

1 there were continued concerns about NVA threats from the west, as Que Son and FSB Ross in August were hit by 130mm guns and ground attacks by the *711th NVA Division*.^{*} This threat to Da Nang would continue through the following month.²⁴

As August 1972 began, most of Quang Tri City remained in Communist hands. The territory north and west of the Thach Han River, particularly around the Ai Tu combat base, was dotted with NVA artillery units.²⁵ The enemy maintained a seemingly ceaseless artillery and mortar barrage on the South Vietnamese, who now burrowed into the ground "like gophers."²⁶ This was a busy time for Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO. Lieutenant Colonel George E. "Ed" Jones, commanding Sub Unit One since the previous month, recalled that in addition to controlling naval gunfire and air strikes, ANGLICO radios and operators provided an extensive and "very solid backup system for the operational South Vietnamese units as well as the U.S. Marine and U.S. Army Advisors."²⁷ Air observers from ANGLICO continued "dawn to dusk" coverage from American and Vietnamese Air Force aircraft, providing the primary "eyes" over areas considered no-man's land.

The brigades of the Marine Division were well placed to deny the enemy resupply and to make a final lunge into the heart of the city, the Citadel, but were held off by the well-concealed defenders. Enemy fire and the congestion of friendly units in the area severely hampered maneuver by the Marines. Marine Brigade 147, operating northeast of Quang Tri City, began receiving heavy pressure from the enemy, but had thwarted several attempts by the numerically superior enemy to reopen Route 560 northeast of the city. The Marines' supply blockade began to take its toll on the NVA's ammunition stockpiles. All enemy supplies making their way into the city had to be ferried across the Thach Han River.²⁸

To the south, VNMC Brigade 258, with four maneuver battalions under its operational control, was in heavy house-to-house fighting around the Citadel. The 3d VNMC Battalion attacked from the northeast, with the 6th and 9th VNMC Battalions closing in from the southwest. Each day, VNMC Brigade 258 moved slowly forward, tightening its grasp on the enemy forces still in the Citadel. This slow progress made General Lan realize that he would have to reinforce his maneuver forces if they were to overpower the three

NVA regiments holding the Citadel.** Lan continued to keep VNMC Brigade 369 in division reserve.²⁹

Taking the Citadel

On 22 August, an unusual and significant contact was made by the 8th VNMC Battalion as it confronted a sizable enemy force attempting to break out from the Citadel. Preceding the attack, the enemy artillery provided a curtain of fire. The NVA infantry advanced behind the cover of tanks. The Marines, surprised at such an action, quickly rallied and drove the NVA back into the Citadel. During the remainder of the month, the desperate enemy increased the number of his night attacks in an effort to rupture the tight circle the Marines had drawn. By this time in the invasion and the Lam Son counteroffensive, the VNMC had suffered 1,358 men killed and 5,522 wounded. The Corps estimated that it had killed 10,285 Communists during this same five-month period.³⁰

As September began, Marine units had been in constant street fighting inside the city for 35 days under some of the heaviest enemy artillery shelling since the invasion in March. The forward maneuver battalions had been under daily counterattacks by enemy units of the *308th NVA Division*. In the city, the VNMC 1st, 3d, 5th, 6th, and 8th Battalions attacked through the rubble to reach the Citadel and the QL-1 highway bridge over the Thach Han River.

On 5 September, Major Richard B. Rothwell, with the 5th VNMC Battalion, personally helped to blunt a local counterattack by the enemy from inside the Citadel. As the enemy attacked the 5th VNMC Battalion's command post just at dusk, Rothwell rushed to a balcony on the second floor of a building to gain a better view of the enemy disposition. Although wounded in both the head and face from an exploding mortar round, he called for supporting fire. Despite his painful wounds, he kept calling and adjusting artillery fire and directing air strikes. At 2130 the enemy withdrew in confusion having left behind more than 50 individual and crew-served weapons.^{***}

A battalion from VNMC Brigade 147 had taken up positions at the An Tiem Bridge where Route 560 crossed the Vinh Dinh River. All enemy supply and infiltration routes and lines of communication to the north were effectively blocked. The Communists were feeling the bite of supply and ammunition shortages.

**It was determined later that the NVA rotated units in and out of Quang Tri City to maintain fresh defenders.

***For his actions Major Rothwell was awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

^{*}*711th NVA Division: 31st Infantry Regiment; 38th Infantry Regiment; and 270th Infantry Regiment.*

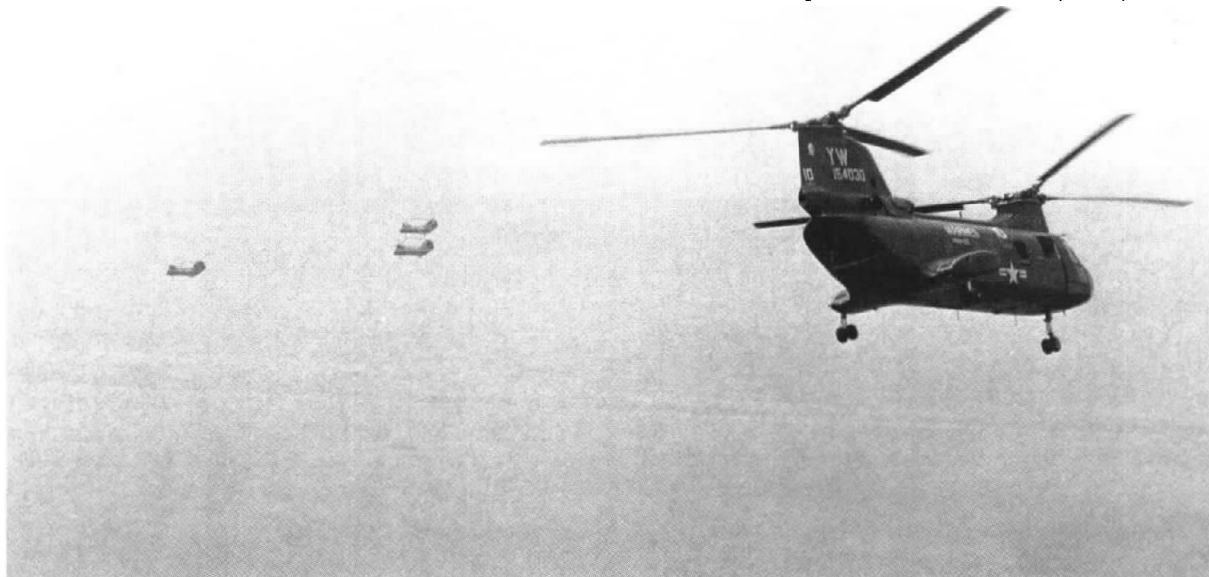


Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800644

On 7 September 1972, BGen Edward J. Miller of the 9th MAB and Col Nhon of the ARVN Rangers inspect a unit at the Tan My naval base prior to loading them on assault ships for an amphibious demonstration. These troops were part of the successful maneuver.

HMM-165 helicopters from the USS Tripoli turn back 5,000 yards from the coast in a simulated assault. Surface forces turned back at the same time. Both South Vietnamese and American Marines were transported so as to give every indication of an authentic landing.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800692



On 8 September, the three battalions of the 1st Ranger Group relieved VNMC Brigade 147 of its blocking mission north of the city. General Lan now had two brigades he could commit in the pincer movement which would begin the all-out assault on the city. Marine Brigade 258 continued its attack along the southern front with four battalions while VNMC Brigade 147 attacked from the northeast with the 3d and 7th VNMC Battalions.³¹

Generals Truong and Lan also requested an amphibious diversion by the U.S. Seventh Fleet to draw the enemy away from the Vietnamese Marines attacking the Citadel. The U.S. amphibious forces agreed to carry out the feint, except for an actual landing. Virtually all aspects of an assault were conducted, including an operation order, increased radio traffic, and covert missions which discreetly left evidence in the vicinity of the selected landing beaches. The USS *Juneau* (LPD 10) loaded 400 ARVN Rangers from Tan My for the supposed surface assault.

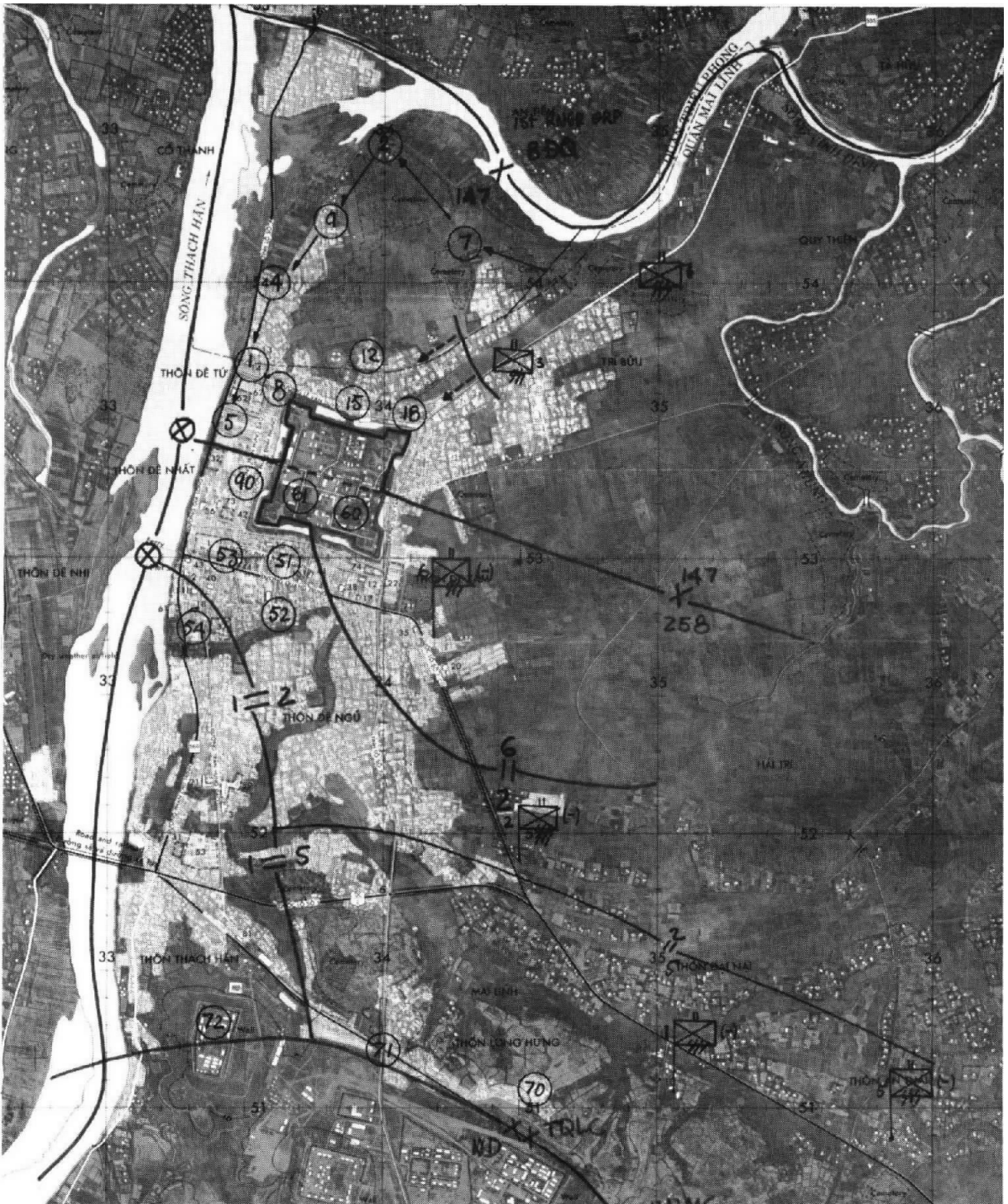
The Final Assault

On 9 September, the final assault on Quang Tri City began with intensive artillery fire and air strikes on the Citadel. On the same day, Task Force 76 and the 9th MAB carried out the amphibious diversion north of the Cua Viet River. As the Vietnamese Marines launched their attack to recapture Quang Tri City, a B-52 strike, naval gunfire, and tactical air opened up in the diversionary objective area.³² The 9th MAB saw the heaviest volume of supporting arms fire yet, which reached a peak at H-Hour minus 3 through H-Hour. Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Kirby, observing from the primary control ship, remembered that the "fire-power brought to bear on that beach was enormous."³³ As these fires ceased, B-52s bombed the landing beaches while the task force concentrated for the landing. Surface and helicopter forces approached their turnarounds as naval gunfire stopped. Surface forces turned back at 10,000 yards and the helicopters of HMM-165 at 5,000 yards. Upon retiring from the

Early 11 September 1972, Vietnamese Marines succeeded in gaining the top of the Citadel's wall and continued to push in more men. The rubble of the 18th-century walls proved a major obstacle to anything except infantry movement and continued small unit action.

Vietnamese Marine Corps Photo





Marine Advisory Unit Command Chronology

The Quang Tri battlefield as recorded on the Marine advisors' situation map of 16 September 1972. The top of this special map is north and the numbered grids are 1,000 meters across. Annotations include unit boundary lines (ND for Airborne, TQLC for Marines, BDQ for Rangers). Unit headquarters are shown by the stylized flags, and company-sized units by the numbered circles. The numbers indicate significant events.



Photo courtesy of Col Donald L. Price, USMC

Members of the 6th VNMC Battalion raised their nation's flag over the west gate of the Citadel. For the South Vietnamese and their Marines this was a proud moment of victory.

beach the amphibious forces returned to holding areas and the Rangers returned to Tan My.

The NVA reacted by hastily shifting major forces and artillery north of the Cua Viet River to counter this apparent amphibious assault, thus markedly reducing the level of artillery and antiaircraft fires at Quang Tri City. The diversionary action enabled the Marine Division to advance rapidly. An additional bonus to the deception became evident immediately following the B-52 strikes. As the bombers departed, the NVA emerged from the tree line to defend against the anticipated assault from the sea. Naval gunfire inflicted casualties on these troops in the open.³⁴

At Quang Tri City an imaginary line drawn across the middle of the Citadel became the boundary between the two Marine brigades. VNMC Brigade 258 continued its attack in the southern portion while VNMC Brigade 147 attacked in the northern half. The 3d VNMC Battalion, now attached to VNMC Brigade 147 and closest to the northern wall of the Citadel, stood fast while the 7th VNMC Battalion deployed to its north. Near the southeast corner of the Citadel, Lieutenant Colonel Do Huu Tung, commanding officer of the 6th VNMC Battalion with VNMC Brigade 258, set up a forward command post and moved within striking distance of the 18th-century walls of the Citadel, which were 30 inches thick and 15 feet high. A lot of this wall had already been reduced to rubble, but unsurprisingly much of it still stood. Progress toward the wall was slow because the enemy had tunnelled an intricate and interlocking defensive system throughout the entire fortress. On the night of 9 September, a squad of Marines from the 6th VNMC Battalion managed to slip in and out of the Citadel.

At 2100 on 10 September, Lieutenant Colonel Tung launched a night attack against the enemy on the southeast corner and was successful in gaining a lodgement on top of the wall. Early on 11 September, a platoon moved over this section of the wall, and in spite of stubborn enemy resistance, expanded to occupy a company-sized position within a few hours.

While the fighting for the Citadel was going on, the 1st VNMC Battalion had secured the bridgehead where QL-1 crossed the Thach Han River and held it

despite several fierce NVA counterattacks. From 11 to 15 September, the 2d VNMC Battalion reached the Thach Han River, closing the gap between the 1st and 6th VNMC Battalions. The VNMC 3d and 7th Battalions fought their way through the northern part of the city and reached the fortress wall on the morning of 15 September. At 1015 that same day, the 3d VNMC Battalion entered the north side of the Citadel. That afternoon the enemy stiffened his resistance and called in a massive artillery barrage to stop the 3d and 6th VNMC Battalions as they advanced toward the west wall. By 1700 on 15 September, the Marines had gained complete control of the Citadel.

The NVA withdrew, stating that with "modern technology and weapons and a maximum of firepower, the U.S. had schemed to level this area and turn Quang Tri town into a land of death with no place for the revolutionary forces."³⁵ At 1245 the next day, the red and yellow flag of the Republic of South Vietnam was raised over the city's west gate by members of the 6th VNMC Battalion. The ceremony marked the end of 138 days of NVA occupation of Quang Tri City.

President Nguyen Van Thieu visited the frontline positions of the Vietnamese Marine Division on 20 September to congratulate General Lan and the officers and men of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The President then flew by helicopter to the command post of VNMC Brigade 147, after which he drove to the 6th VNMC Battalion's command post. There he personally congratulated Lieutenant Colonel Tung and his Marines on their success inside the Citadel. The recapture of Quang Tri was probably the most significant South Vietnamese victory of the spring invasion.³⁶ During the seven-week battle to recapture Quang Tri City, the VNMC had suffered 3,658 casualties of the more than 5,000 casualties sustained since June 1972 — about 25 percent of the entire Corps.³⁷ The Vietnamese Marine Division, with its victory at Quang Tri City, had come of age as a fighting unit.³⁸

*This prompted General Cooksey, the FRAC commander, to recommend the Vietnamese Marine Division for a United States Presidential Unit Citation.

**Edwin W. Besch, in Saigon, observed later that an "Inchon-style" landing in North Vietnam by Vietnamese or American forces might have been less costly.

CHAPTER 9

Returning North

Consolidation – Push to the North – Reorganization – The Eleventh Hour – Ceasefire

Consolidation

On 25 September 1972, VNMC Brigade 369 opened a new command post at Hai Lang Village and assumed operational control of the battalions at Quang Tri City, and VNMC Brigade 147 assumed defensive positions along the coast and on the division's right flank. VNMC Brigade 258 reverted to division reserve. Major Gordon W. Keiser took over as senior advisor for Brigade 258 from Major Robert D. Kelly.¹ For the Americans of ANGLICO and the advisors there was a sense of accomplishment. For the South Vietnamese, however, the battle was far from over.

The Vietnamese Marine Division had used tactical air almost daily since the NVA invasion in March 1972. Between June and September, there had been 3,381 American and 775 Vietnamese air tactical sorties, and 525 B-52 strikes flown in support of the VNMC. From 26 to 28 September, 18 VNMC officers, two from each of the infantry battalions, underwent instruction in close air support and naval gunfire spotter techniques, followed by an immediate practical application with

U.S. Marine advisors. Most of the Vietnamese officers became competent in coordinating U.S. air strikes through an airborne FAC and controlling naval gunfire. This added capability further reduced the necessity for ANGLICO and advisor involvement in the control of U.S. supporting arms.²

With the capture of the Quang Tri Citadel and the establishment of Marine blocking positions at the approaches to the city, the VNMC Marine Division, with its forward headquarters at Huong Dien, was in a position to push north. General Lan was anxious to reoccupy all of the territory lost during the NVA invasion prior to any kind of ceasefire negotiations. Since the beginning of the Easter Invasion, when President Nixon outlined the conditions for such a ceasefire, President Thieu had been concerned that all lost South Vietnamese ground be regained prior to an in-place settlement. Enemy activity had dropped sharply after the taking of Quang Tri City, but it was evident that the NVA was still present in strength just outside the city. Identification of a unit from the *312th NVA Di-*

South Vietnamese Marines move into the ruins of the Citadel after the Communists were driven out. Both the Marines and the living conditions show the effect of previous fighting.

Vietnamese Marine Corps Photo





Government of Vietnam Photo

Firepower from both sides reduced Quang Tri City to a uniform level of destruction. This is the view along Quang Trung Street after the South Vietnamese retook the city.

vision raised the enemy presence to six divisions in Quang Tri Province, as reported by the 1st Regional Assistance Command.* The enemy artillery fire from the northwest which daily showered Vietnamese Marine positions occasionally was followed by nighttime probing attacks.³

Heavy monsoon rains began to fall in October and would continue until the end of December. The area to the east of the city was low-lying coastal marshlands, threaded with rivers, and was difficult enough to cross in good weather. The torrential rains would make passage impossible in some areas. Experience had shown that during the monsoon a 200-meter-wide river could become a two-kilometer-wide bay overnight, a vital consideration when moving armor, artillery, and foot troops. With growing concern about the peace negotiations in Paris, General Lan recommended that an attempt to take the offensive should be made immediately, taking advantage of the lull in enemy operations and the continued presence of 9th MAB support. Route 560, north of Quang Tri, was the only improved line of communications east of QL-1 leading to the

*312th NVA Division: 141st Infantry Regiment; 165th Infantry Regiment (only element encountered); and 209th Infantry Regiment.

Cua Viet River. This was the obvious axis of attack and Lan hoped to move north by some other route and to do so before the monsoon restricted his options. He ordered Colonel Nguyen Nang Bao's VNMC Brigade 147 to attack north along Route 560 to push the enemy beyond mortar range of Quang Tri City and to capture Trien Phong District Headquarters. Accomplishment of this mission would also serve to cut a major NVA supply line.⁴

On 7 October, prior to H-Hour, the division's fire support coordination center arranged for heavy artillery, naval gunfire, and close air support. General Cooksey's headquarters in Hue coordinated the American fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. U.S. Army helicopters provided armed reconnaissance forward of the axis of attack and eastward to the beach. Flights were composed of two U.S. Army light observation helicopters with ANGLICO air observers on board, providing excellent naval gunfire coverage on targets up to 5,000 meters inland. This capability was particularly valuable during inclement weather when aircraft could not operate because of limited visibility.

Push to the North

At H-Hour, the 8th VNMC Battalion moved out in



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800744

Marines of the 9th Battalion consolidate their gains. Here a TOW antitank missile team installs a launcher. At right, LtCol Nguyen Kim De, the battalion commander, and Maj Paul L. Carlson, an advisor, supervise the emplacement of this weapons system.

the attack under difficult circumstances along Route 560. The highway ran through a marshland between the Thach Han River and the Vinh Dinh River, where thick groves of bamboo and hedgerows permitted enemy snipers to fire point-blank at the advancing Marines. The attack continued for three days against heavy enemy resistance. On 10 October, with the front lines extended the desired distance, Colonel Bao, commander of Brigade 147, moved his other three battalions on line and awaited further orders. The operation had resulted in 111 enemy killed and 55 weapons captured.

On 20 October, General Lan ordered Bao to conduct a second operation along the eastern flank of the brigade front. The attack, conducted by the 9th VNMC Battalion supported by armor, was designed to extend the friendly lines north toward the Cua Viet River. The river was critical to the defense of Quang Tri City; whoever controlled the Cua Viet controlled the economic lifeline of Quang Tri Province. The river also was sufficiently deep and wide to accommodate landing craft inland all the way to Dong Ha and into

Quang Tri City itself. It was essential that this artery be in South Vietnamese hands prior to any settlement.

The 9th VNMC Battalion encountered stiff resistance as it moved north. The eastern portion of the two-pronged attack reached its objectives, but the western portion was held up by a heavy 122mm rocket attack. U.S. Army armed helicopter "Pink Teams" were called in to suppress the rocket positions. Captain George Philip III, a U.S. Marine advisor flying in the command and control helicopter, served as the liaison between the VNMC units on the ground and these American helicopters. With the fire suppressed, the western prong moved on line with the eastern force on an axis about six kilometers from the Cua Viet River, still short of its south bank.⁵

VNMC Brigade 369, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen The Luong, held the western portion of the division front against an enemy attack the first week in October, but the remainder of the month was relatively quiet with the exception of daily enemy bombardments. The brigade conducted limited patrolling to its front and meanwhile improved defen-

sive positions in Quang Tri City. During the month several reconnaissance patrols crossed the Thach Han River to try to determine the enemy's intentions. VNMC Brigade 258, with Colonel Ngo Van Dinh in command, remained the division reserve. By October's end, the Marine front lines had stabilized along a line that could permit subsequent efforts to establish a foothold on the Cua Viet outlet to the sea. Morale and discipline remained high for all VNMC units as they improved positions and replacements filled the depleted ranks.

Reorganization

Due to the preponderant number of recent recruits who had reported to MR 1 to fill the ranks of his battalions, General Lan directed that, commensurate with military operations, all elements of the division undergo troop inspections. Battalions rotated out of the line and positioned themselves on the hard sandy beaches near Wunder Beach. The U.S. Marine advisors were amazed at the detailed inspections conducted. Inspect-

Advisors required material and maintenance support for the period of Vietnamization. Maj William R. Hart, an artillery advisor, and Maj Joseph J. O'Brien, an infantry advisor, confer amid the battle's aftermath.

Photo courtesy of Leatherneck Magazine



ing officers meticulously went over each item of equipment laid out in parade-ground fashion on the beach. Individual weapons were inspected by these officers with the thoroughness of drill instructors. Basic skills and knowledge were demonstrated in an area which was only four miles behind the front lines.

On 1 November, orders came from Saigon for the Marines to cross the Thach Han River west of Quang Tri in an effort to expand the division's area of control. Under the cover of early morning darkness, VNMC Brigade 369 sent 600 Marines led by the 6th VNMC Battalion across the Thach Han River directly opposite the Citadel. The crossing, using sampans, small boats, and barges, was not without difficulties. Some of the Marines drowned as sampans overturned and guide ropes broke. By dawn on 2 November, however, nearly 200 Marines were established on the western side, followed shortly by 200 more. As the Marines moved inland they were vigorously opposed by the enemy. The forward elements bogged down 500 meters from the river line in the face of heavy enemy automatic weapons and mortar fire. The NVA counterattacked the Marine foothold with a regiment supported by mortars and artillery. The massive counterattack reflected the enemy's firm intention to maintain positions west of Quang Tri City and to deny the southern forces access to the Ai Tu area. Later in the day, as the Marines moved north along QL-1, between a small canal and the Thach Han River, they came under intense small arms fire from concealment in the dense foliage. All of the company commanders were killed and more than 40 Marines were reported missing. Despite the employment of every available supporting arm, the Marines could not make headway. During the hours of darkness of 2-3 November, the 6th VNMC Battalion withdrew east of the Thach Han River, leaving only a reconnaissance team on the west bank. The 6th VNMC Battalion operation was the Marines' last effort to cross the Thach Han River prior to the ceasefire in January 1973.⁶

The Eleventh Hour

On 11 November, the day after the U.S. Marines had celebrated their 197th birthday, the VNMC began an operation to extend its control to the northwest. As Lieutenant Colonel Tran Xuan Quang's 4th VNMC Battalion attacked, it was stopped by intense artillery and mortar fire and localized ground counterattacks. The NVA appeared determined that the Marines would not reach the Cua Viet River. In spite of severe resupply problems, the NVA expended five

times more ordnance during November than it had in October.⁷

The monsoon rains curtailed both enemy and friendly movement. Transporting supplies was difficult for both sides, and living conditions were equally oppressive. The two sides could see each other occasionally, but neither seemed inclined to fire; they shared a miserable lot. Routes previously used to resupply were flooded. Route 555 itself was nearly obliterated by rising water and rendered unusable.⁸

The Communists expended every effort to keep forward units close to the Marine positions and thus hopefully to make tactical air and naval gunfire support impossible. On one occasion, however, the tactic did not work. A B-52 strike was conducted in support of the 4th VNMC Battalion which was operating just south of the Cua Viet River near the beach. Six prominent hill masses were the only logical positions for the enemy to occupy, above the flooded lowlands. Previously, B-52s had dropped their bombs with such devastating effect that it was unnecessary to rebomb the same position. On this occasion, however, three of the six hill masses were programmed for additional strikes six minutes after the first. As the second flight

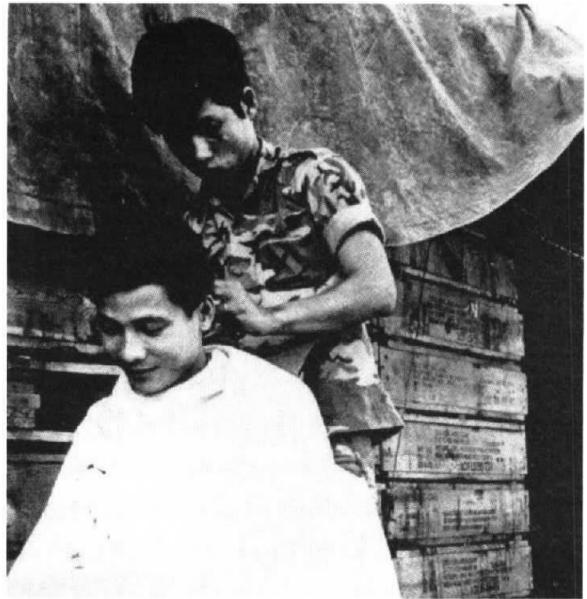


Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck Magazine*
Reorganization and consolidation was translated to improving living conditions and personal appearance at the unit level. In contrast to previous conditions, these two 369th Brigade Marines are in front of an improvised living space constructed from ammunition boxes.

Retraining was high on the list of priorities. Here a class is given on the 81mm mortar, a battalion support weapon that also proved to be a heavy load when carried by South Vietnamese infantry and often was left behind when equipment was moved by foot.

Photo courtesy of *Leatherneck Magazine*





Vietnamese Marine Corps Photo

Victory in Quang Tri is celebrated on the U.S. Marine Corps' birthday in 1972. From left are LtGen Ngo Quang Truong, commanding I Corps; Col Joshua Dorsey, USMC, Senior Marine Advisor; and BGen Bui The Lan, commanding the Vietnamese Marine Division. The event took place in front of the situation map at the division command post at Huong Dien.

struck, NVA soldiers who had survived the first attack had moved back into their battered positions. Vietnamese and U.S. Marines 3,000 meters away bore witness to the devastating effectiveness of strategic bombers in a tactical role.⁹

December 1972 was marked by the ever-present possibility that the continued negotiations between American National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho would result in a ceasefire agreement and that truce accords would go into effect. Generally the frontlines remained static with the VNMC no closer than three and a half miles from the Cua Viet River. During the first part of the month the NVA initiated nothing larger than company-sized attacks. However, at dawn on 17 December, the enemy launched a battalion-sized attack on the 7th VNMC Battalion, located west of the Vinh Dinh Canal. The NVA, in two separate attacks, lost 37 dead on 18 December, and 132 killed the next day, and gained no ground. Documents found on enemy dead and on prisoners revealed that at least three regiments opposed the VNMC efforts to move north. The *27th NVA Regiment*,* the *48th NVA Regiment*, and the *101st NVA Regiment* were making every effort to fix the Marines in place.

Lieutenant Colonel George E. Jones' Sub Unit One continued to support South Vietnamese forces in MR 1 and throughout the rest of the country. During the last quarter of 1972, American ships, their fire coordinated and controlled by ANGLICO personnel,

*Of the *B5 Front*.

fired 211,700 rounds in direct support of the Armed Forces of South Vietnam. U.S. naval gunfire enabled South Vietnamese artillery to move inland and provide support for areas further to the west. Due to heavy rain curtailing airborne air controllers and tactical air support, almost twice as many naval rounds were fired during November and December in MR 1 as were fired by South Vietnamese 155mm howitzers. An NVA soldier captured by the ARVN Airborne Division, which was positioned west of the VNMC Division, reported that naval gunfire was extremely effective along the Thach Han River and that he, and others, had surrendered due to the heavy pounding.

By the year's end, naval gunfire spotter instruction had been given to Vietnamese artillery forward observers who then applied their new skills upon returning to the field.¹⁰ On Christmas Day 1972, Sub Unit

Victory in Quang Tri is celebrated in Saigon. For the Vietnamese Marines, this campaign brought increased popular support and prestige that was reflected in high levels of recruitment despite battlefield losses.

Photo courtesy of Capt Edwin W. Besch, USMC (Ret)

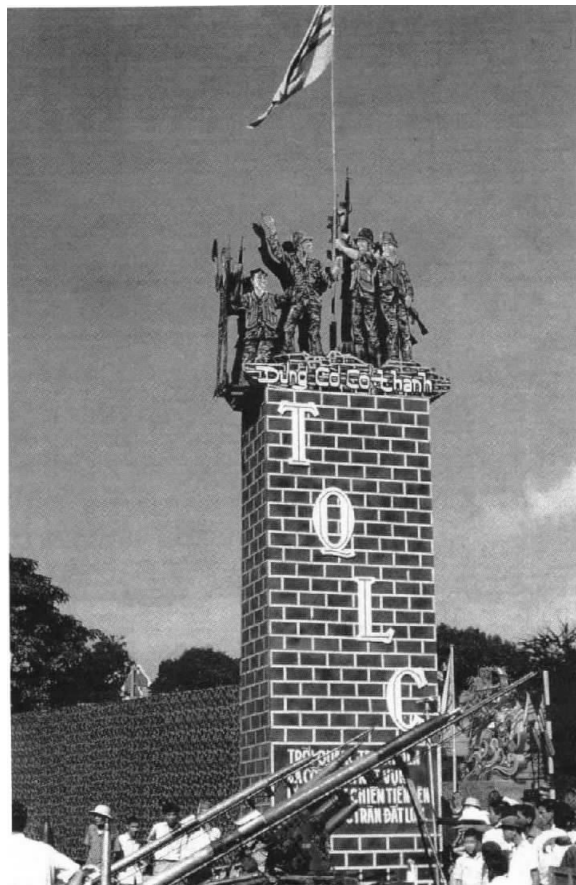




Photo courtesy of LtCol George E. Jones, USMC (Ret)

A large group of the normally disbursed Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO—the headquarters staff and others—pose in front of the unit headquarters in Saigon. At right is LtCol George E. Jones, the commanding officer during the counteroffensive in mid-1972.

One suffered its last death in action when a Marine air observer in a South Vietnamese Air Force Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog aircraft flew along the Cua Viet River to inspect the NVA positions to the north. First Lieutenant Dwight G. Rickman left Phu Bai that day to confirm that the Communist forces were complying with the truce. He never returned.¹¹

There was very light contact between the two forces as 1973 began. Both sides made probes and counter-probes. On 14 January, the frontline battalions of VNMC Brigades 147 and 258 had heavy contact with the enemy all along the front. With a ceasefire likely, the 9th MAB became involved in coordinating plans to take all U.S. personnel out of MR 1. General Miller requested that MACV make it clear to CinCPac that the amphibious forces were the only available resources capable of the task and that they not be used for clearing mines in North Vietnamese waters.¹² On 15 January, under orders from Saigon, General Lan began planning for a final effort to gain the Cua Viet River

prior to the now-certain ceasefire. The attack was to be made by an infantry and tank force with enough power to reach and cross the Cua Viet River. Task Force Tango was organized with the mission to seize the former U.S. naval base and LST ramp at the mouth of the river.

At 0655 on 26 January, as the main VNMC attack began, every available supporting arm was brought to bear on the NVA. The ground attack, led by Colonel Nguyen Thanh Tri, the deputy commandant of the VNMC, advanced in two mechanized columns. Major James R. Sweeney, as the senior U.S. Marine advisor with Task Force Tango, moved forward with Colonel Tri. One column moved north along the coastal sand dunes while the other took advantage of a woodline which ran roughly three kilometers inland from the beach to move north by a parallel axis. Within three hours, the Marines had seized the intermediate objectives despite determined resistance from the NVA.

As the 4th VNMC Battalion under Lieutenant

Colonel Nguyen Dang Tong, with Major William M. Keys as advisor, proceeded towards the final objective, the South Vietnamese armor came under fire by wire-guided AT-3 missiles. During the next 18 hours, 26 M48 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers were lost to Communist missile teams employed in groups of two and three. During this time, SA-7 surface-to-air missiles destroyed two allied aircraft flying close air support. The NVA resisted fiercely as the left-hand column closed on its fortified positions.¹³

At 0145, 28 January, the column along the beach, with only three tanks in support of a mixed force of 3d, 4th, and 5th VNMC Battalion Marines, made a final assault. At 0700, 300 Vietnamese Marines broke through the Communist lines and hoisted a red and yellow South Vietnamese flag at the Cua Viet River. A radio message to the task force command post reported the lead company had secured the LST ramp on the south bank of the Cua Viet River and they were standing knee-deep in the river. Colonel Tri radioed back “. . . go deeper!”¹⁴

Ceasefire

At 0745 the USS *Turner Joy* (DD 951) fired the last U.S. naval gunfire support in the Vietnam War and pulled off the gun line. Lieutenant Colonel Gerald H. Turley noted this action in the advisors' operational

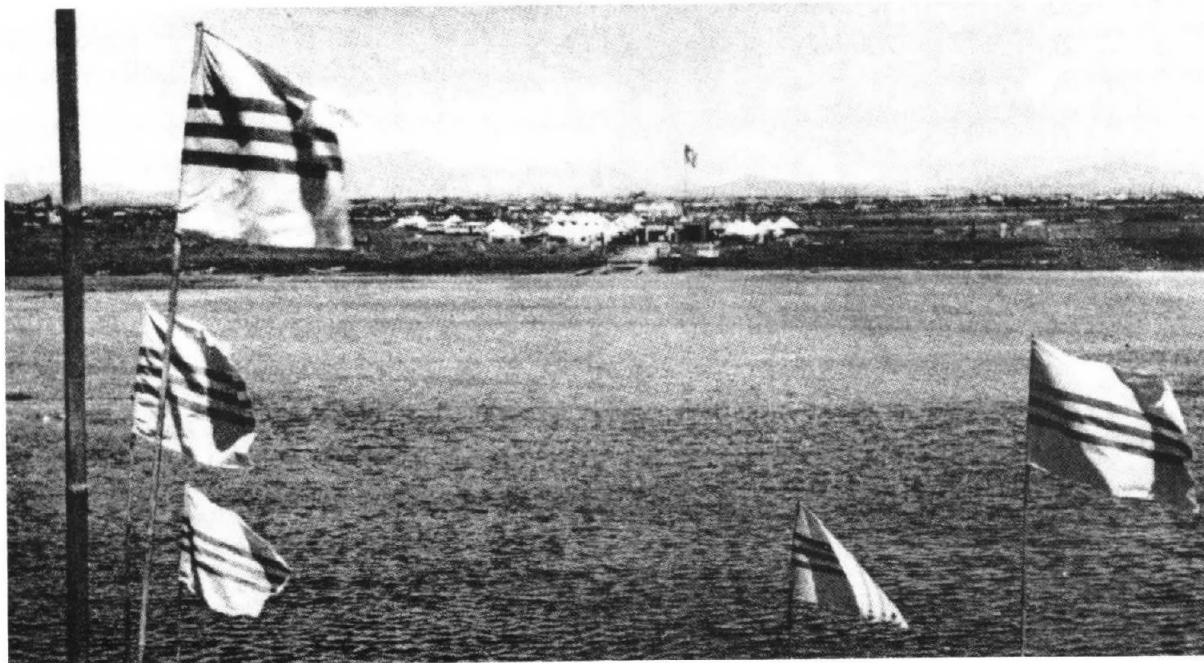
log. This was a fitting climax as the *Turner Joy* had been involved in the Gulf of Tonkin since 1964. At the same time, the U.S. withdrew all support to Task Force Tango, anticipating the ceasefire that would go into effect at 0800. Beginning around 0600, all artillery north and south of the front began firing, gradually increasing in rate. Both sides had been stockpiling artillery ammunition for the final moments of the war. Neither side wanted the other to be able to make any last-minute gains of ground.¹⁵

The final enemy shelling produced some surprises, at least for Major Nguyen Dang Hoa's 1st VNMC Battalion east of Quang Tri City. During the previous few weeks the battalion command group, which was located in an abandoned village a short distance to the rear of its forward companies, had experienced only desultory harassing fire. As the area was quite flat and the enemy possessed no vantage spot from which to adjust artillery fire, it was assumed that the command group's location was not known to the NVA. This assumption proved untrue.

After a few ranging shots of high-explosive, point-detonating rounds, the enemy switched to shells armed with hitherto rarely used delay fuzes. While the well-built South Vietnamese bunkers provided a more-than-adequate defense against the former

The opposing forces remained facing each other where the battle lines were drawn. At the Thach Han River at Quang Tri, the south bank is marked by South Vietnamese flags.

Government of Vietnam Photo



rounds, they were no match for the delay-fuzed variety. Although the area was saturated with delay rounds, none hit any of the crowded bunkers. With low-hanging clouds precluding any friendly air support and the U.S. Navy pulling off the gun line, there was little else to do but wait for the ceasefire. At 0800 all firing stopped. While the Americans and the South Vietnamese observed the truce accords, the NVA prepared for a new offensive.¹⁶ Recalled Lieutenant Colonel Turley, who had served through to the end, "all U.S. Marine advisors were formally relieved of their duties with Vietnamese battalions." They returned to the VNMC division command post at Huong Dien where General Lan assembled the Marine Advisory Unit for a final formation. The next morning, all but five advisors returned to Saigon for rotation back to the United States.¹⁷

For Task Force Tango along the Cua Viet River the fighting continued. That evening the NVA launched a counterattack against VNMC forces at the naval base. Other NVA units cut across the rear of both columns in an effort to separate them from support, and succeeding in this by 30 January. At this point, a company-sized force from the 4th battalion was encircled at the Cua Viet River outposts. Efforts to resupply the Marines from across the beach resulted in the loss of a mechanized landing craft (LCM). The VNMC units attempted to break out south along the beach on 31 January, rather than be isolated by the NVA. "All contact with beleaguered Marines was lost and the outpost overrun," was the terse wording of the division operations summary as of 0935 that morning. The South Vietnamese suffered 40 casualties and lost 20 armored vehicles in the post-ceasefire incident.¹⁸

PART IV
THE MARINES WERE THERE

CHAPTER 10

A Tract of Time

*9th MAB and the Naval Campaign—Support to the Fleet—Evacuations—Search and Rescue
NGF Airborne Spotters, Fast and Slow—Raids and Demonstrations—Redeyes at Sea
Support to Military Region 1—Fleet Support Continues
Across the Beach: The Lam Son Landings—Turnaway at Quang Tri*

9th MAB and the Naval Campaign

Separate from the advisory effort with the Vietnamese Marine Corps in MR 1, III Marine Amphibious Force aviation and ground units participated with the Seventh Fleet and the Seventh Air Force in reacting to the enemy's Spring Offensive. The North Vietnamese attack of 30 March 1972 had found III MAF forces deployed for rapid response to the unfolding and confusing situation. Brigadier General Edward J. Miller's 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) Headquarters was on the USS *Blue Ridge* at White Beach, Okinawa; Colonel Walter C. Kelly's 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) had just departed the U.S. Naval Base Subic Bay, Philippines, for the South China Sea on Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Alpha ships; Lieutenant Colonel Phillip B. Friedrichs' Battalion Landing Team 1/9 (BLT Bravo) with ARG Bravo had left Hong Kong for the East China Sea.*¹ On the morning of 2 April, the 31st MAU and BLT Bravo were already off the Vietnamese coast awaiting developments in MR 1. Vice Admiral William P. Mack, the Seventh Fleet commander, had diverted ARGs Alpha and Bravo to positions 15 nautical miles east of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for possible evacuation of Americans from Dong Ha. On the *Tripoli*, Colonel Kelly and Lieutenant Colonel William R. Von Harten, commanding BLT 3/4, monitored radio traffic sent by Lieutenant Colonel Turley from the Ai Tu Combat Base, as he "attempted to bring order from chaos."**²

Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., CinCPac, cancelled Exercise Golden Dragon on 3 April, and III MAF's commander, Lieutenant General Louis Metzger, ordered General Miller and the 9th MAB staff to remain on the USS *Blue Ridge* for combat or evacuation operations. The *Blue Ridge*, with the Task Force 76 com-

*ARG A: 31st MAU, BLT 3/4, HMM-165, and Logistic Support Unit Alpha on the *Tripoli*, *Anchorage*, *Duluth*, and *Schenectady*. ARG B: BLT 1/9 on the *Denver*, *Tuscaloosa*, and *Mobile*.

**Later it was learned that General Cao Van Vien of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff and General Abrams were still assessing the situation in MR 1 and had not sent or approved the initial calls for assistance to the Seventh Fleet, requests which had been generated from the confused situation in MR 1. See Chapter 4 for details.

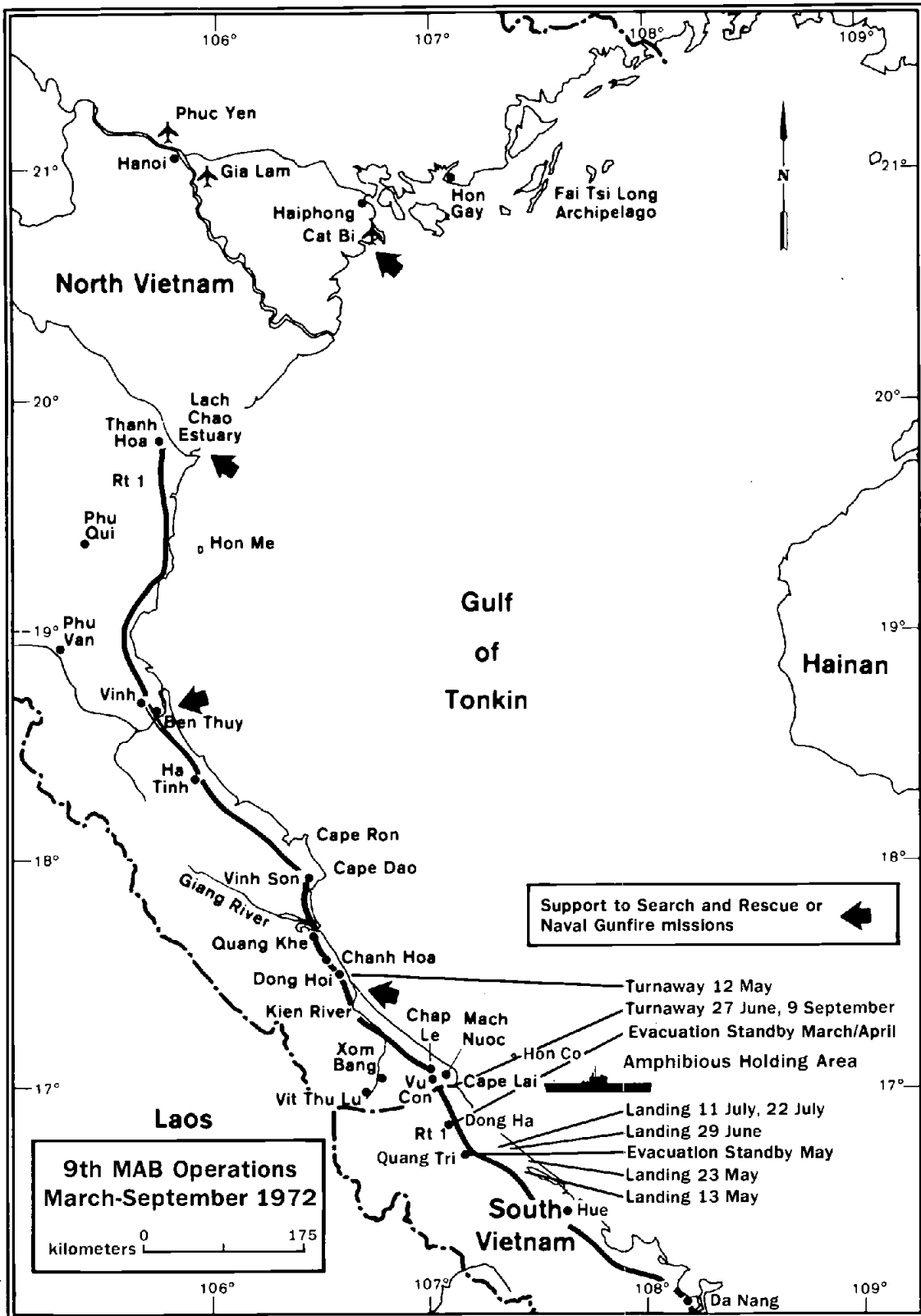
mander, Rear Admiral Walter D. Gaddis, and General Miller, sailed for Vietnam on 5 April. Admiral Mack returned ARG Bravo to White Beach, Okinawa, to replace defective amphibian tractors and to load additional supplies and personnel. These orders were passed through the operational chain of command to the "action agency"—III MAF in General Metzger's case. He recalled that Seventh Fleet was saturated with message traffic at this point. Aviation deployments with "tight" time schedules required Metzger to move his forces and to notify Seventh Fleet that unless otherwise directed he would do so "in accordance with orders from higher authority."³

With the forward deployment of amphibious forces to holding areas off the DMZ, Admiral Mack directed units to conduct "ready operations," a term that included both contingency and support activities. The 9th MAB had various contingency plans which were based on its task-organized character. After the initial attacks, the amphibious brigade turned its attention from potentially conducting emergency evacuations to building up its forces. During the next 10 months there were at least nine changes in task organization as amphibious ready groups and Marine units rotated. Changes occurred because of ship availability, contingency requirements, and the long intervals at sea.***⁴

Marine units at sea for operations on 9 April were the 9th MAB headquarters, 31st MAU, and BLT Bravo. Upon arriving in the Tonkin Gulf, the brigade organized itself into a regimental landing team and a composite helicopter squadron.****⁵ Admiral Mack kept Amphibious Squadron (Phibron) 5 in the Western Pacific as ARGs Alpha and Bravo, despite its

***There were three general arrangements: first, the preinvasion ready force of an embarked Marine amphibious unit and an additional battalion landing team; next, the expansion of contingency forces to two MAUs and two BLTs; finally, the retention of two MAUs as the probability of intervention lessened in late summer 1972.

****Initial task organization on 9 April 1972: 9th MAB (TG 79.1), H&S Co, 9th MAB (TU 79.1.0), Det, 1st RadBn (TE 79.1.0.1); RLT 4 (TU 79.1.2), Hq, 31st MAU (TE 79.1.2.0), BLT 3/4 (TE 79.1.2.1), BLT 1/9 (TE 79.1.2.2), Det B, HML-367 (TE 79.1.2.2.1), Det A, HML-367 (TU 79.1.3); BLSG (TU 79.1.4), LFSP (TU 79.1.5); HMM-165 (TU 79.1.6).



Adapted from Naval Historical Center Material



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American Marine staffs spent the early part of the Spring Offensive preparing for a variety of contingencies before the situation stabilized enough to take definite action. BGen Edward J. Miller, in his stateroom on board the USS Blue Ridge, at right rear, and his staff are briefed by the MAB G-3, LtCol James L. Shanahan, on a proposed course of action.

planned return to the United States. On 11 April, the newly arrived Amphibious Squadron 7 formed Amphibious Ready Groups Charlie and Delta.* General Metzger formed an additional MAU and BLT to provide landing forces for Charlie and Delta. The 33d MAU was activated under Colonel Robert J. Perrich, then commanding 4th Marines. This amphibious unit consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Hertberg's HMM-164 and Lieutenant Colonel Clyde D. Dean's BLT 1/4. Embarkation on amphibious ships was followed by landing exercises in the Philippines, and then deployment to amphibious holding areas off the coast of Vietnam.

When the USS *Blue Ridge* arrived off the DMZ with Task Force 76 and the 9th MAB, Admiral Gaddis and General Miller were ordered by Seventh Fleet to conduct "amphibious operations as directed." Five possible courses of action arose: evacuations, landings, demonstrations, support to the Seventh Fleet, and support to the South Vietnamese. Prompted by Admirals

*Phibron 5: USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10), *Duluth* (LPD 6), *Denver* (LPD 9), *Mt. Vernon* (LSD 39), *Anchorage* (LSD 36), *Mobile* (LKA 115), *Tuscaloosa* (LST 1187), and *Schenectady* (LST 1185). Phibron 7: USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3), *Juneau* (LPD 10), *Point Defiance* (LSD 31), *Alamo* (LSD 33), *St. Louis* (LKA 116), *Manitowoc* (LST 1180), *Sumter* (LST 1181), *Cayuga* (LST 1186), *Barbour County* (LST 1195), and *Bristol County* (LST 1198).

Mack and McCain's need for a variety of alternatives during April, Admiral Gaddis and General Miller conducted a wide-ranging and at times frenzied planning effort simultaneously with ongoing operations.**⁶ The Marines of the 9th MAB soon were involved in tasks other than their basic amphibious assault mission. This dictated separation from task force and parent units to meet commitments that were not anticipated in existing contingency plans. Most assignments were parallel at various times to ready operations and support to the Republic of Vietnam.⁷ "They were interesting times," concluded General Miller.⁸

Support to the Fleet

The Seventh Fleet amphibious ships soon found that the demands of 24-hour combat watches in the Gulf of Tonkin could not be met entirely with the ship's crew, most of whom were conducting both regular and general-quarter duties at such points as gun positions, watch stations, and damage control stations. Battalion and squadron staffs manned shipboard coordination centers for operations, logistics, and fire support during periods of general quarters (particularly when Vietnamese Marines were embarked and Task

**The 9th MAB operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel James L. Shanahan, recalled this description as "possibly not extreme enough." (Shanahan Comments)