U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE BITTER END

1973-1975

COVER: *Vietnamese board CH-53s in Saigon's LZ 39, a parking lot. The 9th MAB extracted 395 Americans and 4,475 Vietnamese and third-country nationals in April 1975.*
Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A150961

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE BITTER END

1973-1975

by

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and

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HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
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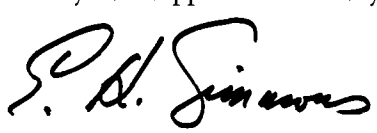
Foreword

This is the ninth volume in a nine-volume operational and chronological historical series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate functional series complements the operational histories. This volume details the final chapter in the Corps' involvement in Southeast Asia, including chapters on Cambodia, the refugees, and the recovery of the container ship SS *Mayaguez*.

In January 1973, the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords setting the stage for democracy in Southeast Asia to test its resolve in Cambodia and South Vietnam. The result was not a rewarding experience for America nor its allies. By March 1975, democracy was on the retreat in Southeast Asia and the U.S. was preparing for the worst, the simultaneous evacuation of Americans and key officials from Cambodia and South Vietnam. With Operation Eagle Pull and Operation Frequent Wind, the United States accomplished that task in April 1975 using Navy ships, Marine Corps helicopters, and the Marines of the III Marine Amphibious Force. When the last helicopter touched down on the deck of the USS *Okinawa* at 0825 on the morning of 30 April, the U.S. Marine Corps' involvement in South Vietnam ended, but one more encounter with the Communists in Southeast Asia remained. After the seizure of the SS *Mayaguez* on 12 May 1975, the United States decided to recover that vessel using armed force. Senior commanders in the Western Pacific chose the Marine Corps to act as the security force for the recovery. Marines of 2d Battalion, 9th Marines and 1st Battalion, 4th Marines played a key role in the events of 15 May 1975 when America regained control of the ship and recovered its crew, concluding American combat in Indochina and this volume's history.

Although largely written from the perspective of the III Marine Amphibious Force, this volume also describes the roles of the two joint commands operating in the region: the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, and the United States Support Activities Group, Thailand. Thus, while the volume emphasizes the Marine Corps' role in the events of the period, significant attention also is given to the overall contribution of these commands in executing U.S. policy in Southeast Asia from 1973 to 1975. Additionally, a chapter is devoted to the Marine Corps' role in assisting thousands of refugees who fled South Vietnam in the final weeks of that nation's existence.

The authors, Major George Ross Dunham and Colonel David A. Quinlan, individually worked on this volume while assigned to the History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps. Colonel Quinlan, who is now retired and resides in Hartford, Connecticut, began the book in 1976. Major Dunham, who recently retired and resides in Dunkirk, Maryland, inherited his co-author's work and completed the majority of the volume during his tour from 1985 to 1990. Both authors are graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy and have advanced degrees. Colonel Quinlan, who was an infantry officer, has a juris doctor degree from George Washington University (1979) and Major Dunham, who was an aviator, has a master of arts degree in history from Pepperdine University (1976).



E. H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired)
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

> Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty.
>
> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address
> 20 January 1961

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973-1975 is a story about commitment, sacrifice, and the price America and its ally, South Vietnam, paid. It answers no questions, places no blame, and offers no prophetic judgement, but provides an historical account of the end of a state and the beginning of new lives for those fortunate enough to escape that upheaval. This description of the United States Marine Corps' involvement at the bitter end of America's military presence in Southeast Asia also traces the effects of uncontrolled fear on a society fighting for its survival.

The effect of fear on the fighting man on the battlefield was no different in 1975 in South Vietnam than it was more than 2,400 years earlier, when the Athenians fought to defend their beloved city. In preparing his Marines and sailors for battle in the Peloponnesian War of 429 B.C., and anticipating their fear of death, Phormio of Athens told them:

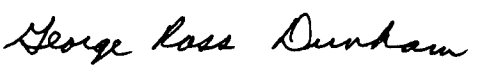
> Fear makes men forget, and skill which cannot fight is useless.

The South Vietnamese Armed Forces in the spring of 1975 were rendered useless as a fighting force. No level of training or skill, no program of Vietnamization, no amount of money could have reversed the rampant spread of fear that engulfed all of South Vietnam in March and April of 1975. Incredible acts of courage temporarily checked the nation's slide into oblivion, at places like Xuan Loc and Bien Hoa, but fear ruled the day. Its only antidote, courageous leadership at the highest levels, rapidly disappeared as the NVA war machine gained momentum. As one senior leader after another opted to use his helicopter to evacuate rather than to direct and control the defensive battle, strategic retreats turned into routs and armies turned into mobs of armed deserters. Amidst all this chaos, the U.S. Marine Corps aided its country in the final chapter of the Vietnam War, the evacuation of American citizens, third-country nationals, and as many South Vietnamese as conditions permitted.

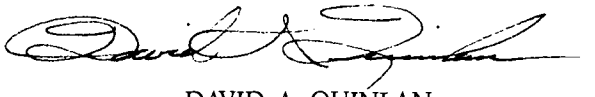
To describe those events accurately, the authors used, for the most part, original sources, including interviews of many of the participants. A debt of gratitude is owed to many people for the compilation and collation of that material. In particular, we thank the other Services and their respective historical agencies for their contributions, with a special note of appreciation due to Dr. Wayne W. Thompson and Mr. Bernard C. Nalty, both of the Office of Air Force History, and Dr. Edward J. Marolda of the Naval Historical Center. A large portion of the available source material was provided by the staff of the Marine Corps Historical Center and for that contribution we are very appreciative. In particular, we thank the Historical Center librarian, Miss Evelyn A. Englander, and archivist, Mrs. Joyce Bonnett, and their staffs; the Reference Section (Mr. Danny J. Crawford and staff); the Oral History Section (Mr. Benis M. Frank and Mrs. Meredith P. Hart-

ley); and the Publications Production Section (Mr. Robert E. Struder, Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns, Mr. W. Stephen Hill, and Corporal Andre L. Owens III). Of course, history cannot be read until it has been written, and rewritten, and for that demanding task of editing, we thank the Chief Historian, Mr. Henry I. "Bud" Shaw, Jr.; the head of the Vietnam Histories Section, Mr. Jack Shulimson; and our colleagues in the section who had to read our work in its most primitive state (Lieutenant Colonel Gary D. Solis, Major Charles D. Melson, and Mr. Charles R. "Rich" Smith). To those whose names are too many to mention here, we extend our sincerest gratitude for loyalty and special acts of assistance in this project, and for those who reviewed our manuscript and contributed comments and pictures, we offer you a book bearing your imprint, and our thanks. The authors, however, are responsible for the content of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

We would like to salute every Marine and American who served in Vietnam and dedicate this book to those who paid the ultimate price for the "survival and success of liberty." In particular, we commend the sacrifice of the four Marines who died in South Vietnam on 29 April 1975: Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge; Corporal Charles McMahon, Jr.; First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea; and Captain William C. Nystul; and ask that the fourteen Marines who lost their lives on Koh Tang in Cambodia, on 15 May 1975, also not be forgotten.



GEORGE ROSS DUNHAM



DAVID A. QUINLAN

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THE UNITED STATES PRESENCE IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

CHAPTER 1

The War Goes On

Paris Peace Accords—The NVA Marshals in the South—A Division of Marines

Fifteen minutes after noon on 29 April 1975, units of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB) received the order to execute Operation Frequent Wind, the plan for emergency evacuation of noncombatant civilians from Saigon, and to supply the final episode of Marines in Vietnam. Less than two hours later, the first elements of the 9th MAB's ground security force (GSF) landed in South Vietnam for the last time. Specifically organized to provide security for the evacuation landing zones, the first elements of the 9th MAB entered the Defense Attache Office (DAO) compound at 1506 Saigon time. The men were met by: ". . . the cheers of awaiting evacuees, almost all of whom were overcome by emotion at the sight of the organized and well disciplined Marines."[1]

These troops, many of whom were veterans of previous Vietnam battles, provided protection for the refugees in the DAO Compound. With the departure of the last evacuee, the Marine security force began returning to the safety of Seventh Fleet ships. Elements of the GSF also deployed to the American Embassy in Saigon where a few Marines remained until the bitter end. As the last CH-46 helicopter lifted off the Embassy rooftop at 0753 on 30 April with 11 Marines on board, U.S. involvement in South Vietnam ended.*

Paris Peace Accords

The signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973 represented a formal end to hostilities. Negotiated at the Paris Conference on Vietnam, it would serve as an important backdrop to events in a country where war seemed endemic.

The "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam" required the United States and its allies to cease military activity and leave South Vietnam within 60 days of the signing. To accomplish this, the Paris Accords required the U.S. to dismantle all its military bases and withdraw all military personnel including its advisors to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. By 27 March the conclusion of the 60-day implementation phase, South Vietnam and the United States had completed most of the changes required by the Accords and its protocols. The absence of the same effort and commitment on the part of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong would soon define the meaning of "peace" in Vietnam. In essence, the precarious balance of power in Southeast Asia and the future of South Vietnam rested on a piece of paper.

For the critical transition from war to peace, the Accords empowered three commissions to oversee the implementation phase and resolve any differences. The Four-Power Joint Military Commission (JMC) represented each belligerent: the United States, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong. At the conclusion of the 60-day cease-fire, this commission would in theory shed its protective outer garment (U.S. and North Vietnam) and become the Two-Power Joint Military Commission, an insular body representing the interests of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG, the Viet Cong). The third commission, and the most important one, involved international participation in the transition to peace. Entrusted to regulate and oversee the implementation of the Accords' articles, the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) consisted of four members: Canada, Hungary, Poland, and Indonesia.[2] The ICCS bore the implied responsibility of enforcement, but lacked the power to do more than report the violations to the Joint Military Commission. The ICCS was to cease functioning when the Accords' provisions had been fulfilled, signalled by a supervised national election and the installation of the new government's elected officials. The ICCS' goal and the final determinant of its existence would be the attainment of this "peace," but in the interim the commission's immediate and overwhelming problem would be settlement of territorial disputes and ceasefire violations. Final resolution of these and any other matters pertaining to the Accords ultimately required a unanimous vote of the JMC. This rarely happened.

The Four-Power Commission attempted to deal with

*For the Marine Corps, involvement began in 1954 with the assignment of the first Marine advisor (Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat), continued with the insertion of a helicopter task force at Soc Trang in 1962, and increased significantly in March of 1965 with the landing of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade at Da Nang.

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

Two CH-53Ds from HMH-462 carrying elements of 2d Battalion, 4th Marines head for Saigon. The first helicopter landed in the DAO compound at 1506 on 29 April 1975.

The Paris Peace Accords, with this introduction, were signed by the U.S., South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government on 27 January 1973. It restricted the U.S. to a maximum of 50 military personnel in South Vietnam.

AGREEMENT ON ENDING THE WAR

AND

RESTORING PEACE IN VIET-NAM

The Parties participating in the Paris Conference on Viet-Nam,

With a view to ending the war and restoring peace in Viet-Nam on the basis of respect for the Vietnamese people's fundamental national rights and the South Vietnamese people's right to self-determination, and to contributing to the consolidation of peace in Asia and the world,

Have agreed on the following provisions and undertake to respect and to implement them:

charges and countercharges of landgrabbing, deception, and deceit by both the North and South Vietnamese. Having little or no success, it merely served as a conduit for frustration and diplomatic infighting. The U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Viet Cong representatives of the Four-Power group resolved little, leaving as a legacy to the Two-Power Joint Military Commission (South Vietnam and Viet Cong) and the International Commission of Control and Supervision unresolved problems, misguided efforts, and mutual distrust.[3]

The ICCS, virtually powerless, found enforcement of the Paris Peace Accords impossible. The North Vietnamese indifference and flagrant disregard of the peace terms so frustrated Canada that it gave proper notice and quit the commission on 31 July 1973. Announcement of the decision to withdraw came on the heels of the 15 July Viet Cong release of two Canadian observers whom the Communists had illegally seized and held captive since the 28th of June. After a personal request from President Richard M. Nixon to Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran agreed to replace Canada on the ICCS and on 29 August its first observers arrived in South Vietnam. The new member soon learned what Canada and the other members of the ICCS already knew: some of the signatories to the Paris Peace Agreement had chosen to ignore their own words. Just prior to its departure from Southeast Asia, Canada charged that North Vietnam regularly had been violating Article 7 ". . . by moving thousands of troops into South Vietnam and that the infiltration was continuing on a 'massive' scale."[4] The terms of that part of the protocol allowed only a one-for-one replacement of worn-out or damaged armaments, munitions, and war materials, and precluded anyone from introducing troops, military advisors, or military personnel including technical assistants into South Vietnam.[5]

The Communists argued that the United States did not adhere to the spirit of the Accords. General Tran Van Tra, the Viet Cong representative to the Four-Power Commission, maintained that the United States and South Vietnam attempted to use the agreement, "in accordance with their existing plans, . . . to pacify, encroach, and build a strong army in order to change the balance of forces in their favor and gain

Between 27 January and 27 March 1973 the last American military forces left South Vietnam. U.S. Army soldiers and U.S. Air Force airmen board a plane bound for the United States while representatives of the four-power Joint Military Commission observe.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

complete control of South Vietnam."*[6] He further alleged that the United States violated three articles of the Peace Accords: Article 8 of the Protocol by leaving behind in Vietnam all "their weapons, ammunition, and military equipment"; Article 3 by withdrawing troops prior to a withdrawal plan approved by the Four-Power JMC and supervised by the ICCS; and Article 6 by failing to submit a plan for U.S. base dismantlement and in fact dismantling no bases when it had agreed to dismantle all of them.[7] Tran Van Tra accused the Americans of a deception "brazen beyond words" because they had told him, " '. . . we have no bases in South Vietnam. All of them were turned over to the Republic of Vietnam prior to the signing of the agreement. [We] are now stationed in camps temporarily borrowed from the Republic of Vietnam.' "[8]

Even more critical than the issue of total removal of U.S. forces and their allies from South Vietnam was the question of what to do with North Vietnamese troops still occupying RVN territory. It represented disagreement between the United States and its ally. In attempting to conclude a peace acceptable to all parties, President Richard M. Nixon authorized Henry Kissinger, head of the U.S. delegation in Paris, to agree to North Vietnam's demands. This decision did not meet with President Nguyen Van Thieu's approval. During the ongoing negotiations in Paris, the leader of South Vietnam repeatedly had voiced his opposition to any agreement which would allow North Vietnam to leave its troops in the Republic of Vietnam. To President Thieu this military arrangement represented an important strategic advantage for the Communists and a decided disadvantage for the government of South Vietnam (GVN), and it only served to intensify his displeasure with the Accords. Neither the events in Paris nor Kissinger's overtures had changed his position. Thieu contended that American estimates placing North Vietnamese military strength in the South at 140,000 were "imaginary and misleading" and suggested that the actual figure was not less than 300,000. Yet in the end when confronted with the possibility of a unilateral signing by the United States and Nixon's repeated pledges that the U.S. would " '. . . take massive action against North Viet-Nam in the event they break the agreement,' " President Thieu reluctantly agreed to comply with the terms of the Paris Peace Accords. It would not be his last tough decision nor would he have to wait long for his concerns to become reality.[9]

Despite serving as voting members of the Joint Military Commission responsible for maintenance of the peace, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong openly violated the ceasefire agreement. Using force wherever necessary to accomplish political ends, Communist military activities focused on strategically important areas. One such area and the site of numerous ceasefire violations was the Mekong River which played a central role in the resupply of Cambodia and U.S. support of that government.** On 29 June 1973, Congress altered that role when it voted on the Case-Church Amendment, a measure to end military assistance to Cambodia. Unlike its predecessor, the Cooper-Church Amendment which had attempted to ban combat activity in Cambodia in 1970, this rider to a continuing funding resolution passed. It prohibited the United States, after 15 August 1973, from engaging in any combat activity in Indochina, especially air operations.*** Without U.S. combat air support to protect the overland lines of communication, the

*Some of Tran Van Tra's statements are based on highly questionable sources as evidenced by his use of a quote from a report issued on 6 April 73 by the Committee to Denounce War Crimes in Vietnam, a U.S. antiwar group. He writes: "In the 2-month period between 28 January and 28 March 1973, the Saigon administration violated the Paris Agreement more than 70,000 times, including 19,770 landgrabbing operations, 23 artillery shellings, 3,375 bombings and strafings of liberated areas, and 21,075 police operations in areas under their control." *B2 Theatre*, pp. 18-19.

**In 1970, a coup replaced Prince Norodom Sihanouk, an avowed neutralist, with Lon Nol, who openly professed his alliance with the United States, which then immediately recognized the new Cambodian government and began aiding it in its struggle with Communist insurgents. For more information on Cambodia, see Chapter 7.

***In response to the American incursion into Cambodia in 1970, Senator Frank F. Church, a Democrat from Idaho, and Senator John Sherman Cooper, a Republican from Kentucky, cosponsored an amendment to the Foreign Military Sales Act which would have prohibited the use of American troops and advisors in Cambodia and outlawed direct air support of Cambodian forces. It passed the Senate but failed in the House and when finally passed on 29 December 1970 as part of the Defense Appropriations Bill, it only barred the introduction of U.S. ground troops in Laos and Thailand. Two years later, Senator Church and Senator Clifford P. Case, a Republican from New Jersey, combined forces to sponsor a bipartisan measure bearing their names. Its passage in June 1973 reflected the growing disenchantment of Congress with even minimal American involvement in Asian combat. In December 1973, Congress passed yet another ban on combat activity in Southeast Asia. This one, a part of the foreign aid bill, forbade the use of any funds for military operations in or over Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. Col Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam Almanac* (New York: Facts On File Publications, 1985), pp. 132-133; "Senate OKs Another War Curb," *Facts On File* (1973), p. 498; and "Foreign Aid Authorized," *Facts On File* (1973), p. 1078.

Mekong River supply link became even more important, representing Cambodia's best chance for survival. North Vietnam, recognizing the strategic value of this border area, already had begun offensive operations to harass the civilian population and disrupt daily activities. The U.S. Navy in its segment of an April 1973 Defense Attache Office report described the effects of the Communists' ceasefire violations in this region of South Vietnam:

> In the area of the Tan Chau Naval Base there are now no civilians. Because of the daily artillery attacks of the North Vietnamese communists the civilian populace has relocated to Chau Doc and Long Xuyen. . . . Since the beginning of the recent attacks (approx. 1 month) over one hundred civilians have been killed and hundreds wounded. ICCS inspection teams have visited the sites of the atrocities, but for fear of being rocketed themselves disappear after a short visit.[10]

In the face of diplomatic agreements to the contrary, including a second ceasefire signed by the United States and North Vietnam on 13 June 1973, the war between North and South Vietnam continued. The North Vietnamese shifted the emphasis from battlefield engagements to logistics. Part of North Vietnam's plan was to deprive the South Vietnamese and Cambodian forces of their supplies while at the same time reinforcing its positions and, when able, stockpiling supplies for future actions.

Military and political control of the countryside in western South Vietnam and eastern Cambodia made it possible for North Vietnam to modify its warfighting methods while still continuing to develop its long-range strategy. In prophetic testament to the changing tides of war and the shift in North Vietnam's peacetime battlefield tactics the authors of the U.S. Navy's portion of the April 1973 DAO Report wrote: "The decision of the enemy to control the "Blue Water" Mekong River as well as establish Hong Ngu as an entry point to Vietnam makes for a determined enemy."[11]

There was no "peace" in sight as conditions in South Vietnam seemed to indicate that no one really wanted the Paris Accords to work. Despite the uncertain combat conditions and the numerous ceasefire violations, the Marine Corps adhered to the terms of the Accords. It terminated the Vietnamese Marine Corps Advisors Program, thereby reducing its presence to a handful of officers in the reorganized Defense Attache Office, Saigon, and a Marine Security Guard company. A Commander Naval Force Vietnam message, 13 March 1973, said in part: "The Marine Advisory Unit, NAVADVGRP, MACV will be disestablished effective 29 Mar 73 . . . . With the disestablishment of the Marine Advisory Unit, follow-on technical and material support to the Vietnamese Marine Corps will be coordinated by the VNMC Logistics Support Branch, Navy Division, Defense Attache Office, Saigon."[12]

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) appointed Major General John E. Murray, USA, an expert logistician, to head the DAO and serve in the capacity of defense attache. An Army officer who had begun his career as a private in July 1941, Major General Murray quickly discovered that defense attache duty in Saigon in 1973 would differ significantly from the norm. As the senior American military officer in South Vietnam, he would work with the Ambassador, but report to the Secretary of Defense. The Ambassador only had direct authority over the defense attache in the area of public affairs and media matters. A briefing on his mission responsibilities provided him with his clearest indication of the drastic changes underway in Vietnam: "One of the things I was told my assignment entailed was not to lose any more American lives. And number two, I was told to get the hell out of there in one year."[13] America was leaving South Vietnam and Major General Murray had been chosen to complete Vietnamization with a staff of 50 military men. Of the 50 assigned to the DAO, only four were Marines. In fact, within two months of DAO's founding, the entire American military complement in South Vietnam totalled less than 250 men, a far cry from the peak total of 543,400 in April 1969.[14]

With such a minimal presence in Vietnam, the United States had difficulty influencing events. This situation most affected the enforcement of Article 8. More than any other part of the Paris Accords, Article 8 (MIA Accountability) depended on good faith and cooperation.[15] Mutual trust and confidence, already in short supply, became even scarcer when discussion focused on the accountability of personnel missing in action. An international point of humanitarian concern, MIA accountability, quickly became the most serious Peace Accords issue. The Communists not only failed to cooperate in resolving the status of Americans and others missing in action, but also actively obstructed United States and South Vietnamese efforts to do so. On 15 December 1973, in a rice paddy 15 miles southwest of Saigon, the Communists ambushed an American-South Vietnamese team searching (as

permitted by the agreements) for the bodies of missing Americans.* Fatalities included one U.S. Army officer, Captain Richard Morgan Rees, of Kent, Ohio, and one South Vietnamese pilot.[16] In addition to the several injured South Vietnamese, the ambush wounded four American servicemen including Army First Lieutenant Ben C. Elfrink. The seemingly mild, official U.S. reaction to this unwarranted killing of one of its military officers (unarmed) on a JMC-sanctioned, MIA recovery mission reflected the American public's growing detachment from Southeast Asian affairs. Americans had begun to view Indochinese events as South Vietnam's problems. Besides registering a protest with the ICCS and North Vietnam, the United States did little else. A few days later, a *Des Moines Tribune* editorial, entitled "Murder in Vietnam," captured the relationship between the "non-action" and the subtle changes underway in America: ". . . giving up searching for American servicemen would be sad but not as sad as running the risk of more incidents which might give some U.S. military men a reason to take 'necessary measures.' Surely the military establishment, the administration, and Congress have learned not to walk into that mess again."[17]

In Vietnam, the DAO had already begun its analysis of the ambush in an attempt to discern the Communists' purpose and intent. In a "back channel" message to the Pentagon, Major General Murray offered his conclusions: "The enemy's hostility toward JCRC operations has been clearly demonstrated in the ambush . . . . All search operations are subject to enemy intervention . . . we see no definite change in the enemy's attitude. . . ." The only change that did occur was for the worse. In June 1974, the North Vietnamese and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) broke off all negotiations on MIAs by refusing to meet with the United States and South Vietnamese representatives.[18]

The PRG, having already (May 1974) stopped negotiating with the South Vietnamese on matters mandated by the Paris Accords, merely concluded the masquerade by supporting the North Vietnamese on the MIA issue and jointly they ended all negotiations. Ceasefire meant "less fire," but little else without consultation, cooperation, and some form of negotiations.

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

LtCol George E. "Jody" Strickland, chief of the DAO VNMC Logistics Support Branch which helped supply the Vietnamese Marine Corps, poses in MR 1 with the commander of 4th Battalion, 147 Brigade, VNMC, LtCol Tran Ngoc Toan, shown here as a major.

The NVA Marshals in the South

Immediately after the signing of the Accords, at the beginning of the ceasefire, there was a noticeable decline in the level of combat activity throughout South Vietnam.** This was cause for considerable optimism in Washington and elsewhere. Yet, the abatement in violence was merely a sign that the NVA had subscribed to new methods. Even though the Communists' tactics had changed, their strategy had not.

*Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. "Tony" Grimm, Plans Officer, USSAG, Thailand, from April 1974 until April 1975, remembered that "The lasting impact of the enemy ambush . . . was that Ambassador Graham Martin ordered a halt to any future JCRC operations in RVN. From then on the JCRC had to rely on . . . broadcasts and leaflets encouraging Vietnamese villagers to free their hamlets from the spirits of dead Americans." LtCol Edward A. Grimm, Comments on draft ms, 28Nov88 (Comment File, MCHC).

**U.S. Congressional records reveal that ARVN soldiers killed dropped from 28,000 in 1972 to 13,500 in 1973. On the last day of December 1974, when the statisticians compiled the totals for the year, a new trend became readily apparent, war had again supplanted peace. ARVN troops killed in action in 1974 were 30,000. *Senate Report Vietnam*, p. 1, and *House Report Vietnam*, p. 45.

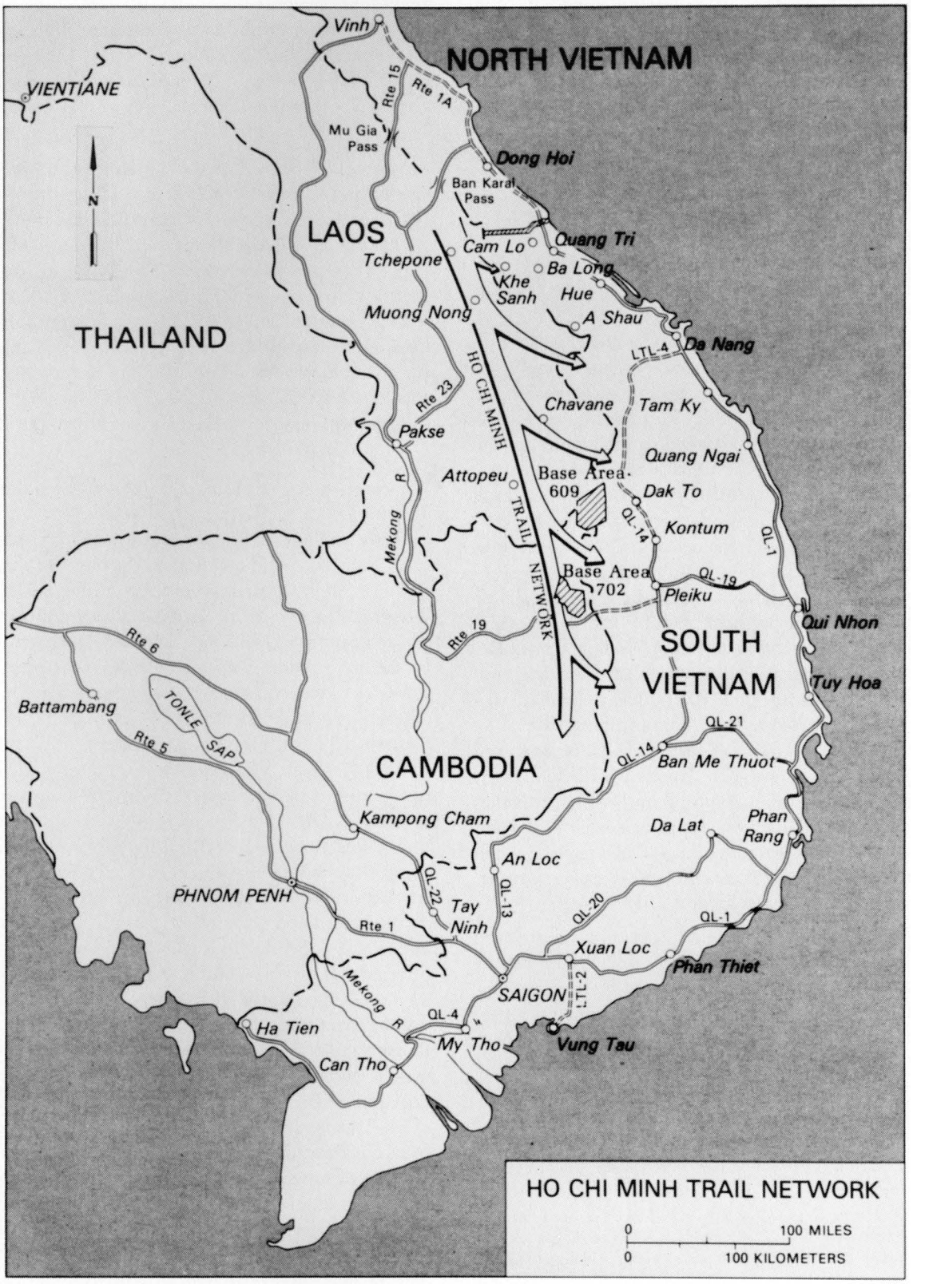
North Vietnamese Army Photo

North Vietnamese Army soldiers build the Truong Son highway in western South Vietnam. Vietnamese Marines reported the activity in 1973, but RVN troops couldn't stop it.

North Vietnam's objective was still the conquest of South Vietnam, and the planned lull in fighting allowed it to refit and reinforce its units, reconstruct its lines of communication, and replenish its supplies in the south. During the early stages of this marshalling period, the NVA continued to maintain a military presence in South Vietnam and to apply pressure to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam through localized small unit actions. While the North Vietnamese participated in these disruptive activities, the American public remained largely uninformed; Vietnam was no longer front-page news.

By May of 1974, U.S. analysts agreed that Hanoi planned to continue its buildup in the south, and, in a matter of a few months, would have enough troops to conduct a major offensive. At year's end, the strength increase of the North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam was so dramatic that some experts predicted an imminent attack.[19]

Although aware of the North Vietnamese Army's preparations and its size, American analysts still believed that if any large-scale attack occurred, it would fail. By basing their forecast on the command and control inflexibility displayed by the North Vietnamese in both the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 Easter Offensive and the expectation of effective air support, the analysts erred. Lieutenant Colonel George E. "Jody" Strickland, who served in Saigon at the DAO as the Chief, Vietnamese Marine Corps Logistic Support Branch, Navy Division (Chief, VNMC LSB), from June 1973 until June 1974, offered his candid recollection of this evaluation: "The dichotomous assessment of an imminent NVA attack on one hand and the forecast of its failure on the other had obvious detrimental influences." Lieutenant Colonel Strickland related that despite the prediction of failure most Americans and South Vietnamese still vigorously prepared for the anticipated enemy offensive, including the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) which reacted by ". . . building up supplies, hardening defenses, and expanding reconnaissance and offensive operations in MR 1."[20] Yet others refused even to consider the possible consequences of an NVA success. The American Embassy,



Map adapted from Col William E. Le Gro, USA, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981)

a bastion of optimism throughout this period, reacted to the forecast by agreeing to a reduction in the size of its security force and by refusing to acknowlege the need for contingency evacuation plans. The conflicting opinions on the extent of the North Vietnamese Army's progress and its offensive capability persisted until the bitter end. Fourteen years later, Strickland proffered his opinion of the consequences of this argument, stating: "Conflicting GVN [Government of Vietnam] decisions at the start of the 1975 NVA offensive were rooted in the disastrous prediction of NVA failure."[21]

The failure never occurred because of exhaustive efforts by the North Vietnamese to remedy longstanding deficiencies in command and control. Developing new lines of communication became their "peacetime" mission and evidence of significant new construction reflected the priority attached to it. Beginning, not by coincidence, with the ceasefire and immediate freedom from U.S. air interdiction, the Communists built or improved a road network that ran from North Vietnam through the western reaches of the three northernmost regions in South Vietnam. East-west spurs from the main highway ran into the A Shau and Que Son valleys in the northern part of South Vietnam and into the Central Highlands. Aerial photographs in December 1974 revealed the extent of these improvements.* In western Thua Thien Province, a mere trail two years prior had become a hard-surface, all-weather road. Formerly a trek to South Vietnam on foot consumed 70 days, but now North Vietnamese Army trucks could carry a battalion from North Vietnam to Military Region 3 in less than three weeks. With NVA troops riding instead of walking a majority of the distance, the number of casualties from fatigue, malaria, and other diseases significantly decreased.[22]

Yet without a sufficient supply of petroleum products, the Communists' road network meant little. North Vietnam could not sustain a major offensive in South Vietnam without a guaranteed source of fuel. To satisfy this need and properly complement their improved LOCs, the NVA constructed an oil pipeline from North Vietnam extending almost to Phuoc Long Province in South Vietnam. The length of pipeline in South Vietnam totalled 280 miles, of which about 270 were constructed after, and in violation of, the ceasefire.[23] General Van Tien Dung boasted of this accomplishment: "Alongside the strategic road to the east of Tuong Song range was a 5,000-kilometer-long oil pipeline which ran from Quang Tri through the Tay Nguyen and on to Loc Ninh. . . ."[24]

With the opening of the pipeline, the NVA no longer had to rely for petroleum, oil and lubricant (POL) on barrels laboriously man-handled into position and cached in the countryside. In addition to the supplies of petroleum which it was able to store in South Vietnam, the NVA by January of 1975 had stockpiled an estimated 65,000 tons of ammunition. One estimate projected that this amount of ammunition could support an operation of the intensity of the 1972 Easter Offensive for at least one year. The Communists now possessed sufficient fuel to put these "bullets" to good use. [25]

By enhancing the means of transport which allowed an increase in the frequency of replenishment, the North Vietnamese Army almost doubled the number of artillery pieces and quadrupled the number of tanks it had in South Vietnam. Between January 1973 and January 1975, the enemy increased the number of artillery weapons in the South from 225 to an estimated 400. In armored firepower, the NVA expanded its force from an estimated 150 to approximately 600 100mm gun tanks including Soviet-built T-54s and Chinese Type 59s. Ominously indicating their intentions, the North Vietnamese also augmented their combat power by increasing the number of antiaircraft artillery (AAA) regiments in South Vietnam from 13 to 23. This threat included four battalions of the SA-2 surface-to-air missile, which they deployed in the northern part of South Vietnam, just below the demilitarized zone, from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. In addition to the SA-2s, the NVA emplaced radar-directed 85mm and 100mm AAA guns in Military Region 1. The North Vietnamese also reintroduced sizeable quantities of the SA-7 (Grail), a man-transportable, shoulder-fired, heat-seeking missile which complemented its improved antiaircraft capability.[26] Because of the higher altitude potential of this antiaircraft system, it became increasingly more hazardous and difficult for the South Vietnamese to fly close air support missions, particularly in the northern provinces. Lieutenant Colonel Strickland recalled that during his tour (June 1973-74), "VNAF [South Vietnamese Air Force] close air support for the Vietnamese Marine Corps was virtually zero."[27] With

*Lieutenant Colonel Strickland stated that the road's discovery was reported by VNMC LSB personnel as early as August 1973 at which time airborne hand-held photos were provided to the DAO, VNMC, and HQMC. Strickland Comments.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

LtCol Anthony Lukeman, pictured later as a lieutenant general, replaced LtCol Strickland in 1974 as chief of the VNMC LSB. In that year he was concerned over severe cuts in funds for the Vietnamese Marines.

almost no interdiction from the air, the NVA wasted little time in exploiting this window of opportunity. The North Vietnamese Army's combat troops in South Vietnam, judged at the end of 1973 to be in excess of 149,000, grew in the next 12 months to over 185,000. Additionally 107,000 support personnel stationed in South Vietnam assisted the frontline troops by keeping the lines of communication open. Besides these regular soldiers, unofficial reports in January of 1975 placed 45,000 guerrillas in the Republic of South Vietnam.[28]

At first cautious, especially in the months immediately following the ceasefire, the North Vietnamese soon pursued their activities with impunity as the South Vietnamese showed themselves ineffectual in stopping the build-up. By its own admission, the North Vietnamese Politburo, which directed the military activities in South Vietnam, kept a weather-eye cocked toward the United States to gauge the reaction to each of its moves. They needed no reminder that a powerful U.S. Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea and an equally powerful U.S. Seventh Air Force based in Thailand were disconcertingly close. Yet what they did not see and hear, especially in the South Vietnamese skies, reassured them and encouraged much bolder actions in the days ahead.[29]

During Fiscal Years (FY) 1974 and 1975, the U.S. Congress slashed budget line items providing military aid to South Vietnam. Although not cut entirely, the funding equaled only 50 percent of the administration's recommended level. During FY 1973 the United States spent approximately $2.2 billion in military aid to South Vietnam. In FY 1974, the total dropped to $1.1 billion. Finally, in FY 1975, the figure fell to $700 million, a trend that was not misread in Hanoi. As General Dung very candidly phrased it, "Thieu [President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam] was forced to fight a poor man's war."[30] Perhaps more distressing, as far as the recipients of the military aid were concerned, was the fact that by 1975 the dollars spent for certain items were buying only half as many goods as they had in 1973. For example, POL costs were up by 100 percent, the cost of one round of 105mm ammunition had increased from 18 to 35 dollars, and the cost of providing 13.5 million individual rations exceeded 22 million dollars. Considering the steady reduction in funding and the almost universal increase in prices, the South Vietnamese in 1975 could buy only about an eighth as much defense for the dollar as they had in 1973.[31]

In June 1974, just before the start of FY 1975, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Lukeman replaced Lieutenant Colonel Strickland as Chief, VNMC LSB. Almost immediately he began to notice the effects of the reduced funding, less than a third the size of the 1973 budget. In September, in a letter to HQMC, he penned his concerns:

> Briefly, the current level means grounding a significant part of the VNAF [South Vietnamese Air Force], cutting back on the capabilities of the VNN [South Vietnamese Navy], and running unacceptable risks in the stock levels of ammunition, POL, and medical supplies. I am concerned it will mean, in the long run, decreased morale, because replacement of uniforms and individual equipment will start to suffer about a year from now, and the dollars spent on meat supplements to the basic rice diet will be cut way back. At this point, the planners have concentrated (understandably) most of their attention on "shoot, move, and communicate" but have lost in the buzz words a feel for the man who will be doing those things.[32]

The South Vietnamese attempted to adjust to the decreased funding and rising costs, but each of these adjustments had the effect of placing them in a more disadvantageous position relative to the strengthened North Vietnamese forces. The tempo of operations of all services, most particularly the Air Force, was cut

back to conserve fuel. The expenditure rate of munitions also dropped. Interdiction fire was all but halted. The decreased financial support forced the South Vietnamese to consider cutting costs in all areas of defense including the abandonment of outposts and fire bases in outlying regions.

The overall impact of the budget reduction on the allocation of military monies was readily apparent. In FY 1975 at the $700 million level all of the funded appropriations were spent on consumables. There was nothing left over for procurement of equipment to replace combat and operational losses on the one-for-one basis permitted by the Paris Accords. Handcuffed by a lack of funds, the South Vietnamese could derive little comfort from an agreement which authorized both sides to resupply selectively as losses occurred.[33]

In an effort to increase South Vietnam's purchasing power while complying with restrictions imposed by the Accords, the U.S. reduced the number of civilian contract maintenance personnel in South Vietnam. These U.S. civilians provided highly technical assistance to the South Vietnamese in the areas of management, maintenance, and supply. The reduction in the availability of their critical skills had an immediate and debilitating effect on the overall readiness of the Vietnamese Armed Forces. Technical expertise and training, an important element in successful combat service support, became a critical factor in the highly complicated task of maintaining reliable aircraft. The Vietnamese tried to shoulder more of the burden in this area, but as expected, they suffered severely from lack of experience. It required several years to develop the skills necessary to manage a field as complex as aviation maintenance, and that time did not exist.[34]

In an oversight hearing to develop the FY 1975 budget, the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives discussed the merits of Fiscal Year 1975 military assistance to Vietnam. A comparison of raw statistics relating to ar-

The UH-1 helicopter, shown here, could carry a flight crew and 12 soldiers. The South Vietnamese operated 861 UH-1s; helicopters totaled more than 40 percent of RVN aircraft.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A801616

Photo courtesy of BGen William A. Bloomer, USMC (Ret)

An EA-6B Prowler cruises near ships of the Seventh Fleet providing electronic countermeasures support to the Navy-Marine Corps team. These aircraft of VMCJ-1 would fly from the USS Coral Sea *around the clock in support of Operation Frequent Wind.*

tillery reveals how misleading the numbers game really was. In total numbers of artillery pieces, the South Vietnamese were down from 1,600 at the time of the ceasefire to 1,200 in January of 1975. On paper this still presented a distinct advantage for the South Vietnamese when compared to the estimated 400 tubes the North Vietnamese operated in South Vietnam. If the comparison ended there, the South Vietnamese enjoyed an imposing three-to-one edge over the NVA. Yet the characteristics of the weapons presented a vastly different picture. The North Vietnamese were equipped with 85, 100, 122, and 130mm guns, all of which could fire faster with a longer range than their South Vietnamese counterparts. The ARVN, meanwhile, possessed primarily 105mm and 155mm howitzers. They augmented this array of weapons with 80 175mm guns, the only ones with enough range to fire counterbattery, while all of the enemy's artillery possessed this capability. Compounding this problem was the fact that the ARVN by this time was fighting a basically static war from fixed positions, budget reductions having limited their ability to conduct prudent clearing and counter-offensive operations. In contrast the NVA enjoyed relatively unrestricted freedom of movement. With the ability to mass its weapons at the time and place of its choosing, the NVA gained a significant edge. To neutralize the NVA advantage, the ARVN used air support, which often during times of critical need was not available, and when on station, usually ineffective.[35]

The question surrounding the reliability of air support arose from the combined effects of funding cutbacks and enhanced North Vietnamese AAA capability. This combination had a detrimental impact on the readiness and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). The VNAF numbered some 62,000 men and was subdivided into six air divisions with bases at Da Nang, Pleiku, Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, Binh Thuy, and Can Tho. At the time of the ceasefire, South Vietnam operated 2,075 aircraft with Article 7 of the Accords allowing a one-for-one replacement of lost aircraft. More importantly, the VNAF composition reflected a serious degradation in firepower and the ability to suppress the enemy's air defense system. The South Vietnamese strike force consisted of 388 attack aircraft (79 A-1s, 248 A-37s, 11 AC-47s, and 50 AC-119s) and 143 F-5A/B fighters. In 1972 it added two squadrons (32 aircraft) of C-130As to its arsenal, significantly modernizing its transport fleet of 56 C-7s, 14 C-47s, 16 C-119s, and 19 C-123s. Still, the bulk of the VNAF, over 44 per cent, consisted of helicopters: 861 UH-1s and 70 CH-47s. Thus this seemingly impressive figure of 2,075 aircraft quickly translated into only 391 jet-propelled fighter and attack aircraft and no electronic warfare planes capable of neutralizing the enemy's highly effective, mobile air defense system.[36]

The North Vietnamese had used extensive numbers of radars to build a very deadly air defense network centered around three closely integrated weapon systems. As General William W. Momyer, a former commander of the Seventh Air Force, later wrote: "The

air defense in North Vietnam was a thoroughly integrated combination of radars, AAA, SAMS, and MiGs. It was Soviet in design and operation."[37] This combination of high speed aircraft (MiGs), antiaircraft artillery, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) like the SA-2, and numerous radar sites posed a serious threat to allied air superiority. To insure the primacy of allied air power, this enemy challenge had to be met with increasingly more sophisticated American weapons systems and antiair procedures. Before the ceasefire, these methods included jamming enemy radars using electronic counter-measure (ECM) aircraft such as the Air Force EB-66 and the Marine Corps EA-6A, high speed avoidance maneuvering (possible with low-flying, very maneuverable, tactical fighters—F-4s, A-4s, and A-7s), sophisticated detection devices installed on specific aircraft (code-named Wild Weasel) to detect, harass, and destroy SAM sites, and introduction of antiradiation missiles, precision-guided munitions (PGMs, such as laser-guided "smart bombs"), and chaff bombs (full of metallic strips used to confuse NVA radars attempting target identification).[38]

Although most of the Communist air defense system remained in place in North Vietnam, some of it appeared near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in 1972. When North Vietnam launched the Easter Offensive in April 1972 it deployed SA-2s, radars, and a handheld weapon, the SA-7, in support of its army. The presence of this modernized, mobile, ground air defense system in South Vietnam had immediate consequences for the United States and significant long-term effects for the VNAF: "No longer was it feasible to operate below 10,000 feet without using countermeasures."[39] The presence of the SA-7 with its heat-seeking missile meant that "low and slow" aerial delivery of munitions was unsafe and, as such, outdated. The alternative was to fly higher where the results were much less predictable. The SA-7, in effect, had removed a third of South Vietnam's attack aircraft from the battlefield as the Soviet-built weapon virtually "put some aircraft such as the A-1 out of business."[40]

In 1972, the United States countered this NVA move with new ECM and anti-SAM tactics including more sophisticated chaff delivery, flares to confuse the SA-7, and introduction of a new jamming aircraft, the Marine Corps' EA-6B Prowler. As successful and necessary as these measures proved to be, the United States, bound by the terms of the 1973 Paris Accords, had no choice but to remove its aircraft and highly technical weapon systems from South Vietnam. Overnight, the VNAF arsenal lost its means of suppressing the enemy's ground air defenses. The United States had bequeathed the South Vietnamese Armed Forces an air-ground team absent its most essential element, air supremacy. General Momyer succinctly summarized, "The contest for air superiority is the most important contest of all, for no other operation can be sustained if this battle is lost. To win it, [one] must have the best equipment, the best tactics, the freedom to use them, and the best pilots."[41] The South Vietnamese Air Force had none of these. Possibly worse, it had no all-weather attack aircraft like the A-6A Intruder, no navigational bombing punch in the form of F-4 Phantoms equipped with special electronic equipment (Loran), and no B-52s. Instead, out of necessity, the VNAF relied on the belief that, when needed, U.S. air power, technological aid, and money would be forthcoming. This belief would persist until the bitter end. Former Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps and a member of the Joint General Staff (JGS), Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, expressed the psychological and emotional importance of that faith: "We needed only one American plane to come in and drop one bomb to let the North Vietnamese know we were still getting strong U.S. support. We felt at that time (1975) if we could get one plane or a little bit of air support the war might change."[42]

Compounding their strategic problems were tactical and logistical problems. By 1 January 1975, the South Vietnamese had suffered the loss of 370 aircraft as a result of operational training and combat. None of these aircraft was ever replaced. The South Vietnamese simply could not afford replacement aircraft. Additionally, 224 aircraft were placed in flyable storage because the spare parts and petroleum products needed to keep them flying could not be funded within the constraints of the new $700 million U.S. budget package. The 1,481 operational aircraft in the South Vietnamese inventory on 1 January 1975 reflected a two-year attrition of nearly 25 percent. The debilitating effect of unreplaced aircraft losses and an imposing NVA antiaircraft threat had combined to produce a South Vietnamese Air Force simply incapable of neutralizing the North Vietnamese firepower advantage.[43]

With South Vietnam's air force nearly impotent, the navy represented a potential alternative. The U.S. Navy had provided gunfire support for ground operations prior to the ceasefire and many South Vietnamese military leaders expected the same level of firepower from the Vietnamese Navy (VNN). The concept of a navy to serve the coastal nation of Vietnam began

with the French, but "During the years from 1954 to 1959, the Navy section of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam worked to develop a viable navy for South Vietnam."[44] Its efforts produced a Vietnamese Navy which within 15 years was capable of manning 672 amphibious ships and craft, 20 mine warfare vessels, 56 service craft, and over 240 junks. Composed of 42,000 men, the VNN in April 1975 consisted of a naval staff with Vice Admiral Chung Tan Cang as its chief of naval operations, a sea force headed by Captain Nyugen Xuan Son, and amphibious forces commanded by Commodore Hoang Co Minh. This navy operated on rivers, along the coast, and at sea using everything from destroyer escorts to patrol craft. Sixteen coastal radars, also manned by the Vietnamese Navy, assisted them in monitoring NVA coastal activity and supporting approximately 400 sea force vessels responsible for stopping resupply by sea. Within months of the U.S. Navy's departure, the coastal radars failed for want of parts and proper maintenance. Lacking the technical expertise to keep its radars operating, the VNN lost its best means of locating and interdicting North Vietnamese infiltrators. The Vietnamese Navy's other mission, supporting ground operations, fared little better.

The Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC), which for political reasons had been made a separate service in 1965, complained often about the VNN's inability to provide naval gunfire support. Accustomed to the U.S. Navy's version of firepower, this supporting arm suffered severely under the much smaller Vietnamese Navy. The VNN failed to provide the Vietnamese Marines with much needed, integrated, and coordinated naval bombardment. Captain Nguyen Xuan Son related that the VNMC often complained that it was not receiving enough gunfire support. It had been conditioned by the U.S. Navy, which upon request, would provide up to 1,000 rounds a day. Having experienced that type of firepower, the VNN maximum of 100 to 200 rounds a day fell far short of the Marines' needs and expectations. Captain Son described the navy's dilemma, "we had to explain to the Marines and to the JGS that our ships had only one gun, one 5-inch barrel, or the maximum which was two 3-inch barrels, and if we lined up five ships then we had five barrels and they could not fire all day."[45]

Although many of the weaknesses of the Vietnamese Armed Forces can be attributed to problems of inflation, cutting of funding, shortages, inferior equipment, broken promises, and North Vietnamese subterfuge, South Vietnam was not entirely blameless. Army Colonel Richard I. McMahon, a member of the Defense Attache staff during this period, later wrote that the South Vietnamese required:

> . . . [a] formidable military force at their side . . . [the] South Vietnamese commanders had little reason to believe they could stand on their own. . . . Although the departure of the American military was the major reason for this lack of confidence it was not the only one. Combat performance of the South Vietnamese Army was not good and its commanders knew it.[46]

Other factors, including corruption and poor senior officer leadership contributed to the eventual collapse of the Saigon government. As enemy pressure intensified, these cracks in the armor began to surface, especially on the battlefield.

In the late fall of 1973, the Communists began to increase direct military pressure on the ARVN forces. In November, the NVA launched a division-size offensive in Quang Duc Province, located on the Cambodian border just south of Darlac Province. The attack in the southernmost province of Military Region 2 resulted in the heaviest fighting since the ceasefire. Between December 1973 and February 1974, the NVA attacked and seized several South Vietnamese outposts in the remote border areas, including Tong Le Chan in western Military Region 3. During the spring and summer of 1974, fighting flared throughout South Vietnam.[47]

In the early morning hours of 17 May 1974, elements of the *2d Regiment, 3d NVA Division* launched a heavy attack against Phu Cat Airbase in Binh Dinh Province, Military Region 2. The objective was to neutralize the base in preparation for a general offensive throughout the province. After suffering initial setbacks, the 108th and 263d Regional Force Battalions counterattacked, driving the NVA forces from the vicinity of the base. The *NVA 16th Antiaircraft Battalion* and the *2d Battalion, 2d Regiment* of the *3d NVA Division* were rendered ineffective for combat as a result.[48]

On 10 August 1974, elements of the ARVN 22d Division opened a counteroffensive against the *3d NVA Division* guarding the entrance to the An Lao Valley in northern Binh Dinh Province. Combat operations in the valley, a Communist stronghold, represented some of the typical problems the ARVN experienced during this period of fiscal austerity. Due to budgeting considerations, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff was forced during the operation to restrict the use of artillery and air support. Elsewhere in Military Region 2, the ARVN's 82d Ranger Battalion withstood

a month-long siege in Camp Plei Me in southern Pleiku Province. Against the unrelenting pressure of the *48th* and *64th NVA Regiments*, the Rangers held out from 4 August until relieved by elements of the ARVN 53d Regiment on 2 September 1974.[49]

Between 27 and 30 September 1974, NVA forces drove ARVN defenders off Mo Tau Mountain. From this vantage point, the North Vietnamese artillery could command Phu Bai Airfield, the major government airstrip north of Hai Van Pass, located in Military Region 1. The NVA immediately brought up its guns and cleared the airstrip by fire. The mountain complex was occupied by four NVA battalions, which were finally dislodged by elements of the ARVN 1st Division and 15th Ranger Group on 11 December. [50]

During the first week of December, heavy fighting erupted in Military Region 4 when Communist forces launched attacks in both the northern and southern portions of the Mekong Delta. The major threat was the *5th NVA Division* whose regiments, refitted in Cambodia, were moving into Kien Tuong Province (just south of the Parrot's Beak region where a peninsula of Cambodian territory pokes a nose into South Vietnam). To parry the Communist incursion, the 9th ARVN Division engaged the NVA as they first entered the Cambodian border region.[51]

While major unit fighting was taking place in Military Regions 1 and 4, an equally ominous event occurred that December in Military Region 2. The NVA's *968th Division*, which had been operating in southern Laos for several years, moved en masse into the Central Highlands. This marked the first time since the Cease-fire Agreement that an entire NVA division had entered the south as a unit. During this period Military Region 3 had remained relatively quiet. Yet as the year came to an end, NVA units were closing in on Song Be, the capital of Phuoc Long Province. As the sun set on the last day of 1974, its shadows foretold more than just the impending arrival of a new year in the Republic of Vietnam.[52]

By the end of 1974, the North Vietnamese had wrested the initiative from the thinly spread and overcommitted ARVN Divisions. The Joint General Staff had no uncommitted reserve. Its strategic reserve, the Airborne Division and the Marine Division, were already deployed to Military Region 1. As early as 1973 when the United States installed an Army general as the head of its newly formed Defense Attache Office, Americans began to recognize the seriousness of the situation. General Murray recalled, "I was shocked to discover that they had no general reserve. All thirteen of their divisions were fully committed. We had left them without a general reserve."[53] The need for a reserve and the strategic value it offered as a means to buy time and avert forced withdrawal or even defeat would become readily apparent in 1975. It would not be a good year for the South Vietnamese. Time was running out.

A Division of Marines

Following the Easter Offensive of 1972, the South Vietnamese Marine Division remained in the northernmost part of Military Region 1. It faced three North Vietnamese divisions in defensive positions to the north and west. The division's assigned area of operations (AO) encompassed over 1,600 square miles of diverse terrain. Bounded on the north by the Thach Han River, the AO stretched south to the vicinity of Phong Dien. The South China Sea was the eastern boundary while to the west the foothills of the mountainous Hai Lang forest west of Route 1 marked the extent of the Marines' responsibility. The division headquarters was located in Huong Dien, a village northeast of Hue in the coastal lowlands of Thua Thien Province. Numerous units of the division's supporting organizations, among them the amphibious support battalion and the motor transport company, were based in Hue.[54] The Vietnamese Marine Corps' headquarters remained in Saigon at 15 Le Thanh Ton in the old French Commando Compound. This location also contained the Americans' VNMC Logistic Support Branch, DAO. Thus Lieutenant Colonels Strickland and then Lukeman maintained an office in the same building as the VNMC chief of staff, Colonel Le Dinh Que. Besides a division rear headquarters, the VNMC operated a training center, ranges, and a hospital complex at Song Than (10 miles northeast of Saigon, near Bien Hoa off Highway 1 at Di An); training facilities and a supply section at Thu Duc; and a training base at Vung Tau.* Opened on 8 September 1972 and occupying part of the former 1st U.S. Army Division encampment, Song Than also housed the VNMC's recruit depot and a company of LVTs, a few of which regularly trained at Vung Tau.[55]

The Marine Division was one of the best divisions in the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. Until Decem-

*Unlike the USMC, the Vietnamese Marine Corps as a separate service had its own medical battalion. Another unusual arrangement provided for the existence of two chiefs of staff. To assist him in his duties as division commander and commandant, General Lan had established a second billet at Huong Dien into which he continuously rotated officers junior to Colonel Que, the chief of staff at division headquarters in Saigon. Strickland Comments.

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

Entrance to VNMC Training Center and Song Than base camp on the outskirts of Saigon.

ber of 1974 when the newly formed 468th Brigade* was added, the division consisted of three Marine Brigades: the 147th, the 258th, and 369th and supporting units. It was reinforced by the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade, the 15th Ranger Group, and eight Regional Force battalions. Brigadier General Bui The Lan, Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps** and a graduate of both the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, personally commanded the Marine Division. Lan also had operational control of the 2d Airborne Brigade. Additionally, the Marines maintained 12 joint Marine and Popular Force platoons living in assigned villages and hamlets within the AO, a variation of the earlier U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program in MR 1. Concentrated in the hamlets surrounding Huong Dien, these platoons provided additional security for the division command post.[56]

*Originally, before the shifting of units began, the brigade designation corresponded to the battalions in that organization, e.g. battalions 1, 4, and 7 constituted the 147th Brigade. Strickland Comments.

**On 4 May 1972, President Thieu appointed the commandant of the VNMC, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang to the Joint General Staff as assistant for operations. The next day, Colonel Lan, the division commander, became acting Commandant (CMC) of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. On 1 June 1972, exactly eighteen years after receiving his commission as a second lieutenant, Bui The Lan pinned on his stars. At that moment, Brigadier General Lan officially became CMC, but he began his new role while maintaining tactical command of the division. LtCol G. H. Turley and Capt M. R. Wells, "Easter Invasion," reprinted in *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973, An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography* (Washington: MCHC, 1985), p. 190; "VNMC/MAU HistSum."

While deployed in MR 1, the Marine Division remained part of the RVNAF General Purpose Strategic Force. Controlled and directed by the Joint General Staff, rather than by Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Troung, the MR 1 commander, the Marine Division received its orders from Saigon. The JGS believed that when the NVA began their general offensive, the major thrust would come from the north. Apparently, this military assumption was sufficient reason for Saigon to maintain direct control of the strategically placed Marine Division. Despite this awkward command arrangement, General Lan and General Troung established and maintained an amicable working relationship.[57]

To prepare for the expected offensive, General Lan personally directed the construction of a formidable, in-depth defense throughout the division's AO. For each crew-served weapon there were three alternate fall-back positions. All were bunkered, stockpiled with 14 days of ammunition, and well-camouflaged. These were the best protected, best concealed positions that Lieutenant Colonel Strickland had seen in his four tours in Vietnam.[58]

The construction of the observation post and forward command post bunkers was unique. General Lan insisted that these critical command and control facilities be able to withstand a direct hit by a 130mm artillery shell. Several candidate structures were tested by command-detonated, captured 130mm shells placed directly on top of the bunkers. Through this process of trial and error, the VNMC built a bunker

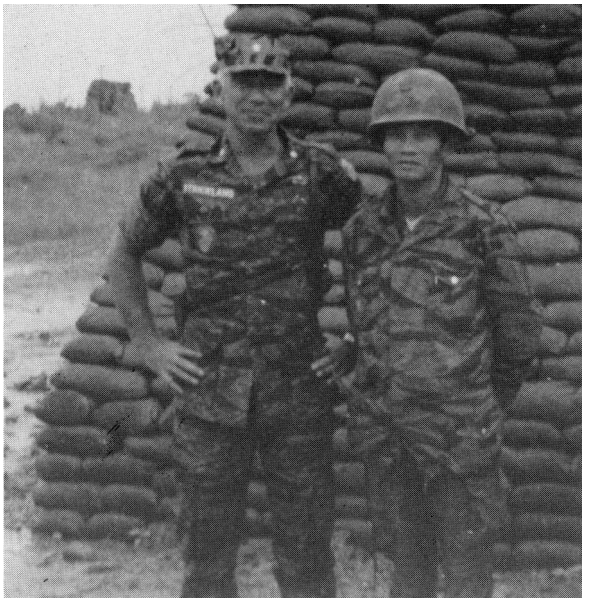


Photo courtesy of LtCol George E. Strickland, USMC (Ret)

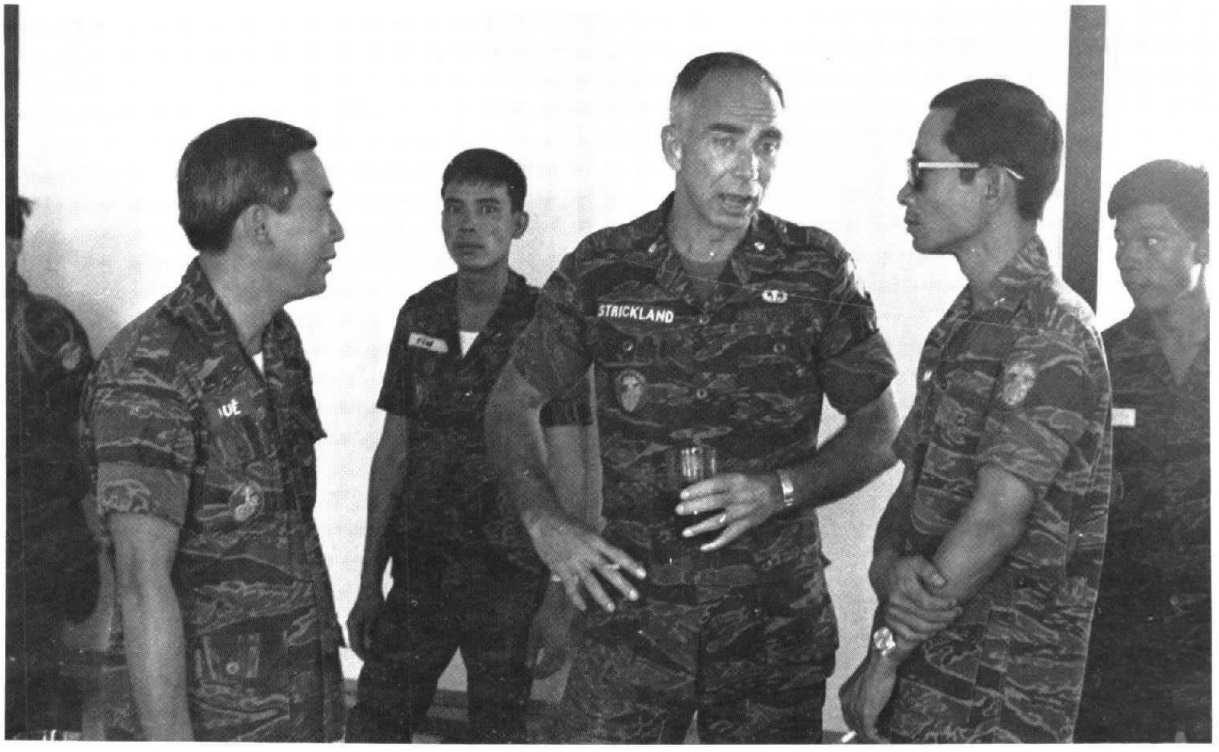
In front of the 369th Brigade command bunker inside the Citadel at Quang Tri City are LtCol George E. Strickland and brigade commander, LtCol Luong. Bunkers were stockpiled with 14 days of ammunition.

that satisifed General Lan. The final product was remarkably simple, but effective. The process of construction consisted of digging a hole, erecting within it a pyramid of pierced steel planking, and then compacting four feet of earth over the pyramid. The bunker, designed to accommodate three Marines—one standing and two sitting, plus their two PRC-25 radios—adequately withstood the 130mm detonation test. The unanswered question remained—could troops survive a similar explosion and a direct hit? General Lan solicited volunteers to find out, and three men agreed to enter the bunker and remain there during a second detonation. When the smoke had cleared, the bunker was still there. How had the troops fared? When asked for his comments on the experience, one of the Marines replied, "Very loud." With these fortifications complete, General Lan felt confident that he and his subordinates could exercise effective command and control, even under the most intense attacks.[59]

Of all the weapons at his disposal, General Lan took particular, almost personal care of his antitank missile launchers that fired the TOW (Tube-launched Optically-tracked Wire-guided) missile. The Viet-

Vietnamese Marine Commandant BGen Bui The Lan, right, and his chief of staff, Col Le Dinh Que, discuss VNMC matters with LtCol Strickland, chief of the VNMC LSB.

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



namese Marines were among the first to employ the TOW in combat. In the Easter Offensive of 1972, they achieved 57 kills of NVA armored vehicles out of a total of 72 missiles fired. Serious about its use, General Lan's Marine Division possessed 12 TOW systems despite an authorization for only nine. General Lan's concept of employment was to attach some of the weapons to his battalions deployed in the enemy's likely avenues of approach. The remainder he kept under his personal control for operational use as a mobile reserve to reinforce the action at its hottest spots.

The VNMC displayed a remarkable ingenuity in developing its total TOW capability, particularly the mobile part. General Lan was not satisfied with the standard M-151 jeep as a prime mover for the TOW system. With the weapon and a two-man crew, there was not enough space remaining in the jeep to carry more than two missiles. Also, General Lan did not like the idea of carrying spares in a trailer towed behind a vehicle. Displaying as much resourcefulness here as they had in developing the bunker, the South Vietnamese Marines solved the problem. Instead of using the standard M151, General Lan mounted the TOW system on the M170 ambulance jeep. This vehicle had a longer bed than the M151, and it could easily accommodate the launcher and its crew. Spare missiles were carried by welding special racks on either side of the vehicle. General Lan produced a mobile TOW system capable of carrying crew, launcher, and seven missiles all in the same vehicle.

General Lan felt so strongly about the TOW that if he discovered anyone abusing this prized possession, he took immediate remedial and punitive action. Such an incident occurred during one of his daily visits to the forward deployed battalions. General Lan, upon learning that one of his supplymen was using a TOW battery as a source of current for the light in his tent, called for the battalion supply officer and the battalion commander. Nonjudicial punishment proceedings were conducted on the spot. He fined the clerk, the supply officer, and the battalion commander the cost of the battery, $900. Additionally, the battalion commander received one week confinement at hard labor. This incident took place in early 1974, when TOW components were in short supply.

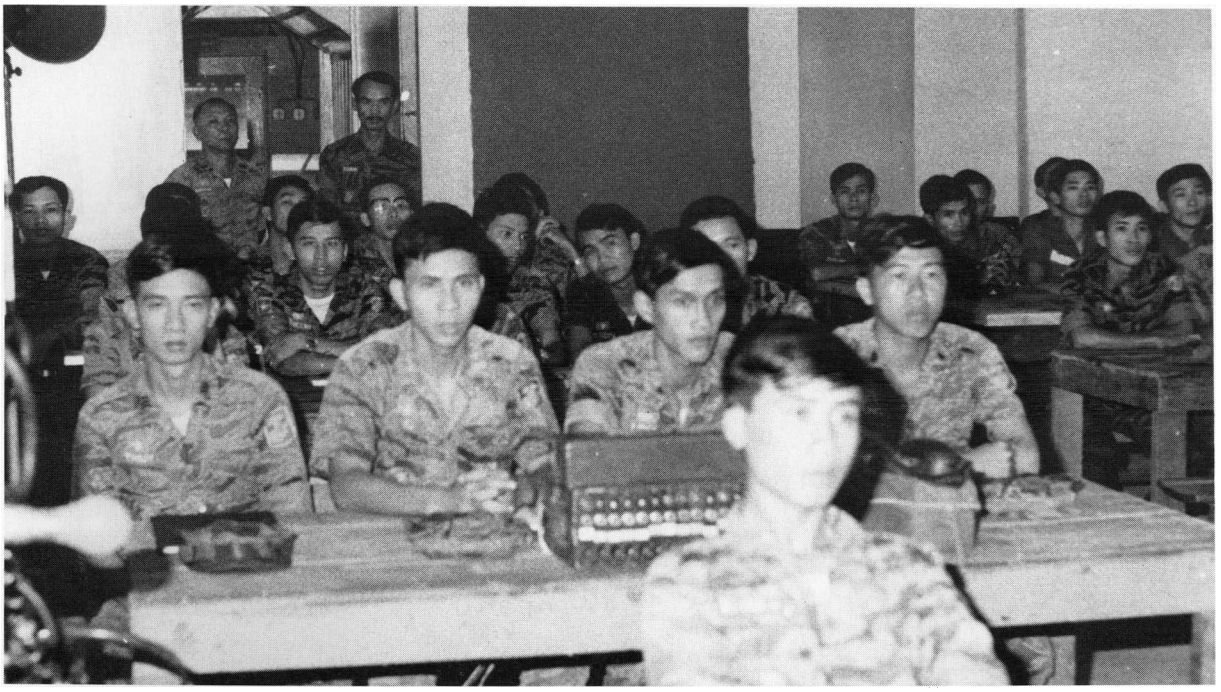
With their TOWs and their in-depth defense, the Vietnamese Marines did not fear an NVA land attack. One of the two concerns that Lieutenant Colonel Strickland observed as keenly critical to the VNMC centered around the practice of laterally shifting forces (General Lan's other major concern was VNAF close air support). Too clearly, the VNMC had seen the rout of the 3d ARVN Division during the Easter Offensive where the division, in the midst of shifting units, had been caught by the NVA with its guard down. Commonplace throughout the war, the lateral shifting of units between highlands and lowlands addressed not tactics, but morale. The average South Vietnamese truly believed that the highlands and not the lowlands were infested with malaria-bearing mosquitoes. These inherited beliefs forced commanders to shift units in order to maintain morale.* General Lan knew that the NVA were familiar with this routine. Certain they would try to capitalize on it, General Lan devised a plan to overcome this weakness. All lateral shifts of Marine battalions were conducted under a cloak of secrecy with no advance warning. They were executed no differently than a surprise attack.[60]

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

Col Le Dinh Que, at left, the VNMC chief of staff, discusses with LtCol Strickland the transfer of a platoon of LVTP-5s to Military Region 1. The vehicles became obsolete as budget cuts and high petroleum prices combined to make their operation too costly.

In 1973 the South Vietnamese Marine Corps provided the country another type of surprise, a technological one. Just six months after signing the Peace Accords, the VNMC displayed for the first time its "new" LVTP-5. The big amphibian tractors that rumbled through the streets of Saigon in July 1973 dur-

*Eventually, medical research proved that the malaria did originate in the highlands and not the lowlands as originally thought.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Members of the newly formed 468th Brigade undergo training at Song Than base camp. Originally a three-brigade division, at the direction of the Joint General Staff, the VNMC added a fourth brigade in December 1974, meant to be fully operational by April 1975.

ing South Vietnam's Armed Forces Day parade caused quite a stir.* Several of the attaches of the foreign embassies in Saigon wanted to know what new weapon the VNMC had acquired for its arsenal. They might not have been as impressed had they known the rest of the story. The LVTP-5 was an outdated piece of equipment. The USMC advisor's turnover file in 1972 stated: "The LVTP-5 is a 20 year old vehicle designed for a maximum 10 year usage. It has a gasoline engine, is a fire hazard and gets 2-4 miles to a gallon. Spare parts are almost non-existent. Many parts are no longer manufactured." [61] The spare parts shortage was so severe that the amphibian tractors were literally towed to the parade starting point. Apparently, the Joint General Staff was as impressed by the event as the spectators. Shortly after the parade, they ordered the transfer of four LVTP-5s from the VNMC's Amphibian Tractor Company at Song Than to Military Region 1. In addition to this deployment, the Vietnamese Marines kept a small detachment of LVTPs at the training base at Vung Tau.

Operational use of the LVT brought about a closer association between the Taiwanese and South Vietnamese Marine Corps. The Chinese not only operated the LVTP-5, but maintained it as well. More importantly, the Taiwanese Logistic Command designed and tooled a supply system to manufacture spare parts unique to the LVTs. Lieutenant Colonel Strickland, through the U.S. Marine advisors on Taiwan, gained approval from the Commandant of the Chinese Marine Corps to supply spare parts for amphibian tractors to the VNMC on a contract basis. Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Strickland escorted the commanding officer of the VNMC Amphibian Tractor Company to Taiwan, where he learned shortcuts in LVT maintenance. The net result of these initiatives, despite supply shortages, was a significant increase in 1974 in the number of amtracs operationally ready for combat.[62]

The defensive mission and posture of the division did not prevent General Lan from conducting a very aggressive program of reconnaissance of NVA-occupied territory. Long-range reconnaissance companies regu-

*The procurement of 31 LVTP-5s had been arranged under a project known as Enhance Plus, a program established to strengthen the VNAF and make Vietnamization a success. The delivery of these vehicles to the VNMC on 8 November 1972 resulted in the formation of an amphibian tractor company at Song Than Base Camp. Their arrival predated the Peace Accords and therefore did not violate the prohibition on the introduction of new weapons. VNMC/MAU HistSum.

larly were sent north to the Rock Pile and into the western reaches of Quang Tri Province around Khe Sanh. All the Marines selected for these elite reconnaissance companies were handpicked by Colonel Tri, the Assistant Commandant of the VNMC. One of these platoons obtained an excellent hand-held camera shot of the SAM-2 sites around Khe Sanh. These patrols also provided the information which ultimately led the VNMC to conclude that a NVA division headquarters was located in Lang Vei, the old Special Forces outpost near Khe Sanh. Intelligence gathering was a two-way proposition as the NVA occasionally reminded the Vietnamese Marines by sending a reconnaissance flight over their AO. Expecting the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) to intercept these violators of South Vietnamese air space, General Lan became increasingly disconcerted when the VNAF failed to even challenge the NVA intruders. It seemed that even when the agonizing process of requesting tactical air support from battalion to brigade to division to Military Region 1 headquarters in Da Nang provided a timely contact, the Vietnamese Air Force still did not respond.* To Generals Truong and Lan, and their troops as well, who had become accustomed to and reliant upon timely tactical air support (formerly provided by the U.S.) this absence was an ominous portent. Lieutenant Colonel Strickland noted that this issue more than any other preyed on General Lan's mind and colored his outlook for peace in Southeast Asia.[63]

Following the signing of the Cease-fire Agreement, enemy ground activity in the Marine's AO consisted of monthly, sporadic mortar shellings, small but sharp firefights, and isolated ground attacks. Both sides spent considerable time and effort in firing propaganda barrages across the relatively fixed defensive lines. Major artillery or ground attacks were rare, but in early September enemy activity throughout the AO increased significantly. The tempo reached a peak just a few days before the major NVA thrust against Mo Tau Mountain, slightly to the south. On 21 September 1974, the Communists launched a battalion-sized ground attack against the 8th VNMC Battalion. The preceding day, the Marines had observed a 30-truck enemy convoy moving toward a possible assembly area. At approximately 1930, an observation post reported seeing what appeared to be helicopter lights approaching the vicinity of the suspected staging area. Based upon these reports, the Marines redeployed the supporting artillery to positions from which the 8th Battalion could receive more firepower. The enemy opened the engagement by directing approximately 5,500 rounds of mixed artillery and mortar rounds at the VNMC 8th Battalion positions. They followed the preparatory fires with a ground attack. The VNMC stopped the NVA infantry battalion in its tracks; after taking heavy casualties, the enemy withdrew. Many of the North Vietnamese casualties (247 KIA reported) resulted from artillery fire readjusted from ground observation posts. Approximately 300 rounds of 4.2-inch mortar fire from the ARVN armored brigade hit the advancing enemy with resounding accuracy. Effective small arms fire combined with the expenditure of over 50,000 M-60 machine gun rounds helped turn the planned NVA offensive into a VNMC victory.[64]

Following the engagement, enemy activity fell off, except for periodic mortar attacks against various VNMC positions. The remainder of 1974 was marked by light, sporadic NVA activity. Poor mobility caused by seasonal rains further contributed to the low level of activity. In December of 1974 the JGS, in an effort to reconstitute a mobile strategic reserve, directed the VNMC to form a fourth brigade and have it fully operational by the end of April 1975. The 14th, 16th, and 18th VNMC Battalions comprised the newly designated organization, the 468th Marine Brigade. Upon completion of its training, the 468th (formed and initially trained in Military Region 1) moved south to the Song Than Base Camp near Saigon. During the months immediately prior and subsequent to this event, the remainder of the Vietnamese Marine Corps enjoyed the relative "calm before the storm."[65]

On 13 December 1974 in a letter to HQMC, Lieutenant Colonel Lukeman prophetically wrote: ". . . The VNMC is getting a good rest from heavy fighting. They will need it in the spring . . ."[66]

*The VNMC had no Direct Air Support Center (DASC) or the associated tactical air control infrastructure and its accompanying tactical air request and air direction radio networks.