

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

AN EXPANDING WAR

1966



A Marine from Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, holds his rifle chest-high as he crosses a stream. The battalion is moving to link up with the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, in Helicopter Valley, in July 1966.

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AN EXPANDING WAR

1966

by

Jack Shulimson



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
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Foreword

This is the third volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This particular volume details the continued buildup in 1966 of the III Marine Amphibious Force in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps, and the accelerated tempo of fighting during the year. The result was an "expanding war."

The III Marine Amphibious Force had established three enclaves in I Corps during 1965. Employing what they believed was a balanced strategy—base defense, offensive operations, and pacification—the Marines planned to consolidate their base areas in 1966. At the beginning of 1966, the 1st Marine Division reinforced the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam. By the end of the year, the III Marine Amphibious Force had nearly doubled in size. Two separate events, however, were to dash the high hopes held by the Marines in 1966. An internal political crisis in the spring halted the Marine pacification campaign south of the large Da Nang Airbase. In July, the North Vietnamese Army launched an incursion through the Demilitarized Zone and Marines went north to counter the enemy thrust. By December 1966, Marine units were stretched thin along the 265-mile length of I Corps. As one Marine commander observed, "too much real estate—do not have enough men."

Although written from the perspective of III MAF and the ground war in I Corps, the volume treats the activities of Marine advisors to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, and Marines on the staff of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in Saigon. There are separate chapters on Marine air, artillery, and logistics. An attempt has been made to place the Marine role in relation to the overall effort.

The author, Mr. Jack Shulimson, is the senior Vietnam historian in the History and Museums Division. He has been with the division since 1964 and is the author of several earlier classified histories and co-author of *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965: The Landing and the Buildup*. Mr. Shulimson has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Buffalo and a master of arts in history from the University of Michigan. He is at present a candidate for a doctoral degree in American studies at the University of Maryland.



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

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit monthly command chronologies, Marine Corps messages and journal files, the Oral History Collection of the History and Museums Division, comment files of the division, and previously classified studies prepared by members of the division. Especially useful in the latter category were Captain Moyers S. Shore III, "Marines in Vietnam, January-June 1966," and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody and Major Thomas E. Donnelly, "Introduction of North Vietnamese Regulars," parts III and IV of a then-projected single-volume history of the war. Two other former members of the division, Major Jack K. Ringler and Mr. George W. Garand, worked on preliminary drafts covering the 1966 period.

The author has supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 135 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events depicted in the history, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of all those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those ranks held by the individual in 1966.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, especially two former members, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers and Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Access to Marine Corps documents has been facilitated by Mrs. Joyce Bonnett and her assistant, Mrs. Linda Benedict, of the division's Archives Section. Miss Evelyn Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Pat Morgan, have been most helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Mrs. Gabrielle M. Santelli, and her successor, Mr. Danny J. Crawford, made its files available and answered numerous queries cheerfully and professionally. Gunnery Sergeant William K. Judge and Mrs. Regina Strother of the Center's former Still Photo Depository, now a part of the Defense Audio Visual Agency, assisted in photographic research. The Head, Oral Histories Section, Mr. Benis M. Frank, was equally supportive in making his collection available.

Mrs. Vivian A. Lyon and Miss Faye A. Grant typed numerous card entries for the Index, and Major Edward F. Wells provided excellent assistance to the author in organizing it.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of Publications Production Section, and his predecessor, Mr. Paul D. Johnston, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Maps were produced by Staff Sergeant Jerry L. Jakes and Mr. Richard A. Hillman. Mr. Hillman also did the design and layout of the book. The manuscript was typeset first, for the comment edition, by Corporal Paul W. Gibson. Final typesetting was accomplished by Corporals Gibson and Joseph J. Hynes, with Miss Catherine A. Stoll contributing significant technical expertise, and assistance in final stages from Lance Corporal Mark J. Zigante.

Special thanks are due Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, who established the guidelines for the Vietnam series and made available his personal notebooks for 1966 when he commanded the 9th Marines; Colonel John E. Greenwood, former Deputy Director for Marine Corps History, who closely supervised the comment edition and gave wise counsel; his successor, Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., who pushed the project to completion; and Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who provided me with the benefit of his long experience in writing Marine Corps history, encouragement when it was needed, and general editorial direction. I am indebted to my colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, who freely exchanged information and made documents available for my examination. I must express my gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and insight available only to those who took part in the events. Finally, however, the author is responsible for the contents of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jack Shulimson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

JACK SHULIMSON

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PART I
THE MARINE BASE AREAS
IN EARLY 1966

CHAPTER 1

A Larger Force for a Growing War, III MAF in January 1966

III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs—Command Relations—Planned Deployment of the 1st Marine Division—The Enemy Buildup—The Marine Counterinsurgency War Versus the MACV Perspective—Marine Mission and Future Plans

III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs

The III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) began 1966 with reason for optimism. From its origin as the 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) in March of 1965, III MAF had developed into a potent combined arms force consisting of the reinforced 3d Marine Division, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and supporting components. Major General Lewis W. Walt, the burly and much decorated III MAF commanding general, now had more than 41,000 men under his command.

The Marines were located in the northernmost of South Vietnam's four military regions, I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). To the north the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), immediately north and south of the Ben Hai River, separated North and South Vietnam. Bordered by Laos to the west, the South China Sea to the east, and II Corps Tactical Zone (II CTZ) to the south, I Corps extended 265 miles from north to south and varied in width from 30 to 70 miles east to west, encompassing 10,000 square miles.

The heavily forested Annamite mountain chain dominated western I Corps. East of the Annamites, the terrain gradually descended into densely vegetated hill masses, interlaced by river valleys and stream beds. A rich alluvial coastal plain characterized eastern I Corps, with occasional ridges, running from the mountains to the sea, compartmentalizing the region.

I Corps was not only a military and political division, but also a significant cultural and economic area. Its five provinces, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai, contained 2.6 million people. Two of South Vietnam's major cities were located in I Corps: Hue, the ancient imperial and cultural capital of Vietnam, and Da Nang, formerly called Tourane by the French, a large seaport, second in size only to Saigon. The

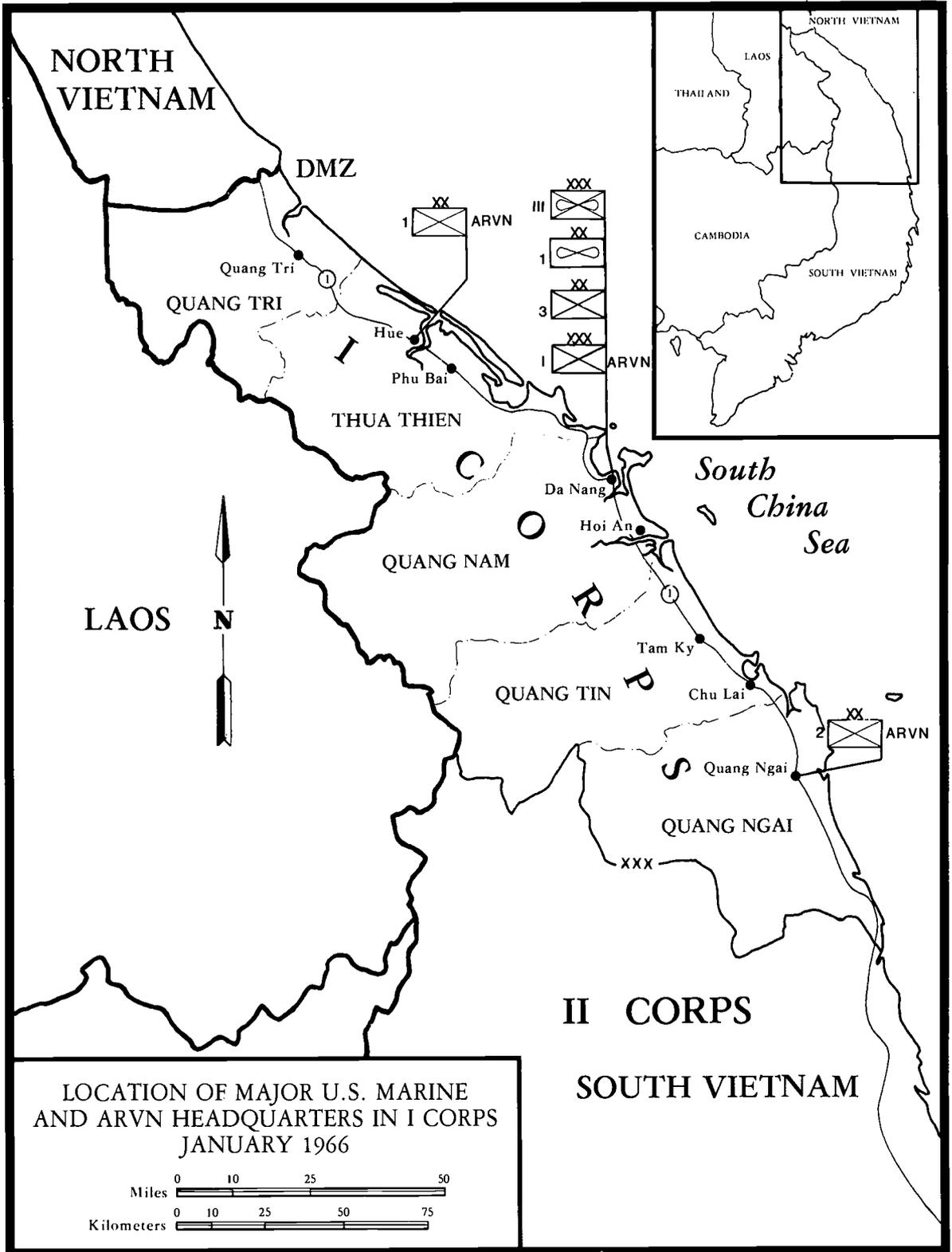
bulk of the population lived in the coastal region and fertile river valleys where most made their living as rice farmers or fishermen.

In 1966, two Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) divisions were in I Corps. The 1st ARVN Division, with its headquarters at Hue, was responsible for the two northern provinces of Thua Thien and Quang Tri. In southern I Corps, the ARVN 2d Division, headquartered at Quang Ngai City, was deployed in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. An independent regiment, the ARVN 51st, protected the approaches to Da Nang in Quang Nam Province.

With the deterioration of South Vietnamese Government control in the spring of 1965 and subsequent American intervention, the 9th MEB established an eight-square-mile base at the Da Nang Airfield. By January 1966, Marine forces, now III MAF, were operating from three enclaves in I Corps which contained 800 square miles and held over 400,000 South Vietnamese civilians. The large Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) consisted of more than 530 square miles.* Over a quarter of a million South Vietnamese lived within its limits, largely in the fertile coastal plain between the air base and the junction of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers.

Fifty miles south of Da Nang along the coast was the Marines' second largest base, Chu Lai. By the

*According to present U.S. military usage, a TAOR is, "A defined area of land for which responsibility is specifically assigned to the commander of the area as a measure for control of assigned forces and coordination of support." See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, JCS Pub 1 (Washington, 3Jan72), p. 295. Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, who commanded Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 during 1965 and early 1966, emphasized that when his unit arrived in Vietnam in August 1965 the term TAOR referred to much more than tactical operations. "It seemed to imply the Civic Action Program, pacification, charitable works and many other human kindnesses. . . ." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).





Marine Corps Photo A186662

The American and South Vietnamese flags fly in front of the 3d Marine Division Headquarters at Da Nang. This massive bunkered structure reinforced by timbers and concrete was indicative of the growing Marine presence in I Corps.

beginning of 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR contained 205 square miles of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces and over 100,000 persons, who lived in the numerous fishing and farming hamlets in the area.

Phu Bai in Thua Thien Province, the third Marine base, was approximately 35 miles northwest of Da Nang and eight miles southeast of Hue. The Phu Bai TAOR was the smallest of the three, only 76 square miles in area with 36,000 persons living in the six villages surrounding the small airstrip there.

Da Nang, the central and largest of the three bases, was the site of the headquarters of III MAF, the 3d Marine Division, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, with a total of six infantry battalions, were also in the Da Nang TAOR. An artillery regiment,

the 12th Marines, which had its headquarters and two battalions at Da Nang, supported the infantry.

The rest of the 3d Division was divided proportionately between the other two bases. Two regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, consisting of five infantry battalions supported by a two-battalion artillery group, were at Chu Lai. At Phu Bai, the Marines positioned an infantry battalion, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by an artillery battalion, the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, both under the operational control of the 3d Marines at Da Nang.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing also was widely dispersed. One fixed-wing group, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11, was based at Da Nang and another, MAG-12, at Chu Lai. The Marine



Marine Corps Photo A194585

MajGen Lewis W. Walt, Commanding General, III MAF (left), pins the second star on his newly promoted deputy, MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon. Gen McCutcheon is also the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam.

helicopter groups were deployed in the same manner; MAG-16 was stationed at the Marble Mountain Air Facility in the Da Nang enclave, and MAG-36 was located at the Ky Ha Air Facility in the Chu Lai TAOR. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163 from MAG-16 was assigned to Phu Bai, while still another MAG-36 squadron, HMM-363, was at Qui Nhon in II Corps under the operational control of the U.S. Army command, Field Force, Vietnam.

General Walt was the commanding general of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division. Walt, an all-conference guard in football at Colorado State University and an honors graduate of the ROTC unit, accepted a Marine commission upon his graduation in 1936. As a member of the 1st Raider Battalion on Guadalcanal during World War II, he earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart as well as a battlefield promotion to lieutenant colonel. Later in the war, he was awarded two Navy Crosses, one at Cape Gloucester, where a key terrain objective became known as "Walt's Ridge," and the second at Peleliu, which also had its "Walt's Ridge." During the Korean War, he commanded the 5th Marines in 1952-53 and then became the G-3 of the 1st Marine Division. On 4 June 1965, as the junior major general of the Marine Corps, General Walt assumed command of III MAF.¹

Major General Keith B. McCutcheon, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, was also the III MAF deputy commander.* McCutcheon, a slight, deceptively soft-spoken man, had had a brilliant, innovative career in Marine aviation. He played a leading role in the development of Marine close air support doctrine during World War II and in the postwar development of helicopter tactics. During the Korean War, he commanded HMR-161, the Marine helicopter squadron which supported the 1st Marine Division. Prior to assuming command of the 1st MAW in May 1965, McCutcheon had served as the operations officer on the staff of Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific Command (CinCPac), who was responsible for all U.S. forces in the Pacific, including Vietnam.²

To help him with the widely scattered forces, logistics, and construction effort, General Walt had two assistant division commanders in the 3d Marine Division. Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt coordinated activities at Chu Lai, while Brigadier General Lowell E. English assisted Walt at Da Nang. This arrangement lasted until mid-March, when Walt was relieved of his direct responsibility for the 3d Marine Division.**

Command Relations

Command relations in the Vietnam War were complicated by the very nature of the war and the way the United States entered the conflict. Starting with a strength of a few thousand when it was established on 8 February 1962, the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) was committed to the training of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) to fight a counterinsurgency war. As the dimensions of the struggle increased through the succeeding years, the American involvement correspondingly expanded. In 1965, the first major U.S. combat units deployed to Viet-

*At the beginning of 1966, General McCutcheon was still a brigadier general. He received his second star in a formal promotion ceremony at Da Nang on 22 January. See 1st MAW ComdC, Jan66.

**See Chapter 4 for the restructuring of the III MAF command relations in March.

nam and by the beginning of 1966, MACV totaled nearly 185,000 men.

General William C. Westmoreland, a former airborne commander and West Point superintendent, who had assumed command of MACV in June 1964, combined several command functions in his person. He not only headed the military advisory effort to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, but also was a subordinate unified commander under CinCPac. In this latter capacity, he had operational control of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, including III MAF, Field Force, Vietnam, and the U.S. Air Force 2d Air Division, and was responsible for the overall U.S. military conduct of the war, with the exception of the bombing of North Vietnam and the limited air and air-ground operations in Laos. Admiral Sharp retained personal direction of the air campaign in the north while General Westmoreland shared responsibility with the U.S. Ambassador in Laos for the U.S. operations conducted in that country.³ Westmoreland also functioned as the Army component commander and as such was the Commanding General, U.S. Army, Vietnam, the Army's logistic, administrative, and support command within South Vietnam.*

General Walt's command responsibilities were almost as diverse as General Westmoreland's. Not only was he commander of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division, he was also ComUSMACV's Naval Component Commander, Vietnam (NCC), having under his operational control the Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (Seabees) in I Corps. In his role as NCC, Walt was concerned with common item supply for U.S. forces in I Corps, base construction in the northern provinces, and the running of all ports, beaches, and depots from Quang Ngai Province in southern I Corps to the DMZ. As the commander of both III MAF and the Naval Component,

General Walt served directly under the MACV commander. For purely Marine administrative and Marine logistic considerations, however, he reported to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (CGFMFPac), Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak.

As NCC, with operational control of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, Walt had a direct link to the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CinCPacFlt), Admiral Roy L. Johnson. This occurred because Johnson retained command of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, exercising it through Vice Admiral Edwin B. Hooper, Commander, Service Force, Pacific Fleet. General Walt also held one other position that was distinct and separate from his responsibilities as CG III MAF. Since August 1965, he had been the Senior U.S. Advisor for I Corps and directed the U.S. advisory effort in the five northern provinces. Thus, in one capacity or another, General Walt directed the activity of nearly all U.S. forces in I Corps.**

Political considerations limited the authority of the U.S. military in Vietnam. General Westmoreland did not have command of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, and his military advisory functions often overlapped those of the U.S. civilian assistance program under the U.S. Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who then was serving his second tour in that position. Westmoreland's relationship with both the South Vietnamese and the U.S. Embassy was one of close consultation and coordination. He was a member of the U.S. Mission Council, chaired by Ambassador Lodge, which developed and coordinated U.S. policy within South Vietnam. Moreover, General Westmoreland was the senior

*According to U.S. military doctrine, "With the exception of the commander of a unified command and members of his joint staff, the senior officer of each Service assigned to a unified command and qualified for command by the regulations of his own Service is the commander of the component of his Service. . . ." JCS, *Unified Action Armed Forces* (UNAAF), JCS Pub. 2 (Washington, D.C., Nov59), p. 40. As a subordinate unified commander, General Westmoreland could have designated another Army general to head the Army component command, but decided to retain responsibility for this function in his own person.

**Vice Admiral Hooper commented that these complex command relations were not "widely understood. Yet from them stem much of the effectiveness and flexibility of the Navy and Marine Forces. The exercise of responsibility and authority up the Navy's chain of command was one of the secrets of the notable success of the logistic support provided by the Navy." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Hugh M. Elwood, who became assistant wing commander of the 1st MAW in April 1966, was less sanguine about command relations, remarking that "CGFMFPac, in his Op Order, applied the term 'Command less OpCon' to III MAF. This made command relations sticky indeed since it gave CG III MAF two masters. . . ." LtGen Hugh M. Elwood, Comments on draft MS, dtd 4Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, which according to the former MACV commander, gave him "defacto control over the broad scope of operations."⁴

General Walt developed similar procedures with the South Vietnamese authorities and U.S. civilian agencies in I Corps. He and the Regional Director of the U.S. Operation Mission (USOM) in the I Corps Sector, Marcus J. Gordon, initiated the organization of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. The council consisted of senior representatives from the Marine command, the Navy, the U.S. civilian assistance program, and the Vietnamese Government who met once a month under the chairmanship of General McCutcheon. It had no command responsibility, but under its auspices the various American and South Vietnamese civilian and military authorities could meet, discuss their programs, coordinate policy, and smooth out misunderstandings.*

As significant as the development of the Council, and perhaps even more so, was the close relationship that General Walt established with the volatile I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi. Thi, who as a paratroop brigade commander had led an abortive coup against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime as early as 1960, played a large role in the inner circle of "young Turk" military commanders who dominated South Vietnamese politics following the fall of Diem in 1963. As I Corps commander, Thi controlled both the South Vietnamese civilian and military apparatus in I Corps. Although not openly defiant of Saigon, he carefully selected the directives which he chose to obey. In the South Vietnamese capital, one often heard rumors that Thi was about to lead a coup against the flamboyant Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and the more reticent General Nguyen Van Thieu, who, respectively, as the Commissioner in Charge of the Executive Branch and the Chairman of the Joint Directorate, the official name for the ruling military junta, governed South Vietnam.⁵

General Walt did not concern himself with the machinations of Vietnamese politics, but rather with

the establishment of a working partnership with General Thi. The Marine general respected the courage and military competence of the Vietnamese I Corps commander and recognized that Thi also had political responsibilities. Walt later commented, "We sometimes find that this political purpose and military purpose get on collision courses, but always to date we [Thi and himself] have been able to sit down and talk this out." Acknowledging that Thi was an ambitious man, Walt nevertheless believed that the Vietnamese general's ambition lay in making I Corps an example for the rest of the country.⁶

During 1966, the existing command relations were to become even more complex as the war, and the American role in it, expanded. As hope for any peaceful solution to the conflict diminished and the American "peace" offensive, inaugurated in late 1965 by a temporary suspension of the bombing of the north, proved futile, the war increased in intensity and dimension. With the accelerated arrival of U.S. combat forces, MACV planned further alterations of its component commands. The one that directly affected the Marine Corps was the proposed change in the NCC.

Both General Westmoreland and Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, commander of the Naval Advisory Group, believed that the increased naval participation in the war required a naval component commander to be in Saigon, directly under COMUSMACV. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the forceful Commandant of the Marine Corps, who was in Vietnam on an inspection trip in January, met with General Westmoreland and Admiral Ward in Saigon and received their assurances that an independent NCC would not alter command relations between MACV and III MAF. Although agreeing to the need for a large naval role in Vietnam, Greene suggested that the proposal receive further study in order to determine its possible ramifications. When he asked General Walt for his opinion a few days after the Saigon meeting, the latter replied that he had no objection to the transfer of his NCC responsibility to the Navy, as long as Marines had a "strong representation on the policy and working level."⁷

*Colonel Sumner A. Vale observed that whatever the successes of the Joint Coordinating Council it did not create a "unity of effort"—U.S. and Vietnamese, civil and military—comparable to

what the British found essential for counterinsurgency operations in Malaya. Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 18Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Planned Deployment of the 1st Marine Division

With the continuing buildup of U.S. forces, increasing responsibility was spread among the various component services of MACV. In late 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara recommended to President Lyndon B. Johnson the doubling of U.S. forces in Vietnam during the new year. For the Marine Corps, this involved the further deployment of both ground and air units to Vietnam and the establishment of a force structure for III MAF consisting of 18 infantry battalions, 21 aviation squadrons, and other supporting units, totaling approximately 70,000 troops.⁸

The major deployment for the Marines during the first half of the year was to be the movement of the 1st Marine Division from Okinawa to Vietnam. Major General Lewis J. "Jeff" Fields, the division commander, an experienced artillery and staff officer who had served with the 11th Marines during both World War II and Korea, had transferred the headquarters of the division from Camp Pendleton, California, to Camp Courtney, Okinawa, in August 1965. He held a rear echelon, including the 5th Marines, at Pendleton under his assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles. Even before the establishment of the division forward headquarters at Courtney, one of its regiments, the 7th Marines, sailed from Okinawa for Vietnam with its 1st Battalion. The other two battalions had already departed Okinawa; the 2d Battalion was inserted at Qui Nhon in II Corps and the 3d Battalion became the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) battalion. By the end of the year, all three 7th Marines battalions and a supporting artillery battalion from the 11th Marines were at Chu Lai. Two other infantry battalions from the division were also in Vietnam at this time, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang and the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. These two battalions represented no further reinforcement for III MAF, but were "in country" as a result of an FMFPac intratheater rotation system. Under this policy, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rotated from Vietnam with the former battalion slated to become the SLF with the Seventh Fleet and the latter returned to Okinawa for rest and refitting.⁹

Under the new deployment authorized by the President, the division headquarters, the regimental

headquarters of the 1st, 5th and 11th Marines, the remaining infantry and artillery battalions, and division support elements were scheduled to reinforce III MAF. Lieutenant Colonel Roy E. Moss, the 1st Marine Division embarkation officer, related that he learned about the decision at a December conference at FMFPac Headquarters in Honolulu at which a tentative schedule for moving the division to Vietnam was drawn up. Moss arrived back on Okinawa at 0200, the morning of 27 December and five hours later briefed General Fields. According to Moss, the general asked, "Roy, how do we get all of our units moved to Vietnam . . . ?" Moss replied that the tentative schedule called for 30 ships, staggered over a two and a half month period, to accomplish the mission. General Fields approved and sent Moss to Subic Bay in the Philippines to discuss the matter with representatives of Task Force 76, the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force. At the U.S. Naval Base at Subic, the Navy agreed that with "judicious scheduling [it] could meet the needs of the division."¹⁰

The Enemy Buildup

The American buildup did not occur in a vacuum, but because of the South Vietnamese inability to cope with the increase in strength of the Communist-led forces within South Vietnam. Allied intelligence estimates of the total enemy strength in South Vietnam had risen from a possible 138,000 in March 1965 to over 226,000 men by the end of the year. MACV believed that these forces consisted of more than 110,000 guerrillas, 39,000 political cadre, 18,000 combat support troops, and approximately 70,000 men organized in regular formations, including 19 regiments ranging from 2,000 to 2,500 men in strength. Seven of these regiments were positively identified as North Vietnamese.¹¹

Although Communist North Vietnam had long provided the insurgency in the south with leadership, inspiration, and logistic support, it was not until late 1964 that regular North Vietnamese Army [NVA] units began to infiltrate into South Vietnam, and it was not until the autumn of 1965 that the first major encounter between allied forces and North Vietnamese troops occurred. In October, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) defeated elements of two NVA regiments, the 32^d and 33^d, during the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in the II Corps Central Highlands. The following month, the South Viet-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

North Vietnamese Army troops parade in Hanoi. By the beginning of 1966, North Vietnamese regulars were infiltrating into South Vietnam at the rate of 12 battalions per month.

name 37th Ranger Battalion repulsed the *NVA 18th Regiment's* attack of the Thach Tru outpost, 16 miles south of Quang Ngai City. Despite the allied victories in these two engagements, the growing North Vietnamese presence in the south alarmed both the South Vietnamese and American commands. General Westmoreland later stated that the North Vietnamese were infiltrating at the rate of 12 battalions a month at the end of the year and more than 26,000 NVA soldiers had come south during 1965.^{12*}

Larger enemy formations continued to appear in South Vietnam in 1966, especially in the Central Highlands, southern I Corps, and the border region between I Corps and II Corps. By early 1966, three

North Vietnamese divisions were operating in these areas: the *1st NVA Division*, consisting of the *33d*, *32d*, and *66th NVA Regiments*, was in the Central Highland provinces of Pleiku and Kontum; the *2d NVA Division*, consisting of the *21st NVA*, *3d NVA* and *1st Viet Cong (VC) Regiments*, was in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces; and the *3d NVA Division*, consisting of the *18th NVA*, *22d NVA*, and *2d VC Regiments*, was in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces. The allies also received reports of a substantial North Vietnamese unit buildup just north of the DMZ.

The Communists made several administrative changes in their command and control organization which reflected the increasing North Vietnamese role in the war, especially in northern South Vietnam. Since 1961, the headquarters of *Military Region 5 (MR-5)*, which extended from Quang Tri Province in the north to Dar Loc and Khanh Hoa Provinces in the south, had been responsible for both military operations and the political ad-

*U.S. Air Force historians commented that Rand Corporation analysts in a 1968 study of infiltration raised the estimate of North Vietnamese moving into South Vietnam during 1965 to 36,000 personnel, "roughly a three-fold increase over the total for 1964." Office of Air Force History, Comments on draft MS, dtd 28Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

ministrative process in this sector. Although *MR-5* received both military and political direction from North Vietnam, the headquarters was ostensibly subordinate to the *Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN)*, the Viet Cong military high command and politburo. The North Vietnamese partially discarded the facade of subordination to *COSVN* when they established two new commands. In the Central Highland provinces of Kontum, Dar Loc, and Pleiku, they formed the *B-3 Front* which was directly under North Vietnamese military control, while in I Corps, they detached the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from *Military Region 5*. These two provinces then became the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region* under the direct control of *Military Region 4*, the administrative and military subdivision for southern North Vietnam.

*The Marine Counter guerrilla War
Versus the MACV Perspective*

Despite the buildup of enemy main force units and North Vietnamese intervention, the major concern of the Marine command in I Corps was with the tightly knit VC political and guerrilla substructure. Of the 30,000 estimated Viet Cong and NVA in I Corps, approximately half were believed to be irregulars, subordinate to local village and hamlet level VC organizations. At Da Nang, for example, III MAF estimated no more than 2,000 main force and local force VC troops to be within a 25-mile radius of the airbase, yet the Communist political and guerrilla apparatus permeated the southern portion of the TAOR.¹³ General Walt estimated that this VC local "infrastructure" controlled one-third of the population living in I Corps and influenced, largely through terror, still another third of the populace.¹⁴

Confronted with this situation, the Marines had emphasized small-unit counter guerrilla tactics through 1965 rather than multibattalion operations against the enemy's main force units. Operation Starlite, south of Chu Lai in August, and Operation Harvest Moon, in the Que Son Valley along the border between Quang Nam and Quang Tin in December were notable exceptions, but the emphasis was on pacification. General Walt stressed that the objective of the war was to win the loyalty of the populace to the government, and the only way to

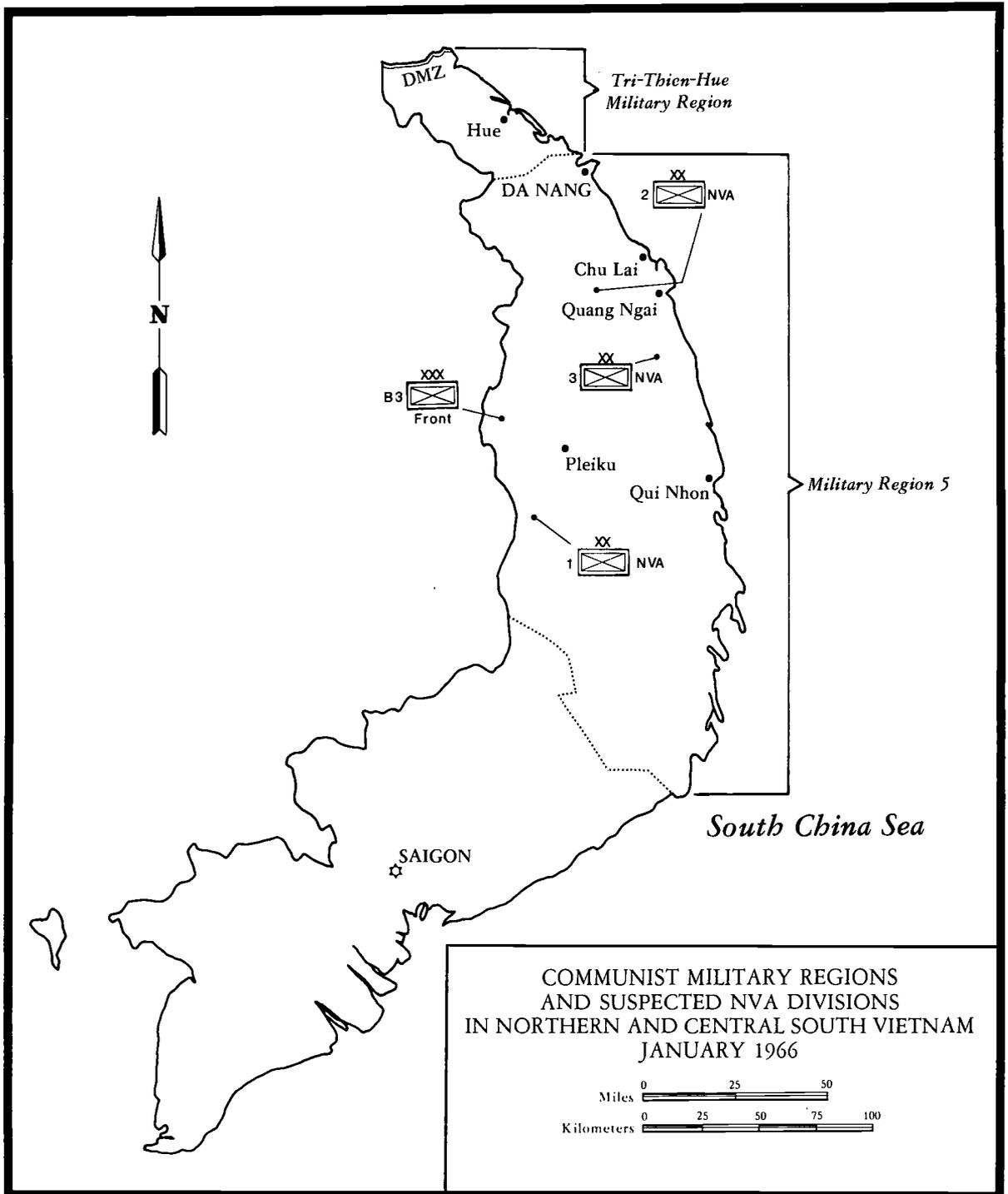


Marine Corps Historical Collection
General Nguyen Chi Tranh, who in 1966 was Commander-in-Chief, "Liberation Army of South Vietnam," and Chief of the Viet Cong Central Office for South Vietnam, is seen reading a book in his South Vietnam headquarters. Tranh was also a general in the North Vietnamese Army and a member of that government's National Defense Council.

obtain this objective was to eradicate the Viet Cong in the villages and hamlets. This was what the Marines sought to do. In describing this pacification effort, one former Marine staff officer, Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., the 3d Marine Division G-2 in January 1966, later wrote that:

... to reassure the villagers that they were safe, supported and protected, U.S. Marines undertook a most demanding pattern of intensive, multiple, day-and-night, tedious patrol activity. The incredible total of man-hours devoted to this end and the sincere, compassionate, and dedicated manner in which thousands of Marines did their duty were never understood or appreciated by outsiders.¹⁵

General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, was a strong advocate of the III MAF concept of operations. Known since his Naval Academy days as the "Brute," partially as a jesting reference to his small stature, but also in deference to his commanding and forthright personality, Krulak had served earlier



as a special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs during the Kennedy administration. According to General Krulak, Admiral Sharp used him as a personal advisor "on *all* Marine matters," and he [Krulak] sought to persuade:

CinCPac . . . that there was no virtue at all in seeking out the NVA in the mountains and jungle; that so long as they stayed there they were a threat to nobody, that our efforts should be addressed to the rich, populous lowlands. . . .¹⁶

Krulak argued:

It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among these mountains.¹⁷

General Westmoreland had a different perspective. He contended that the introduction of North Vietnamese Army units into the south created an entirely new situation. The MACV commander's opinion was that the Communists wanted to develop multidivision forces in relatively secure base areas, while at the same time continuing extensive guerrilla action to tie down allied forces. His intelligence staff section stated that the enemy planned to mount major offensives in 1966 in the provinces northwest of Saigon and in the Central Highlands. According to MACV, the enemy hoped to achieve control of the Pleiku-Quy Nhon axis and thus isolate I Corps from the rest of Vietnam. General Westmoreland viewed 1966 as a year of transition in which he was building up his troop strength and "a widespread logistical infrastructure (ports, airfield, supply storage areas, etc.)." He believed that in order to protect his vulnerable base areas, he had to husband his forces and resources and use in concert the intelligence available, the tactical mobility, and the shock action his troops possessed to launch spoiling attacks and keep the enemy's main forces off-balance.¹⁸

The MACV commander, moreover, had some reservations about the thrust of the Marine Corps pacification campaign. He recalled that in 1964, the ARVN 22d Division in the populated, coastal Binh Dinh Province had concentrated on small-unit operations against the guerrilla forces, and as:

. . . progress began to become evident, two main-force enemy regiments debouched from the hills and virtually destroyed the spread-out South Vietnamese units in detail, making a shambles of the pacification program. It took well over a year to recover what was lost.¹⁹

General Westmoreland's staff reinforced his doubts about the Marine Corps concentration on the small-unit counter guerrilla campaign south of Da Nang. On 15 November 1965, Brigadier General William E. DePuy, the MACV J-3, reported to General Westmoreland after a visit to III MAF that he was "disturbed by the fact that all but a tiny part of the I Corps area is under the control of the VC who have freedom of movement east and west—north and south—outside the Marine enclaves." DePuy stated that the Marines were "stalled a short distance south of Da Nang," because the Vietnamese were unable to "fill in behind Marines in their expanding enclaves." Although impressed with the Marine professionalism and concern for the "security of the people and the pacification process," General DePuy believed that III MAF should use part of its force "as a mobile element throughout the Corps." He recommended to General Westmoreland that the Marines "be directed" to launch large-unit offensive operations against VC base areas "with two to three battalion forces during at least two weeks out of every month."²⁰

General Westmoreland agreed with his operations officer's analysis of Marine operations. As he later wrote: "I believed the Marines should have been trying to find the enemy's main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population." Although General Westmoreland wanted the Marines to form mobile strike forces, he "had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt" that he would "precipitate an interservice imbroglio." He recognized that "as a senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution." Westmoreland explained, "Rather than start a controversy, I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads."²¹

From the III MAF perspective, the differences with MACV were more in emphasis than in substance. General Walt did not consider his "ink blot strategy," with its gradual extension of the



Marine Corps Photo A186695
Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, holds a news conference at Da Nang during a visit there in January 1966. Gen Walt is seated to his right.

Marine enclaves as manpower became available, necessarily in conflict with General Westmoreland's advocacy of highly mobile "search and destroy"* operations aimed at the enemy's main force units. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF operations officer, later observed:

Westmoreland's view was, "Yes, we accept the Marine Corps' concern about pacification, but we want you to do more." He wanted the Marines to experiment with lighter battalions and new tactics. General Walt's position was, "Yes, I will engage the enemy's main force units, but first I want to have good intelligence."²²

At FMFPac Headquarters, General Krulak viewed

*General Westmoreland believes that the term "search and destroy," which was later abandoned, had been distorted by critics to imply "aimless searches in the jungle and the random destroying of villages and other property." Westmoreland states that this was not the case, and that "search and destroy" was nothing more than an operational term for a tactic . . . , synonymous with "sweeping operations or reconnaissance in force." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 83. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1966, observed in his comments: "Search and destroy means traversing the same terrain repeatedly against a nebulous foe—while the people were untended." Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

the Marine differences with MACV as more basic. He recalled in 1978 that he differed with General Westmoreland, ". . . not in a limited, but in a profound way." Krulak declared, "Our effort belonged where the people were, *not* where they weren't. I shared these thoughts with Westmoreland frequently, but made no progress in persuading him."²³

In Washington, the Commandant perceived the disagreement between the Marines and MACV in much the same way as General Krulak. General Greene later stated that General Westmoreland and his commanders were preoccupied with the large unit war and that, "From the very beginning the prime error had been the failure to make the population secure—to stamp out the VC hidden in town and hamlet." Greene contended that:

I Corps was ideally established geographically (the bulk of the population in a narrow coastal strip) to do this—and to initiate security operations from the sea against key points along the coast.

He declared that he had advocated such a strategy:

. . . in a presentation to the Joint Chiefs and to General Westmoreland. The Chiefs were interested but Westmoreland wasn't and being CG MACV his views of the "big picture," the "broad arrow," prevailed. . . .²⁴

Marine Mission and Future Plans

Despite the differences over pacification and the big-unit war between MACV and the Marines, the basic directives which governed III MAF operations were broad enough to incorporate both approaches. According to the 21 November 1965 MACV Letter of Instruction (LOI) to General Walt, the mission of III MAF was to:

Conduct military operations in I ARVN Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps, and in other areas of RVN [Republic of Vietnam] to defeat the VC and extend GVN [Government of South Vietnam] control over all of Vietnam.

In order to carry out this assignment, the Marines were to defend and secure the base areas of Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai; to conduct search and destroy missions against VC forces which posed an

immediate threat to these bases; to launch other search and destroy operations against more distant enemy base areas; to extend clearing operations in selected areas contiguous to the major bases; and finally to execute any contingency plan in I CTZ or elsewhere in Vietnam as directed by ComUSMACV.²⁵

These all-encompassing objectives were reinforced by the U.S./GVN Combined Campaign Plan for 1966 which was promulgated by General Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff on 31 December 1965. American forces were to secure their base areas and conduct clearing operations in the vicinity of the base, and all "friendly forces were to conduct operations against VC forces in heretofore 'safe havens, areas, and bases.'"²⁶

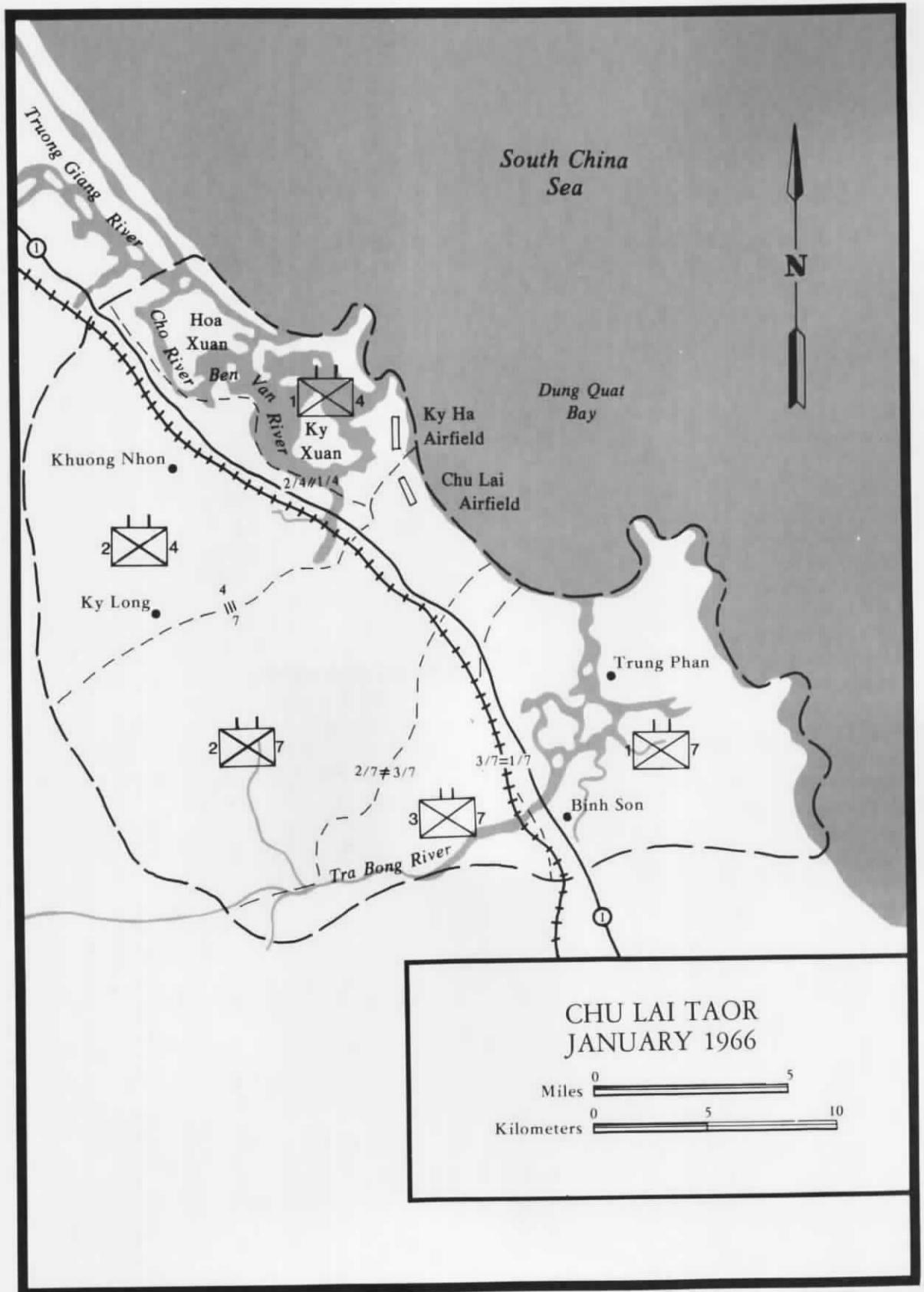
Working within these very general guidelines, General Walt's III MAF 1966 campaign plan maintained a balance among mutually supporting activities. This "balanced approach" consisted of a three-pronged effort comprised of search and destroy missions, counterinsurgency operations, and pacification.* With the aim of extending government con-

trol throughout I Corps, the Marines were to concentrate first on the coastal region between Da Nang and Chu Lai. Once the linkup of these two TAORs was accomplished, the Marine command was to focus its attention on the coast north of Da Nang to the DMZ and south of Chu Lai to the II Corps' boundary. III MAF believed that it could secure the entire coastal plain from Quang Tri to Quang Ngai by the end of 1966 and could make considerable progress in the populated inland river valleys.²⁷

General Walt based his concept of operations on several contingency factors, the two most important being the arrival of additional allied forces and no North Vietnamese buildup except in southern I Corps. With the arrival of the remainder of the 1st Marine Division and the possibility of obtaining operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade, then in II Corps, the III MAF commander had hopes of having 21 infantry battalions under his command by midyear. He required 10 battalions to develop and defend the base areas, which would allow 11 battalions for more mobile operations.²⁸

During 1966, the implementation of III MAF plans was different at each of the Marine enclaves; the military situation at each base was dissimilar and called for various approaches. With only one infantry battalion at Phu Bai, the northern Marine enclave was primarily concerned about base defense. At Da Nang, major emphasis was on pacification because of the highly concentrated population south of the airbase. Although not neglecting the pacification aspects, the proportionately stronger Marine forces in the less settled Chu Lai region were able to mount operations against the enemy's regular force buildup in southern I Corps.

*General Krulak commented in 1978 that this "balanced approach" was a compromise with Westmoreland and not a balance, that every man we put into hunting for the NVA was wasted. . . ." The former FMFPac commander further maintained that he had sought to persuade CinCPac that this approach was "a mutation strategy . . . designed to pacify all shades of strategic thought; that if we persisted in such a compromise, we would bleed ourselves—which we did." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File).



CHAPTER 2

Expanding War in Southern I Corps

The Chu Lai TAOR—Operation Double Eagle

The Chu Lai TAOR

In January 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR, which straddled the Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Province boundary, stretched from Hoa Xuan Island in the north to just below the town of Binh Son in the south, a distance of 17 miles. The eastern portion of the TAOR bordered the South China Sea and the western sector extended 15 miles inland at its widest point. Route 1, the major north-south highway, bisected the TAOR, paralleling the coast and connecting Chu Lai to Da Nang, 57 miles to the northwest, and Quang Ngai City, 20 miles to the south.

In the Chu Lai region, the Annamite chain reaches within four miles of the sea and the coastal plain is relatively narrow, limiting the amount of arable land. Several rivers provide drainage, the most important being the Truong Giang, the Cho, the Ben Van, and the Tra Bong. With the South China Sea, these waterways form islands, peninsulas, coves, and bays along the coast which provide an excellent livelihood for the inhabitants of the several fishing villages in the region.

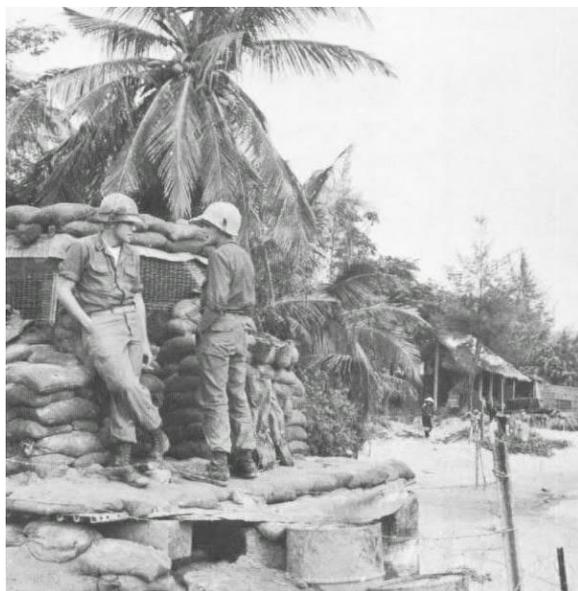
Selected in 1964 as a possible site for a supplementary airbase to Da Nang, Chu Lai became a major Marine base in May 1965. Immediately after landing, Marines and Seabees began work on a short airfield for tactical support (SATS) inland from Dung Quat Bay, aligned with the prevailing winds, northwest to southeast. Within a month, MAG-12's Douglas A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft were flying from Chu Lai. Soil stabilization was a continuous problem throughout 1965, but at least half the 8,000-foot runway was always operational. In addition, III MAF had contracted with a U.S. commercial firm for the construction of a permanent 10,000-foot concrete runway, 2,000 meters west of the SATS

field.* Northwest of the SATS field, the Marines and Seabees had already built a helicopter air facility on Ky Ha Peninsula, which, since September 1965, had been the base of operations for MAG-36.

With the buildup of Marine forces at Chu Lai during the summer of 1965, General Walt appointed Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, one of his two assistant division commanders (ADC), the base coordinator. In November 1965, newly promoted Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt relieved Karch at Chu Lai after the latter had completed his overseas tour. Platt was responsible for the 14,000 Marines at Chu Lai, the defense of the base, and all tactical ground operations. He had operational control of two reinforced infantry regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, and the artillery group, consisting of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines. As the Chu Lai Base Coordinator, General Platt directed the security arrangements for the two Marine aircraft groups, Colonel Leslie E. Brown's MAG-12 and Colonel William G. Johnson's MAG-36, as well as for the Chu Lai Logistic Support Unit.

The two infantry regiments shared the responsibility for the defense of the base. Colonel James F. McClanahan's 4th Marines had two battalions on line for the protection of the northern and central portions of the TAOR. His northernmost, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, defended the northern coastal approaches and the Chu Lai vital areas.

*In the strict sense, Chu Lai was not a true SATS field. "A SATS is a type of shore-based carrier deck complete with catapult and arresting gear. The Chu Lai field was longer than a true SATS and a catapult was not installed until April 1966, but it did use SATS components." LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation in Vietnam, 1962-70," *Naval Review*, 1971, pp. 129-130. For additional information concerning the building of the airfield and 1965 operations, see Chapter 18 and Jack Shulimson and Major Charles Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965* (Washington: His&MusDiv, HQMC, 1978), Chapters 3 and 12.



Marine Corps Photo A186377
Two Marines relax outside their defensive positions on the outskirts of a hamlet in the western sector of the Chu Lai Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). The men are from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.



Marine Corps Photo A186383
Marines of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines cross a flooded rice paddy in the western Chu Lai sector. The troops are after local guerrillas who have fired upon them.

Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, maintained his command post and two companies on Ky Ha Peninsula, and his other two companies were on Ky Xuan and Ky Hoa Islands which controlled the access into the inland waterways of the northern TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Rodolfo L. Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines manned the defenses in the central portion of the TAOR, operating west of the airfield and Route 1. The battalion's area of operations centered around the farming villages of Khuong Nhon and Ky Long in the western sector of the TAOR.

Colonel Oscar F. Peatross' 7th Marines had all three battalions on line to secure the southern sector defenses. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, on the coast, had a company-size combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula and tied in with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines on its western flank. The 3d Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley, was responsible for most of the sector in Quang Ngai province immediately to the west of Route 1. Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, flanked by the 4th Marines on the

north and Bodley's battalion to the east, was responsible for the southwestern portion of the TAOR.

During the first weeks of January, securing TAORs was the main objective of both the 4th and 7th Marines, with the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's battalion which participated in the 3d Marines' Operation Mallard from 10-17 January in the An Hoa region south of Da Nang. The two regiments had established several civil affairs programs in conjunction with the Vietnamese authorities. These included such diverse activities as the distribution of food and clothing, medical assistance programs, and school and market place construction. Nevertheless, the major emphasis of the Marine battalions at Chu Lai was in aggressive small-unit patrolling designed to eliminate the VC guerrillas.

Contact was sparse throughout most of January in the 7th Marines TAOR. Only the company stationed at the combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula had any significant combat. It accounted for 10 of the 13 VC killed by the regiment during the month. According to Colonel Peatross, the VC tactics consisted of

small-scale probes, harassment of patrols, and extensive use of land mines.¹

In the 4th Marines TAOR, Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion found and destroyed more than 40 mines and booby traps. Although reporting a marked increase in reconnaissance and probing activity by the *VC A-19* and *A-21 Local Force Companies*, the thinly spread 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to the northeast found itself hard pressed to engage the VC in significant numbers, killing only one VC and capturing seven while sustaining nine casualties, including five dead.² Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the battalion commander, later stated that his main concern during the period "was that the VC would bring 120mm mortars onto Hoa Xuan Island," located just northwest of Ky Hoa Island, and thus bring the Ky Ha airfield within mortar range. He explained that since he "was 'two-hatted,'" serving also as the Ky Ha defense commander, and that two of his companies "were tied by order to manning the 'swath' on Ky Ha during hours of darkness, we were too 'troop poor' to occupy Hoa Xuan." Sullivan declared that his requests for a fifth company "to 'sit on top' of the *A-19* and *A-21 VC LF Companies*, who were active on Hoa Xuan, were denied." The battalion commander several years later remarked:

Hoa Xuan, according to my mission, had to be patrolled each week. It made no difference if I sent a platoon up there, or exercised the whole battalion, Hoa Xuan was exerting an average toll of one KIA and several WIA each week . . . The island was literally nickel and diming us to death whenever we set foot on the place.

He contended: "Occupation of Hoa Xuan, I remain convinced, would have cut our casualties, and virtually eliminated the northern 120mm mortar threat to the Ky Ha Peninsula and the airfield at Chu Lai."³

The war for the Chu Lai Marines intensified with the incremental deployment of 1st Marine Division units to Vietnam and the continuing buildup of regular forces in southern I Corps. On 17 January, Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell's 1st Marines Headquarters arrived at Chu Lai, followed a little over a week later by Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's Battalion Landing Team (BLT)* 3/1. Young's battalion remained on board its amphibious shipping in preparation for the pending multibattalion Double

Eagle operation in southern Quang Ngai Province. These reinforcements allowed the Marines to mount large mobile operations and provided more flexibility at Chu Lai.

In the 7th Marines' sector, Colonel Peatross ordered his battalions to advance 4,000 to 5,000 meters toward the forward edge of the regimental TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, on the western flank of the regiment, began its displacement on 20 January, followed by the other two battalions on the 24th and 25th. Upon the completion of the movement, the 7th Marines established new defensive positions along the Tra Bong River and the 1st Battalion's positions extended as far south as Binh Son across the river.⁴

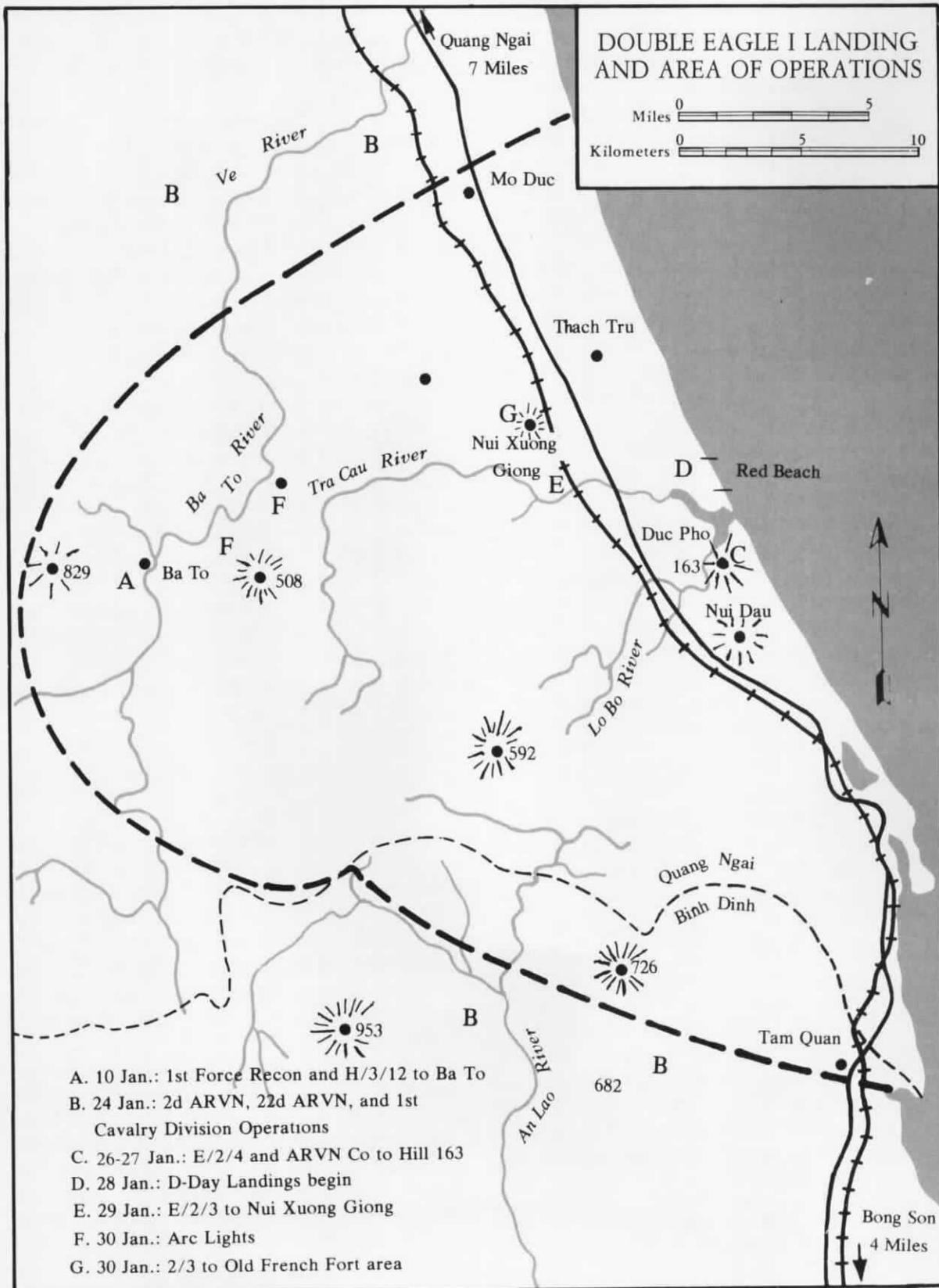
The major change in troop dispositions occurred in what had been the 4th Marines sector. On 20 January, the 1st Marines assumed operational control of the two battalions of the 4th Marines. Six days later, the 1st Battalion, reinforced by a 7th Marines company, took over responsibility for the 2d Battalion's TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion was assigned to the reactivated Task Force Delta, essentially the 4th Marines Headquarters and maneuver battalions from Chu Lai. Operation Double Eagle, one of the largest search and destroy missions in South Vietnam up to that time, was about to begin.⁵

Operation Double Eagle

Double Eagle planning began the previous month. On 7 December 1965, General Westmoreland ordered III MAF and Field Force, Vietnam to initiate a coordinated offensive against the enemy buildup in the region of the I and II Corps border during late January. By the beginning of the year, General Walt had received approval of a general concept for a multibattalion operation in southern Quang Ngai Province.⁶

On 6 January, General Walt ordered General Platt to reactivate Task Force Delta Headquarters for planning. General Platt had commanded Task Force Delta during Operation Harvest Moon in December, but closed out the headquarters upon completion of the operation. A task force organization allowed the Marines a large degree of leeway in both composition and command for operations outside the major enclaves. Its size was limited only by its mission, and

*A Marine infantry battalion reinforced by artillery and other supporting elements to permit independent operation; the basic unit for amphibious operations.



its formation permitted the employment of air and ground components under a single commander. Equally important, this ad hoc organization permitted the least disruption of the command structure of units remaining in the TAORs. Normally a Marine task force was of such size to merit a general officer as commander. According to Colonel Peatross, "This was a strong factor in getting the Vietnamese generals into the field."⁷

General Platt and Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, the South Vietnamese 2d ARVN Division commander, had established excellent personal relations since working together during Harvest Moon. They also discovered they had a common interest in tennis and played when they had the opportunity. Generals Lam and Platt soon became good friends. On a professional level, the Marines found Lam very cooperative and respected his military judgment.⁸

Similar personal friendships facilitated coordination between III MAF and the South Vietnamese I Corps military commanders. General Walt stated that for large operations, "General Thi and I talk it over—we come up with a concept and we put the concept to our staffs, who get together" and work out the details.⁹

The working out of details for Double Eagle was somewhat more complicated. It involved coordination not only with I Corps but with MACV, Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the Vietnamese authorities in II Corps. General Walt's original concept involved a two-battalion amphibious landing in southern Quang Ngai Province near Duc Pho and a helicopter landing of another battalion in the vicinity of the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To, 18 miles inland. Field Force, Vietnam and RVN II Corps commands were to launch a supporting operation in Binh Dinh Province to the south while an ARVN task force under General Lam was to block the enemy's avenues of retreat to the north.

General Walt established liaison with the Seventh Fleet very early in the planning phase.* On 6

January, the commander of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), Captain William J. Maddocks, and the Marine commander of the Special Landing Force, Colonel John R. Burnett, visited III MAF to discuss the operation. By the next day, General Walt's staff and the amphibious commanders had adopted a tentative concept of operations for the proposed landing. Shortly after the departure of Maddocks and Burnett from Da Nang, Admiral Sharp approved the plans and the assignment of two battalions for the landing, BLT 2/3, the SLF battalion, and BLT 3/1, which at that time was on board Seventh Fleet amphibious shipping for its previously planned move to Chu Lai. On 12 January, Vice Admiral John J. Hyland, Commander of the Seventh Fleet, issued his initiating directive for the operation, designating Captain Maddocks commander of the amphibious task force, and Colonel Burnett commander of the landing force. In accordance with amphibious doctrine, the amphibious commander was to transfer operational control of the ground forces to the III MAF ground commander for the operation, General Platt, once all the troops were ashore.¹⁰

The morning after Admiral Hyland issued his directive, General Thi, the I Corps commander, hosted a conference at his Da Nang headquarters, which included the senior U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders in both I and II Corps. General Thi explained that the purpose of the meeting was to develop an overall concept for operations in southern Quang Ngai-northern Binh Dinh Provinces. After a two-hour discussion, the conference reached a general agreement. Most of the conferees believed that the NVA and VC main force units were in Quang Ngai Province, but that their base areas were located in the Tam Quan coastal region and the An Lao River Valley in Binh Dinh Province. The III MAF task force, buttressed by 2d ARVN Division units, was to destroy the enemy main force units while the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), in a

*III MAF was under the operational control of MACV while the Seventh Fleet was a component command of CinCPacFlt. Both ComUSMACV and CinCPacFlt were subordinate to CinCPac. When General Walt wanted Seventh Fleet amphibious forces committed in I Corps he had to submit his request through MACV which, assuming concurrence, forwarded the request to Admiral Sharp for his approval. Despite this seemingly lengthy command chain, the amphibious forces were normally readily

available for in-country use when requested. Vice Admiral Hooper, former ComServPac, pointed out the reason for this arrangement in commenting on the draft manuscript: "Seventh Fleet under CinCPacFlt, had responsibilities throughout the entire Far East and western Pacific. Its forces, including TFs 76 and 79, had to react to crises, and sometime multicrisis . . . not just in Vietnam." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 78](Vietnam Comment File).

separate but coordinated operation supported by the ARVN 22d Division, was to go after the base areas.

General Walt viewed "these operations as a converging effort to entrap" the enemy. On the other hand, Major General Stanley R. Larsen, the Field Force, Vietnam commander, was less sanguine than Walt and declared "that we should not think in terms of entrapping and annihilating large bodies of VC, but should consider ourselves highly successful to destroy one battalion." Both commanders did agree that the Corps boundaries "were not inviolate—they could be crossed by I Corps and II Corps forces as required to exploit the situation."¹¹

During the next two weeks the Marines refined their plans for the operation. On 15 January, III MAF published its operation order which directed Task Force Delta to be prepared to deploy two reinforced battalions by helicopter or amphibious shipping to an objective area near Thach Tru in Quang Ngai Province. General Platt was to coordinate the date of D-Day with the Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the ARVN commanders. A reconnaissance effort was to precede the operation and U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses were to fly bombing missions against suspected enemy positions further inland subsequent to the landing. The SLF battalion, BLT 2/3, was to remain on board amphibious shipping, ready to land on order to exploit the situation. III MAF modified its order the following day to provide for two BLTs, BLT 3/1 and BLT 2/4, to land over the beach on D-Day. Later, on 16 January, General Walt established D-Day for the operation as 28 January, so BLT 3/1 and the SLF BLT could conduct a practice landing in the Philippines.¹²

General Platt and his staff expedited final planning for the operation. His ADC command group, reinforced by the Headquarters Company of the 4th Marines as well as members of the 3d Marine Division and 7th Marines staffs, provided the personnel for the Task Force Delta Headquarters. Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the former 3d Division Chief of Staff who had relieved Colonel McClanahan on 24 January 1966 as commander of the 4th Marines, became General Platt's Chief of Staff for the operation. After establishing liaison with the Seventh Fleet, General Platt and Colonel Johnson, whose MAG-36 was to provide helicopter support for the operation, visited General Lam at his headquarters in Quang Ngai to coordinate with the 2d ARVN

Division. On 24 January, the task force commander published his operation order and briefed General Walt the next day on the final plan.^{13*}

Task Force Delta's operating area consisted of 500 square miles, the center of which was approximately 20 miles south of Quang Ngai City and about 10 miles west of Duc Pho. The southern boundary encompassed a small portion of northern Binh Dinh Province in II Corps. Red Beach,** the site selected for the landing, was a 1,000-meter stretch of flat sand about three and a half miles northeast of Duc Pho. Inland from the beach, the assault elements would have to place heavy reliance on helicopters and amphibian tractors for movement in a region partially inundated by numerous rivers, streams, and marshes. To the west lay a mountainous area of jagged peaks criss-crossed by valleys and trails. Despite heavy foliage, there were numerous sites suitable for helicopter landing zones, but the lush jungle vegetation, precipitous hills, and intertwining valleys seriously impeded overland movement from these zones. In short, it was the sort of terrain which

*Several commentators remarked on various initiatives taken during the planning phase of the operation. Colonel Noble L. Beck, who was the executive officer of the 4th Marines in 1966, recalled that "General Platt had learned on Operation Harvest Moon that command control of several infantry battalions and supporting air simply couldn't be managed by an inadequately staffed task force headquarters. Accordingly he tasked me (then) . . . Deputy Chief of Staff designate for Task Force Delta for Operation Double Eagle to come up with the Task Force headquarters T/O . . . this Task Force T/O proved-out on Double Eagle and became standard for the expeditionary task force operations which followed." Col Noble L. Beck, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Aug 78](Vietnam Comment File). According to Colonel Zitnik, Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, was made the tactical air commander for the operation. "Colonel Johnson and one or two of his Sqdn. COs and Staff Officers were involved in all the ground planning." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commander of the 3d Engineer Battalion in January 1966, stated that unlike the planning for other operations his battalion supported, General Platt at the Double Eagle briefing, "had each unit commander provide a resume of what role his unit would perform." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78](Vietnam Comment File).

**Marine Corps documentation refers to the landing beach for Double Eagle as Red Beach while Navy documentation refers to Blue Beach. See TF Delta AAR Double Eagle I and II, 28Jan-1Mar66, dtd 15Mar66 and TG 76.6 OpO 304-66, dtd 24Jan66.

favored the enemy's highly mobile light infantry and hit-and-run tactics.

General Platt's intelligence section estimated the enemy strength to be 6,000 regulars, reinforced by approximately 600 guerrillas. Two NVA regiments, the 18th and 95th, were supposedly located in the mountains roughly 10 miles southwest of Red Beach, while the 2d VC Main Force Regiment was thought to be four miles north of the NVA regiments. Additionally, the 300-man 38th Independent Battalion and 11 separate companies, ranging from 90 to 150 men each, normally operated in this area. The remaining enemy units consisted of scattered guerrilla bands and support troops including the Binh Son Transportation Battalion with 250 permanent personnel and about 1,000 laborers.

The 5,000-plus Marines of Task Force Delta approximated the size of the enemy's regular units. Ultimately, General Platt would have four Marine battalions under his command, including three BLTs, initially BLTs 2/3, 3/1, and 2/4. The fourth battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 9th Marines from the Da Nang TAOR, would consist of only a command group and two of its four rifle companies. Supporting forces were organized into provisional commands. These were Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's artillery group with a total of 26 pieces ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 155mm guns and howitzers, a provisional reconnaissance group, an engineering company, an

amphibian tractor company, and a shore party group.

The Marine concept of operations called for three distinct phases: reconnaissance, landing, and exploitation. Marine reconnaissance units and an artillery battery were to be inserted at the Special Forces camp at Ba To well before D-Day. From this location, the reconnaissance Marines were to provide information on enemy positions and movement in the western portion of the Double Eagle area of operations. The artillery battery would not only support the reconnaissance missions, but would be in position to cover the amphibious landing forces as they moved inland beyond the range of naval guns. After the establishment of the Ba To contingent, one company of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was to conduct a reconnaissance of the landing beach in conjunction with the 2d ARVN Division two weeks before the landing. On D minus 1 (27 January), another company from the battalion, with a company from the 4th ARVN Regiment, was to secure Hill 163, which overlooked Red Beach from the south. At H-Hour on 28 January, BLTs 3/1 and 2/4 were to land across Red Beach and secure immediate objectives north and west of the landing beach. Once the landing force had secured the beachhead, the Delta command group was to land, at which time the amphibious task group commander would pass operational control to General Platt. BLT 2/3 was to remain on board amphibious shipping as the

Reconnaissance Marines at the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To protect themselves from the rain with their ponchos. Inserted by helicopter into various landing zones, reconnaissance teams monitored enemy movement in the western sector of the Double Eagle operating area.

Marine Corps Photo A186724



task force reserve while the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was airlifted from Da Nang to Quang Ngai City for the final phase of the operation.

Since General Platt wanted to create the impression that his forces were ashore only to conduct limited sweeps close to the coast, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was to stay at Quang Ngai and the SLF battalion to remain on board its shipping out of sight over the horizon. The exploitation phase was to be the main effort, signaled by B-52 strikes against suspected enemy troop concentrations and marshalling areas. These B-52 missions or Arc Lights, the codename for all B-52 strikes in Vietnam, were scheduled for D plus 2. Following this intensive bombardment, the Marine infantry was to move inland by helicopter to cut off any enemy forces attempting to escape.¹⁴

The reconnaissance phase began in early January. On 7 January, General Walt ordered the establishment of the 3d Marine Division reconnaissance base at Ba To Special Forces Camp. Three days later, six U.S. Air Force Sikorsky CH-3C helicopters ferried four 105mm howitzers and crews from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines and two platoons of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company from Chu Lai to the camp. After establishing his base on 12 January, Captain William C. Shaver, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance company, sent out his first patrols.¹⁵

For the next two weeks, the reconnaissance Marines reported the movements of small groups of VC. One 14-man patrol, led by 1st Lieutenant Richard F. Parker, Jr., encountered a significant enemy force near Hill 829, approximately 4,000 meters northwest of the Ba To Camp. Lieutenant Parker and an advance party reached the top of the hill at 1400 on 21 January and halted for the day because of poor visibility. Three hours later, Parker's Marines heard yelling and firing from the vicinity of their rear base on the lower slope of the mountain. By the time Parker and his group reached the patrol's rear party it had already repulsed four or five attacks. In the confusion, 1st Lieutenant James T. Egan, Jr., a forward observer from the artillery battery, had disappeared. Parker and his men searched the immediate area, but found no sign of the missing lieutenant.

At 0745 the next morning, the reconnaissance Marines began the difficult climb down the mountain to continue their mission. About two and a half

hours later, 50 to 60 enemy soldiers suddenly attacked from the rear. Lieutenant Parker wryly remarked in his after action report, "the entire descent was made under conditions of heavy contact and was not a controlled movement."¹⁶ The patrol leader and five of his men escaped into a densely vegetated draw and set up an ambush. They were joined one-half hour later by three other Marines from the patrol. Lieutenant Parker then called for an artillery mission on suspected enemy positions. After the battery stopped firing, four helicopters from MAG-36, two Sikorsky UH-34s escorted by two Bell UH-1E gunships, picked up the patrol, the nine men in the draw, and three other Marines stranded nearby. One Marine, Lance Corporal Edwin R. Grissett, was missing. The 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, which had come under the operational control of Task Force Delta on 21 January, conducted other patrols in the vicinity of Hill 829 several days after Parker's men returned to Ba To, but never found Lieutenant Egan or Lance Corporal Grissett.*

While the reconnaissance Marines continued their patrolling in the Ba To region during mid-January, the preparations for the coordinated allied offensives in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces entered the final stages. On 13 January one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines conducted a surveillance mission with the Reconnaissance Company, 2d ARVN Division in the initial objective area at Red Beach and the immediate coastal region. Ten days later, BLTs 2/3 and 3/1, conducting Exercise Hill Top III, landed on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines as a dress rehearsal for Double Eagle. With the completion of the exercise the following day, 24 January, both battalions embarked on their amphibious shipping and sailed for the South China Sea where they were to rendezvous with the rest of the amphibious task force.**

*On 3 February 1978, the Marine Corps officially changed the status of by then Major Egan from missing in action to killed in action. HQMC, Report of Casualty 2866A66 Final JNL/1fr, dtd 3Feb78, Subj: Egan, James Thomas, Jr., Maj USMCR. Lance Corporal Grissett was captured by the enemy and died of malnutrition in December 1968 while in captivity. Information provided by GySgt William A. Hoffman, Casualty Section, Personnel Affairs Branch, HQMC, 13Mar75.

**The two BLTs were embarked in the attack transports *Paul Revere* (APA 248) and *Montrose* (APA 212); the dock landing ships *Catamount* (LSD 17) and *Monticello* (LSD 35); and the am-

On the 24th, four battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division began Operation Masher near Bong Son in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province, 50 miles north of Qui Nhon. Six ARVN airborne battalions and six infantry battalions from the 22d ARVN Division reinforced the airmobile division during Operation Thang Phong II, the South Vietnamese companion operation to Masher in Binh Dinh. Further north in I Corps, General Lam's 2d ARVN Division prepared to launch Operation Lien Ket-22. With the two-battalion South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo attached to his command, General Lam planned a five-battalion advance from a line of departure eight miles south of Quang Ngai City to blocking positions in the Song Ve Valley and the coastal region north of the U.S. Marines in Double Eagle. The combined allied forces for Masher/Thang Phong II and Double Eagle/Lien Ket-22 were the equivalent of three divisions; the area of operations covered more than 2,000 square miles.

On 26 January, Task Force Delta undertook the last of the preliminary operations before the amphibious landing. Nine UH-34Ds from HMM-261 carried 190 troops of Captain Brian D. Moore's Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines from Ky Ha Airfield at Chu Lai to the Nui Dau ARVN outpost, eight miles south of the Double Eagle landing beach. At Nui Dau, Major Ernest L. Defazio, the executive officer of the Marine battalion, assumed command of a combined force, consisting of Company E, 4th Marines and the 2d Company, 3d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment. Shortly after midnight, the combined unit left the outpost, Company E in the lead followed by the ARVN company. The force was to move to the beach and then travel along the coast and secure Hill 163. According to Defazio, it took over six hours in the darkness to cross the one mile of rugged terrain from Nui Dau to the beach.



Marine Corps Photo A186776
Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines scale rocks along the shore line as they begin ascent to secure Hill 163 on 27 January prior to D-Day for Double Eagle. From Hill 163, the company had a ringside seat for the amphibious landing the following day.

Slowed by the loose sand, intense heat during the day, and heavy packs, the combined task unit did not reach the top of Hill 163 until 1300 on 27 January. The Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers prepared defensive positions on the hill which had a commanding view of Red Beach. Major Defazio remarked that he had a "ringside seat" for the amphibious landing the next day.¹⁷

D-Day, 28 January, was a dismal day with low overcast and light rain. Despite the heavy seas, the first wave of Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's BLT 3/1 landed at 0700 as planned. Offshore, a destroyer, the USS *Barry* (DD 933), and a cruiser, the USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) provided naval gunfire coverage, while eight Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 and eight McDonnell F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 were on station overhead. The only opposition encountered by the assault troops occurred late that day. Companies I and M were exposed to occasional small arms fire; one Company I Marine was wounded. Shortly after Lieutenant Colonel Young's men secured their objectives, five 105mm

phibious assault ship *Valley Forge* (LPH 8). Other ships assigned to, or supporting, the amphibious task group for Double Eagle included: the attack transport *Navarro* (APA 215); the dock landing ship *Fort Marion* (LSD 22); the tank landing ships *Tom Green County* (LST 1159), *Tioga County* (LST 1158), *Windham County* (LST 1170), and *Westchester County* (LST 1167); the high speed transport *Weiss* (APD 135); the gasoline tanker *Elkborn* (AOG 7); the salvage vessels *Safeguard* (ARS 25) and *Bolster* (ARS 38); the attack cargo ship *Skagit* (AKA 105); the guided missile light cruisers *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) and *Topeka* (CLG 8); and the destroyer *Barry* (DD 933).



Marine Corps Photo A186615
Marines clamber down net from the transport into landing craft for the assault across Red Beach in Double Eagle. This operation was the largest extended amphibious operation of the war.

howitzer-equipped amphibian tractors (LVTH-6) moved ashore to provide artillery support for the infantry battalion. Company B from the 3d Engineer Battalion was also on the beach to establish various water points. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the battalion commander, remembered that "The beach assault took a toll of operational engineer equipment and generators."¹⁸

At midmorning the surf began to build rapidly. Swells, six to eight feet in height, held up the debarkation of Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Nevertheless, by noon, the battalion was ashore, as were the forward elements of Task Force Delta's Headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery command group. Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines also landed and reinforced the LVTH-6 platoon in support of the infantry.

Weather hampered the operation for the rest of the day. Although General Platt arrived at Red Beach from Chu Lai by midafternoon, he was unable to assume operational control of the Double Eagle forces because high seas and pounding surf prevented the landing of sufficient communication equipment. As a result, the command of forces ashore remained with the amphibious task force commander, Captain Maddocks, and with the commander of the landing force, Colonel Burnett, the SLF commander. General Platt received the concurrence from Captain Maddocks "to coordinate actions



Marine Corps Photo A186581

Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move across Red Beach. Ships of the amphibious task force and landing craft approaching the shore can be seen in the background.



Marine Corps Photo A186738

Marines unload LST on Red Beach. Rough seas, as seen in the background, hampered the bringing of additional equipment and supplies ashore.

ashore in the event of emergency," which in practical terms would give operational control to Platt.^{19*}

High seas also curtailed the artillery and logistic buildup. Supplies slowly accumulated at the beach support area (BSA) while the rest of the artillery remained on board ship. These units included the 3d 155mm Gun Battery; the 107mm Mortar Battery, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines; Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines; and a platoon from the 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 11th Marines.

The weather, typical of the second half of the northeast monsoon season, continued to plague the operation on the following day, 29 January. Low overcast and periodic rain squalls prevented any sizeable helicopter operations until late afternoon and restricted both infantry battalions to operations

within 6,000 to 8,000 meters of the landing beach. The Marine infantry did receive some reinforcements during the day. Captain Moore's Company E left its positions on Hill 163 and rejoined its parent battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. That same afternoon, HMM-362, the SLF helicopter squadron, assisted by six MAG-36 UH-34s which arrived at the BSA from Chu Lai, flew Company E, BLT 2/3 from the USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) to Nui Xuong Giong, a 180-meter peak west of Red Beach. The Marine company was to provide security for a detachment of the task force communications platoon which was to establish a radio relay station on the hill to insure reliable communications for the planned operations in the mountains and Song Ve Valley to the west.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6, later remarked that his UH-1Es accompanied the SLF squadron's UH-34s to Nui Xuong Giong. He recalled:

The landing . . . was to be unopposed, but at the last

*See Chapter 19 for a further discussion of command relations during the amphibious portion of Double Eagle.

minute VMO-6 was assigned to escort the helos on this mission. . . . As the H-34s were landing on the hilltop the lead pilot . . . of my second section observed what he described as a military training unit with some uniformed VC. . . . a uniformed soldier (with rifle) was shedding his uniform while running and as we were trying to get permission to fire we heard the firm order "Do not fire." . . . all the VMO-6 pilots on this flight experienced . . . frustration at not being allowed to pursue what appeared to be, and eventually proved to be, the only few enemy in the area.²⁰

The VMO-6 commander conceded that he never was able to pinpoint the originator of the message but believed "that it was either from afloat or an enemy transmission." Zitnik concluded: "This incident occurred before the transfer of control ashore and contributed to frustrations in General Platt's headquarters as well as with the UH-1E pilots."²¹

Although General Platt had not as yet received operational control of the units ashore, preparations for the exploitation phase were well under way on 29 January. Air Force Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports lifted Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command

group and two rifle companies from Da Nang Airbase to Quang Ngai Airfield, 2,000 meters west of Quang Ngai City. From the airfield, which the Marines were using as a helicopter staging area, MAG-36 UH-34s were to helilift the battalion into the Song Ve Valley to exploit B-52 Arc Light missions.

The Marine command attempted to postpone the B-52 strikes for a day, but MACV replied that the missions would either have to be flown on the 30th as scheduled or canceled altogether.²² Flying high above the low-lying clouds on 30 January, the Stratofortresses struck three target areas in the Song Ve Valley. Despite some improvement in the weather, poor visibility prohibited helicopter operations in the mountains and Marine ground exploitation of the Arc Light missions.

Task Force Delta took advantage of the calm seas on the 30th to bring more forces ashore. The remaining artillery batteries and other supporting units arrived in the BSA. Later that afternoon, 28 helicopters from three MAG-36 helicopter

Marines from BLT 2/3, part of the Special Landing Force (SLF) on the carrier Valley Forge (LPH 8), run to board helicopters for movement ashore on D plus 1 (29 January 1966) of Double Eagle. Some of the troop-laden helicopters are already airborne and can be seen flying above the ship.

Marine Corps Photo A186769



squadrons and 12 UH-34s from HMM-362 transported Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's BLT 2/3 command group and his remaining three companies from the *Valley Forge* to an old French fort northwest of Company E's position, eight miles inland. After the lift was completed at 1730, most of the helicopters returned to the Quang Ngai Airfield since Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, thought it unnecessary to risk the aircraft overnight in a forward area when they could easily return in the morning.²³

On the afternoon of 30 January, MAG-36 did establish a forward operating base in the Double Eagle BSA, located 400 meters inland from Red Beach and known as "Johnson City." In addition to the logistic support area* and task force headquarters, "Johnson City" contained an expeditionary airfield complete with a tactical air fuel dispensing system (TAFDS), maintenance facilities, tower, runway, and airfield lights. As the tactical air commander for the operation, Colonel Johnson established his MAG-36 combat operations center 100 yards from General Platt's command post and adjacent to the mobile direct air support center (DASC) from Marine Air Support Squadron 2. This collocation allowed the air commander to tie in the DASC with the fire support coordination center (FSCC). According to Johnson, the close proximity of the Task Force Delta air and ground commanders "permitted the detailed and continuous planning which enabled us to react expeditiously throughout Double Eagle."^{24**}

On 31 January, the weather finally cleared in the objective area and the tempo of operations increas-

ed. At 1210, General Platt assumed operational control of the landing force and began to move inland. Two USAF CH-3C helicopters and a Marine Sikorsky CH-37 Mojave lifted the six 105mm howitzers from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines from the "Johnson City" support area to the old French fort so that the artillery could support operations to the west. Shortly after noon, Marine UH-34s transported Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines to Hill 508, five miles southwest of the fort. The Marine company was to provide protection for another detachment from the communications platoon, whose mission was to relay radio transmissions from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion which was to operate in this rugged terrain. At 1600 that afternoon, MAG-36 completed the helilift of Trevino's command group and his remaining three companies into a landing zone in the Song Ve-Song Ba To Valley, 2,000 meters northwest of Hill 508. The Marine battalion advanced rapidly to exploit one of the Arc Light targets on the high ground to the northeast. During the day, 14 Marine jets, 6 A-4 Skyhawks, 2 F-4B Phantoms, and 6 Chance Vought F-8E Crusaders, provided helicopter landing zone preparations and air cover for the infantry.

The next day, 1 February, General Platt moved his forces deeper into the interior of the Double Eagle area of operations. Helicopters from MAG-36 lifted Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two rifle companies to a landing zone on the high ground east of the Song Ve, 7,000 meters northwest of where the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had landed the previous day. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Bat-

*Major General Oscar F. Peatross, who in 1966 commanded the 7th Marines, remarked, "that although Task Force Delta was self-supportive, some critical supplies were flown by helicopter from the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai . . . into the Logistics Support Area." He recalled that he only visited the Task Force headquarters a few times, but that "each time I rode down in a helicopter taking supplies from Chu Lai and on three occasions the helicopter was loaded with among other things . . . radios that had been picked up the evening before, repaired overnight, and returned the next morning." According to General Peatross, Lieutenant Colonel William L. Nelson, the commanding officer of the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai, visited the TF Delta Headquarters each day and "brought back a critical list every day, filled it every night, and criticals were flown back the next morning."

MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Zitnik in his comments reinforced Colonel Johnson's remarks. Zitnik observed: "Aircraft were requested and provided as needed. There became a new kind of relationship between the planners on the spot and the [Wing Tactical Air Command Center (TACC)]. . . . Even though the TACC was not 100 percent up to date, when the word came to them that MAG-36 and the ARVN or Marines, or both, were being committed there appeared a remarkable spirit of cooperation and trust on the part of the TACC . . . they never questioned the need for fixed-wing or helo support just because a request came that did not appear on the pre-planned schedule." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A186620

Gen Walt together with LtGen John A. Heintges, USA, Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command (USMACV), visit Task Force Delta Headquarters during Double Eagle. From left to right: Gen Heintges; Gen Walt; BGen Jonas M. Platt, the Task Force Delta commander; and an unidentified U.S. Army colonel.



Marine Corps Photo A186583

A Marine 60mm mortar section from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines provides fire support for the advancing infantry. Apparently feeling relatively secure, the troops have placed their rifles against the right side of the Vietnamese structure in the picture.

talion, 3d Marines made an overland sweep west of the fort area in the valley of the Tra Cau River.

During the succeeding days, despite the extensive commitment of Marine units, there was no heavy fighting. Marine units encountered only small guerrilla bands. According to Captain James R. Hardin, Jr., company commander of Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the Viet Cong “would hit us—pull out. Hit us and pull out. They wouldn’t stick around for firefights.”²⁵ Although firefights were the exception the Marines did take a heavy toll of the enemy’s local forces. In two engagements on 2 February, Lieutenant Colonel Young’s 3d Battalion, 1st Marines accounted for 31 enemy dead in the coastal region north of Red Beach. On 3 February, General Platt began to move most of his forces south toward Binh Dinh Province to trap the NVA and VC main force regiments between the Marines and the 1st Cavalry Division.

In contrast to the Marines, the 1st Cavalry troopers encountered North Vietnamese regulars early in their operation. In heavy fighting which lasted from 28 January through 3 February, the Cavalry’s 3d Brigade engaged the 18th NVA Regiment in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province eight miles



Marine Corps Photo A187622

Marines move through densely jungled terrain after a B-52 strike. The broken tree limbs and fallen trees are a result of the heavy carpet bombing of the area.



Marine Corps Photo A186723

An Air Force CH-3C helicopter lifts a Marine 105mm howitzer from the beach support area further inland. The rapid deployment of the guns permitted the Marine artillery to keep the advancing infantry within the artillery fan.



Marine Corps Photo A186713

A heavily-laden Marine 81mm mortar section trudges forward to a new firing position during Double Eagle. The first man carries the mortar bipod and an extra round while the third man totes the mortar tube.



Marine Corps Photo A421241
Marine in the foreground directs an UH-34 into a landing zone during Operation Double Eagle. Gen Platt had the use of two-thirds of the III MAF helicopters for the operation.

north of Bong Son. During that six-day period, Colonel Harold G. Moore, the brigade commander, reported that his troops killed over 600 enemy by body count, captured 357 NVA soldiers, and recovered 49 individual weapons and six crew-served weapons. The Army brigade suffered 75 KIA and 240 wounded. After being reinforced by the 2d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry near Bong Son, Moore's brigade moved into the rugged interior of the An Lao region to link up with the Double Eagle Marines with the aim of smashing the *18th NVA Regiment* once and for all.²⁶

As Task Force Delta deployed into the southern portion of the Double Eagle area of operations, General Platt split his battalions into smaller elements, each consisting of a command group and two rifle companies reinforced by an 81mm mortar section. This provided Platt with six to seven maneuver elements in the field while at the same time enabling him to provide security for the

"Johnson City" support area. The task force commander took full advantage of the fact that he had two-thirds of III MAF's helicopters available for his use and ordered a series of small search and destroy missions. His improvised maneuver elements would land in an area, search it, and reboard the helicopters for further movement south. The infantry units accomplished 17 battalion and 19 company helilifts during the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery group displaced 47 times, including two small amphibious landings further south along the coast, in order to support the fast advancing infantry.²⁷

During the advance, the Marines seized hills both for the purpose of providing supporting artillery fire and to maintain better voice communication with the infantry battalions. The Task Force Delta communications platoon established three relay stations



Marine Corps Photo A186718
Marine infantrymen advance through a gully with razor-sharp punji stakes protruding on both embankments. Local Viet Cong guerrillas employed such crude, but effective, impediments to hinder the Americans during the operation.

on mountain tops to keep radio contact with the widely dispersed maneuver elements. According to General Platt, the task force communications capability was stretched to the absolute limit and the newly distributed AN/PRC-25 radios proved indispensable and reliable, often reaching distances of 20 to 25 miles.²⁸

On 4 February, Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, accompanied by a small communication platoon detachment, secured Hill 726, 1,000 meters south of the I Corps boundary, and linked up with Battery B, 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division.* While the Marines provided security and radio communication, the Army battery fired in support of Marine units in Quang Ngai Province and the 1st Cavalry Division in Binh Dinh. Through the next week, neither the Marine infantry nor the cavalry brigades encountered enemy main force units, only light resistance from local guerrillas. On 11 February, Task Force Delta maneuver elements began to redeploy north toward the "Johnson City" support area, using the same tactics in the retrograde movement as they had in the advance.

During this period, the most significant sighting of enemy forces was made by Captain James L.

*Although uneventful for the Marines of Company G, the helilift of the company from its former positions in the Lo Bo Valley, 12,000 meters north of Hill 726, caused some excitement for the helicopter pilots. A Marine aircraft reported taking ground fire from one of the villages near the pickup point and UH-1E gunships were assigned to escort the UH-34 troop transports. Colonel Zitnik, at the time VMO-6 commander and the flight leader of the gunships, recalled, "I directed the troop carrier helos around a burning village from which 50 caliber or heavier fire was observed. I called for A-4 support but could not get it in time (this was an on-call mission laid on late in the day) to help the troop carriers, so I commenced a rocket run towards the village and immediately received fire causing my helo to crash." Zitnik's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William L. Buchanan, landed in the darkness next to the wrecked aircraft and loaded onboard the five-man crew, who all survived the crash. According to Zitnik, "the trip out was memorable," as Buchanan's aircraft, with now nine men on board, "staggered into the air along and between the burning villages in the dark of the night." Task Force Delta sent a reinforced Marine infantry platoon and maintenance men to protect and repair the downed aircraft. An Air Force CH-3C lifted the UH-1E out of the crash site the next morning. See: Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File); MAG-36 AAR, Double Eagle, dtd 28Mar66, encl MAG-36, ComdC, Mar66; 2/4 AAR 5-66, Operation Double Eagle, encl, 2/4 ComdC, Feb66; MASS-2, Report of Double Eagle DASC Opns, dtd 17Mar66 in 1st MAW, Double Eagle Folder, Jan-Mar66.

Compton's provisional reconnaissance group, which consisted of a command group, Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, and Captain Shaver's 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. While Shaver's men patrolled a 11,500-meter circle around Ba To, the Company B reconnaissance Marines operated throughout the Double Eagle area. The task force reconnaissance group primarily employed four- to five-man teams, who could call artillery and air missions on targets of opportunity.

On 12 February, two UH-34 helicopters inserted two four-man teams from Company B into the mountainous terrain 11,000 meters northwest of Ba To. Shortly after landing, one of the teams observed 31 armed men to their front dressed in green uniforms carrying two mortars. The Marines called an artillery mission which killed 10 enemy. After the artillery had fired another mission, 80 more enemy soldiers appeared. The team asked to be extracted and 15 minutes after its departure, 1st MAW jets, controlled by radar, dropped 39 250-pound bombs on the enemy concentration. The next day, a UH-1E from VMO-6 took out the second team, which had come under heavy fire and suffered one man dead.²⁹

During the entire operation, the Marine reconnaissance group conducted more than 40 patrols and sighted nearly 1,000 enemy soldiers. The reconnaissance Marines called for 20 artillery and naval gunfire missions which resulted in at least 19 known enemy dead.³⁰ Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines at Ba To fired more than 1,900 rounds in support of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company alone.³¹

Gradually, it became apparent that most of the North Vietnamese units had left the Double Eagle operating area. According to one prisoner report, the main force enemy units withdrew from Quang Ngai Province a few days before D-Day. The Army's Operation Masher, redesignated White Wing on 5 February because of criticism in certain U.S. Government circles that the U.S.-named operations sounded too brutal, turned out to be the main show instead of a side event when the 1st Cavalry Division encountered the *18th NVA Regiment* in Binh Dinh Province. Even during Masher/White Wing, nearly half of the 2,000 enemy casualties claimed by the operation occurred during the first heavy fighting. Thereafter, until the end of the operation on 6 March, the cavalry troopers met the same pattern of

sporadic resistance that the Marines faced during Double Eagle.

Generals Platt and Lam ended their coordinated operations in Quang Ngai Province in mid-February. South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo closed out Lien Ket-22 on 12 February, having found only a few enemy in its zone of operations.³² By 17 February, all Task Force Delta forces, including the reconnaissance and artillery elements that were at Ba To, were on board amphibious shipping, or had already returned to their respective base areas. During the operation, the U.S. Marines killed 312 enemy soldiers and captured 19. General Platt's men also captured 20 tons of rice, 6 tons of salt, and 4 tons of miscellaneous supplies including barley, copra, corn, concrete, and fertilizer. In addition, the Marines captured 18 weapons and 868 rounds of ammunition. These results were achieved at the cost of 24 Marines killed and 156 wounded.³³

Although Task Force Delta ended its operations in southern Quang Ngai Province on 17 February, Double Eagle entered an entirely new phase 50 miles to the north, a development not called for in the original plans. Major General McCutcheon, acting CG III MAF* at that time because General Walt was in Washington, had received intelligence that the 1st Viet Cong Regiment had entered the Que Son Valley near the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces west of Tam Ky, the area where the Marines had previously conducted Operation Harvest Moon. McCutcheon ordered General Platt to redeploy Task Force Delta and launch Double Eagle II in this region.

Retaining his basic task organization, but replacing the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, a unit which had participated in Harvest Moon, General Platt began the operation on the morning of 19 February. Elements of four battalions, employing both helicopters and trucks, converged on the objective area. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved by



Marine Corps Photo A186586
Marines from Task Force Delta confiscate VC rice and salt during Double Eagle. During the operation in southern Quang Ngai Province, the Marines captured or destroyed 26 tons of rice and salt belonging to the enemy.

truck from Chu Lai to north of Tam Ky where it dismounted. As Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion moved into blocking positions, helicopters carried the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; BLT 2/3 of the SLF; and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines into landing zones further to the southwest in the Que Son sector. The helilifted battalions then attacked in a northeasterly direction towards the 3d Battalion.

The 1st VC Regiment was not there. Interrogation of prisoners revealed that the Viet Cong unit had withdrawn long before the Marines arrived. For the next 10 days, the Marines swept through numerous villages, cleared out isolated guerrilla bands, and uncovered enemy supplies, but found no major VC units. Task Force Delta accounted for 125 enemy dead and 15 captured. Marine losses were six killed and 136 wounded. The Marines also captured or destroyed caches including 28 tons of rice, 500 pounds of sweet potatoes, 53 weapons, and 450 rounds of ammunition.³⁴

*During General Walt's one-month absence from Vietnam, 10Feb-9Mar66, General McCutcheon was both CG 1st MAF and acting CG III MAF. Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Division ADC, was the acting CG 3d Marine Division. According to English, "Keith McCutcheon and I had an agreement while Gen Walt was back in the States. Keith said: 'You run the ground war and I'll run the air war.'" MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

On the next-to-last day of the operation, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines entered the hamlet of Ky Phu, west of Tam Ky, where the battalion had encountered the *80th VC Battalion* during Harvest Moon in December. This time the Marines found a concrete marker on which was inscribed the Viet Cong claim that they had defeated the Americans. According to Captain Alex Lee, the acting S-3 of the battalion, "While many desired to use demolitions on this sign, it was Lieutenant Colonel Utter's decision to let it stand for the lie it was."³⁵

Task Force Delta began returning to Chu Lai the afternoon of 27 February, but the VC made one last attempt to disrupt the Marine forces before the closeout of the operation. In the early morning hours of 28 February, a VC squad attacked the Task Force Delta command post perimeter, just outside of Tam Ky. A Marine platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines repulsed the enemy. Captain Edwin W. Besch, who was at the time the Task Force Delta Headquarters Commandant, remembered that the VC were led by a man "who had dressed in ARVN uniform and sauntered up in a friendly manner to Marines who had taken him into their . . . CP for coffee the night before. . . ."³⁶ Another Task Force Delta Headquarters staff officer, Colonel Glen

E. Martin, recalled that the Marines stopped the VC assault "just short of General Platt's tent."³⁷ Captain Lee later wrote that "five naked VC with explosives strapped around their bodies stumbled directly into a 2/7 machine gun position . . ."³⁸ As a result of the early morning action, the Marines killed two VC for sure, possibly another two, and took one wounded VC prisoner. The Marines suffered casualties of one man dead and another wounded. The last elements of Task Force Delta departed Tam Ky at 1300 on 1 March and Double Eagle II was over.³⁹

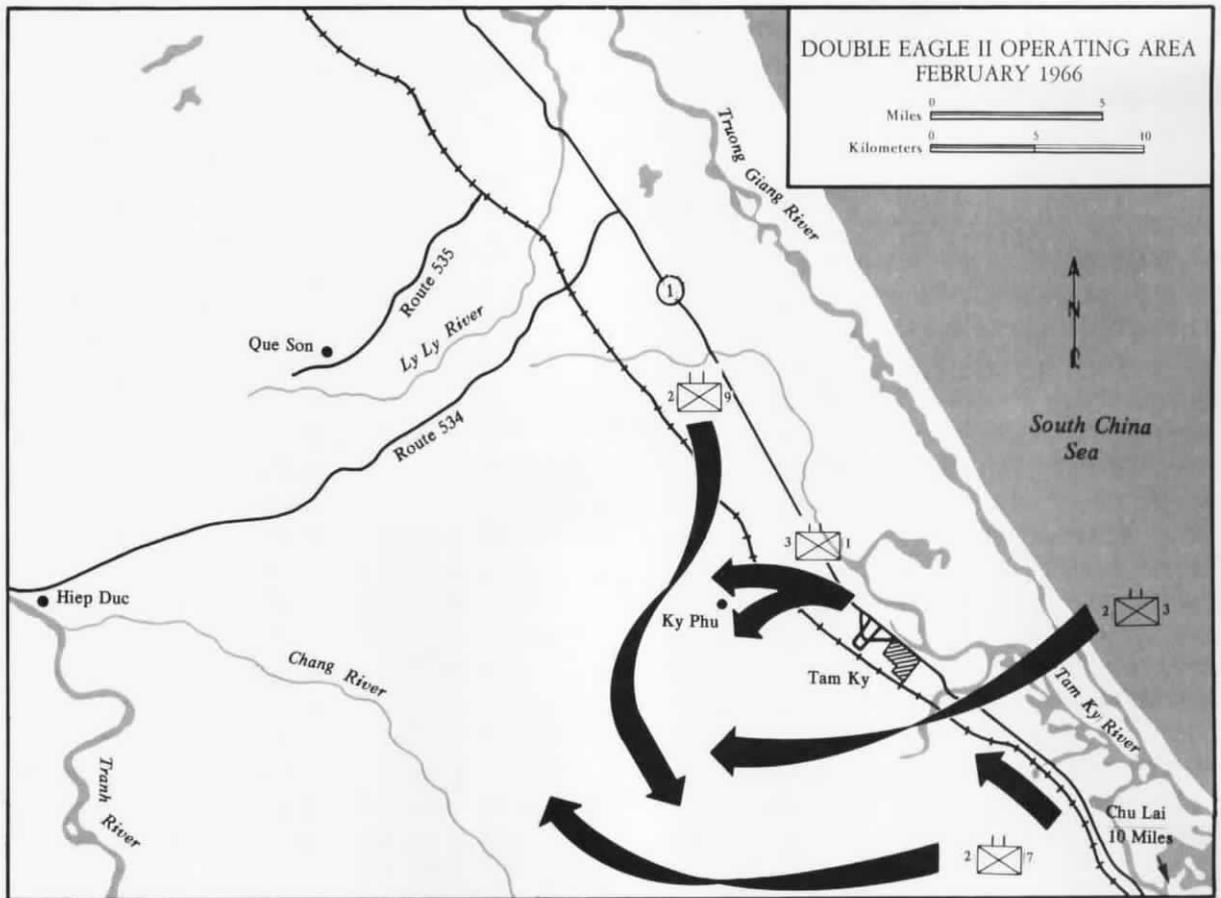
While neither of the Double Eagle operations produced the desired results, General Platt believed that they both achieved an element of success. Although the Marines had not encountered any sizeable enemy formations, they had taken a heavy toll of local guerrilla forces in these areas. Moreover, General Platt argued that the people residing in both the Que Son Valley and southern Quang Ngai Province learned that neither area was "the VC private backyard because U.S. Marines trampled over a huge area with little or no significant opposition."⁴⁰

General Krulak, on the other hand, insisted, several years later, that the lessons of the Double Eagle operations were largely negative. He pointed

A UH-34 lifts off after bringing Marines into a landing zone during Double Eagle II. Double Eagle II took place in the Que Son Valley, 50 miles to the north of the site of Double Eagle I.

Marine Corps Photo A186763





out that the operations failed primarily because the VC and NVA had been forewarned. Furthermore, and even more important, Krulak contended that both operations taught the people in the area that the Marines "would come in, comb the area and disappear; whereupon the VC would resurface and resume control."⁴¹

The displacement of two Marine battalions and supporting elements from Chu Lai for such an exten-

sive period placed a heavy strain on the remaining units in the TAOR. For example, on 27 February, a VC raiding party hit a squad outpost of the thinly stretched 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. They killed five Marines before being repulsed.⁴² In February, the 7th Marines reported that the local VC initiated more than 60 incidents in its sector.⁴³ The Marines had conducted a major, mobile operation, but they had yet to secure their base areas.

CHAPTER 3

The War in Central I Corps

The Da Nang TAOR—Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification

The Da Nang TAOR

The Marine buildup was well under way in the extensive Da Nang TAOR at the beginning of 1966. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, were reinforced by air, artillery, and a large logistic facility. The four fixed-wing squadrons of Colonel Emmett O. Anglin, Jr.'s MAG-11 were stationed at the main airbase, while three of the helicopter squadrons of Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor's MAG-16 were located across the Da Nang River at the Marble Mountain Air Facility on the Tiensha Peninsula. The headquarters and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Marine Division's artillery regiment, Colonel James M. Callender's 12th Marines, were at Da Nang. One infantry battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, was the Base Defense Battalion, under direct operational control of III MAF. Including the personnel of the Naval Support Group, the Seabees, and Colonel Mauro J. Padalino's Force Logistic Support Group, there were over 24,000 Marines and sailors at Da Nang.

Colonel John E. Gorman's 9th Marines was responsible for the southern and eastern sectors of the Da Nang TAOR, an area of approximately 250 square miles. Bounded by three major rivers, the Cau Do on the north, the Yen on the west, and the Ky Lam on the south, the regiment's zone of action was cut up by numerous streams. Except for a narrow sandy strip along the coast, the area consisted of rich, densely populated farm lands interspersed with heavy vegetation. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler, who on 5 January assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, was responsible for the eastern portion of the TAOR extending from Route 1 to the coast. The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr., occupied the sector of the TAOR be-

tween Route 1 and the main north-south railroad. Lieutenant Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey III's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, under the operational control of the 9th Marines, secured the regiment's western flank by occupying the key terrain between the railroad and the Song Yen. Although the 9th Marines' TAOR extended as far south as the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers, the regiment confined most of its activities, with the exception of some patrolling, to that area north of the Thanh Quit and La Tho Rivers.

The 3d Marines, commanded by Colonel Thell H. Fisher, protected the more sparsely populated northern and western sectors of the 3d Division TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Harold A. Hatch's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, attached to the 3d Marines, tied in with the 9th Marines sector at the Yen River and occupied the strategic high ground west of the airbase. The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III, defended the northern and northwestern approaches, including the Cu De River Valley, where the Marines had first begun their pacification efforts.

Pacification continued to be the principal concern of the regiments at Da Nang. In mid-1965, the Marines first experimented with population security in the village complex of Le My, seven miles northwest of the airbase in the 3d Marines sector. Here the regiment's 2d Battalion, later relieved by the 1st Battalion, occupied defensive positions around the village. Behind this security shield, the Marines instituted a civic action program with the assistance of the local Vietnamese authorities. Le My, at least initially, set the pattern for the Marine pacification campaign.

This system worked well in the lightly populated 3d Marines sector, but the problem was more complex in the 9th Marines area south of Da Nang. A quarter of a million people lived in the villages and hamlets in the 15-mile stretch of land between the airbase and the Ky Lam River. Many were sympathetic to, or dominated by, the Viet Cong; the



Marine Corps Photo A187162

Two men of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines move past a Buddhist tomb while on patrol in the southern part of the Da Nang area of operations. As evidence of Viet Cong influence in the region, the scrawled sign in Vietnamese on the building in the picture reads: "Long Live the People's Revolution."

South Vietnamese Government controlled only a thin belt of territory paralleling Route 1.

During the latter half of 1965, the South Vietnamese began the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign, a pilot pacification program, within the 9th Marines TAOR. The campaign was slated for a 20-square mile, rice-rich, alluvial plain in southern Hoa Vang District containing 38 hamlets. The South Vietnamese divided the target area into two sectors, one consisting of a five-village complex west of Route 1 and the other consisting of a four-village complex east of the highway.

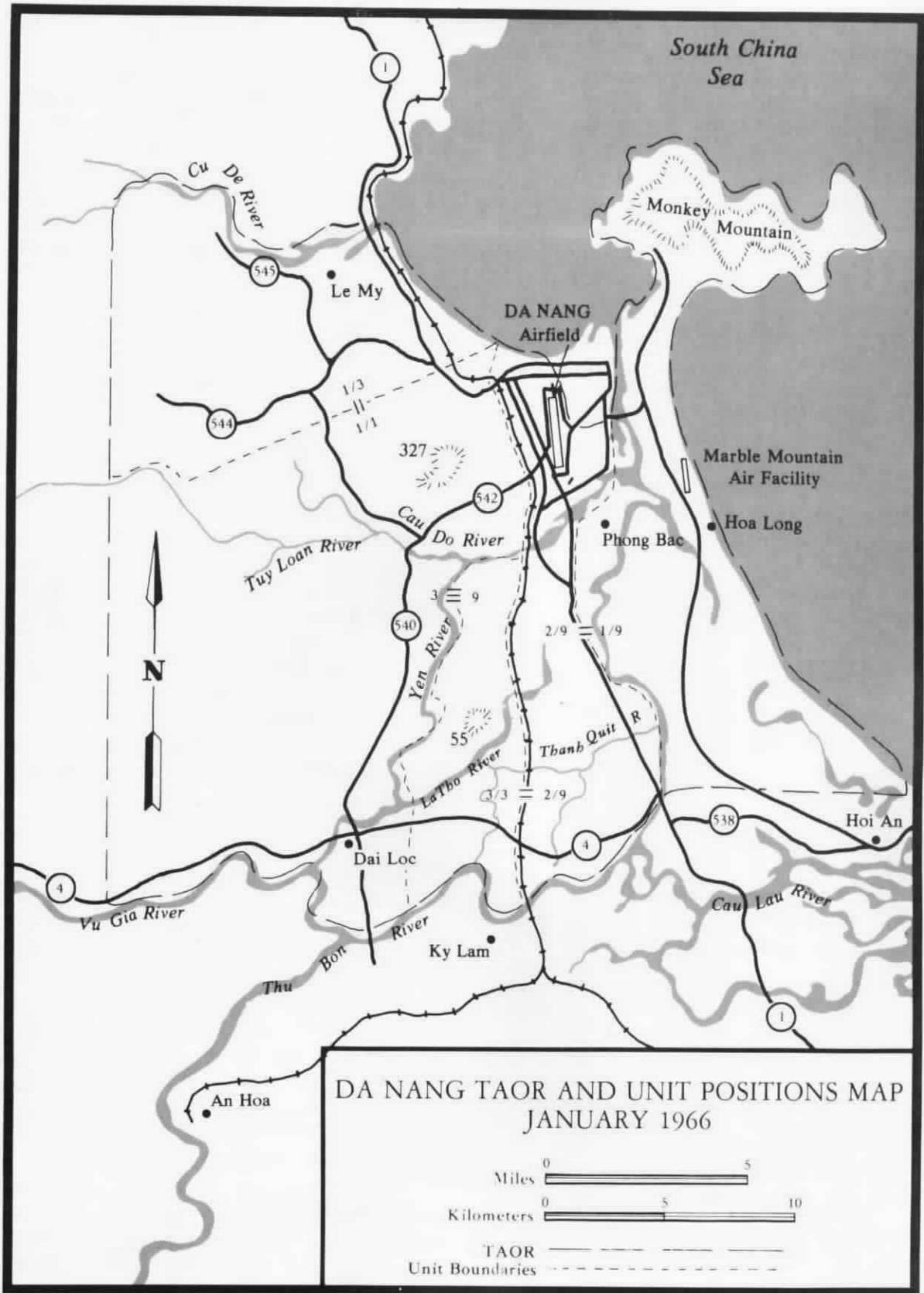
In November 1965, the South Vietnamese assigned a 60-man Rural Reconstruction, or *Can Bo*,* Platoon, to the five-village sector west of Route 1, thus inaugurating the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign. Part of



Marine Corps Photo A186455

A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, pulls the nails from his boot after stepping on a punji trap in the contested sector south of Da Nang. The nails went through the side of the boot but were stopped by the punji liner in the boot.

*The word *Can Bo* is of Chinese origin and during World War II the Communist Viet Minh used the term to designate highly motivated individuals who operated clandestinely against the Japanese and Vichy French. It was their mission to first indoctrinate and then organize the local populace against colonial rule. According to the MACV historian, the South Vietnamese Government attempted to capitalize "on the position of honor and respect these Can Bo occupied in what became a historic and successful revolution . . . and so designated those lower level government employees who worked at the village and hamlet levels." MACV Comd Hist, 1966, p. 502.



DA NANG TAOR AND UNIT POSITIONS MAP
JANUARY 1966

Miles 0 5
Kilometers 0 5 10
TAOR —————
Unit Boundaries - - - - -

the platoon furnished limited security within the hamlets, while the other members assisted the villagers in building up the local economy and meeting community needs. Supplementing the Rural Reconstruction cadre were the 59th Regional Force Battalion (RF) and Popular Force (PF) units. The RF were locally recruited militia who operated directly under the province chief and could be assigned anywhere in the province while the PF personnel operated directly under the district chief and normally remained in their native hamlets. The battalions of the 9th Marines were to provide the forward protective screen for the five villages undergoing pacification.¹

Although there was some initial progress, the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was in difficulty by the beginning of 1966. Both the Marines and the South Vietnamese had overestimated the ease with which they would be able to eradicate enemy influence. One problem the program faced was that nearly 20 percent of the 9,000 families, living in the five villages, were estimated to have Viet Cong relatives. Complicating the situation even further, confusion prevailed among the Vietnamese as to who was

Marines from the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines engage VC in a firefight during Operation Mallard. The operation took place northwest of the An Hoa region, later called the "Arizona Territory" after the western badlands.

Marine Corps Photo A186547



responsible for the campaign. The demarcation of authority between the commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who had operational control of ARVN forces and military responsibility for pacification in Quang Nam, and the Quang Nam Province Chief, who also was responsible for pacification as well as political administration within the province, was vague and a cause for some friction. Nevertheless, the basic factor for the lack of success in the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was the lack of security within the hamlets. The Viet Cong simply avoided the Marine battalions and attacked the understrength South Vietnamese militia and Rural Reconstruction cadre. Over 15 percent of the latter quit their positions. Instead of building up the PFs and RFs, the South Vietnamese removed the province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Trung Tuong, who had originated the concept, from the chain of command. The program continued to flounder through January.²

Another area, the An Hoa region just south of the Da Nang TAOR, was to play a significant role in Marine pacification efforts during 1966. An Hoa lies nestled in a fertile plain 20 miles from Da Nang immediately southwest of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Vu Gia Rivers. To the west, the terrain rises into the foothills of the Annamite mountain range while another series of mountains, the Que Sons, rises to the south and southeast. This small triangular area possesses all the basic ingredients for industrialization. The rivers and small streams in the region form a natural basin with hydroelectric potential. The only coal mine in South Vietnam is located seven miles to the southwest at Nong Son.

The South Vietnamese Government had realized the economic possibilities of this region. In 1962, the Diem regime selected An Hoa as one of its strategic hamlets and started establishing an industrial complex to consist of hydroelectric, water purification, and chemical fertilizer plants. By 1964, the factory equipment was either in Saigon or awaiting shipment to Vietnam. The project engineer, Le Thuc Can, had chosen the sites for the buildings and construction had begun.

It was then the Viet Cong struck, isolating An Hoa from government influence. In late 1964 and early 1965, enemy troops severed the roads in the area leading to Da Nang and the coast. At the same time, they forced the South Vietnamese to halt all con-

struction of a railroad spur to link An Hoa with the main north-south railway.

Despite these setbacks, the French-educated Can was determined to continue the project. At An Hoa, he had gathered together several Vietnamese engineers and established training schools to teach the young Vietnamese peasants the rudiments of mechanics, electronics, and other useful industrial skills. When the roads were cut, Can had supplies flown into the small An Hoa airfield. Eventually, he found it necessary to lengthen the 1,500-foot runway to 3,000 feet in order to accommodate larger aircraft.³

Security continued to be a problem. To protect the industrial area, the hard-pressed ARVN 51st Regiment maintained an infantry company, reinforced by two 105mm howitzers, in the hills to the south. Despite the government presence, the VC *R-20 [Doc Lap] Main Force Battalion* controlled the area surrounding the complex. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF G-3, recalled: "My own feelings at the time [1966] were that an accommodation had been reached between the VC and local ARVN commander. . . ." ^{4*}

The 3d Marines' Operation Mallard during January 1966 was the first large III MAF penetration into the An Hoa region. Acting on intelligence that the *R-20 Battalion* had been reinforced by the *5th VC Main Force Battalion*, the Marine regiment, supported by a composite artillery battalion, conducted a two-battalion operation in the area. On 10 January, Air Force C-130 transports flew two 105mm howitzer batteries from the Da Nang airfield to the An Hoa airstrip where the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines established an artillery fire base. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by Company G from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, crossed the Vu Gia River in LVTs and began to search for the VC in the area northwest of An Hoa, later commonly known as the

*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., in his comments, agreed with Colonel Simmons' view that an accommodation existed between the ARVN and the VC and further remarked on the incongruities there: "There were tremendous anachronisms and inequities that stick in my memory. . . . I seem to recall that there were French resident engineers in An Hoa, who continued to live in very comfortable homes and enjoyed speedboating and water skiing on the lake there." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

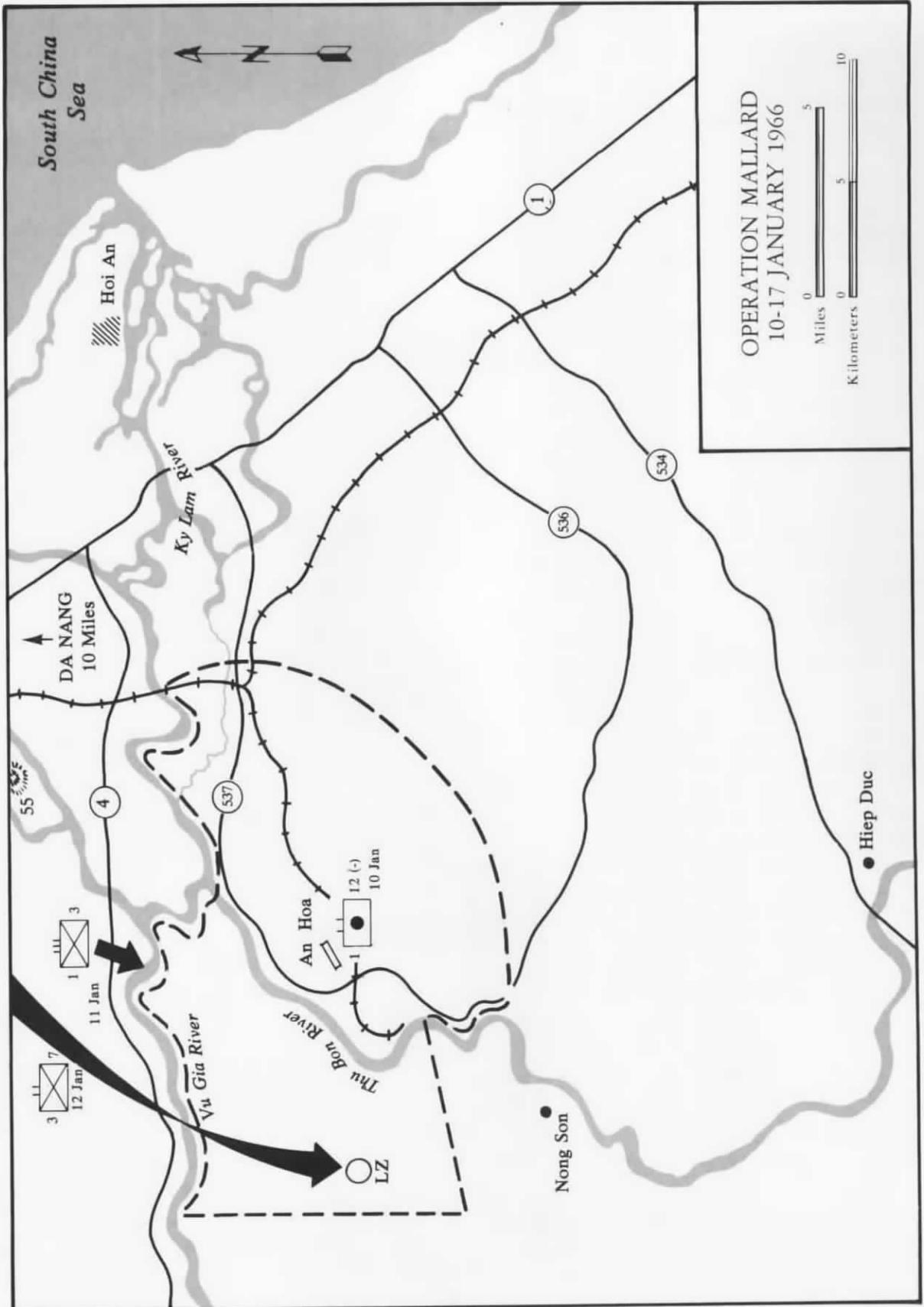


Marine Corps Photo A186548
A Marine takes time to relax and eat during Operation Mallard. C-Rations were the basic staple of the Marines in the field.

"Arizona Territory" after the Western badlands. A 155mm howitzer battery north of the Vu Gia also supported the operation. On 12 January, MAG-16 helicopters lifted Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which had arrived two days previously at the Da Nang airfield from Chu Lai, into landing zones in the mountains west of An Hoa to exploit a B-52 raid.

The heaviest action occurred during the early morning hours of 14 January in the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines sector. A four-man fire team from Company G, 9th Marines, leaving its platoon's patrol base on the west side of the Thu Bon some 4,000 meters northwest of An Hoa, surprised about 40 VC "deployed in skirmish line with four 60mm mortars on line."⁵ According to the fire team leader, Corporal Mark E. DePlanche:

We moved along this trail when all of a sudden I saw something white move . . . It appeared as though there was a hedgerow along the trail and suddenly two more bushes started moving and I yelled, "Oh God" and started spraying the area to my left. . . .⁶



The three other members of the Marine fire team also opened fire and the startled VC "became disorganized and dispersed," leaving behind the mortars.⁷ A number of the enemy withdrew to a nearby small hill and began throwing down grenades at the Marines. Maintaining radio contact with its platoon, the fire team was soon reinforced and the VC broke contact. Policing the battlefield, the Marines found four dead VC, captured the four mortars, and 80 60mm mortar shells, and recovered 15 enemy packs and a quantity of assorted small arms ammunition. Corporal DePlanche was the only Marine casualty, sustaining a slight wound to his right hand from an enemy grenade. He was later awarded the Navy Cross and the other three members of the team received Silver Stars for the action.

The military results of Operation Mallard, nevertheless, were minimal if measured with the enemy casualty yardstick. Viet Cong units simply fled west into the mountains upon the approach of the Marines. The important aspect of the operation, which ended on 17 January, was the response of the An Hoa population. More than 300 villagers asked to be evacuated to more secure areas. According to the Dai Loc District Chief, these people wanted to

live in their own hamlets "but not until the VC had been driven out. . . . the people wanted the Marines to come back into their area, drive the VC out, and stay there to make security."⁸ General Walt met Le Thuc Can for the first time and was impressed with what the man had accomplished under adverse circumstances and promised that the Marines would return to An Hoa.⁹

The lack of South Vietnamese Government cohesion in I Corps and Viet Cong strength in the Da Nang area prevented General Walt from carrying out his promise to Can for several months. On 25 January, the enemy forces demonstrated their capabilities. Employing 120mm mortars, the VC brazenly shelled the Da Nang Airbase, firing from positions within the Ngu Hanh Son area. Although the attack resulted in the death of one Marine and the wounding of seven others, the mortar rounds caused only minor damage to the base itself.* Again

*This was the second reported attack during the month in which the enemy employed 120mm mortars. In an earlier attack, the enemy shelled the U. S. Army Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province. Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War*, p. 115.

A Marine attempts to make friends with a puppy during Operation Mallard. The interior of the Vietnamese house in the picture is typical of those in the villages surrounding Da Nang.

Marine Corps Photo A186549





Marine Corps Photo A186559

Marines escort villagers who asked to leave their homes for a more secure area during Operation Mallard. Gen Walt promised that the Marines would return to the An Hoa region.

on 15 February, the Viet Cong revealed the vulnerability of government control in the Da Nang sector when an assassination team killed the Le My village chief during a ceremony in one of the Le My hamlets. These instances demonstrated that continued emphasis upon pacification and security in support of pacification was still sorely needed.

Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification

At two high-level conferences early in 1966, U.S. policymakers stressed that pacification in Vietnam should receive greater priority. In January, representatives from General Westmoreland's staff, the

American Embassy in Vietnam, Admiral Sharp's CinCPac staff, and their Washington counterparts met secretly in Warrenton, Virginia, to review the course of the war. The conferees examined the South Vietnamese Rural Reconstruction Program, the label for pacification at the time, as well as the structure of the American civilian assistance organization in South Vietnam. The most important result of the conference was its general focus and direction. William J. Porter, the U. S. Deputy Ambassador to South Vietnam, commented that the watchword in Washington was to become "pacification."¹⁰

The truth of this particular statement became evident the following month at the Honolulu meeting between President Johnson and the Vietnamese Chief of State, Nguyen Van Thieu, and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. On 8 February 1966, the U.S. and South Vietnamese Governments issued the "Honolulu Declaration." President Johnson renewed the American pledge to support the South Vietnamese in their struggle against the Communists, while Ky and Thieu promised renewed dedication to the eradication of social injustices, building of a viable economy, establishment of a true democracy, and the defeat of the Viet Cong and their allies.¹¹ President Johnson stated that as a result of this conference both governments were committed to winning the "other war," an euphemism for pacification. He quoted Henry Cabot Lodge, the U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam: "We have moved ahead here today in the fight to improve the lot of the little man at the grassroots. That is what this is all about."¹²

Despite its emphasis on pacification, the conference was by no means a repudiation of General Westmoreland's large unit strategy. At the conclusion of the conference, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided the MACV commander with a memorandum of understanding as to the consensus of the meeting. The memorandum approved an increase in South Vietnamese and U.S. regular forces and directed "intensified offensive operations against major VC/PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] forces, bases, and lines of communications—almost doubling the number of battalion-months of offensive operations from 40 to 75 a month." In effect, Honolulu endorsed the so-called "balanced approach." As General Westmoreland recently commented: "It was not a matter of either pacification or

actions to thwart enemy main force operations, it was both."¹³

Still, the Honolulu Conference gave a renewed impetus to the country-wide South Vietnamese pacification program. On 21 February, General Nguyen Duc Thang, the Minister for Rural Construction, became the Minister of Revolutionary Development, and the Rural Reconstruction cadre became Revolutionary Development teams, although retaining the Vietnamese designation *Can Bo*. General Thang designated national priority areas to be targeted for an extensive pacification effort in each of the four corps areas.¹⁴

In I Corps, the Ngu Hanh Son area was expanded to include all of Hoa Vang and parts of Hieu Duc and Dien Ban Districts and was redesignated as National Priority Area 1 (NPA 1). Lieutenant Colonel Lap, commander of the 51st ARVN Regiment, was placed in charge of both the security and pacification aspects of the program.¹⁵

Lap's appointment promised both a more vigorous Vietnamese pacification effort and better coordination with the 9th Marines, the regiment largely responsible for supporting the South Vietnamese effort in NPA 1. Colonel Simmons, who relieved Colonel Gorman as commander of the 9th Marines on



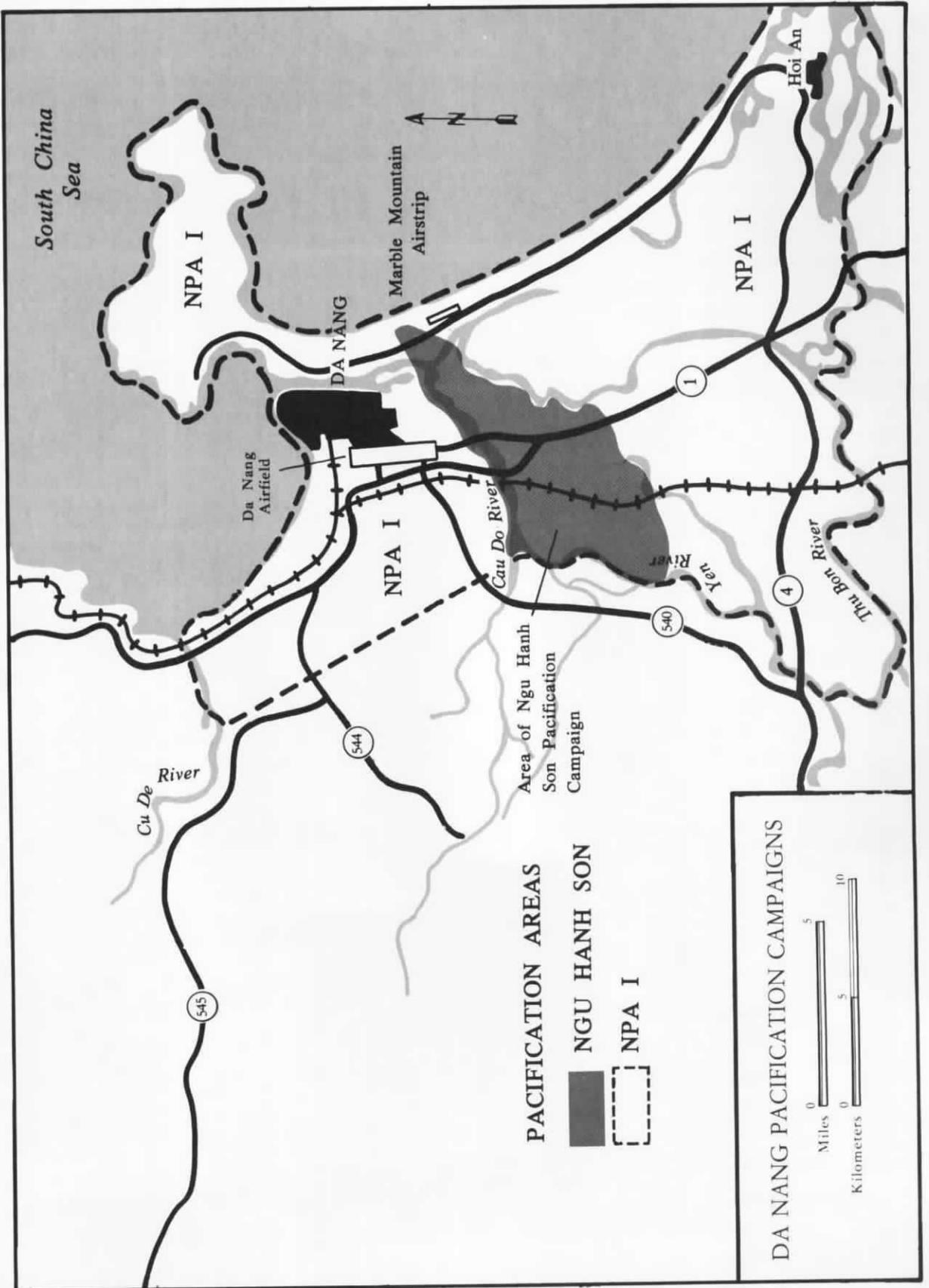
Marine Corps Photo A801847

MajGen McCutcheon, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and Deputy Commander, III MAF, congratulates Col Edwin H. Simmons upon the latter's assumption of command of the 9th Marines. Col Simmons, the former operations officer of III MAF, relieved Col John E. Gorman.

At the Honolulu Conference, President Johnson (at right center) speaks across the table to Vietnamese Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu (leaning forward) and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky (seated to the left of Thieu). To the right of the President is the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





18 February, described Lap as a "compassionate man, brought up in the classical Confucian ethic, [who] had an affinity with the people and a maturity of judgment which previously had been lacking."¹⁶

The Marines for their part continued to experiment with techniques of cooperating in pacification with the local South Vietnamese forces. The 3d and 9th Marines each had an RF company under their command. Lieutenant Colonel "Woody" Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the Base Defense Battalion, had eight PF platoons under its operational control, seven in the vicinity of the main airfield and the eighth in the village of Hoa Long south of the Marble Mountain helicopter facility.

In January, General Walt received permission from General Thi to extend the combined action company program to all Marine enclaves including Da Nang. The program had begun the previous year in the Phu Bai TAOR under Lieutenant Colonel Taylor, then commanding the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. Under its concept, a Marine squad was integrated with a PF platoon on the premise that while the Marines provided training for the local forces they themselves gained knowledge about the local populace and countryside. This, it was hoped, would create a bond of mutual interest among Marines, PFs, and villagers. Although Taylor initiated the training program at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines relieved the 3d Battalion as the Base Defense Battalion on 17 February and established the first formal combined action unit in the TAOR at the Hoa Long Village complex.¹⁷

In the 9th Marines sector, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with South Vietnamese troops and local administrative and police officials, conducted a sophisticated cordon and search operation in the hamlet of Phong Bac on 24-25 February. While the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support and attempted to remain as unobtrusive as possible, South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers. Although the regiment had experimented with this technique in 1965, this was the first operation to have the full cooperation of the local officials and to bear the title, "County Fair."^{*}

^{*}See Chapter 14 for further discussion of the combined action and County Fair programs.



Marine Corps Photo A187590
Vietnamese villagers in the hamlet of Phong Bac drink water from Marine lister bags during 9th Marines "County Fair" operations on 24 February 1966. The County Fair concept employed a sophisticated cordon and search technique in which the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support while South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers.

The design of the program was "to convince the people that the GVN (Government of Vietnam) was an effective government that was interested in the welfare of the people and that a GVN victory against the VC was inevitable."¹⁸

During February, the 9th Marines concentrated on plans to eradicate the guerrilla forces in its TAOR. Colonel Simmons reminded his officers that General Walt's highest priority was the pacification effort south of Da Nang.¹⁹ The regimental commander anticipated a gradual, coordinated advance of his battalions from their base areas south of the La Tho and Thanh Quit Rivers to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers. Despite the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two of his rifle companies participated in the Double Eagle operations during most of the month, the remaining regimental units maintained

a high level of small unit patrolling in preparation for the clearing operation.*

To sustain mobility and flexibility, the regiment stationed a reinforced rifle squad of 22 men at Marble Mountain which could be rapidly helilifted to exploit a VC contact. According to a III MAF special report, this concept, codenamed Sparrow Hawk, gave a battalion commander "a small, effective air-ground unit able to respond . . . in a rapid manner without tying down large forces of either infantry or helicopters." The report concluded that although the 9th Marines had not as yet killed any large number of VC, "the use of this fast-acting force has undoubtedly prevented a number of friendly casualties."²⁰ In an incident on 25 February, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's Company E, one of the battalion's rifle companies remaining in the Da Nang TAOR during Double Eagle, engaged 30 Viet Cong in the hamlet of La Tho Bac (1), 1,000 meters east of the railroad and 2,000 meters north of the La Tho River. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr., the company commander, requested and was reinforced by the Sparrow Hawk squad. According to the 9th Marines situation report for the day, "At 1200 all major units involved linked up (at the river south of the hamlet). . . . Total of 11 VC KIA (body count)."^{21**}

The greatest difficulty the 9th Marines encountered during February was not with Viet Cong troops, but with mines and booby traps. Over 70 percent of the regiment's casualties for the month, 12 of the 17 killed and 120 of the 173 wounded, were a result of these explosive devices.²² Extensive

*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, observed in his comments that the deployment of rifle units from Da Nang during Double Eagle "resulted in a quasi-reaction force being organized from service and service support units in the Da Nang TAOR to meet any contingency." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).

**Variations of the Sparrow Hawk technique existed in other sectors as well. Colonel Zitnik commented that "Marines in the Chu Lai sector also operated in a manner similar to Sparrow Hawk, except the designated troops remained in their battalion area and were picked up en route to the target area. Upon initial insertion of the small unit, the parent company (and battalion if necessary) prepared to reinforce its unit again with a larger helo lift." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

enemy use of mines was best exemplified on Hill 55. The hill, 3,000 meters northeast of the confluence of the Yen, the Ai Nghia, and the La Tho Rivers, was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines TAOR. It had to be occupied before any advance could be made to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers.

In late January, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion began mine clearing operations when Captain Grady V. Gardner's Company I secured the hill. During February, the battalion, supported by mine-clearing LVTE-1s from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and engineers from the 3d Engineer Battalion, started the difficult and dangerous task of removing the mines and constructing the forward battalion CP on the low-lying hill. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey recalled that on 4 February, he personally briefed General Krulak "on top of the only engineer constructed bunker there at that time."²³

During the month, the engineers lost a road grader and a light crane to mines while constructing a road and bunkers on the hill. The LVTE-1s expended 31 line charges which caused 99 secondary explosions. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion, remembered that his engineers employed man-pack line charges together with transistorized mine detectors in addition to the engineer tractors to detonate the enemy explosive devices.^{***} By the end of February, the infantry and engineers had completed most of their mine clearing mission on Hill 55, but as Lieutenant Colonel Dennis later observed, "No sites were ever considered 'cleared' since the VC would remine and booby trap locations we previously had cleared."²⁴

In the 3d Marines sector, Colonel Fisher, an experienced combat veteran of both World War II and Korea, expressed the same concern about the enemy mines and booby traps. Although reporting only light contact with enemy units in February, he

^{***}In his comments, Colonel Dennis remarked that the man-pack units "were not a normal item of issue," for a Marine engineer battalion. Prior to coming to Vietnam, he had seen both the man-pack units and the "new" transistorized mine detectors on a visit to the Army's Fort Belvoir. When he later assumed command of the 3d Engineer Battalion, he requested both items "for testing." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187759

A Marine from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines uses a flamethrower to clear obstacles near Hill 55. This small hill was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines area of operations and was later to be the site of the command post for the regiment.

observed that the number of mine incidents during the month represented a 110 percent increase over January and a 350 percent increase over the preceding four months. All told there were 52 mining incidents in the 3d Marines TAOR during February, the worst occurring near the Cu De River when an amphibian tractor hit a mine, exploded, and caught fire, resulting in the death of five Marines and one ARVN soldier, and the wounding of 20 other Marines and one Navy corpsman. Colonel Fisher concluded that the increasing incidence and sophistication of the enemy explosive devices reflected a determined organized attempt of the VC to

restrict the freedom of Marine patrol activity in the Da Nang TAOR.²⁵

With the expanding small-unit war in the enclave, the Marine infantry buildup at Da Nang continued. After the completion of Double Eagle II at the end of February, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the former SLF battalion, rejoined its parent regiment at Da Nang. The battalion relieved the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in the 3d Marines southern sector. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch's 1st Battalion went into division reserve with its command post at Marble Mountain and prepared to act as a mobile force wherever needed.