a Marine helicopter and began negotiations with the Struggle Force commander. He was unable to persuade the Vietnamese to abandon their positions on the eastern bank. Chaisson then ordered Captain William F. Lee, the commanding officer of Company L, 3d Marines who had accompanied his reinforced squad to the other side, to move his troops into the dissident ARVN troop formation. The Americans advanced directly into the midst of the rebels and simply sat down; they made no attempt to dislodge the Vietnamese. Colonel Chaisson then boarded his helicopter and reported to General Walt.

Walt and Chaisson then returned to the bridge in Walt's staff car. According to Colonel Chaisson:

Walt and I went back down to the west side . . . in his car and we got out. He walked out on the bridge and I went out with him. And as we got to the east side this [Vietnamese] warrant officer walked out and told him to stop. This warrant officer showed that he was going to blow it up—take the whole three of us out.

The III MAF commander tried unsuccessfully to convince the Vietnamese officer to remove the demolitions. Chaisson vividly described the confrontation between the large Marine general and the small Vietnamese officer in the following manner:

Walt really gave him hell and was trying to intimidate him. The guy wasn't intimidating very much and so Walt said, "Well, I'm going to stay right here and send for a platoon of Marines." So he called this platoon of Marines . . . and this warrant officer . . . was holding his hand up as though he was going to give the signal to blow it and Walt stood right in there.³⁷

General Walt in 1978 recalled:

. . . the Vietnamese warrant officer said in a very commanding voice, "General we will die together." He brought his raised arm down sharply to his side. There was no doubt that he expected the bridge to blow on his signal. I shall never forget the expression on his face when his signal did not blow up the bridge and us with it.³⁸

The incident ended in somewhat of an anticlimax. Chaisson later related:

This platoon of Marines came from the west side and just came right across and went right through . . . an Army lieutenant, who'd been the advisor with this engineer outfit, went [alone] over the rail and went underneath and pulled off whatever the stuff was. And they did have it wired. Then Walt got back in his car and drove away. But

he really showed them it was a showdown and he called it and they did it.³⁹

III MAF laconically reported to MACV: "After considerable debate ARVN engineers succeeded in removing the demolitions from bridge. . . . It is planned to use the bridge for civilian and U.S. military traffic commencing 19 May."⁴⁰

Once the bridge incident was over, the focus of attention returned to the fighting in the city itself. The Struggle Forces had barricaded themselves in several pagodas and refused to surrender. The main point of resistance was the Tinh Hoi Pagoda where about 350 heavily-armed rebels held out against government troops. General Cao did not want unnecessary casualties and would not order a direct assault on the pagodas. The National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, went to the I Corps Headquarters where, according to Cao, the colonel pulled a gun and threatened his life unless Cao gave the order to attack. General Cao made a hasty retreat to the III MAF compound and asked General Walt for "asylum and transport to the United States."⁴¹ Premier Ky did not relieve Cao; he simply named Brigadier General Du Quoc Dong as the acting I Corps commander. The following day, Ky recalled Colonel Loan to Saigon and directed the government forces not to attack the pagodas. The government

troops were to encircle each stronghold and starve out the defenders.

On the Tiensha Peninsula, the situation remained tense. The Struggle Forces continued to control the eastern bank of the Da Nang River and exchanged shots with government forces on the western bank. A large ARVN ammunition dump was adjacent to the new III MAF Headquarters compound being constructed on the peninsula. Captain Dinh Tan Thanh, the commanding officer of the 519th ARVN Ordnance Company, which controlled the supply point, threatened to blow up the dump if government troops crossed the river.

To prevent this, on 20 May, General Walt told the 9th Marines to move Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang from Chu Lai the previous month, to the new III MAF compound. The battalion was to occupy the site and be prepared to seize the ammunition dump which was just across the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley loaded two rifle companies on trucks at Marble Mountain and, supported by a platoon of tanks, headed north. After a brief delay at a Struggle Forces' roadblock, the Marines reached their destination. While the Marines were preparing defensive positions, Captain Thanh paid a visit to Lieutenant Colonel Kelley. Thanh vaguely hinted that if the Marines would guarantee his safety and that of his men he would consider turning the dump over to the Marines. The battalion commander relayed the gist of this conversation to III MAF Headquarters.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley had reason to be concerned about the safety of his troops. Firing across the river continued all night and into the morning of 21 May. Shortly after sunrise, a Vietnamese A-1 Skyraider made two strafing passes on the Marine positions, but no one was injured. Minutes later, two more Skyraiders fired into the compound with 20mm cannon and 2.75-inch rockets, wounding seven Marines. Apparently the Vietnamese Air Force pilots were after a rebel truck parked outside the perimeter fence, but missed their target.

General Walt warned the Vietnamese Air Force that if any further air attacks occurred, Marine jets would shoot down the Vietnamese planes. He later remembered that after the strafing incident he ordered four Marine A-4s to fly as a combat air patrol (CAP) over the four Vietnamese Skyraiders. The Vietnamese air commander then ordered:

An aerial view of the bridge connecting Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. The bridge was the site of a dramatic confrontation between Gen Walt and dissident forces.

Navy Photo K-52114



... four more Skyraiders above our jets. I then ordered four more A-4's to fly CAP over the top of the second layer of Skyraiders. For over an hour I sat in the III MAF command center with two phones in my hand—one to the Marine air commander and the other to the Vietnamese air commander.

According to Walt, he cautioned the Vietnamese air commander:

... that if his planes fired one round, one rocket or dropped one bomb we would shoot all his planes out of the sky. On the other phone I told my Marine air commander to be prepared to immediately carry out my order. Finally having been convinced I meant what I said the Vietnamese commander gave orders for his planes to land at the airfield and the crisis was past.⁴²

There were no further air strikes, but later that morning the 2d Battalion came under mortar attack from the rebel side. Eight more Marines were wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley warned the insurgents that he would retaliate if there were any more provocations. There were none.

During the next two days, the Marines attempted to convince the ARVN dissidents to surrender the ammunition dump to the Americans. Finally at 0200 on 23 May, Captain Thanh, fearing the Vietnamese Marines were preparing to attack, told Lieutenant Colonel Kelley that he was willing to turn over the dump. For the next two hours, the officers ironed out the details of a 15-point agreement. Thanh was extremely meticulous and insisted that every word be approved by other members of the local Struggle Force committee. Kelley only insisted that the Marines be able to bring tanks into the dump, a point which Thanh conceded. After completing the final draft of the document, the two men conducted a tour of the installation. At 0530, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley brought the text of the agreement to General Walt, who gave it his approval. At 0800, two M-48 tanks followed by a Marine company entered the dump.⁴³

Although not related to the incident at the ammunition depot, the entire Struggle Movement in Da Nang collapsed on 23 May. At 1400, the dissidents in the Tinh Hoi Pagodas surrendered; the loyalist troops disarmed 325 rebels, removed 33 bodies, and recovered over 1,300 weapons. All ARVN troops sympathetic to the Struggle Movement returned to their former units. The Directorate appointed Lieutenant Colonel Le Chi Cuong to replace the imprisoned Nguyen Van Man as mayor of Da Nang and by the evening of the 23d, the city

had returned to normal. All told, about 150 Vietnamese on both sides were killed during the fighting in Da Nang and another 700 wounded. American casualties were 23 wounded, including 18 Marines.⁴⁴

The end of the Struggle Movement in Da Nang apparently convinced General Thi to abandon any hope for a return to power. He conferred with General Westmoreland on 24 May and reluctantly agreed to meet with Premier Ky to discuss their differences. Three days later the two met at Chu Lai.* Thi stated that he only wanted what was best for the Vietnamese people and that he was not a puppet of the Buddhists. According to Thi, the Struggle Forces lacked discipline and he offered to cooperate fully with the premier. Ky decided that the former Corps commander would be most "helpful" if he left I Corps and shortly after the meeting Thi left for Da Lat to await reassignment. Later in the year, General Thi and his family went into exile in Washington, D.C.

Before leaving I Corps, Thi tried to persuade General Cao at Da Nang to return to I Corps Headquarters and work for a final settlement. General Cao refused since he still feared for his personal safety and that of his family. Indeed, he wrote a letter to General Westmoreland:

... asking for asylum in the United States where he would like "to become an American citizen, to join the Marines or the Army, to fight against the Communists. . . . My wife and children will be safe in your country, and I will do my best to serve freedom and the United States."⁴⁵

In any event, recognizing that Cao was unacceptable to Ky, the Directorate named the loyal 2d ARVN Division commander, Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps commander.

Despite Thi's departure, the situation in Hue continued to deteriorate. The most radical of the Buddhist leaders had taken control. The day before the

*Lieutenant Colonel Alex Lee, who at the time, as a captain, commanded Company F, 7th Marines, recalled that Companies E and F of the 2d Battalion had the assignment to guard the Chu Lai strip during the meeting. According to Lee, there was "an unending stream of rumors and counterrumors concerning possible VC attack, NVA attack, and possible RVN unit attack. None of these rumors came true; however, it was a hot dusty and very tense time to wait developments with little or nothing in the way of valid information." LtCol Alex Lee, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187170

Gen Walt (right) greets MajGen Hoang Xuan Lam (left), upon his arrival at Da Nang to assume command of I Corps. Lam, the former Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division, was the last in a rapid succession of I Corps commanders after the removal of Gen Thi.

Chu Lai conference, an estimated 10,000 people filed through the streets of Hue in a massive funeral procession for the young Vietnamese officer who had fired on General Cao's helicopter. After the funeral, 300 students marched on the United States Information Services Library. While police and ARVN soldiers watched, the mob smashed windows, set books and furniture ablaze, and even pried the brass lettering off the face of the library. All that remained of the modern, two-story structure was a burned-out shell.

On 29 May, the radicals employed a familiar but most gruesome tactic. A Buddhist nun sat down in front of a pagoda in Hue, doused her robe with gasoline, and set herself on fire. That night, another nun followed suit in front of the Saigon Buddhist Institute and next morning a monk did the same in Da Lat. In a press conference, Tri Quang stated that

President Johnson was responsible for the fiery suicides and several days later he began a much-publicized hunger strike to protest American support of the Vietnamese Government.

On 1 June, the protests were once more aimed at the Americans. Intelligence reports indicated that a mob planned to attack the U.S. consulate at Hue. The staff therefore destroyed all classified material and evacuated the building. Before leaving, the U.S. consul contacted General Nhuan and asked for troops to protect the building. The 1st ARVN Division commander complied, but his guards hastily departed when a mob of 800 protesters stormed the mission. After first stoning the building, the mob broke down the door and set the consulate on fire with barrels of gasoline. It then moved next door where it sacked and burned the residence of the U.S. administrative assistant. The homes of the Thua

Thien province chief and other Vietnamese officials also went up in flames.

As a result of the increasing violence, the government granted additional concessions to the Buddhists. At a meeting of the Armed Forces Council on 6 June, the Directorate was enlarged to include 10 civilian members, two of whom were Buddhists. A week later, Premier Ky established a predominantly civilian 80-man People-Army Council to advise the government on political, economic, and social matters. These changes in Saigon did not satisfy the dissidents. Those Buddhists who had been installed in the government were not official representatives of the Buddhist Institute and both Tam Chau and Tri Quang continued to voice their opposition to the existing administration.

The Buddhists also employed a nonviolent harassing tactic. In Da Nang, Hue, Quang Tri, and Qui Nhon, they began placing family altars and statues in the streets. All U.S. personnel were ordered not to touch the religious figures since the desecration of one could precipitate an incident. In Da Nang, the cluttered streets snarled traffic and General Walt restricted the use of vehicles. The movement of supplies from the piers came to a halt. The I Corps commander, General Lam, ordered the police to remove all shrines; this was accomplished in Da Nang. In Hue, however, the 1st ARVN Division troops and National Police refused to touch the altars.*

*Several Marine commanders stationed near Phu Bai during this period remarked in their comments on the inconvenience caused by the Buddhist demonstrations. Colonel Samuel M. Morrow, then a major and commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, remembered that ". . . the Buddhists would set shrines down the middle of Highway 1 making the passage of trucks and self-propelled artillery virtually impossible for fear of knocking one of them over. . . ." Col Samuel M. Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Sumner A. Vale, then commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled that the altars ". . . were not placed in the center of the highway but enough off-center so that a 2½-ton truck could still use the road." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, commented that during the Buddhist difficulties in Hue, ". . . nearly all our resupply was by helo. Since ammo had first priority, we frequently got only one meal of C's per day. We made up the other two meals from captured rice, sweet corn, and peanuts." LtCol Ralph E. Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

At this time, Premier Ky decided to act. He ordered General Lam to rectify the situation in Hue. On 10 June, Lam airlifted 300 riot control police to the old imperial capital. Two days later, the first of four government battalions arrived and the National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, took command of final operations against the rebels.

This time the government forces acted with restraint and there was little fighting. While clearing the streets, the Vietnamese policemen bowed three times and then carefully removed each altar. Those demonstrators who refused to disperse were quickly hustled into waiting trucks and rushed off to jail. In breaking up the few last protest marches, ARVN troops used tear gas instead of bullets. The main areas of resistance were located in the Citadel and near two Buddhist pagodas, but by the evening of 18 June Colonel Loan's unit had neutralized these strongholds. With the arrest of key rebel leaders and the ousting of General Nhuan as the 1st ARVN Division's commander, the Struggle Movement disintegrated. By morning, the government had reestablished its control of Hue.

Throughout the crisis period, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Lodge backed Premier Ky and the Directorate. Their cooperation, especially during April when the Vietnamese Marines arrived at Da Nang, placed General Walt in a difficult position. He viewed the situation differently than MACV. Walt had an extremely close relationship, both professionally and personally, with General Thi. The Marines considered Thi a good, competent commander who had been effectively prosecuting the war in I Corps. His removal was a disappointment to III MAF.^{46**}

The Marines were not anti-Ky. Their main interest was to get on with the war, and each move by the government, be it a troop deployment, an inflammatory public announcement, or a removal of a key

**One veteran Marine commander observed in his comments: ". . . it would appear that the natural (and healthy) differences and professional rivalry between [U.S.] Marine and [U.S.] Army sort of played into the hands of the political differences between Ky and Thi in this one instance. Of course the geographic separation of Walt from Westmoreland, coupled with the proximity of Thi to the former and Ky to the latter, also aggravated the situation. I think it's even more to General Walt's credit that he managed this situation so expertly." Col Leon N. Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Struggle leader, caused reverberations throughout I Corps. The parade of corps commanders through Da Nang, finally ending with the appointment of Lam, also complicated the Marine task. Colonel Chaisson, much later, expressed the fears of the Marine command when he stated:

If we'd got ourselves in a position with the government forces fighting the local forces up there, and particularly if we had been caught in the middle of it and there'd been

any significant U.S. casualties, I have a feeling that the U.S. Government would have probably pulled out of the war right then and there.⁴⁷

The fact of the matter was that the Saigon forces put down the revolt without a full civil war, thus, Ky and the Directorate achieved temporary solidification of their government at the expense of a certain amount of instability in I Corps.

CHAPTER 6

The Advance to the Ky Lam

April Actions and Operation Georgia—The May Ky Lam Campaign—Operation Liberty

April Actions and Operation Georgia

The spring political crisis caused a serious disruption of Marine offensive operations at Da Nang. With the sudden arrival of Vietnamese Marine battalions at the Da Nang Airbase in April, the U.S. Marine regiments in Quang Nam Province suddenly found themselves with a new mission. They not only had to fight a war against the Communists, but also to prevent one between government troops and the Struggle Forces. Colonel Simmons compared the role of his regiment to that of the "ham in the sandwich," the filler to absorb the shock of the confrontation between the two opposing sides.¹

This situation could only benefit the Communists. The 9th Marines had to revert to the defensive because of the threat to the security of Da Nang created by the polarization of the ARVN forces into hostile factions. With the abandonment of several government outposts along Route 4 and vast amounts of ammunition, the VC not only rearmed at GVN expense, but reentered the area the Marines had just cleared during Operation Kings.*

On 16 April, an old enemy, the R-20 "*Doc Lap*" Battalion, attacked one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in position north of the abandoned 39th Ranger outpost at Phong Thu. Company H, commanded by Captain Everette S. Roane, had established defensive positions north of Route 4, and

put a squad ambush south of the road. Suddenly, at 0400, the enemy opened up with recoilless rifle and mortar fire. Simultaneously, the enemy launched two company-size assaults, one from the southeast and the other from the southwest. The attack from the southwest, about 100 men, ran into a Marine ambush and stalled. According to the Marine squad leader, his men "shot 12-15 VC for sure—most likely more." At dawn the following morning, the squad found two enemy bodies in front of its position.²

The approximately 150-man force attacking from the southeast reached the north side of Route 4, but was unable to penetrate the Marine company's perimeter. As soon as the attackers crossed the road:

The VC were like ducks in a shooting gallery. Many VC were shot as they crossed the road and went down into the paddy in front of the 2d Platoon. At one point, 22 VC bodies could be counted in that vicinity. Other VC were shot as they attempted to remove bodies. During the lulls in illumination, as bodies would be removed and more VC would cross the road, there would be more bodies.³

Marine aerial observers arrived overhead and as Marine artillery responded, the enemy's supporting mortars and recoilless rifles fell silent. The VC ground assault dissipated, and the attacking force broke up into small groups. Enemy probes continued along the Marine company perimeter, but, "this most likely was to cover the collection of VC casualties and the withdrawal of the main force."⁴

At first light, the Marines counted 12 enemy bodies, but estimated killing another 63. Company H had not gone unscathed, suffering seven dead and 37 wounded, largely as a result of the enemy's recoilless rifle and mortar attack.⁵

In mid-April the 9th Marines resumed the initiative, following the temporary standoff of the political crisis. Originally, the regiment planned to follow Kings with a one-battalion operation beginning on 10 April in the An Hoa region south of the Ky Lam and Thu Bon. Thus, the Marines would

*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, commented that he vividly recalled "a request . . . for engineers to clear mines and booby traps from one of the abandoned ARVN encampments on Route 4." He and his engineers came under a night attack from the VC before the job was done and his engineers sustained four casualties, including one man killed. Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

carry out General Walt's promise to Mr. Can, the An Hoa project leader, that III MAF would protect the industrial complex there. Though unable to meet the original date, the 9th Marines completed its revised order for Operation Georgia by 14 April. The mission was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.⁶

With the completion of the planning, the 9th Marines battalions began preliminary preparations for the operation. On 18 April, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang three days earlier, relieved the 3d Battalion on the eastern flank of the 9th Marines area of operations. Both Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion and Taylor's 3d Battalion then reentered the former Kings area of operations in conjunction with ARVN and Vietnamese militia forces. Their assignment was not only to eradicate the VC but to determine suitable LVT river-crossing sites and assembly and resupply points for the forthcoming operation.

Although the operation had not officially begun, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor established a forward base at the An Hoa airstrip on 20 April. Helicopters from MAG-16 lifted the command group and Company L from Marble Mountain while Air Force C-123s, as in Operation Mallard, flew in an artillery battery, Battery F, 12th Marines.

On the 21st, the designated date for the start of the operation, the rear headquarters and two rifle companies, supported by a platoon of LVTHs from Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, moved overland toward the objective area. A third company, Company I, 9th Marines, arrived at An Hoa by helicopter and Air Force transports brought in a second 105mm battery, Battery B, 12th Marines. Both fixed-wing transports and helicopters continued to fly in supplies for the An Hoa buildup. On 22 April, Company L linked up with the LVT convoy after it had crossed the Thu Bon River.

With the establishment of the An Hoa base, the battalion began the second phase of the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor had divided the An Hoa region into 20 well-defined, company-size TAORs and the Marines, with local ARVN and South Vietnamese Popular Forces, began a series of actions, using tactics similar to those used during Operation Kings. Combining County Fair and Golden Fleece techniques, the Marines attempted to secure the



Marine Corps Photo A186933

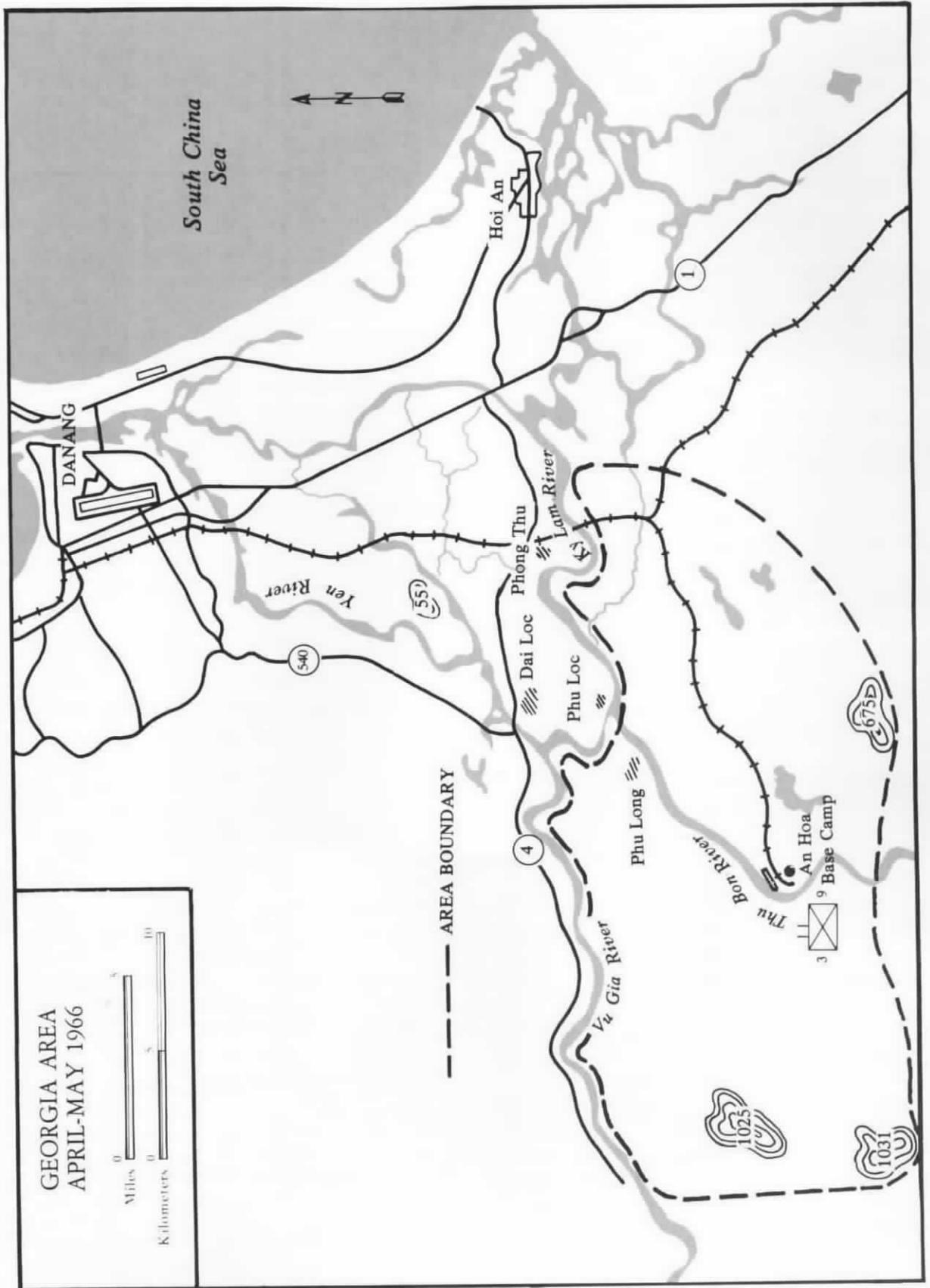
Le Thuc Can, project leader of the An Hoa Industrial Complex (center), discusses plans with Gen Walt and LtCol William W. Taylor (left), Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion is about to reenter the An Hoa region in Operation Georgia.

hamlets surrounding the An Hoa base in order that the industrial complex there could become a reality.

Despite intelligence reports indicating the presence of the *VC V-25 (5th VC) Battalion* in the western sector of the Georgia zone of action, that area between the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, the Marines encountered little opposition through the end of April, only harassing fire and mines. Marine aerial observers and a platoon from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, supporting the operation, accounted for most of the VC sightings at this stage. Air observers and reconnaissance Marines "frequently detected movement of small enemy forces at long range and directed artillery fire at the VC with telling effect."⁷ Major Samuel M. Morrow, commander of the provisional artillery group at An Hoa, commented that although some:

. . . very fine targets were observed and some excellent missions . . . fired, there was a tendency on the part of these untrained observers [the reconnaissance Marines] to enter fire for effect too early and attempt to "chase the target" rather than reenter the adjustment phase. . . .⁸

Yet the reconnaissance outposts on the southern and



western fringes of the Georgia operating area controlled 36 artillery missions and six air strikes, resulting in at least 30 enemy dead.⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Paul C. Trammell, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Taylor in early May as the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, later recalled that although Major Morrow expressed his doubts about the “effectiveness of the recon teams in fire adjustment,” the artillery commander afterwards “conceded that the concept worked well.”¹⁰

The heaviest action of Operation Georgia occurred on 3 May. Captain George R. Griggs' Company M, 9th Marines, which had just relieved another company during the operation, prepared to cross the Thu Bon. Its objective was the hamlet of Phu Long (1) on the northern bank of the river in the north-central sector of the Georgia area. During the river crossing, an estimated one- to two-company enemy force, later identified as being from the ubiquitous *R-20 Battalion*, opened fire on the Marine company in LVTs. In a four-hour firefight lasting through the afternoon, Griggs' company, reinforced by two other Marine companies and supported by air and artillery, finally secured Phu Long (1). LVTHs, which accompanied the Marines in the river crossing, brought direct fire upon the enemy positions and



Marine Corps Photo A187160
A 60mm mortar team from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in Operation Georgia has just fired off a round at a VC sniper.

A Marine appears to be watching over a pastoral scene during Operation Georgia. Smoke, however, can be seen rising where Marines have destroyed a VC bunker.

Marine Corps Photo A187042





Marine Corps Photo A187050

Marines from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines engage the VC in a firefight during Operation Georgia. The Marine on the left appears to be reaching for a clip to reload his M14 rifle.

As Marines from the 3d Battalion watch, a VC suspect raises his hands in surrender and comes out of his bunker. The Viet Cong made effective use of bunkers, fighting holes, and underground tunnels.

Marine Corps Photo A187024



were "instrumental in neutralizing enemy fire and preventing more casualties."¹¹ During the engagement, the Marines suffered five dead and 54 wounded. They killed 15 of the VC and estimated that they had inflicted another 100 casualties.

Although technically ending on 10 May, Georgia, like Kings before it, was in reality an extension of the Marine area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Trammell held his command post and two rifle companies, reinforced by an artillery battery from the 12th Marines at the An Hoa base. The final reports of Georgia indicated that a favorable kill ratio had been achieved, 103 confirmed VC dead at a cost of nine Marines killed and 94 wounded.

The May Ky Lam Campaign

Taking advantage of the truce in the political situation, on 4 May, Colonel Simmons published a

plan for a renewed offensive above the Ky Lam River. The Ky Lam Campaign, named after the river, was to be a three-phased advance "to clear the regimental zone of action of organized resistance south to the line of the Thu Bon-Ky Lam-Dien Binh-Cau Lau-Hoi An Rivers."¹² At the end of May, the forward battalions were to reach Phase Line Brown, a line which extended from below Dai Loc in the west and followed the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers eastward, with the exception of a 2,000 meter-wide horseshoe-shaped salient extending south 5,000 meters along both sides of Route 1 to just above Dien Ban. In June, the regiment was to begin the second phase of the operation, securing all of Route 4 west of Route 1 and extending the Marines' lines down to the Ky Lam. During July, the 9th Marines, in the final phase of the campaign, was to advance southward in the region east of Route 1 and incorporate the city of Hoi An in its area of responsibility.¹³

The concept of operations for the offensive required the same "scrubbing" tactics used in Kings and Georgia. Battalions were "to deploy their companies in a diamond configuration, terrain permitting, and to employ all supporting arms imaginatively and vigorously."¹⁴ Colonel Simmons later explained that the failure to use air and artillery in the past had resulted in needless Marine casualties. He believed that the American command had to take a realistic attitude toward civilian casualties. The selective employment of supporting arms did not by itself increase the number of civilians killed and wounded, but did cause the inhabitants of contested hamlets to abandon their homes, thus becoming refugees. Simmons viewed the refugee from his perspective as an asset, "a person who had made his election physically to move over to our side." The removal of refugees from the hamlets in the uncleared area made the Marine task of identifying and eradicating the VC that much easier. The cost of housing, feeding these refugees, and rebuilding their hamlets, if necessary, was considered a minimal price to pay.¹⁵

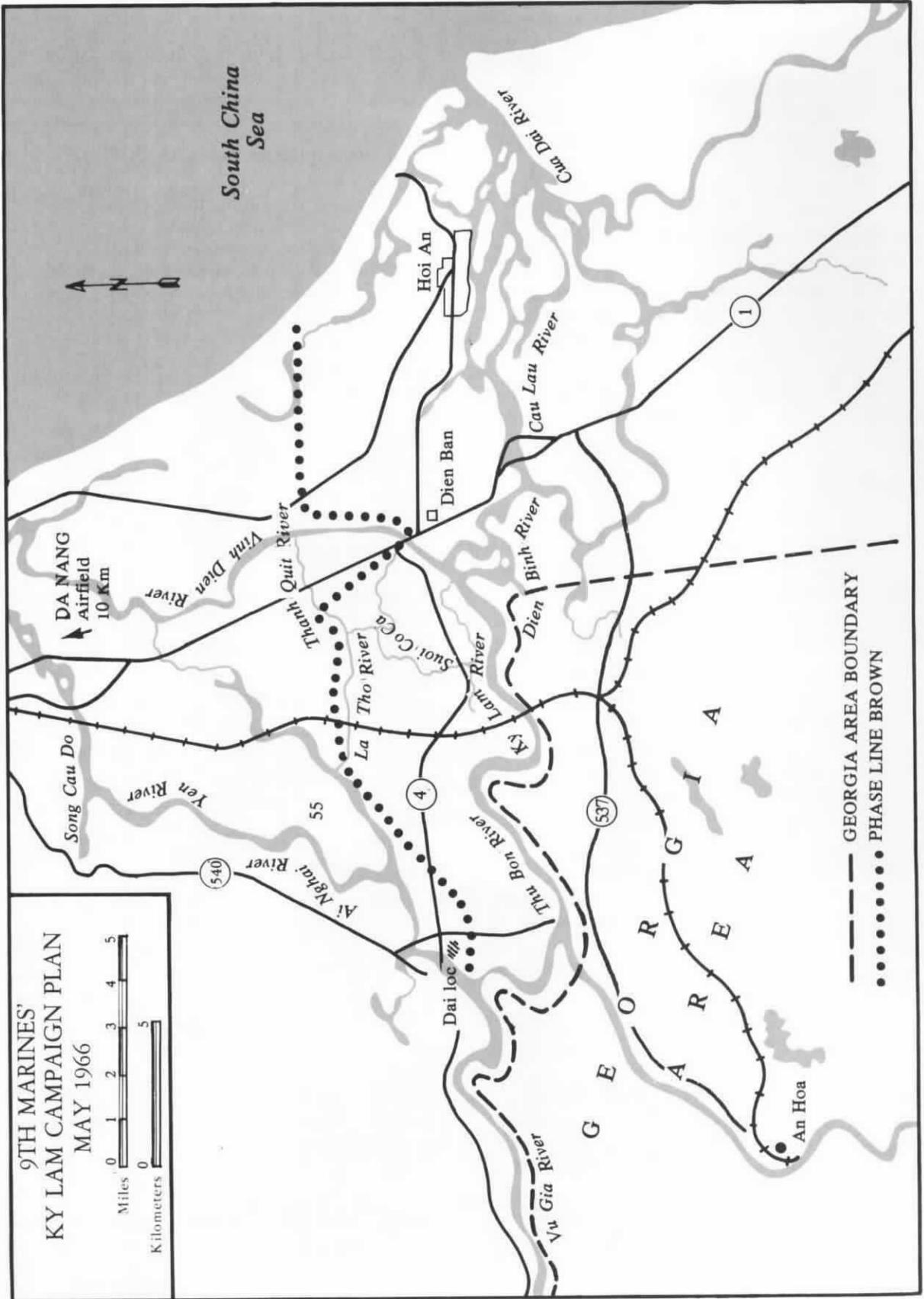
For the Ky Lam Campaign, Colonel Simmons had four infantry battalions under his operational control. These were the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and all three 9th Marines battalions, including the 3d Battalion in An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which had been the Da Nang Base Defense Battalion, became

available for the campaign when relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Doehler's battalion inherited Dorsey's responsibility for the 9th Marines' western sector.

The heaviest fighting in the early stages of the campaign was in Doehler's zone of action. On 10 May, he had established the battalion's forward command post in Dai Loc. His Company B, commanded by Captain Norman E. Henry, was on the eastern bank of the Vu Gia, 3,500 meters south of Dai Loc to provide a covering force for units leaving the Georgia area of operations. That morning, Company A, 9th Marines, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Battalion during Operation Georgia, crossed the Vu Gia in LVTs and rejoined its parent battalion at Dai Loc. After the river crossing, Company A prepared for a clearing operation around the town of Dai Loc, while Henry's company made preparations for a similar operation in southern Dai Loc District above the Thu Bon. Allied intelligence sources indicated that the *R-20 Battalion* had infiltrated this area. A report received on 11 May stated that a company of the battalion was in the hamlet of Do Nam near a small finger lake, 2,000 meters northeast of Company B's position.¹⁶

On the morning of 12 May, one of Henry's patrols unexpectedly came upon the enemy. The 14-man squad had left the company CP at 0630, moving east. One hour later, the patrol reported that it had come under small arms fire and captured a VC suspect. Encountering no further resistance, the Marines continued their patrol. At 0830, the squad leader radioed back that a water buffalo was in its path. Captain Henry ordered the squad to avoid the animal, but "if threatened by it, they were given permission to shoot." In the squad's next report, about 30 minutes later, the Marines stated that they had wounded the buffalo and were giving chase to finish it off. Fifteen minutes after that, the patrol reported harassing fire and seeing Viet Cong fleeing to the east "and that the patrol was giving physical pursuit." The patrol leader asked for supporting mortar fire. Company B's mortar section fired an 81mm ranging round, but the patrol was unable to observe its impact. Captain Henry ordered his mortars to cease firing, fearing that they might hit his own men. About that time, the company lost radio contact with the patrol.

The company commander sent out a second squad to follow the route of the first patrol. The second



squad came under small arms and mortar fire itself. The Marines countered with mortar fire from the company base area which silenced the enemy's weapons. About 1030, the squad leader reported hearing a "heavy volume of small arms fire, mortars, M79s, and hand grenades due east of their position," near the village of Do Nam. Believing that he had found the missing Marines, he asked for an aerial observer.

Although no Marine observation aircraft was available, "an Army AO [aerial observer] happened into the area and reported an apparent firefight" in the vicinity of the action recently reported by the second squad. The Army aircraft dropped a red smoke grenade in the village of Do Nam and fired four rockets into a trenchline in front of the Marines. Making another pass, the Army AO threw out two messages to the Marines below, informing them that there were 20 VC in the trench line.

By this time, Captain Henry decided to move the rest of his company to support his embattled Marines. By 1145 he had established a 500-meter defensive line near the village of Hoa Tay, 500 meters southwest of the second squad's position. The company commander then ordered the squad, which had suffered five heat casualties, to pull back to the company lines. By 1230, the entire company was heavily engaged. The company's 81mm and 60mm mortars failed to silence the enemy's weapons and Henry asked for artillery and air support. After an artillery mission fired by the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, the action died down for about 20 minutes. At noon, the enemy opened up again with small arms and mortars, but by this time F-4Bs from VMFA-542 were overhead. The jets' first runs on the entrenched VC in Do Nam once more temporarily silenced the enemy.

Following the air strikes, about 1320, Captain Henry's men spotted two Marines crossing an open field toward their lines. Henry ordered "a base of fire and mortar fire" to cover the two men. Both Marines were from the first patrol and badly wounded. The company commander asked them, before they went under sedation, where the rest of the squad was. The men vaguely pointed in a general direction to the northeast and said that they were all dead. Before being overrun, the wounded men claimed that the patrol had killed 30 of the enemy.

Despite poor communications, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler had been able to follow the course of

the Company B action. Through "fragments of information which had sifted through," the Marine battalion commander believed that his company had encountered the *R-20 Battalion*. He had just received an intelligence report that two companies of the *R-20* had reinforced the enemy company already in the area "to ambush Marine units operating in the area." Doehler ironically remarked later that since Company B was heavily engaged at the time, "it was considered to be an accurate if not timely report."

Shortly after 1330, the 1st Battalion commander decided to reinforce his Company B. After some initial problems in obtaining helicopter support, he moved Company D and a platoon from Company A to link up with Henry's company. By 1815, the three Marine units were consolidated in a 360-degree defensive perimeter around the hamlet of Hoa Tay.

By this time, Marine air and artillery had broken the back of enemy resistance. F-4Bs, F-8s, and A-4s from VMFA-542, VMF(AW)-235, and VMA-214, respectively, joined UH-1E gunships from VMO-2 in 27 close air support missions. Nine airstrikes were run at half-hour intervals. Marine artillery had fired 242 supporting rounds. The combination of air and artillery apparently inflicted heavy casualties on the VC. According to Doehler, the supporting arms disorganized the enemy, forcing them to break up into small groups. Later interrogation of the villagers revealed that these small bands of VC had slipped back across the Thu Bon during the night of 12 May. They had forced civilians in the hamlets to carry their dead and wounded.

On the morning of 13 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP into Hoa Tay and prepared to conduct a two-company search and clear operation. That afternoon Company B recovered the bodies of the 12 missing Marines near the western tip of the small finger lake. For the next two days the battalion carried out a series of cordons and searches in the area of southern Dai Loc District containing the hamlets of Hoa Tay, Hoa Nam, and Giao Thuy (2) and (3).

This entire sector contained a series of heavily fortified hamlets interspersed among large, open fields. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler described the village defenses as formidable, observing:

A complex network of trenches surrounded each of the villages. In many cases, communication trenches extended from village to village. These trenches typically were four



Marine Corps Photo A187064
Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines recover the bodies of the men from the unit's lost patrol. The VC had overrun the Marine squad, killing 12 of its 14 members.

to six feet deep with firing positions located every few meters. At the bottom of the trenches, tunnels were dug back into the ground to provide overhead cover. . . . In some places bamboo-lined bunkers were found, some of which were underground and some above ground.

The Marines found the villagers of Hoa Nam and Giao Thuy "cooperative and fairly talkative as long as they were alone with an interpreter and an interrogator." They told what they knew about VC movements in the area and in several cases volunteered the names of VC guerrillas living in their hamlets.

The Marine battalion was unable to take advantage of this intelligence. The renewal of the political crisis on 15 May, signaled by the arrival of the South Vietnamese Marines at Da Nang, forced Lieutenant Colonel Doehler to cut short the operation on that date. Once more the ARVN units south of Da Nang divided into opposing factions and abandoned their outposts along Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP back to Hill 55, and his battalion was again on the defensive.

During the first two weeks in May, the other 9th Marines' battalions conducted similar scrubbing actions in their respective sectors, but encountered only harassing fire and mines. With renewed political troubles in Da Nang, they too returned to their former positions. The regiment's offensive ground to a halt. Nevertheless, in the three-day period from 12-15 May, Doehler's battalion claimed to have killed 57 of the enemy. One later intelligence source indicated that the VC casualties may have been as high

as 150 dead. The Marine battalion suffered 15 killed, 17 wounded, and 10 nonbattle casualties.*

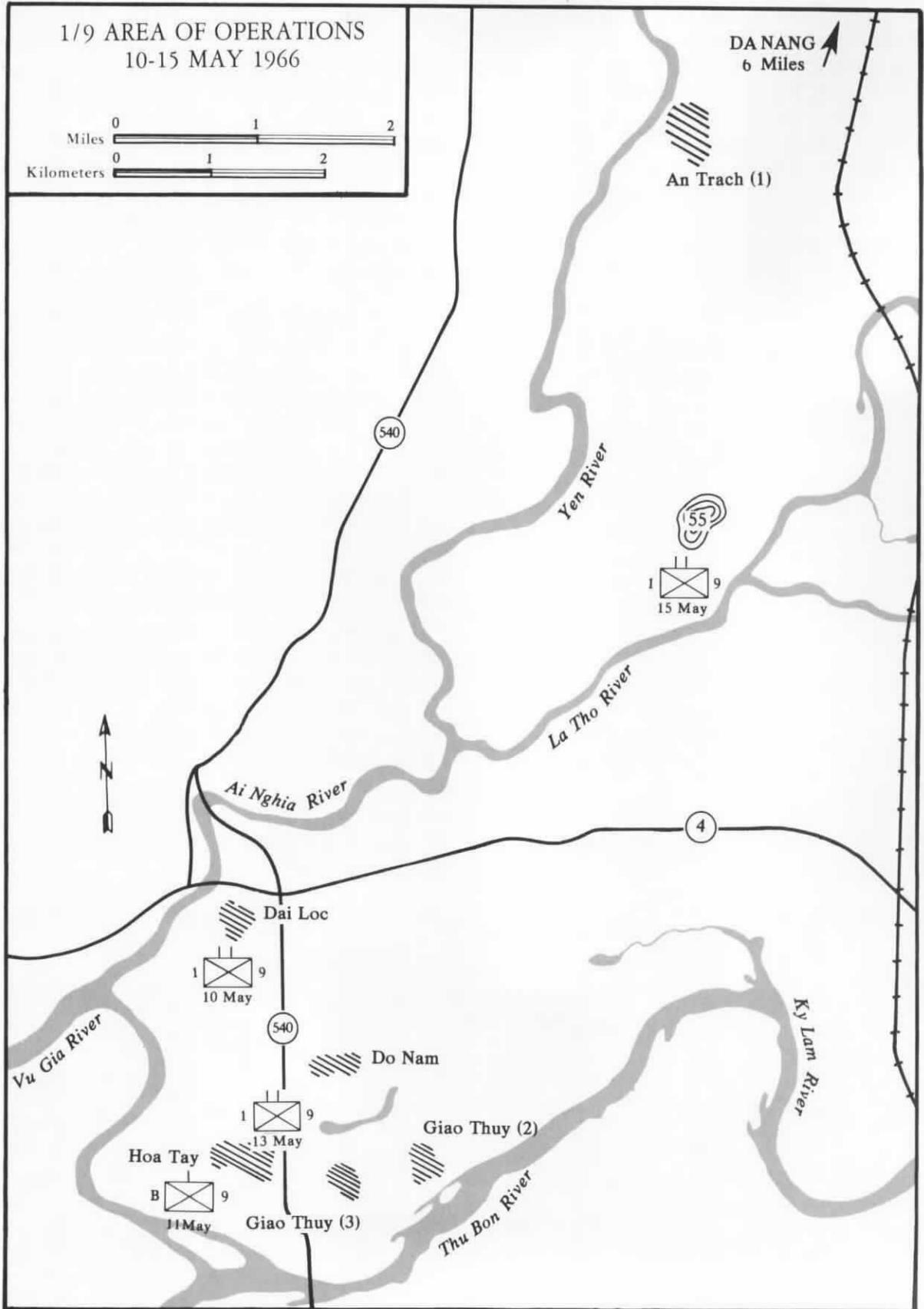
With the Marines on the defensive south of Da Nang, the enemy tried to exploit the chaotic situation caused by the political crisis. On 21 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines met the *R-20 Battalion* again. The enemy unit had infiltrated the hamlet of An Trach, a former model village for Marine Corps civic action, located north of Hill 55. At 1115 a Company C squad made contact with 40 to 50 VC 500 meters across the Yen River from An Trach (1). The fighting escalated into a fierce engagement extending across both banks of the river. In a seven-hour battle, Companies A and C, reinforced by Sparrow Hawk squads, M-48 tanks, and supported by air and artillery, defeated two companies of the *R-20*. According to the 3d Marine Division account:

In the initial stages of the contact, the Viet Cong fought from trenches until they were overrun by Marines. Later, Viet Cong were seen attempting to run from the Marines, even digging frantically, to evade contact with Marine units. During the later stages . . . the Viet Cong became very confused and appeared to be without leadership.¹⁷

In the day's fighting, the battalion killed 53 enemy and possibly another 83, but suffered 12 dead and 31 wounded.¹⁸

Colonel Simmons observed that all of the regiment's significant contacts during May resulted from VC initiative. The enemy would begin the action when the Marines were at a disadvantage, either because of numbers or terrain, and in some cases because of both. The Marines, nevertheless, eventually attained the upper hand. For the entire month, the 9th Marines killed more than 270 of the enemy; 75 Marines died, 328 were wounded. Over 50 percent of the Marine casualties in May were caused by enemy mines and explosive devices, many of them made from equipment abandoned by the

*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., who during this period was the 3d Marine Division G-2, recalled, ". . . they told Bill Doehler to confirm body counts . . . he replied there is not a damn, single [enemy] body out here. We had to pause for about three full days in counting bodies, in order to allow the totals to catch up with what [was] already reported." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



ARVN forces south of Da Nang. Colonel Simmons remarked upon the considerable increase of enemy incidents during the month, declaring that this upsurge was largely due to "the increased freedom of movement enjoyed by the Viet Cong in many outlying areas as the result of diminished GVN military activities during the periods of political instability . . ." As a result, the regiment failed to reach Phase Line Brown on 31 May and the Ky Lam Campaign was behind schedule.¹⁹

Operation Liberty

With the surrender of the Struggle Forces at Da Nang and the restoration of some stability there, the 9th Marines once more renewed its offensive, coordinated with the South Vietnamese. On 2 June, Colonel Lap, who had replaced Colonel Yeu as the Quang Da Special Sector commander, visited Colonel Simmons at his CP. The South Vietnamese commander wanted the 9th Marines to resume County Fair operations in the five-village pacification area. He assured Simmons that at least one battalion from the 51st ARVN Regiment would be committed to the pacification campaign. Following Lap's visit, Colonel Simmons revised portions of his previous orders. On 5 June, he ordered his battalions to renew County Fair operations with the Vietnamese and extended the deadline for the attainment of Phase Line Brown from 31 May to 20 June.²⁰

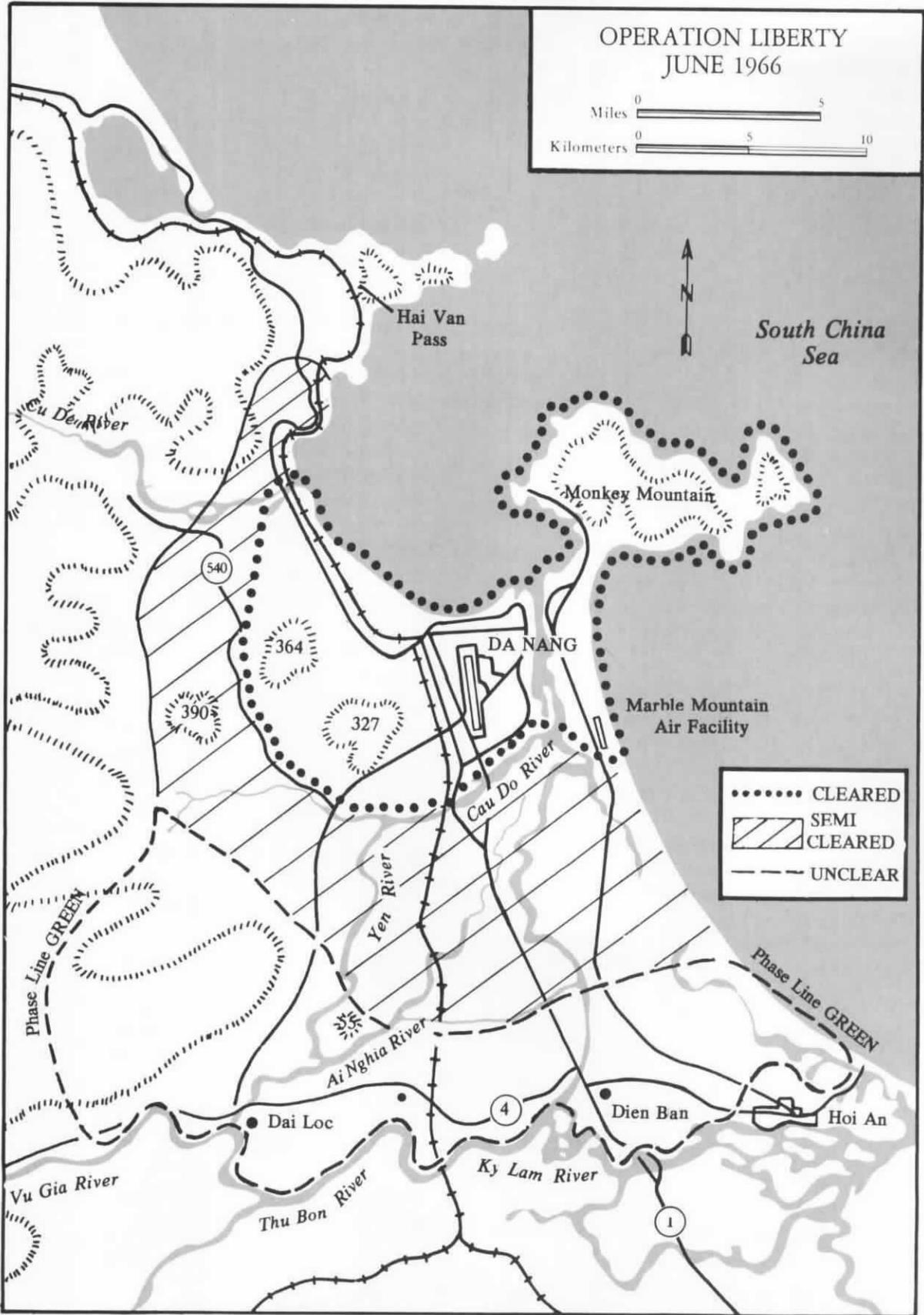
At this juncture, General Kyle decided to transform the 9th Marines Ky Lam Campaign into a division-size offensive, involving "a conventional linear type attack of all forward units to push the frontlines forward in a deliberate search and clear operation to include the cordon and search of every hamlet in the zone. . . ." He divided the Da Nang TAOR into three sectors: the cleared, the semicleared, and the uncleared. The cleared area formed an irregular arc around the Da Nang Airbase, delineated by the South China Sea to the east, the Cau Do to the south, the foothills to the west, and the Cu De River to the north. Extending the arc outward from the cleared area boundary, the semicleared sector reached the Thanh Quit River to the south, three to five kilometers into the high ground to the west and the Hai Van Pass to the north. The uncleared region consisted of the area between the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers and the banks of the Ky Lam-Thu Bon. Phase Line Green, the final phase line, paralleled the latter two rivers. The 3d Marine Division commander ordered that only minimum forces be held in the rear and set 30 June as the target date for reaching Phase Line Green.²¹

Continuing arrival of Marine reinforcements allowed General Kyle to make this all-out effort. On 28 May, the 1st MP Battalion arrived at Da Nang from the United States and relieved the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines of its airfield security mission. The 3d Battalion then returned to the operational

Marines of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sit in a captured Viet Cong barracks and training site in Dai Loc District south of Da Nang. The site is near where the Marine lost patrol was overrun.

Marine Corps Photo A187072





control of its parent regiment, taking over the 3d Marines western TAOR. Colonel Harold A. Hayes, Jr., who had relieved Colonel Fisher on 16 April as 3d Marines commander, at last had command of all three of his battalions. Other reinforcements were scheduled to arrive at Da Nang, or were already in place. Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell was slated to transfer his 1st Marines Headquarters from Chu Lai to Da Nang in June. In fact, two of his battalions had already moved by the end of May. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines arrived at Da Nang on 22 May while the 1st Battalion arrived on 31 May. Both battalions were temporarily placed under the operational control of the 9th Marines. The 3d Battalion became the regimental reserve; the 1st Battalion relieved the regiment's eastern flank battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which rejoined its parent regiment at Phu Bai.

By mid-June General Kyle could expect to have three Marine infantry regiments consisting of eight battalions at Da Nang. He planned to reduce the extensive 9th Marines TAOR by assigning the 1st Marines to the eastern flank while the 3d Marines took over that part of the 9th Marines TAOR west of the Yen River. In effect, Kyle visualized a shoulder-to-shoulder advance to the Ky Lam. The operation, codenamed Liberty, was scheduled to begin on 7 June, with the 9th Marines bearing the brunt of the campaign in its initial stages.

Colonel Simmons divided his TAOR into company-size objective areas. His reserve battalion, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was to concentrate on combined operations with ARVN and Vietnamese local forces in the five-village pacification region in the semicleared area. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was to continue its two-company holding action in the An Hoa region. All the remaining infantry companies were assigned to the three forward battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the eastern flank, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in the center, and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on the western flank. Thus each forward battalion was to consist of five infantry companies instead of the usual four, with three companies deployed to the front and two to the rear. The advancing battalions were to secure Route 4 by 20 June and reach the Ky Lam by the end of the month.²²

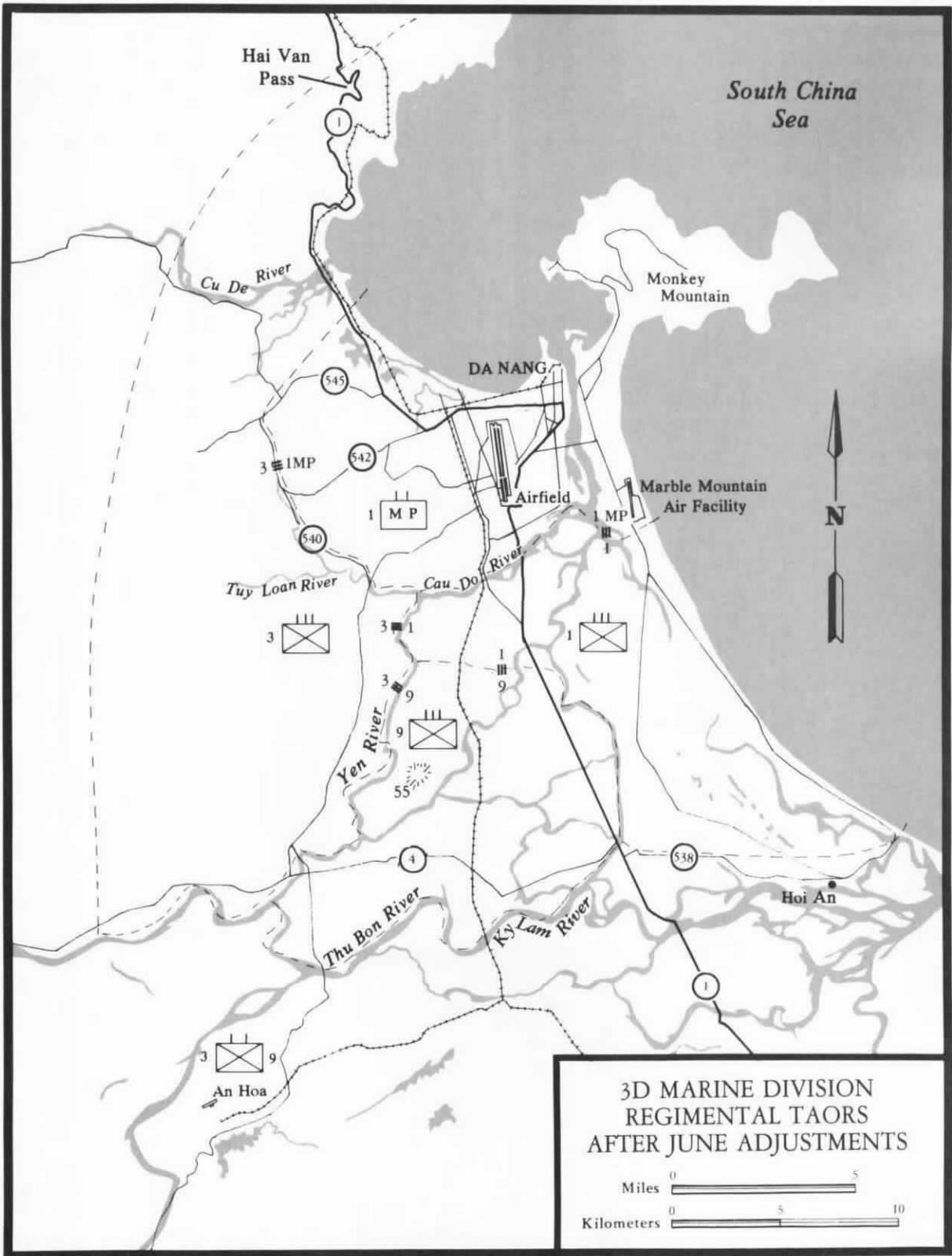
Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on the division's left, had its heaviest engagement just before Operation Liberty

started. During the evening of 5 June, the battalion commander and his small mobile command group, embarked in three Ontos,* found themselves stalled on the northern fringes of Phong Ho (2), a hamlet 10,000 meters south of the Marble Mountain Air Facility and in an area "noted for their hostility toward ARVN soldiers and their allies." Bell's vehicle had run out of gas and the group had just been resupplied by helicopter. As the aircraft took off for the return trip to Marble Mountain, VC weapons from positions approximately 1,000 meters to the southwest opened fire. Using his command group with its Ontos as a blocking unit, Lieutenant Colonel Bell ordered reinforcements from his Company B, supported by LVTs and tanks, brought up from the south of Phong Ho (2). According to the battalion commander, "the result was a sound thrashing of the VC" with 11 dead enemy left on the battlefield and a number of captured weapons. Bell remembered several years afterward, "This area was never pacified and later was leveled, and the villagers removed and relocated."²³

On 7 June Operation Liberty began with heavy preparatory artillery fires. Marine artillery neutralized 35 objective areas in front of the advancing infantry.²⁴ Initially, the enemy countered the Marine offensive with only small arms fire and mines. The mines were the more deadly of the two. The most significant mine incident occurred on 11 June in the 9th Marines central sector. Captain Carl A. Reckewell's Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, walked into a large minefield in a grassy plot just south of the La Tho River. Two detonations killed three Marines and wounded 21. While the wounded were being evacuated, four to five additional explosions occurred and the grass caught fire, but fortunately there were no further Marine casualties. The following day, the artillery fired a destruction mission which caused seven secondary explosions in that same field.²⁵

On 15 June, the division completed its planned realignment of regiments in the TAOR. Colonel Mitchell assumed operational control of his two 1st Marines battalions and took over responsibility for

*The Ontos was a full-tracked, lightly armored, mobile carrier, mounting six 106mm recoilless rifles, four .50 caliber spotting rifles, and one .30 caliber machine gun. It had a crew of three and was the primary weapon of the antitank battalion.



the division's eastern flank from the 9th Marines. With a corresponding reduction in the western sector, the 9th Marines' TAOR now consisted of only 134 square miles, the regiment having given away nearly 100 square miles in the exchange.

With the adjustment of forces and sectors, the 3d Marine Division continued its "scrubbing" actions in Operation Liberty. The only serious enemy opposition occurred in the 9th Marines zone of action. On 18 June, Company C, 9th Marines, operating 2,000 meters south of Dai Loc, came under heavy mortar and small arms fire, suffering eight wounded. The company asked for supporting air and artillery which ended the enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines underwent a similar attack on 22 June in the hamlet of La Hoa (1), immediately east of the railroad and 4,000 meters north of the Ky Lam. Marines once more called upon supporting arms, including naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Marton* (DD 948), to silence

the enemy.* By the end of the month, all three Marine regiments reached Phase Line Green and the operation ended. VC resistance to the Marine advance had been scattered and ineffective. The 9th Marines observed that the lack of major enemy resistance gave plausibility to the thesis that the momentum of Operation Liberty prevented them from gaining any degree of initiative and uprooted them "from what had been a relatively secure operating area."²⁶ That regiment alone claimed to have recovered 40 square miles from the VC. The Marines were once more optimistic about pacifying the extensive Da Nang enclave.

*According to U.S. Navy historians, "Between four and nine ships including destroyers, cruisers, and rocket ships were available for gunfire support in Vietnam at any one time and more than half the missions supported Marines in I Corps." NHD, Comments on draft MS, dtd 19Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

PART III
SPRING FIGHTING IN
SOUTHERN I CORPS

