

TOP SECRET

Chapter 19

LIMITED DEPLOYMENT OF US FORCES

Protecting US bases and installation in the RVN against enemy attack, long a matter of concern to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had become even more urgent with the launching of the first bombing reprisals against NVN. As decisions for even greater pressures against NVN were taken in February 1965, culminating in ROLLING THUNDER, the security of the US bases and forces in the RVN caused growing anxiety at high levels of the US Government and resulted in progressively more positive actions to insure the safety and integrity of the US military establishment in the South.

Steps to Improve Security of US Forces

In connection with the Tonkin Gulf reprisals, US officials had considered sending combat troops to the RVN specifically to protect US bases and personnel. General Westmoreland had rejected the idea, holding that too many US battalions would be needed to secure adequately all major US installations in RVN. The presence of large numbers of US troops might cause the GVN to lose interest in defending bases and to relax even further its already lax security measures. Moreover, there would be language and jurisdiction problems.¹

By February 1965, however, General Westmoreland had changed his mind. The deepening pattern of VC violence directed specifically at US forces and installations, dramatized by the major attack against Pleiku, had convinced him that the war had reached a new plateau--one on which Americans were in great danger. ARVN control in three of the four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) was deteriorating rapidly. On 9 February COMUSMACV stated that it might be necessary to send in US combat forces of at least division strength to protect US personnel and

1. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-121-65 to SecDef 20 Feb 65 (derived from JCS 2343/525-1), JMF 9155.3 (11 Feb 65). A study by the Army Staff estimated that 44 battalions, or 4 plus divisions, would be needed to defend the 240 US bases, large and small in RVN.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

installations. The Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately pressed for precise judgments on the number and types of US troops that would be needed.²

General Westmoreland informed Admiral Sharp and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 17 February that the United States could no longer count on the RVNAF to protect US installations and personnel. He listed, in priority, those areas where US combat forces were needed: 1) Da Nang; 2) the Saigon/Bien Hoa/Vung Tau complex; and 3) the Nha Trang/Cam Ranh Bay area. Admiral Sharp agreed with the judgment and so informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³

Both commanders considered the US base at Da Nang to be the keystone of the US effort against NVN. Such programs as YANKEE TEAM, BARREL ROLL, and the OPLAN 34A depended heavily on this base for support. CINCPAC called it a likely target for the enemy and doubted the ability of the RVNAF to stop a serious enemy effort to seize it. The VC already had the capability to sabotage the Da Nang airfield, to attack it with 57mm recoilless rifles and mortars, or to attack it in battalion strength. Admiral Sharp said that it was important for the United States to act rather than react against this enemy threat. If the United States moved quickly to place adequate US combat forces in the area, it could deter an attack. But if it waited for a tragedy to occur, the reaction would have to be much greater in order to restore the security of the area. CINCPAC could readily furnish combat forces since two Marine Battalion Landing Teams (BLTs) were off the coast of RVN at the moment and could quickly be built to Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) strength by air and sea lift. He recommended that a MEB be deployed at once to the Da Nang area. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had, in connection with the eight week program, recommended accelerated deployment of the MEB. On 20 February they again recommended to the Secretary of Defense in a memorandum that the MEB be sent to the RVN at a total strength, including command and control elements, of about 8,500 men and officers. In order to reconstitute a Special Landing Force (SLF) Afloat when the MEB was deployed ashore, they recommended that a Marine Brigade from Hawaii be sent to the Western Pacific.⁴

2. Ibid.

3. (TS-GP 1) Msgs, COMUSMACV 0712 to CINCPAC, 17 Feb 65; CINCPAC to JCS, 180210Z Feb 65.

4. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-121-65 to SecDef, 18 Feb 65, (derived from JCS 2343/525-1), JMF 9155.3 (11 Feb 65).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

The JCS noted that as a bonus of the deployment to the Da Nang area, "our readiness posture for other contingencies in a strategically sensitive area of Southeast Asia will be significantly improved." The Joint Chiefs of Staff informed the Secretary that additional measures were under study and that they would send him further recommendations.⁵

Ambassador Taylor informed Washington authorities on 22 February that he and General Westmoreland had agreed that there was no need to deploy US combat troops to RVN except to Da Nang. He had strong reservations on basing "any considerable number" of Marines at Da Nang and thus revising the long-standing US policy of keeping US ground combat troops out of the RVN. Once this policy was breached it would be very difficult to hold the line. The GVN would seek to unload other ground force tasks on the United States. The presence of US combat forces would breed friction with the local population. Conflicts would arise with the RVNAP on command relations. Ambassador Taylor also pointed out that the French had tried, and failed, to defeat the Viet Minh guerrillas. "White-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is, is not suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles," Taylor declared. He doubted that US forces would do any better than had the French. "When I view this array of difficulties, I am convinced that we should adhere to our past policy of keeping our ground forces out of direct counterinsurgency role," Taylor said. Ambassador Taylor appreciated, however, General Westmoreland's concern for the safety of Da Nang and was willing to go along with the introduction of a Marine BLT to strengthen the base against overt assault.⁶

General Westmoreland on the same day asked that one BLT land at Da Nang as soon as possible to protect construction workers at the site of the HAWK battery and to secure the battery when in place. He asked also that, following this landing, a second BLT be sent in to provide inner perimeter security at Da Nang airfield. No tactical aircraft need be brought in, and the third BLT of the MEB should not come ashore in the foreseeable future.⁷

For his part Admiral Sharp informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 24 February that he considered the entire MEB must be landed at Da Nang as an act of prudence, to be taken before, not after, tragedy occurred. He believed that the vulnerability

5. Ibid.

6. (TS) Msg, Saigon 473 to JCS, 22 Feb 65, JCS IN 36860.

7. (TS-GP 1) Msg, COMUSMACV MAC 5633 to CINCPAC, 23 Feb 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

of the US investment in Da Nang was as apparent to the enemy as it was to US authorities. With a strong mobile force around Da Nang providing a tight security for the airfield complex and good security for outlying installations, two ancillary benefits would emerge. First, the RVNAF would be encouraged to use its own troops for patrol and security operations; and second, the VC/NVA would have to regard Da Nang as a tougher target. Sharp wanted a jet attack squadron ashore, but was willing to have the deployments phased gradually. As first priority he wished a MEB command and control element, a surface BLT, and a helicopter squadron landed at once. Following this he wanted to build up ashore, using the US Marine security forces already at Da Nang to provide a second BLT. A third BLT would be landed when it could be effectively supported and employed.⁸

CINCPAC also asked that the deployment of the MEB be accompanied by deployment of one Marine F-4 squadron for close air support. He recommended that the Special Landing Force (SLF) be kept in the South China Sea on a 96 hour reaction time from RVN and that a MEB be moved from Hawaii to WESTPAC to replace the MEB landed at Da Nang.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff fully supported CINCPAC's recommendations and forwarded them, on the same day they were received, to the Secretary of Defense, urging that they be adopted. The only significant change they made to CINCPAC's recommendations was to ask for two squadrons of jet aircraft instead of one.⁹

On 26 February the President approved deployment of a helicopter squadron and two BLTs to Da Nang, but deferred decision on the movement of the remainder of the MEB, the command and support elements, and the jet squadrons.¹⁰

The deployment of the MEB was cleared by Ambassador Taylor with GVN Prime Minister Quat on 1 March. The two officials explicitly agreed that the United States could consider

8. (TS-GP 1) Memo, J-3 to JCS, 24 Feb 65, Encl to JCS 2343/525-2, JMF 9155.3 (11 Feb 65).

9. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-130-65 to SecDef, 24 Feb 65 (derived from JCS 2343/525-2), JMF 9155.3 (11 Feb 65).

10. (TS) Msg, JCS 0736-65 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 27 Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

that the GVN had requested these troops and that the United States was responding by furnishing them. On the next day General Westmoreland discussed the military details with Generals Thieu and Minh. The RVN officers expressed some concern that the civilian population in the area might react adversely to the introduction of the US Marines and agreed that these forces should be moved in as unobtrusively as possible to minimize the impact of their arrival. "The concern of the Vietnamese," General Westmoreland observed, "is that arrival of this large contingent of Americans could trigger demonstrations with overtones of cessation of hostilities and peace by negotiation."¹¹

On 7 March the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed CINCPAC to land at once a surface BLT, a helicopter squadron with MEB command and control elements, and minimum logistic elements. These forces were to "marry up" with combat and service elements already in the RVN. A second BLT would be landed to build up the MEB to two BLT strength. The SLF would remain in the South China Sea. The mission of these Marine forces would be to occupy and defend critical terrain features in order to secure Da Nang airfield, landing beaches, and other US facilities in the area. The Marine force was specifically not to engage in day to day actions against the VC. Additional forces would not be deployed unless directed by the JCS. Both Marine BLTs landed on 8 March.¹²

In the meantime other measures were taken to improve the security situation for US personnel in the Saigon area. In a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense the JCS recommended approval of a CINCPAC recommendation that a reduced strength US Army Military Police Battalion be sent at once to RVN. Deputy Secretary Vance approved deployment of the battalion on 18 February.¹³

Changing the Role of US Forces

The bulk of Army and USAF units in RVN in February 1965 were combat support types. The United States did not intend,

11. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2798 to State, 1 Mar 65, JCS IN 45134. (TS-GP 3) Msg, COMUSMACV MAC JOO 6394 to CINCPAC, 2 Mar 65, JCS IN 46032.

12. (TS-GP 4) Msg, JCS 6580 to CINCPAC, 7 Mar 65. (S) Marine Corps Commandant's Vietnam Chronology.

13. (S-GP 4) JCSM-110-65 to SecDef, 16 Feb 65 (derived from JCS 2343/524); (S-GP 4) Memo, DepSecDef to CJCS, 18 Feb 65, Att. to JCS 2343/524-1, JMF-9155.3 (22 Jan 65).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

as a matter of policy, that these units or the military advisors to the RVNAF should engage in direct combat with the VC. Nevertheless, there were indications as the VC made gains during the early months of 1965 that US authorities were thinking more and more in terms of using US forces in a direct combat role. Admiral Sharp set the stage for this type of approach when he told the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 26 February, " . . . we need a positive statement of national policy and, specifically, a command decision as to whether or not we are or will participate actively in the fighting in RVN, or whether we will continue to adhere to our long standing policy that this is a Vietnamese war and that we are only advisors." He pointed out that the recent decision to allow the use of US jets in RVN had openly involved the USAF in the war in RVN.¹⁴

At a meeting at the White House on the evening of 26 February the President made it clear that US policy was to do everything possible to "maximize" US military efforts to reverse the unfavorable situation in Vietnam. Among the military steps discussed in "an exploratory way" was the possibility of sending in more US advisors at the combat unit level, the provision of more helicopters for both surveillance and fire support, the increased use of US jet aircraft in RVN, and the use of US naval vessels to assist the RVN in preventing infiltration by sea.

To provide the President with the latest and best possible information as a basis for making additional decisions on these and other matters of US concern in Vietnam, the Secretary of Defense requested the Chief of Staff Army, General Johnson, to visit the RVN in early March. General Johnson visited RVN from 5 to 12 March to "evaluate the need for and nature of additional supporting actions" in Vietnam. He talked with Ambassador Taylor, principal members of the US Mission Team, and with all key RVN political and military leaders.¹⁵

Ambassador Taylor told General Johnson that the basic unresolved problem was the GVN's inability to protect its people. Unless the people were safe and realized it, all programs in the RVN were either impossible or ineffective. If they were protected adequately, all other problems could be solved in a reasonable length of time. Taylor charged that the

14. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to CJCS, 262155Z Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Feb 65.

15. (TS) Msg, JCS 0736-65 to CINCPAC, 27 Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam, Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

lack of progress in destroying the VC in the countryside stemmed from insufficient trained military, paramilitary and police forces, ineffective pacification programs resulting from GVN instability, and a popular apathy and dwindling morale--"the consequence of a long war with no end in sight."

Another primary concern, said Ambassador Taylor, was the growing strength of the VC. The RVN's open frontiers allowed infiltration, and the VC recruiting tactics were remarkably effective. The heart of the overall problem was the continued support of the VC from NVN. The only way to stop it apparently was by the application of military pressures on NVN.

Ambassador Taylor cited historical factors as a main reason for the GVN's instability. The country had no heritage of loyalty to a single government or leader, and US aid, no matter how massive, was not going to bring about quickly such loyalty or unity in the people. He told General Johnson that it was now necessary to explore remedial measures for the RVN's ailments and listed 13 specific areas in which this should be done. Among the military measures to be explored, were the use of US manpower to offset shortages in the RVNAF and an increased tempo for both BARREL ROLL and ROLLING THUNDER.¹⁶

General Westmoreland in talking with General Johnson had conceded that the initiative lay with the enemy. The communists had consolidated political gains in the countryside, had increased their military strength, and had improved their organization, weaponry and logistic capability. The people were becoming convinced of the inevitability of VC victory. RVNAF losses were widely publicized but those of the VC were kept quiet. Looking to the future, Westmoreland forecast an increased VC offensive throughout RVN, particularly in the northern and central parts of the country. He anticipated a buildup of VC strength and a regrouping of main force units into larger formations. The enemy's strategy would aim at isolating the RVNAF in pockets, and thus cutting them off from the population, their supplies, and communications. If present trends continued, with no new elements introduced, within six months the RVNAF would be essentially a series of "islands of strength" clustered

¹⁶, (TS-GP 1) Memo, CSA to SecDef et al., 14 Mar 65.
OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

around the District and Provincial capitals. The RVN would be jammed with refugees in a "generally subverted countryside." And pressure would grow for the GVN to negotiate a settlement with the VC.

General Westmoreland decried the lack of a strong GVN which made coordinated, effective national resistance to the VC impossible. The RVN had done remarkably well in sustaining any government at all, but had succeeded only because of the resiliency of the people and the lingering momentum of previous years.

This grim politico-military picture led him to the conclusion that "we are headed toward a VC take-over of the country, sooner or later, if we continue down the present road at the present level of effort. This collapse could take place within a year. On the other hand, the GVN, with US assistance, might be able to hold out in its major bases and province towns for several years."

COMUSMACV believed that the United States must, as a matter of policy, "buy time." The United States must prevent the ARVN from being defeated in open combat by committing its own air forces in direct support of the ARVN wherever it was threatened by superior VC forces, and United States naval forces should be used to stop the infiltration of ammunition and other bulk supplies to the VC by ocean-going vessels. Moreover, US ground forces in addition to the MEB at Da Nang, might be needed elsewhere in RVN "for identical purposes or indeed, to prevent a collapse in some particular area at a critical time." He also called for additional measures to increase the US capability in target acquisition, research, and analysis. Other steps his staff was carefully considering were; 1) use of CBU-1 munitions and nonlethal chemical and biological agents; 2) addition of three more UH-1B helicopter companies, one to each corps (using the Marine squadron at Da Nang for one corps); 3) addition of FACs and observation aircraft to provide a "tailored company/squadron" for each corps; 4) addition of one-half squadron of C-130s for in-country airlift. He admitted that his suggestions, if adopted, would bring into being a new basic policy toward the war in RVN. The United States would be committed to do whatever was necessary militarily to prevent defeat. But in his mind steps already being taken pointed toward the evolution of a new policy. "If a policy of direct US support and involvement is announced and if the measures discussed above are taken," COMUSMACV stated, "it is entirely possible that the adverse trends would be reversed. The VC are not 10 feet tall; they have problems which must be formidable." 17

17. Ibid.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

In its impact upon US policy, General Johnson's report to the President ranked with General Taylor's report of 1961 to President Kennedy and with the Bundy report of the preceding month. In his written report General Johnson told the President substantially what Ambassador Taylor and General Westmoreland had said, although expanding on some of their views. He called for the adoption of measures by the United States under three categories: 1) measures to arrest the deterioration; 2) measures to free ARVN forces for offensive operations; 3) measures to contain infiltration by land.

Under the first category General Johnson proposed 21 specific military measures. These included introduction of more aircraft; removal of certain of the restrictions on ROLLING THUNDER (see Chapter 18); stepping up unconventional operations against NVN; expansion of US Seventh Fleet participation, particularly air, in the RVN; and a reorientation of BARREL ROLL to increase its effectiveness. He also suggested revision of procedures for funding and construction and other broad measures to build up the US base. These broad measures included acceleration of construction of jet airfields in RVN, increasing logistic support capability, and reorientation of this capability in RVN from north-south to east-west.¹⁸

PR
Noting that the VC were tending more and more to attack in larger formations, frequently of one or more battalions, he also noted the need to free the ARVN from guard duties and to permit its employment along more suitable military lines. "... the time has come to decide," General Johnson declared, "how much the United States is willing to commit to the security of South Vietnam within South Vietnam. Consequently a clarification of US policy is required as to what we expect the Vietnamese to do for themselves and what the United States will provide as complementary forces." He then gave two suggested alternatives for deployment of a tailored division force which would free some ARVN units for offensive action against the VC in the critical II CTZ, the highlands areas of the RVN. The first was to deploy US combat units to take over security at the Bien Hoa/Tan Son Nhut airbase complex, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, and Pleiku. He did not feel that this action, which would free about six ARVN battalions and 25 RF companies, would be militarily sufficient, but judged it to be all that was "politically feasible within the US at this time"; his second alternative was to deploy US

18. Ibid.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

combat units into the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac, also in the II CTZ. This would allow the movement of two ARVN divisions and eleven ARVN battalions into the coastal regions of Binh Dinh, Phu Yen and Phu Bon provinces where the VC had recently increased their pressure significantly.

To stop infiltration, General Johnson suggested invoking the SEATO Treaty and establishing an International Force south of the 17th Parallel across Quang Tri Province and the panhandle of Laos to the Mekong. He further suggested, that if this was not feasible, a four division US force be placed in the same geographical area. He also made certain broad suggestions on changing funding procedures within RVN to facilitate programming and adaptation to the war that was going on. "Time is running out swiftly in Vietnam and temporizing or expedient measures will not suffice The United States possesses capabilities which, if applied with speed, vigor, and imagination, can redress the present military imbalance without excessive risk of widening the conflict." 19

The President met with Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the afternoon of 15 March for a climactic discussion of General Johnson's recommendations. The meeting was marked by close questioning concerning the situation in various areas of the RVN, the reasons for the overall deteriorating security situation, and measures which could be taken to stem and reverse the adverse trends.

On the next day General Wheeler, in a cable describing this meeting, stated that the President viewed the outlook as bleak, but "one which must and will be overcome." He had made it clear that the United States would provide anything that would improve the posture of the GVN and the US in Vietnam. He had approved, in principle, the 21 specific actions that General Johnson had said must be taken to arrest the deteriorating situation. 20

Four points, above and beyond those involved in General Johnson's recommendations, emerged from this meeting with the President. The President held the JCS responsible for the success of the war against the VC and he was currently dissatisfied with the progress being made. It now appeared to be

19. Ibid.

20. (TS) Msg, JCS 0936-65 to CINCPAC, 16 Mar 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

beyond the capabilities of the RVNAF to defeat the insurgents without direct participation of US combat units. The President appeared willing to provide whatever support was necessary to defeat the VC in the RVN. On the other hand he did not want to get more deeply involved with Communist China in the process, if this were avoidable.

General Wheeler also told Admiral Sharp that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were considering the two alternatives for deployment of US ground forces that General Johnson had included in his report. In addition, the thought had been advanced that a ROK division might also be involved as the nucleus of a SEATO force.

The Chairman also stated that General Greene, the Commandant, Marine Corps, had proposed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the United States establish a series of about six "beach heads" along the RVN coast from Da Nang south to the Delta, each to be occupied by US combat forces of appropriate size. General Greene had pointed out that access to these areas from the sea would insure their supply and support and would provide a means of withdrawal if needed.

General Wheeler noted that these proposals to use US combat forces would modify existing policy in that they would commit US troops, in force, against the enemy. To be workable, therefore, whichever proposal was approved would require some sort of combined US/GVN command. On reflection, General Wheeler concluded, "I find that many of the reasons supporting our past practices have lost validity in the light of the situation facing us in South Vietnam. In other words, I believe that we must reexamine our past policies, measure their validity against our performance and that of the enemy and modify them as needed to stem and reverse an adverse tide." 21

General Wheeler described the President's attitude as one of "stark determination to do everything possible to better our situation and to attain our objective of 'making these people leave their neighbors alone.'" 22

On 18 March General Westmoreland sought Ambassador Taylor's agreement to landing the third BLT of the MEB at Phu Bai. Taylor concurred despite his several reservations about the wisdom of this move. The Ambassador feared that this might be only the first of other moves that would commit more US combat forces in South Vietnam. He was keenly aware that the understrength RVNAF might have to be supplemented by foreign troops, and that commitment of a US division would shore up the badly deteriorating I and II CTZs, boost RVN civilian morale, and end talk that the United States was not serious in its efforts to help the RVN. Ambassador Taylor

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

was also aware of the probable adverse effects of such a commitment. To send in US combat troops would increase US involvement, expose more US forces to danger, and invite greater losses. It would also raise sensitive questions of command, and might encourage the GVN to "let the United States do it." There were other disadvantages as well, but the total effect for good or bad could not be measured, according to Ambassador Taylor, until the possible missions for a US division were examined. There were two obvious possibilities, use of the division in the high plateau or in defending key enclaves along the coast. In the first instance, aside from easier operating conditions, the US troops could use their superior mobility and firepower effectively in cutting off infiltration. In the latter case they would be used in a "rather inglorious static defensive mission" operating in a heavily populated area and fragmented to the point that command and control could become awkward.²³

Ambassador Taylor had tentatively concluded that it would not be desirable to send a US division into RVN unless clear and tangible advantages outweighed the numerous disadvantages. The United States must determine how much of its own combat forces would close the manpower gap in RVN. Obviously the US division would make some contribution but it was not certain by any means that it would be enough to reverse the downward trend. If, on the other hand, the United States decided it would be worthwhile to send in the division, the best place for it would be in the highlands. This would be the more exposed position and "even permits one to entertain the possibility of a kind of Dien Bien Phu" if the VC cut off access to the coast by road.

The coastal enclave idea was safer and simpler even though less impressive and potentially less productive. Taylor wondered if the two deployment possibilities could not be combined in some way with the retention of a base coastal area, linked with a position inland.²⁴

Admiral Sharp, on 18 March, agreed with the Chief of Staff, Army's view that to move US troops into the Bien Hoa-Tan Son Nhut complex would be useful, but it would have to be carefully arranged with the GVN. As to other deployments, CINCPAC held that no US combat troops should be moved into the plateau

23. (TS) Msg. Saigon 3003 to State, 18 Mar 65, JCS IN 67403.

24. Ibid.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

area until Nha Trang and Qui Nhon, which were vital points of entry to the plateau from the coast, were fully secured. Any supply of US forces in the highlands should be by means other than air, which was undependable and already overtaxed. "U.S. assumption of responsibility for the defense of the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac would position major combatant U. S. ground forces in a key area of Viet Cong interest and activity, and would impose major logistic problems," CINCPAC noted. It should not be started until the United States had assurance of full logistic support capabilities based on the coastal towns and was convinced it could keep the land LOCs open.²⁵

A/11
Even before they received CINCPAC's views, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at their meeting on 17 March 1965, directed the Joint Staff to develop, as a matter of priority, a plan for the employment of US and allied forces in a combat role in the RVN. The concept of the plan was to include a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) in the Da Nang area, a US Army division force in the high plateau centering around Pleiku, and a ROK division force in the Bien Hoa-Vung Tau-Saigon area. Using this concept as a basis, the Joint Staff developed for the Joint Chiefs of Staff a draft memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, which contained recommendations for the specified deployments. The Chief of Staff, Air Force, did not agree. He said he did not believe the Joint Chiefs of Staff were ready to deploy an Army division to the Pleiku area. Although this had been discussed at the 17 March meeting, no decisions had been reached and there remained questions as to which units were to be deployed, the method of deployment, the concept of employment, and logistic support. In addition there was the question of military advisability of setting this division down in an area surrounded and controlled by the VC. He wanted the paper changed to show deployment of the Army division with supporting forces "to develop and expand additional coastal enclaves south of Da Nang to provide security for important installations and for counterinsurgency operations."²⁶

The Chief of Staff, Air Force, also proposed adding to the memorandum to the Secretary of Defense wording that would indicate a recommendation to increase the intensity and severity of ROLLING THUNDER and to deploy four of the nine squadrons called for in the eight week program on an accelerated basis.

25. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 180840Z Mar 65, JCS IN 67919.

26. (TS-GP 3) Memo, J-3 to JCS, 18 Mar 65; (TS-GP 3) CSAFM-J-84-65, 19 Mar 65; JCS 2343/543. JMF 9155.3 (18 Mar 65).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

On 19 March, after considerable discussion, the Chief of Staff, Air Force, withdrew his objection to deployment of the Army division to the Pleiku area, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed to add the wording that he desired with regard to increasing air attacks on NVN and the deployment of the four squadrons. The resultant memorandum was approved and sent to the Secretary of Defense on 20 March.²⁷

The Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Secretary of Defense that they now considered that US combat forces must be introduced in a combat role in RVN in sufficient strength to achieve "an effective margin of combat power" and to let the enemy know that the United States intended to stand by the GVN. Participation by ROK and other third country forces, if offered, would be valuable both psychologically and as actual combat assistance.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff then recommended the following deployments and actions:

a. Expand mission of Marine elements at Da Nang to include counterinsurgency combat operations. Deploy remainder of the III Marine Expeditionary Force to the Da Nang area as requested by CINCPAC, with the same missions.

b. Deploy, as soon as proper logistic support is insured, a US Army division with necessary supporting forces from the continental United States for employment in the central plateau, centered on the Pleiku area, for counterinsurgency combat operations.

c. Deploy, as soon as practicable, a Republic of Korea Army division force to South Vietnam for counterinsurgency and base security operations.

d. Deploy, as requested by CINCPAC, four of the nine Air Force squadrons

General Wheeler immediately notified CINCPAC of the recommendations that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had made to Secretary McNamara. He asked him to give, as soon as possible, his views on the logistic requirements and command arrangements necessary to carry out the JCS recommendations.²⁸

27. (TS) Dec On JCS 2343/543, 19 Mar 65; (TS-GP 3) JCSM-204-65 to SecDef, 20 Mar 65; JMF 9155.3 (18 Mar 65).

28. (TS) Msg, JCS 1008-65 to CINCPAC, 20 Mar 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

Admiral Sharp sent General Wheeler's message to General Westmoreland seeking his views and suggesting that he consider deploying the Army division to Qui Nhon initially to establish a logistic base, insure the security of the area, and carry out aggressive patrolling. After the base was established, the Korean division would take over from the US division, which would then move to the central plateau. He made other suggestions for possible employment of the ROK division in an enclave and asked for suggestions on command relationships between the ROK, the US Marines, and the RVN. COMUSMACV would have operational control of the Marines.²⁹

In his reply General Westmoreland recommended that the III MEF be stationed in the Da Nang area and the Army division in the Qui Nhon-Pleiku area. The ROK division might best be used to provide security for airfield construction at Chu Lai. These deployments would also allow the opening of the rail line and of Highway One from Qui Nhon to Hue. Insofar as command arrangements were concerned, he and the commander of the RVNAF should act together on a "coordinate/cooperative" basis with each retaining command of his national forces. A small combined US/GVN staff would be maintained at the highest level in the field to mutually approve or disapprove staff actions. For this staff, which would have limited directive powers, General Westmoreland suggested a US Chief with a full-time RVN deputy.

Below this level the command relations and control arrangements would be played by ear with US and RVN units in the same area operating along lines agreed to by the intermediate unit or headquarters commanders. Close liaison would be maintained between these intermediate headquarters, with all directives passing through national channels. Because of the language problem, among others, the ROK units would be under US operational control--for all practical purposes under US command. These ROK forces initially would only be assigned area security missions. General Westmoreland foresaw attaching the ROK division to the MEF, with the Assistant MEF Division Commander being physically with the ROK Division commander in his headquarters. The concept thus presented was, General Westmoreland stated, only an interim arrangement and was susceptible to modification "if and when it becomes politically palatable or militarily essential" to have the United States take full command. He believed that he would have "de facto" control of RVNAF forces in any bilateral operations anyway.³⁰

29. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 210053Z, Mar 65.

30. (TS) Msg, COMUSMACV MAC 1566 to CINCPAC, 22 Mar 65.

(See Ch. 22, Command Arrangements).

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

945
Ambassador Taylor went into greater detail on his ideas for employing US forces on 27 March when he informed the Secretary of State that it was quite clear that the existing operational units of the RVNAF were incapable of coping with the VC threat. The United States must decide what kind of strategy it would pursue during 1965, whether to base that strategy on the hope that ROLLING THUNDER would take care of the situation, whether to concentrate on reversing the downward trend in certain critical provinces, or whether to go all-out by injection of all possible military strength into RVN or, as he phrased it, "to go for broke to win rapidly." He then discussed the ideas which he had first presented earlier in March for the use of US forces, citing again the advantages of each. He also examined the matter of combining some of these ideas such as the use of mobile reserves operating out of offensive enclaves. He said that if the United States decided that additional ground forces were needed he would favor their employment "in accordance with the Offensive Enclave-Mobile Reaction" idea.³¹

Reporting to the Chairman, the Director, on 31 March, stated that additional approvals for deployment of US forces had reached a total of 32,686 in the RVN. Additional requests for authorizations totalling 3,882 were pending approval by the Secretary of Defense. This augmentation was independent of the combat forces that were currently being considered. The additional authorizations that would be required to attain a combat posture in the RVN amounted to 77,814 which, if approved, would bring the total authorization for US forces in the RVN to 116,341.³²

At a meeting of the Secretary of Defense, Ambassador Taylor, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington on 29 March 1965, General Wheeler summarized the JCS views on how best to employ US and other "third country" forces. The Marine force at Da Nang should be built up to full MEF strength and its mission expanded to include active counterinsurgency. An Army division should be sent into the plateau area as soon as "logistically appropriate" and given a pacification mission. Other suggested deployments included a ROK division and 4 more.

31. (TS) Msg, Saigon 3120 to State, 27 Mar 65.

32. (TS) DJSM-395-65 to CJCS, 31 Mar 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

tactical fighter squadrons to be sent into the battle area as space and logistic support became available. General Wheeler noted that the Joint Chiefs of Staff appreciated that the facts of "political and logistic" life would dictate the time phasing of this buildup.³³

Ambassador Taylor again noted that rapid introduction of a force of this size would create a variety of political problems. He suggested that the size of the force be left open, but that planning proceed on the basis of an orderly buildup as political and logistic problems were resolved. The Secretary of Defense asserted that the MEB at Da Nang should be filled out to include support elements, thus making it self-sufficient. He believed that more US Army forces, probably somewhere between a brigade and a division, would be needed to relieve the ARVN for offensive pacification missions. He was not sure how or where third country forces should be employed or at what rate they should be introduced. He felt however that they should be introduced as rapidly as possible commensurate with political acceptability, logistic support, and useful missions for these forces.³⁴

Ambassador Taylor then reviewed his ideas on employment of US combat forces, describing these under the general headings of "The Defensive Enclave," and "The Offensive Reserve - Strike Mission." He advocated establishing several enclaves along the coast and assigning them a combination offensive-counterinsurgency/strike role. To offset the requirement for more US forces in the RVN he favored keeping ready reserve forces afloat off RVN and on Okinawa for quick air reinforcement, if needed. General Johnson disagreed with employing US forces under the Offensive Reserve-Strike Mission initially, because of the proven lack of combat intelligence. He advocated instead setting up model territorial pacification operations in the three plateau provinces. Secretary McNamara expressed the view that planning should initially be accomplished for a number of offensive enclaves along the coast. As experience grew and logistic support was developed, the mission of US forces could be expanded and the setting up of plateau enclaves could be considered.³⁵

33. (TS) Note to Control Div, "The Meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense with Ambassador Taylor (U)", 29 Mar 65, OJCJS File 091 Vietnam Mar 65.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

TOP SECRET