

bic Bay for turnover of ARG Alpha shipping. At Subic Bay, the changeover was accomplished on 14 and 15 February. The ships of Amphibious Squadron 5, amphibious cargo ship *Mobile* (LKA 115), dock landing ship *Mount Vernon* (LSD 39), and the tank landing ship *Barbour County* (LST 1195), were relieved by Amphibious Squadron 7's ships, amphibious cargo ship *St. Louis* (LKA 116), dock landing ship, *Fort Fisher* (LSD 40), and tank landing ship *Bristol County* (LST 1189). The *Okinawa* (LPH 3) remained as the ARG's amphibious assault ship. Additionally, Colonel Douglas T. Kane relieved Colonel Twomey as the commanding officer of the 31st MAU on 16 February 1974.

On 22 February, as a result of the stabilization of the situation in and around Phnom Penh, the 31st MAU/ARG Alpha's Eagle Pull response time was relaxed to 96 hours. As the situation in Cambodia continued to improve, the reaction time changed accordingly, and on 1 March, CinCPac assigned a response time of 120 hours.<sup>23</sup>

On 16 March, III MAF notified the 31st MAU that the possibility existed of a compromise of Eagle Pull, but also added that it considered the likelihood remote. Two weeks later, the 31st MAU and its units reembarked in ARG Alpha shipping and departed for Okinawa where BLT 2/4 and its logistic support unit (LSU) disembarked. III MAF returned operational control of these units to the 4th Marines, and the next day detached Battalion Landing Team 1/4, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Davis, Jr., and its LSU. Under the operational control of the 31st MAU, BLT 1/4 began the loading of its gear on the waiting ships of ARG Alpha. The 120-hour (five-day) response time to Kompong Som was further relaxed to 132 hours during this period in order to allow the MAU sufficient time to conduct the BLT/LSU replacement.

Less than a week after the switch, the 31st MAU/ARG Alpha departed Okinawa in two formations. On 5 April, elements of the 31st MAU embarked in the *Okinawa* (LPH 3) arrived in Subic Bay, and unloaded cargo in preparation for an LPH turnover. The rest of the MAU, in the remainder of ARG Alpha shipping, began its visits to Taiwanese ports. By the evening of the 6th, the LPH swap was complete and the 31st MAU's LPH units were on board a new amphibious assault ship, the USS *New Orleans* (LPH 11).<sup>24</sup>

On 23 May, in view of the fact that the military and political situation in Cambodia appeared more stable, CinCPac authorized the 31st MAU to further relax the response time for Eagle Pull to 168 hours (one

week). Meanwhile, 31st MAU received approval to send two representatives in June on an orientation visit to Nakhon Phanom and Phnom Penh.

Although this visit was important, one situation far overshadowed it, looming larger with each passing day. The CH-53s had been on board ship almost continuously for over a year. Regardless of maintenance efficiency, continuous, long-term exposure to salt air causes aircraft structural materials to corrode at a faster than normal rate. The overriding need to remedy this problem combined with stable conditions in Cambodia precipitated a decision to exchange helicopter squadrons. Major General Herman Poggemeyer, Jr., the Commanding General, III MAF ordered the replacement of HMH-462, thereby returning the MAU to a standard helicopter inventory. To accomplish this, the *New Orleans* sailed to Okinawa where on 20 June, HMM-164 replaced HMH-462. The *New Orleans*, with the new helicopter squadron embarked, departed for Subic Bay, arriving there on 22 June 1974. During the helicopter turnover, the other ships of ARG Alpha remained at Subic Bay until relieved by Amphibious Squadron 3. The *Fort Fisher*, *St. Louis*, and *Bristol County* were relieved by dock landing ship *Monticello* (LSD 35), amphibious landing ship *Tulare* (LKA 112), and tank landing ships *Fresno* (LST 1182) and *San Bernardino* (LST 1189).<sup>25</sup>

This exchange ushered in two months of training which coincided with a calm period in Cambodia and the rainy season. On 13 August, a turnover of the MAU's ground combat element occurred when Lieutenant Colonel Edwin J. Godfrey's Battalion Landing Team 3/4 relieved BLT 1/4. HMM-164, on board the *New Orleans*, remained in place. During the replacement period, the reaction time to Kompong Som coastal waters continued to be 168 hours.

Less than three weeks later, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George P. Slade, began its predeployment training on Okinawa in order to meet a scheduled departure date of 12 December 1974. There was evidence that during the coming dry season, the Communist forces would make an all-out effort to crush the Cambodian Army and destroy the Republic, thus increasing the probability that the evacuation would take place while BLT 2/4 was afloat. Lieutenant Colonel Slade adjusted his training accordingly; emergency evacuation became the byword of his battalion. The CH-53s of HMH-462, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James L. Bolton and also scheduled for deployment in December, be-

came frequent visitors to Camp Hansen and the surrounding Central Training Area, as Slade's battalion and Bolton's squadron perfected their teamwork. During November, two full-scale emergency evacuation exercises were conducted, one at Camp Hansen and the other at an abandoned World War II Japanese airfield on the Yomitan Peninsula of Okinawa. During the battalion's preparation period, 31st MAU/ARG Alpha continued its deployment, maintaining a relatively relaxed response time of 168 hours.<sup>26</sup>

On 16 December 1974, when the ships of ARG Alpha entered Buckner Bay to disembark BLT 3/4, BLT 2/4 stood ready, prepared to conduct an emergency evacuation if so ordered. After the exchange of BLTs, ARG Alpha headed south, eight days before Christmas. A few miles away, at MCAS Futema, HMH-462 was making its final preparations for the long flight to Cubi Point where it would stand by, available for employment should the situation suddenly change.

#### *The Other Contingency*

While the focus of attention and planning was on Eagle Pull, the 4th Marines, MAG-36, and the 9th Marines, except for periods of airborne contingency BLT assignment, appeared to be left out of the mainstream

of activities. This situation changed when Colonel Johnson returned from his visit to South Vietnam in September of 1974. When he reported that no real plans existed to evacuate South Vietnam, especially the northern half, it became obvious that III MAF would have to begin preparing on its own for that possibility. Since the 31st MAU/ARG Alpha was already dedicated to Eagle Pull, any amphibious force involvement in an evacuation from South Vietnam would have to be planned and executed around BLT/ARG Bravo, the 9th Marines contingency group.

Shortly after Colonel Johnson's briefing on the situation in South Vietnam, Colonel Jack D. Rowley, the commanding officer of the 9th Marines, ordered his staff to develop a command post exercise (CPX) so the regiment and its deploying battalions could become familiar with the special emergency evacuation requirements and the situation in MR 1. Under the staff supervision of the regimental executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Wise, Major Burrell H. Landes, the regimental operations officer, prepared the plans. Even before Major Landes and his S-3 section began their efforts to write an operation order, the regimental S-2, First Lieutenant Thomas W. Kinsell,

*This sign in English, "Drive Safely," along the Mekong in Phnom Penh in 1973-1975, seemed to apply to Americans charged with planning the safe evacuation of officials from the capital city of a country where U.S. influence and responsibilities could not be ignored.*

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



prepared a general and special situation report for wide dissemination. While still preserving the secrecy of the actual mission, the brief more than adequately met all the requirements of the mission. This scenario or a derivative and the resultant operational plan were used on four occasions by the 9th Marines between November 1974 and April 1975 to test the ability of the regiment to respond to an emergency evacuation.<sup>27</sup>

The "CPX 3-75 Scenario," based on Vietnam, provided a realistic portrayal of the situation there, and as events would bear out, made Lieutenant Kinsell's situation brief a blueprint for history. Its accuracy on political events did not concern the Marines nearly as much as its depiction of the changing face of weaponry available to the enemy.<sup>27</sup> Intelligence sources indicated that the North Vietnamese Army had, and the Khmer Rouge were suspected of having, some of the same types of antiaircraft weapons which had played havoc with the Israeli Air Force during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. On 5 October 1974 in response to this expected threat, Major General Norman W. Gourley, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, established the 1st MAW Tactical Evaluation Board. He appointed his assistant wing commander, Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, as the senior member of the board. The other members were the 1st MAW G-2 and G-3 officers, all of the 1st MAW group commanders, and representatives of the 3d Marine Division. The purpose of the board was to determine what changes were required and what innovations could be incorporated into Marine air/ground tactics to reduce the risk to aircraft when exposed to sophisticated surface-to-air missiles and antiaircraft weapons.<sup>28</sup>

General Carey convened the first meeting of the board at wing headquarters in Iwakuni, Japan, on 26

October 1974. He opened the meeting by announcing that he was confident U.S. technology could counter any advantages that enemy antiaircraft systems enjoyed at that moment. General Carey added, however, that this belief was of little comfort to him, in view of the fact that new technology was not yet operational. At present, there were contingencies that WestPac Marines had to be prepared to face, and the probability that other agencies would be of assistance was remote. This was to be a "self-help program all the way." As a result of the two days of meetings, the board concluded that the best way to combat weapons, which required visual acquisition before the weapon locked on the target, was to make the acquisition process as difficult as possible. This could be done by flying more missions in darkness and inclement weather. This would require a shift in training emphasis, in turn creating some safety problems. The environmental impact also had to be considered; nighttime noise abatement plans were in effect in the vicinity of several of the air stations in Japan. The board decided that the risks in the training shift were more than offset by the potential improvement in the tactical proficiency of the wing's pilots. At the conclusion of the meeting, General Carey told the 3d Marine Division representative to tell Major General Kenneth J. Houghton that the wing would still provide the same level of support, but the division should be prepared to see more air support at night because night operations would be less costly in countering enemy antiaircraft defenses.<sup>29</sup>

By December 1974, the division and wing, particularly MAG-36, had reoriented their training schedules to cover the full spectrum of night training and had increased its frequency. This reorientation was none too soon.

PART II  
SOUTH VIETNAM

## CHAPTER 5

# The North Vietnamese Winter-Spring Offensive, 1974-75: The Mortal Blow

### *The Collapse of the Central Highlands—Defeat in Military Region 1—A Wasted Division*

By the end of 1974, the balance of ground combat power in South Vietnam had clearly shifted in favor of the North Vietnamese Army. In spite of this advantage, the North Vietnamese leadership still harbored some doubts as to their ability to conquer the South rapidly. The ruling Politburo of North Vietnam met in Hanoi from 18 December 1974 until 8 January 1975 for the purpose of resolving the timetable for the conquest of South Vietnam. Hanoi apparently also had its own “hawks and doves.” General Van Tien Dung, chief of staff of the North Vietnamese Army, counselled that the possibility of a resumption of American bombing could not be disregarded. This issue was discounted as not insurmountable and depending on United States reaction, possibly not even a concern.

#### *The Collapse of the Central Highlands*

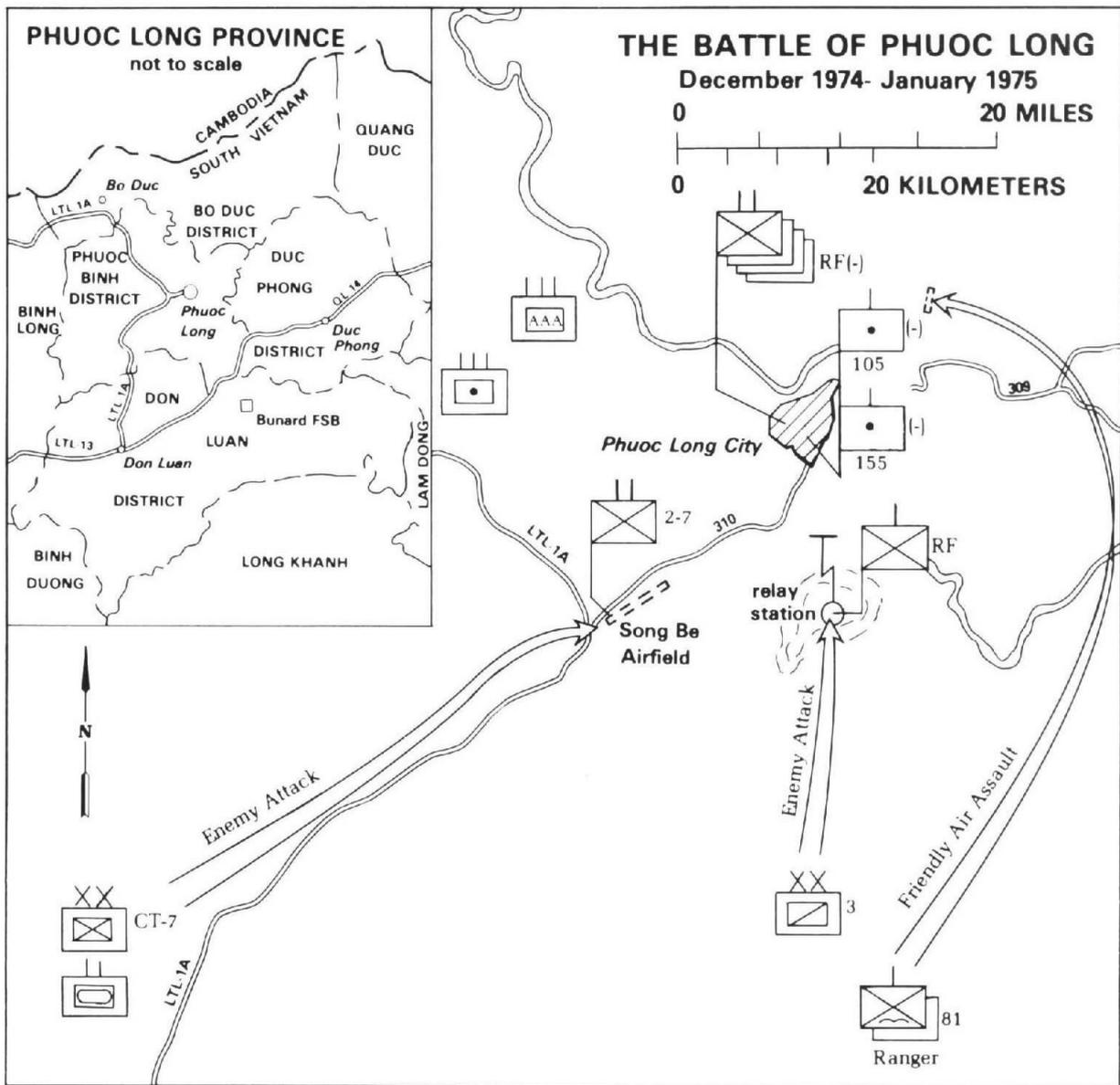
On 13 December 1974 at Don Luan where Interprovincial Route 1A intersects Route 13, the 301st NVA Corps undertook a campaign to capture Phuoc Long,

a province in MR 3 bounded on the north by Cambodia. This offensive marked the beginning of North Vietnam's new strategy of attacking not only to destroy the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, but to capture populated areas as well. To accomplish its objective of seizing the provincial capital of Phuoc Long City, tucked between the Be River and Ba Ra Mountain, 75 miles northeast of Saigon, the NVA employed its recently formed 3d Division, 7th Division, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, an antiaircraft regiment, and local force and sapper units. The Communists planned to use these forces to effect its new strategy of capturing populated areas by striking a city's center first and then in the resultant confusion and chaos, destroying from within its defensive perimeter. General Dung, who had employed this style of fighting with much success against the French in 1952, said: “We sent our troops in, avoiding enemy positions in the outer perimeter . . . and unexpectedly struck right in town, wiping out the nerve

*North Vietnamese Army soldiers capture Phuoc Long (Song Be) City, capital of Phuoc Long Province. On 6 January 1975, after the loss of more than 3,000 troops, the defenders of Phuoc Long surrendered, making it the first province since 1954 to fall to Communists.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Map adapted from Gen Cao Van Vien. *The Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983)

center of the enemy command, taking the town in one day and only then sending the troops out to destroy the perimeter outposts. We called these tactics the 'paratroop' tactics or the 'blooming lotus.' The NVA would use a variation of the "blooming lotus" to capture Phuoc Long Province and upon that success build a battle plan that would know no defeat.<sup>1</sup>

North Vietnam's tactics in the Phuoc Long campaign involved isolating each garrison, attacking it, and through massive shelling and sheer numbers, overrunning it. By this process, which lasted less than three weeks, the NVA captured Duc Phong, Bo Duc, Bunard Fire Support Base, Don Luan, and, with the fall of Phuoc Long City on 6 January, the province. Phuoc

Long became the first province since 1954 to fall intact into the hands of Hanoi's forces, and its capture exposed the VNAF's gravest weakness, the absence of an uncommitted reserve. For the South Vietnamese, it meant not only the strategic loss of territory in an area of intense North Vietnamese infiltration, but the loss of more than 3,000 soldiers including nearly half of the 250 members whom the elite 81st Ranger Group committed to the battle. At 0900 on 5 January, in a desperate attempt to save the besieged capital, the JGS inserted by helicopter these veterans of the 1972 South Vietnamese victory at An Loc, chosen for the mission because of their ability to fight behind enemy lines. The NVA tanks proved an unfair match and 39 hours

after entering Phuoc Long, the Rangers withdrew from the city.

The importance of the victory was overshadowed by the manner in which the North Vietnamese achieved it. Using supporting arms and sappers to create confusion, chaos, and communication problems behind ARVN lines and in the headquarters area, the NVA destroyed any semblance of orderly resistance. The North Vietnamese then simply overwhelmed the disorganized defenders. To insure completeness of victory, the enemy neutralized RVN air support and destroyed defensive structures. Phuoc Long offered the NVA a blueprint for future operations and also served as an indicator of South Vietnam's battlefield prowess. The bitter end did not really begin at this isolated capital, but a growing cloud of doubt and discomfort did originate here, portending that, without some major changes in strategy, South Vietnam and its armed forces would suffer grave consequences. As General Cao Van Vien stated: "Psychologically and politically, the loss of Phuoc Long, the first provincial capital of South Vietnam permanently seized by the Communists, came as a shock to the population and the armed forces. The apparent total indifference with which the United States and other non-Communist countries regarded this tragic loss reinforced the doubt the Vietnamese people held concerning the viability of the Paris Agreement."<sup>2</sup> One experienced historian of the Vietnam War called Phuoc Long "a significant battle in terms of its influence on South Vietnamese morale and as the prelude to the events of 1975."<sup>3</sup>

This victory, followed by a weak South Vietnamese counterattack, strengthened the belief of the "hawks" in Hanoi that the balance of power in the South had shifted conclusively in their favor. Furthermore, the failure of the United States to intervene in the conflict made it easier to infer that America's willingness to support the South Vietnamese had waned. Based on this assumption, the North Vietnamese Politburo made plans to plunge ahead with maximum force. Before concluding its conference in January 1975, the Politburo adopted a two-year plan which aimed for a complete and final victory over the South. Initially, attacks would be directed toward My Tho in the Mekong Delta; Ban Me Thout and Tuy Hoa in the center of the country; and Hue and Da Nang in the north. The objective was to seize the cities, and in the process, smash the ARVN.<sup>4</sup>

As the North Vietnamese Army staged its forces for the attack, it faced, in addition to the Vietnamese

Navy and Air Force, a South Vietnamese Army ground force of approximately 192,000 soldiers and Marines. The South Vietnamese forces were disposed as follows:

—in Military Region 1, five divisions: the Marine, Airborne, 1st, 2d, and 3d ARVN Divisions; the 1st Armored Brigade; and four Ranger Groups, the 11th, 12th, 14th, and 15th, comprising 11 Ranger Battalions.

—in Military Region 2, two divisions: the 22d, and 23d; the 2d Armored Brigade; and seven Ranger Groups, the 4th, 6th, 21st, 22d, 23d, 24th, and 25th, comprising 17 Ranger Battalions.

—in Military Region 3, three divisions: the 5th (which had lost one of its regiments during the fighting in Phuoc Long Province), 18th, and 25th; the 3d Armored Brigade; and five Ranger Groups, the 7th (under direct operational control of the JGS), 31st, 32d, 33d, and 81st, comprising 18 Ranger Battalions.

—in Military Region 4, three divisions, the 7th, 9th, and 21st; and the 4th Armored Brigade. There were no Ranger units deployed in MR 4.\*<sup>5</sup>

To oppose these forces in 1973 North Vietnam mustered 14 infantry divisions and 62 separate regiments for an estimated total of 149,000 to 167,000. By the war's end there were 18 NVA divisions, or approximately 185,000 to 200,000 frontline troops.\*\*

General Dung's assessment of the VNAF's situation and the NVA victory at Phuoc Long helped him overcome objections by conservative members of the Polit-

\*Normally assigned to the Saigon area, the 4th and 6th Ranger Groups were deployed along Highway 1 in Binh Dinh under the operational control of MR 2. *Vietnam From Ceasefire to Capitulation*, p.73.

\*\*Sources vary as to how many divisions and Communist soldiers were actually in South Vietnam at any given time. The January 1973 figures are taken from the official Defense Attache Office reports and *The Final Collapse*. Sources also vary as to how many NVA divisions actually began the final assault on Saigon. Official records stated that the Communists "massed up to 16 divisions in MR 3 and had deployed forces for a three-pronged attack against Saigon" (DOA *Final Assessment*, p. 1-15; see also *From Ceasefire to Capitulation*, p. 176). Another source, *Fall of the South*, in its caption for a map showing the final offensive against Saigon said that General Dung "called for the simultaneous assault on Saigon's defenses by eighteen Main Force Divisions." That same map also detailed 19 divisions while the book's index listed under "North Vietnamese Military Units" 15 NVA divisions (*Fall of the South*, p. 140). The former chief of staff of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, General Cao Van Vien, stated that "the total enemy force around Bien Hoa and Saigon during the last days amounted to fifteen NVA infantry divisions augmented and supported by a sapper division, an artillery division, some armor brigades, and SAM anti-aircraft units" (*Final Collapse*, p. 129). General Dung purposely avoids discussing specifics concerning divisions and instead includes in the final assault forces: the NVA *1st Army Corps*, NVA *2d Army Corps*, NVA *3d Army Corps*, and the *232d Tactical Force*. *Spring Victory*, pp. 212-231.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

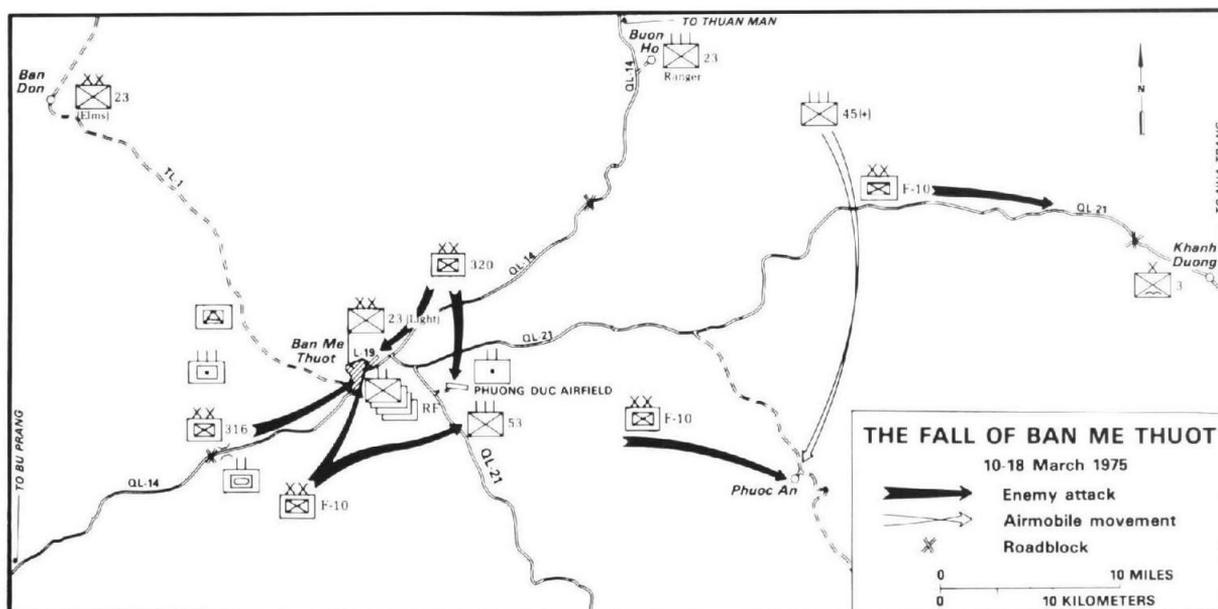
*NVA troops advance on Ban Me Thuot in a coordinated three-division assault. As a result of the swiftness of the 10 March attack, some Americans were taken prisoner and struggled to survive under grueling circumstances until their release in November of 1975.*

buro to a major offensive in the South and dictated his strategy. The main attack would be directed against the weakest link in the South Vietnamese Army's defensive chain, Military Region 2. Commanded by Major General Pham Van Phu, the Central Highlands represented the Achilles heel of the South Vietnamese armor, the most thinly defended area in all of South Vietnam. Furthermore, the South Vietnamese had concentrated their forces in the northern portion of the region, in the vicinity of Pleiku and Kontum. Therefore, General Dung decided to strike first at Ban Me Thuot, a city in Darlac Province in the southern part of the region. He codenamed the battle plan "Campaign 275."<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of 1975, the North Vietnamese had two divisions and two independent regiments in MR 2. During the month of January, they moved the headquarters and two regiments of the 968th NVA Division (one of the "new divisions" created in September 1968, hence the 968 designation) from southern Laos into the Duc Co area of Pleiku Province. In mid-February, North Vietnam deployed the 316th NVA Division to Darlac Province. The 316th Division, one of the organizations in North Vietnam's strategic reserve,

moved by truck from the Thanh Hoa area of North Vietnam through Quang Tri Province (via the new all-weather road network) to Military Region 2 for a rendezvous with the other divisions committed to the impending coordinated assault on Ban Me Thuot. Eventually, the members of this division would combine forces with the 10th NVA Division and the 320th NVA Division, also enroute to objectives in Darlac Province, to defeat the defenders of this strategic region.<sup>7</sup>

In preparation for such an assault, the North Vietnamese, between January 1973 and January 1975, increased their strategic reserve from two to seven divisions (not including the 968th Division). This significant enlargement indicated both the NVA's offensive intentions and their planned means of execution. They would use their lines of communication to exploit the advantage they held over the ARVN—possession of a large, mobile force in reserve. During the same period, North Vietnam completed a road network in the area, prepositioned supplies in abundant quantities, and established command posts. In addition, most of the troops committed to this campaign were familiar with the battlefield and many of them



Map adapted from Gen Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983)

had considerable combat experience. A comparison of the North Vietnamese Army units with those of the South Vietnamese in MR 2 revealed that in firepower the forces were about equal. However, on what was to become the first field of battle in Darlac Province, the ratio of North Vietnamese infantry to South Vietnamese riflemen was six to one. In heavy artillery, the NVA enjoyed a two-to-one advantage. Of even greater significance was the longer range capability of the NVA guns. In numbers of tanks and armored vehicles the opposing sides were almost equal.<sup>8</sup>

The North Vietnamese launched a series of attacks in the northern and extreme southern portions of MR 2 beginning on 1 March when the *968th Division* struck RVN outposts west of Pleiku. On 4 March the Communists closed the Mang Yang Pass on National Highway 19 connecting Pleiku Province to Binh Dinh Province and the coast, and shortly after that attacked and damaged two bridges on National Highway 21 which provided access from the coast to the Central Highlands via Ban Me Thuot, the Darlac Province capital. On 9 March, the *9th Regiment* of the *320th Division* severed Ban Me Thuot's final link to the outside world and its source of possible reinforcements, National Highway 14 running north to Pleiku. These events marked the beginning of Campaign 275, Dung's plan to seize the Central Highlands by exploiting the ARVN decision to concentrate its soldiers in the Pleiku-Kontum area while leaving Ban Me Thuot thinly defended.<sup>9</sup>

At 0200 on 10 March, the *10th* and *316th Divisions* struck Ban Me Thuot. The *320th Division* augment-

ed the attack on the city by assaulting the L-19 and Phuong Duc airfields. As at Song Be (Be River), the enemy employed the element of surprise and coordinated supporting arms to confuse, demoralize, and defeat the defenders. The NVA employed intense artillery fire and predeployed sappers to eliminate preselected targets and create havoc and confusion within the ARVN's command structure and its rear areas. At the same time it sent infantry supported by tanks into the city and captured strategic locations.<sup>10</sup>

The attack was a complete success, and the North Vietnamese quickly overran the city, defended by the 53d Regiment of the ARVN 23d Division and Regional and Popular Force units composed primarily of Montagnards.\* The II Corps commander, General Pham

\*In his book, *The Fall of Saigon*, David Butler described a published news story about the collapse of Ban Me Thuot's defenses. He wrote: "... partisans of an old Montagnard separatist group called FULRO (*Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées*) guided the attacking Communist troops to the approaches to Ban Me Thuot and joined with them in the fighting" (*Fall of Saigon*, pp. 80-81). A Vietnamese Marine Corps battalion commander captured by the Communists in Saigon on 30 April and subsequently placed in a Communist "re-education" camp recently confirmed this story. Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Toan (former commander of 4th Battalion, 147th Brigade, VNMC) said: "While in prison in North Vietnam, I had occasion to meet a Montagnard chief who told me that in a top secret meeting with an envoy of Hanoi's Politburo held in the jungle near the juncture of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the Communists promised self-government for the Montagnards in return for cooperation in defeating the ARVN in Military Region 2. He said that after leading the NVA tanks into Ban Me Thuot which helped conclude that battle in a victory for the Communists, the North Vietnamese immediately took him prisoner." Toan Comments.



Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*Thousands of civilian and military vehicles, targets for shelling, clog Interprovincial Route 7B near Cheo Reo, the Phu Bon provincial capital. This poorly organized and led strategic retreat from the Central Highlands cost II Corps 75 percent of its 20,000-man strength.*

Van Phu, ordered first one regiment and then another of the ARVN 23d Division to launch helicopter-borne counterattacks. The North Vietnamese anticipated this move and antiaircraft units were displaced forward in trail of the attacking tanks and infantry. Many of the troop-laden South Vietnamese helicopters were blasted from the sky. Those troops that did make it into the landing zones found themselves in a cone of fire delivered by five North Vietnamese artillery battalions. Once on the ground they ran headlong into a crowd of panicked, fleeing refugees who turned out to be their dependents. At this point, discipline broke down as many of the soldiers deserted their units and started to search for family members. As a result of this

chaos, the fight was never a close one. By 18 March, the defeat of the 23d Division was complete.<sup>11</sup>

While the fighting at Ban Me Thuot was in its final days, a momentous conference took place at Cam Ranh. On 14 March, President Thieu flew there to confer with the II Corps commander, General Pham Van Phu. Thieu told General Phu, the man who had sworn to fight to the last in the Central Highlands, about his plan to defend a truncated South Vietnam. Thieu ordered Phu to abandon the highlands and form a defensive perimeter around the populated areas in the coastal lowlands to include Ban Me Thout. His first priority would be to retake the Darlac capital. Phu, a former prisoner of war as a result of the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu, showed no signs of enthusiasm for recapturing Ban Me Thout or in carrying out the ordered redeployment. Instead, he negotiated and pleaded with President Thieu for the promotion of a Ranger colonel named Pham Van Tat. The reason for this became obvious the next day at Pleiku when the II Corps commander directed the new one-star and his own chief of staff, Colonel Le Khac Ly, to effect the withdrawal. Before General Phu and his entire II Corps staff retired by helicopter from Pleiku to Nha Trang, he told Colonel Ly, "We will plan to retake Ban Me Thout from there [Nha Trang]." Just prior to boarding the helicopter, Phu ordered his deputy for operations, Brigadier General Tran Van Cam, to remain behind as well.<sup>12</sup>

With Highways 14 and 19 out of Pleiku blocked, Phu's plan called for his corps to make its retreat over long abandoned Interprovincial Route 7B using the element of surprise (General Dung's staff had briefed him that this highway was unusable and therefore not an option should the ARVN try to escape from the Communists' planned encirclement). Despite this advantage, Phu also knew that Route 7B had a number of unusable bridges, some of which were actually missing, and that the final portion of the 135-mile trek would be over terrain which contained numerous land mines. Still Phu believed this was the best choice and he planned to assign the Popular and Regional Force (PF and RF) units holding positions at Pleiku and responsibility for screening the convoy's movement along the escape route. The II Corps commander expected that this action would provide his soldiers enough time to reach the coast. Unfortunately (and possibly on purpose), no one told the PF and RF about the evacuation and consequently they did not cover a withdrawal of which they had no knowledge. General

Phu's last-minute decision to leave behind Brigadier General Cam with vague instructions to "oversee" the withdrawal left Cam confused and angry. Unwilling to share command with newly promoted Pham Van Tat, General Cam jumped on a helicopter and flew to Tuy Hoa, virtually leaving the chief of staff in charge. When Colonel Ly inquired about Brigadier General Tat's whereabouts, he was told that Tat was rounding up Rangers at Kontum and that Ly was to proceed with the evacuation as planned with the 20th Combat Engineer Group leading and General Tat's Ranger Groups guarding the rear. Ly knew that once the withdrawal had begun, he would have little hope of concealing it from the NVA. By day's end on 16 March, the first day of the strategic retreat, the North Vietnamese knew full well the ARVN's intentions, and by the time the lead elements of the South Vietnamese column reached Cheo Reo (Phu Bon's province capital) on the evening of 18 March, the Communists responded with their own surprise. Units of the *320th Division* began shelling the stalled column: rockets, mortars, and artillery fire rained down on the evacuating South Vietnamese. The II Corps engineers' unfinished bridge over the Ea Pa River, east of Cheo Reo, had halted the convoy which by now stretched back past the intersection of Route 7B and Highway 14, almost as far as Pleiku. In order to avoid disaster, Colonel Ly walked through the crowd and the line of jammed vehicles to the command post in Cheo Reo (Hau Bon). He arrived just in time to deploy the 23d Ranger Group at Ban Bleik Pass, a strategic point just west of the capital. The Rangers stopped the NVA's ground attack on the column's flank and while they held the critical pass, the engineers finished the bridge and Colonel Ly and the battalion commanders got the convoy moving again. That marked the end of the good news as General Phu then ordered Ly to depart Cheo Reo by helicopter. As one writer observed: "From the nineteenth, what leadership there was came from individual battalion and group commanders who led whatever nearby troops would still obey orders."<sup>13</sup>

NVA General Dung was flabbergasted by the turn of events, and his own words best describe his reaction: "But now if a whole main force army corps was fleeing at full tilt . . . then why? On whose orders? Had our two thunderbolts striking in the southern Tay Nguyen shaken the enemy troops so badly? . . . This was another very big strategic mistake on their part. If the order to pull the Second Army Corps out had been issued by the central government in Saigon, then

the matter had surpassed the bounds of this campaign and had reached strategic proportions."<sup>14</sup>

General Phu was issuing his forces a death sentence, and General Dung was agreeing to serve as the executioner. Dung ordered all of his available forces to close on Route 7B for he planned not just defeat, but annihilation.

Annihilation began on 21 March as the *320th Division* overran the 23d Ranger Group at Cheo Reo and cut the convoy in half, trapping more than 160,000 civilians; the 4th and 25th Ranger Groups; and the survivors of the 23d Rangers. Phu ordered General Tat and the rear guard to escape overland through the jungle. Of the original 7,000 Rangers, 900 actually made it to Nha Trang, the new location of II Corps headquarters. During the retreat, II Corps lost 75 percent of its 20,000-troop strength and of the 5,000 soldiers remaining, none was ready to fight, let alone implement Thieu's plan to retake Ban Me Thout! The flood of evacuees, including thousands of dependents who had clogged the roads and slowed the withdrawal to a chaotic crawl, ended in desperation at Tuy Hoa as approximately 60,000 battered, starving people sought food, water, and refuge where none existed. "One of the most poorly executed withdrawals in the war, and certainly the most tragic, had ended."<sup>15</sup>

Given only two days to prepare for what amounted to a massive withdrawal phased over four days, this retreat quickly turned into a rout as one senior leader after another disappeared from the scene of the action. By the third day, 18 March, the last hope for disciplined leadership, organizational control, and any hope of success disappeared with the unscheduled departure of the officer leading the convoy, Colonel Ly. Relentlessly, the Communists pursued this wounded, headless creature. The retreating, slow-moving ARVN column, hampered by the restrictive terrain and masses of civilians, soon became hopelessly disorganized and incapable of retreating in any kind of military manner. The North Vietnamese chased the South Vietnamese to the coast and in the process captured thousands of troops and tons of equipment which ARVN soldiers abandoned in their haste to escape. Improperly and ineptly executed, the withdrawal touched off a series of reactions which ultimately led to the general collapse of the northern and central regions. One author later wrote of the debacle, "The retreat from the highlands was the most drastic change on the Vietnamese military map in twenty years. In less than ten days, it yielded six entire provinces, a



full infantry division, the equivalent of another division of Rangers, and tens of thousands more militia and support troops, along with most of their arms and equipment. It also cost Nguyen Van Thieu the confidence of his military commanders, his soldiers, and his people."<sup>16</sup>

The North Vietnamese Army moved quickly to capitalize on this opportunity. A few ARVN units, notably the 22d Division in Binh Dinh Province and the 3d Airborne Brigade in Khanh Hoa, resisted the aggressors, but otherwise the Communist drive to the coast met with little resistance. South Vietnam had been effectively cut in two. With II Corps' demise, the Communists shifted their attention to Military Region 1 where they hoped to continue their successes.

#### *Defeat in Military Region 1*

In early 1975, military activity in MR 1 was relatively light because seasonal rains had precluded major combat operations. Fighting began in January and focused on the high ground south and southwest of Hue—hills over which both armies had fought fiercely since late August 1974. The South Vietnamese finally regained most of this key terrain by mid-January and in the process inflicted heavy casualties on elements of one North Vietnamese Army division and its supporting independent regiments.

In late January, collected intelligence revealed to the South Vietnamese that major offensive preparations were underway as North Vietnamese armor units rolled out vehicles in ever increasing numbers for what appeared to be major maintenance repairs and overhaul. Additionally, South Vietnamese intelligence sources detected new armor parks, artillery positions, and maintenance areas. While these preparations were underway, sporadic fighting continued throughout the region.

After losing the high ground overlooking Highway 1, south of Hue, to South Vietnamese counterattacks in the first weeks of 1975, the North Vietnamese Army moved more units into the area. Activity during February entailed a series of sharp, but inconclusive engagements southwest of Da Nang. In Quang Ngai Province, the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units continued the pattern of low-level attacks which had characterized military operations in the province starting in mid-1974. Spoiling actions by the 2d ARVN Division and Ranger forces succeeded in holding in place elements of the *52d NVA Brigade*, which had attempted at one point to move southward into Binh Dinh Province. Then came March and the disaster in



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A800720  
*LtGen Ngo Quang Truong, MR 1 commander, stands at his headquarters forward-located in Hue. Between 12-17 March Gen Truong argued against transfer of the airborne division from MR 1, but to no avail.*

the Central Highlands, which allowed the Communists to turn their full attention to the northern part of South Vietnam, Military Region 1.<sup>17</sup>

On 8 March, major fighting erupted when Communist forces attacked and occupied some 15 hamlets in southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. Well over 100,000 of the inhabitants chose to become refugees by fleeing south to Hue.\* At the same time in southern Military Region 1, the *2d NVA Division* and *52d Brigade* attacked and overran the district capitals at Hau Duc and Tien Phuoc and threatened the Quang Tin provincial capital of Tam Ky.

On 12 March, with mounting pressure in Military Region 1 and increasing apprehension over the defense of Saigon, President Thieu ordered the MR 1 commander, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, to release the Airborne Division for deployment from the Da Nang area to Saigon. At the same time, he ordered Lieutenant General Truong to give top priority within MR 1 to the defense of Da Nang. Truong strongly op-

\*Vietnamese Marine Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Toan recently recalled the South Vietnamese response to this attack: "These hamlets were retaken by the VNMC and a detached ARVN tank unit on 10 March 1975. Tons of weapons and equipment were captured and 100 NVA soldiers were taken prisoner." Tran Ngoc Toan Comments.



posed the president's decision to remove the Airborne Division. The next day he flew to Saigon to argue personally against such a move, but to no avail, gaining only a four-day postponement. The withdrawal would begin on 17 March, although two days later Thieu, after another personal request by Truong, authorized the 1st Airborne Brigade (the last brigade scheduled for redeployment to Saigon) to remain at Da Nang on the condition it not be committed to combat and the defense of MR 1. To replace the departing units, Thieu ordered the newly formed Vietnamese Marine Corps brigade to deploy to MR 1. Brigade 468 (composed of only two battalions—the 14th and 16th) of the VNMC Division arrived in Da Nang a few days later.<sup>18</sup>

Also at the 13 March meeting, Thieu directed the new III Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, to withdraw his forces from An Loc and employ them in MR 3 wherever they were needed most. Both of these decisions represented serious blows to the morale of the RVNAF: the brigade's withdrawal because it ripped out the very heart of Truong's defenses, and the An Loc retreat because it reversed perhaps the ARVN's greatest victory. In June of 1972, the Communists ended a 95-day siege of this provincial capital when, in defeat, their forces withdrew to bases in Cambodia. The ARVN's shining moment in achieving a battlefield success at Binh Long's capital, just 65 miles north of Saigon, was made possible during the Easter Offensive by something dramatically absent in 1975—U.S. air support. Marine Corps A-4s and Air Force B-52s had helped to end the siege by continuously bombing the enemy concentrations around An Loc.<sup>19</sup> In March 1975 while Thieu attempted to redress the absence of a strategic reserve and the need for additional support, General Dung boasted: "The United States appears completely impotent, and even if they increased their aid they would not be able to rescue their puppets from the impending collapse."<sup>20</sup>

Events would prove Dung correct, but neither South Vietnam nor the United States nor even General

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\*Commenting on the issue of American assistance and aid, Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. Grimm recalled his Indochina experiences just prior to General Dung's boasts: "A particularly disheartening spectacle to all U.S. personnel present was the arrival in Saigon in the fall of 1974 of several U.S. Congressional delegations (CODELs) allegedly on fact-finding trips but who were actually and vociferously pre-decided against any further assistance to our allies. Both Major Jaime Sabater and myself were specifically assigned and prepared to brief members of these CODELs but we were repeatedly rebuffed. The CODELs sought and received briefings from the enemy and ostensibly 'neutral groups' instead." Grimm Comments.

Truong expected what soon followed. To compensate for the loss of the airborne brigades, General Truong ordered the Marine Division to plan for a redeployment from its position near Hue to the Da Nang area. In the midst of confusion over the defensive strategy and the growing civilian panic, Communist forces crossed the Thach Han River, attacked and occupied the ruins of Quang Tri City. The South Vietnamese forces resisted and then fell back. The date, 19 March 1975, marked the beginning of the end for Military Region 1 and northern South Vietnam. The Government of South Vietnam (GVN) in the ensuing days concentrated its efforts on establishing a defensive perimeter around Hue. At 1800 on 24 March, Lieutenant General Truong decided to abandon Hue and evacuate as many troops as possible along a narrow coastal sandspit east of Highway 1, where they could move without restriction until reaching the evacuation column north of Hai Van Pass. The effort proved futile, and as panic grew, the withdrawal, compounded by North Vietnamese Army pressure, became a rout. This left, as the last line of defense, Da Nang.<sup>21</sup>

The massive influx of civilian refugees into the Da Nang area precipitated a breakdown in law and order. Attempts to establish a defensive perimeter around the city met with little success, and on 30 March, that former bastion of American firepower fell to the Communists. Da Nang, by now in total chaos, collapsed without a shot being fired. The aggressors from North Vietnam literally walked into the city and found planes, tanks, guns, and equipment; all serviceable and yet abandoned.

Responsibility for this disaster would be laid at the doorstep of President Thieu. The catastrophic chain of events leading to the surrender of Da Nang resulted directly from the decision to abandon Military Region 2 and the ill-advised withdrawal of the Airborne Division from Military Region 1. Subsequent efforts to adjust defenses in the face of increased Communist pressure destroyed confidence and morale, and worse yet, caused panic among the civilian populace. This, in turn, led to a total collapse within the country, handing the Communists a stunning victory at minimal cost.

The North Vietnamese plans and preparations that produced the successful offensive of the 1975 dry season were fully underway by 1974. The only modification to the plan and one which came as a complete surprise was the length of the operation. It was originally planned for both the 1975 and 1976 dry seasons. On 31 March, the North Vietnamese Politburo met



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Abandoned vehicles on Highway 1 attest to the quickness with which the defense of Da Nang collapsed. President Thieu's decision to withdraw the airborne division from MR 1 precipitated panic among inhabitants and led to loss of this region in less than 12 days.*

and decided to accelerate that timetable by one year to take advantage of their unexpectedly swift successes and the half-dozen weeks before the onset of the next monsoon season: "From this moment the final decisive battle of our army and people has begun; its aim is to complete the people's national democratic revolution in the South . . ."22

Reaching this point of success so far ahead of schedule astounded even General Dung, whose troops had been preparing almost continuously for three months to ensure that they would begin the first phase of the campaign with the element of surprise and overwhelming odds on their side. The results were incredible. The South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) had suffered a catastrophic defeat in MR 1. In the debacle, the 1st, 2d, and 3d Divisions were lost as identifiable military units, along with the territorial and Ranger forces. The RVNAF managed to extract some 16,000 troops, including 4,000 Marines from Military Region 1, but nearly all of the heavy equipment was left behind. Thus an unbroken series of defeats closed the final chapter on the region which once served as home to the U.S. Marines stationed in South Vietnam:

19 March—Quang Tri City and Province abandoned as the general retreat from Military Region 1 begins.

24 March—Quang Nai and Tam Ky fall.

25 March—Hue and Hoi An fall.

26 March—Chu Lai falls.

30 March—Da Nang falls.<sup>23</sup>

#### *A Wasted Division*

Since 1973, the Vietnamese Marine Corps Division had remained in a relatively unchanged defensive posture. In early 1975, the division was in defensive positions along the northernmost line in Military Region 1: VNMC Brigade 258 was on the south bank of the Thach Han River just south and west of Quang Tri City; Brigade 369 was defending a line running east from Quang Tri City to the coast; and Brigade 147 was in the southernmost part of Quang Tri Province defending the western approach to Highway 1 and the coast (It was located south of the My Chanh River and west of My Chanh). Additionally, during January 1975, the Marine Corps began outfitting a new brigade, the 468th.

As of 12 February, the division's mission was to defend Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, to delay any enemy advances, and if forced to withdraw, then to defend Hue. On 12 March, when the Airborne Division was unexpectedly ordered to deploy from Da Nang to Saigon, the Corps Commander, General



Photo courtesy of MajGen John E. Murray, USA (Ret)

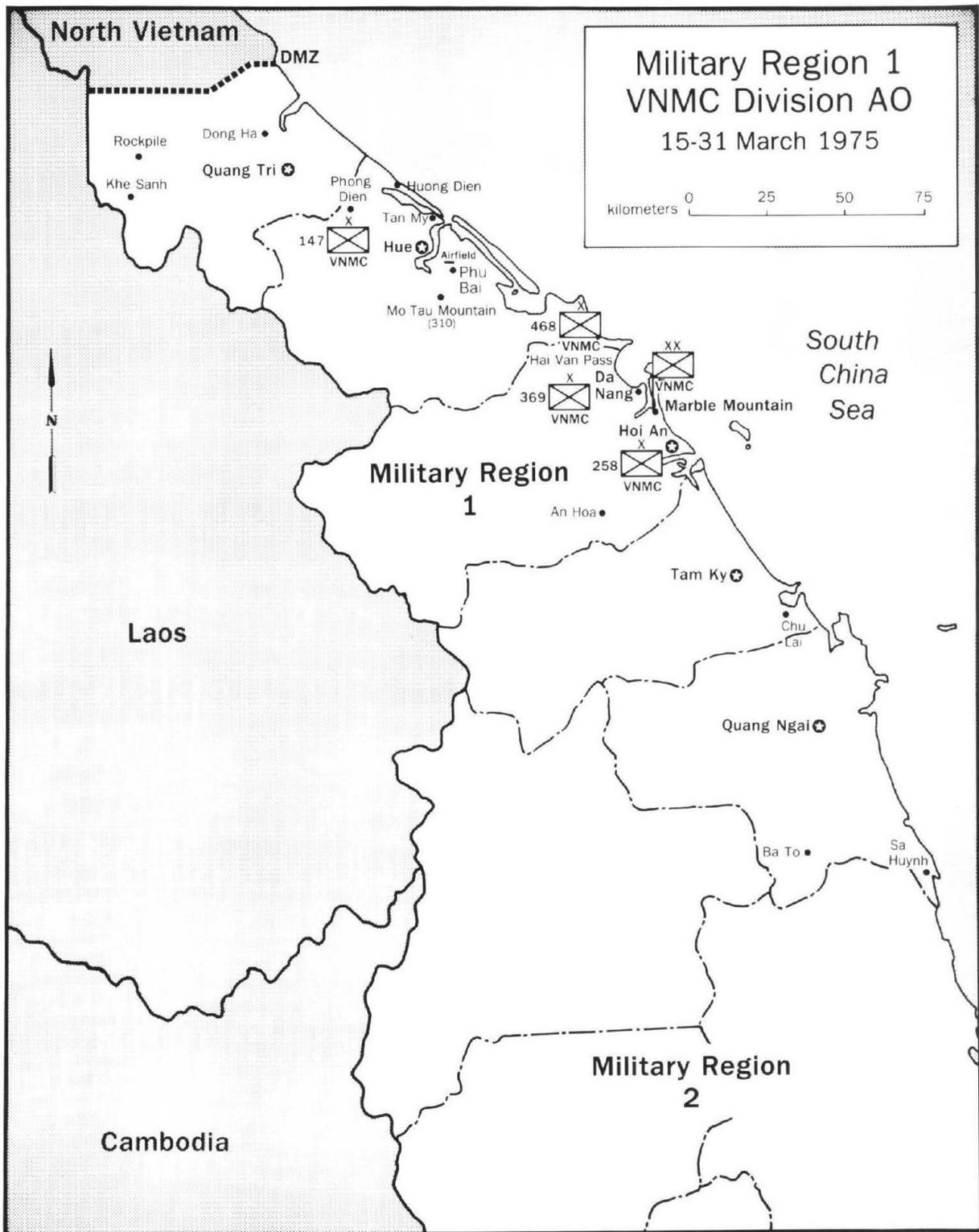
*Despite the prohibition against military advisors, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces worked closely together. Seen here are LtGen Truong, MajGen Murray, LtGen Khang, Capt (Mrs.) Strickland and LtCol Strickland, and Gen Lan, receiving an award from Gen Murray.*

Truong, was told that the defense of Da Nang had now become the top military priority in MR 1. He immediately communicated this change in strategy to General Lan, informing him to anticipate immediate movement of the Marine Division into positions vacated by the departing airborne units and assumption of primary responsibility for the defense of Da Nang. Within hours of the decision to withdraw the airborne units from Military Region 1, the Vietnamese Marine Corps, following Truong's orders, redeployed its forces, removing both of its brigades from Quang Tri. It shifted Brigade 147 south from My Chanh to Phong Dien where it straddled Highway 1 on an arcing line from the 4th Battalion, west and south of the city, to the 7th Battalion on the east side. General Lan ordered the 369th Brigade to move to a position north and west of Da Nang and directed the 258th Brigade to deploy south of Da Nang where it could cover the city's exposed southern flank. Additionally, the newest Marine brigade, the 468th, had been designated by the JGS as replacements for the departing Airborne Division. At the same time Truong's forces were shifting, the Communists launched heavy attacks against the recently arrived defenders of Phong Dien, the 4th

and 5th battalions of the 147th Brigade. With no reserve available, General Lan ordered the brigade to delay the North Vietnamese Army and then fall back on Hue.<sup>24</sup>

By 17 March, the 258th Brigade had deployed to Da Nang and replaced the already departed 2nd Airborne Brigade. The next day, General Lan moved the division command post from Huong Dien, Thua Thien Province to Marble Mountain Airfield, southeast of Da Nang. This placed both Truong's I Corps Headquarters located at Da Nang Airfield and Lan's command post within miles of each other.

Even though the defense of Da Nang had become their primary mission, the Marines, on 20 March, were ordered to defend at all costs their positions north of Hue. That same day, VNAF C-130s delivered the 468th Brigade to Da Nang and its Marines deployed to defensive positions from the northern end of the Hai Van Pass along Highway 1 to Phuoc Tong. While this was underway, the 147th prepared for its task. To accomplish its mission the 147th Brigade had been task-organized into four infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, and various supporting units. Days earlier in anticipation of heavy fighting, division headquarters





Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*VNMC Commandant MajGen Bui The Lan addresses his division. In March 1975 he lost over half of the division during the evacuation of Military Region 1.*

had reinforced the 147th Brigade with the 3d Battalion of the 258th Brigade.\* With an overall fighting strength of 3,000, the 147th prepared materially and psychologically to execute to the letter the order to defend. Two days later, this order was countermanded, and the 147th was instead ordered to move southeastward to the coastline at Tan My where the Vietnamese Navy was expected to load and move it to Da Nang. On 23 March, the confused and concerned Marines executed their new orders and made their way southward to the beach, knowing that the brigade's fate now rested solely in the hands of the Vietnamese Navy.<sup>25</sup>

Characteristic of the almost total breakdown in coordination among the South Vietnamese forces, the Navy was not informed of this development until long

\*According to Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Toan, the commander of the 4th Battalion of the 147th Brigade, by the middle of March the four brigades operationally controlled the following battalions: 147th—3d, 4th, 5th, and 7th; 258th—1st and 8th; 369th—2d, 6th, and 9th; and 468th—14th, 16th, and 18th. The 18th Battalion consisted of a headquarters and two infantry companies. Toan Comments.

after the Marines had left their positions. The Navy tried to effect the rendezvous, but arrived behind schedule with too few landing craft and failed to extract the stranded Marines. The few boats that got to the area could not beach because of submerged sand bars and only those Marines who were strong swimmers eventually made it to South Vietnamese ships.

When it became clear to the Marines that their newly acquired position was indefensible and that they would not be evacuated, they destroyed their crew-served weapons, and, in the case of the TOW missile launchers, dumped them into the surf. Less than 20 percent of the 147th Brigade made it to Da Nang. The remainder died in the beach area or were captured without ever having had a chance to fight in a major battle.<sup>26</sup>

Typical of the individual effects of this failed operation were the experiences of Vietnamese Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Tran Ngoc Toan, the commanding officer of 4th Battalion, 147th Brigade. During the retrograde operation, Lieutenant Colonel Toan's battalion, as well as the other battalions, could not reach the few LCMs which had made it as far as the sand bar, still hundreds of yards from the shoreline. He related, "One company swam out to the sand bar and climbed on board. This included the brigade commander. Sandwiched between 130mm artillery in Hue and the advancing NVA regiments, my battalion was decimated." In the next week Toan and approximately 450 Marines from the 147th made it overland to Da Nang.\*\* They evaded capture and escaped to the southern end of the peninsula where Catholic residents of a small fishing village transported them in their boats to Da Nang. By the time they arrived there on 2 April, the city was already in the hands of the NVA. They immediately shed their uniforms and donned civilian garb, placing their pistols in the back of their pants and small hand grenades in their shirt pockets. Slipping out of the city, Toan said, "they walked, paid truck drivers for rides, and hitchhiked their way down Highway 1 to Vung Tau, arriving two weeks later."<sup>27</sup>

The 258th and 369th Brigades fared little better. With each passing day, the area around Da Nang became more and more crowded, clogged with refugees attempting to escape the onrushing North Vietnamese, unimpeded by fighting forces.

\*\*Toan related: "The other battalion commanders, 3d, 5th, and 7th, were captured around Hue city and moved to Dong Ha, later Khe Sanh." Toan Comments.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*The VNMC memorial in Saigon was dedicated to the thousands of Marines who died fighting to defend the Republic of South Vietnam. VNMC Brigades 147, 268, and 369, deployed far from their Saigon headquarters to Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, would never be allowed to stand and fight the invading NVA units which captured MR 1.*

By 27 March, the estimate of refugees in the Da Nang area exceeded one million. Locally raised units of the ARVN disintegrated when the soldiers gave first priority to the welfare of their families. Social order completely disappeared, broken down by fear and chaos. It soon became quite obvious to everyone that a coordinated defense of Da Nang was impossible. The only major units maintaining tactical integrity were the 258th and 369th Brigades. On 28 March these Marines were ordered to fall back to the city. All heavy equipment had to be abandoned and approximately 5,500 Marines reached their objective. The surviving Marines futilely attempted to defend Da Nang, but that short-lived effort ended two days later when approximately 4,000 of them boarded evacuation ships.\*<sup>28</sup>

\*There were conflicting reports as to the conduct and behavior of the heavily armed Marines during Da Nang's final hours. The Marines were no longer a cohesive fighting unit, but had disintegrated into small armed groups. See for example Alan Dawson, *55 Days, The Fall of South Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), pp. 186-87.

As an eyewitness to the loss of South Vietnam's second largest city, General Lan represented an excellent source of information on what had happened in MR 1.\*\* In the days following Lan's evacuation from Marble Mountain, he met with Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Lukeman (Chief, VNMC Logistics Support Branch, DAO) at his headquarters at Vung Tau to discuss the re-equipping of his remaining Marines. During this conversation, General Lan shared with Lukeman his experiences in I Corps and his assessment of what went wrong.

Lan stressed six military aspects of the withdrawal which, though intrinsically linked to politics, were, in his mind, the overriding factors in determining the outcome of the strategic retreat. First and foremost was the decision to withdraw from prepared positions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces without contact with the enemy. The second factor was the impact of the sudden reversal of a critical strategy: deciding to

\*\*General Lan was rescued from a beach near Monkey Mountain early on the morning of 29 March by a South Vietnamese Navy boat. *Fall of the South*, pp. 80-81.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*This woman is one of the many thousands of refugees who fled Da Nang on 29 and 30 March. These South Vietnamese lost everything after the government transferred the airborne division from MR 1 and withdrew the Marine Division from Quang Tri Province.*

withdraw immediately after having ordered the same units to “Defend at all costs” positions north of Hue. Both of these political decisions had an adverse effect on morale and fighting spirit. Further, the clogging of the avenues of retreat by fleeing refugees hampered Marine tactical maneuverability. “Tactical movement during the withdrawal was impossible,” related General Lan. The dissolution of other fighting units within the area also influenced the attempt to defend Da Nang. It caused considerable degradation of fighting strength and military discipline and adversely affected the confidence of the fighting defenders: “When troops from those units (those located near their home and family) were ordered to withdraw, their homes were forfeited and their families became refugees. They deserted their military units and joined their families as refugees.” (Lieutenant Colonel Lukeman noted that the Marines did not have the same problem as most had been recruited from another part of South Vietnam, primarily Military Region 3). Another signifi-

cant aspect was the absence of coordination and control of the military arms, as evidenced by the Vietnamese Navy’s attempt to rescue the Marines defending Hue. The last items of importance and the overall determining factors in the enemy’s success were tactics and timing. The North Vietnamese demonstrated opportunism and efficacy: “[The enemy] attacked with rockets and artillery against populated areas and then at Da Nang, employed tanks on three axis lightly supported by infantry. Civilian panic, additional military desertions, and increased difficulty of movement in the rear followed.”<sup>29</sup> The resulting chaos and absence of military control during the evacuation of Da Nang underlined the accuracy and the gravity of General Lan’s observations.\*

During the two-week period that Military Region 1 came apart at the seams, the United States took notice and decided to take action. At first the U.S. moved slowly, but in a matter of days it was expending maximum effort to address this sudden and unexpected calamity. The Marines of the III Marine Amphibious Force were the first to experience the effects of this reaction. Located in the region and having prepared contingency plans for the evacuation of Americans from Southeast Asia, III MAF had anticipated a call, but not quite this soon nor from this country. The command had been concentrating its efforts on Eagle Pull with its sights set on the almost inevitable evacuation of Cambodia. The events in South Vietnam quickly rewrote the script and seemed to indicate that the III Marine Amphibious Force might have to double load its gun and do so without delay!

\*Recently, Lieutenant Colonel Toan offered his opinion of the cause of some of the undisciplined behavior in Da Nang at the end of March 1975. He attributed a large part of it to the confusion surrounding when and how the forces defending Da Nang would be evacuated. He said that late in the day on 28 March, General Lan phoned I Corps headquarters at Da Nang and when he got no answer, he knew that everyone had left and the Marines were on their own. At this point, the Navy offered the only means of retreat and at 0600 the next day, they conducted an evacuation at the beach near Marble Mountain. At this time, word was passed to the remaining South Vietnamese Marine units to make their way to Marble Mountain for another pickup scheduled for later that day at 1500. Information about the planned evacuation spread to other military units in Da Nang, and those soldiers who learned of it realized that if they had any hope of escaping capture, they too needed to move to the beach. As a consequence, chaos and disorder erupted, and the Navy was forced to cancel the second evacuation. Shooting and violence ensued as all those unevacuated Marines and soldiers desperately sought a way out of the surrounded city. Toan Comments.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Evacuation of South Vietnam's Northern Provinces

*The Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group—Initial Operations in Vietnamese Waters  
Military Sealift Command Operations—Meeting the Needs*

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The North Vietnamese spring offensive launched in March 1975 enjoyed a level of success far beyond its commander's greatest expectations. The utter collapse of resistance in the Central Highlands, with the flight of thousands of soldiers and civilians to the sea, followed immediately by a rout of the South Vietnamese forces in Military Region 1 came suddenly and unexpectedly. The ensuing chaos reflected the low morale and the rapidly deteriorating confidence of the South Vietnamese people in their government and its decisions. The United States reacted to these events by providing humanitarian assistance to those South Vietnamese fleeing the Communist onslaught. This assistance took the form of rescuing refugees at sea and transporting them to areas still under South Vietnam's control. America's military involvement, including the use of Major General Carl W. Hoffman's III Marine Amphibious Force, began on 25 March 1975.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group*

The swiftness with which the situation in South Vietnam changed and the resultant need for American Marines to assist in evacuation operations posed some unique and challenging problems for General Hoffman and his staff. First, the amphibious ships that III MAF needed, known as ARG Bravo, were not readily available. Second, the battalion that his staff wanted to send was a thousand miles to the north on the main island of Japan. The battalion landing team of ARG Bravo, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Loehle's reinforced 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and its supporting units, already had deployed to Camp Fuji, Japan, for training. Dependent on ARG Bravo ships for transportation, BLT 3/9's mobility was severely limited by its ships' movements. The Navy, anticipating that the battalion would stay on the island of Honshu for two to three weeks of scheduled training, sent two of the three ships in the amphibious ready group south to Subic Bay for routine maintenance. When events unexpectedly went from bad to worse in South Vietnam, BLT 3/9 suddenly faced a dilemma: how to get to the scene of the action? With the *Frederick* (LST 1184) and the *Durham* (LKA 114) in Subic Bay, the battalion had at its disposal in Yokosuka harbor only one ship,

the *Dubuque* (LPD 8), and diplomatic sensitivities made even its use questionable. An agreement between the United States and Japan precluded the deployment of military units from Japan directly to combat in Southeast Asia. Considering all these factors, General Hoffman made the decision to use Okinawa-based Marines instead of BLT 3/9.

On 25 March 1975, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines received the warning order to support possible evacuation operations from Da Nang.\* The battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Hester, was located at its customary cantonment on Okinawa, Camp Hansen. It had all but completed its predeployment training in preparation for its scheduled relief in May of Lieutenant Colonel George P. Slade's 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines.

BLT 2/4, the landing force of the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (31st MAU) which Colonel John F. Roche III commanded, was already on board ships of Amphibious Ready Group Alpha. It had deployed to the Gulf of Thailand on 28 February in anticipation of the impending order to execute Operation Eagle Pull, the evacuation of Phnom Penh.<sup>2</sup>

Its relief, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, possessed considerable leadership experience in its senior officers and senior NCOs, almost all of whom were veterans of combat in Southeast Asia. They led an extremely well-motivated group of junior officers and Marines, all anxious to join the action. The warning order on 25 March represented that opportunity, but before the battalion could actually effect the order, it was modified.

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Walter J. Wood, who as a captain commanded Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines during this period, recalled the events surrounding the issuance of the warning order. He stated that when the battalion was alerted on 25 March 1975, the battalion commander immediately called a meeting around 0900 which lasted less than a half-hour: "I was instructed that my company would be helilifted to White Beach at around 1400 for embarkation aboard the USS *Blue Ridge*. During this brief, my company's mission was described to me . . . we were to embark aboard the *Blue Ridge* for immediate departure to Da Nang where we would reinforce U.S. facilities. We did embark on 25 March but for reasons never explained to me or since forgotten, the *Blue Ridge* did not get underway for Vietnam until 27 March." Wood Comments.



Department of Defense Photo (USN) K107687

*Company D and elements of Headquarters and Service Company march down the pier at White Beach, Okinawa, on 25 March 1975, to embark in USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19). These Marines, as members of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group, spent the next 13 days at sea recovering refugees evacuating northern South Vietnam.*

On 27 March, General Hoffman, who at the end of 1974 replaced Major General Herman Poggemeyer, Jr., as III MAF commander, activated the 33d Marine Amphibious Unit and assigned Lieutenant Colonel Hester's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines as its ground combat element. The MAU, led initially by the commanding officer of the 4th Marines, Colonel Alfred M. Gray, received the mission of supporting the evacuation of American citizens and other designated evacuees from Da Nang. The MAU headquarters and Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines went on board the amphibious command ship, USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19), while it was moored at White Beach, Okinawa. As soon as the command group was embarked, Rear Admiral Donald E. Whitmire's (Commander Task Force 76) flagship departed for South Vietnam. The remainder of the battalion awaited the arrival of the amphibious transport dock ship, *Dubuque*, which along with the other two ships in ARG Bravo had been directed to assist in evacuation operations. *Durham* and *Frederick*, still in Subic Bay, were ordered to proceed directly to South Vietnamese coastal waters.<sup>3</sup>

The following day, Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kizer's Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165

(HMM-165) was attached to the MAU as its aviation component. The assignment of this squadron posed the MAU an additional problem. The squadron's helicopters were distributed throughout WestPac; most were located at Futema, but some were operating out of Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Philippines. Additionally, the task force did not contain a ship specially configured for an aviation unit. As a result, HMM-165 was initially split into four separate detachments and divided among the available ships: the largest group of helicopters, seven CH-46s, was placed on board the *Dubuque*, a smaller detachment (two UH-1Es) went on board the *Blue Ridge*, and single helicopter (CH-46) detachments joined both the *Durham* and the *Frederick*.

Upon initial receipt of the warning order, Lieutenant Colonel Hester perceived his mission as the establishment and protection of evacuation sites in the Da Nang area. A mission of this magnitude would involve the majority of units in a task-organized battalion landing team. However, on 30 March, Easter Sunday 1975, as the remaining elements of BLT 1/4 boarded the *Dubuque*, events in South Vietnam significantly changed the complexion of the operation.

Da Nang fell into the hands of enemy forces, altering all plans to evacuate that region. The task force received new orders to sail instead to Qui Nhon and Nha Trang.

Once there, the new plan called for the battalion to aid and assist in the humanitarian evacuation of the area. The Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines would then assume responsibility for the internal security of the ships assisting the refugees. The new directive describing this role, although somewhat confusing, had an undeniable effect on the organization and make-up of the battalion. Rather than a BLT, all that would be required was a small battalion command group and the rifle companies organic to the battalion. Thus BLT 1/4 would deploy as a "light" battalion, specifically tailored for the task at hand. Most of the Headquarters and Service Company of the battalion as well as the normally attached units would remain behind. The amphibian tractor platoon carrying the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifle platoon, already on board the *Dubuque*, was unloaded. The 81mm mortar platoon, which had assembled at the Camp Hansen helicopter landing zone, found out only moments after its arrival that it had become a last-minute "cut" from the troop list. The frenetic and seemingly chaotic pace of the embarkation reflected, if nothing else, the battalion's flexibility, a trait it would exhibit time and time again in the ensuing weeks. If this event appeared confusing and haphazard to the participants, imagine the wonderment and disbelief of the spectators. The S-3 of the 9th Marines, one of those watching that Easter morning while the *Dubuque* laid to off Okinawa in Ora Wan Bay, related his observations:

On my way to the Officers Mess that Sunday morning, I paused to watch as 1/4's 106s were loaded into LVTP-7s and then the LVTs splashed into the water and swam out to the *Dubuque*. After a leisurely brunch, I left the Mess about 90 minutes later and headed for the regimental command post. As I walked along the road bordering the bay, to my astonishment I observed the same LVTs swimming away from the *Dubuque* still fully loaded. They were heading for the LVT loading ramp at the foot of their tractor park and the *Dubuque* was getting underway, headed in the direction of White Beach. I immediately quickened my pace, curious to find out the latest change and the reason for the return of 1/4's heavy gear.<sup>4</sup>

During that Sunday afternoon, on 30 March, the *Dubuque* got underway from White Beach, Okinawa for Vietnamese waters. The *Dubuque* carried the battalion command group; Companies A, B, and C; and HMM-165(-) (seven CH-46s). Also on board were ele-

ments reinforcing the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines: First Lieutenant Joseph J. Streitz's detachment from the Military Police Company, 3d Marine Division; a platoon from the 3d Engineer Battalion led by Second Lieutenant Paul Melshen; the 3d Counterintelligence Team (3d CIT), commanded by Captain Charles J. Bushey; and the 17th Interrogator-Translator Team (17th ITT) commanded by Chief Warrant Officer Allen F. Kent.<sup>5</sup>

On 31 March, the 33d MAU was redesignated the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group to emphasize the humanitarian nature of the mission. Colonel Dan C. Alexander, the Chief of Staff, 9th MAB, became its commander. The renamed group was assigned task designator 79.9, thereby consummating a major shift in plans to accommodate the rapidly changing situation in South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

Originally, Colonel Alfred Gray had been ordered to remain at Okinawa and reconstitute a new 33d MAU to be built around Lieutenant Colonel Lynn Bond's BLT 1/9, the airborne contingency BLT, and Lieutenant Colonel Herbert M. Fix's HMM-463. Fix's squadron was already embarked on the USS *Hancock* (CVA 19), outward bound from Pearl Harbor, steaming hard for the Western Pacific. Due to the fact that the rapidly changing situation in South Vietnam could make plans instantly obsolete, this idea never matured beyond its formative stage.

Overcome by events and the exigencies of the moment, the original plan was scrapped and replaced with the one calling for a shipboard security force. The modified concept received its initiation under Major General Kenneth J. Houghton, the 3d Marine Division commander, who also had observed the embarkation and departure of Colonel Alexander's force. General Houghton expressed the desire that this force—on the verge of a new and unique mission—make the best use of its company grade and lower leadership echelons.

Success, however, did not come without proper planning and to serve that end, on 31 March 1975, Joint Operations Order 76.8/79.9 was published. Although Task Force 76 retained its task designator, Admiral Whitmire activated the 76.8 designator to distinguish those involved in the special evacuation operation from the rest of his forces. Admiral Whitmire, himself, took command of Task Group 76.8. The order he and Colonel Alexander issued covered the group's anticipated activities and directed the placement of Marine rifle companies, describing their command relationships.<sup>7</sup> One company would be placed on each

of the four amphibious ships and serve under the operational control of the ship's commanding officer. Its mission would be to provide internal security for the ship and to assist in evacuee processing and administration.

#### *Initial Operations in Vietnamese Waters*

On 2 April 1975, the *Frederick* and the *Durham* joined the *Blue Ridge* and the *Dubuque* off the coast of Nha Trang. That same day, the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the embarkation of Marine security forces on board Military Sealift Command (MSC) ships for purposes of security and assistance in refugee processing.\*<sup>8</sup>

At the time of issuance of the authority to embark Marines on MSC ships, the Navy/Marine Corps force was preparing to use Colonel Alexander's Marines on Navy ships in the recovery and evacuation of refugees fleeing South Vietnam's coastal cities. Soon they would have to shift gears to respond to the newest directive, but for the immediate future, the Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines prepared themselves for evacuation duty on the amphibious ready group's ships.\*\*

\*Admiral Steele recalled that this decision was not reached without considerable effort after most in authority, other than those in the Western Pacific, had overlooked the disorder embarking evacuees could wreak on an unguarded MSC ship: "I immediately objected to the continued operational control by the MSC command of these ships in a combat zone and strongly recommended that Marines be embarked. It was not until after horror stories began to come from the civilian masters about what was happening on these ships, and many urgent recommendations on the part of Seventh Fleet and CinCPacFlt, plus actual seizure of a ship by onboard evacuees, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally responded." Steele Comments.

\*\*Major Carl A. Shaver, the operations officer for BLT 1/4, remembered in detail the events of 2 April 1975 when, while underway, Lieutenant Colonel Hester and he hosted an operational meeting of the battalion staff members embarked on the *Dubuque*. His recollections reveal the embarked Marines' perspective on the ongoing events: "It was the general consensus of everyone present that the refugee evacuation assignment was only an intermediary mission. Obviously with all the men, money, and materials that had been poured into the war effort, it was inconceivable that the U.S. would stand idly by and allow the South Vietnamese government to lose significant amounts of real estate. Additionally, with the daily buildup of shipping and Marine combat capabilities in the area it was reasonable to assume that any immediately available Marine units could become involved in an offensive effort. Finally after approximately two hours it was time to terminate the meeting and allow various attendees to board Mike boats for transport to the ships to which they had been assigned. I closed the meeting by reminding everyone of the requirement to be innovative and creative, in executing a refugee evacuation mission of such large magnitude and one with no realistic existing precedent." Shaver Comments.

Labeled as Security Forces "Alpha" through "Delta," which matched their Marine Corps' designations, the rifle companies were distributed as follows:

Security Force "A" (Captain Harry Jensen, Jr.), *Durham*  
 Security Force "B" (Captain Robert T. Hickinbotham), *Frederick*  
 Security Force "C" (Captain Maurice O. V. Green), *Dubuque*  
 Security Force "D" (Captain Walter J. Wood), *Blue Ridge*

The Marine companies were reinforced by special evacuation teams including detachments of MP's, engineers, counterintelligence personnel, and interrogator-translators. Each attachment had a specific mission: the military policemen provided expertise in crowd control, searching procedures, and the movement of refugees once on board ship; the engineers aided in demolitions location and destruction; the counterintelligence personnel provided expertise on how to counter any sabotage and single out individuals suspected of being terrorists; and the Vietnamese interrogator-translator enabled communication with the refugees and, if necessary or desired, interviews.\*\*\*

Once on board their assigned ships, the company commanders met with their respective ship's captains and formulated a plan for the embarkation, searching, and moving of refugees, and for the overall security of the ship. Each plan had unique characteristics, specifically tailored to fit the peculiarities of the ship. The threat of sabotage was very real and therefore these plans were in detail—specifying restricted areas on the ship, refugee billeting areas, screen and search areas, and movement routes. These detailed plans encompassed all of the varied methods of embarking evacuees.

Marines and sailors hastily trained to prepare for the anticipated mass of humanity. Crowd control, evacuation procedures, and a Vietnamese orientation course occupied the Marines' time on board ship. Counterintelligence personnel briefed Marines in the problems of identifying and neutralizing saboteurs. The interrogator-translator team gave a quick Vietnamese language orientation course. Key Navy and Marine Corps officers and senior enlisted men made walk-throughs of the evacuation chain. The versatile printing section on board the *Blue Ridge* reproduced thousands of signs in Vietnamese composed by the 17th

\*\*\*Major James E. Livingston, operations officer for the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group, recently recalled: "The engineers during the RVN Evacuation Force operations were utilized to conduct metal screening of Vietnamese for weapons and explosives. They utilized these (crude but effective) detectors very effectively in support of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines detachments charged with ship security." Livingston Comments.

ITT. Captain Bushey's counterintelligence team prepared a simplified instruction card for the small unit leader that included basic Vietnamese phrases and human relations oriented "do's and don'ts." Preparation for this event was a total effort.<sup>9</sup>

On 3 April, the task force lay off Nha Trang. At this point, Colonel Alexander sent two UH-1Es aloft as a means of visually reconnoitering the coastline for refugees. He flew in the lead "chopper." The sight that greeted the airborne observers was incredible. Literally thousands of boats of every description loaded to the gunnels with refugees, were headed out to sea. Refugees on the larger craft were packed like sardines in numbers staggering the imagination. Keeping a safe distance from the shore, the airborne Hueys could see the semi-destroyed towns of Qui Nhon and Nha Trang where isolated fires dotted the landscape. The stage was set for a massive movement of panicked and fear-stricken refugees toward the ships that symbolized the last vestiges of freedom and a promise for safe haven, their most immediate need.

The next day, the *Durham*, with Security Force "A" on board, received the first group of refugees while off the coast of Cam Ranh Bay. They came slowly at first; cold, hungry, and fearful. Their numbers then rapidly increased until a priority for receiving craft had to be relayed to the refugee flotilla by interpreters. The process of evacuation, with some initial rough spots, went smoothly enough and the *Durham* took on board almost 4,000 Vietnamese. Next the *Frederick* and the *Dubuque* made preparations to receive refugees. *Frederick* pulled in relatively close to the port of Cam Ranh Bay, and its Marines and sailors watched intently as the South Vietnamese naval base fell before their eyes. After the North Vietnamese Army's tanks rolled over their opposition, they began firing at the South Vietnamese Swift boats.\* The proximity of these tanks, visible to everyone on the ship, justified a quick withdrawal and a temporary cessation of evacuation operations. Meanwhile, *Dubuque* began accepting refugees into her well deck. One unusual sidelight of this effort was gleaned from interviews with the evacuees. In preparation to receive the refugees,

the *Dubuque*, an LPD, ballasted down (filled with water) to provide a water access by which the small craft could enter the ship's well and navigate all the way to the loading ramp. The refugees mistakenly interpreted the ballasting down as the slow sinking of the ship and naturally were reluctant to leave their overcrowded but otherwise seaworthy vessel for one that was "sinking."<sup>10</sup>

At this point in the operation, the task force received a message that impacted both on the operations at hand and the long-term mission of the security force. It learned of the Joint Chiefs of Staff decision to place Marine security forces on board Military Sealift Command (MSC) ships. The Marines of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group, already involved in the Navy's evacuation effort, had been chosen to assist the MSC ships, besieged with more refugees than they could handle. One of the primary considerations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a commitment they could not ignore, Cambodia, still held first priority for the Seventh Fleet and III MAF. Worse yet, new developments in and around Saigon did not bode well for the continued life of the Vietnamese government. This alarming development meant Seventh Fleet amphibious shipping might be needed to respond to two events simultaneously. The decision to release the task force from refugee operations and move the Marine security force to MSC ships reflected senior military commanders' recognition of the dilemma facing American forces in the Western Pacific in early April 1975.

As the battlefield conditions worsened for America's allies in South Vietnam and Cambodia, it became painfully obvious that the United States was faced with innumerable uncertainties and too few solutions. Events in the Western Pacific were converging at breakneck speed, producing a seemingly unavoidable crisis. Clearly, the United States was taking decisive action to deal with the crisis, but it was impossible to determine if those steps would be enough.

Recognizing this state of affairs, the commanding general of III MAF, General Hoffman, prepared for the worst-case situation. Having only six infantry battalions available, with one, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, already committed to Operation Eagle Pull, he decided to increase the number of battalions available for deployment by relieving, as soon as possible, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines of its ship security duties. Once replaced by another contingent of Marines, the battalion would be reorganized and redesignated BLT 1/4.

\*Designed by the Louisiana-based Stewart Seacraft Company, the United States sent 84 Swift boats to South Vietnam prior to 1967 to augment the VNN's Coastal Surveillance Force. These 50-foot craft armed with .50-caliber machine guns and an 81 millimeter mortar could attain speeds in excess of 20 knots. Edward J. Marolda and G. Wesley Pryce III, *A Short History of the United States Navy and the Southeast Asian Conflict, 1950-1975* (Washington: Navy Historical Division, 1984), p. 46.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Pioneer Commander awaits refugees in the South China Sea during April 1975. Sister ship, Pioneer Contender, received a Marine security detachment on the night of 4 April.*

As a result of this decision, General Houghton ordered the 3d Marine Division to constitute a series of specially configured ships' security detachments to replace the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines.<sup>11</sup>

General Houghton published a letter of instruction to his division in which he designated specific regiments and certain battalions to form these detachments and prepare them for deployment. Fourteen days would pass before they would be activated and ordered to replace the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group. In the intervening two weeks, the 1st battalion, 4th Marines continued as the evacuation security force. During that delay, the decision to move the Marines to Military Sealift Command ships was implemented.

On the evening of 4 April, the security force received its first call for assistance from an MSC ship. Company B on board the *Frederick* received orders to place a reinforced Marine rifle platoon on board a distressed Military Sealift Command ship, the SS *Pioneer Contender*. The platoon, commanded by Second Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, Jr., was assigned this difficult task with minimum notice in less than ideal conditions. The SS *Pioneer Contender*, fully loaded with refugees and steaming south from Cam Ranh Bay en route to Phu Quoc island, had no prior notice either.

Having started its journey in Da Nang where it embarked thousands of panic-stricken refugees from that devastated city, the *Pioneer Contender* never established control of its passengers. The ship's captain, fearful of a complete breakdown in order and discipline, sent out a call for assistance. His urgent request translated into Lieutenant Lee's orders to prepare to disembark.

As night settled over the coast of South Vietnam, Lieutenant Lee and his platoon, reinforced with one interpreter, a machine gun squad, and two corpsmen, went over the side of the *Frederick* and down the wet net. For most of these young Marines, this was their introduction to amphibious-related operations, made more memorable by the seemingly tiny LCM-6, bobbing and pitching in seas so wild that all refugee operations had been cancelled. From this start, there followed a harrowing ride in complete darkness and swelling seas to a slightly, but only slightly, more stable platform, the *Pioneer Contender*. Lieutenant Lee and his men, each laden with 50 pounds of equipment and consumables, made a precarious ascent up a jury-rigged Jacob's ladder suspended from the leeward side of the ship's stern. Following this feat, the Marines struggled to the ship's superstructure, totally oblivious to the teeming mass of refugees, nearly invisible in the dark. After a quick orientation by the ship's



Department of Defense Photo (USN) K107611

*In the background is the USNS Greenville Victory which was hijacked for a change of course to the mainland by disgruntled refugees who were actually deserters from MR 1. In the foreground is an LCM-8 from USS Durham used to ferry evacuees between MSC ships.*

master, Lieutenant Lee surveyed the situation and in a classic understatement, reported to the task force commander, "7,000 on board, everything under control." There were in fact almost 16,000 on board and insufficient food and water to sustain them. Many of the refugees were armed and the threat of a hijacking very real. The day before, under similar circumstances, armed refugees, most of them former military men, seized control of the USNS *Greenville Victory* and ordered its captain under penalty of death to alter its course and take them to the mainland. After steering a direct course for Vung Tau, the mutiny ended when the hostile passengers disembarked allowing the hostage captain to regain control of his ship. The *Greenville Victory's* hijacking reminded everyone of the dangers inherent in transporting refugees and what fate could befall a complacent commander.<sup>12</sup>

The *Pioneer Contender's* journey had begun nearly a week earlier when it picked up its first refugees in the Da Nang area. On 29 March, it sailed from that port but continued to pluck people from the sea as it made its way south along the coast. Its destination, Phu Quoc (a small island off the west coast of South Vietnam in the Gulf of Thailand), had been chosen by the Saigon government as the best location to receive and house evacuees from Military Regions 1 and 2.

*A Marine from 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on board the SS Pioneer Contender comforts a Vietnamese baby. The ship made two visits to Da Nang Harbor to pick up refugees between 29 and 31 March 1975, and after the second visit it sailed to Phu Quoc Island.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 10420075

*A young refugee from MR 1 is befriended by a Marine of BLT 1/4, a member of Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group. Many BLT Marines went on board MSC ships during Operation Fortress Journey.*

Phu Quoc's only claim to fame was that it was the home of a *nuc mam* (sauce made from fermented fish) factory. The government did not want the evacuees unloaded near any of the southern population centers for fear of touching off a panic.

Once established on board the *Pioneer Contender*, after a dramatic night arrival, Lieutenant Lee turned his attention to getting his vessel's refugees to Phu Quoc without any casualties. Lee's platoon of Marines would accomplish this objective by maintaining good order on the ship through a disciplined display of force. Throughout the trip south, the proper mix of strength and confidence calmed the passengers, enabling the Marines to control them despite numerous challenges, not the least of which was the wretched living conditions, typified by the ankle-deep human waste running over the decks.<sup>13</sup>

Time and time again, Lieutenant Lee and his Marines went forward to distribute food and water at locations predesignated by their interpreter. The Marines

literally risked their lives each time they did this, because many of the refugees were starving and desperate. Just for one feeding, distribution throughout the ship was an all-day evolution, consequently causing many to fear that supplies would run out before their turn arrived. One incident pointed up the danger involved in the daily feeding routine. On that occasion, a group of Marines simply delivering the daily ration, was overwhelmed by the crush of refugees, instantly placing them in danger of being killed or seriously injured. A young Marine, Private First Class Charles P. Vidaurri, from his position in the superstructure, observed the commotion in the restless crowd and immediately delivered a burst of M-60 machine gun fire over their heads. This enabled the Marines on deck to restore order quickly and then finish distributing the day's food and water allocation. As each day seemingly grew longer in the hot sun, Lieutenant Lee used ever increasing amounts of warning fire to maintain order. He took the precaution of arming himself with a shotgun and told his platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Earle Livermore, a veteran of the Vietnam War, to do likewise. These precautions helped avoid the use of deadly force and the journey to Phu Quoc was completed without a casualty.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Military Sealift Command Operations*

Lieutenant Lee's deployment on board the SS *Pioneer Contender* marked a shift in operational priorities. The next day, 5 April, all embarkation of refugees on Navy ships ceased. (The amphibians did not get involved in evacuee transport again until the helicopter evacuations of Phnom Penh and Saigon.) The Navy ships now were free to maneuver as necessary. The restored mobility enhanced their participation in the evacuation by allowing them to locate additional refugees adrift at sea.

In this capacity, aircraft of HMM-165 conducted daily reconnaissance flights. At first, these flights covered only the Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh Bay areas, but eventually they ranged as far south as Vung Tau. Each flight observed the same thing—thousands of Vietnamese fleeing by boat from their homeland. On the coast, the North Vietnamese blitzkrieg was forcing those in its path to flee hastily, and as a result the seaborne evacuation could not keep pace with the flood of refugees. Recovery of these evacuees by the Military Sealift Command ships began off the coast of Cam Ranh Bay and within three days had moved south to Phan Rang and then Phan Thiet. Thus in less than a week, the evacuation effort had become

one of scheduling and coordination: matching available Marine security forces with the numerous requests for protection made by commercial ships laden with starving and armed refugees.

This new use of Marines—as specially tailored, reinforced, platoon-sized security forces for Military Sealift Command's ships—required new planning. Each of the four rifle companies was broken down into three “security forces,” task organized with support from the weapons platoon, medical section, engineers, military police, and interpreters. Two additional security detachments were formed out of various headquarters elements, as backups should they be needed. Various attached personnel—doctors, counterintelligence specialists, and some interpreters—were kept in a central pool to be used in general support. This security force structure was supported by ships of Task Group 76.8 and the helicopters of HMM-165. Each “force” was prepared to mount out with enough supplies to last a week.

In addition to the modifications in this force, the Navy reorganized Amphibious Ready Group Bravo. The reconstituted ARG Bravo consisted of the attack carrier, *Hancock* (CVA 19), the *Durham*, and the *Frederick*. The carrier *Hancock*, reconfigured as an LPH, served as its embarked squadron's (HMH-463) flight deck. The amphibious ready group, strengthened by the addition of the helicopter platform, prepared to embark Colonel Gray's 33d MAU. In anticipation of this reorganization, the *Durham* and *Frederick* transferred their embarked rifle companies to the *Dubuque*. This had to be done at sea in order to make room for the 33d MAU and still maintain the tactical integrity of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group. Crossdecking became a way of life for the Marines of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. Some made as many as four ship changes in a week, usually on a moment's notice.<sup>15</sup>

On 5 April, the evacuation flotilla positioned itself off the coast of Phan Rang. The 1st Platoon of Com-

*Vietnamese refugees scramble down a cargo net to a barge manned by men of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines who served as a specially tailored security force. In the foreground is tiny Pawnee, which played a role throughout the evacuation of northern South Vietnam.*

Department of Defense Photo (USN) 1162058

