

U. S. Marine Corps
Activities in Vietnam, 1954-1964

THE ADVISORY AND
COMBAT
ASSISTANCE ERA

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WORKING DRAFT

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PREFACE

In a military sense the decade which began with the signing of the Geneva Agreement and ended with the introduction of American ground forces was a critical era for both the United States and South Vietnam. Committed to the survival of free Vietnam, the United States chose to rely upon a program of discrete military advice and assistance to the South Vietnamese--a program which spawned its own peculiar brand of military activity. When the French-Indochina War ended in the summer of 1954 barely 350 American military personnel, most of whom were supply technicians, were serving in Vietnam. That commitment expanded slowly but steadily in the years between 1954 and 1965 in response to the widening Communist insurgency. By the end of 1964 the number of American servicemen in Vietnam stood at well over 20,000--a figure which included advisors and pilots involved in combat activities on a daily basis.

This monograph is a narrative account of the activities of the U. S. Marines who participated in the defense of Vietnam "between the two wars." It is an attempt to identify not only the participants and their actions but the broader reasoning which underlay their assignment. In this regard the chronicle is meant to place light on little publicized Marine activities which occurred during the period and thereby set them in their proper perspective.

The monograph serves a broader purpose in that it is the first of a series of unclassified monographs prepared by the Historical Division to cover U. S. Marine Corps operations and activities in Vietnam. It has been derived from official sources which include command diaries, organizational histories, and interviews as well as generally accepted secondary sources. Although some documents cited retain an overall security classification of Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret, no classified material has been cited. With the exception of some documents held by the Operational Archives Branch of the Naval Historical Division, all records cited can be found in the Historical Reference Section, Historical Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps.

Similar monographs will continue the account of U. S. Marine operations in Vietnam in one year segments beginning with calendar year 1965. In due time, the Historical Division intends to consolidate these monographs into a series of definitive, unclassified operational histories similar in scope and physical appearance to the multi-volume accounts which have described Marine operations in World War II and Korea.

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CHAPTER I
THE BACKGROUND TO INITIAL UNITED STATES
MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO SOUTH VIETNAM(1)

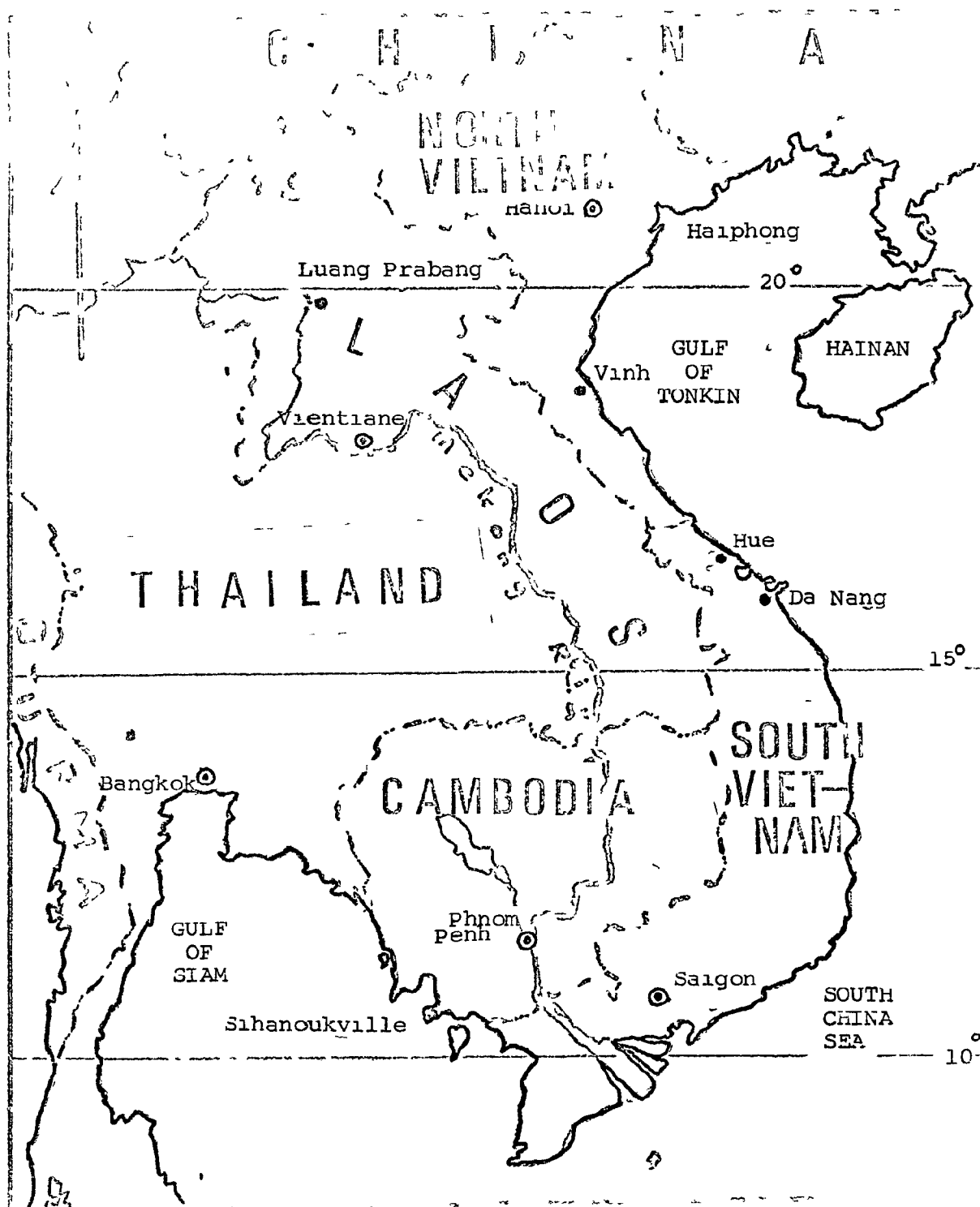
I:1

Despite the belief current among many Americans, United States military involvement in South Vietnam did not begin in the middle 1960s. Nor was it the result of some precipitious decision reached by policy makers in Washington. Instead, the decisions which led to the first American military activities in that small Asian nation were made at the height of the Cold War a full decade earlier. Far from a massive reaction to some imagined danger to the Free World, the decisions were but cautious responses to a series of threatening developments on the Southeast Asian subcontinent. Those developments, several of which were by-products of the Geneva Agreement of July 1954, posed a very serious threat to world peace by endangering the fragile power balance in Southeast Asia.

Initial American military involvement in South Vietnam occurred as part of a comprehensive but modest American plan designed to insure peace on the Southeast Asian mainland. Those earliest military programs, which took the form of assistance and advice, accurately reflected the decisions in which their origins lay: they were limited and cautious. It was within this context that the U. S. Marine Corps, in conjunction with the other American armed services, began its association with the South Vietnamese in the first weeks of 1955.

SOUTH VIETNAM: THE GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

The geographic configuration of mainland Southeast Asia probably weighed as heavily in the American decision to undertake military activity in Vietnam as did any other single influence. Once described by the late Dr. Bernard Fall as having the appearance of "two rice baskets at the ends of their carrying pole,"(2) Vietnam occupies an unenviable position on the southern periphery of Communist China.



THE RELATIVE POSITION OF SOUTH VIETNAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Scale 1 8,236,800

100 200 300 400 500

I:3A

In its entirety Vietnam once included three distinct geographic entities: Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. It was from these three divisions that Dr. Fall derived his description. Tonkin, the northernmost region, actually abutted against the underside of mainland China. The principal geographic feature of this region was the fertile Red River Delta. The southernmost division, Cochinchina, likewise centered on an extensive rice producing delta, the Mekong. Between these two so-called "rice baskets" lay the long, narrow, and mountainous region of Annam.

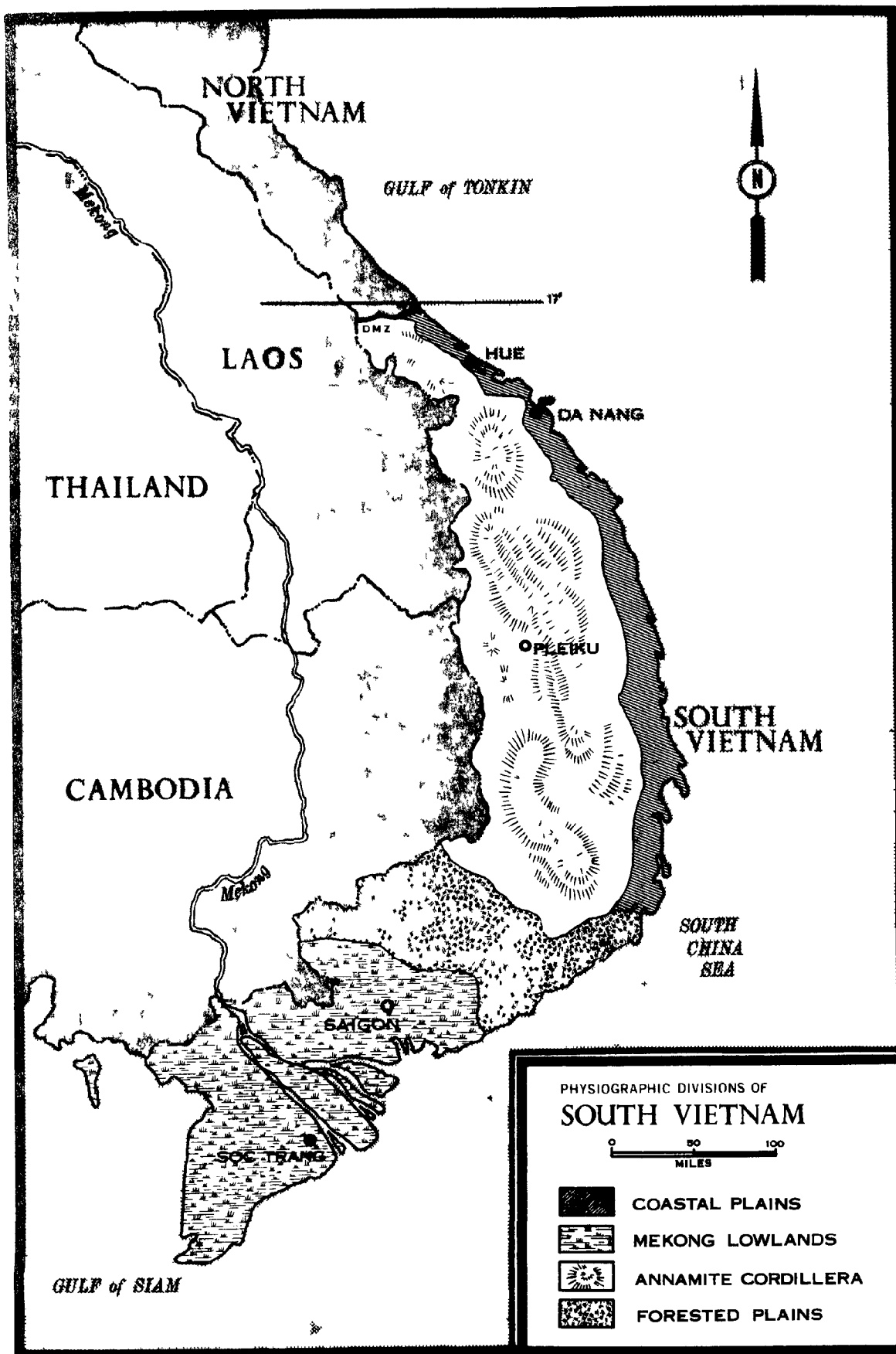
Since mid-1954 the area known collectively as Vietnam has been divided into northern and southern nations. South Vietnam, where the earliest U. S. military activities were focused, came to include all of Cochinchina and the southern half of Annam. The geography of this small nation can be generally described as rugged and difficult. The lengthy country shares often ill-defined jungle boundaries with Laos and Cambodia in the west and with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) on the north. Her land borders total almost 1,000 miles--600 with Cambodia, 300 with Laos, and roughly 40 with North Vietnam. Approximately 1,500 miles of irregular coastline on the Tonkin Gulf and the South China Sea complete the enclosure of her 66,000 square mile area.

Inland from this coastal belt the rugged Annamite Cordillera forms a mountainous spine which dominates most of the northern two thirds of South Vietnam. The eastern slopes of these mountains normally rise from the coastal plain at a distance of five to 10 miles from the sea. At points, however, the towering jungle-covered mountains crowd to the water's edge, separating the lowlands into compartments. Conversely, at other locations along the coast the lowlands extend deep into the mountains, thereby forming fertile agricultural valleys as far inland as 40 miles from the sea. The population of the highlands is sparse except for towns such as Pleiku and Kontum which are located on extensive plateaus

The mountains of the Annamite chain reach their highest elevations (between 6,000 and 7,000 feet) in the southern portions but dissolve into hilly terrain well north of the Mekong lowlands. This lightly populated hill region situated between the highlands and the Mekong Delta is known as the forested plains.

Although not heavily populated by Asian standards--roughly 16.1 million people in mid-1965--South Vietnam has always suffered from an unevenly distributed population. (*) The bulk of the nation's people are compressed into two general areas, the most significant of these being the Mekong Delta which sprawls over the southern quarter of the country. Traditionally referred to as "the breadbasket of Southeast Asia," this rice producing region is essentially a marshy lowland formed by the Mekong River and its many branches which flow into the South China Sea. The Mekong Delta averages between 750 and 2,000 people per square mile. The long coastal plain (known properly as the coastal lowland) which parallels the sea from the Mekong Delta to the northern border forms the remaining area of significant population. Although generally heavy, the population density of this narrow strip varies according to its productivity.

(*) All population statistics cited are projected figures based on a census taken by the South Vietnamese government in 1960.



I:6A

South Vietnam's climate, like its physical structure, often inflicts hardships upon the population. The nation lies with Southeast Asia's twin tropical monsoon belt. Beginning in mid-May, the southwest (summer) monsoon lasts until early October in the nation's southern portions. In South Vietnam's northern reaches, the northeast (winter) monsoon rains begin in November and end in March. The temperature extremes throughout the country range from the middle 50s to over 100 degrees. Rainfall varies from about 28 inches along the central coastal areas to nearly 126 inches on the northern coast. The coastal areas normally are victimized by a half-dozen typhoons during the course of a year. These storms, which strike usually between July and November, often cause heavy flooding along the lowlands.

Approximately 10 percent of South Vietnam's 16.1 million people live in urban centers. Saigon, the nation's capital, presently has an estimated population of 1.7 million. Located slightly north of the Mekong Delta complex and inland from the coast, the city dominates both the economic and political activities of the entire country. Although Saigon has excellent port facilities for ocean-going ships, such traffic must first negotiate the tangled Saigon River which leads inland from the South China Sea. Da Nang, located 84 miles south of the border between North and South Vietnam, is the nation's second largest city. With a population of roughly 390,000 and a good harbor, Da Nang constitutes the principal economic center in northern South Vietnam. The old imperial capital of Hue (population of roughly 200,000), situated about 50 miles north of Da Nang, historically has exerted a strong cultural influence over the Annamese coast. (*)

(*) The population of most of the nation's major cities and towns has been swollen by the influx of refugees which occurred as the Vietnam War intensified in the mid-1960s. In 1965, for example, population estimates for these same cities were as follows. Saigon--1.5 million, Da Nang--144,000, Hue--105,000.

The physical structure of the country has retarded the development of man-made lines of communications in South Vietnam. The extensive mountain masses generally have restricted the construction of roads to the coastal lowlands, the area surrounding Saigon, and the Mekong Delta. The main north-south highway, Route 1, follows the narrow coastal plain from Saigon northward through the length of the nation. A railroad also parallels Route 1 from the capital to the northern border. Several roads penetrate from the coast westward into the mountains to reach the towns located there. The most noteworthy of these are Route 19, built to serve Pleiku in the central highlands, and Route 9, which runs westward into Laos from Dong Ha, one of South Vietnam's northernmost towns.

The absence of a well-developed road system has forced South Vietnam into a heavy dependence on its inland and coastal waterways for transportation routes. The distribution of the preponderance of the nation's population in the Mekong Delta and along the coastal lowlands has tended to encourage this dependence on waterborne transportation.

VIETNAM'S RECENT POLITICAL HISTORY

Prior to July 1954, the expanse of mainland Southeast Asia now occupied by South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos belonged to France. Together these possessions made up French-Indochina over which the French had exercised political control in one form or another, with one exception, since the last quarter of the 19th century. That interruption occurred following the capitulation of France to Nazi Germany in June 1940. Exploiting the disrupted power balance in Europe, the Japanese swept into French-Indochina less than four months after France had fallen. Until early 1945, however, the Japanese were content to allow pliable Vichy French colonial authorities to maintain administrative responsibility for Indochina. Then, on 9 March 1945, they finally ended their cooperative association with the French. In an unexpected coup, the Japanese military arrested all French officials and seized direct control of all governmental functions.

Barely six months after the remains of the French colonial apparatus had been dismantled in Indochina, the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended all Japanese hopes of dominance in Asia. The grip Japan had held on most of Southeast Asia for nearly half a decade was broken permanently on 2 September 1945 when she surrendered unconditionally aboard the battleship USS Missouri.

French-Indochina's troubles did not end with the close of the war, however. Instead, the Allied victory signalled the return of the colonial power to reclaim its lost Asian possession. The French, eager to regain their international stature, soon began planning the restoration of their political and economic influence on mainland Southeast Asia.

But wartime developments had brought about changes in postwar French-Indochina which portended tremendous difficulty for any attempt to reestablish foreign political control. A Communist organization created in the 1930s by Ho Chi Minh had been transformed into an armed guerrilla force by its leader during World War II. These Communist guerrillas, with limited American support, had harassed the Japanese Army in Indochina throughout the course of the war. With the close of World War II the organization, known as the Viet Minh, shifted from an anti-Japanese position to a militant nationalist posture. The combat-tested guerrillas were prepared to contest the French return in late 1945.

Following the Japanese surrender to Chinese Nationalist forces in northern Vietnam in late 1945, Ho Chi Minh managed to establish a government in Hanoi, the capital and principal city of Tonkin. The French, however, were not so easily deterred in their desire to rebuild an empire in Indochina and the Communist government was short lived. A bitter struggle erupted between French and Viet Minh forces in Tonkin in December 1946 after negotiations between their representatives failed to reach an acceptable political compromise.

Drawing heavy popular support from its exaggerated appeal to Vietnamese nationalism, the Communist movement gained impetus during the late 1940s and spread to Annam and Cochinchina. The United States began providing the French forces in Indochina with substantial military assistance after the Communist take-over in China and the North Korean invasion of South Korea placed the specter of Asian Communism in clear perspective in 1949 and 1950. But in spite of increasing amounts of American military aid the French proved unable to arrest the Viet Minh's momentum. In the early 1950s French public support for the sale guerre (dirty war) began to erode. This process continued as the French Army's failures and casualties mounted. Finally, on 7 May 1954, the Viet Minh's victory over the besieged 13,000-man French garrison at Dien Bien Phu shattered what remained of the French determination to prosecute the war in Indochina.

The debacle at Dien Bien Phu was the final setback for the French Expeditionary Corps. In Geneva, where Communist and Free World diplomats were gathered to consider the question of a formal peace in Korea along with the Indochina problem, French and Viet Minh representatives signed an agreement on 21 July¹⁹⁵⁴₁ which ended the eight-year war.

POST-GENEVA SOUTH VIETNAM: A NATION IN CHAOS

The Geneva Agreement altered the map as well as the immediate and long-range future of former French-Indochina. With French abdication of political control of the area, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam emerged as independent states. More significantly, the Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam into northern and southern zones pending a reunification election proposed for July 1956. The partition line, drawn at the Ben Hai River (or roughly at the 17th parallel), was straddled by a five mile wide demilitarized zone (DMZ).

The execution of the Geneva Agreement drove a deep ideological wedge between the northern and southern zones. France relinquished political control of North Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Viet Minh and agreed to withdraw all military and political personnel immediately following the cease-fire. Political leadership in the South, where the French military was to remain until mid-1956, nominally passed to the French supported emperor, Bao Dai. For all practical purposes, however, political control in the South fell to the emperor's recently appointed premier, Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem, the product of a prosperous Catholic family from Hue, was known as a strong nationalist. Also staunchly anti-Communist, he had never been able to reconcile his convictions with the Viet Minh movement during the French-Indochina War. Given a narrow choice between supporting the Communists or the French, he had left Vietnam to live at a Catholic seminary in the United States during the early 1950s. Diem's appointment as premier naturally deepened the ideological chasm which the settlement at Geneva had opened between northern and southern Vietnam.

Other provisions of the Geneva Agreement helped sharpen the ideological split between the two zones. The agreement had provided for a period to follow the cease-fire during which civilians on both sides of the partition line would be allowed to emigrate to the other zone in accordance with their political convictions. It was anticipated that thousands of Catholics living in Tonkin would seek refuge in the non-Communist South. There was also the provision whereby all French military forces, including Vietnamese units, which were positioned north of the dividing line would be evacuated to the South within 300 days. Likewise, the Viet Minh soldiers operating in the South were to be assembled and removed to the North. An International Control Commission (ICC) was charged with supervising the cease-fire.

The implementation of the Geneva Agreement in the late summer of 1954 left South Vietnam with problems which cast considerable doubt over her future. The new state had been thrust into widespread confusion by the partition. The problems which attended her economic prospects nearly typified the overall situation in post-Geneva South Vietnam. During the long colonial period the northern and southern sections of Vietnam had been forced into economic interdependence. Southern Vietnam, always noted for its heavy rice yield, had supplied agricultural products to the northern Vietnamese in exchange for manufactured goods produced in Hanoi and Haiphong. The execution of the Geneva Agreement ended that mutual dependency with damaging results to both economies. The South, almost devoid of mineral resources, could not hope to approach a level of economic self-sufficiency. The little industry that did exist (mostly in and around Saigon) was limited almost exclusively to rice processing and garment making. Small amounts of tea and rubber were produced for export but their production was controlled by the departing French. South Vietnam's economic outlook in the aftermath of the Geneva cease-fire could hardly have been less promising.

The new nation's chances for success at self-government appeared even poorer than her prospects for achieving a measure of economic stability. The colonial period had left the South with no real apparatus for national government. Premier Diem was attempting to create the necessary machinery but his hold on the feeble institutions in Saigon was far from secure. Adding to the premier's problems was a confrontation which was developing between himself and Emperor Bao Dai, then in residence in France. The presence of two armed politico-religious sects, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, and a Saigon-based underworld organization, the Binh Xuyen, further complicated South Vietnam's political scene. The leaders of these three organizations threatened to overpower the government unless Diem granted imposing concessions. These demands included the authority to maintain their private armies and permission to continue the political autonomy which the French had allowed them to establish over large and heavily populated rural areas. The outcome of this power struggle, like the entire future of the South, was uncertain.

One thing, however, was clear in the weeks after the Geneva Agreement. Whoever controlled the 210,000-man Vietnamese National Army (VNA) would probably control South Vietnam also. Although the National Army was not an efficient military organization by even the most liberal estimates, it was the only organized source of power available to the quarreling leaders of post-Geneva South Vietnam. Originally created by the French in 1950 to supplement their own Expeditionary Corps in Indochina, the VNA had since suffered from structural deficiencies. It actually had no organizational echelon between the French-controlled General Staff and the 160 separate battalions. Having no regiments or divisions, the Vietnamese battalions naturally were dependent on the French Expeditionary Corps for logistical and administrative support.(*). A dearth of good Vietnamese leaders and general inattention on the part of the French complicated the problems resulting from this structural flaw. Related to these deficiencies was the deterioration of the National Army's morale during the latter stages of the French-Indochina War. Desertion rates were high in almost every VNA battalion at the time of the cease-fire.

(*) Selected VNA battalions, however, were sometimes task organized into Groupe Mobiles (mobile groups) by the French for specific offensive operations. But these groups, which were equivalent roughly to regimental combat teams, never included three National Army battalions under a Vietnamese command group.

The fact that South Vietnam might become the victim of a North Vietnamese armed attack made her future even more uncertain. The situation which had settled over the South since the end of the war in 1954 was strikingly similar to that which had existed in Korea in 1950 when North Korean forces had launched the surprise invasion of the Republic of Korea. Like Korea, Vietnam was divided both geographically and ideologically: the North clearly within the orbit of the Soviet Union and Communist China and the South under the influence of Western Powers.

As in Korea in 1950, there also existed a very real armed threat to the weaker pro-Western southern state. Immediately after the Geneva cease-fire, the Viet Minh army regrouped north of the 17th parallel and was redesignated the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). American intelligence reported that the PAVN, which numbered roughly 240,000 combat veterans, was being reorganized and reequipped with Soviet and Red Chinese weapons in violation of the Geneva Agreement. Additionally, Western intelligence estimated that the Viet Minh had intentionally left 10,000 men south of the partition line following their withdrawal. This directly violated provisions of the Geneva Agreement.

In Korea a military vacuum had developed in the years after World War II which apparently had invited Communist aggression. There the absence of strong non-Communist indigenous armies had forced the United States into direct participation in an unwanted war on the Asian mainland. There existed the distinct possibility that such a military vacuum would reappear when the French military completed its withdrawal from South Vietnam in mid-1956.

THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

It was in the face of this threatening situation that the Eisenhower administration moved to discourage renewed Communist military pressure on Free Southeast Asia. The American plan involved two separate but mutually supporting projects. First, it was decided to create an international organization which could protect Free Indochina (i.e., Laos and Cambodia as well as South Vietnam). This was obtained on 8 September 1954 when eight nations signed the Manila Pact. Two weeks later the pact was transformed into the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). The member nations, the United States, Great Britain, France, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand agreed in a separate protocol that Cambodia, Laos, and the "Free Territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam" all resided within their defense sphere.(3)

The second element of the American plan to insure peace in troubled Southeast Asia was to assist in the construction of a viable anti-Communist state in South Vietnam. Well aware of the difficulties which such a project would encounter, the U. S. State Department decided to stabilize the newly created country through a comprehensive "nation building" program. Although the proposed program was based principally on political stabilization, military assistance was considered an ingredient essential to its overall success ". One of the most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese Government to become strong," explained Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, "is to assist it in reorganizing the National Army and in training that Army." (4) The State Department's position, in short, was that the National Army would serve as the shield behind which Premier Diem would consolidate his political power, restructure his government, and rebuild his nation's fractured economic system.

So it was that a variety of circumstances--Vietnam's proximity to Communist China, the impending French withdrawal from Indochina, and the memories of the Korean invasion of 1950--merged in the fall of 1954 to influence the American decision to apply U. S. military power to the uncertain situation in South Vietnam. That application was to be indirect and limited. It was to take the form of military advice and assistance. More significantly, it was intended to insure peace on mainland Southeast Asia by bringing stability to the troubled southern half of Vietnam.

CHAPTER II
THE CREATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT
OF THE VIETNAMESE MARINE CORPS
THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP, VIETNAM(1)

II:1

When the Geneva cease-fire went into effect in the late summer of 1954, the machinery for implementing the military phase of the American assistance program for South Vietnam already existed. President Truman had ordered the establishment of a U. S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG or MAAG) in French Indochina in mid-1950 as one of several reactions to the North Korean invasion of the Republic of Korea. The official designation of this group, however, was somewhat of a misnomer for the French steadfastly had refused to accept any advice, operational or otherwise, from the American officers. As a result, the MAAG had evolved into little more than a logistical funnel through which U. S. military aid and material had been poured to the French Expeditionary Corps.

Lieutenant General John ("Iron Mike") O'Daniel, U. S. Army, had been assigned to command the MAAG in the spring of 1954. O'Daniel's selection for the Saigon post anticipated a more active U. S. role in training of the Vietnamese National Army. He had been chosen for the assignment largely on the basis of his role in creating and supervising the training programs which had transformed the South Korean Army into an effective fighting force during the Korean War. Now, in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement, he and his 342-man staff began preparing for the immense task of rebuilding South Vietnam's armed forces.

The entire American project to assist the South Vietnamese in the construction of a viable nation was delayed during the fall of 1954 while the necessary diplomatic agreements were negotiated among American, French, and South Vietnamese officials. President Eisenhower dispatched General J. Lawton Collins, U. S. Army (Retired), to Saigon in November to complete the details of the triangular arrangements. General Collins carried with him the broad powers which would be required to expedite the negotiations.

By mid-January 1955 the president's special envoy had paved the way for the transfer of responsibility for training, equipping, and advising the Vietnamese National Army from the French to the USMAAG. He and General Paul Ely, the officer appointed by the Paris government to oversee the French withdrawal from Indochina, had initialed a "Minute of Understanding." In accordance with this document the United States agreed to provide financial assistance to the French military in Vietnam in exchange for two important concessions. First, the French pledged to conduct a gradual military withdrawal from South Vietnam in order to prevent the development of a military vacuum which might precipitate a North Vietnamese invasion. Secondly, they accepted an American plan to assist in a transition stage during which the responsibility for rebuilding the Vietnamese military could be transferred to the MAAG in an orderly fashion. General Collins, in addition to engineering the understanding with General Ely, had persuaded Premier Diem to reduce his 210,000-man army to 100,000 men, a figure which the U. S. State Department felt the United States could realistically support and train.

II:4

The American "nation building" plan encountered further delay even after the Ely-Collins understanding had been reached. Ely's government, arguing that the United States had agreed to provide only one-third of the amount France had requested to finance its Indochina forces, refused to ratify the agreement. The deadlock was finally resolved on 11 February 1955 when French officials accepted the terms of the Ely-Collins arrangement in a revised form.

A combined Franco-American training command, designated the Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM), became operational in Saigon the day following the French ratification of the Ely-Collins understanding.(*). Headed by Lieutenant General O'Daniel but under the "overall authority" of General Ely, TRIM was structured to prevent domination by either French or Americans. The training mission was composed of four divisions, Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Security, each of which was headed alternately by either an American or a French officer. The chief of each division had as his deputy an officer of the opposite nationality. U. S. officers, however, headed the divisions considered by MAAG officials as the most important--Army and National Security. Operating through TRIM and assisted by the French military, the USMAAG was tasked with implementing the U. S. Military Assistance Program in a manner that would mold the demoralized Vietnamese National Army into a credible fighting force prior to the withdrawal of French forces.

(*) The combined training mission originally was designated the Allied Training Operations Mission. This designation was changed prior to the time the mission became operational.

THE ORIGINS OF U. S. MARINE ASSISTANCE TO SOUTH VIETNAM(2)

II:7

Only one U. S. Marine was serving with the USMAAG in Saigon when TRIM became operational--Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat. (*) Croizat's assignment to the U. S. advisory group had resulted when General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, nominated him to fill a newly created billet as liaison officer between the MAAG and the French High Command during the latter stages of the Indochina War. Croizat was chosen for the new billet largely because of his French language fluency and his close association with many French officers while attending their War College in 1949.

(*) Other Marines, however, were serving in Saigon at the time. They were those assigned to the American Embassy. One officer was serving as Assistant Naval Attache/Assistant Naval Attache for Air, and 12 other Marines were performing as security guards.

Lieutenant Colonel Croizat did not arrive in Vietnam until 2 August 1954. By then the cease-fire agreement had been signed at Geneva and the need for a liaison officer with the French High Command no longer existed. General O'Daniel, therefore, ordered the Marine to assist the French in planning for the evacuation of North Vietnam where they were confronted with the task of removing not only their military personnel and equipment but also Vietnamese civilians who desired refuge in the South.

Lieutenant Colonel Croizat initially supervised the construction of a transient facility for incoming refugees at Cap St. Jacques, a coastal point 70 miles southeast of Saigon. With the completion of this task he proceeded to North Vietnam to aid in the actual evacuation. There, he performed liaison type duties between French military officials and two American agencies--the U. S. Operations Mission (USOM), which was administering American relief assistance, and the USMAAG, which was concerned with recovering the equipment which had been supplied to the French Expeditionary Corps by the United States. Lieutenant Colonel Croizat's efforts contributed to the successful evacuation of over 800,000 civilians and all American equipment from the North prior to the deadline which had been established by the Geneva Agreement. It was not until late February that he returned to Saigon.

During his absence, Premier Diem had taken steps to establish a small Vietnamese Marine Corps. A decree signed by the Premier in mid-October 1954 included the following articles:

ARTICLE 1. Effective 1 October 1954 there is created within the Naval Establishment a corps of infantry specializing in the surveillance of waterways and amphibious operations on the coast and rivers, to be designated as.

'THE MARINE CORPS'

ARTICLE 2.

ARTICLE 3. The Marine Corps shall consist of various type units suited to their functions and either already existing in the Army or Naval forces or to be created in accordance with the development plan for the armed forces.(3)

This new amphibious force consisted of former Vietnamese National Army commando and dinassaut (river assault) contingents. Totalling 2,373 officers and men in December 1954, these various forces were scattered throughout South Vietnam's coastal areas. By far the largest of these was the 1st Landing Battalion, which had been assembled at the French Naval Training Center located at Nha Trang, a coastal town located about 200 miles northeast of Saigon. Other units of the fledgling Marine Corps included a river patrol company, a ranger group, a river group, and a field support group.

Lieutenant Colonel Croizat was assigned to the MAAG's Naval Section as the senior U. S. advisor to this newly created Vietnamese Marine Corps. The nature of the Franco-American training agreement automatically made the Marine officer a member of the Naval Division, TRIM. Croizat soon discovered that the small amphibious force was threatened by several serious problems. First, and perhaps its most critical, was that despite Premier Diem's decree, the Marine Corps continued to exist only on an informal basis. "The Marine Corps itself had no real identity," its U. S. Marine advisor lamented. "...It was a scattering of dissimilar units extending from Hue to the Mekong delta area." (4) The fact that its units were still dependent on the French Expeditionary Corps for logistical support underscored the weakness inherent in the VNMC's initial status.

A second problem arose from the continuation of French officers in command billets throughout the Vietnamese Naval forces. Under the Franco-American agreement which had created TRIM, a French Navy captain doubled as chief of the combined training missions's Naval Division and as commanding officer of the Vietnamese Naval forces. This placed the French in a position to review any proposals advanced by the U. S. Marine officer. Complicating the situation even further, a French Army captain actually commanded the 1st Landing Battalion at Nha Trang. (*)

(*) The French captain, Jean Louis Delayen, described by Lieutenant Colonel Croizat as "an exceptionally qualified French Commando officer," later attended the U. S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico. Croizat, Notes on The Organization, p. 3.

Demobilization presented another possible difficulty for the Vietnamese Marine Corps in early 1955. Under the U. S.-Vietnamese force level agreements, the Vietnamese naval forces were limited to 3,000 men. The Vietnamese Marine Corps, which alone totalled a disproportionate 2,400 men, had been instructed to reduce its strength to 1,137 men and officers.

In short, a single U. S. Marine and a handful of Vietnamese Marine officers were confronted by a series of challenges, any one of which could determine the fate of the VNMC. As Lieutenant Colonel Croizat later recalled, the central issue in the early existence of the Vietnamese Marine Corps was its very survival.

THE POLITICAL STABILIZATION OF SOUTH VIETNAM IN EARLY 1955
AND ITS EFFECT ON THE VIETNAMESE MARINE CORPS (5)

During early 1955 the entire South Vietnamese government was engulfed by a crisis which threatened to disrupt the American plans to help build a strong anti-Communist nation. The crisis occurred not in the form of an overt North Vietnamese attack but rather as a result of the South's political instability. In February the leaders of the two religious sects, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, and the Binh Xuyen, found a common meeting ground in their dissatisfaction with Premier Diem's refusal to accede to their various demands and formed the United Front of National Forces.

By mid-March the disaffected leaders of these organizations felt strong enough to test the premier's strength. Trouble began in late March when the Hoa Hao launched a series of guerrilla-type activities against Diem's National Army units in the sect's stronghold southwest of Saigon. On 28 March the premier ordered a company of paratroops to seize the Saigon Central Police Headquarters which the French had allowed the Binh Xuyen to control. Fighting erupted throughout the capital the next day as Binh Xuyen units clashed with loyal government forces. A truce was arranged finally in the city on 31 March after three days of intermittent but fierce fighting. That same day the Cao Dai broke with the United Front and accepted a government offer to integrate some of its troops into the National Army.

An uneasy peace prevailed over South Vietnam until 28 April when new fighting broke out. By the middle of May, government forces had driven the Binh Xuyen forces from Saigon, shattering their organization. Remnants of the bandit group, however, escaped into an extensive swampy area south of the capital and continued fighting individually and in small groups. In the countryside, 30 of Diem's battalions, including the 1st Landing Battalion, took the offensive against the Hoa Hao regular and guerrilla forces. The crisis, for all practical purposes, ended in the last week of June when the Hoa Hao leader surrendered 8,000 regulars and ordered his guerrilla forces to cease all anti-government activity. Mopping-up operations did continue against the remaining Binh Xuyen in the swamps near Saigon and against a few die-hard Hoa Hao guerrillas along the Cambodian border.

The sect crisis of 1955 proved to be the turning point in South Vietnam's political fortunes. At the height of the crisis, Emperor Bao Dai attempted to remove Diem as premier by ordering him to France for "consultations." Electing to remain in Saigon and direct the efforts of the government to quell the rebellion, the premier declined Bao Dai's summons. The Vietnamese military forces proved loyal to the premier. Throughout the emergency the government units had faithfully executed Diem's commands. More significantly, Premier Diem had imposed a measure of political stability on South Vietnam. He had successfully met the armed challenge of the sects and the Binh Xuyen and had openly repudiated Bao Dai's authority.

An epilogue to the sect crisis was written on 23 October when a nationwide referendum was held in South Vietnam to settle the issue of national leadership. In the balloting, since criticized as having been rigged, Premier Diem captured 98.2 percent of the total vote against Bao Dai. Three days later, on 26 October, South Vietnam's new president proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

The Vietnamese Marine Corps benefitted greatly from Premier Diem's confrontation with his political rivals. Prior to committing the 1st Landing Battalion to combat in June, the premier had replaced its French commander with a Vietnamese officer. This new battalion commander, Major Le Quang Trong became the Vietnamese Marine Corps' first Senior Marine Officer. Then, on the last day of June, Diem removed all remaining French officers from command of South Vietnamese naval forces. These actions removed one of the major obstacles which previously had blocked U. S. and Vietnamese efforts to build an independent Vietnamese Marine Corps.

The burdens of demobilization also were lightened somewhat as a result of the sect crisis when a new force level was approved by the United States in mid-Summer of 1955. The new agreement, dictated in part by the requirement to integrate portions of the sects' armies into the National Army, raised the force level to 150,000 men and placed the personnel ceiling of the Vietnamese Naval forces at 4,000 men. This revision enhanced the prospects for a corresponding increase in the strength of the VNMC.

The 1st Landing Battalion's performance against the sects also removed much of the opposition to the VNMC which had been voiced by both U. S. Army and French Army officers. These elements had seriously questioned the need for an amphibious force apart from the National Army. Until the sect uprising, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat had used the influence afforded by his position as interpreter between the MAAG Chief and Premier Deim to champion the continuation of the VNMC. But during the sect battles, the 1st Landing Battalion firmly established its value to the new nation. By displaying discipline and efficiency in combat, the Vietnamese Marines had spoken out in their own behalf at a critical juncture in their Corp's existence.

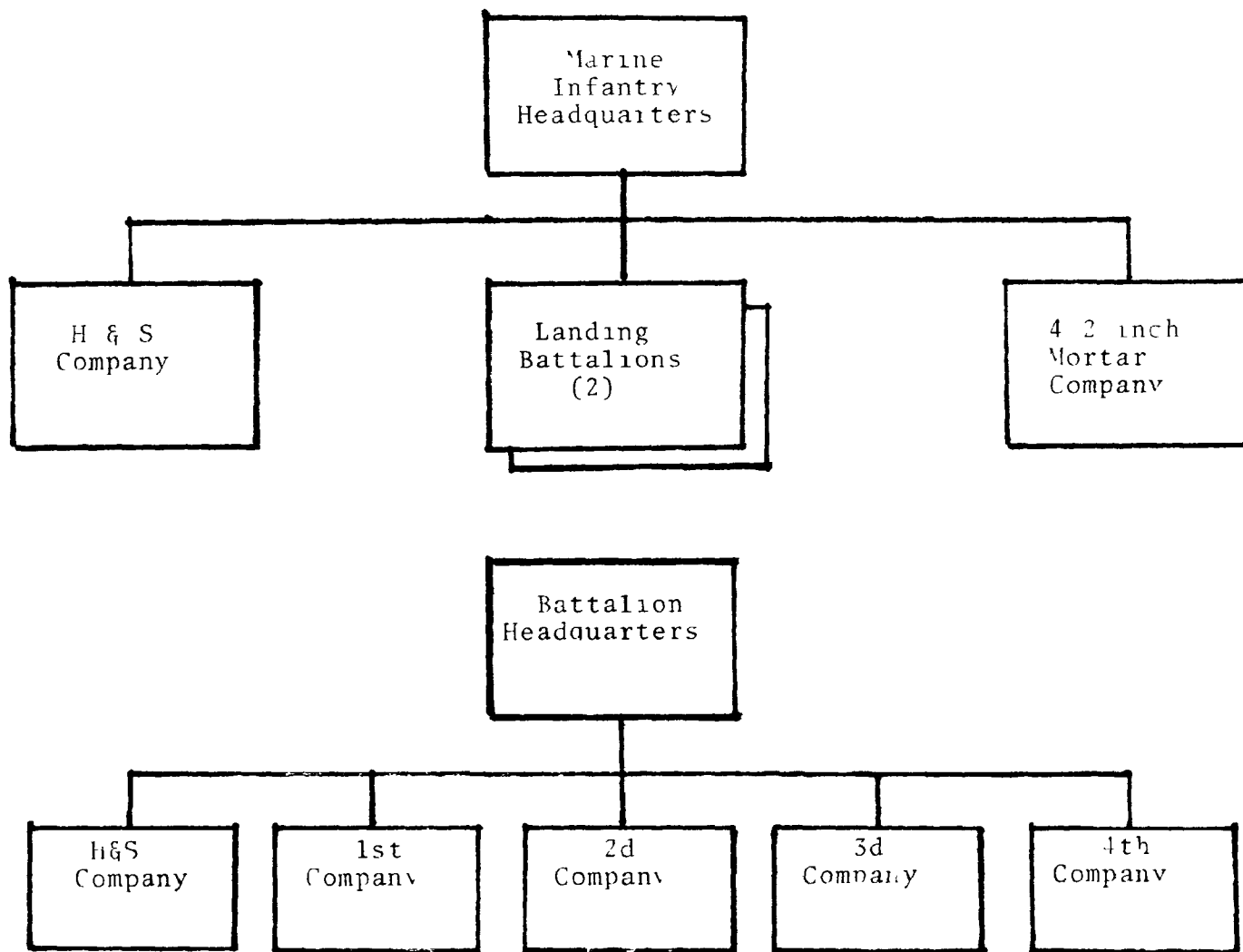
While the 1st Landing Battalion was deployed against the rebellious sect forces, two additional U. S. Marine advisors arrived in South Vietnam. One officer and one noncommissioned officer joined the MAAG in June and were assigned to TRIM. Croizat dispatched the new officer, Captain James Breckinridge, to Nha Trang where he became the first American advisor to the 1st Landing Battalion. As State Department policy prohibited American military personnel from participating with indigenous units in combat activities, Captain Breckinridge was forced to wait at Nha Trang for the battalion's return from the field. The unit, however, remained deployed until February 1956. The noncommissioned officer, Technical Sergeant Jackson E. Tracy, remained in Saigon to assist Colonel Croizat. He was later assigned as an infantry advisor.

Shortly after the close of the year a new officer was assigned to head the Vietnamese Marine Corps. On 18 January Major Phan Van Lieu assumed command of the VNMC and became the second Vietnamese to hold the title of Senior Marine Officer.

During this same period, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat reviewed the entire organizational structure of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. This appraisal prompted him to suggest that the South Vietnamese Marines consider restructuring their force. On 21 December 1955, Vietnamese Marine officers responded by submitting a plan to the Vietnamese Joint General Staff which outlined a comprehensive reorganization of their service. The salient feature of the plan was to create an additional landing battalion without increasing the 1,837-man ceiling which then governed the size of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Significantly, the plan contained a clause which revealed that the "ultimate objective" was to expand the VNMC to regimental size in the future. (6)

The Vietnamese Joint General Staff approved the new structure and reorganization was begun when the 1st Landing Battalion returned to Nha Trang in February. This resulted in the formation of a 2d Landing Battalion, a 4.2-inch mortar company, and a Headquarters and Service Company. The officers and troops of these new units were obtained from the old river, commando, and light support companies which were disbanded.

VNMC TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 18 FEBRUARY 1956 AUTHORIZED STRENGTH, 1,837



LANDING BATTALION, TABLE OF ORGANIZATION, AUTHORIZED STRENGTH, 928

While this reorganization was underway, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat initiated a search for acceptable means of expanding the Vietnamese Marine Corps to a regiment. A staff study produced by the Senior Marine Advisor a month before the first phase of the reorganization effort had begun included several important recommendations. Croizat proposed that authorization be granted to raise the ceiling on the VNMC from 1,837 to 2,435 officers and men. This, he pointed out, could be accomplished without affecting the overall ceiling on all South Vietnamese military and naval forces. By reassigning to the Vietnamese Marine Corps an amphibious battalion then organized within the National Army, the 150,000 force level would not be altered. This would transform the Vietnamese Marine Corps into a three battalion regiment and would place all South Vietnamese amphibious forces under a single command. Croizat's study further recommended that the Vietnamese Marine Corps be designated part of the general reserve of the nation's armed forces and that it be controlled directly by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff. No immediate action was taken on Croizat's recommendation.

During the ensuing three years several apparently unrelated occurrences impacted either directly or indirectly on the U. S. Marine advisory effort in South Vietnam. The French completed their military withdrawal from South Vietnam and dissolved their High Command in April 1956, slightly ahead of schedule.(7) In conjunction with this final phase of the French withdrawal the Training Relations Instructions Mission was dissolved. No longer was it necessary for the MAAG programs to be executed through the combined training mission.

Another noteworthy incident in the record of the early relations between the U. S. and Vietnamese Marines occurred when the Marine noncommissioned officer billet within the MAAG was upgraded to an officer position. This adjustment, which anticipated the creation of the 2d Landing Battalion, had the effect of placing an American officer with the individual VNMC battalions on a permanent basis. Thus originated the concept of assigning a U. S. Marine officer to each of the Vietnamese Marine battalions--a concept abandoned only temporarily between 1959 and 1962.

Shortly after the departure of the last French troops, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat ended his tour as Senior Marine Advisor in Saigon. He was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel William N. Wilkes, Jr., in June 1956. A veteran of the Guadalcanal Campaign, Wilkes came to Vietnam from Washington, D. C. where he had just completed a French language course.

In August, less than two months after Lieutenant Colonel Wilkes' arrival, President Diem appointed a new officer to head his Marine Corps. This time Bui Pho Chi, a captain, was selected for the assignment. The change was only temporary, however, for in October Diem ordered Major Le Nhu Hung to assume command of the Marine Corps. Major Hung, who became the VNMC's fourth Senior Marine Officer, was to hold the position for four years.

A new attempt to abolish the Vietnamese Marine Corps coincided with the series of changes in its leadership and the departure of Lieutenant Colonel Croizat. During the summer months the Vietnamese Secretary of Defense proposed that the VNMC be made a branch of South Vietnam's Army. Fortunately, the recent combat record of the 1st Landing Battalion outweighed the Secretary's influence and the effort to abolish the Vietnamese Marine Corps was thwarted.

The Vietnamese Marine Corps continued as a two-battalion regiment under the command of Major Le Nhu Hung from mid-1956 through 1959. During this time span Lieutenant Colonel Wilkes and his successor, Lieutenant Colonel Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr., a Marine who had once served as an aide to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, instituted a variety of programs which improved the combat readiness of the VNMC.(*). For example, they encouraged voluntary enlistments in an effort to build esprit de corps among the Vietnamese Marines. Formal schools for Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers were created and in 1958 the VNMC began sending officers to basic and intermediate level schools at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico. The American advisors also persuaded the Vietnamese Marine leaders to emphasize a corps-wide marksmanship training program.

(*) See Appendix A and B respectively for complete listings of VNMC Commandants and Senior Marine Advisors to the VNMC.

In conjunction with the reorganization of the VNMC and the stress upon small unit and individual training, much of the U. S. advisory effort during this period was devoted to logistics. The Marine advisors soon discovered that the Vietnamese officers, who had not been directly concerned with supply problems under the French, tended to ignore logistical matters. This lack of concern dictated that the American officers not only design a workable logistics system but closely supervise its operation as well. They instituted intensive schooling of supply and maintenance personnel. Equally important, they emphasized the value of command supervision to the Vietnamese officers. Vietnamese commanders, for instance, were taught that equipment shortages could be prevented if they personally followed-up supply requisitions.

THE VIETNAMESE MARINE CORPS AND THE COMMUNIST INSURGENCY (8)

South Vietnam gave every outward indication that she had achieved a measure of overall stability in the three years following Diem's election in the fall of 1955. In early 1956 President Diem felt strong enough politically to announce his nation's refusal to participate in the reunification elections scheduled for midyear. The proposed July election deadline passed without a serious reaction by Communist North Vietnam. Equally encouraging was the fact that there had been no resurgence in the armed power of either the politico-religious sects or the Binh Xuyen. At the same time the American-backed South Vietnamese economy appeared to be gaining considerable strength.

II:30

Steady progress had been made in rebuilding the nation's military and naval forces. The dissolution of TRIM in the spring of 1956, had enabled the U. S. military advisors to establish closer ties with the Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF). The logistical aspect of the American military assistance effort had also been made more effective since 1956 when the International Control Commission sanctioned the entry of a U. S. Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM) into South Vietnam. Charged with responsibility for all logistical functions, TERM relieved MAAG officers to concentrate on training related matters. By 1958, the old National Army had been renamed the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and had been organized into eight divisions, several territorial regiments, and an airborne regiment. The Vietnamese Marine Corps continued to exist as a two-battalion force within the nation's naval establishment and, with the airborne regiment constituted the government's general reserve.

One of the young republic's problems, however, remained unsolved. The threat of subversion by the Communist agents, who had remained in the South after the Geneva cease-fire, cast a shadow over the country's future. The first indications of this internal menace began to appear in early 1957 when the Viet Minh "stay behinds" initiated a campaign of terror in South Vietnam's rural areas. Aimed at government officials and rural police, the Communists' attacks were intended to erode government support among the peasants.

II:31

Still faced with the possibility of a North Vietnamese invasion across the 1954 partition line, President Diem was reluctant to commit his regular military forces to curb the disturbing trend of rural murders and kidnappings. The government initially relied on its paramilitary forces, the Village Self Defense Corps (SDC) and the Civil Guard (CG) to maintain security in the countryside. But this response did little to stop the marauding guerrillas. In the 12-month period following mid-1957, some 700 Vietnamese officials were liquidated by the so-called "Viet Cong," a name selected for the guerrillas by Saigon officials which literally translated meant "Vietnamese Communist." (9)

By July 1958 the Viet Cong threat had begun to assume the dimensions of a correlated campaign against Americans as well as Diem's government. The first Communist attacks on U. S. facilities in Saigon and the initiation of an intense anti-American propaganda drive during the closing weeks of 1958 confirmed this pattern.

The 1st Landing Battalion of the Vietnamese Marine Corps was ordered into action against the Viet Cong in late 1958 as part of a government effort to reverse this trend. The battalion operated throughout December 1958 and January 1959 in a mosquito-infested region of An Xuyen Province in the Mekong Delta. In addition to killing and capturing a number of enemy troops and political leaders, the Vietnamese Marines uncovered a suspected guerrilla training center containing food and ammunition. The 1st Landing Battalion suffered no casualties during the operation.

The Viet Cong threat to the Republic of Vietnam grew during early 1959 despite the government's commitment of some regular military forces to the counter guerrilla effort. A few months after the 1st Landing Battalion's operation in An Xuyen Province, both VMC battalions were deployed to combat-- the 1st Battalion again to An Xuyen and the 2d Battalion to Vinh Binh Province south of Saigon. In widely-scattered actions during May, the 1st Landing Battalion, aided by a Civil Guard unit, inflicted over 200 casualties on the Viet Cong. One company of the 2d Landing Battalion killed 18 guerrillas and captured over 100 more in the Vinh Binh area.

These were the final operations for the Vietnamese Marine as a two-battalion force. Both landing battalions had demonstrated the ability to conduct sustained field operations under adverse conditions against an unconventional enemy. Functioning without their U. S. Marine advisors, the Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers had planned and executed effective operations against the guerrillas. Moreover, they had managed to maintain a high level of morale among their troops in the face of hazardous and exhausting field conditions.

The victories of the Vietnamese Marines over the Viet Cong represented some of the few encouraging signs in Saigon's campaign to restore security in the rural areas. The Communists, who in mid-1958 had begun to receive limited quantities of arms, ammunition, and radio equipment from North Vietnam, were actually increasing the tempo of their activities. They were now making daring raids on rural police stations and isolated military outposts--raids which usually resulted in the capture of additional government weapons.

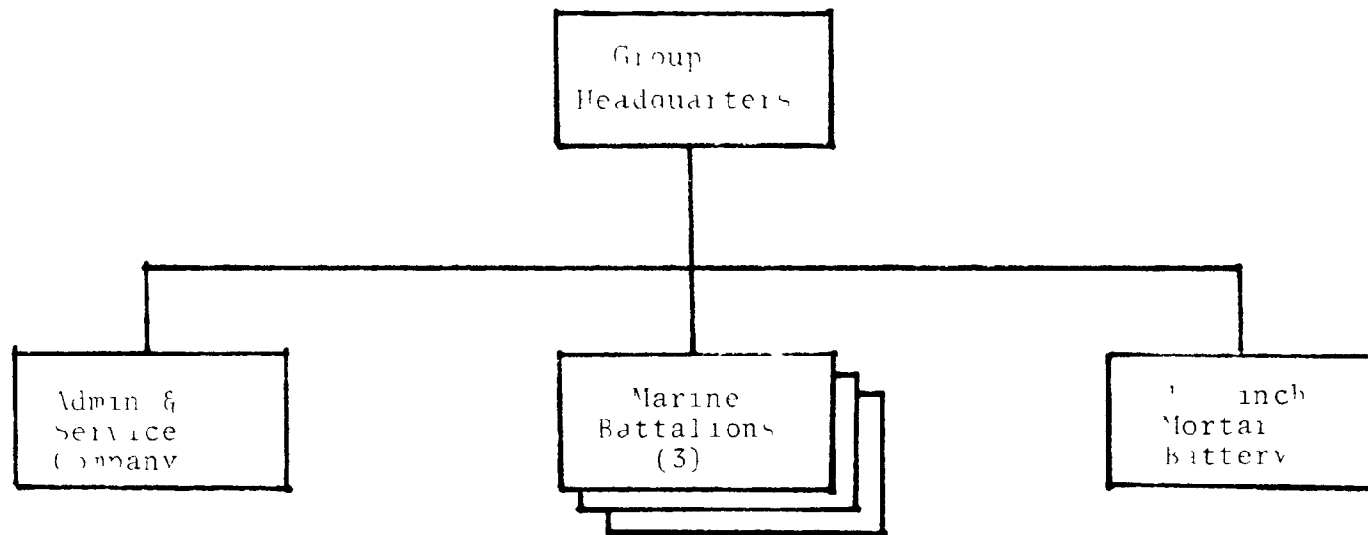
Although the growing insurgency in the South did not go unnoticed by U. S. and Vietnamese authorities, neither did it stimulate sweeping changes in the Vietnamese Armed Forces. Faced with the reality of Viet Cong guerrilla warfare but also with the possibility of an overt North Vietnamese attack, senior MAAG officials advised the Vietnamese Joint General Staff not to alter the orientation of their small regular military establishment. (*) Instead, they suggested that the government strengthen those units whose assignment to internal security operations would not disturb seriously the nation's counter-invasion potential. The Vietnamese Marine Corps, whose infantry battalions had already participated successfully in internal security operations, fell into this category of units to be bolstered for the counter guerrilla role

(*) General O'Daniel had been replaced as MAAG Chief by Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams in late 1956. Known in Army circles as a strict disciplinarian, Williams guided the USMAAG until 1960 when he was relieved by Lieutenant General Lionel C. McGarr.

It was against this background that the VNMC was enlarged again in mid-1959. This expansion was based on the staff study prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Croizat three years earlier. On 1 June, after both battalions had returned to garrison, a new landing battalion was formed and the Vietnamese Marine Corps was redesignated the "Marine Corps Group." Now numbering 2,276, the Vietnamese Marines were formed into a group headquarters, an administrative and service company, and three infantry battalions. Lieutenant Colonel Croizat's objective of a three battalion regiment had been realized.

The significance of the VNMC's 1959 expansion was deeper than the obvious increase in its combat potential. It marked yet another stage in the evolution of the Vietnamese Marine Corps from a small, informal organization into a mature fighting force. With the assistance of a few U. S. Marine advisors, the Vietnamese Marine officers had transformed their service into a respected and vital component of South Vietnam's military establishment. The Vietnamese Marine Corps had survived its embryonic period.

II 37a



NAME TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 JUNE 1959, AUTHORIZED STRENGTH, 2,276

THE WIDENING INSURGENCY PROMPTS AN INTENSIFIED AMERICAN
MILITARY ASSISTANCE EFFORT IN SOUTH VIETNAM(10)

By the summer of 1959, the security situation in the Republic of Vietnam had deteriorated to the point that much of the optimism formerly voiced by American officials there had begun to disappear. The National Intelligence Estimate prepared by the United States for August accurately described the conditions which were settling over South Vietnam. The estimate disclosed that the nation's economy was beginning to falter noticeably. President Diem's government, continued the pessimistic report, had grown increasingly unpopular. Furthermore, it warned that Communist harassment by the Viet Cong could be expected to intensify.

As predicted, security conditions in South Vietnam did grow worse in the months following the American intelligence estimate. In the last four months of 1959 almost 200 assassinations were reported. In January 1960, another 96 civilians were killed by the Communists and in the following month the total reached 122. By the fall of the year the Viet Cong were engaging ARVN units in vicious hit-and-run attacks. These tactics were resulting in frequent and demoralizing defeats for the government forces.

These disturbing trends, attributed by U. S. authorities in Saigon to both the "increasingly aggressive tactics of the Viet Cong" and the government's inability to combat them, prompted a barrage of discouraging American Reports.(11) The National Intelligence Estimate released in November 1960 pointed to a "marked deterioration since January" in South Vietnam's internal security.(12) One month later the American Ambassador, in Saigon, Mr. Eldridge Durbrow, reported with even more alarm:

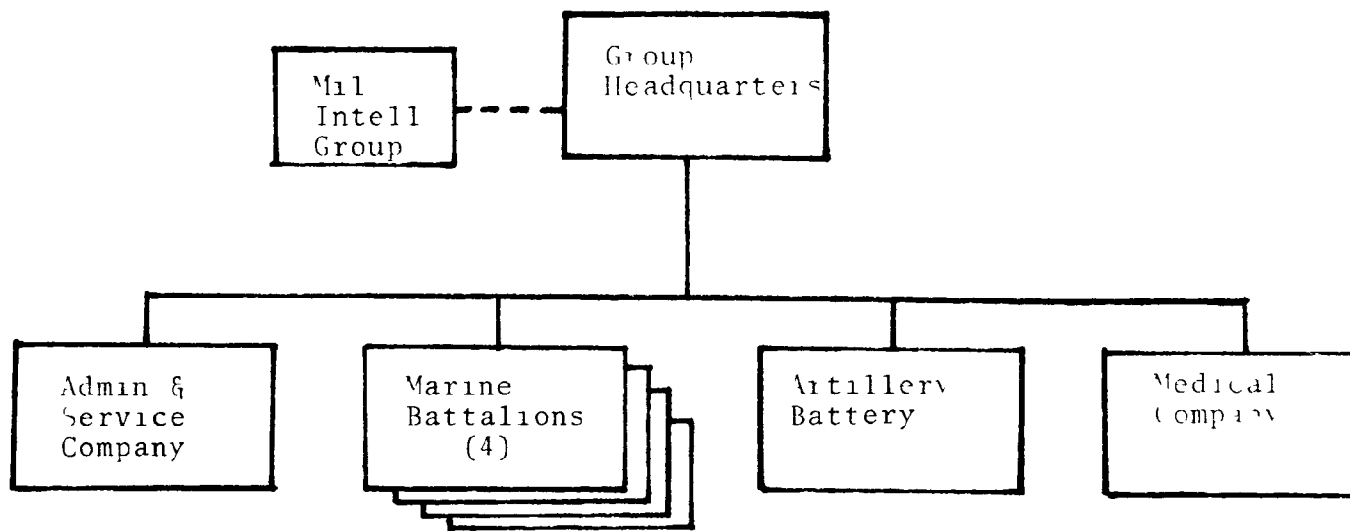
...[the] situation in Viet-nam is highly dangerous to US interest. Communists are engaged in large-scale guerrilla efforts to take over countryside and oust Diem's Government. Their activities have steadily increased in intensity throughout this year.(13)

Washington had begun considering responses to the pattern which it saw emerging in South Vietnam early in 1960. President Eisenhower at that time had ordered the USMAAG, Vietnam to develop a Counter Insurgency Plan (CIP) which would help stabilize the struggling nation. The completed plan did not reach the White House during the Eisenhower presidency, however. Instead, it arrived shortly after the inauguration of his successor, President John F. Kennedy, in January 1961. Significantly, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier, recently had pledged his nation's support for so-called "wars of national liberation" in a speech widely circulated in the West.

The plan presented for the new president's consideration drew clear connections between the military and political aspects of the war in Vietnam. It included a conditional offer of U. S. support for a 20,000-man increase in the regular South Vietnamese military forces and a 32,000-man increase in the Civil Guard. These military and paramilitary increases were dependent upon President Diem's agreement to reform his nation's military and political systems--measures which MAAG officials considered necessary for the success of any counter-insurgency effort. President Kennedy approved the main provisions of the Counter Insurgency Plan on 28 January 1961. Two weeks later negotiations on the package were opened with Diem. When another fact-finding group returned from South Vietnam in late April with more discouraging reports, the President approved the addition of other military measures to the CIP. These included the deployment of 400 U. S. Army Special Forces personnel to Vietnam and increases in the strength of the MAAG "as necessary to insure the effective implementation of the military portion of the program...."(14) Although the negotiations with Diem had reached a stalemate in Saigon, President Kennedy's modification of the CIP stimulated planning for the enlargement of the MAAG and the broadening of its responsibilities.

By the summer of 1961 the growing Communist threat to the Republic of Vietnam was beginning to dictate some increased U. S. support for Diem's military even though the Vietnamese President still balked at demands that he reform his government. One American reaction to the situation was to increase the size of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. This latest expansion, which began in July, was carried out under a new Senior Marine Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Le Nguyen Khang. Khang, who spoke fluent English, had graduated with distinction from the U. S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico.⁽¹⁵⁾ He was advised in the task of expanding his service by Lieutenant Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, Jr., the Senior Marine Advisor who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson in June 1960. Robichaud, a former Marine master sergeant, was no stranger to Asian warfare. Commissioned during World War II, he had commanded a 2d Marine Division reconnaissance platoon on Guadalcanal and had seen action later in Korea. It was under the guidance of Khang and Robichaud, that a fourth infantry battalion and a 75mm pack howitzer battery, the VNMC's first artillery unit, were formed. These additions raised the number of Vietnamese Marines to 3,321. Unfortunately, as President Diem had not yet accepted the provisions of the Counter Insurgency Plan, there was no corresponding increase in the number of Americans assigned to advise the VNMC. U. S. Marine advisors, however, were made available to the new units when the older battalions were deployed to the field.

II 43a



VMC (MARINE GROUP) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION, 1 AUG 1961, AUTHORITY: STRINC II 3 321

In August 1961 another World War II veteran, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Brown replaced Robichaud as the Senior Marine Advisor. Brown became the fifth officer to head the U. S. Marine advisory program.

The same month that the new Senior Marine Advisor assumed his duties, Colonel Khang ordered a battalion to strike at a traditional Communist stronghold on South Vietnam's southernmost tip--the Ca Mau Peninsula. Supported by the newly-formed artillery battery, the battalion attempted to trap a reported Viet Cong force with an amphibious landing. The concept of the operation was to preposition one element and then to sweep inland from the sea with the amphibious force. But the results of the operation were disappointing. The Marines failed to find the elusive enemy.

A similar operation was repeated in the same area the following month. Again the Marine units could not locate the Viet Cong. Vietnamese Navy and Marine officers complained that there were no enemy troops in the area. In any case, the results of these two unsuccessful operations typified the problems which plagued most of the South Vietnamese forces throughout the country during 1960 and 1961. The Communist forces, aided by difficult terrain and a well-developed intelligence network, could usually evade government units when escape was desirable.

While the Vietnamese Marine units were sometimes being frustrated in combat, definite progress toward strengthening their service was being made in other areas. American advice, for instance, continued to produce positive results in the area of logistics. Frequent inspections of troops in garrison and of those returning from the field revealed that the Vietnamese were placing more emphasis on the care of individual equipment. Replacement items were being requisitioned with more promptness and unit commanders were beginning to show increasing concern about the slow receipt of requested supply items. The replacement of worn-out World War II trucks with new vehicles removed a long-standing source of trouble for both the Vietnamese and their advisors. This adjustment reduced greatly the time consumed in performing major mechanical repairs on the old vehicles. The growing familiarity among the Vietnamese Marines with supply and maintenance procedures and the procurement of newer equipment served to improve the overall combat readiness of their service.

While the intensified conflict in South Vietnam had forced improvement on the VNMC, it had also provided a number of U. S. Marines an opportunity to witness the problems which attended counterinsurgency warfare. Lieutenant General Alan Shapley, the Commanding General Fleet Marine Forces Pacific (FMFPac), recognized the unique nature of the struggle for Vietnam and approved a program which assigned Marines from his scattered commands to temporary duty in the republic. Beginning in May 1961, 20 Marine officers and staff noncommissioned officers from various FMFPac commands were sent each month to observe the techniques being developed and employed in Vietnam. Commonly referred to as "OJT's" (on-the-job-trainees), the visiting Marines were not the only ones to benefit from this program. They often provided much needed relief to the heavily burdened permanent Marine advisors serving with the Vietnamese. Even though the Marines on temporary duty, like all MAAG advisors, were prohibited from accompanying the government units into combat, the long-range objective of the program was achieved. It provided the Marine Corps with a pool of leaders who possessed the first-hand knowledge of the military situation in South Vietnam.

So it was that by late 1961 the U. S. Marine Corps had already begun to feel the subtle influence of the growing crisis in South Vietnam. The seven year period which had begun with the Geneva settlement and had ended in late 1961 had seen the unfolding of a limited but highly effective Marine Corps advisory program in South Vietnam. At the outset of the Vietnamese Marine Corps' existence a U. S. Marine officer had charted a moderate but realistic course for its future. He, his successors, and their small staffs had then carefully guided its growth from one battalion to a four battalion regiment. Moreover, they had supervised the development of a corps of Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers who, by late 1961, had already demonstrated their ability to cope with the complex tasks of logistical and administrative planning while simultaneously conducting combat operations.

But, in late 1961 neither the U. S. Marine advisory effort nor the Vietnamese Marine Corps had felt the full effect of the guerrilla war which by then was threatening to consume South Vietnam. Gradually, the Communist insurgency was forcing more ramifying decisions upon policy planners in Washington. By December 1961, the entire American military assistance program stood squarely on the threshold of a new and more intense phase. The days of the limited U. S. Marine advisory effort, like those of limited American assistance, were numbered.

CHAPTER III

U. S. MARINES IN THE WIDENING AMERICAN

COMMITMENT TO SOUTH VIETNAM, 1962

THE U. S. ALTERS ITS POLICY OF LIMITED MILITARY AID TO SOUTH
VIETNAM(1)

During their first year in office, officials of the Kennedy administration had begun to suspect that the existing program of limited, noncombatant military assistance could not prevent the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. Those doubts, which had been planted by the obvious failure of the Diem government to contain the Communist insurgency in its early stages, matured rapidly during the second half of the year as several high-level fact-finding missions returned from Southeast Asia with pessimistic reports. By early autumn some highly placed American officials had already begun admitting privately that South Vietnam could be saved only by a more vigorous U. S. participation in the military effort.

A report delivered in early November 1961 by President Kennedy's special military advisor, General Maxwell D. Taylor, was particularly devastating to the administration's position on aid to the Government of Vietnam. Like most others who had made first-hand assessments of the war during the course of the year, General Taylor concurred that President Diem's nation was in grave danger. Taylor followed this warning with a formula for salvaging the situation. He recommended that the United States abandon its existing policy of advice and cooperate with the Diem government in a form of limited partnership--a recommendation which implied that the U. S. should no longer pressure the South Vietnamese into accepting the reforms included in the Counter Insurgency Plan. The American role in this partnership, Taylor explained, would be to provide "working" advisors and "working" military units to aid South Vietnam's military forces.

President Kennedy's military advisor offered some specific proposals for implementating such a program. Among these were recommendations that three U. S. helicopter companies and approximately 6,000-8,000 American ground combat troops be deployed to the Republic of Vietnam. The helicopter units would support the GVN's ground operations but the American ground combat units were to be used only in a defensive posture. Constituting essentially a show of force, Taylor believed that their presence would underscore the United States' determination to stand by South Vietnam and thereby have the side effect of raising the morale of the republic's armed forces. He added that in order to support such a build-up, it would be necessary to restructure and increase the size of the USMAAG.

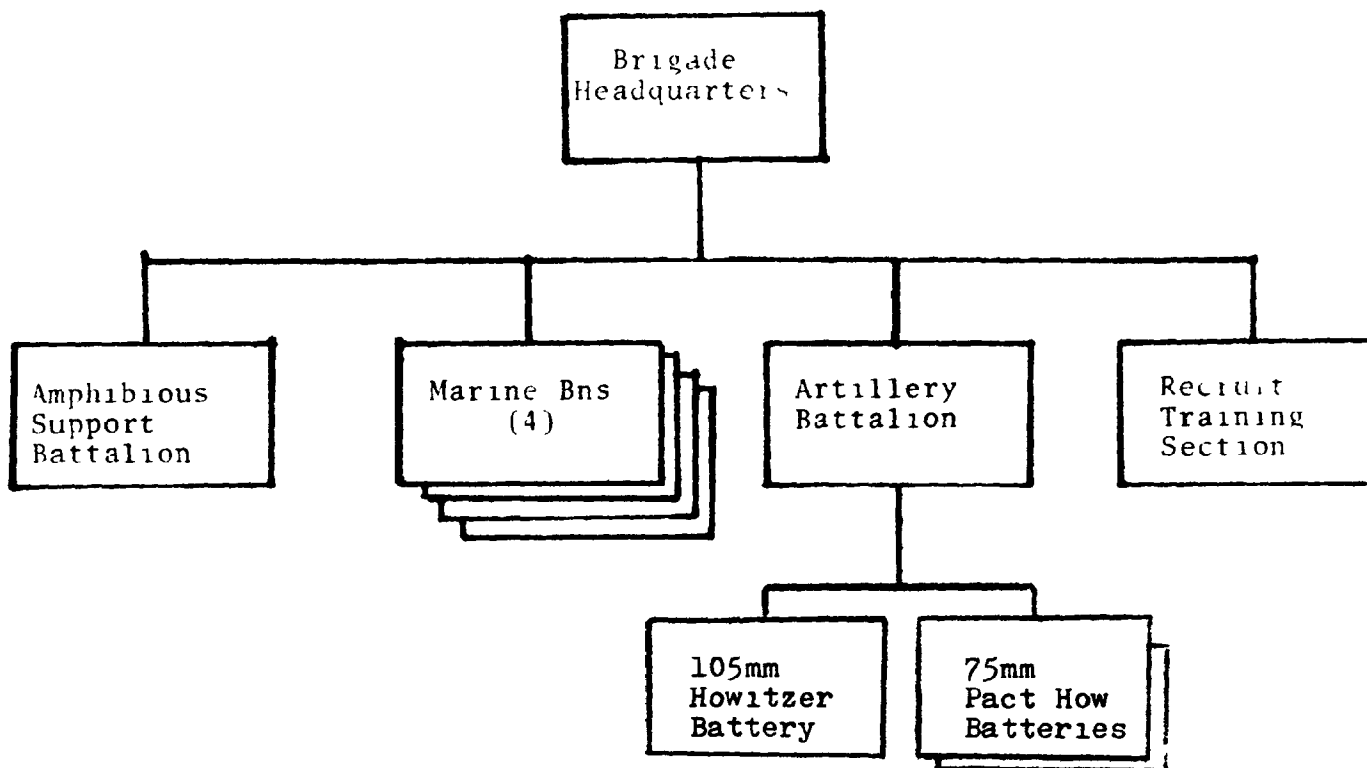
III:4

President Kennedy's consideration of Taylor's proposals resulted in a compromise decision. In early December, it was decided that the United States would increase its advisory and assistance program but would not deploy ground combat units to Vietnam. To increase the effectiveness of the intensified program, some of the restrictions under which the U. S. advisory personnel had labored since early 1955 were removed. One important change allowed the American advisors to accompany their Vietnamese units into combat. While the President declined to order U. S. ground units into the war zone, he did approve Taylor's recommendation to send American helicopter units to support Diem's armed forces. The arrival of the first of these units in South Vietnam, two companies of Army transport helicopters, in December 1961 signaled the beginning of a new and more dynamic phase of American military participation in the struggle to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam.

In conjunction with the increased U. S. military assistance, the Government of Vietnam launched a nationwide pacification plan--the Strategic Hamlet Program. The concept of the program had been borrowed from one employed successfully by the British against the Communist guerrillas in Malaya during the 1950s. It had been proposed to President Diem in late 1961 by Robert G. K. Thompson, the head of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon, who had been instrumental in countering the Communist in Malaya. In theory the Strategic Hamlet Program was designed to evolve in three phases: It would begin with military operations to clear the insurgents from selected rural areas, proceed to protecting the resettled civilians in fortified hamlets defended by the Civil Guard, and achieve its objective with the re-establishment of effective government control over the population. With the construction and occupation of more and more fortified hamlets in contiguous Communist-held areas, the Diem government hoped to re-establish its control over the entire countryside. While its objective was essentially political, the success of the Strategic Hamlet Program obviously depended heavily on the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces which were responsible for clearing and defending the populated areas.

CREATION OF THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND
AND STEPPED UP U. S. MARINE ACTIVITIES (2)

The President's action on General Taylor's report produced some dramatic changes in the nature and extent of the Marine portion of the U. S. military assistance program--changes which were anticipated on 1 January 1962 by the expansion and redesignation of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. On that date the former Vietnamese Marine Group became the Vietnamese Marine Brigade and was enlarged to 6,109 officers and men. Under its new table of organization, the number of infantry battalions remained at four but two new battalions were added. One battery of eight 105mm howitzers, two batteries of eight 75mm pack howitzers, and a headquarters and service battery comprised an artillery battalion which was created to provide artillery fire support to the infantry units. An amphibious support battalion of 1,038 officers and men was also formed. This unit contained the personnel necessary to provide the entire Marine brigade with reconnaissance, communications, motor transport, medical, and training support. Lieutenant Colonel Khang continued in his position as Commandant of the expanded Vietnamese Marine Corps.



AMC (MARINE BRIGADE) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 JANUARY 1962

AUTHORITY: SPIN 11 6,109

A definite indication that the level of Marine involvement in the Vietnam war was about to increase came several weeks later when a detachment of 42 Marines from the 1st Radio Company, FMF, arrived to bolster South Vietnam's communications capability. Initially designated Detachment A, 1st Radio Company, FMF, these Marines were integrated into the U. S. Army 3d Radio Research Unit at Pleiku in the Central Highlands. (*)

(*) This detachment was later redesignated the Detachment, 1st Composite Radio Company.

The stage for the next step in the American advisory buildup was set in mid-January. At a meeting in Honolulu with the Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, the ranking American military officials concerned with Vietnam were ordered to make substantial increases in the number of advisors serving with the Vietnamese Armed Forces.

Less than a month after the Honolulu conference a new U. S. command was created in Saigon to manage the influx of advisors and the intensified military assistance effort more efficiently. On 8 February the U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV or MACV) supplanted the MAAG as the senior American command in the Republic of Vietnam. Its commander, Army General Paul D. Harkins, (ComUSMACV) assumed direct responsibility for all U. S. military policy, operations, and assistance to President Diem's government.

The number of U. S. Marines assigned to MACV's staff indicated that they would play an important role in its operations. In all, 21 staff billets in the new command were allocated to the Marine Corps. The most important of these was the chief of staff billet. This assignment went to Major General Richard G. Weede, a veteran who had distinguished himself as an artillery battalion commander during the campaigns for Saipan and Okinawa nearly two decades earlier. Weede arrived in Saigon from Hawaii where he had commanded the 1st Marine Brigade since 1959. Other Marines joined General Harkins' command as Deputy Chief of Staff, J-2 and as branch chiefs for the J-3 through J-6 divisions. Two other positions assigned to Marine officers were the project officer for a Joint Operations Evaluation Group and a research and development project officer for a Department of Defense agency. Both of these were operationally controlled by the newly organized Military Assistance Command.

Under the new U. S. command arrangement, the old Military Assistance Advisory Group became subordinate to General Harkins' command. Headed by Major General Charles J. Timmes, U. S. Army, the MAAG was now responsible primarily for the advisory aspect of the assistance program. But with the impending increases in the number of advisors, the MAAG's staff was restructured to include Marines. Marine officers were to serve as deputy chief of staff and head of the plans branch of the J-3 division.

III.11

The U. S. Marine advisory program expanded dramatically in the weeks following the creation of MACV in Saigon. In order to provide more effective assistance to the newly formed Vietnamese Marine Brigade, a Marine Advisory Division of 18 officers and men was organized within the MAAG's Naval Section. The table of organization for the Marine Advisory Division included permanent advisor billets for a major and six captains and for the first time since 1956 provided for noncommissioned officers to serve in advisory roles. Of the six captains, four were assigned as advisors to the infantry battalions while the two others were slated to advise on engineer and supply matters. The addition of four logistics-trained staff non-commissioned officers to serve as assistants to the infantry battalion advisors freed those officers from direct involvement in time consuming supply matters. The inclusion of the major's billet also enhanced the overall effectiveness of the advisory division. He was designated to double as Assistant Senior Marine Advisor and as the artillery battalion advisor. Another noncommissioned officer, a gunnery sergeant, was assigned to assist in the artillery advisory duties.

The U. S. Marine advisors who arrived after the formation of the advisory division had the benefit of more extensive preparation for their assignment. After 1961 all advisors were graduates of either Junior School at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico or of a U. S. Army counterinsurgency course. Following their assignments, but before departing for Vietnam, many advisors received schooling in military assistance operations. This included a five-month course of instruction in the French language. Upon arrival in Saigon, the Marines were given two days of orientation briefings at MACV headquarters before assuming their jobs in the Marine Advisory Division.

Lieutenant Colonel Brown continued to serve as the Senior Marine Advisor and headed the new advisory division throughout the summer of 1962. In October he was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Clarence G. Moody--a veteran who held the Navy Cross for heroism as a company commander during the Korean War. Moody, having served in a liaison capacity with the British Royal Marines following Korea, was somewhat familiar with the problems involved in dealing with foreign military services. He became the sixth Senior Marine Advisor and the second Marine to command the Marine Advisory Division.

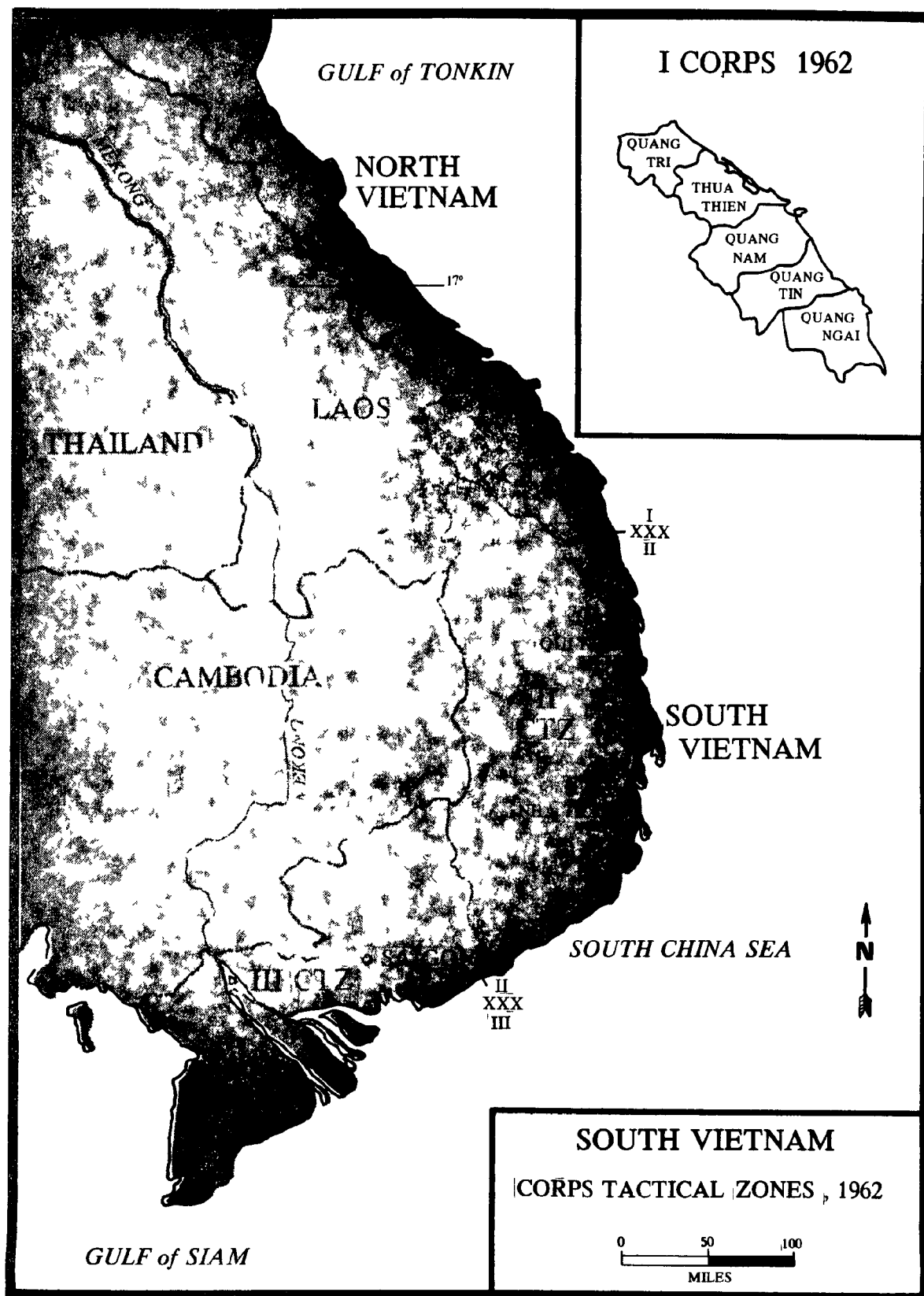
Throughout most of 1962 the U. S. Marine advisors serving with the Marine Advisory Division accompanied their respective VNMC battalions into combat where they provided tactical advice and other assistance. Prior to planned operations, for example, they assisted with the development of detailed orders and plans for employing artillery fire and air support. If the impending operation was amphibious in nature the Marine officers coordinated with the appropriate U. S. Navy advisors assigned to the supporting Vietnamese Navy units, insuring that all planning for embarkation had been accomplished. In the field the American advisors coordinated troop lift, resupply, and medical evacuation missions with the supporting U. S. helicopter unit. Often they directed attack aircraft in close air strikes conducted in support of their units. The U. S. Marine assistant battalion advisors usually remained in the battalion rear to assist with the logistical aspect of the operation.

VIETNAMESE MARINE BRIGADE COMBAT OPERATIONS, 1962 (3)

During 1962 the infantry battalions of the Vietnamese Marine Brigade performed a variety of combat missions ranging from security duty around key government installations to helicopter landings in suspected Viet Cong redoubts. The four infantry battalions (the 4th Battalion became available for combat assignment at midyear) participated in 23 combat operations which involved 404 days in the field. These operations included 12 amphibious landings and eight heliborne assaults. With the exception of two howitzer batteries which saw some combat, the artillery battalion devoted the year to training. Supervised by Major Alfred J. Croft and Gunnery Sergeant William A. Loyko, their new Marine advisors, the Vietnamese artillery men learned their skills in a number of field firing exercises conducted on ARVN artillery ranges.

In terms of casualties the VNMC battalions fought no major engagements with the Communists during the year. A typical operation was one conducted in An Xuyen, South Vietnam's southernmost province, early in the years. The 2d Battalion, which was assigned to the An Xuyen Province Chief for the period between 18 February and 26 April, conducted one helicopter landing, provided troop escorts for numerous truck convoys, and fought several minor engagements with the Viet Cong. Although the Vietnamese commander reported 112 enemy killed and another 40 wounded during the two-month assignment, the figures contradicted the Marine advisor's (Captain Evan L. Parker) estimates which placed the Viet Cong casualties at about 40 dead and 20 wounded.

In other instances the Vietnamese Marine battalions were ordered to serve as the reserve force ^{for} for one of the three corps tactical zones into which South Vietnam was divided. (See Map on page III 18a) The 1st Battalion, for example, accompanied by Captain Bradley S. Snell, assumed the mission as II Corps reserve on 16 May and remained in that role until mid-September. Based at Ban Me Thuot deep in the Central Highlands, the battalion provided security for government installations while remaining ready to react to enemy threats. As the corps reserve it conducted one helicopter operation and several sweep and search type missions. In one of these searches the Vietnamese Marines uncovered a Viet Cong small arms factory which they destroyed. During its assignment in II Corps the 1st Battalion accounted for only four Viet Cong dead and one wounded while it suffered 16 dead and 28 wounded.



III 18a

The newly activated 4th Battalion, advised by Captain Don R. Christensen, entered combat for the first time during an operation in Binh Thuan Province in the first week in August. Supported by Battery A (a 75mm howitzer unit) of the artillery battalion, it joined the 43d ARVN Infantry Regiment in an attempt to locate and destroy Viet Cong forces operating around Phan Thiet, the province capital, located on the coast 95 miles east of Saigon. Following the conclusion of this operation on 22 August, the Marine units reverted to the control of the Binh Thuan province chief. In this capacity they assisted in clearing and resettlement operations conducted in conjunction with the Strategic Hamlet Program. Between 4 August and 15 October, when its assignment in the province ended, the 4th Battalion reported having killed 12 Viet Cong and having captured seven more. Vietnamese Marine casualties were one killed and five wounded. Some 600 civilians had been resettled in fortified villages during the assignment.(4)

The combat statistics accumulated by the Vietnamese Marine Brigade during the year were not overwhelming. The Vietnamese commanders reported a total of 19 Viet Cong killed, 77 wounded, and another 158 taken prisoner. U. S. Marine advisors felt that even these moderate figures were somewhat exaggerated. They estimated that only about 98 enemy soldiers had been killed, 27 wounded, and roughly half as many actual Viet Cong captured as had been reported by their Vietnamese Marine counterparts. The Vietnamese Marines also had failed to inflict any serious damage on the enemy's supply network. They had captured only 16,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 45 grenades, 31 mines, and 50 individual weapons. In addition, printing press, two typewriters, several motors, and an assortment of medical supplies had been confiscated from Viet Cong hide-outs. (5)

THE DECISION TO COMMIT A MARINE HELICOPTER
SQUADRON TO SOUTH VIETNAM(6)

One of the most important developments in the chronicle of U. S. Marine activities in South Vietnam during the early 1960s occurred shortly after the creation of MACV. In mid-April 1962 a Marine medium helicopter squadron was deployed to the Mekong Delta to provide support for the Government of Vietnam forces in their battle with the Communist guerrillas. The significance of the squadron's arrival went beyond the added mobility that it afforded those Vietnamese units attempting to hold the rice producing delta region. Coinciding as it did with the increases in the number of Marines serving on the MACV staff and under the MAAG, its arrival indicated that the Marine role would expand in direct proportion to the widening U. S. effort to defend the Republic of Vietnam.

The decision to deploy the Marine aviation unit to the combat zone originated in the immediate aftermath of General Taylor's report to President Kennedy. On 17 January 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Harry D. Felt, to prepare for increased operations in South Vietnam. This order implied that the Pacific command should stand ready to deploy additional helicopter units to Diem's republic in the event that it became necessary to augment the Army companies already operating there. (By now the number of Army helicopter companies in South Vietnam had risen to three.) CinCPac was also instructed to explore South Vietnam's requirements for additional helicopter units beyond the Army companies already present.(7)

Shortly afterward, Admiral Felt advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a valid requirement for additional helicopter support did exist in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam. He recommended that a fourth U S. Army light helicopter company be deployed to the area. Included in the admiral's recommendation was a proposal to support the aviation unit with a composite maintenance, avionics, and medical group. (8)

Admiral Felt's recommendations were approved by the Secretary of Defense on 6 March. The Joint Chiefs immediately assigned the responsibility for providing the support package and helicopter unit to the Army. In turn, Army authorities alerted the 33d Transportation Light Helicopter Company at Fort Ord, California for the move. Its departure date was set for 18 April.(9)

III:24

Unknown to the officers and men of the alerted unit, the plans for its deployment to combat were being reconsidered at the time the orders were received. Two days before Admiral Felt's recommendation reached the JCS, a proposal to augment Army helicopter units with Marine pilots had been advanced by General Timmes, the MAAG chief. This proposal triggered a brief but eventful debate within U. S. military circles. With General Harkins' concurrence, Timmes recommended that nine Marine helicopter pilots be assigned to the Army aviation units in Vietnam for periods of 60 to 90 days. This arrangement, he pointed out, would enable the Marine pilots to become familiar with the nature of the combat support operations in South Vietnam and would provide them with transitional training in the Army's Piasecki-built tandem-rotored H-21 (nicknamed the "Flying Banana") helicopter. (10)

Admiral Felt turned to the Commanding General, Aircraft, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific, Major General Carson Roberts, for his comments on the MAAG chief's plan. Roberts, a veteran of World War II and Korea who had recently been selected for promotion to lieutenant general, was scheduled to relieve General Alan Shapley as Commanding General, FMFPac. While he found the prospect of Marine aviators participating in combat support operations in Vietnam appealing, Roberts felt that the proposal under review had some definite disadvantages. He pointed out that under Timmes' plan the Marine pilots would be flying a type of helicopter unfamiliar to them instead of the ones they would operate if the Marine squadrons were later deployed to Vietnam. Furthermore, General Roberts warned, the piecemeal assignment of his pilots would reduce the combat readiness of the units from which they would be drawn. (11)

The Marine general then offered a counterproposal which he believed would benefit both the South Vietnamese government and the Marine Corps. He suggested that a complete Marine medium helicopter squadron from Marine Aircraft Group 16 (MAG-16), 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) and supporting elements be moved from Okinawa to the war zone. The Marine squadron, operating 24 HUS-1s (a single rotor, Sikorsky-built, utility helicopter later known as the UH-34D) would replace the Army helicopter company at Da Nang in the northernmost corps tactical zone, I Corps. The Army unit would then be freed for redeployment southward into either II or III Corps Tactical Zones.

General Roberts emphasized several advantages which he saw in this plan. First, it would provide additional helicopter support for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces while concurrently providing an entire Marine helicopter squadron with an opportunity to gain first-hand experience conducting counter guerrilla operations. It would also provide Marine Corps units with operational experience in I Corps, the area to which they would be committed if standing contingency plans were later executed. Finally, Roberts explained that his proposal offered an almost entirely self-sufficient aviation unit which would be supported administratively and logistically by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The unit would require only minimal support from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. (12)

On the same day that he had heard the Marine commander's proposal, Admiral Felt received a message from Admiral John H. Sides, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, which strongly advised that Roberts' plan be implemented. (13) Admiral Felt then solicited General Harkins' opinion on the matter. He reminded the MACV commander that the proposed deployment would provide the Marines with operational experience in an area where they might some day be committed. The admiral further pointed out that the location of a Marine helicopter unit at Da Nang would enable the Army aviation companies to move south into one of the other corps tactical zones--a move that would facilitate the logistical support of those units by shortening their supply lines. (14)

Harkins generally concurred with Admiral Felt's viewpoint. He noted that the more powerful Marine HUS helicopter could be expected to out perform the Army's H-21 in the higher elevations around Da Nang. He also felt that the Marines, with their seaborne supply network, were better equipped to cope with the logistics problems in the more isolated northern reaches of South Vietnam. But he objected to the deployment of the Marine unit to Da Nang on the basis that the relocation of the Army's 93d Helicopter Company from I Corps in the immediate future would disrupt a series of operations which were already underway in I Corps. As an alternative, General Harkins proposed that the Marine helicopters be located initially at Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta. Later, when the tempo of operations in the northern corps tactical zone permitted, it could exchange places with the Army unit at Da Nang. (15)

One Army general raised more specific objections to the proposal that the Marine squadron be deployed from Okinawa. General James F. Collins, the Commander in Chief, U. S Army Pacific (CinCUSAPac), argued that the presence of the Marine helicopters at Soc Trang would introduce "another supply and maintenance feature into the III Corps area." (16) This argument was followed by the recommendation that the Army's 81st Light Helicopter Company, then based in Hawaii, be ordered to the Mekong Delta. The 81st, General Collins contended, was already trained in troop transportation operations in jungle terrain.

General David M. Shoup, the Marine Corps Commandant, who approved the FMFPac plan in concept, harbored one reservation regarding General Roberts' proposals. His concern stemmed from the possibility that the Marine Corps might be required to replace the squadron from Okinawa with another in order to maintain the level of operational forces available to CinCPac --an eventuality which would upset long-range Marine Corps deployment schedules. General Shoup indicated that he, too, would oppose the use of the Marine helicopters in South Vietnam if this proved to be the case.(17)

At this juncture in the debate, Admiral Felt journeyed to Saigon to discuss the matter more thoroughly with General Harkins. Following consultations the two commanders jointly communicated their recommendations to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 14 March.¹⁹⁶² They advised that it would be more desirable to deploy one of the Marine helicopter squadrons from Okinawa than either the Army unit already on alert in California or the one in Hawaii. This decision, Felt and Harkins informed the Joint Chiefs, was influenced heavily by the readiness posture of the various units under consideration. A Marine squadron, they pointed out, could be on station and ready for combat operations by 15 April--before the company already alerted by the Army could depart California. (18)

Admiral Felt and General Harkins then dealt with the CincUSAPac's contention that additional supply problems would be created by the deployment of a Marine unit to the Mekong Delta. The Pacific commanders advised that, in their opinion, the logistical support "can be handled relatively easily by [the] Marines." (19) They added that should requirements for a fifth helicopter unit arise in South Vietnam, the Army's 81st Helicopter Company would be selected for the assignment. It would be replaced in Hawaii by the 33d Transportation Light Helicopter Company from Fort Ord. Finally, Admiral Felt and General Harkins recommended that the Marine squadron be deployed initially to the Mekong Delta area of III Corps Tactical Zone (III CTZ). Later, when operational conditions in I Corps were more favorable, the Marines could replace the Army helicopter unit there.

The Pacific commanders were advising the Joint Chiefs that units already on station in the Western Pacific be utilized for the combat support assignment in the Republic of Vietnam. Moreover, they had framed a general scheme for the future deployment of a helicopter unit which could be used in the event the Government of Vietnam forces required further support of this nature.

After meeting to discuss the matter, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the entire package of recommendations on 16 March. ¹⁹⁶² Admiral Felt immediately ordered the Pacific Fleet to deploy a Marine helicopter squadron to South Vietnam and authorized direct liaison between the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and ComUSMACV. In turn, Admiral Sides, the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, notified the Commander, Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral William A. Schoech, of the decision and directed him to take appropriate action. (20)

THE MARINE TASK UNIT DEPLOYS TO SOC TRANG (21)

III:35

The Commanding General of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Major General John P. Condon, a Michigan native who had earned three Legions of Merit and a Distinguished Flying Cross for service during World War II and Korea, was informed of the impending deployment on 22 March. At the time, Condon, his staff, and elements of his command were participating in SEATO exercise TULUNGAN in the Philippines. The arrival of the orders proved timely for most of the affected units were in close proximity to the wing commander. As the Marine helicopter squadron and its supporting elements were scheduled to arrive in Vietnam just two weeks after the SEATO exercise ended, preparations for the move were begun immediately. General Condon quickly dispatched several officers to Saigon to establish liaison with USMACV.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing fortunately possessed a background which facilitated the rapid preparations for the movement. Since August of the previous year General Condon's command regularly had deployed a medium helicopter squadron (HMM) and its supporting elements with the Special Landing Force (SLF) which cruised Southeast Asian waters ready to implement U. S. contingency plans. These deployments had given the Marines of the wing a reservoir of experience which enabled them to make maximum use of the short period of time available for planning.

By 30 March, the wing's planning had progressed to the stage that General Condon could provide the Commander of the Seventh Fleet with specific recommendations for the entire operation. The general concept of the plan was that Task Unit 79.3.5, under the command of a Marine colonel, was to be built around a Marine medium helicopter squadron which was participating in Operation TULUNGAN. This task unit, code named SHUFLY, was to occupy an old Japanese-built landing strip near Soc Trang, a small town located about 85 miles southwest of Saigon in Ba Xuyen Province. Condon informed the Seventh Fleet commander of the arrangements which his liaison officers had made during their trip to Saigon. An ARVN infantry battalion and two 4.2-inch mortar companies were to assume the defense of the airstrip at Soc Trang the same day that the Marines began landing.

The Marine general then proceeded to outline the chain of command and method of support which he considered best for the Marine task unit. SHUFLY, he suggested, should be under the operational control of ComUSMACV but should remain under the administrative control of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Most of its logistic support, the wing commander thought, could come through normal Marine and Navy channels with fuels, lubricant oils, rations, and ammunition, being the exceptions. Rations and ammunition were to be provided by MACV, while fuels would be supplied by private Vietnamese distributors operating under contracts with the U. S. government.

III:37

Next, General Condon explained to Admiral Schoech his desires for the organization of the task unit. He felt that SHUFLY would function best if organized into three distinct task elements. First, he proposed that a headquarters be formed under the command of Colonel John F. Carey, a veteran Marine aviator who had been awarded the Navy Cross for heroism during the battle for Midway. This headquarters, General Condon advised, should consist of eight officers and six enlisted men. The second element of the task unit, the wing commander continued, would be Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 (HMM-362), reinforced, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Archie J. Clapp. The squadron, whose normal complement was 63 officers and 196 enlisted Marines, was to be augmented by 50 maintenance personnel. Its equipment would include 24 HUS helicopters (which under normal operating conditions could lift eight to 12 combat loaded Vietnamese troops), three Cessna single engine OE-1 observation aircraft, one R4D transport aircraft, and supplemental maintenance equipment. Prior to its deployment, HMM-362 would exchange its helicopters for newer ones in order to reduce maintenance problems once operations in Vietnam began. SHUFLY's third element would be a sub unit of Marine Air Base Squadron 16 (MABS-16). Designated Task Element 79.3.5.2, it would be commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William W. Eldridge. Navy medical, dental, and chaplain personnel would be included in the sub unit's 193 enlisted men and 18 officers.

III:38

The wing commander intended to provide the MABS-16 sub unit with a TAFDS (tactical airfield fuel dispensing system) and a MATCU (Marine airfield traffic control unit). The traffic control unit would be equipped with TACAN (tactical air navigation) and GCA (ground control approach) systems which would enable the helicopter squadron to conduct landings during periods of reduced visibility. (22)

Colonel Carey, the task unit commander, was to be assigned responsibility for liaison with MACV and the military authorities in III Corps, the tactical zone which encompassed the entire Mekong Delta and the zone of transition between the delta and the highlands. All security, external communications, and administrative matters also were to fall under his cognizance. This arrangement would allow Lieutenant Colonel Clapp and his squadron to concentrate on daily flight operations and aircraft maintenance. Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge's MABS-16 sub unit would be responsible for all normal base support and airfield operations. (23)

General Condon's report to Admiral Schoech concluded with a rough outline of the timing of the task unit's deployment. On 9 April--only eight days after the termination of the SEATO exercise in the Philippines--Marine transport aircraft from the 1st MAW, augmented by three transports from the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW), would begin airlifting the headquarters and MABS-16 detachment from Okinawa. The Marine general anticipated that all "housekeeping" facilities would be in position at Soc Trang within five days. Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's HMM-362 would fly into Soc Trang from the amphibious assault ship (helicopter carrier) USS Princeton (LPH-5) on the morning of 15 April. The proposal that the helicopters be flown ashore satisfied a Department of Defense requirement that conspicuous unloading activities were to be avoided in the Saigon area.

III:41

Admiral Schoech approved the 1st MAW's proposed plan on 3 April and ordered Task Unit 79.3.5 to be transferred to General Harkins' command on 15 April. He then instructed Carrier Task Group 79.3 to provide SHUFLY with whatever supply and administrative support it might require for the movement. At the same time the fleet commander ordered appropriate subordinate commanders to provide an escort of destroyers for the USS Princeton and an inconspicuous air cover when the LPH arrived and began unloading HMM-362. The covering aircraft, however, were instructed not to approach within 20 miles of South Vietnam unless the situation around Soc Trang endangered the Marine helicopters. (24)

The day following Schoech's approval of the Marine plan, the carrier task unit was formed to transport HMM-362 to South Vietnam. SHUFLY was activated simultaneously and given orders which reflected General Condon's planning. Colonel Carey was instructed to establish his headquarters at the Marine Corps Air Facility, Iwakuni, Japan in order to prepare for the deployment. The task unit commander was advised that he would receive more detailed instructions relative to administration and logistics at a later date.

Colonel Carey's task group headquarters in Japan had only one week in which to complete preparations for the move to the Republic of Vietnam. His staff's responsibility for coordinating between units located at Atsugi, Japan and Futema, Okinawa made this task even more difficult. Carey's officers worked out the details of the airlift with the staff of Marine Aerial Refueler-Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152), the GV-1(*) unit assigned to carry the MABS-16 sub unit and the task unit headquarters to Soc Trang.

(*) The GV-1 a four-engine, turbo-prop refueler transport built by Lockheed, is the Marine refueling version of the Air Force C-130.

The airlift portion of the movement began as scheduled on 9 April with the MABS-16 detachment being transported from Futema directly to Soc Trang. At 0800 Colonel Carey and part of his staff landed at Soc Trang in a twin-engine Douglas R4D Skytrain. As planned, the 400-man ARVN battalion had already established a perimeter around the airfield. Using the R4D's radio, the crew provided landing instructions for the GV-1s of VMGR-152 and VMGR-352 which began landing and unloading their cargoes at half hour intervals. Several key American and Vietnamese military officers were on hand to watch the lead elements of SHUFLY arrive. Major General Condon, the 1st MAW commander flew the first GV-1 into Soc Trang but departed after the aircraft had been unloaded. General Harkins and Brigadier General Le Van Nghiem, the Vietnamese commander of III Corps also made appearances at the airstrip to welcome Colonel Carey and his Marines.

III:44

Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge's MABS-16 detachment began readying the airfield for HMM-362's arrival shortly after the first transport aircraft had unloaded. To serve as living spaces the Marines raised 75 strongback tents, all with plywood decks. They set up a water purification system and began trucking water from the town of Soc Trang, about two and a half miles away. Within two days, 9,000 gallons of water had been purified. Other conveniences improved the camp's living conditions. A field laundry and a mess hall were set up and by 12 April, hot meals were being served to the Marines. A post office began operations and telephones were installed to connect living and working areas.

By 14 April, the day before HMM-362 was scheduled to arrive at Soc Trang, most of the airfield facilities were ready to support flight operations. An old hangar, which had been constructed by the Japanese during their World War II occupation of Indochina, had been repaired to house some of the squadron's aircraft and equipment. The MABS-16 communications section was operational and had established radio and teletype links with MACV in Saigon and MAG-16 on Okinawa. The TAFDS had been assembled and filled with aviation fuel and MATCU-68, the air traffic control unit assigned to SHUFLY, was prepared to control flight operations.

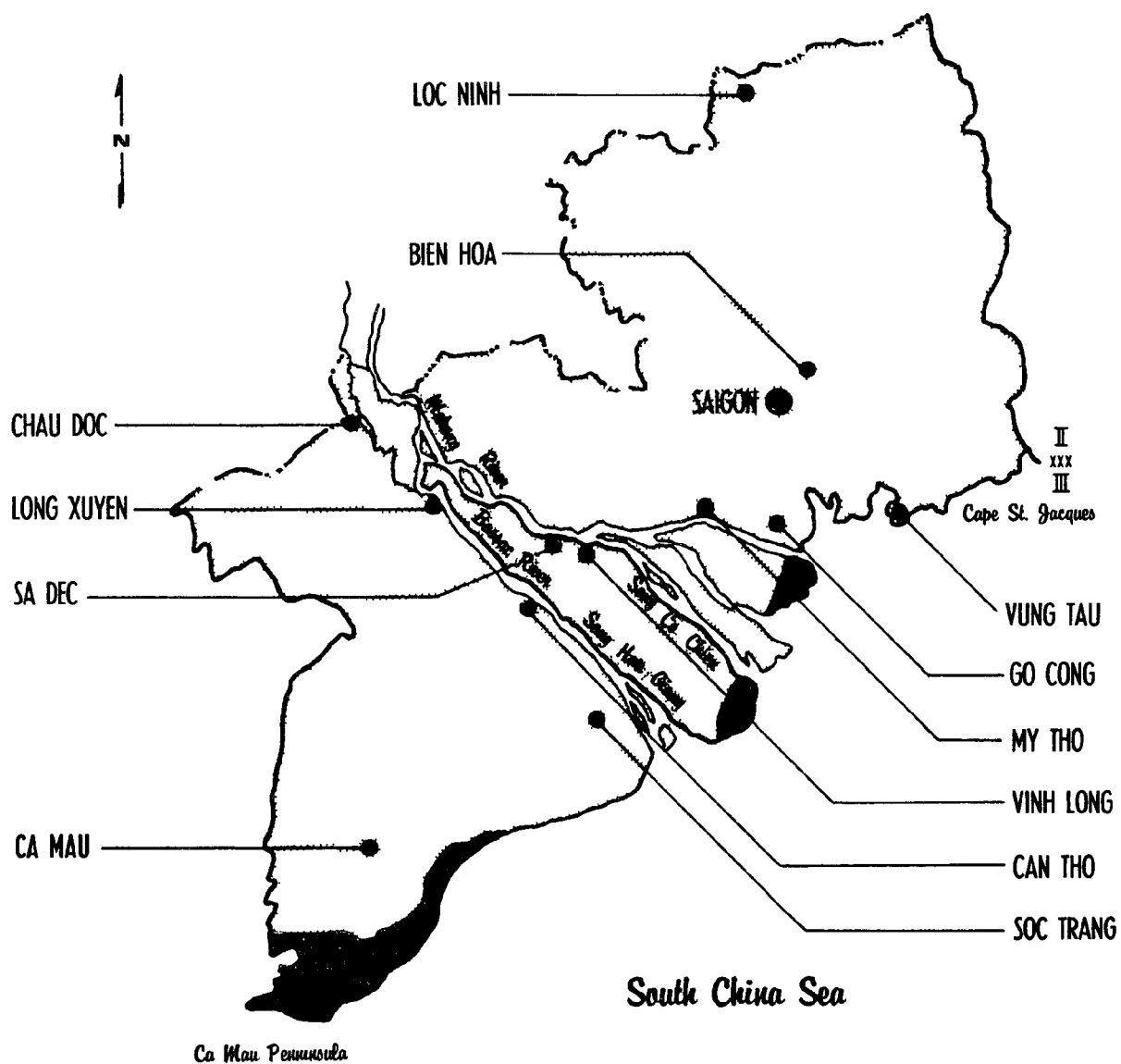
Carrier Task Unit 79.3.5 steamed from Okinawa on 10 April with HMM-362, its reinforcements, and HMM-261 embarked on the USS Princeton. The task unit arrived off the coast of South Vietnam in the early morning hours of 15 April. At dawn Lieutenant Colonel Clapp, who had seen action as a fighter pilot during the Iwo Jima and Okinawa campaigns in World War II, led the first flight of helicopters from the deck of the Princeton. The operation proceeded smoothly with aircraft from both squadrons ferrying HMM-362's equipment 20 miles inland to the Soc Trang airstrip. Far out at sea, jets of the Seventh Fleet orbited, ready to provide protection to the Marine helicopters. They were not needed, however, as the Viet Cong made no effort to oppose the movement. By midafternoon the airlift of HMM-362's personnel and equipment to the Soc Trang airfield had been completed. HMM-261 returned to the Princeton where it continued to function as the helicopter element of the Special Landing Force.

The day after arriving at Soc Trang, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron, nicknamed "Archie's Angels," was prepared to support the ARVN. As the squadron's services were not required immediately, the pilots and crews began flying missions to familiarize themselves with their new surroundings. They learned that their operations were to be conducted over the vast expanse of South Vietnam which stretched from just north and east of Saigon to the nation's southernmost tip, the Ca Mau Peninsula, and from the South China Sea westward to the Cambodian border. Their initial flights over the Mekong Delta revealed a predominantly flat and monotonous landscape. Parched by the long dry season, the dusty brown rice paddies stood in sharp contrast with the verdant mangrove swamps which surrounded near major streams and along the coast. Numerous villages and hamlets, most enclosed by thick hedgerows and treelines, were scattered throughout the countryside. Thousands of canals and an occasional road or prominent trail completed the rural landscape in which the Viet Cong guerrilla thrived. Larger towns, such as Soc Trang, Can Tho (located about 80 miles southwest of Saigon and My Tho (located about half way between the capital and Can Tho) were under the control of the Government of Vietnam. (*)

(*) See map of III Corps Tactical Zone, 1962, p. 48.

III CORPS TACTICAL ZONE

1962



0 25 50
Miles

APPROXIMATE SCALE 1:2,000,000

While the pilots and crews of HMM-362 were acquainting themselves with the geography of the Mekong Delta, Colonel Carey and his staff met in Saigon with U. S. and Vietnamese officers from the MACV and III Corps headquarters. There, they established liaison with the three ARVN divisions subordinate to General Nghiem's III Corps--the 21st, the 7th, and the 5th--and discussed operational matters. After several conferences, the final details of the command arrangements had been completed. It was agreed that all Marine missions would require the approval of MACV, III Corps, and the task unit commander. This arrangement would enable General Harkins' command to retain actual operational control of the Marine helicopters even though they would be supporting III Corps exclusively. To insure maximum coordination, Marine liaison officers were assigned to the corps headquarters and to the 21st ARVN Division. Headquartered at Can Tho, only 35 miles northwest of Soc Trang, it was anticipated that the 21st ARVN Division would require more Marine helicopter support than the other divisions that operated within the corps tactical zone.

While operational planning was underway, the MABS-16 Marines set about to improve the newly occupied compound. Two diesel-powered generators were put into operation and began furnishing electrical power for the camp. The utilities section, which maintained the generators, then began installing electrical wiring throughout the compound. Head and shower facilities were constructed to accommodate the Marines.

III:49

Measures were also taken during this interlude to strengthen the airfield's defenses. Expecting that the Viet Cong might attempt to infiltrate the Marine position, Colonel Carey created a 40-man security unit to protect the inner camp and the flight lines. This unit, composed of men from MABS-16 and HMM-362 and responsible to a permanent sergeant-of-the-guard, maintained roving patrols and security posts during hours of darkness. A network of concertina wire, trip flares, and machine gun emplacements provided additional protection around the helicopters and living area. Attack alerts were conducted periodically to coordinate the ARVN's outer defenses and the Marine guard within the perimeter.

Within less than two weeks after the first Marines had arrived at Soc Trang the camp had been adequately prepared to support sustained combat helicopter operations. In addition, defenses had been established and the lines of logistical support from MACV had been opened. Food and water were readily available. All necessary liaison with the Vietnamese units to be supported had been accomplished. Pilots and crews had gained a rudimentary knowledge of the area in which they would fly and SHUFLY's entire command structure had undergone a one week "shake down" in which it had proven sound.

III:50

COMBAT SUPPORT OPERATIONS IN THE MEKONG DELTA(25)

III:51

Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron began combat operations on Easter Sunday, 22 April, exactly one week after arriving in the Republic of Vietnam. The unit's first combat assignment was to assist the Army's Saigon-based 57th Helicopter Company in an operation code named LOCKJAW. The American helicopters were to support the ARVN 7th Division which was headquartered at My Tho, 53 miles northeast of Soc Trang. The Marine helicopters, which departed Soc Trang at 0900, flew 29 sorties and lifted 400 Vietnamese soldiers without incident during the course of their first operation.

Once HMM-362 began combat flight operations the tempo of activities at Soc Trang quickened. The same day that SHUFLY helicopters participated in the coordinated helilift from My Tho, a HUS was called upon to evacuate an American advisor from Vinh Long, 46 miles north of Soc Trang. The following day the first combined operation involving Vietnamese Marine ground forces and U. S. Marine helicopters was conducted. A company of Vietnamese Marines were helilifted into a threatened outpost south of the town of Ca Mau, located near the southern tip of South Vietnam, to provide security while HMM-362's helicopters evacuated the 57-man garrison.

On 24 April, 16 Marine helicopters supported the 21st ARVN Division in Operation NIGHTINGALE conducted near Can Tho. In this operation 591 ARVN troops were lifted into eight landing zones along two canals where a large group of Viet Cong had been reported. Shortly after the first wave of the assault force landed a vicious small arms fight erupted. HMM-362 suffered its first combat damage when a helicopter was forced down after its oil line was punctured by enemy ground fire. An accompanying HUS quickly landed and retrieved the crew. Four other helicopters proceeded to the forward loading site, picked up a Marine repair team and enough ARVN troops to protect them while they worked, and returned to the downed aircraft. The mechanics completed their repairs in two hours after which the crew returned the helicopter to Soc Trang. The security force was then lifted out of the area.

Despite the damage suffered by the Marine aircraft, the Can Tho operation apparently achieved some success. The Viet Cong reportedly suffered 70 dead and lost three prisoners to the South Vietnamese while the ARVN units lost only three killed and six wounded. Moreover, the Marines of HMM-362 had responded to a new challenge by demonstrating that they could recover helicopters which had been forced to land in insecure territory. Although the principle of providing security while accomplishing field repairs had been employed previously by the Army helicopter companies, the Can Tho operation of 24 April marked the first time the Marines had been required to use the technique.

HMM-362 again joined the Army's 57th Helicopter Company for a coordinated troop lift on 25 April. This time the objective was the small village of Chau Doc on the Bassac River near the Cambodian border which had been raided and burned by a force whose identity was undetermined. Fourteen Marine helicopters transported 168 troops from the 21st ARVN Division to the scene of the atrocity while two other squadron aircraft lifted the Deputy Commander of III Corps, the 21st Division Commander, and the Senior U. S. Advisor in III Corps, Colonel Daniel B. Potter, Jr., U. S. Army, to the village. The landing was uncontested as the marauding band had fled across the border into Cambodia.

The conditions which confronted HMM-362 in the Mekong Delta during its first weeks of combat operations encouraged the squadron's pilots to experiment with new tactics. One such instance occurred in the first week of May in Ba Xuyen Province when the province chief requested that the Marine helicopters support his Regional Forces(*) in a raid on a fortified Viet Cong village about 12 miles southwest of Soc Trang. Because the objective was located so near the Soc Trang airfield, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp ordered an unusual technique used for approaching the landing zone. The flight would rendezvous over Soc Trang at tree-top level and proceed to the objective with the flight leader slightly to the rear and above the formation. From this vantage point the flight leader could expect to keep the other aircraft in sight and exercise better control over each element of the flight. The success of the new procedure led Lieutenant Colonel Clapp to remark later that the technique was similar to "calling the plays from the grandstand." (26) It became another tactic available for the squadron's future use.

(*) The Regional Forces (RF) was the name given by the GVN to the old Civil Guard. Likewise, the Village Self Defense Forces had been redesignated the Popular Forces (PF). Like their predecessors, the RF and PF units were paramilitary forces under the control of the province chiefs.

In terms of lessons learned, HMM-362's most significant operation during its initial month of combat support came on 9 May. Twenty-three helicopters and two OE-1 observation aircraft launched from Ca Mau at 1100 for an assault on Cai Ngai, a Viet Cong controlled village, 21 miles to the south. At 1200 the helicopters began landing the ARVN troops in six landing zones which had been attacked only five minutes earlier by Vietnamese Air Force fighter bombers. Firing broke out even before the Vietnamese troops could jump from helicopters. During this clash eight of the Marine aircraft were hit by small arms fire and two Vietnamese troops were wounded while still aboard the helicopters. One HUS, struck in the oil return line, was forced to land a few miles from the objective. Troops were quickly flown in to establish a perimeter around the downed aircraft while repairs were made. After the temporary repairs had been completed its crew flew the helicopter to Ca Mau, where it remained until more extensive work could be accomplished. The other aircraft, including an OE-1, suffered only superficial damage and continued to support the ARVN operation.

From this encounter with the Viet Cong the Marine pilots learned that air strikes conducted just prior to a helicopter landing in the heavily populated delta country tended to disclose the location of the landing zone to the enemy. In this instance the Communists had been able to reach the landing zone in the few minutes which elapsed between the last air strike and the arrival of the Marine helicopters. Following this experience, the Marines would no longer allow VNAF air strikes on landing zones prior to operations in the flat delta region.

The Americans and Vietnamese, however, soon learned to use fixed-wing aircraft to support helicopter operations in another manner. By mid-June, Vietnamese Air Force T-28 Trojans (a single-engine two-seat trainer built by North American) modified to carry bombs, rockets, and machine guns, were flying escort missions for the Marine helicopter squadron. This particular aircraft could fly slowly enough to cruise with the HUS yet fast enough to deliver an air strike en route to the objective and then catch up with the helicopter formation. It was used primarily to attack targets near the landing zone after the ARVN troops were on the ground. The placement of an American pilot-instructor and a Vietnamese student-pilot in the T-28 helped solve language problems which invariably developed when coordinating ARVN ground operations and U. S. air operations. The effectiveness of the escort tactic increased as the American and Vietnamese participants became accustomed to planning, coordinating, and executing the mission.

The Marines quickly learned the value of utilizing the OE-1 in conjunction with their helicopter operations. The single-engine, two-man aircraft proved remarkably versatile in day-to-day operations over the delta. Primarily, they were used in daylight visual reconnaissance, usually to study objective areas and the approach routes which the helicopters would later use. Sometimes their crews were called upon to photograph proposed landing zones for briefing purposes. Often the aircraft's radios were used to relay messages between various ARVN ground units which were operating beyond the range of their radios. Equipped with two frequency modulated (FM) radios for work with ground stations and one ultra high-frequency (UHF) radio for communicating with other aircraft, the OE-1 was perfectly suited for controlling helicopter landings. The Marine aviators also found that, unlike their helicopters, the observation aircraft did not arouse suspicion in the area over which it flew. This advantage was due probably to several factors. First, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) routinely operated similar aircraft over the entire region; secondly, the enemy could not readily determine whether the OE-1 was on a reconnaissance mission or merely flying from one point to another; and finally, the small aircraft made little noise. Given these characteristics it was no accident that the helicopter squadron relied on the observation aircraft more and more as the pattern of operations unfolded.

Shortly after their arrival in Vietnam, the Marines of HMM-362 began experimenting with one of the more imaginative techniques developed in the early stages of the intensified U. S.-GVN counterinsurgency effort. Marine air crews had noticed that the enemy often managed to elude the larger ARVN units by fleeing the operations area in small groups. Even the smallest breach between ARVN units seemed to allow large numbers of guerrillas to escape into covered or heavily populated areas where they became impossible to find. Colonel Carey and Lieutenant Colonel Clapp devised a plan to prevent escapes of this nature. Their idea was to have a flight of four Marine helicopters loaded with about 50 ARVN soldiers circle above the contested area. This so-called "Eagle Flight" would be on the alert for any Viet Cong attempting to evade the ground forces. Once the enemy was located, often by the OE-1 observation aircraft, the helicopters would land the Vietnamese soldiers at a position where they could block his escape. The Marine commanders felt that the adoption of such a tactic would increase the effectiveness of the ARVN's helicopter assault operations.

After several weeks of planning by HMM-362 and the affected III Corps commands, the concept was put into practice. The Eagle Flight was first tested in a large operation on 18 June when HMM-362 helilifted ARVN troops into 16 different landing zones. Heavy monsoon rains made the enemy particularly difficult to pin down, but the Marine pilots managed to sight 10 Viet Cong near the main landing zone. After landing near the enemy, the ARVN troops captured 10 Communist soldiers and wounded one other. Shortly after this incident another Eagle Flight made two eventful contacts with the enemy. The Marine helicopters landed their small force and the ARVN promptly killed four Viet Cong and captured another. Twenty minutes later, after reboarding the helicopters, the South Vietnamese swept down upon a new prey, this time capturing four prisoners.

III:61

The novel concept was employed successfully again on 10 July. While HMM-362 aircraft lifted 968 ARVN troops into the Ca Mau area, an Eagle Flight spotted a sampan moving northward from the operations area. The flight leader landed the troops nearby and the ARVN intercepted the craft. Later that day the Marines and ARVN of the Eagle Flight clashed twice with an estimated platoon of Viet Cong. In the first encounter seven enemy were killed and several weapons were captured. In the second skirmish, the enemy suffered six dead and lost more weapons. All four Marine helicopters, however, were hit by small arms fire during the two brief fights.

By the middle of July, the Eagle Flight had become a proven combat tactic. By reducing the enemy's opportunity to escape when the government forces possessed the advantage on the battlefield, it had favorably influenced the tactical situation in the Mekong Delta. Equally important, SHUFLY's commanders had demonstrated their ability to adapt their technological resources to the unsophisticated but effective methods commonly employed by the Viet Cong. Variants of the Eagle Flight tactic, under different names such as Tiger Flight, Sparrow Hawk, Pacifier, and Quick Reaction Force (QRF), would be used by the Marines throughout the Vietnam war.

The Marines were quick to apply their technological know-how to other problems which they confronted during their early operations in the III Corps Tactical Zone. One example was their adaptation of the TAFDS to the problem which arose when the helicopters were called upon to operate far beyond their normal fuel range. HMM-362 helicopters would airlift a TAFDS unit, complete with a 10,000 gallon fuel bladder, pumps, and MABS-16 personnel, to the site where the ARVN troops were to be loaded. The fuel bladders were filled by gasoline trucks which travelled from the nearest source of fuel. The Marine helicopters could then use the TAFDS as a temporary base of operations, refueling between troop pick-ups when necessary. Thus employed, the TAFDS allowed the operating radius of the helicopters to be extended to support even the most distant South Vietnamese operation.

While the Marines were learning to adapt their technology to the guerrilla war environment, the enemy was applying his ingenuity in attempts to frustrate the American and South Vietnamese helicopter operations. The Viet Cong quickly learned to capitalize on the presence of large crowds of civilians who sometimes gathered near helicopter landing zones to watch the strange aircraft. One such incident occurred in June when Communist soldier' mingled with a crowd and delivered fire on helicopters which were lifting elements of the 21st ARVN Division. Two aircraft were hit by enemy fire although the damage was not extensive enough to force them to land. The Marines, who refused to return fire with their individual weapons unless the Viet Cong could be separated from the civilian populace, found no effective method of countering this tactic. Later in June, the Marines of HMM-362 encountered a new enemy tactic when they found that hundreds of upright bamboo stakes had been prepositioned in the intended landing zone. The perpendicular spikes, each four or five feet high, not only prevented the helicopters from landing but also made it impossible to disembark the ARVN troops while hovering. Fortunately, the abundance of landing zones in the delta region tended to make this particular tactic ineffective.

III:64

On 20 July, HMM-362 added a new dimension to the counter-guerrilla capabilities of the South Vietnamese forces when it executed the first night helicopter assault of the war. The mission, which began at 0415 at Soc Trang, involved lifting three waves of ARVN troops into an objective on the Plain of Reeds, about 40 miles southwest of Ben Tre. The ARVN force intended to encircle a suspected Viet Cong village before dawn and then attack it at daybreak. The Marine portion of the airlift was completed 10 minutes before daylight after which the Army's 57th Helicopter Company joined the operation. Although the night troop lift was executed without incident, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp attributed its success at least partially to the near perfect conditions. The moonlight, reflected from the flat, flooded rice paddies, had aided the Marine pilots in the tricky operation. (27)

III:65

Prior to SHUFLY's deployment to Soc Trang General Roberts' staff at FMFPac had developed a policy for the periodic rotation of the task unit's Marines for which the Commandant's approval had been gained. The helicopter squadron would be replaced by a similar unit after approximately four months of operations in the combat zone. But rather than being drawn from the 1st MAW on Okinawa, the replacement squadron was to be provided by the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in California. Officers and men serving with the supporting headquarters and MABS-16 elements, however, were to be replaced by Marines from MAG-16 at approximately four month intervals. So as not to disrupt the operational efficiency of the task unit, individual replacements would be made in increments.

In accordance with this rotation policy, HMM-163, the HUS unit scheduled to relieve HMM-362, began arriving at Soc Trang on 23 July. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Rathbun, a veteran fighter pilot of World War II and Korea, the squadron continued to arrive during the last week of July. Airlifted by GV-1s from the Marine Corps Air Facility, Santa Ana, California, the new squadron brought neither helicopters nor maintenance equipment. The squadron commander had orders to continue operations with HMM-362's aircraft and equipment.

Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron continued its pace of operations even after the new unit's appearance. On 27 July, 18 of HMM-362's helicopters participated in an operation about 30 miles northeast of Soc Trang. The next day the task unit commander committed 21 helicopters and OE-1s to a 21st ARVN Division operation near Ca Mau. The Eagle Flight was committed on four different occasions during this operation.

Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's "Ridge Runners" officially relieved "Archie's Angels" on 1 August after a week of orientation flying with HMM-362's crews. The men of the departing squadron could reflect on their tour in South Vietnam with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Since their arrival in mid-April, they had executed 50 combat helicopter assaults, had flown 4,439 sorties, and had amassed 5,262 hours of combat flight time. During the course of these missions they had made approximately 130 different landings against Viet Cong opposition. Seventeen of their 24 helicopters and two of the three OE-1 aircraft had received battle damage. To the credit of the squadron's maintenance personnel and aircrews, HMM-362 had not lost a single aircraft during its operations in the Republic of Vietnam. Miraculously the squadron had suffered no casualties while testing the Marine Corps vertical envelopment concept in the guerrilla war situation. (28)

During their three and a half months at Soc Trang, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's men had contributed significantly to another facet of the war effort--one usually considered unrelated to normal combat operations. Sensing the unique links between the political and military aspects of the struggle in South Vietnam, Colonel Carey had initiated a "People-to-People-Program," the objective of which was to assist the Government of Vietnam in winning the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. Within a few days after occupying the Soc Trang airfield, Colonel Carey had ordered the task unit's medical facilities made available to Vietnamese civilians requiring emergency medical treatment. Navy doctors and corpsmen began visiting nearby villages to hold "sick call" for the local inhabitants. On an average visit these medical teams would examine around 60 Vietnamese of all ages. They would then dispense soap, vitamins, and aspirin--commodities which many Vietnamese had never seen. Gradually, the medical teams had expanded their operations until by mid-June they were being flown by helicopter as far away as Ca Mau.

HMM-362's departure from Vietnam coincided roughly with the departure of most of the Marine task unit's senior officers --the men who had conceived the programs and directed the efforts to win the "other war" for the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. On 30 July Colonel Julius W. Ireland, another Marine aviator who had seen combat in two previous wars, relieved Colonel Carey as the task unit commander. The new commander was one of the few Marines to have had previous experience in Vietnam. In April, 1954 he had landed at Da Nang as squadron commander of Marine Attack Squadron 324 (VMA-324) and delivered 25 A-1 bombers to the hard-pressed French. Five days after Ireland assumed command of Task Unit 79.3.5, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph R. Davis replaced Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge as commanding officer of the MABS-16 sub unit. On 13 August another change occurred when the executive officer of the Marine task unit, Lieutenant Colonel Harry C. Dees, was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Alton W. McCully. Except that it left few original members of the task unit, the departure of these Marines for new duty stations in Okinawa, Japan, and the United States did not affect the operations at Soc Trang. The new commanders would continue to direct the Marines support to the Vietnamese government on both the battlefield and the psychological front.

HMM-163 participated in its first combat mission as a squadron on 1 August when it joined the Army's 57th Helicopter Company in a coordinated troop lift. Like their predecessors, "Rathbun's Ridge Runners" maintained a brisk pace of operations during the weeks following their initial assignment. Shortly after its first troop lift, the squadron participated in a 2,000-man South Vietnamese spoiling operation in An Xuyen, South Vietnam's southernmost province. Anticipating a major Viet Cong offensive in the four southern provinces, III Corps authorities moved their headquarters to Soc Trang and established a forward command post at Ca Mau. The Vietnamese Air Force then positioned a composite detachment of four AD-6s Skyraiders (single-engine, propeller driven attack bombers built by Douglas), two T-28s, and a number of H-34 helicopters (the U. S. Army, Air Force, and VNAF version of the HUS) at Soc Trang to support the operation. Joined by the VNAF H-34s, the Marine squadron conducted numerous troop lifts during the week-long operation. At the end of the action the ARVN reported 84 Viet Cong killed, another 30 captured, and confiscated nearly 15,000 pounds of arms, ammunition, and explosives. The first Marine helicopter loss in Vietnam occurred during the operation when a VNAF fighter careened off the runway and damaged a parked HUS to the extent that it could not be repaired. Marine mechanics stripped the undamaged parts from the helicopter for use as replacements.

III:70

HMM-163 suffered its first aircraft damage as a result of combat a few day's later on 18 August during a mission led by Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun. Fourteen HUSs arrived at a prearranged pick up point to rendezvous with an ARVN infantry force but the Marine pilots discovered that the unit had not arrived. One crewman⁷ then reported having seen some ARVN troops about a half mile away from the landing zone. At this juncture, a white smoke signal appeared at approximately the same location that the Marine had observed the South Vietnamese troops. Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun and his wingmate, assuming that the smoke marked the actual pick-up point, took off to investigate the area. While making a low pass over the smoke signal, the squadron commander's helicopter was hit several times by small arms fire which severed the rudder control cable and punctured the main rotor transmission. The loss of oil required Rathbun to make a forced landing on a nearby road. After mechanics had been flown in and repairs had been accomplished, the helicopter was flown to a secure area.

An investigation of the incident later revealed that the confusion had begun when the ARVN unit scheduled to be heli-lifted became involved in a skirmish with guerrillas less than a mile from the pick up point. A VNAF observation aircraft pilot then marked the Viet Cong position for an airstrike with a white smoke grenade rather than red smoke. This was the smoke which Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun had attempted to identify when his aircraft was hit.

III:71

From this incident the pilots of HMM-163 learned several valuable lessons about helicopter support in conjunction with ARVN ground operations. First, helilift of government forces from the field at prearranged times required thorough last minute coordination. Secondly, helicopters could not be used safely on low-level reconnaissance or identification passes. Finally, prearranged colored smoke signals were easily confused. Such signalling methods were most effective when used in conjunction with radio communications between air and ground units.

"Rathbun's Ridge Runners" continued their intensive support operations in III Corps Tactical Zone throughout the month of August. Their daily missions normally included both scheduled troop lifts and unscheduled medical evacuations. During the week of 19-25 August HMM-163 helicopters logged slightly over 800 combat flying hours. A squadron record for a single day was established on 24 August when 197.6 helicopter hours were flown. Flight time for the helicopters during the entire month totalled 2,543 hours--a new Marine Corps record for an HUS squadron. The OE-1 aircraft added 63 missions and 212 hours to this total. Another statistic revealed that 21 of the squadron's pilots logged over 100 hours of combat flying time during August.(29) This record was even more impressive considering that flight operations were hampered by the monsoon season which reached its peak during August in the Mekong Delta.

III:72

Two other noteworthy events occurred during HMM-163's first month of operations in Vietnam. On the same day that Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's helicopter was shot down over the erroneously marked enemy position, the squadron commander was notified that he had been selected for promotion to colonel. (The timing of the notification prompted a squadron wit to coin the phrase: "Lost a bird, gained a bird.") (30) Also, Marines began mounting M-60 machine guns by the cargo hatch of the helicopter. This modification enabled the crew chief to return fire when the Communist guerrillas delivered fire from positions in or near landing zones.

In early September General Harkins directed Colonel Ireland to prepare for the deployment of the Marine task unit northward to Da Nang. The shift to I Corps, which had been the subject of much debate prior to the Marine task unit's assignment at Soc Trang, came as no surprise. Shortly after his unit's arrival in the Mekong Delta, Colonel Carey had accompanied General Condon on a visit to the Army's 93d Helicopter Company at Da Nang. There they had discussed details of the relocation with Army officers. In early July General Harkins had set 1 August as the date on which the Marine task unit and the 93d Helicopter Company would switch locations. But personal appeals by General Nghiem, the III Corps commander and his senior U. S. advisor, Colonel Porter, that the Marine helicopters be retained at Soc Trang caused Harkins to postpone the date for the exchange until 15 September.

In that the airlift was executed in phases, the Marines' movement to Da Nang was accomplished in much the same manner as had been the task unit's initial move into Soc Trang. On 4 September Colonel Ireland dispatched the task unit's assistant communications officer and an advance party to Da Nang to assess the communications requirements there and to prepare for the arrival of the remainder of the Marines and their equipment. Four days later Marine wiremen, message center personnel, and radio operators began preparing a communications center at their new home. The next day the advance party established radio contact with SHUFLY headquarters in order to help coordinate the move. By 9 September MABS-16 technicians had assembled a TAFDS at the Da Nang airfield. This facility would enable the GV-1 transports participating in the airlift to refuel for the 460-mile return flight to Soc Trang after unloading their cargoes at Da Nang.

While the advance party readied the facilities at Da Nang for its unit's arrival, combat support operations and preparations for the move northward continued simultaneously at Soc Trang. During an operation on 5 September, three of HMM-163's helicopters were hit by several rounds of enemy small arms fire. Although all three aircraft returned safely to base, the Marines suffered their first casualty to Viet Cong fire when Corporal Billy S. Watson, a crew chief, was slightly wounded. Troop lifts from Soc Trang continued until 1740 on 13 September when helicopter support operations were ended and the final preparations for the move to Da Nang began.

On the evening of 14 September the first Marine GV-1s arrived at Soc Trang from Okinawa. At dawn the next morning, the refueler-transports began shuttling the Marines and their equipment to Da Nang and the Army's 93d Helicopter Company to Soc Trang. By the end of the day much of the airlift had been completed. The crews and helicopters of Colonel Rathbun's squadron, however, did not begin displacing northward until 16 September when 12 HUSs made the seven hour flight to Da Nang with three en route refueling stops. The 12 remaining helicopters arrived at SHUFLY's new base of operations the next day. The move was completed on 20 September when the last cargo carrying GV-1 landed at Da Nang.

III:76

THE MARINE TASK UNIT ARRIVES IN I CORPS (31)

III:77

The Marines of the task unit found that in many ways their new surroundings at Da Nang contrasted with those which they had left behind in the Mekong Delta. The airfield, with its 8,000-foot runway, was much larger than that at Soc Trang and was already occupied permanently by Vietnamese and U. S. Air Force units. Scattered around the airfield were several clusters of masonry structures which had been constructed by the French after World War II. The Marines' new home was a group of 50 of these buildings located about two and one half miles west of the runway. Although the living areas were somewhat crowded and in need of much repair, the indoor toilets, showers, ceiling fans, and fluorescent lights (none of which functioned properly) were welcomed by the men who had grown accustomed to life in Soc Trang's "tent city." The Marine compound included a chapel, medical and dental facilities, service clubs, a movie, a barber shop, a laundry, and a mess hall.

III:78

While many of the problems encountered initially by the Marines at Da Nang were similar to those that had greeted their predecessors at Soc Trang, there were also some new ones to be resolved. The two most imposing of these stemmed from the distance between the living compound and the working areas. Located along the southeast side of the airstrip, the flight line and hangar were nearly three miles from the Marine quarters. Located still further away, about a quarter mile south of the hangar, were the motor pool and the communications facility. In addition to creating a new requirement for transportation, the distances between the various areas necessitated adjustments in the security arrangements which had been used at Soc Trang.

4

Fortunately SHUFLY's first commander, Colonel Carey, had foreseen the requirement for transportation between the living area and the flight line during his visit to the Da Nang installation in April. The problem was solved by the purchase of three used American school buses which were already on hand when the Marines arrived from Soc Trang. The security situation proved somewhat more perplexing. Initially Colonel Ireland handled the problem in much the same manner as it had been at Soc Trang. A permanent sergeant-of-the-guard was detailed to supervise a security force composed of men from the MABS-16 sub unit and HMM-163. Guard posts were established around the helicopter flight line, the hangar, the TAFDS, the motor pool-communications area, and the billeting compound. But this arrangement, while serving the intended purpose, was not ideal. Frequently the Marines who served on security watch at night were called upon to perform long hours of work the following day. This prompted Colonel Ireland to request that a permanent security force be assigned to his command in order that the overworked mechanics, cooks, carpenters, electricians, and communicators could concentrate on their particular jobs. The request was placed under consideration by ComUSMACV and FMFPac authorities but was not approved immediately. (*)

III:80

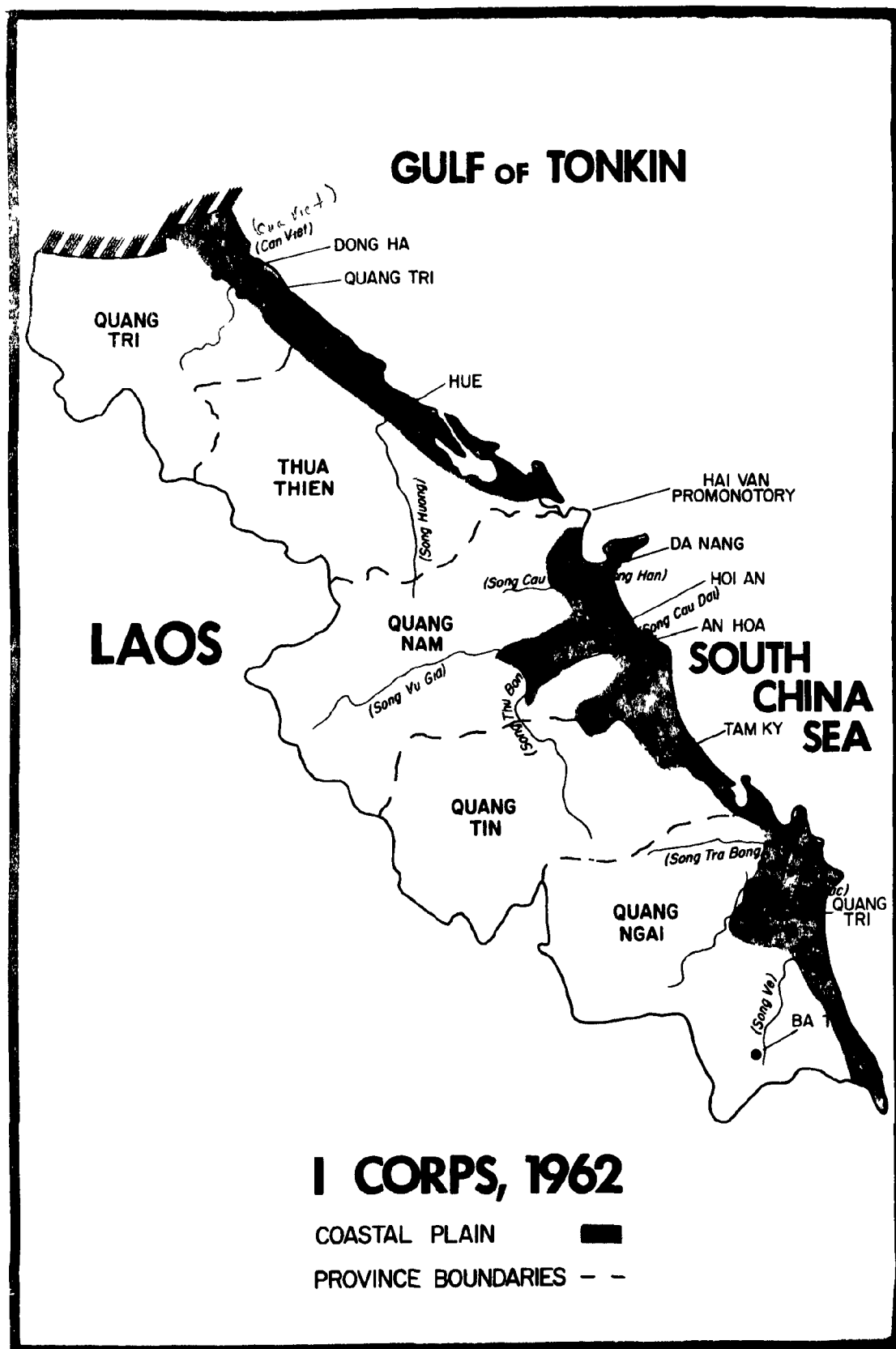
(*) General Weede explained that, because such increases could not be made without the approval of the Department of Defense, any such requests were forwarded first to MACV Headquarters for approval. LtGen Richard G. Weede intvw by HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 23Jul73 (No. OralHistColl, HistDiv, HQMC, hereafter, Weede Interview.)

Unlike at Soc Trang, Colonel Ireland's task unit was not responsible for every facet of airfield operations at Da Nang. The U. S. Air Force provided radar, GCA, TACAN, and meteorological services at the new installation and the Vietnamese operated the control tower. This situation allowed a small reduction in the overall size of the Marine task unit. Those MABS-16 specialists who had operated these systems at Soc Trang were returned to their parent organization on Okinawa.

I CORPS TACTICAL ZONE

At the time the Marine task unit arrived in Da Nang, I Corps Tactical Zone encompassed South Vietnam's five northern provinces. Quang Tri Province, located immediately south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) which sat astride the 1954 partition line, topped this tier of military and political subdivisions. Below Quang Tri Province lay Thua Thien, followed by Quang Nam, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. All five provinces extended inland from the seacoast to the Laotian border, a distance which varied between 30 and 70 miles. Together, they occupied the central portion of the region formerly known as Annam and extended 225 miles to the south of the DMZ. (*)

(*) See map of I Corps on page III 83a.



III 83a

The climatic pattern in the northern provinces was the exact reverse of that which affected the southern portion of the nation. In I Corps the dry season occurred in the summer months while the monsoons, which blew from the northeast, dominated the winter. Heavy monsoon rains accompanied by wind and fog normally began in October. After reaching their peak usually in November, the monsoon rains tended to diminish gradually until their disappearance around mid-March.

The differences between the physical structure of the northern provinces and the Mekong Delta was even more striking than their reversed climatic patterns. White beaches stretched almost unbroken along the entire length of I Corps. Just inland and roughly parallel to the coast south of Da Nang lay a lightly populated strip of sand dunes and generally unproductive soil. This strip varied in width from one half to two miles. In the west it dissolved into the flat, densely populated coastal plain. Any similarity between the Mekong Delta and the northern provinces was found in this expanse of fertile rice-producing land where tiny rural hamlets and slightly larger villages, each enclosed by thick hedgerows and treelines, abounded. North of Da Nang the semi-barren coastal sands tended to extend farther inland, and thereby reduced the prominence of the productive portion of the coastal plains.

The most distinct geographic feature of I Corps, and one easily visible to the Marines at Da Nang, was the chain of towering mountains which protruded from the flat coastal plain several miles west of the city. There was a conspicuous absence of foothills leading to the mountains which seemed to surround Da Nang on the north and west. North of the Hai Van Peninsula, a promontory which jutted into the South China Sea about 10 miles north of the Marines' new home, a zone of foothills eased the transition from the wide coastal plain to the rugged jungle-covered mountains.

The coastal plains of the five northern provinces were broken by several significant streams along which most of the region's principal population centers were located. Roughly 10 miles south of the 1954 partition line the Cua Viet emptied into the southern portion of the Tonkin Gulf. Both Quang Tri City, the capital of Quang Tri Province, and Dong Ha, South Vietnam's northernmost population center of any significance, were situated on the Cau Viet and its major tributary, the Song Cam Lo. The Song Huong (often referred to as the Perfume River), which flows past the old imperial capital of Hue, entered the sea at a point approximately half way between Da Nang and the nation's northern boundary. (*) At Da Nang the Song Han (also called the Da Nang River) flowed into Da Nang Harbor after its main tributary, the Song Cau Do, curved through the coast plains immediately south and west of the city. Eighteen miles south of the Marines' new base of operations, the Song Cau Dai emptied into the South China Sea near Hoi An, the capital of Quang Nam Province. The Song Cau Dai originated about 18 miles inland at the confluence of the Song Thu Bon and the Song Vu Gia which twisted seaward from the south and west respectively. Together these three estuaries constituted the most important geographic feature of the sprawling coastal plain south of Da Nang. Another major stream, the Song Tra Bong, flowed on an eastward course about 32 miles south of the Song Cau Dai. Still further south was the Song Tra Khuc, a river which dominated the wide coastal

plain of Quang Ngai Province in much the same fashion as did the Song Cau Dai and its tributaries in the area south of Da Nang. The provincial capital, Quang Ngai, once a major railroad center for South Vietnam, was situated several miles inland on the south bank of the Song Tra Khuc. The southernmost stream of any significance in I Corps was the Song Ve, which angled northeastward through central Quang Ngai Province. While none of these waterways was navigable far beyond its mouth by ocean-going vessels, each had served the local population in two ways since recorded history. They had been convenient routes of communication as well as vital sources of irrigation water during the long dry seasons.

(*) In the Vietnamese language the word "song" which means river, normally precedes the name of major streams.

The two and a half million people who inhabited I Corps in 1962 had developed along social and economic lines dictated largely by the geography and climate of their region. Rice growing, centered on the coastal plains, dominated the economic activities of the area. Combined, the provinces of I Corps produced nearly half a million tons of rice annually. Fishing, concentrated along the coast and the major rivers, ranked as the second most important economic pursuit. Unlike most of South Vietnam, I Corps did possess some potential for industrial development. A small but productive surface coal mine was located about 25 miles southwest of Da Nang at Nong Son along the Song Thu Bon. Although the mine was still operating in 1962, it had made little discernable impact on the overall economic picture of the region.

In this essentially agrarian setting, the Vietnamese tended to cluster together in tiny hamlets, each composed of several thatched or masonry huts. The next larger community unit, the village, usually consisted of several contiguous hamlets. Traditionally, the inhabitants of the hamlets and villages had retained a large degree of self-government. "The laws of the emperor," ran an ancient Vietnamese adage, "are less than the customs of the village." (32) This age-old observation still bore validity when the Marines arrived in I Corps in 1962.

Almost superimposed over the natural social-political structure that had evolved in the rural areas was the governmental echelon directly subordinate to the province--the district. The district had first appeared in Vietnamese history shortly after the first Chinese annexation of the territory now controlled by North Vietnam in 111 B. C. (33) It had been used in various forms since then by both the Chinese and Vietnamese dynasties that ruled Vietnam prior to the French arrival. The French, too, had resorted to administering Annam (as well as Tonkin and Cochinchina) through the province-district structure. During the period when Annam existed as a French protectorate, the resident colonial officials had modernized the districts somewhat by delineating specific geographic boundaries for each. It was this administrative structure that the Diem government inherited following Vietnam's independence in 1954. But, while the districts continued to function, their effectiveness as administrative agencies was often nullified by the traditional self-rule of the villages. As a result the district was often the lowest level to which the central government's influence seeped, particularly in the more remote rural areas.

From its new base at Da Nang, Colonel Ireland's task unit was responsible for directly supporting the forces under Major General Tran Van Don's I Corps headquarters. The 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions, headquartered respectively at Hue and Da Nang, were the major tactical units at General Don's disposal. Occasionally elements of the 25th ARVN Division, headquartered at Kontum in northwestern II Corps, joined I Corps forces for offensive operations along the southern fringe of Quang Ngai Province. Also scattered over the northern corps tactical zone were numerous paramilitary units of assorted sizes. These too, were situated primarily in the heavily populated coastal plain.

Opposing these government forces in the early fall of 1962 were Viet Cong forces of formidable strength. Four interprovincial battalions, four interprovincial companies, five provincial companies, 18 district companies, and three district platoons were known to be operating within the boundaries of I Corps. Together, these units totalled 4,750 men. (35)

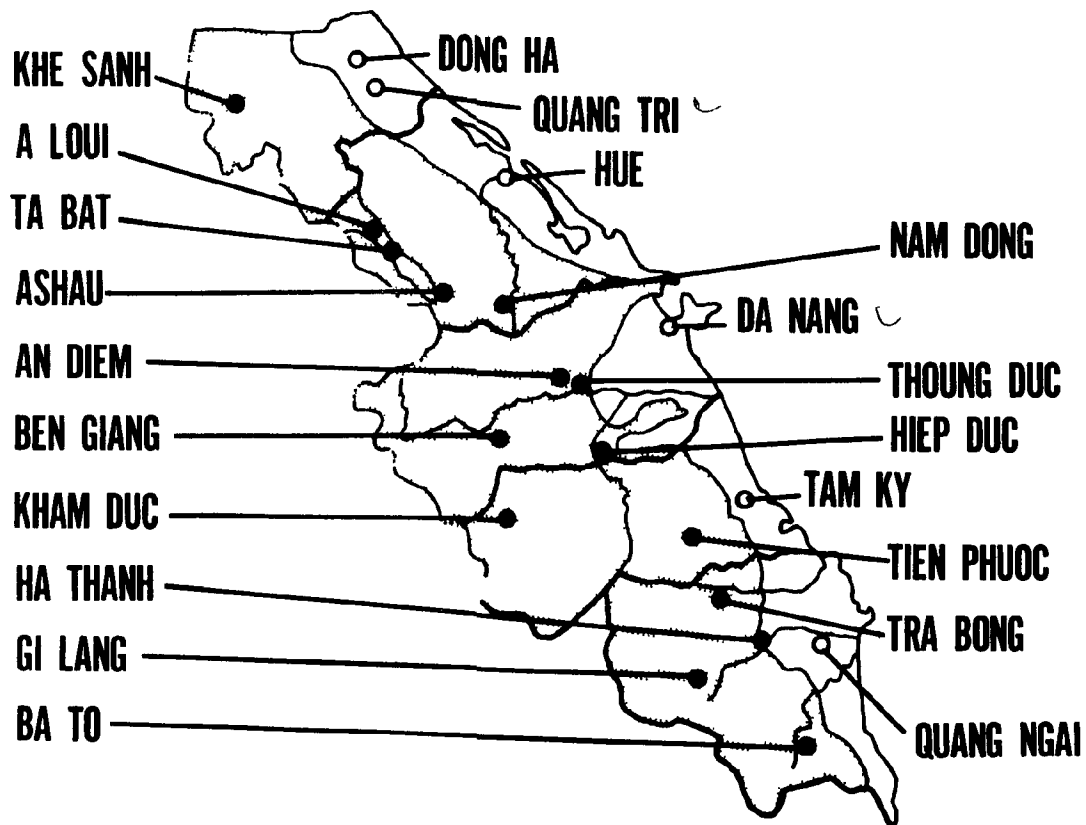
As indicated by the location of the preponderance of his forces, General Don's primary concern was to control the densely populated coastal plain that stretched between the DMZ and the southern boundary of Quang Ngai Province. But action was not limited strictly to the flat lands. During the dry seasons, battalions of the 1st and 2d Divisions frequently mounted offensives into the mountains. Usually these drives were aimed at Communist base areas or infiltration routes. During the early 1960s the North Vietnamese had developed an extensive trail network which bypassed the western terminus of the demilitarized zone by curving through Laos. While the main trails continued southward through the Laotian panhandle and into Cambodia, extensions had been driven into each of the five provinces of I Corps. Largely because of its proximity to North Vietnam, the northern corps tactical zone had become a major target of Communist infiltration by mid-1962. In June, for example, the 4th Viet Cong Battalion, a main force unit, had been infiltrated into Quang Nam Province from Laos. By September MACV intelligence estimates reported one North Vietnamese (PAVN) infantry division, two independent infantry regiments, and one artillery regiment poised in areas of Laos adjacent to the I Corps border. "These units," the U. S. report warned, "...could be committed anywhere in I Corps or [the] northern part of II Corps 20 days after starting movement." (36)

To counter the possibility of large-scale North Vietnamese infiltration, the Government of Vietnam had established a number of small military outposts deep in the mountains near the Laotian border. Often manned by small U. S. Special Forces teams and Montagnard irregulars, these outposts served as bases from which intelligence gathering and harassing activities were conducted. Although it played an important role in the government's military operations in the northern provinces, the outpost system had its drawbacks. Man-made routes of communications between the distant camps and the strongholds on the coastal plains were often nonexistent. Those that did exist, such as Route 9, which ran from Quang Tri westward into Laos, were susceptible to ambush and could be cut easily by the Communists. The outposts, therefore, had come to depend heavily on helicopters for logistical support.(*). It was anticipated that the newly-arrived Marine task unit would devote a sizable percentage of its sorties to supporting the far-flung camps.

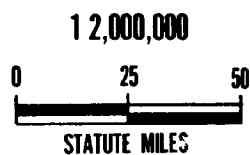
(*) Runways had been constructed at some of the larger camps such as A Chau, A Loui, and Ta Bat. This allowed fixed-wing transport aircraft to operate into these outposts.

MAJOR OUTPOSTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM'S FIVE NORTHERN PROVINCES

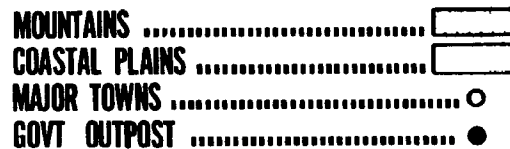
1962 - 1964



APPROXIMATE SCALE



LEGEND

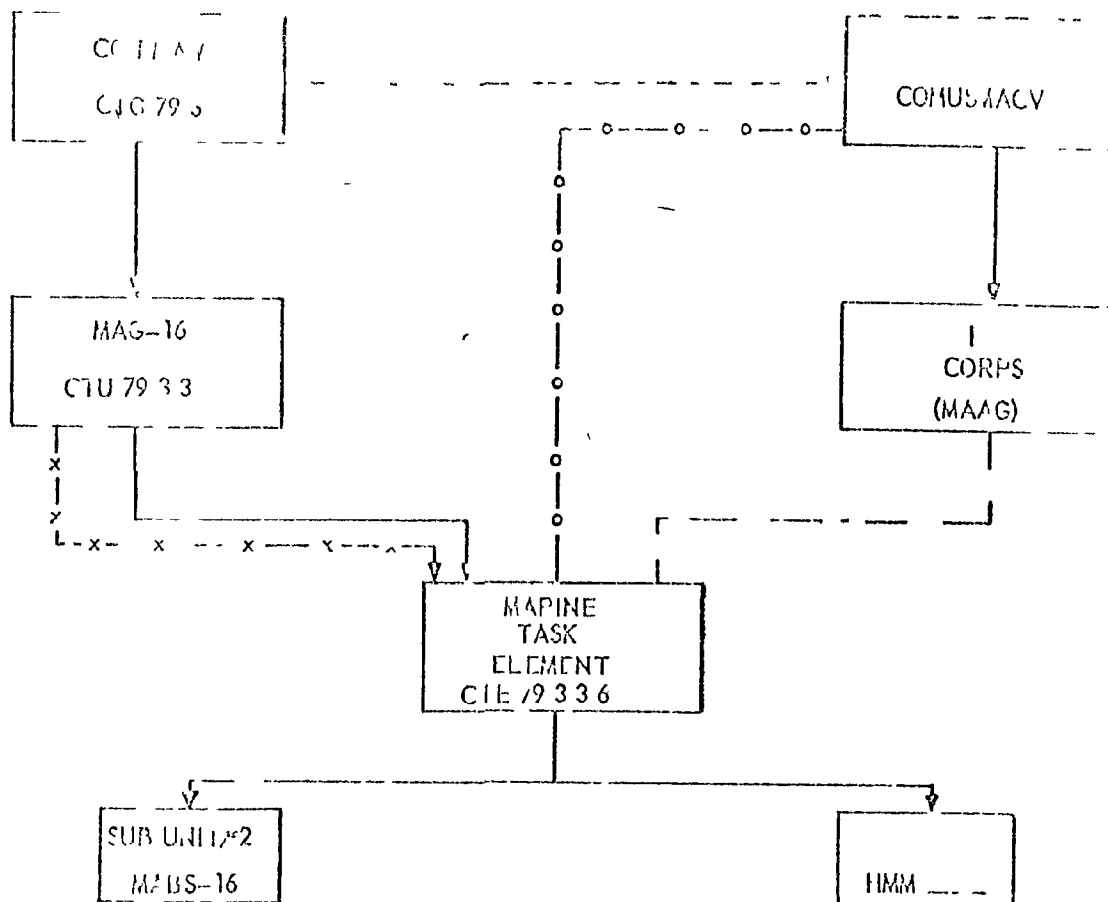


III 93a

The system of helicopter coordination in I Corps was somewhat different than that which had governed Marine operations in the Mekong Delta. At Da Nang, an Air Support Operations Center (ASOC) had been organized within the corps headquarters to process all requests for aviation support. Manned by ARVN, VNAF, U. S. Air Force, and U. S. Marine officers, the ASOC processed mission requests from the various field commands and assigned specific missions to the American and Vietnamese units which supported I CTZ. This arrangement enabled the corps headquarters to plan and co-ordinate all combat support missions flown within the five northern provinces.

The Vietnamese commanders in I Corps, who had learned to value helicopter support as a result of the Army aviation company's eight-month presence at Da Nang, lost no time in employing the newly arrived Marine squadron. HMM-163 flew its first combat operation from Da Nang on 18 September, the day after the last flight of helicopters arrived from Soc Trang. Fourteen HUSs lifted troops of the 2d ARVN Division into two landing zones in the rugged hills about 35 miles south of Da Nang and 25 miles inland from the coast. The scarcity of suitable landing zones in the steep hill country and the fact that the enemy could deliver fire on those that did exist from nearby high ground and the surrounding jungle prompted the Marine pilots to adjust their tactics in preparation for this mission. After VNAF fighters bombed and strafed the objective area, the helicopters made an unopposed landing.

III:95



- - - - - COMMAND (The authority to direct, coordinate and control military forces)
- - - - - OPERATIONAL CONTROL (Those functions pertaining to assignment of tasks, the designation of objectives and the authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission)
- x-x- - ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL/LOGISTIC SUPPORT
- o-o- - CLASS I, III & IIA SUPPORT
- - - - - COORDINATION

COMUSMACV STRUCTURE, JULY, 1965, 11 2

III:95a

The tactic of preparing helicopter landing zones with air strikes was continued and refined in the ensuing weeks. The Marines began using artillery fire in conjunction with air strikes to neutralize enemy in the vicinity of the objective. The OE-1 was well suited for assisting in the employment of the artillery fire support. Having familiarized themselves with the landing site during a prior reconnaissance mission, the pilot and observer of the OE-1 would arrive over the designated area prior to the operation and adjust artillery fire until the helicopters appeared. During the landing the crew of the observation aircraft~often coordinated between the helicopters and the escorting aircraft and were available to assist the ground units with artillery fire missions.

On 19 September, the day after their initial combat support assignment in I Corps, the Marine helicopter crews were called upon to conduct an operation which they would repeat often in the coming months. They were ordered to evacuate a threatened government outpost from the mountains 18 miles west of Da Nang. That day the HMM-163 pilots lifted an odd cargo of troops, dependents, personal belongings and an assortment of pigs, cows, chickens, and ducks to a secure area on the coastal plain.

Unfortunately, helicopter evacuations of encircled or endangered South Vietnamese outposts would become almost routine for Marine helicopter squadrons assigned to Vietnam during the period between 1962 and 1965. As the North Vietnamese stepped up their support for the Viet Cong, the isolated government outposts along the infiltration routes became particularly vulnerable. The increased number of helicopter evacuation missions executed during the next three years was grim testimony of the trend of warfare which was unfolding in the South. Reinforced with limited numbers of North Vietnamese personnel and growing amounts of Communist bloc equipment, the Viet Cong were pressing the initiative even in South Vietnam's most isolated areas.

The task unit's staff borrowed another idea from their experience in the Mekong Delta which allowed HMM-163 to provide more efficient helicopter support in the northern provinces. In this case the concept of temporarily positioning the TAFDS to support specific operations was refined somewhat by placing the portable refueling bladders at secure permanent locations throughout I Corps. Several days after arriving in I Corps the Marines emplaced a 10,000 gallon section of the TAFDS at Quang Ngai, about 65 miles south of Da Nang to serve as a permanent refueling point for aircraft operating in southern I Corps. Within the month, another fuel bladder was positioned at Hue and a third was emplaced at Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province which was situated on Route 1 about half way between Da Nang and Quang Ngai. These well-chosen refueling points greatly enhanced the squadron's operational potential. Used to support daily operations, they enabled the helicopters to operate deep into the adjacent mountain areas on resupply and medical evacuation missions.

The most serious incident recorded during the early operations in I Corps ironically resulted from mechanical failure rather than Viet Cong fire. It occurred on 6 October when the search and rescue helicopter which was covering a 20-plane helilift of 2d ARVN Division troops crashed and burned on a hillside 15 miles southeast of Tam Ky. Unable to land near the downed aircraft because of the thick jungle, other helicopters landed troops at the base of the hill with instructions to proceed to the crash site on foot. When the Vietnamese soldiers reached the downed aircraft after cutting their way through dense vegetation, they found the copilot, crew chief, and five other members of the task unit dead. The pilot, First Lieutenant W. T. Sinnott, who was injured seriously, was hoisted through the trees and evacuated by an HUS which came to the rescue. The five Marines killed in the crash were First Lieutenant Michael J. Tunney, Sergeant R. E. Hamilton, Sergeant J. W. Pendell, Corporal T. E. Anderson, and Lance Corporal M. A. Valentin. Two Navy personnel, Lieutenant Gerald Griffin, a doctor, and Hospitalman G. O. Norton were also dead. These were the first deaths suffered by Marine Task Unit 79.5 since deploying to Vietnam. (38)

III:100

The Communists lost no time in challenging the newly arrived Marine unit. HMM-163 suffered its first battle damage while lifting elements of the 2d ARVN Division into a landing zone southwest of Tam Ky on 26 September. One of 22 helicopters involved in the mission was struck in the fuselage by small arms fire despite the use of preparatory air and artillery strikes on the landing zone. The day after this incident another of the squadron's helicopters was hit by enemy fire while attempting to evacuate wounded ARVN soldiers from the battlefield. On the 29th two more aircraft were damaged by ground fire while participating in another troop lift. One round, which passed through the windshield and exited at the rear of the cockpit, missed the copilot's head by inches. During the first week of October another HUS was struck while landing at Tien Phuoc, a government outpost about 15 miles southwest of Tam Ky. In this incident two ARVN troops were killed and the Marine crew chief, Lance Corporal James I. Mansfield, wounded before the pilot could fly the aircraft out of the danger area. In each of the instances the helicopters were able to return to Da Nang where necessary repairs were made.

An administrative measure which eventually resulted in the extension of the length of tours for the Marine helicopter squadron as well as all other personnel assigned to SHUFLY was taken in the first week of October. Colonel Ireland communicated a recommendation to the Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing proposing that the tours for both the squadron and the individual Marines serving with the sub unit and the task unit headquarters be set at six months. First pointing out that the U. S. Army helicopter company which had occupied Da Nang previously had operated from January to September without rotating personnel, the task unit commander outlined the positive features of such an adjustment. It would, he contended, provide more continuity for administration and operations, thereby resulting in a more effective utilization of manpower. To underscore his argument, Ireland emphasized the number of man-hours involved in the rotation of a helicopter squadron. Adding his opinion that the two-month extension of all tours would not measurably affect the morale of the Marines at Da Nang, he recommended that the next rotation of helicopter squadrons be postponed until January. After being forwarded to FMFPac for consideration, Colonel Ireland's proposals were approved later in the fall and instructions were passed to all involved commands to implement the new policy. (39)

III:101

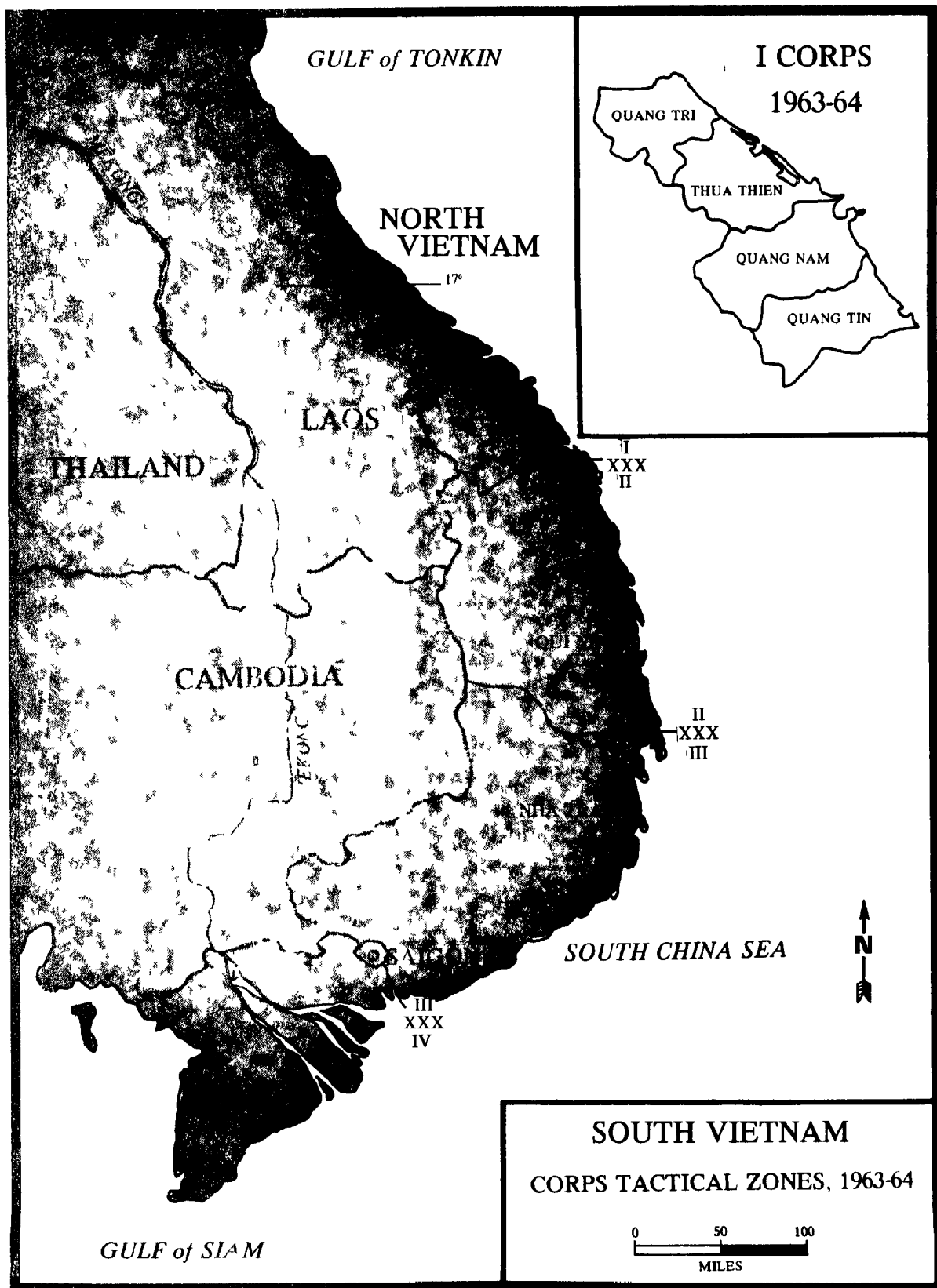
Another adjustment--this one in the area of tactics--had been made during the task unit's first two months at Da Nang. By November the Eagle Flight concept had been tailored to complement reaction force plans which already existed in I Corps at the time of SHUFLY's relocation. ARVN authorities in the northern corps tactical zone had developed a system whereby their various infantry units were placed on alert for use as heliborne reaction forces. Designated the Tiger Force, the alert unit was staged at its base, ready to react to any tactical emergency. On 7 November, HMM-163 executed one of its earliest Tiger Flights in response to a train ambush sprung by the Viet Cong several miles northwest of the Hai Van Peninsula. Four Marine helicopters launched from Da Nang, made an airborne rendezvous with two other HUSs, and proceeded to Hoa My, four miles away, to pick up a 52-man ARVN Tiger Force. The Marines then helilifted the South Vietnamese into a suitable landing zone near the ambush site. The relatively short amount of time consumed in the reaction did not prevent the Communist attackers from vanishing into the surrounding jungle. Generally, however, the tactic was more successful, particularly when the reaction force was used to reinforce a threatened static position or to establish hasty blocking positions in support of ground offensive operations that were already underway.

By early November the monsoon season had begun to settle over the northern portions of South Vietnam. Unlike the summer rains in the Mekong Delta in which Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's crews had managed to set new helicopter flight records, the winter monsoons that struck the northern provinces seriously restricted flight operations. Heavy fog and low clouds frequently made it impossible to conduct air operations in the mountainous areas. The squadron was forced to concentrate most of its operations in the coastal plains. In an effort to maintain his support at a maximum level, Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun began dispatching an OE-1 to the objective area prior to scheduled missions in order to obtain a current report on the local weather conditions. Despite these efforts, the monsoon rains, which often moved in quickly from the South China Sea, still disrupted flight operations. A typical weather-related incident occurred on 13 November after 200 Vietnamese Special Forces troops had loaded into 20 Marine helicopters for an early morning troop lift. But the mission was cancelled before take off when the OE-1 pilot reported the landing zone to be obscured by heavy ground fog.

III:103

Several unrelated changes in official designations occurred at approximately the same time that the monsoons began affecting operations in the northern provinces. In November all Marine aircraft were redesignated in accordance with a Department of Defense order which standardized aircraft designations throughout the U. S. armed services. Hereafter, SHUFLY's HUS helicopters would be known as UH-34Ds, its OE-1s as O-1Bs, and its R4D as a C-117. A similar change occurred that same month when the Marine task unit was redesignated Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6. In another adjustment, ARVN authorities in Saigon ordered the realignment of South Vietnam's tactical zones. A fourth corps tactical zone (IV CTZ), which encompassed the entire Mekong Delta, and a Capital Military District, which included Saigon and its environs, were created. The composition of I Corps was affected by the adjustments as Quang Ngai Province was shifted from I Corps into II Corps. The Marines continued to provide helicopter support to the province, however, which was relatively isolated from the remainder of II Corps.

III:104



III 104a

More important than either the new aircraft designations or the realignment of the tactical zones were several internal changes within the Marine task unit. On 6 November the task unit was redesignated Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6. That same day Lieutenant Colonel Alton W. McCully, who had been functioning as the executive officer of the task unit, assumed command of the task element. Colonel Ireland returned to Okinawa where he took command of Marine Aircraft Group 16, which, under the new arrangement, became responsible for both the administrative and logistical support of SHUFLY.

THE CONTINUATION OF THE MARINE PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE
PROGRAM AT DA NANG

The concept of the People-to-People Program, which had been successful in the Mekong Delta, had been brought to Da Nang by Colonel Ireland and his Marines. During the fall and early winter of 1962 as flight operations were forced to subside, the Marines were able to increase the tempo of the program. They actively supported an orphanage in Da Nang which was maintained by an American missionary family. On Christmas day the Marines participated in a "Father-For-A-Day" program which had been arranged by the task element chaplain, Richard P. Vinson. Each orphan spent the day with a Marine who had volunteered to serve as his "father." The Vietnamese children were treated to dinner in the mess hall, presented with Christmas gifts, and then joined in singing carols with the Marines. At the conclusion of the festivities Chaplain Vinson presented the director of the orphanage with a gift in Vietnamese currency equivalent to over 800 dollars --money which the men of the task element had donated. In addition to their activities associated with the orphanage, the Marine officers taught English to a number of Vietnamese civilians. Held three nights weekly, the classes were received enthusiastically.

SUMMARIZING THE EVENTS OF 1962

In retrospect, 1962 can be assessed as one of the most eventful years in the chronicle of U. S. Marine Corps involvement in the Republic of Vietnam. The Marine commitment expanded dramatically in both scope and intensity during the first four months of the year in accordance with the decisions that widened the entire American military assistance effort in Vietnam. The number of Marines serving in the war torn republic on other than temporary assignments and embassy duty jumped from three officers to over five-hundred officers and men in that brief period. Included in this figure were the Marines serving with the MACV and MAAG staffs in Saigon, the detachment of the 1st Radio Company, FMF, the Marine Advisory Division, and the helicopter task unit.

During the course of the year the Marines had participated a broad range of advisory and combat support activities. Those serving as advisors had assisted the Vietnamese Marine Corps through another phase of expansion; this time to a six-battalion brigade capable of providing its own artillery support. As a result of a change in American policy, the advisors had also begun accompanying their respective Vietnamese Marine units into combat. Then, with the deployment of SHUFLY to Soc Trang in mid-April, the first of the Marine Corps' operational units had arrived in the war zone to support the South Vietnamese forces.

III.107

Following SHUFLY's arrival in the Mekong Delta the number of Marines entering Vietnam for duty stabilized. The remainder of the year was characterized by operations rather than growth. During the final eight months of 1962 the activities of the Marine helicopter squadron came to symbolize the dynamic nature of the Marines involvement in the struggle for South Vietnam. The Marine task unit demonstrated the capacity to conduct and support sustained helicopter operations in a combat environment. Confronted by a war without lines in which the people rather than terrain features were the objective, the Marine commanders adjusted their helicopter tactics accordingly. Largely as a result of the ingenuity of their leaders and the industry of SHUFLY's Marines, the two helicopter units which saw action in Vietnam during 1962 amassed impressive combat records. Moreover, the Marines and Navy personnel of the task unit distinguished themselves by performing in a role for which their conventional training provided little experience--the People-to-People Program. First initiated at Soc Trang in the summer of 1962, this program would serve as a foundation upon which the Marine Corps would later build a doctrine that would define the relations between Marines on duty in South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese people.

CHAPTER IV

THE U. S. MARINE ADVISORY AND COMBAT SUPPORT

EFFORTS IN VIETNAM CONTINUE, 1963

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN VIETNAM DURING 1963(1)

IV:1

A sudden rupture occurred in South Vietnam's internal political situation during 1963 which largely determined the course of the war as well as the nation's future. Following the sect uprising of 1955-1956 the Diem government had experienced a three-year period of relative political tranquility. Beginning in 1959, however, political dissent began to re-emerge from virtually every influential segment of South Vietnamese society. The results of the August 1959 national elections, in which pro-Diem candidates suspiciously captured every seat in the National Assembly, served to stimulate political opposition which had lain dormant for nearly four years. Opposition to the government mounted steadily in the months following the elections within military as well as political circles as many South Vietnamese officers began privately expressing disenchantment with Diem's management of the war. On 11 November 1960 several ARVN leaders launched an unsuccessful coup d'etat in Saigon which the President barely managed to survive. The regime's popularity diminished steadily in the wake of this abortive effort as Diem tightened his control on the war torn nation.

Another problem--religious unrest--which was to play a key role in determining South Vietnam's political direction as the decade unfolded, also emerged during this period. Buddhist leaders throughout South Vietnam began publicly protesting various policies enacted by the Catholic-controlled government as early as 1960. Over the course of the next two years the religious protests were highlighted by a series of spectacular self-immolations by the Buddhist monks. Finally, in May 1963, the long-standing religious problem erupted in violence when the Vietnamese police and military forces killed 12 Buddhist demonstrators while suppressing a religious demonstration at Hue. This action triggered a protracted crisis of public confidence in the Diem government which deepened as the summer wore on. Then, on 21 August, Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's brother and closest political advisor, ordered the national police to raid key Buddhist pagodas throughout the nation. Following the raids, which were brutally executed, Nhu boldly attempted to blame the attacks on several key South Vietnamese generals. His clumsy effort to shift the responsibility for the police raids served only to alienate some of the nation's most powerful military leaders.

On 2 November a junta of South Vietnamese generals led by Major General Duong Van Minh reacted to the deepening political crisis by deposing President Diem and seizing control of the Government of Vietnam. Both the president and his brother were murdered by ARVN soldiers the following day. Throughout the power struggle the United States maintained a cautious official neutrality. In accordance with this policy General Harkins ordered the USMACV to cease all activities and to withdraw its advisors from the South Vietnamese units pending the outcome of the coup.

The overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem stirred fresh hope among U. S. and South Vietnamese officials that the new leadership could attract the solid public support of the Vietnamese people and thereby wage a more effective war against the Communists. South Vietnam's new leaders immediately focused their attention on healing the nation's deep political divisions and securing continued U. S. assistance for the war effort. They pledged to respect religious freedom, to return the government to civilian control, and to continue the struggle to eradicate the Viet Cong menace. Appreciating the inter-relationship of these assurances, the United States officially recognized the new government on 7 November and the temporary ban on military assistance was lifted.

The American hopes that the new political climate in the Republic of Vietnam would stimulate a more effective military effort proved to be short-lived. Confusion reminiscent of that which existed during the sect uprising of 1955 spread through the government in the immediate aftermath of Diem's death. The dismissal of more than 30 high-ranking military officers for actively supporting the former president during the coup typified the new regime's campaign to realign top personnel in all governmental agencies. Far from enhancing the efficiency of the Vietnamese military, the power struggle and the chaos which prevailed in its wake dragged the war effort to its most ineffective level since before the U. S. stepped-up its military assistance program in early 1962. It was on this unfortunate note that the year 1963 ended.

IV:5

At the beginning of 1963, the Marine Advisory Division, still commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Moody, consisted of eight Marine officers and 10 noncommissioned officers. In April, however, the table of organization was adjusted slightly when the first sergeant and four assistant infantry advisor (noncommissioned officers) billets were eliminated. Another small unit training advisor was added to the organization, changing the strength of Lieutenant Colonel Moody's command to eight officers and six noncommissioned officers. Men from the 3d Marine Division continued to augment the advisory effort while serving in Vietnam on temporary assignments.

Like the U. S. organization which advised and assisted it, the Vietnamese Marine Corps began the new year at the same strength that it had achieved when it had been expanded to brigade size in early 1962. Still commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Le Nguyen Khang, the Vietnamese Marine Brigade continued to operate as part of the nation's general reserve under the direct control of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Its four 1,080-man infantry battalions were assigned security, amphibious assault, and resettlement missions throughout South Vietnam's four corps tactical zones. Occasionally, the battalions were placed under the operational control of a province chief for brief periods. The artillery battalion, which became completely operational in mid-January when B and C Batteries passed their final gunnery examinations, supported the VNMC infantry units throughout the year.

IV:7

The Marines began their first operation of the new year on 3 January when the 2d Battalion made an amphibious landing on the Communist-controlled Ca Mau Peninsula. Shortly after the landing the 4th Battalion joined its sister organization in an extended search for enemy units. Despite the size of the government effort, contact with the Viet Cong was sporadic and casualties on both sides were light. The Vietnamese Marines lost five men killed and 14 wounded while reporting 11 enemy dead and 14 wounded. During the operation, Vietnamese Marine engineers constructed a strategic hamlet. But the most noteworthy result of this particular offensive was the capture of enemy weapons by the infantry units. Two pistols, two carbines, five light mortars, 15 rifles, and 36 mines were seized before the operation ended on 11 April.

Shortly after the close of the three-month offensive on the Ca Mau Peninsula, the Vietnamese Marine leaders began task organizing their battalions for operational purposes. These units were usually called either provisional regiments or provisional brigades but on at least one occasion the organization was designated a Marine Task Force. In each case the composition was similar--two or three infantry battalions, an artillery unit, an engineer or reconnaissance company, and a command element.

The first operation involving a task-organized Marine force took place in early May when a provisional brigade entered the Do Xa base area in northern II Corps. Acting upon the advice of Lieutenant Colonel Moody, Lieutenant Colonel Khang created a mobile brigade headquarters to control the 2d and 4th Battalions, a battery from the artillery battalion, and the reconnaissance company. Headed by Khang, the provisional brigade had been ordered to locate and destroy a Viet Cong logistics center which had been reported near the juncture of Quang Ngai, Quang Tin, and Kontum Provinces. After being helilifted into the vicinity of the objective on 2 May, the Vietnamese Marines managed to uncover a cache containing two rifles, six typewriters, three sewing machines, one radio, 44 maps, a French artillery computing board, and about 100 flashlight batteries. But they killed only two enemy soldiers and captured only one in the course of the search. Thirty-six Marines were wounded during the operation, most as a result of encounters with booby-traps constructed from bamboo spikes.

In early September Lieutenant Colonel Wesley C. Noren, recently transferred from the 2d Marine Division where he had served as Assistant G-3, replaced Lieutenant Colonel Moody as the Senior Marine Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. He became the seventh Marine to hold that position.

IV:10

In mid-October the Vietnamese Marine commanders formed a provisional regiment for Operation PHI-HOA 5 which was to be conducted in III Corps Tactical Zone. (*) The 1st, 3d, and 4th Battalions, supported by a composite artillery battery and the reconnaissance company, joined ARVN, VNAF, and Vietnamese Navy units in a major search and clear campaign in the northwest corner of Gia Dinh Province only about 20 miles southeast of Saigon. Like most other large government military operations undertaken in the 1963 period, this one failed to uncover any major enemy forces. The Communist soldiers again managed to elude the government forces. An extensive tunnel and cave network, which the Marines systematically destroyed with demolitions, was discovered under the entire area. Still, the Marines managed to kill only six Viet Cong and capture 10. Two Vietnamese Marines were killed and 36 others wounded before the operation terminated on 1 November.

(*) After the realignment of the CTZs the previous December, III Corps included a 200-mile long section of Vietnam which encompassed the southern one third of the Central Highlands and the area south to the boundary of the Capital Military District near Saigon. See map on page III 104a.

The coup d'etat which toppled President Diem from power began the same day that Operation PHI-HOA 5 concluded. Reacting to instructions from General Harkins, Lieutenant Colonel Noren directed all U. S. Marine advisors to curtail advisory activities and to remain in garrison on 1 November. That same day the 1st and 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalions, accompanied by the Composite Artillery Battery, left their base at Bien Hoa on the outskirts of Saigon and moved into the capital to participate in the power struggle. These units actually launched the coup by seizing key installations throughout the city. Sporadic fighting against troops loyal to Diem continued until the early morning of 2 November when the 4th Battalion finally stormed and captured the presidential palace. Four Vietnamese Marines were killed and 12 wounded during the battles in Saigon.

Normal operations against the guerrillas resumed for the Vietnamese Marine Brigade in the second week of November. Accompanied by its U. S. Marine advisor, Captain James P. McWilliams, the 3d Battalion initiated a search and clear operation in III Corps in conjunction with the 11th ARVN Regiment on 10 November. The next day the Vietnamese Marines clashed sharply with a substantial Viet Cong force west of My Tho and suffered six killed and 21 wounded. Nineteen enemy bodies were found on the battlefield along with four weapons, several grenades, and some documents. The operation ended on 14 November.

The same day that the combined Marine-ARVN operation in III Corps terminated, the Vietnamese Marine command formed a provisional regiment to control operations DAI-PHONG 28 and 29 which were to be conducted concurrently in the same general area. Composed of the 1st and 3d Battalions and a 75mm pack howitzer platoon, the Marine force searched until 21 November for Viet Cong units thought to be in Binh Duong Province with discouraging results. Only one enemy was killed, two prisoners taken, and three weapons captured at the expense of five dead and 13 wounded Marines.

A week later the 2d Battalion, advised by Captain Joseph N. Smith, fought a more successful action while participating in Operation DAI-PHONG 30. The battalion commander, Captain Nguyen Thanh Yen, received orders for the operation during the early morning hours of 25 November. Shortly after day-break nearly 550 Vietnamese Marines boarded trucks at their camp near Thu Duc for the trip to Bien Hoa airfield. Upon arrival, officers from III Corps headquarters informed Captain Yen that his battalion was to conduct a heliborne assault against Hoi Dong Sam, a Viet Cong-held village in western Hau Nghia Province just west of Saigon. The purpose of the operation was to intercept a guerrilla force which had overrun the nearby Hiep Hoa Special Forces camp the previous day and had taken several American prisoners. The enemy unit was believed to be using Hoi Dong Sam as a way station while attempting to escape across the Cambodian border. (3)

The operation began at about 0800 when eight U. S. Army H-21 "Flying Bananas" from the 145th Aviation Battalion heli-lifted Captain Smith, a Vietnamese company commander, and a 90-man assault force from Bien Hoa. Several Army UH-1B gunships and a U. S. Air Force L-19 "Bird Dog" observation aircraft escorted the transport helicopters on the 20 minute flight to the objective area. The gunships were put to use almost immediately when Communist .50 caliber machine gun fire erupted from a treeline along the eastern side of the village. Under the suppressive fire of the UH-1Bs, the first wave of H-21s landed the assault force in some partially flooded rice paddies about 700 meters east of the Viet Cong positions. (See diagram on page IV.15a) The Marine assault force quickly deployed into a treeline on the western edge of the landing zone. From this position the company began returning fire with rifles and .30 caliber machine guns. The Air Force forward air controller (FAC) overhead in the L-19 and the Army gunships prevented the enemy from withdrawing across the open rice paddies which surrounded the objective on the north, south, and west.

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IV.15a

The distance between the assembly area at Bien Hoa and the landing zone combined with the scarcity of transport helicopters to slow the progress of the helilift. The landings continued at 40 minute intervals while the UH-1B gunships teamed with the Vietnamese Marine assault force to suppress the enemy's fire. The last elements of the battalion were finally landed about two hours after the initial assault. Largely because of the effective suppressive fires from the air and ground, no aircraft were hit during the helilift.

Once the entire battalion was on the ground, the assault company, augmented by a pair of 60mm mortars and two 57mm recoilless rifles, provided a base of fire to protect the movement of its sister companies. Captain Yen maneuvered his three remaining rifle companies and a battalion command group north to a position from which they could launch an envelopment on the fortified village. Using a treeline which bordered an irrigation canal as cover, the force hooked westward until it was directly north of the Viet Cong position. Meanwhile, a U. S. Air Force B-26 medium bomber relieved the UH-1B gunships on station. At this point in the action the Air Force FAC observed a group of 30-40 enemy attempting to flee from the northwest corner of Hoi Dong Sam. After clearing the target with the Marine battalion, he directed the B-26 to attack the target with its 250-pound bombs. The aircraft made several bombing passes and dispersed the Viet Cong. When the air strike ended the enveloping force began its assault against the northern edge of the village with two companies abreast and one following in reserve several hundred meters to the rear. Once the assault force was in motion the base of fire displaced forward, firing as they moved, to a small canal only about 120 meters in front of the .50 caliber positions in the treeline. The two assault companies, followed closely by Yen, Smith, and the battalion command group, penetrated the northern end of the village and swept through to its southern periphery. The commander of the company on the

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east (or left) flank, deployed elements into the treeline where the Viet Cong automatic weapons had been active. Following a sharp but brief exchange of gunfire, the Marines cleared the position. They found eight enemy dead and three .50 caliber machine guns.

By noon the 2d Battalion had secured the entire village. Captain Yen ordered his assault companies to establish a perimeter defense and the reserve company to begin a systematic search of the position. His Marines uncovered a number of well-camouflaged bunkers and fighting positions. In a small canal just east of the village the Marines found the mount for another heavy caliber automatic weapon. They also discovered eight Viet Cong suspects and detained them for questioning. One rifle company moved to investigate the area where the B-26 had attacked the fleeing enemy earlier in the morning but found no evidence of additional casualties. Following the capture of Hoi Dong Sam, Yem's battalion conducted patrols for several days in search of the Viet Cong force that had attacked the Hiep Hoa Special Forces camp on the 25th. The enemy force, however, eluded the Marines and the battalion returned to garrison at Thu Duc on 28 November.

In many ways the results of DAI-PHONG 30 pointed up the problems which frequently frustrated GVN military forces and their American advisors. The 2d Battalion had seized its objective and in so doing had killed a handful of Viet Cong and detained a number of suspects. The Marines had captured three heavy caliber automatic weapons and an assortment of small arms--all without suffering a single casualty of their own. Still, it was difficult to translate the action into victory. The Marines, along with the other government forces involved in the operation, had failed to intercept the Viet Cong force which was moving toward the international boundary with the American prisoners. Moreover, most of the occupants of Hoi Dong San had made good their escape despite the presence of observation and attack aircraft. Like many other government military operations undertaken during the 1961-1964 period, DAI-PHONG 30 was successful from a statistical standpoint but did little to wrest the tactical initiative from the guerrillas.

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In the first week of December the Vietnamese Joint General Staff ordered VNMC units to conduct an extended search in the jungles of western Tay Ninh Province in III Corps. A special Marine Task Force composed of the 1st and 3d Battalions was helilifted into the area on 3 December to begin Operation DAI-PHONG 31. This operation was punctuated by two major engagements and frequent enemy harassment. In one particularly vicious clash, the Vietnamese Marines incurred heavy casualties while attempting to fight out of a skillfully executed Viet Cong ambush. When the operation concluded on 9 December, the Vietnamese Marines had suffered 11 men killed, 58 wounded, and one captured. Nine Viet Cong bodies had been found and another Communist soldier was captured.' The enemy had left four individual weapons on the battlefield.

In mid-December South Vietnam's new leaders removed Lieutenant Colonel Khang from his position as Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Although he had not participated in the November coup, Khang had been a political appointee of President Diem and as such was viewed as a potential threat to the new regime. After being promoted to colonel, he was assigned to the Philippines as the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces Attache. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien was appointed as his successor and assumed command of the Vietnamese Marine Corps on 16 December.

Vietnamese Marine Brigade units continued operations against the Viet Cong following Khang's relief but no major engagements were fought. Near the end of December, with the nation drifting in political uncertainty and their own top leadership changed, the morale of the Vietnamese Marine Corps plummeted. As 1963 ended the U. S. Marine advisors were reporting climbing desertion rates within almost every VNMC battalion.

Even though 1963 closed with this discouraging pattern of events, the Marine Advisory Division could report positively on several aspects of their own activities. During the year the U. S. Marine advisors had accompanied their units in every combat operation except the November coup. No advisors had been killed in the 12-month period and only four (two of whom were on temporary assignment from the 3d Marine Division) had been wounded. The first combat decorations other than Purple Heart Medals for wounds were also approved and awarded to the advisors during 1963. On 13 December, Captains Don R. Christensen and Frank Zimolzak, former advisors to the 4th and 3d Battalions respectively, were awarded the Bronze Star Medals with the Combat "V" for meritorious service. Captain Richard B. Taylor, an advisor with the 2d Battalion, earned the first Silver Star Medal during the same period for "conspicuous gallantry" between November 1962 and October 1963. (*)

(*) Taylor's decoration was awarded on 31 March 1964.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARINE COMPOUND AT DA NANG CONTINUES

The first month of 1963 saw three important changes in the composition and leadership of Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6. On 11 January, HMM-162, a UH-34D squadron commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Reinhardt Leu, replaced Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's HMM-163 as the task element's helicopter unit. Five days later, on the 16th, Lieutenant Colonel George H. Linnemeier, winner of four Distinguished Flying Crosses during World War II and Korea, relieved Lieutenant Colonel Davis as the MABS-16 sub unit commander. In the last week of January Lieutenant Colonel Harold F. Brown, a veteran aviator who had piloted scout-dive bombers during the Second World War, arrived at Da Nang and assumed command of the task element from Lieutenant Colonel McCully.

During McCully's tour as the Commander, Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6, the Marine compound at Da Nang had begun to assume a quality of permanency which had never been evident at Soc Trang. The utilities section of the MABS-16 detachment was responsible for many of the more noticeable improvements. By the first of the new year they had constructed several shelters on the west side of the runway to cover the motor transport section's working area. They also had replaced the electrical system and repaired some of the damaged plumbing in the living areas. The task element's special services section had begun to provide the Da Nang Marines with entertainment by showing nightly movies, arranging fishing trips into Da Nang harbor, and issuing athletic equipment. The old school buses, which had been on hand since the Marines' arrival in I Corps, were continuing to provide some relief from the daily routine. Although frequently in need of mechanical repair, the buses provided adequate transportation between the billeting area and the opposite side of the airfield.

The monsoon season, which was characterized by cold rains, high winds, and deep mud, proved to be a source of much irritation to the Marines during the winter of 1962-1963. In addition to slowing flight operations and creating almost constant discomfort, the weather caused some unforeseen complications. In October 1962, heavy rainfall had combined with constant vehicle usage to turn the road between the living area and the flight line into a quagmire that was virtually impassable. At the time, Colonel Ireland, then the task unit commander, had responded by requesting equipment from Okinawa to improve the Marines' only road link with their aircraft. Wing authorities promptly complied and a road grader was flown in by KC-130 (the new designation for the GV-1 Hercules). Within days a 700-foot section of the road had been opened and a drainage ditch had been dug along its entire length.

This measure proved to be only temporary, however, for in January the mud again threatened to cut the Marines vehicles off from the east side of the airfield. Lieutenant Colonel McCully obtained a bulldozer from Okinawa to make more permanent repairs. With the help of this piece of equipment the Marines constructed a new 400-foot section of road on an eight-inch rock base. These repairs proved to be satisfactory and the road caused no further problem during the remainder of the monsoon season.

Improvements in the compound continued to be made under the task element's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Brown. In April action was taken on an earlier request for the assignment of a security detachment to guard the Marine area. A reconnaissance platoon of 47 Marines from the 3d Marine Division joined the task element, thus freeing the men of the helicopter squadron and the MABS-16 sub unit of the important secondary responsibility they had held since the task unit's deployment to Soc Trang. The assignment of the ground Marines was timely in that it corresponded with a reduction by the ARVN of its forces guarding the perimeter of the Da Nang airbase. One Marine general later recalled that with the arrival of the infantry unit, "the air-ground team was in being in VIETNAM." (4)

Other less obvious changes that contributed to the overall efficiency of the Marine task element also occurred during the early spring. In April, the task element commander was able to assign a better medical and dental facility. These services which had been crowded into one of the small structures along with other offices since the displacement from Soc Trang, were moved into a separate building in the living compound.

Another problem that had plagued the Marines during their entire first year at Da Nang--inadequate water supplies--was finally solved in late 1963. Originally the task unit had depended on a shallow well from which water had to be pumped and purified. The Marines had nearly exhausted this source shortly after their arrival at Da Nang late in the dry season and their commanders had been forced to impose strict water discipline. The monsoon rains had initially eased the water crisis but by January production had again dropped, this time as a result of the accumulation of heavy silt in the pumps. A Vietnamese contractor was engaged to clean and repair the pumping system but the problem soon recurred. In the early spring two new shallow wells were dug, one in the motor transport working area and the other in the living compound. With the onset of the dry season, however, the Marines again were forced to conserve water. This time the shortage became so acute that tank trucks were required to haul some 16,000 gallons of water a day from a nearby Air Force installation. Finally, in November, a detachment from a Navy construction battalion completed a well 450 feet deep and capped it with a high pressure pump. This proved to be the permanent solution to the long-standing water shortage.

Over the course of the year the Marines had received several new vehicles which helped relieve the burden on the rebuilt busses which were beginning to falter under heavy use. Four 10-passenger, four-wheel-drive trucks and two M-442 "Mighty Mite" jeeps were flown in by KC-130s from Okinawa and assigned to the task element's motor transport section. By summer, two of the old busses had been replaced with tactical passenger vehicles which were better suited for transporting personnel between the barracks and work areas. The addition of the new vehicles also allowed the mess hall to begin transporting hot noon meals to the men working on the east side of the airstrip. A mess line set up in the hangar area fed those Marines who previously had lost time by travelling to the living compound for noon meals.

Two changes were made in the task element's command structure in midyear. On 5 July Lieutenant Colonel Earl W. Cassidy, a veteran aviator with 20 years service, relieved Lieutenant Colonel Linnemeier as commanding officer of the MABS-16 sub unit. Two weeks later, on the 18th, Colonel Andre D. Gomez, a Marine who had distinguished himself as an artillery officer during World War II before becoming a pilot, assumed command of Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6.

In summary, the improvements made in the task element's compound during the course of 1963 insured the successful support of sustained combat helicopter operations. Although overshadowed by the publicity which the actual flight operations attracted, the continued improvement of the Da Nang base was vital to the overall effectiveness of the Marine combat support effort.

Although the size of I Corps had been reduced in late 1962 when the Vietnamese Joint General Staff shifted Quang Ngai Province to II CTZ, the mission of the Marine task element remained unchanged. As 1963 opened Lieutenant Colonel McCully's command was still responsible for providing direct helicopter support to the forces of the five northern provinces. Nor had the government order of battle in the northern provinces changed to any great degree. The 1st ARVN Division still occupied the coastal plains south of the DMZ in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Headquartered at Da Nang, the 2d ARVN Division continued to carry the main burden for operations against the Viet Cong in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. Operating in Quang Ngai Province to the south of the new I Corps-II Corps border were elements of the 25th ARVN Division. Interspersed along the coastal lowlands among the various regular battalions of these three divisions were the small paramilitary garrisons. In the mountains to the west, the scattered Special Forces outposts and their Montagnard defenders continued their struggle for survival while monitoring Communist infiltration.

Marine helicopter support for these government forces encountered a brief interruption shortly after the new year began when HMM-163 was replaced by a fresh UH-34D squadron. Marine KC-130s shuttled between Okinawa and Da Nang for several days during the second week of January bringing the officers and men of HMM-162 to Vietnam and returning with members of HMM-163. The change-over of units was completed on 11 January when Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun officially transferred his squadron's aircraft and maintenance equipment to the newly-arrived unit.

In the five months and ten days since they began operations at Soc Trang, "Rathbun's Ridge Runners" had amassed an enviable combat record. The squadron's crews had flown a total of 10,869 hours, 15,200 sorties, and had lifted over 25,216 combat assault troops and 59,024 other passengers. In one month alone (August) they had established a Marine Corps record for medium helicopter squadrons by flying 2,543 helicopter hours. These records had not been set without risks, however. During the course of their operations in the Mekong Delta and in I Corps, helicopters operated by HMM-163's crews had been hit on 32 occasions by Communist small arms fire.(6) Moreover, the squadron had become the first Marine unit to suffer combat casualties in the Vietnam conflict.

HMM-162, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Reinhardt Leu, a veteran Marine aviator who had flown both fighter and observation aircraft in combat, began full-fledged combat support operations the same day that the last of Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's squadron departed Da Nang. Their early flights were limited to routine resupply missions and a few medical evacuations. These afforded Lieutenant Colonel Leu and his pilots further opportunity to acquaint themselves with the terrain over which they would operate during the next six months. 113

The new squadron participated in its first major combat troop lift on January 19 when a break in the monsoons allowed the 2d ARVN Division to execute a heliborne operation into the mountains about 15 miles west of Da Nang. Eighteen Marine UH-34Ds lifted 300 ARVN troops into three separate landing zones near a suspected Communist base area. The squadron's pilots and crews encountered their first Viet Cong opposition while executing this trooplift. Upright bamboo stakes obstructed one of the landing zones while at another the enemy fired at the Marine aircraft with small arms. Although two UH-34Ds were hit, none were shot down and the mission was completed successfully.

A month later, on 18 February, the Marine pilots experienced another of the hazards associated with flight operations in Vietnam while attempting to land troops from the 1st ARVN Division in a clearing about 18 miles southwest of Hue. Five helicopters suffered punctures in the bottoms of their fuselages when they accidentally landed on tree stumps concealed by high grass in the landing zone. One stump caused extensive damage to an aircraft when it ripped into its forward fuel cell. The crew was forced to leave the UH-34D in the field under ARVN protection over night. The next morning Marine mechanics were flown in from Da Nang to repair the helicopter.

Despite several troop lifts involving a dozen or more aircraft, heliborne assault missions did not dominate HMM-162's operations during the unit's first three months in South Vietnam. Poor weather conditions over the northern provinces continued to restrict flight operations generally to resupply and medical evacuation missions. Statistics for the first quarter of 1963, for example, indicated that Marine helicopters conducted 6,537 logistics sorties as opposed to 1,181 tactical support sorties.

The singlemost significant incident during HMM-162's initial three months in Vietnam took place in the second week of March when the squadron suffered its first aircraft losses and casualties. These were incurred during a salvage-rescue mission undertaken in northern II Corps. The incident began on 10 March as two Marine UH-34Ds attempted to insert a four-man American-Vietnamese ground rescue team into the jungle about 30 miles southwest of Quang Ngai. The team's assignment was to locate a U. S. Army OV-1 Mohawk (a twin-engine turboprop electronic reconnaissance aircraft manufactured by Grumman) which had crashed earlier in the day. The exact site of the accident had not been located but the general area was known to be a steep jungle-covered mountain, the elevation of which approached 5,000 feet. While attempting to lower search personnel into the jungle by means of a hoist, one of the helicopters lost power as a result of the extreme elevation and crashed. The ARVN ranger who was on the hoist when the accident occurred was killed but the helicopter's crew managed to climb from the wreckage shortly before it erupted in flames. The copilot, Captain David N. Webster, was severely burned in the explosion.

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Other Marine UH-34Ds from Da Nang joined in the rescue operation, refueling from the TAFDS at Quang Ngai for the flight into the mountains. The situation was complicated further when a second Marine helicopter experienced a power loss and crashed near the burned-out UH-34D hulk while attempting to land a rescue team composed of MABS-16 Marines. Fortunately, the aircraft did not burn and the only injury incurred in the crash was a sprained ankle, but the extremely steep and densely jungled terrain kept the Marines from reaching the site of the other downed helicopter. Bad weather and darkness prevented further efforts to extricate the various American and South Vietnamese personnel from the jungle that day. During the night Captain Webster died of injuries.

The next day the Marines stripped a UH-34D of some 700 pounds of equipment so that it might operate safely at the extreme elevations in the vicinity of the crash sites. After carefully maneuvering the helicopter into a hovering position, the pilot was able to extract the survivors and the dead copilot from the site where the first UH-34D had crashed and burned. The survivors were flown to Quang Ngai. There the wounded were treated and later evacuated by U. S. Air Force transport to an American hospital at Nha Trang.

While these events were taking place the Marines from the second downed helicopter, guided by search aircraft operating over the area, located and recovered the body of the Army Mohawk pilot. This accomplished, the Marines hacked out a small clearing from which they were evacuated by another Marine helicopter.

The episode was not yet over, however, as the crashed OV-1 and its payload of advanced electronics equipment still had not been secured. Finally, an ARVN ranger company which had joined the search, reached the remnants of the Mohawk and established security around the site while U. S. Army technicians were helilifted in to examine the debris. The Marine UH-34D that had crashed nearby without burning had been damaged beyond repair. It was cannibalized for usable parts and then destroyed.

On 13 March, with the search and rescue tasks completed, the Marine helicopters began shuttling the South Vietnamese rangers to Mang Buc, a nearby government outpost. During this phase of the mission the helicopters began receiving fire from Viet Cong who had moved into positions near the rangers' perimeter. Three UH-34Ds delivered suppressive fire on the enemy with their door-mounted M-60 machine guns while the remaining helicopters picked up the troops in the landing zone. This was the first instance of a Marine helicopter providing close air support in actual combat.

Other developments occurred in the early months of 1961 which either directly or indirectly affected the conduct of Marine helicopter operations. One was the improved coordination of intelligence gathering and usage among all South Vietnamese and American agencies with I Corps. This effort, which was essentially a concerted drive to streamline the collection and flow of intelligence information, was stimulated by a series of corps-wide intelligence seminars the first of which was held in early February. Of special interest to the Marine aviators was the establishment of closer liaison between the Marine task element, U. S. Army Special Forces, and South Vietnamese units in the northern corps tactical zone.

Closely related to the improvement of the overall intelligence situation was the acquisition of some new equipment by the SHUFLY Marines. In March the task element received two new model hand-held aerial cameras for use by the crew of the O-1B observation aircraft. Later in the month a photo lab was completed to facilitate the rapid processing of the photographs. By the end of the month the Marines were also being provided with high altitude photographic coverage of some objective areas taken by U. S. Air Force reconnaissance jets.

The tempo of Marine helicopter operations began to quicken in early April with the advent of sustained periods of clear weather. On 13 April HMM-162 participated in a major helicopter borne assault in which 435 2d ARVN Division troops were lifted into a suspected Communist stronghold in the mountains along the Song Thu Bon about 30 miles south of Da Nang. As in most troop lift missions, the Marine O-1Bs provided reconnaissance and radio relay support. For the first time in the war Marine transport helicopters were escorted by helicopter gunships, the UH-1B Iroquois (a single-engine, turbine-powered utility helicopter built by the Bell Helicopter Company). Five UH-1Bs from a detachment of the Army's Da Nang-based 68th Aviation Company, armed with M-60 machine guns and 2.75 inch rockets, joined the VNAF fighter bombers in conducting preparatory air-strikes on the landing zones.

The initial landing met no enemy resistance but later in the day action in the operational area intensified. A Marine UH-34D was hit by eight rounds of enemy small arms fire while attempting to evacuate wounded South Vietnamese soldiers and U. S. Army advisors from a landing zone near the point where the ARVN forces had been landed that morning. With the helicopter badly damaged and the copilot, First Lieutenant John D Olmen, wounded, the aircraft force landed in the Vietnamese position.

Two other Marine helicopters were dispatched to the scene to pick up the Marine crew and complete the evacuation. They managed to evacuate Lieutenant Olmen, a wounded American advisor, one dead and four wounded ARVN soldiers without incident. On a return trip to pick up more wounded, however, one of the two UH-34Ds suffered heavy damage from Viet Cong fire. In this incident the crew chief, Corporal C. M. Campbell, was wounded twice and the aircraft was forced to land near the first downed helicopter. The accompanying UH-34D landed, picked up the seriously wounded Campbell and returned him to Da Nang for emergency treatment. Repair teams were helilifted to the position on the afternoon of the 13th and began repairing both helicopters. One was able to return to Da Nang later that day but the other required extensive repairs and could not be flown to safety until the 15th.

While HMM-162 repair crews were working feverishly to extricate their aircraft from the predicament along the banks of the Song Thu Bon, another of their helicopters was shot down nearby while supporting the same operation. This aircraft was hit four times while approaching an ARVN landing zone located in a small valley about three miles south of the action in which the two helicopters had been lost earlier. After temporary repairs were made, its crew flew the damaged UH-34D to Da Nang where more detailed repair work was accomplished.

The number of combat support sorties flown into the mountains by HMM-162's crews rose steadily as the weather improved. Near the end of April the Marines helilifted three battalions of the 1st ARVN Division into the mountains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces near the Laotian border. These units were to participate in an extended multi-regiment drive against suspected Communist infiltration routes there. This operation, for which Lieutenant Colonel Leu's squadron provided daily support after the initial landing, taxed the durability of both the Marine crews and their aircraft. For 90 days task element helicopters flew into and out of hazardous landing zones located at elevations as high as 4,500 feet. The majority of these sorties were resupply and medical evacuation missions with the occasional exception being the heli-borne displacement of infantry and artillery units when distance or terrain prohibited overland movement. Despite the dangers inherent in helicopter operations conducted over mountainous terrain, the squadron incurred no aircraft or personnel losses while supporting the offensive in western Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.

While his squadron's support of the 1st ARVN Division's on-going drive near the Laotian border continued, Lieutenant Colonel Leu committed 21 UH-34Ds to Operation BACK PHUONG XI at the southern end of I Corps on 27 April. The Marine crews were tasked with helilifting 567 troops of the 2d ARVN Division into a mountainous area roughly 22 miles southwest of Tam Ky. The squadron was less fortunate during this operation than it was during the lengthy Quang Tri effort. One helicopter was shot down by Viet Cong fire which wounded the pilot, Captain Virgil R. Hughes, in the leg. The crew and the embarked ARVN soldiers escaped further injury when the aircraft made a crash landing in which it was damaged extensively. After the crew was rescued, a salvage team from Da Nang stripped the helicopter of all usable parts and burned the hulk so the Viet Cong could not make use of it. This was the first Marine helicopter loss definitely attributed to direct enemy action.(7)

One trend which became increasingly apparent as the spring of 1963 unfolded was the growing utilization of the Army UH-1B helicopter gunships as escorts to and from landing zones. The gunships accompanied all assault helilifts and medical evacuations, and when available, also escorted resupply flights in order to provide suppressive fire around government positions while landings were in progress. Although well suited for the escort missions, the lightly armed UH-1Bs did not replace the Vietnamese Air Force attack aircraft as the principal source of preparatory airstrikes around landing zones being used for assault helilifts. Primarily because of their heavier armament, the Marines continued to rely on the VNAF T-28s and A-1Hs to conduct the so-called "prep strikes."

May was the last full month of combat support operations for Lieutenant Colonel Leu's squadron. In the first week of June transports from VMGR-152 began landing at Da Nang with the Marines of a new UH-34D squadron. Since assuming responsibility for helicopter support in I Corps in mid-January, HMM-162 had compiled a solid combat record. While under the squadron's operations, the UH-34D helicopters had flown 17,670 sorties for a total of 8,579 flight hours. The O-1Bs added approximately 400 sorties and another 1,000 hours to these figures. In the month of May alone HMM-162's helicopters flew over 2,000 flight hours--a number which approached the record set by HMM-163 during the previous summer in the Mekong Delta. Other statistics reflected the growing intensity of the Vietnam war. Since its deployment to Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Leu's unit had lost three helicopters--two as a result of operations at extreme elevations and one to enemy fire. One member of the unit had been killed and three others wounded since the squadron entered the combat zone.(8)

After a brief change-over period, the outgoing squadron commander officially turned over his unit's aircraft and maintenance equipment on 8 June to Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Shook, the commanding officer of HMM-261. Shook, who had flown Marine helicopters in combat during the Korean War, committed his crews to their first actual combat missions that same day.

A significant change took place in the coordinating arrangements that governed U. S. helicopter units supporting I Corps at approximately the same time that HMM-261 initiated combat support operations. Since their relocation at Da Nang, the Marine task element, along with all other aviation units in I CTZ, had received their missions from the ASOC located within the corps headquarters. As the number of U. S. and VNAF aviation organizations assigned to I Corps grew and the total number of missions multiplied, however, it became necessary to modify the system of coordination and control. In accordance with a ComUSMACV directive, I Corps headquarters created an Aviation Headquarters Operations Center (AHOC) to oversee the employment of Marine and Army aircraft in the CTZ. The AHOC, which was composed of a senior Army representative, a senior Marine representative, and an operations section, was to be directed by the Commander, Task Element 79.3.3.6. Formally stated, its primary mission was to "plan, direct, and control the employment of all Army and Marine Corps Aviation Units and aircraft operations in direct support of I Corps." The newly organized AHOC was also ordered to "participate in, and provide assistance to operational planning and the coordination of employment of USA/USMC Aviation with VNAF/USAF tactical air." (9) The AHOC, therefore, was formed to supplement rather than replace the older Air Support Operations Center, which continued to direct and control all U. S. Air Force and VNAF operations over the northern provinces. It was under

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this arrangement that U. S. Marine and Army aviation units operated after mid-1963.

HMM-261's Marines began encountering systematic Viet Cong resistance to their operations shortly after their first combat missions in early June. A 21 aircraft assault mission into the mountains west of Da Nang was aborted on 6 July when the Marine pilots discovered that the Viet Cong had obstructed the two available landing zones with upright stakes. While inspecting one of the landing zones on a low pass a helicopter was hit in the forward fuel cell by Communist small arms fire. The damage to the aircraft was not serious enough to force a landing but the pilot of an escorting U. S. Army UH-1B was mortally wounded while attempting to suppress the ground fire.

Ten days after the enemy forced the cancellation of the assault mission west of Da Nang, HMM-261 suffered its first aircraft loss in Vietnam. The crash, which was later attributed to mechanical failure, occurred about 37 miles southwest of Da Nang while one of the squadron's helicopters was on a routine logistics mission. Six passengers, two American advisors and four ARVN soldiers, were injured in the accident. The squadron commander dispatched two other UH-34Ds to the scene of the crash to evacuate the wounded and insert a salvage team. The badly damaged aircraft was assessed as beyond repair and was destroyed.

In the second week of August officers from HMM-261 and the task element's staff (now under the command of Colonel Gomez) met with American and Vietnamese officers at I Corps headquarters to plan a large-scale heliborne retrograde movement. The planned helilift was to mark the culmination of Operation LAM SON XII, a three-week long offensive by several battalions of the 2d ARVN Division against Communist infiltration routes in Quang Nam Province along the Laotian border. Although not encircled, the ARVN battalions had been encountering increasing Viet Cong pressure since early August. I Corps authorities feared that, unless their units were withdrawn promptly, they might be cut off from the few landing zones that existed in the rugged operations area.

IV:51

As planned, the retrograde operation involved helilifting some 1,300 troops with their artillery and equipment to Thuong Duc, a government-held town situated 30 miles southwest of Da Nang along the Song Vu Gia. The operation plan called for the commitment of 20 Marine helicopters, 18 of which would participate in the actual troop lifts. The two extra UH-34Ds would be used in the event it became necessary either to replace helicopters assigned to the troop lift or to conduct search and rescue operations for downed aircraft. Three VNAF UH-34s and two U. S. Army unarmed UH-1Bs were designated by the I Corps headquarters to assist HMM-261 with the helilift.

The Da Nang Air Support Operations Center assigned a variety of other aircraft to support the operation. These included two VNAF T-28s, one U. S. Air Force B-26 "Marauder" (a twin-engine, propeller-driven World War II vintage medium bomber built by Martin), and two U. S. Army UH-1B gunships. These aircraft would share the task of providing close air support for the troop lift. A Marine O-1B was scheduled to perform weather reconnaissance missions.

The entire air operation was to be coordinated from two aircraft. An American forward air controller in a VNAF observation plane was to direct all air strikes while overall control for the multi-service, bilingual effort was to come from a U. S. Air Force L-28. This four-man, twin-engine aircraft, which possessed an eight hour fuel capacity and carried three radios, would serve as an airborne air support operations center (Airborne ASOC). It would be flown by an Air Force pilot and would carry a Marine officer from the task element along with U. S. and Vietnamese representatives from the Da Nang ASOC. These officers would be in continuous radio contact with all aircraft in the operations area and also with the U. S. Air Force liaison officer to I Corps who would be positioned with the ground troops.

The concept of the operation called for the ARVN units to be lifted from two hazardous landing zones over a three-day period. According to the plan 500 ARVN soldiers were to be removed from Landing Zone HOTEL on Thursday, 15 August. Landing Zone HOTEL, a small clearing which could accommodate only three UH-34Ds, was situated along a river and was crowded between two 1,000-foot-high ridgelines only five miles from the Laotian border. The steep, jungle-covered ridges generally paralleled each other less than 400 meters apart on either side of the landing zone. Slightly west of the small clearing the ridges joined to form a box canyon. The physical structure of the location dictated that the transport helicopters use the same approach and retirement routes into and out of the landing site.

Due largely to the proximity of the high terrain which surrounded Landing Zone HOTEL, the ARVN adopted a Marine proposal to leave a 125-man security force on the two ridges. This force would provide cover for the helicopters conducting the final troop lift during this first phase of the retrograde movement. The 125 South Vietnamese soldiers would move cross-country to another landing zone to be picked up by helicopters following the completion of the helilift from Landing Zone HOTEL.

The second landing zone, code-name ZULU, was nearly as treacherous as the first. ZULU was completely encircled by a rim of hills some 500 feet higher than the floor of the landing site. In addition to the 125-man security force from HOTEL, the Marine, Army, and VNAF helicopters were scheduled to lift 200 ARVN troops and two 105mm howitzers from this landing zone on 16 and 17 August (the second and third days of the operation).

An unexpected complication developed the morning the operation began when the Air Force grounded its B-26s after one of the bombers crashed as a result of undetermined causes. Shortly after this crash HMM-261 was called upon to divert a flight of helicopters to assist in search and rescue operations for the downed B-26, thus reducing even further the assets available to support the heliborne retrograde.

Despite the loss of some of the air power assigned to the operation, I Corps authorities elected to proceed with the helilift from Landing Zone HOTEL as planned. After the crew of a Marine 0-1B confirmed that good weather prevailed over the operations area, the first helicopters departed Da Nang on schedule. Less than half an hour after take off the Marine and Vietnamese pilots began maneuvering their aircraft between the two ridges which dominated Landing Zone HOTEL. Twice during the pick up the armed UH-1B escorts drew fire from the thick jungle on one side of the approach lanes being used by the transports. Both time they returned fire in the direction of the unseen enemy and forced him to silence his weapons. The first phase of the operation was completed without serious incident four hours after it had begun.

The second phase of the helilift began the next morning with the two unarmed U. S. Army UH-1Bs making several trips to Landing Zone ZULU to lift out the disassembled ARVN 105mm howitzers. The Marine and VNAF transport helicopters followed and continued to shuttle troops out of the landing zone for three hours without encountering enemy opposition. Then a departing flight of UH-34Ds drew fire from a nearby ridgeline. One of the escorting UH-1Bs immediately marked the suspected target for the VNAF T-28s and the attack aircraft bombed and strafed the position. The Communist activity ceased.

IV:56

After an overnight march, the covering force from LZ HOTEL arrived at Landing Zone ZULU. Although they were not scheduled to be removed from the field until the next day, the schedule was adjusted and the 125 weary ARVN soldiers were flown to the secure assembly area on the afternoon of their arrival. This modification reduced the amount of work which would be required of the helicopters on the final day of the operation.

The next phase of the helilift from ZULU on 17 August was characterized by increasing concern for security around the landing site. The general scheme for protecting the helicopters during this critical stage of the exercise was to establish two perimeters, one around the rim of high ground which surrounded the zone and another around the immediate landing site. The outer perimeter would be withdrawn first, leaving the inside ring of troops to deny the enemy direct access to the landing zone while the force from the outer perimeter boarded the helicopters. Once the Vietnamese soldiers were withdrawn from the rim of hills, the area within 300 meters of the close-in defenses would be automatically cleared for air strikes. Even with these precautions the helicopters would be extremely vulnerable to any enemy force that might rapidly occupy the high ground above Landing Zone ZULU following the withdrawal of the outer perimeter. Accordingly, once the troops from the outer defenses were staged for the helilift, the transport helicopters would be directed by the airborne ASOC to tighten the landing interval between aircraft from the usual five minutes to as short a time span as possible. By landing in such rapid succession, the dangerous last stage of the operation could be accomplished more quickly.

Two hours after the helilift began on Saturday morning the air liaison officer at ZULU reported that the outer perimeter had been withdrawn and that all remaining Vietnamese troops were in positions around the landing zone. At this point operation, now in its most critical phase, began to experience agonizing delays. First, a loaded helicopter arrived at the assembly area with a rough running engine. Fearing that the fuel in the TAFDS had somehow become contaminated, Lieutenant Colonel Shook instructed all HMM-261 pilots to check their aircraft's fuel strainers while their passengers disembarked at the assembly point. No other evidence was found to indicate that the fuel contained contaminants, but the operation was slowed at the exact point where the intensified helilift was to have begun. Another minor delay occurred after a helicopter flying near the landing zone reported enemy ground fire. The approach and departure routes were adjusted slightly so that the transport helicopters would not fly over the area and VNAF T-28s were directed to attack the suspected enemy position. Shortly after the air strike ended the air liaison officer at the landing zone reported more enemy activity only 500 meters from his position. This momentary crisis was resolved when the American air liaison officer personally directed armed UH-1Bs to neutralize the target area.

Finally, the airborne ASOC passed instructions to proceed with the operation, whereupon HMM-211 and VNAF helicopters began spiraling down into the landing zone. The escorting UH-1B gunships provided continuous protection for the transport helicopters by flying concentric but opposite patterns around them. One after another the transports landed, took on troops, climbed out of the landing zone, and turned toward Thuong Duc. Less than five minutes after the stepped-up helilift began, the last troops were airborne. The crew chief of the helicopter which embarked the final ARVN heliteam then dropped a purple smoke grenade into the empty landing zone to signal all other aircraft that the lift was complete.

The three-day heliborne retrograde from the Laotian border proved to be one of the most efficient helicopter operations conducted by the Marines in the Republic of Vietnam during the early 1960s. Its success was due largely to detailed planning, particularly the South Vietnamese plans for the ground defense of both landing zones. These plans and their subsequent execution led a grateful Colonel Gomez, the task element commander, to declare: "This was the first time in our experience that a helicopter borne withdrawal had been treated as a retrograde operation rather than an administrative lift. Without a sound retrograde plan the operation might well have failed." (10)

p

IV:60

Although this observation was correct, it could not be denied that the close coordination between the airborne ASOC, the operational aircraft, and the air liaison officer on the ground had contributed to the successful execution of the plans. These agencies were instrumental in coordinating the bilingual, multiservice effort, particularly when it was beset with difficulties in its critical final stage.

HMM-261's combat support missions continued at a normal rate following the completion of the mid-August retrograde helilift. A month later, on 16 September, Lieutenant Colonel Shook's squadron lost its second UH-34D in a crash 25 miles west-southwest of Hue. The helicopter, which had developed mechanical problems while carrying troops of a South Vietnamese assault force, was damaged beyond repair. Its crew members and passengers fortunately escaped injury. The aircraft was stripped of usable parts by a salvage team from Da Nang and burned.

Shortly after this incident, the first elements of a new squadron began arriving at Da Nang and HMM-261 turned to preparations for its departure. Since early June, when it had become the fourth Marine helicopter squadron assigned to SHUFLY, Lieutenant Colonel Shook's unit had performed professionally. It had accumulated 5,288 combat flying hours and 11,406 sorties in the UH-34Ds alone. The squadron's crews had helilifted over 6,000 troops, nearly 1,900,000 pounds of cargo, and had accomplished over 600 medical evacuation missions. (11)

IV:62

The new squadron, HMM-361, assumed responsibility for helicopter support in I Corps on 2 October after a short period of orientation flying with the crews of the departing unit. HMM-361's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Ross, was well qualified to direct a tactical aviation unit in a combat situation. Decorated with five Distinguished Flying Crosses during World War II and Korea, he was a recent graduate of the Air Force Command and Staff College.

Barely a week after Ross' squadron initiated combat support operations at Da Nang, it suffered its first aircraft and personnel losses. The incident occurred on 8 October when two UH-34Ds crashed almost simultaneously while on a search and rescue mission 38 miles southwest of Da Nang. Both helicopters burned, killing 10 men; the pilots, copilots, the squadron's flight surgeon, and five crewmen. A search of the area was initiated immediately for the downed aircraft but darkness prevented their discovery until the next morning. By then the Viet Cong had surrounded both crash sites and were waiting to ambush the search and rescue helicopters which they knew would arrive. When the rescue aircraft attempted to land, they met determined enemy opposition. Colonel Gomez requested ARVN assistance and 254 South Vietnamese troops were lifted into nearby clearings with instructions to dislodge the enemy force from the area around the downed aircraft. While executing the landing, HMM-361 helicopters were hit nine times by small arms fire but suffered only superficial damage. One ARVN soldier was killed.

IV:64

The following day, as the South Vietnamese forces moved toward the downed UH-34Ds, three Marine helicopters escorted by three armed UH-1Bs and two VNAF T-28s, lifted an inspection team into the crash site to recover the bodies and investigate the wreckage. Enemy automatic weapons fire broke out while the UH-34Ds waited in the landing zone and forced the pilots to take off while the inspection team found cover on the ground. After the Communist fire had been suppressed, the helicopters returned for the stranded Marines. Their investigation of the aircraft hulks had been fruitful. the evidence of enemy small arms fire in the wreckage and the relative positions of the two helicopters led Lieutenant Colonel Ross to conclude that the aircraft had been shot down by the Viet Cong. (12) But this was not a conclusive finding. There was room for speculation that the two helicopters had actually collided in midair while attempting to evade ground fire.

Ground action in the hills around the crash sites continued. On 11 October, another Marine helicopter was hit by Viet Cong fire while resupplying ARVN units in the area. In this incident the UH-34D was struck twice in the engine and once in the wheel strut while in a landing zone about two miles from the point ~~over~~ where the crashes had occurred. After assessing the damage, a maintenance team from Da Nang determined that the helicopter would require a new engine. Marines from the security platoon were utilized to provide security until 13 October when an additional 120 ARVN troops were helilifted into the area and established a perimeter around the aircraft. Other helicopters then delivered the new engine and a maintenance crew to the landing zone. After the engines were exchanged, a crew returned the UH-34D to Da Nang.

By the time HMM-361 had removed the last ARVN troops from the hills around the scene of the tragic accidents, monsoon weather had begun to restrict flight operations. The remaining two weeks of October were characterized by a reduced number of missions, most of which were either resupply or medical evacuations. By the end of October, despite numerous flight cancellations, Lieutenant Colonel Ross' crews had gained the unenviable distinction of having attracted more enemy fire during a one month period than any previous squadron to serve with SHUFLY. Their helicopters had been shot at on 46 different occasions and had been hit 18 times.(13)

SHUFLY's combat support operations came to a halt in the first days of November as the reverberations from Diem's overthrow spread to South Vietnam's northern provinces. American officials in Washington and Saigon, aware that Diem supporters would not hesitate to accuse the United States of actively supporting the coup, ordered all U. S. military forces to cease combat support activities. As a result of the sensitive political situation, no U. S. aircraft left the ground on 2 November. Two days after the new regime seized power in Saigon the Marine helicopters were permitted to perform emergency medical evacuation and emergency re-supply missions. Even these flights had to be approved beforehand by ARVN military officers in Saigon. Four days after Diem's overthrow the new leaders in Saigon eased the political restrictions and SHUFLY's operations returned to near normal. One remaining limitation stipulated that U. S. helicopters could not transport ARVN units into population centers even though troops could be helilifted from the cities into rural areas.

IV:67

Due to torrential monsoon rains which began striking the Da Nang area in mid-November, HMM-361's combat support operations continued at a relatively low level throughout the remainder of the year. This trend was confirmed by the flight totals compiled for the final two months of 1963. In November, the squadron's UH-34Ds flew only 145 sorties for 233 flight hours. December's statistics, 230 helicopter sorties for 338 flight hours, indicated a slight upswing but fell far short of the monthly figures achieved earlier in the year. With rain and fog frequently rendering the mountains inaccessible by air, the preponderance of the squadron's missions were conducted along the coastal plains. As 1963 ended SHUFLY's combat support operations were continuing at a greatly reduced rate.

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM AT THE END OF 1963

The military situation in Vietnam at the end of 1963, although not desperate, was far from favorable. Throughout the year the South Vietnamese had committed their ground units to numerous large-scale operations over the entire nation in search of Viet Cong formations of significant size. More often than not, however, these searches proved futile, usually resulting in only inconsequential clashes with small groups of Communists. The continuation of such actions, which for the most part had characterized the entire war since 1960, had worked to the definite advantage of the Viet Cong. The Communist forces suffered few casualties while the government units expended energy, lives, and weapons.

Two new and equally discouraging combat trends also had emerged during the course of the year. Following an action fought in the Mekong Delta during early January in which the Viet Cong soundly defeated an ARVN multi-battalion heliborne force, guerrilla units had displayed an increasing tendency to maintain their organization and fight back when confronted with heliborne offensives. The situation on South Vietnam's battlefield had grown even worse in the weeks following the November coup. Subsequent to the widespread command changes ordered by the new government, the morale, and in turn the combat efficiency of the Vietnamese armed forces, had declined sharply. Moreover, the nation's new leadership terminated the Strategic Hamlet Program which had faltered badly under Ngo Dinh Nhu's management. Although it was replaced with the New Life Hamlet Program (Ap Tan Sinh), a similar program, most Vietnamese and American officials conceded that much time and energy would be necessary to regain momentum in the GVN's drive to win the allegiance of the rural population. So, by the end of the year both the tempo and effectiveness of South Vietnam's overall war effort was at its lowest ebb since the U. S. intensified its military assistance program in early 1962.

IV:70

This threatening situation was hardly consistent with American military plans which were being implemented as the year closed. Ordered by Secretary of Defense McNamara and approved by him late in the summer of 1963, these plans called for a 1,000-man reduction in the number of U. S. military personnel in Vietnam by the end of December. Included in this figure was the 47-man security platoon which had guarded the Marine task element's compound at Da Nang since April. So, for the Marines serving with the task element, 1963 ended on an incongruous note. The Viet Cong threat was on the rise while at the same time their own defenses were being reduced. Events in Vietnam had clearly overtaken long-range plans already in motion.

CHAPTER V

MARINES AND THE QUICKENING PACE OF THE WAR, 1964

NEW AMERICAN DECISIONS AND AN EXPANDING WAR(1)

V:1

Less than three weeks after the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem the U. S. Presidency changed hands. On 22 November President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took over the reigns of the American government. By late November, when the new president assumed office, the process of political and military disintegration which had begun in South Vietnam following the Diem coup, was already well underway. This process continued into the early weeks of 1964. In late January, the political instability climaxed, this time in a bloodless coup organized and led by General Nguyen Khanh, the recently-appointed commander of I Corps Tactical Zone. This second turn-over in the government of South Vietnam in less than three months had its most serious impact on the nation's armed forces. A new series of command changes ensued and again the government's operations against the Communists suffered.

V:2

By March the rapidly declining effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military forces led the Johnson Administration to review the earlier decisions to withdraw American servicemen and to cut back the military assistance program to the GVN. In a 16 March memorandum to President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara warned that "the [military] situation had unquestionably been growing worse" in South Vietnam.(2) To counteract this threatening trend, McNamara offered a broad set of recommendations which included a proposal to support a 50,000-man increase in the size of the Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces. The memorandum did not address the question of additional American advisors who might be needed to supervise the proposed expansion. In any case, President Johnson approved McNamara's plan the following day, thus setting the stage for increases in U. S. military assistance to South Vietnam.(3)

V:3

Shortly after his most recent decision on Vietnam, President Johnson ordered changes in his top civilian and military representatives in Saigon. On 22 June General William C. Westmoreland, U. S. Army, who had been serving since January as Deputy Commander, USMACV, succeeded General Harkins as ComUSMACV. One day later, on the 23d, President Johnson announced that General Maxwell D. Taylor would replace Henry Cabot Lodge as U. S. Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam. Taylor, who had been serving since 1962 as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had been closely associated with the Vietnam problem since his 1961 fact-finding mission. Both he and Westmoreland were well qualified to direct the new American assistance programs.

V:4

Soon after assuming his new responsibilities, General Westmoreland requested that the Joint Chiefs of Staff augment his command with 5,100 additional military personnel. In his opinion, these men were required to support and supervise the expansion of the Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces. Secretary McNamara met with the Joint Chiefs on 20 July to discuss this request for 900 more advisors and 4,200 additional support personnel. All agreed that the deteriorating situation in Vietnam demanded the measure and recommended its approval. The proposal was forwarded to President Johnson who approved it in early August. Emphasizing the urgency of the military situation, McNamara then ordered the Joint Chiefs to complete the entire build-up before 30 September. At this juncture, however, General Westmoreland pointed out that such a rapid influx of personnel would "overload existing facilities [in South Vietnam]" and stated his desire to see the build-up accomplished in a more orderly progression over a period of several months. After considering the general's latest request, the Secretary of Defense withdrew his earlier demand for an accelerated deployment.(4)

While the details of the expanded U. S. advisory program ^{were} ~~was~~ being hammered out in Washington, the focus of the administration's concern swung abruptly from the battlefields of South Vietnam to the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam. In two separate incidents during the first week of August, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked U. S. Navy ships operating in international waters. A protracted crisis ensued when the United States retaliated with limited air strikes against North Vietnamese naval facilities. On 6 August the U. S. Congress unanimously passed a joint resolution authorizing the President "to use all measures, including the commitment of armed forces to assist [South Vietnam] in the defense of its independence and territorial integrity...." (*) President Johnson signed the so-called Tonkin Gulf Resolution five days after it was passed, and in so doing, reaffirmed his pledge of full support for the Government of Vietnam. (**)

(*) "Military Pressures Against North Vietnam, July-October, 1964," Pentagon Papers, bk. 4, sec IV.C.2(b), p. 42. A vigorous debate has since developed concerning the actual origins of the Tonkin Gulf incidents. It has been claimed that the Americans precipitated the attacks by supporting aggressive South Vietnamese naval patrols off the North Vietnamese coast.

(**) U. S. Marines figured heavily in the crisis which followed the North Vietnamese attacks. A Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the 9th MEB, was activated from elements of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and deployed aboard amphibious shipping to a position off Da Nang where it was available to support U. S. contingency plans. Its commander, Brigadier General Raymond C. Davis, and his staff attended planning conferences in Da Nang and reconnoitered possible landing sites near the city but the MEB was not committed. Instead, the organization remained in existence throughout the remainder of 1964 and into early 1965 when, in March, two of its battalions landed at Da Nang. The formation and subsequent commitment of the 9th MEB in the Republic of Vietnam are covered in detail in the 1965 history of U. S. Marine operations in the Republic of Vietnam.

Although tensions between North Vietnam and the United States did not ease after the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis, the North Vietnamese chose to avoid further direct military confrontations with the Americans. Instead, the Communists stepped up their pressure on South Vietnam where efforts by General Khanh to consolidate his control were drawing sharp political opposition. In late August a new Buddhist crisis helped precipitate another turn-over in governmental leadership. Following this, the closing months of 1964 were characterized by several more changes of government and an accompanying downward spiral in the nation's overall military effectiveness. It was becoming increasingly doubtful as the year ended that the Government of Vietnam could stave off total collapse even with the increased amount of U. S. military assistance it was by then receiving.

Against this discouraging backdrop of increasing Communist military pressure, political instability, and military deterioration, American involvement in Vietnam deepened.

MARINES AND A RESTRUCTURED MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND

In many respects 1964 was a year of transition for the U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Not only did the command experience a change in leadership when General Westmoreland replaced General Harkins as ComUSMACV, but it was thoroughly reorganized in preparation for the more vigorous U. S. advisory program which was expected to begin about midyear.

The major organizational change within MACV took place on 15 May when the MAAG was abolished and its staff integrated into that of the senior command. In June MACV itself was restructured under a new table of distribution. The June changes reflected the expected influx of advisors and support personnel and therefore concerned the Army more than the other U. S. armed services.

Initially, the number of Marine billets on the restructured Military Assistance Command staff did not change substantially. Twenty-four Marines (15 officers and nine enlisted) were included in the new table of distribution. This represented a net increase of only one over the number previously assigned to the MAAG and MACV staffs. By the end of September, however, Marines temporarily assigned to the MACV staff from FMFPac commands brought the on-board strength to 37. Another increase occurred in the early fall when eight more permanent Marine billets (three officers and five enlisted) were approved.

CHANGES IN KEY MARINE LEADERS

Two key links in the Marine command chain that connected government policy decisions in Washington to Marine Corps operations in Vietnam changed hands during the first 60 days of 1964. On 1 February General Wallace M. Greene, Jr. replaced General Shoup as Commandant of the Marine Corps. Greene, known in American military circles as a brilliant staff officer, had been serving since 1960 as Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps. By 1964 he had become an outspoken supporter of South Vietnam's struggle against Communist aggression. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, his presence in administration policies would be felt until his tour as commandant ended in early 1968.

An equally important change occurred in early March when General Greene named Lieutenant General Victor J. Krulak to replace General Roberts as Commanding General, FMFPac. A 1934 graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy, Krulak had won the Navy Cross during ground action in World War II. He arrived in the Pacific from Washington where he had served both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as special assistant for counterinsurgency matters. In that assignment he had established his reputation as one of Washington's most vocal advocates of victory in South Vietnam. A dynamic leader and a man of strong convictions, Krulak was to exert a prevailing influence over all Marine operations in Southeast Asia for nearly half a decade.

V:10

Less obvious but of immense importance to both the Marine Corps and the future of U. S. military operations in Vietnam was a change instituted by General Westmoreland within MACV. In May General Weede's two-year tour as MACV Chief of Staff came to an end. Another Marine general officer, Brigadier General Carl A. Youngdale, (*) was already on hand at MACV, having joined the command in January. Instead of being assigned to replace the departing Weede as Chief of Staff, General Youngdale had been assigned as the Assistant Chief of Staff, J-2 (Intelligence). The Chief of Staff billet fell to an Army general officer. To many Marines the loss of the MACV Chief of Staff billet marked a turning point in the management of the American military effort in Vietnam. No longer did the Marine Corps exert an influence on the MACV staff proportionate to the scope of its combat advisory and support activities.

(*) General Youngdale's Marine Corps career had begun in the mid-1930s and had included distinguished combat tours as an artillery battalion and regimental commander during World War II and Korea respectively. In May the newly arrived general became the senior Marine serving in Vietnam when Major General Weede's tour as MACV Chief of Staff ended.

The reorganization of the U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, had little initial effect on the Marine advisory program. With the dissolution of the MAAG, the old Naval Section, under which the Marine advisors had operated since 1955, was redesignated the Naval Advisory Group, MACV. Lieutenant Colonel Noren's Marine Advisory Division, whose authorized strength remained at 11 officers and nine enlisted men through the first half of the year, was also renamed in mid-May, known thereafter as the Marine Advisory Unit, Vietnam, the unit continued to function in much the same manner as it had under the previous arrangements.

The last five months of the year, however, saw some substantial changes in the composition of the Marine Advisory Unit as the advisor build-up recently approved by the Secretary of Defense began. Colonel William P. Nesbit, a recent graduate of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, relieved Colonel Noren (promoted from lieutenant colonel on 1 July) as the Senior Marine Advisor on 4 September. Colonel Nesbit arrived in time to supervise the implementation of a new table of organization which added eight first lieutenants and a captain to the advisory unit in November. (*) The captain and one of the lieutenants were assigned as advisor and assistant advisor respectively to a new Vietnamese Marine infantry battalion which was in the process of being formed. Five other first lieutenants joined Colonel Nesbit's command as assistant advisors to existing infantry battalions while the remaining two were assigned as advisors to the brigade's motor transport and communications companies. Two billets were down-graded in rank the engineer advisor from captain to first lieutenant, and the artillery advisor from major to captain. In addition to phasing out three enlisted advisor billets, these changes relieved Nesbit's assistant of his artillery responsibilities, thus enabling him to concentrate his full attention on the job of Assistant Senior Marine Advisor. When the changes were finally completed the total number of permanent billets within the Marine Advisory Unit stood at 24--18 officers and six enlisted.

V:14

(*) A number of the Marines scheduled to fill the newly created billets did not arrive until early 1965.

Another important aspect of the overall Marine advisory program was altered in the closing months of 1964. Since Colonel Croizat's tour with the Vietnamese Marines in the immediate post-Geneva period, most Marine advisors had attended French language courses prior to departing for service in Vietnam. As French influence in Vietnam faded during the late 1950s, however, the requirement for the language had gradually diminished. By the early 1960s this situation had prompted several Marine advisors to recommend that instruction in French be replaced by Vietnamese language training. Because of these suggestions, the policy was revised in 1964. The arrival of the new advisors in the fall marked the first time that Marine officers had received formal Vietnamese language training before beginning their tours. Colonel Nesbit, who had the advantage of commanding advisors trained in both languages, saw the change as "a marked step forward." (6)

V:16

Throughout 1964 officers and noncommissioned officers on temporary assignments from the 3d Marine Division and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing continued to augment the permanent advisors assigned to the Marine Advisory Unit.- About 10 Marines arrived at SHUFLY headquarters in Da Nang each month to begin 30-day on-the-job training assignments. There the OJTs first received a series of briefings and then were attached to a specific unit where they observed the counter-insurgency techniques being employed against the Viet Cong. The Marine OJTs sometimes found themselves assigned to ARVN units rather than to the Vietnamese Marine battalions. Nevertheless, they provided various forms of assistance to many American combat advisors throughout the year. (*)

V:17

(*) The 3d Marine Division's OJT program did not end until after the Division's units landed at Da Nang in March, 1965.

The Marine Advisory Unit also experimented successfully with another form of augmentation in the early days of 1964. When the Vietnamese Marines deployed to combat with a provisional brigade in January, Lieutenant Colonel Noren requested additional U. S. Military personnel to assist and advise at the staff level. FMFPac responded by temporarily detaching eight officers and 11 enlisted men to the advisory division. MACV provided two more Marine officers and seven additional enlisted men, all of whom remained attached to the Marine Advisory Unit for the duration of the operation. Upon its termination, the temporarily assigned Marines returned to their parent organizations.

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THE VIETNAMESE MARINE BRIGADE (7)

V.19

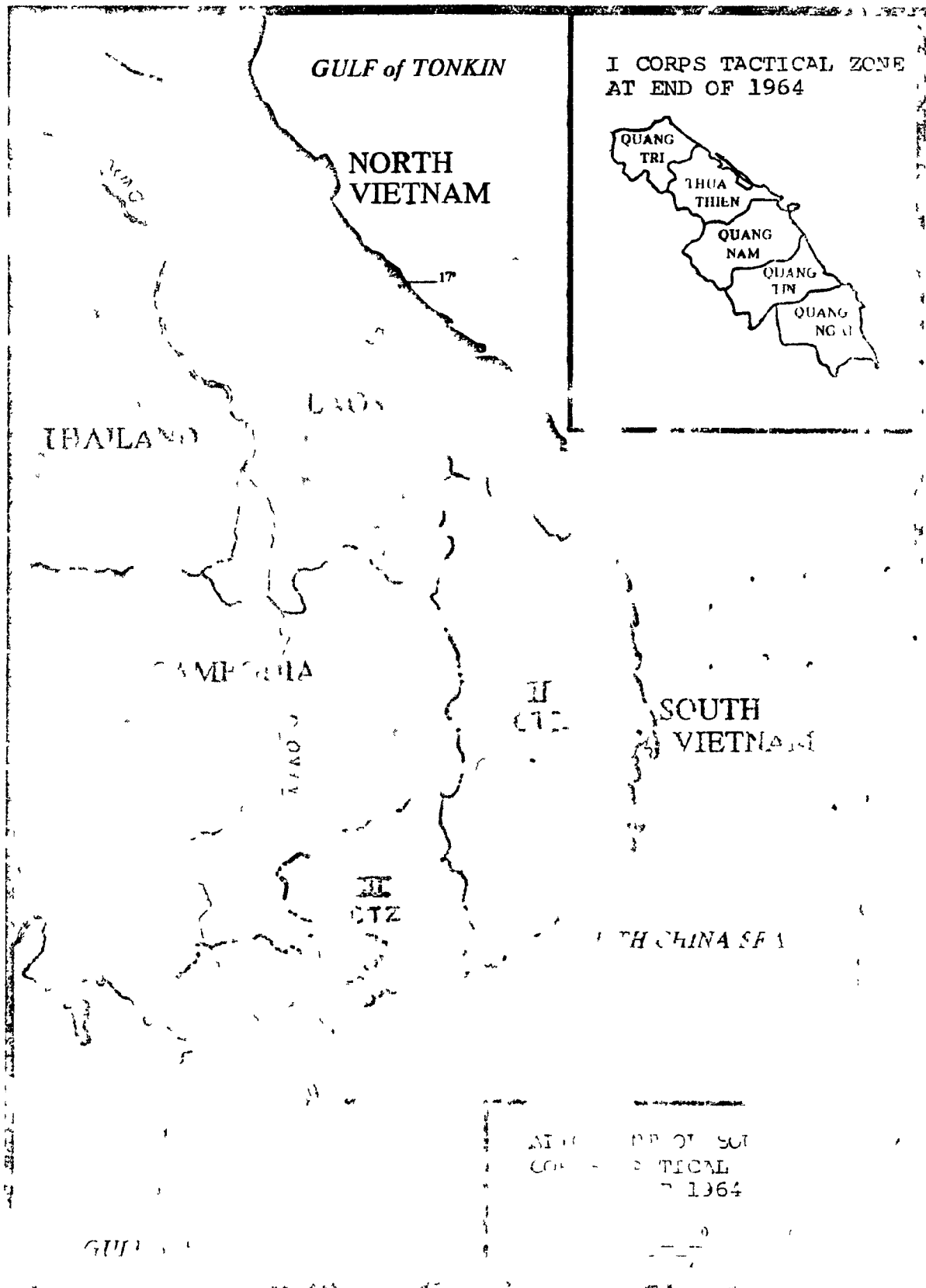
DECLASSIFIED

At the beginning of 1964 the 6,109-man Vietnamese Marine Brigade, still commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, was experiencing a crisis of morale. The recent command changes that had occurred at almost every echelon and a soaring desertion rate had combined to undermine the brigade's combat readiness. In February the American military advisors persuaded the Khanh government to reinsate Colonel Le Nguyen Khang as commandant in an attempt to restore the morale of the service. Following Khang's return, increased attention was given to the welfare of the individual Marines in order to reduce the climbing desertion rate. With the close supervision of the senior Vietnamese officers and their American advisors, the morale problems were gradually overcome.

V:20

Throughout the year the Vietnamese Marine Brigade continued to share the role of South Vietnam's general reserve force with an ARVN airborne brigade. The preponderance of the Marine units generally were held in the vicinity of Saigon, ready to respond to tactical emergencies. Still, the brigade's infantry battalions managed to see action in every corps tactical zone except I Corps, which was the farthest removed from the capital.(*). Although sometimes combined into regimental sized task forces for specific operations, the individual Marine battalions normally were attached to either a corps, a province, or an ARVN division for combat operations. When so attached, the Vietnamese Marines often formed a reserve force, available for commitment in crucial situations to influence actions initiated by other government units.

(*) South Vietnam's corps boundaries were adjusted again in late 1964. The southern boundary of I Corps was moved south to include Quang Ngai Province. The southern border of II Corps was also moved southward to encompass eight provinces formerly encompassed by III Corps. Under the new arrangement, III CTZ formed a narrow strip across the nation which centered roughly on Saigon. The Capital Military District, the boundaries of which coincided with those of Gia Dinh Province, formed an enclave within III Corps. The southernmost tactical zone, IV Corps, encompassed the entire Mekong Delta. See map on page V 22a.

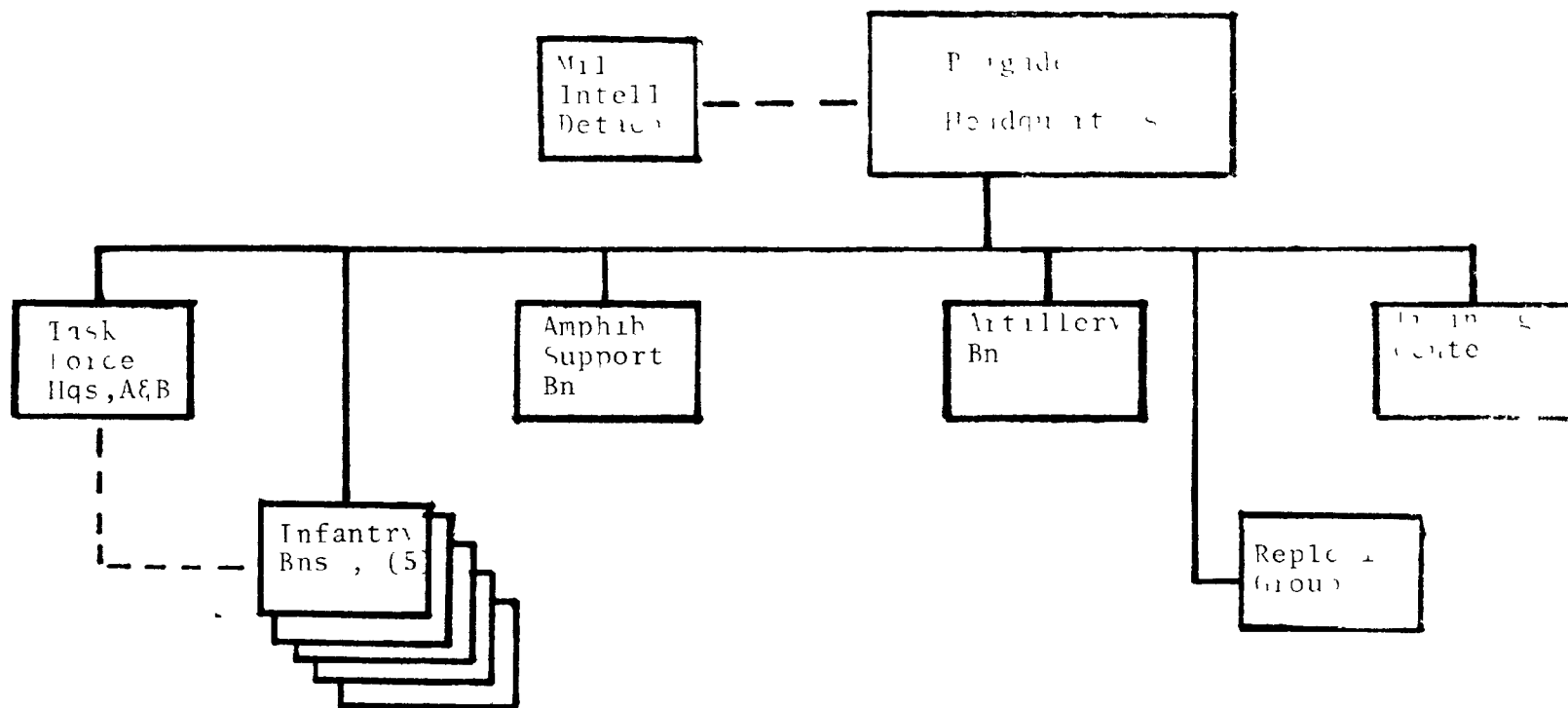


In early January the Vietnamese Joint General Staff assigned a Marine task force to a pacification mission in Go Cong and Long An Provinces, located just southeast of Saigon. Two VNMC battalions, controlled by a task force headquarters, moved into the operation area later in the month and remained until mid-September when the operation was terminated. The object of the Marine unit's presence was to re-establish government control over the region through systematic small unit operations designed to deny the enemy his usual freedom of movement. No major engagements were fought during the extended pacification campaign. Colonel Nesbit, who became the Senior Marine Advisor as the operation was entering its final stages, found morale among the participating Vietnamese Marine units high in spite of the long field assignment. Reduced desertion and unauthorized absence rates tended to substantiate these conclusions. Even though troop morale was definitely improved over what it had been earlier in the year, problems still existed. Colonel Nesbit, for example, noted that "the capability of the task force headquarters in staff functioning was marginal...." The senior American advisor was also of the opinion that the Vietnamese Marine leaders needed to place more emphasis on individual marksmanship. (8)

While the drive to pacify the Go Cong-Long An areas was in progress, other Vietnamese Marine task forces had been organized to undertake different combat assignments elsewhere in the southern portions of Vietnam. One, composed of two battalions, an artillery detachment, and a headquarters element, launched a brief search and destroy operation northwest of Saigon in Tay Ninh Province in January. A similar operation involving another task force was conducted the next month in the rugged mangrove swamps of An Xuyen Province at the southern tip of the nation. In both cases the government offensives failed to produce actions of any real consequence.

Midyear 1964 found the Vietnamese Marine commanders and their American advisors engaged in renewed efforts to restructure and expand the Vietnamese Marine Brigade. Accomplished for the most part in July, the salient feature of this latest reorganization was the creation of a new infantry battalion. Garrisoned at a small base about 12 miles northwest of Saigon, the newly organized 5th Battalion devoted the remainder of the year and the first six months of 1965 to forming and training its companies. It finally became combat ready in June 1965. (See Table of Organization chart on page V:24a.)

V 24a



ANMC TABLE OF ORGANIZATION, 1 JULY 1961
Authorized Strength, 6,555

Aside from the addition of the new infantry battalion, the mid-1964 reorganization produced other noteworthy changes in the structure of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. In the artillery battalion, the two 75mm pack howitzer batteries were reformed into one battery of eight weapons, while the one 105mm howitzer battery was expanded into two batteries of six howitzers each. The tables of equipment were revised to reflect these adjustments. Another significant change occurred in the area of training. The Training Company was deleted from the Amphibious Support Battalion and a separate recruit training center was created at Thu Duc near Saigon. Tactical planning, and control were also improved when the Brigade Headquarters was reduced in size and two smaller Task Force Headquarters (Task Force A and Task Force B) were formed.

Following the mid-1964 reorganization the Vietnamese Marines performed combat missions not unlike those they had been assigned prior to July. One exception was that the brigade no longer found itself tasked with pacification missions. Additionally, the various battalions were called upon during this period to provide security for key government installations located in Saigon and Vung Tau--assignments which gave the infantry units much needed respites from field duty.

By the end of the year the Vietnamese Marine Corps had improved in several important areas. In the motor transport field two new pieces of equipment had been put into full-time operation--a high pressure steam cleaner and an M-108 wrecker. Progress also had been made in upgrading the entire communications capability of the brigade when the table of equipment was revised in accordance with the modified table of organization. The new tables provided for modern test and repair equipment and eliminated obsolete and impractical items. Other unrealized improvements were still in their formative stages as the year closed. In the field of supply, for example, the brigade supply officer, with assistance from his American advisor, was drawing up plans which would give the Vietnamese Marines a more responsive and more managable supply system.

Impressive though they were, these improvements were overshadowed by a military disaster which befell the 4th VNMC Battalion on the last day of ¹⁹⁶⁴~~the year~~. The Marine unit had been serving since early December as the reserve force for III Corps Tactical Zone. On the 27th an estimated Viet Cong battalion overran a small pro-government town named Binh Gia located roughly 35 miles east of Saigon. III Corps officials reacted by dispatching the 4th Battalion and an ARVN Ranger unit to the area. The 4th Battalion, accompanied by two U. S. Marine advisors and three OJT observers from the 3d Marine Division, was ordered to recapture the town. It proceeded to do so on the 30th and encountered no enemy opposition. Later in the day, while the Marines were developing defensive positions around the town, a spotter aircraft sighted a force of about 100 Viet Cong approximately two miles to the west and called for air strikes. A U. S. Army gunship was shot down and its crew killed while attacking the target.

While the technically oriented programs were being developed and implemented, intensified training programs were preparing more and better trained Vietnamese Marines for their responsibilities. Established in July, the Marine Training Center at Thu Duc had graduated 1,464 recruits before the end of the year. A total of 718 officers and noncommissioned officers had attended various training courses in South Vietnam during the year while 42 more officers had attended formal schools in the United States during the same period. Another 52 small unit leaders had participated in on-the-job training programs with U. S. Marine units on Okinawa between January and December. (9)

Against the advice of his senior U. S. Marine Advisor, Captain Franklin P. Eller, the 4th Battalion commander ordered one of his companies to secure the crash site and recover the bodies of the dead crewmen. Accompanied by Eller, First Lieutenant James P. Kelliher, and Staff Sergeant Clifford J. Beaver, two of the 3d Division OJTs, the company moved west from Binh Gia on the morning of the 31st to carry out the mission. After reaching the crash site the Marine unit was ambushed by a large Viet Cong force using 82mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, and .50 caliber machine guns. Unable to maneuver because of the intense fire, the company radioed for assistance and began withdrawing from the ambush site in small groups.

The battalion commander, accompanied by the assistant Marine advisor, First Lieutenant Philip O. Brady and the other OJTs, responded to the call for assistance by leading the remaining three companies from their positions at Binh Gia. Just outside the town they met Captain Eller, who had been wounded, along with Lieutenant Kelliher and the remnants of the hard-hit company. Eller and the survivors of the morning ambush returned to Binh Gia while the remainder of the battalion continued its westward movement in an attempt to locate the enemy force. Later in the morning the Marine column was surprised while moving through an abandoned rubber plantation by a Communist force of between 1,200 and 1,800 men.

No artillery was available to support the beleaguered battalion but Vietnamese Air Force A-1 Skyraiders were able to deliver close air strikes for about 45 minutes. U. S. Army helicopter gunships replaced the Skyraiders on station but their rocket and machine gun fire proved too light to dislodge the enemy from his positions under the dense vegetation. By late afternoon, 29 of the 4th Battalion's 35 officers, including the battalion commander, were dead. In desperation, the Americans organized the surviving Vietnamese Marines into small groups which managed to slip past the Viet Cong and find their way back to Binh Gia.

The Vietnamese Marines had suffered their most decisive defeat of the war at the hands of the Viet Cong. Government personnel losses were extremely high: 112 killed, 71 wounded, and 13 missing out of a 326-man battalion. Equipment losses included 142 weapons and over a dozen radios. Additionally, all four of the U. S. Marines who had participated in the disastrous action had been wounded. Both Captain Eller and Lieutenant Brady were later awarded the Silver Star Medal for their roles in the battle. (*) Captain Donald G. Cook, one of the OJT observers from the 3d Marine Division, was missing in action at the close of the battle. (**)

(*) Personal decorations for heroism had been awarded frequently to Marine advisors throughout 1964. Earlier in the year (16 February) a Marine captain, Donald E. Koelper, an advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion earned a Navy Cross, the nation's second highest award for heroism, for directing the evacuation of a crowded Saigon Theater just prior to the detonation of a Viet Cong terrorist bomb. Although the Marine was killed in the explosion, he was credited with having saved the lives of many Vietnamese civilians.

(**) It was later learned that Captain Cook had been wounded and captured by the Viet Cong. Cook reportedly died in captivity in 1967.

As a result of the disastrous engagement at Binh Gia, the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion was rendered ineffective as a fighting force for a period of three months. This loss created two immediate problems for Colonel Khang and his American advisors. It reduced the brigade's available infantry strength by approximately 25 percent and placed an added burden on the recruit training center which was already laboring to provide enough new troops to fill the 5th Battalion. For the Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1964 had ended on a discouraging note.

V:32

ADDITIONAL MARINE ACTIVITIES

U. S. Marine involvement in South Vietnam during 1964 was not limited to the activities of the advisory division and the helicopter task element. Several other Marine units and detachments made significant, although less publicized, contributions to the war effort throughout the year. One of these was the Marine security detachment which guarded the U. S. Embassy in Saigon. Twice during the year the growing political unrest and the increasing threat of Communist terrorists attacks prompted the expansion of the security detachment, first in April and again in October. By the end of the year the detachment's strength stood at 30 Marines--a figure which made it the second largest such unit in the world. Only the Marine detachment in Paris, with 37 officers and men, was larger.

Other groups of Marines performed a wide assortment of missions in support of the Government of Vietnam during the course of the year. A Special Engineering Survey Unit composed of five officers and 157 enlisted Marines entered the republic in April and conducted a series of surveys before their departure in September. The detachment, 1st Composite Radio Company, continued its duties at the U. S. Army communications installation in Pleiku but its strength was reduced from 42 officers and men to only 16 by the end of December.

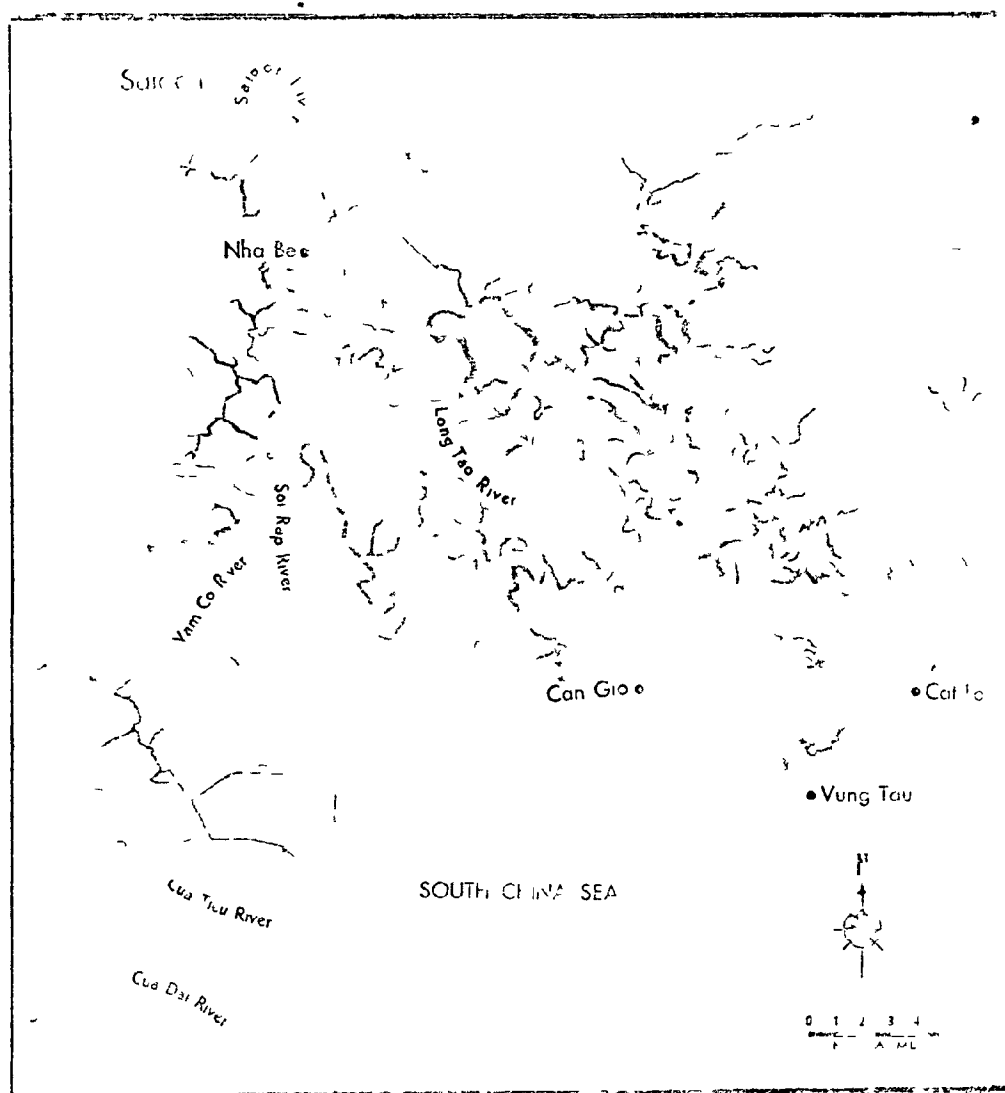
In October an element of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, 3d Marine Division, conducted an extensive survey of Cam Ranh Bay in southern II Corps. Marine counterintelligence teams from FMFPac also were temporarily assigned to MACV for 30-day periods. These officers and noncommissioned officers normally augmented the U. S. Army 704th Counterintelligence Unit during their stay in Vietnam. Another group of Marines to employ their skills in the counterinsurgency environment was a small Special Operations Group of six officers and 21 enlisted men. These Marines conducted operations under the auspices of MACV.

A more significant influx of Marines into the war-torn republic occurred in the last quarter of the year. In response to the intensified advisory effort ordered by Secretary McNamara in July, General Greene, the new Marine Commandant assured the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the Marines could be expected to carry their share of the increased burden. Shortly thereafter, the Marine Corps was ordered to provide 60 officers and noncommissioned officers to serve as advisors to ARVN units in I Corps Tactical Zone. These orders, later described by Marine Major Raymond C. Damm, the aide to the MACV Chief of Staff, as "very short fused ones," were executed without delay. The 3d Marine Division was given short notice to select suitable personnel and to transfer them immediately to ComUSMACV.(10) In response to these instructions, the Okinawa-based command quickly formed four advisory teams, each composed of four men--a captain, a first lieutenant, a gunnery sergeant, and a corporal (who was to serve as the team's radio operator). Accompanied by Major John W. Walker, this first increment of Marine advisors was airlifted to Da Nang by KC-130 in mid-September.

Upon reporting to the I Corps Senior U. S. Advisor, Colonel Howard B. St. Clair (USA), the four teams were broken up and the individual Marines assigned to battalions of the 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions. Major Walker joined the I Corps advisory staff in Da Nang as assistant operations officer. The balance of the 60 new Marine advisors were formed into teams on Okinawa and airlifted to Da Nang in the ensuing weeks. By December the advisors, who had initially been drawn from the 3d Marine Division, were being replaced gradually by officers and noncommissioned officers just beginning their normal 12 month overseas tours.

Two additional permanent Marine advisor billets were also approved in the closing weeks of 1964. These were created within the Naval Advisory Group to assist the Vietnamese Navy in controlling one of South Vietnam's most troublesome areas--the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ). Located southeast of Saigon on both sides of the Long Tao River, the main ship channel to the capital, the Rung Sat was essentially a vast, difficult to penetrate, mangrove swamp. Due largely to its relative inaccessibility, the Viet Cong had developed the Rung Sat into a key base for supporting their operations in the surrounding provinces. More significantly, by early 1964 the Communist-held region posed a serious threat to commercial ships bound for Saigon. For this reason the responsibility for pacifying the area had been turned over to the Vietnamese Navy in April.

Initially one Marine major, Edward J. Bronars, was assigned to assist and advise the Vietnamese Navy in its attempts to secure the Rung Sat. In November, however, the RSSZ advisory staff was reorganized to include one Marine captain and one sergeant. Although they did not arrive for duty until early the following year, the newly approved billets created the third distinct group of Marine ground advisors assigned to the Republic of Vietnam.(11)



THE RUNG SAT SPECIAL ZONE

V 37a

MARINE AIR OPERATIONS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

DURING THE FIRST HALF OF 1964

Still commanded by Colonel Andre D. Gomez, the Marine task element at Da Nang stood at a strength of 450 officers and men as 1964 opened. Lieutenant Colonel Ross' HMM-361 was continuing its assignment as the task element's helicopter squadron while Lieutenant Colonel Cassidy's 204-man MABS-16 sub unit retained responsibility for maintaining and operating the support facilities.

Shortly after New Years Day, ComUSMACV advised Colonel Gomez that the entire Marine task element would be withdrawn from the Republic of Vietnam during the first half of 1964. This decision was one of CinCPac's continuing responses to the Defense Department plans for reducing the level of direct American military involvement in Vietnam. Additionally, Gomez was informed that the task element would be called upon to initiate a training program designed to prepare Vietnamese Air Force pilots and mechanics to operate and maintain the UH-34Ds. This program would lead to the takeover of the 24 Marine helicopters by a new VNAF squadron on 30 June and the departure of the task element for Okinawa where it would rejoin MAG-16, its parent organization. (12)

The new year began with the monsoon season near its midpoint--a condition which kept flight operations at a reduced level. As had been the case at the close of 1963, medical evacuation and resupply missions continued to constitute the major source of work for HMM-361's crews. On 3 January a helicopter was lost to enemy ground fire while attempting to perform a medical evacuation about 30 miles due west of Da Nang. After being hit at least six times while descending into the landing zone, the UH-34D crashed into the jungle. Its crew miraculously escaped injury and was rescued by another Marine helicopter. The damaged aircraft was intentionally destroyed by U. S. Special Forces personnel. This was only the second Marine helicopter loss definitely attributed to Communist fire since SHUFLY's arrival at Soc Trang nearly two years earlier.

In the second week of January a break occurred in the weather over the mountains west of Da Nang. Fourteen helicopters from the Marine task element took advantage of the favorable flying conditions and helilifted 200 South Vietnamese soldiers from the village of An Diem, 22 miles west-southwest of Da Nang, to a position about eight miles deeper in the mountains. (*) Due to enemy fire which struck two UH-34Ds, the flight leader was forced to abandon efforts to place the troops in the primary landing zone. The Marines completed the mission a short time later when they landed the Vietnamese in a nearby alternate zone.

(*) See map of outposts in I CTZ, page III 93a.

During the second week of January General Greene, the newly appointed Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited the Marine installation at Da Nang. The Commandant conducted an inspection of the compound and was briefed on operations by Colonel Gomez and his staff. After presenting combat decorations to several members of the task element, Greene departed for Hawaii where he was to visit the FMFPac headquarters.

The Commandant's impressions of the Marine helicopter task element were summed up in testimony given before the House Committee on Armed Services several weeks after his return to Washington. "I was assured by General Harkins and his officers--and by the officers of the supported Vietnamese units--that this squadron has performed its supporting mission in an outstanding manner," related Greene. "Everything that I observed," he added, "certainly attested to the high morale and effectiveness of this unit." (13)

Late January and early February saw the normal rotation of several of the task element's key personnel as well as its helicopter squadron. On 14 January, Colonel Robert A. Merchant, a former ground officer who had commanded an antiaircraft battalion in the closing stages of World War II, assumed command of SHUFLY. During early February the MABS-16 sub unit also received a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel G. Beal. Beal, a World War II and Korean War veteran, came from the 4th Marines in Hawaii where he had been serving as the air liaison officer.

V:42

Lieutenant Colonel Ross' HMM-361 ended its tour at Da Nang on 1 February. The squadron's arrival in I Corps unfortunately had coincided with the arrival of the early monsoon rains. As a result, its operations had never reached the sustained tempo which had characterized the records of the Marine helicopter squadrons previously assigned to SHUFLY. The unit's flight statistics had suffered also from the interruption caused by the political coup which had deposed President Diem. Lieutenant Colonel Ross' UH-34Ds totalled 4,236 combat flight hours and just under 7,000 combat sorties--figures which, considering the conditions surrounding their accumulation, compared favorably with the number of combat flight hours (7,249) and sorties (11,900) averaged by the four previous UH-34D squadrons to serve in Vietnam.

HMM-364, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John H. Lavoy, a pilot who had flown his first combat helicopter missions during the Korean War, initiated combat support operations from Da Nang on 1 February. Under the existing plans to deactivate the Marine task element, Lavoy's squadron was scheduled to be the last Marine helicopter unit to operate in South Vietnam. As such, HMM-364's pilots and maintenance crews were to initiate the training program to prepare the Vietnamese Air Force personnel to take over the Marine helicopters upon the task element's departure from Da Nang.

On 4 February the first class of eight Vietnamese pilots began a 50-hour package of flight instruction under the supervision of Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's pilots. Included in the course of instruction were operational missions, night and instrument flying, formation work and landing practice. Each student was already a qualified copilot with at least 25 flight hours in VNAF UH-34s--a factor which allowed the training to be conducted concurrently with normal operations. This system had two definite advantages. First it enabled the Vietnamese students to acquire a first hand knowledge of the helicopter tactics most commonly used in the northern provinces. Secondly, it allowed Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's squadron to concentrate on its primary mission of providing combat support for the ground forces in I Corps. The progress of the program proved the concepts sound. The first small group of student pilots was graduated on 9 March despite numerous flight cancellations due to bad weather during the training period. Subsequent classes of VNAF pilots continued to train with the Marine helicopter task element throughout 1964.

Although heavy monsoon clouds lingered over I Corps throughout most of the month of March, brief periods of good weather sometimes allowed heliborne incursions into the mountainous areas. One such period began on the 5th and lasted long enough for Marine, Army, and VNAF helicopters to lift a 54-man ARVN patrol from An Diem to a landing zone near the Laotian border. During the operation one escorting U. S. Army UH-1B gunship accidentally struck a tree and was forced to land in a nearby jungle clearing. Two Marine helicopters quickly rescued the crew and weapons of the downed UH-1B but drew automatic weapons fire in the process. That afternoon 15 Marine helicopters and two armed UH-1Bs returned to the crash site with 64 ARVN troops who established a perimeter around the damaged helicopter. A maintenance team then landed and repaired the aircraft. It was flown back to Da Nang.

The last week of March saw the security element from the 3d Marine Division return to Da Nang. Early in the month hostile incidents around the airbase had increased dramatically. The incidents had usually taken the form of sniper fire from the village situated just across the perimeter fence from the living compound. The primary target of the enemy snipers seemed to be the task element's electrical generators whose high noise level prevented sentries from determining the firing position. Tensions heightened on the night of the 15th when a Vietnamese civilian hurled a gasoline-filled bottle into the doorway of the staff noncommissioned officers quarters. The crude bomb fortunately failed to ignite. The worsening situation led Colonel Merchant to request that the security platoon from the 3d Marine Division be redeployed to protect his aviators, technicians, and specialists. The request was approved promptly and on 24 March a 53-man platoon from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines assumed responsibility for security around the Marine compound. Attached to the MABS-16 sub unit, the infantry platoon was given additional responsibilities. It was to be called upon frequently to assist with rescue operations in insecure areas. Occasionally, the infantry unit would find itself responsible for security around TAFDS bladders during heliborne operations undertaken in remote areas.

V:46

The same day that the platoon from the 3d Marine Division arrived at Da Nang a task element Marine was involved in an act of heroism which later earned him the Bronze Star Medal. While escorting Marine helicopters on a resupply mission about five miles west-northwest of Tam Ky, a U. S. Army UH-1B gunship was hit by Viet Cong fire and crashed in flames. Marine Lance Corporal Walter L. Rupp, a volunteer machine gunner aboard the Army gunship, moved rapidly to help secure the area despite having suffered injuries in the crash. Manning an M-60 machine gun, Rupp delivered fire on the approaching enemy while the pilot, copilot, and three other passengers were rescued from the wreckage. All six of the American personnel, including the Marine enlisted man, were evacuated safely to Da Nang and then flown to the U. S. Army Field Hospital at Nha Trang for more extensive medical attention.

V:47

Much of I Corps experienced improved weather conditions during the first days of April. On the 6th a combined Allied helicopter flight lifted 42 ARVN soldiers from Tam Tan Ky to a landing zone about 18 miles directly west of Quang Ngai. An Army UH-1B was shot down by Communist fire during the operation. Shortly after the crash, one of HMM-364's helicopters landed to rescue the crew and strip the weapons from the downed aircraft. Marine mechanics then helped Army aviation technicians disassemble the UH-1B after which it was suspended beneath an Army UH-37 (a twin-engine, piston powered, heavy helicopter manufactured by Sikorsky) in a specially designed sling and helilifted back to Da Nang for repairs.

Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's squadron suffered its first combat aircraft loss on 14 April. The incident occurred after one of HMM-364's helicopters was hit in the engine by Viet Cong fire while attempting to evacuate wounded Vietnamese infantrymen from a hillside landing zone about 40 miles west of Da Nang near the Laotian border. Struck while taking off, the UH-34D plunged 150 feet down the steep hillside and crashed through the jungle into a stream bed. The Marine manning the M-60 machine gun suffered a broken leg in the crash. The other crew members and passengers, however, were able to carry him up the hill to the ARVN landing zone. Heavy thunder showers prevented rescue for two hours but the weather finally broke and the men were helilifted to Da Nang. The aircraft was destroyed the next day.

V:48

Four days after this incident HMM-364 committed all available aircraft to a battalion-size heliborne assault into the mountains in western Thua Thien Province. The ARVN's objective was a mountainous area on the northern rim of the A Shau Valley, a 30-mile-long, two-mile-wide expanse of relatively low terrain adjacent and parallel to the Laotian border due west of Hue. Colonel Merchant, as commander of the Aviation Operations Headquarters for I Corps, assigned 20 Marine UH-34Ds, four VNAF UH-34s, five U. S. Army UH-1B gunships, and three Marine OH-1Bs to the operation which the ARVN code named LAM SON 115. Additionally, 14 VNAF T-28s, four A-1H Skyraiders, and two observation aircraft were assigned by MACV to provide support for the helicopter assault. The operation was to be controlled by an ASOC airborne in an U. S. Air Force U-10, a single-engine, 4-place utility aircraft whose radios allowed its crew to communicate with every aircraft participating in the effort. In addition to Colonel Merchant, the airborne ASOC's senior member, the controlling agency was to be composed of one U. S. Air Force and one VNAF officer.

The one-day operation began early on 18 April with Marine and VNAF transport helicopters lifting 200 South Vietnamese soldiers from an outpost in the northwestern portion of the A Shau valley into a rugged landing zone approximately six miles further north. Later the same morning 300 more Vietnamese troops were helilifted from a government outpost in the central portion of the valley to a second landing zone situated six miles north of the 200-man unit which had been flown in earlier. HMM-364's helicopters averaged almost 8 hours per aircraft while flying 160 total hours in support of LAM SON 115. Only one Marine UH-34D and one VNAF helicopter were hit by enemy fire during the execution of the well-planned and efficiently coordinated operation. No aircraft were lost.

Often the daily support flights proved more hazardous than the large assault operations whose details were planned in advance. An incident that occurred on 21 April while a UH-34D was evacuating a wounded South Vietnamese soldier from the mountains 15 miles west of Tam Ky confirmed the dangers inherent in the daily operations. In an effort to lure the evacuation helicopter within range of its weapons, the Communists ignited a yellow smoke grenade in a clearing close by the actual landing zone. The pilot alertly identified the correct landing zone, thereby foiling the enemy ruse.

V:50

Several days later Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's Marines encountered an equally clever Viet Cong tactic while performing another evacuation mission, this time in support of a U. S. Special Forces patrol 20 miles west of Thuong Duc. Army UH-1B gunships made several low-level reconnaissance passes over the pickup site while the UH-34D pilot prepared to hoist the casualties through the jungle. After the gunship crews reported no enemy activity, a Marine pilot maneuvered his aircraft into a hovering position above the invisible patrol. At this juncture, well-concealed Viet Cong began firing automatic weapons at the motionless helicopter and forced it to seek safety away from the pickup area. The escorting gunships then wheeled in from above, returning the Viet Cong's fire with rockets and machine guns. The enemy promptly ceased firing, whereupon the Marine helicopter again maneuvered into position above the patrol. Again the enemy challenged the aircraft with fire, this time striking it in the rear portion of the fuselage. Although no serious damage was done, the evacuation helicopter was again forced away from the patrol's position.

V:51

The UH-1Bs once more delivered suppressive fire on the enemy position, finally allowing a second Marine helicopter to hoist the wounded man through the trees. A new burst of enemy fire, however, interrupted a subsequent effort to retrieve the body of a dead patrol member. An HMM-364 helicopter returned to the area the following day and completed the evacuation.

Although neither resulted in U. S. or VNAF aircraft losses, the incidents of 21 and 24 April confirmed that the Viet Cong was devising new methods with which to counter the Allies' helicopters. His use of false smoke signals and his persistent refusal to compromise his position by firing on the faster, more heavily armed, U. S. gunships represented crude but effective additions to his repertoire of counterhelicopter tactics.

Although unappreciated by the Leatherneck crews, the enemys' most recent flurry of actions had no real effect on the overall pattern of helicopter operations. Colonel Merchant, Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy, and a Marine liaison officer from MACV J-3 flew to Quang Ngai on 26 April to participate in the final stages of planning for a heliborne assault into a suspected Viet Cong base area in northwestern II Corps. At Quang Ngai officials from the II Corps headquarters had already completed the general plans for Operation SURE WIND 202, the size of which demanded the use of all transport helicopters available in both I and II Corps. The Marine representatives learned that HMM-364's role in the upcoming operation would be to helilift a 420-man South Vietnamese battalion from the Quang Ngai airfield to an objective code named Landing Zone BRAVO about 30 miles to the west. Simultaneous with this assault, a U. S. Army helicopter company from Pleiku was scheduled to transport two ARVN battalions (960 troops) from Gi Lang, an outpost 24 miles west of Quang Ngai, to a second landing zone about eight miles southwest [west] of Landing Zone BRAVO. The operation was to begin on the morning of 27 April, with the first assault waves scheduled to land at 0930.

V:53

Due to the distance between the mountainous landing zones and because two different helicopter units would be conducting the respective trooplifts, the operation plan treated the two assaults as separate operations. A U. S. Air Force U-10 aircraft had been assigned to carry Colonel Merchant and other ASOC representatives who would coordinate the helilift into Landing Zone BRAVO. Twenty Vietnamese A-1H Skyraiders had been assigned to provide tactical air support for the Marine portion of the operation. Twelve of these attack aircraft were scheduled to conduct preparatory strikes on and around the landing zones, four were to orbit above the area after the helicopter landing began, and the remaining four were to be positioned on airstrip alert at Da Nang. Five Army UH-1B gunships were assigned to escort the Marine UH-34s to and from the landing zone.

V:54

The preparatory air strikes around Landing Zone BRAVO began as the first ARVN heliteams boarded the 19 Marine and two VNAF helicopters which had arrived earlier at Quang Ngai. Following the VNAF's air strikes the escorting Army gunships swept in for a prelanding reconnaissance of the zone. They were met by fire from Viet Cong .50 and .30 caliber machine guns. The gunships countered with repeated rocket and machine gun attacks on those enemy positions that could be located but were unable to silence all of the Communist weapons. After the UH-1Bs had expended their entire ordnance load and most of their fuel, the ASOC (airborne) ordered all helicopters back to Quang Ngai to rearm and refuel.

With the transports and gunships en route to Quang Ngai, the ASOC summoned the on-call VNAF A-1Hs to neutralize the targets. During these attacks one Skyraider was damaged severely by .50 caliber machine gun fire. The Vietnamese pilot turned his aircraft eastward and attempted to nurse it to the airstrip at Quang Ngai. The attack bomber crash landed less than one mile from the west end of the small airstrip.

The A-1H air strikes on and around Landing Zone BRAVO continued until 1225. Shortly after the strikes ceased Colonel Merchant ordered the first wave of helicopters to land the assault force. The UH-1Bs were still drawing fire as the first UH-34D formation approached the contested landing zone. This time, however, the transport helicopters were not deterred. The first UH-34Ds touched down at 1230 with their machine gunners returning fire into the surrounding jungle. Despite the high volume of suppressive fire, several helicopters in the first wave sustained hits from Viet Cong automatic weapons. One, damaged critically, crashed in the landing zone. Its crew members, all of whom escaped injury, were picked up by another Marine helicopter which had been designated as the search and rescue aircraft for the operation. Another UH-34D with battle damage proceeded to the outpost from which the Army helicopter missions were originating and made an emergency landing.

V:56

The second assault wave was delayed while VNAF Skyraiders renewed their efforts to dislodge the enemy from his positions around the embattled landing zone. The helilift resumed at 1355 in the face of reduced but stubborn Communist resistance. During this phase of the troop lift, one VNAF and several Marine helicopters were hit by enemy .50 caliber fire. The Vietnamese aircraft, which had lost its tail rotor controls, spun sharply while trying to take off and crashed near the center of the zone. Its crew members escaped injury and were picked up by the Marine rescue helicopter.

After this incident, as the South Vietnamese soldiers began fanning out from the landing zone and forcing the Communist gunners to withdraw deeper into the jungle, the landing proceeded somewhat faster. The fourth and final assault lift of the day was executed at 1730, after which 357 of the 420 ARVN troops had been transported into Landing Zone BRAVO. During the first day of the operation, 15 of the 19 participating Marine UH-34Ds had been hit. Only 11 Marine and VNAF helicopters originally assigned to support the operation remained airworthy.

The heliborne assault portion of SURE WIND 202 was completed the next morning. Fourteen UH-34Ds from HMM-364, several of which had been repaired during the night, and four Army UH-1B transports lifted the remainder of the South Vietnamese battalion into the landing zone. By then the intensity of the enemy action in the surrounding hills had diminished greatly. Only one Marine helicopter was hit and it suffered only minor damage. Upon finishing their tasks, HMM-364's aircraft proceeded to Gi Lang, the outpost from which the Army aviation was operating, to help it complete its portion of the assault lift.

Aircraft losses for the operation continued to accumulate on the second day when a Marine UH-34D was caught in the rotor wash of other landing helicopters and crashed while approaching the runway at Quang Ngai. The aircraft plummeted into an irrigation canal adjacent to the airstrip, rolled over onto its side, and completely submerged. All personnel managed to climb to safety but the helicopter was a total loss.

On 29 April, three UH-34Ds flew a maintenance-inspection team and a Marine security squad from Da Nang into Landing Zone BRAVO to assess the damage suffered by the two helicopters which had crashed on the first day of SURE WIND 202. The inspection team found that four bullets had struck the aircraft but it could not be determined which had caused the crash. The VNAF aircraft had been riddled by nearly 30 bullets, including a .50 caliber round that had severed the tail rotor control cable. The inspection team concluded that both helicopters were damaged beyond repair and destroyed them where they had fallen.

Originally, MACV and II Corps planners had anticipated that the Marine helicopters would not be required to support SURE WIND 202 beyond the initial assault. It soon became apparent, however, that the daily helicopter requirements for the operation would exceed the aviation assets available in II Corps. The American command in Saigon, therefore, directed Colonel Merchant's task element to continue providing support for the duration of the offensive. Accordingly, the task element commander assigned a liaison officer to the 2d ARVN Division headquarters to coordinate daily aircraft requirements. When SURE WIND 202 finally ended on 25 May, HMM-364's crews had contributed 983 sorties and 800 flight hours to the South Vietnamese effort in northwestern II Corps.

While some of HMM-364's crews continued to fly support missions from Quang Ngai, others conducted a critical operation in western I Corps. The mission, which already had been delayed five days because of the Marines' extensive commitment during the early stages of SURE WIND 202, was executed on 30 April. It involved 17 Marine UH-34Ds, four Army UH-1Bs (two transports and two gunships), two Marine O-1Bs, two VNAF Skyraiders, and one South Vietnamese observation aircraft. Their assignment was to evacuate a 78-man ARVN patrol which had been under sporadic enemy fire for six days in the rugged jungle about 42 miles west of Da Nang. The transport helicopters encountered almost continuous small arms fire during the landing and subsequent evacuation. One Marine helicopter carrying a crew of four Marines and five ARVN passengers was shot down while climbing away from the contested landing zone. The pilot made a forced landing in a nearby clearing and the nine men were evacuated under fire by other UH-34Ds. Despite the hazardous nature of the mission, the entire South Vietnamese patrol was removed to the safety of Nam Dong, a well-defended Special Forces camp located in a strategically situated valley 34 miles west of Da Nang.

V:60

Acts of heroism were commonplace during the 30 April evacuation. One Marine copilot assumed control of his severely damaged helicopter and flew it to Nam Dong after the pilot and crew chief had been wounded. Staff Sergeant John C. Thompson, who served as loadmaster for the operation, was later awarded the Navy Cross for his role in the action. Having arrived in the landing zone aboard the first transport helicopter, the Marine noncommissioned officer exposed himself to Viet Cong fire almost continuously while supervising the loading of each aircraft. After the last five South Vietnamese troops had boarded the final helicopter. Thompson shouted to its pilot that he would remain on the ground to provide covering fire while the aircraft took off. The pilot, however, ordered Staff Sergeant Thompson aboard and then succeeded in maneuvering the heavily loaded UH-34D out of the empty landing zone.

V:61

By late May it had become apparent to U. S. military authorities in South Vietnam that the demand for American transport helicopters in I Corps would continue beyond the 30 June date which had been set earlier for the task element's departure. General Harkins, therefore, proposed to the Commander in Chief, Pacific that the Marine unit be retained at Da Nang indefinitely. He further recommended that HMM-364 turn its helicopters over to the Vietnamese Air Force on 30 June as scheduled and that the unit be replaced by another UH-34D squadron. These recommendations were forwarded to the Joint Chiefs of Staff who approved them on 10 June. In response the Marine Corps began immediate preparations to deploy a new medium helicopter squadron to Da Nang.

HMM-364 began its final month in Vietnam by supporting another heliborne assault into II Corps. This time the Marines teamed with the U. S. Army's 52d Aviation Battalion to lift an ARVN battalion from Dak To, a town situated in western Kontum Province, to a mountainous objective near the Laotian border. To support the operation, which was code named SURE WIND 303, Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's crews positioned a TAFDS fuel bladder at the Dak To airstrip on 1 June. Two days later 15 Marine UH-34Ds contributed 180 sorties to the assault phase of the government operation. No battle damage was recorded by Marine aircraft during this latest incursion into II Corps.

The Marine task element's responsibilities were expanded slightly in the first week of June when Colonel Merchant was directed to provide search and rescue (SAR) support for U. S. aerial reconnaissance operations which had begun over Laos and North Vietnam. After 7 June at least one UH-34D was positioned either at Quang Tri or at Khe Sanh, a South Vietnamese base near the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province, ready to conduct SAR missions for downed American and VNAF pilots.

In addition to normal support operations, HMM-364's pilots devoted much of the second week of June to a search for PFCs Fred T. Schrenkengost and Robert L. Greer, two MABS-16, Marines who had disappeared from the Da Nang compound on 7 June. Intelligence reports indicated that both men had been captured by Communist guerrillas about five miles south of the airfield while sight-seeing on rented motor bikes. The aerial search produced no signs of the missing enlisted men but reliable Vietnamese sources reported that the Viet Cong had displayed them in several villages. The task element commander finally called off the fruitless search on 15 June, a full week after it had begun. Ground efforts by the South Vietnamese to locate the men continued but were also futile. The missing Marines were never found and are still carried on Marine Corps records as missing.

While the aerial search south of Da Nang was in its final stages, HMM-364 suffered its last aircraft loss in Vietnam when a resupply helicopter crashed in the extreme northwestern corner of the republic. The accident occurred on 13 June when a UH-34D was caught in severe down drafts over a rugged mountain peak located about one and one half miles south of Khe Sanh. The crew and passengers luckily escaped injury and were rescued but the helicopter was damaged too extensively to be repaired.

Three days after the incident near Khe Sanh, Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's unit ceased its operations and began preparations to turn over its helicopters and equipment to the Vietnamese Air Force. The Marines spent three days removing the automatic stabilization equipment (the helicopter's equivalent of an automatic pilot) and the USMC identification from the 24 UH-34Ds. While HMM-364's men accomplished the necessary last-minute preparations, pilots from a new Marine medium helicopter squadron, HMM-162 began flying their UH-34Ds ashore from the LPH 8, USS Valley Forge. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. Curtis, an Oklahoman who held four Distinguished Flying Crosses for air actions fought during World War II and Korea, HMM-162 was the first Marine squadron since Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's to deploy to Vietnam with its aircraft and maintenance equipment. With HMM-162's arrival, elements of Lieutenant Colonel Lavoy's unit began departing for Okinawa aboard refueler-transport aircraft from VMGR-152. Also aboard one of the KC-130s bound for Okinawa was Lieutenant Colonel Beal, who relinquished command of the MABS-16 sub unit to Major Marion R. Green on the last day of June.

The newly commissioned VNAF-217th Squadron informally accepted the aircraft from HMM-364 on 19 June. Formal acceptance occurred ten days later with Major General Paul J. Fontana, the Commanding General of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, attending a ceremony presided over by the I Corps commanding general. Following the formal exchange of equipment, the Vietnamese officials presented various orders of the Cross of Valor, their nation's second highest decoration, to Marine pilots who had distinguished themselves during Operation SURE WIND 202. Vice Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky commanding officer of the Vietnamese Air Force, then presented Vietnamese pilot wings to each Marine instructor-pilot who had participated in the helicopter pilot training program. HMM-364's tour in South Vietnam ended officially on 30 June when the last of its members boarded KC-130's bound for Okinawa. Since initiating combat flight operations in February, the squadron's helicopters had logged 2,665 combat sorties and 2,365 flight hours. Another statistic underscored the intensity of the actions in which the unit had participated. Well over half of the squadron's 24 helicopters had been damaged by enemy fire during their five month deployment in Vietnam.(14)

V:66

MARINE AIR OPERATIONS DURING THE SECOND HALF OF 1964

After orientation briefings and familiarization flights, Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' HMM-162 began support operations in the closing days of June. The squadron's first real taste of action came on the last day of the month when six UH-34Ds, escorted by two armed U. S. Army UH-1Bs, attempted to resupply ARVN troops operating in the hills nine miles west of Tam Ky. While trying to locate a Communist position which was firing on the resupply aircraft, one of the gunships was hit and crashed in flames. Two transport helicopters landed immediately to rescue the crew. The Marines pulled three of the four injured men from the wreckage before being driven away from the scene by approaching guerrilla soldiers. During take off, one UH-34D was struck by ground fire but was able to continue its flight to Da Nang. The wounded copilot of the downed Army aircraft died while en route to the dispensary but the injured pilot survived and later was evacuated to the Nha Trang Field Hospital. The heat from the still-smoldering aircraft hulk prevented a second attempt to extricate the body of the fourth soldier later in the day. It was finally recovered on 1 July.

V:67

The squadron's first critical troop lift came within days of its initial action when the task element was called upon to helilift urgently needed reinforcements to the Nam Dong Special Forces camp which had come under heavy Communist attack. The call for assistance was received at 0410 on 7 July and shortly after 0600, six Marine helicopters, loaded with Special Forces personnel and led by Colonel Merchant in an O-1B, launched for the beleaguered outpost. This flight was escorted by two Army UH-1Bs. At the same time two other HMM-162 helicopters took off for An Diem carrying U. S. Special Forces officers with instructions to prepare a company-sized force for commitment to Nam Dong.

V:68

Intense enemy mortar and ground fire at Nam Dong initially prevented the six UH-34Ds from landing the reinforcements, whereupon Colonel Merchant led the flight back to Da Nang to refuel. At the airfield the task element commander briefed A-1H Skyraider pilots and the crew of a Marine O-1B on the battlefield situation. He took off again at 0910, this time airborne in an Air Force U-10. Meanwhile, a U. S. Army CV-2 Caribou (a twin-engine, fixed-wing light transport) managed to airdrop small arms ammunition to the embattled defenders of Nam Dong. Following this emergency resupply, air strikes were conducted on the hills to the south and west of the outpost, causing enemy ground fire to diminish. At 0945 a flight of 18 Marine helicopters, escorted by four UH-1B gunships and two VNAF Skyraiders, landed a 93-man relief force from Da Nang and An Diem. Evacuation of 18 dead, including two Americans and one Australian, and 111 wounded began immediately. At 1545, a flight of 10 UH-34Ds lifted 9,550 pounds of ammunition, medical supplies, radios, and miscellaneous equipment to Nam Dong. Six passengers, five wounded Vietnamese, and eight bodies were evacuated to Da Nang on the return trip. With the help of the Marine, Army, and VNAF air support Nam Dong had survived the attack. (*)

(*) The first Medal of Honor for action in Vietnam was awarded to Special Forces Captain Roger Donlon for heroism during the defense of Nam Dong.

Four days after the battle for Nam Dong, Colonel Merchant's tour in Vietnam ended. He returned to Okinawa to assume command of Marine Air craft Group 16. For his role in directing the heliborne relief of the threatened camp, Merchant was awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. His relief as Commander, Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6 was Colonel Hardy ("Tex") Hay. Hay became SHUFLY's seventh commander.

Normal flight operations continued during the remainder of July with no major heliborne assaults conducted and no Marine aircraft lost. The Marine operations did not, however, lack excitement. On 15 July, a UH-34D was hit by Viet Cong fire while on a routine resupply mission but was able to complete its assignment. Later in the month another helicopter was struck twice by small arms rounds which produced minor damage. Another noteworthy development occurred on the 19th when HMM-162 temporarily detached four UH-34s to Udorn, Thailand to perform search and rescue missions for downed U. S. Air Force reconnaissance aircraft.

V:70

In early August the heightened international tensions which accompanied the Gulf of Tonkin crisis prompted General Westmoreland to order all American military installations throughout South Vietnam to brace for possible enemy attacks. Colonel Hay responded to ComUSMACV's instructions by placing his Marines on a higher alert status for several weeks. The precautions were relaxed gradually as the crisis eased and the likelihood of a sudden Communist attack diminished somewhat.

The pattern of helicopter operations in the northern provinces throughout the remainder of the summer differed little from that which had emerged earlier in the dry season. Medical evacuation and resupply sorties continued to constitute the majority of the task element's support missions. Generally, medical evacuation missions, many of which were executed while Viet Cong and South Vietnamese forces were engaged in combat, provided the major source of action for Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' squadron during this period. On 6 August, for example, a UH-34D was hit by enemy fire while its crew was evacuating ARVN casualties from a landing zone along the Song Tra Bon. Two days later a second Marine helicopter was hit during an attempt to evacuate dead and wounded from the mountains about eight miles west of Tam Ky. The following day, on 9 August, another HMM-162 UH-34D drew fire while evacuating a wounded U. S. advisor from a village on the coastal plain 12 miles southeast of Tam Ky. In all three incidents the aircraft received only minor damage and were able to return safely to Da Nang.

Although the medical evacuation missions generally attracted more Viet Cong attention, many resupply flights also proved hazardous. Small landing zones, high elevations, and bad weather often made even the most routine missions difficult. HMM-162 lost a helicopter as a result of a combination of two of these adverse conditions, extreme elevation and a small landing zone, on 30 August. While resupplying a mountain-top outpost five miles southwest of Nam Dong, the UH-34D struck a tree at the edge of a tiny clearing and crashed. The crew members were uninjured but the extent of the aircraft's damage was too great to permit repair. It was stripped of radios, machine guns, machine gun mounts, and other usable parts and then destroyed.

In mid-August the Marines also lost their first observation aircraft since deploying to Vietnam in 1962 when an O-1B crashed after experiencing mechanical failure. The incident occurred on the 15th while the pilot and observer were conducting a reconnaissance of the northwestern corner of Quang Ngai Province near the Laotian border. Bad weather delayed rescue attempts for over an hour but the two injured crewmen were finally recovered by helicopter and flown to the Da Nang dispensary for treatment. The pilot's injuries were severe enough that he was evacuated to the U. S. field hospital at Nha Trang.

The last major heliborne assault conducted in extreme western I Corps during 1964 was initiated in the first week of September. Eighteen Marine UH-34Ds, four Army UH-1Bs, six VNAF Skyraiders, two Marine O-1Bs, and two U. S. Air Force liaison aircraft were assigned to support a 2d ARVN Division offensive against Communist infiltration routes in southwestern Quang Nam Province. The operation, code named CHINH BIEN, began on the morning of 4 September when 15 HMM-162 helicopters (the other three UH-34Ds participating in the operation were serving as search and rescue aircraft) lifted the first wave of South Vietnamese soldiers from Kham Duc, a government controlled town located 12 miles from the Laotian border in northwestern Quang Tin Province. Their objective was a landing zone situated 24 miles northwest of the assembly area in Quang Nam Province only three miles from the Laotian border. No enemy resistance was encountered and the assault helilift was completed shortly after noon. By then HMM-162's helicopters had flown 192 sorties for 139.6 hours and had transported 304 troops and 9,080 pounds of cargo from Kham Duc to the objective.

Adverse weather began influencing air operations from Da Nang a few days after CHINH BIEN ended. On 14 September all flights were cancelled by rain and high winds from Typhoon Violet, a severe tropical storm. All aircraft remained grounded until late afternoon of the next day when HMM-162 helicopters conducted an emergency evacuation of storm victims from Tam Ky which had been hard hit by Violet. The typhoon caused some minor damage to SHUFLY's facilities when electrical power was lost for a few hours. By the morning of the 16th, power had been restored and all Marine operations had returned to normal.

Within a week, however, a more severe weather disturbance--Typhoon Tilda--struck the coast near Da Nang. On the morning of 21 September, in the face of the approaching storm, Colonel Hay ordered Lieutenant Colonel Curtis to displace his squadron to Nha Trang in central II Corps. Later in the day the unit's entire complement of aircraft departed Da Nang on the 325-mile flight to safety. The task element's C-117D found refuge at Saigon. HMM-162 remained at Nha Trang until the 23d when it returned to I Corps.

Typhoon Tilda caused considerably more damage to the Marine base of operations than had her immediate forerunner. Most of the permanent structures in the compound showed signs of water damage and the electrical power was lost for an entire week except at the waterpoint and the mess hall where a concerted repair effort restored power promptly. Teletype communications circuits were closed for a full week as a result of damage and the radio link with the 1st MAW was broken for nearly two hours.

While the Marines of the MABS-16 sub unit concerned themselves with cleaning up the debris and repairing their damaged facilities, HMM-162's crews resumed combat support operations. On the afternoon of their return from Nha Trang, a flight of UH-34Ds delivered 19 passengers and 4,000 pounds of cargo to Tien Phuoc, a government-controlled town located seven miles west of Tam Ky. The next day Major General Paul J. Fontana, who was still serving as Commanding General of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, arrived at Da Nang for a one day visit to assess the damage and to confer with Colonel Hay. Cleanup activities and normal flight operations consumed the remainder of September.

Two changes were made in the composition of the Marine task element in late September and early October. On 29 September the security force from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines rotated back to their parent unit on Okinawa. They were replaced by a 78-man element from E Company, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines the same day. Led by Second Lieutenant Anthony A. Monroe, the newly arrived Marines would provide protection for the aviation unit until late November.

The second alteration occurred about a week later when HMM-162 was relieved on-station by the officers and men of a fresh squadron. The rotation of helicopter units was completed on 8 October when Lieutenant Colonel Curtis officially signed over the aircraft and maintenance equipment to the new squadron's commanding officer. In a three month deployment to the war zone HMM-162's helicopters had conducted approximately 6,600 sorties for a total of slightly over 4,400 flight hours. Many of these sorties had been missions of mercy flown in the wake of the typhoons which had ravaged Vietnam's northern provinces. During three months of sustained combat support activities, the squadron had lost two UH-34Ds and one OH-1B in operational accidents. (15)

The newly arrived squadron, HMM-365, was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Koler, Jr., an experienced Marine officer who had begun his career shortly after World War II as an infantry platoon leader with the 1st Marine Division in China. Under his leadership the squadron began performing resupply missions the same day that the last of HMM-162's personnel departed Da Nang. On their first day of operations Koler's crews airlifted over 25,000 pounds of cargo to various outposts around Da Nang. The following day a flight of 12 HMM-365 helicopters provided transportation for ARVN troops who were being rotated between Kham Duc and A Roe, an isolated outpost in southwestern Quang Nam Province less than seven miles from the Laotian border. On 11 October the newly arrived Marine pilots and crews tasted their first actual combat when eight UH-34Ds drew Viet Cong fire while landing a 112-man Vietnamese unit in the hills 10 miles west-southwest of Tam Ky.

The day after its crews witnessed their first ground fire, Koler's squadron lost its first aircraft in Vietnam. The incident occurred in western Quang Nam Province while a UH-34D was attempting to take off from a South Vietnamese landing zone located high in the mountains. The crash, in which the pilot was slightly injured, resulted from a loss of power due to the high altitude. After the crew was evacuated a maintenance team salvaged the usable parts and destroyed the aircraft.

In mid-October Colonel Hay summarized the situation in I Corps for his superiors at the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The task element commander was particularly concerned about a new phase of Viet Cong activity which he saw developing in the coastal lowlands of the northern provinces. Although there were few visible signs of either combat or enemy movement to confirm the trend, intelligence sources indicated that Viet Cong main force battalions in I Corps had increased in numbers from nine to 11 in the past several months. During this same period, the number of local force Viet Cong companies in the area had increased by 50 percent to a total of 17. These growth patterns, Colonel Hay noted, were enabling the Communists to tighten their grip on the civilian populace. Moreover, they were responsible for increased enemy harassment of lines of communications in I Corps and posed a particular threat to Da Nang. (16)

Colonel Hay's tour as task element commander ended on 17 October. After a brief change of command ceremony in which he expressed his appreciation to his subordinates for their assistance during this tour, Hay departed for Okinawa to assume command of MAG-16. His replacement at Da Nang, Colonel John H. King, Jr., an officer who had seen action as a fighter pilot during World War II, was well prepared to direct the task element's operations. A recent graduate of the National War College, King had commanded the first operational Marine transport helicopter unit, Marine Helicopter Squadron 161, during the Korean War.

HMM-365's operations continued throughout the remainder of October with only a few significant actions reported. One of these was an abortive medical evacuation mission attempted on 26 October during which the squadron suffered its first combat casualties. The incident, in which both the copilot and crew chief were wounded by Viet Cong small arms fire, occurred while the helicopter was approaching a poorly protected landing zone 10 miles southwest of Tam Ky. The pilot managed to return the damaged helicopter to Tam Ky and land safely, whereupon the seriously wounded copilot was evacuated to Nha Trang and the crew chief was administered first aid.

In early November, at the height of the monsoon season, Typhoon Iris struck the Annamese coast. The tropical storm, whose full force was felt on 4 November, was followed by nearly a week of continuous rain, wind, and fog. The conditions caused flight operations to be suspended except for emergency medical evacuations. When the Marines resumed operations on the 10th, they concentrated on rescuing Vietnamese civilians from the inundated coastal plains. Between 1700 and 1900 on their first day of the flood relief operation, Lieutenant Colonel Koler's Marines rescued 144 flood victims. These rescues, many of which were accomplished by hoisting the Vietnamese from precarious positions in trees or on roof tops were complicated by sporadic Viet Cong harassing fire. The next day, although poor visibility continued to hamper flights, 1,136 more flood victims were helilifted to safety. Again the guerrillas harassed the rescue attempts with small arms fire, this time hitting three of the participating aircraft.

The humanitarian operation continued until 16 November, when another typhoon--Kate--threatened to make matters even worse. The weather on the periphery of the storm forced the cancellation of many Marine flights but the center of the storm passed about 200 miles south of Da Nang. The flooding which resulted from the two back-to-back weather disturbances demanded a rescue effort beyond the capabilities of the Marine and VNAF helicopter units located in I Corps. Accordingly, the Special Landing Force of the U. S. Seventh Fleet joined the operations on 17 November. Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' HMM-162, the helicopter element of the SLF, returned to its former operations area and spent six days rescuing flood victims. The Marines evacuated the most seriously injured to the USS Princeton where they received emergency treatment before being returned to civilian hospitals. When the SLF departed Vietnamese waters on 23 November HMM-162's helicopters had flown 500 hours and completed 700 sorties in support of the disaster relief operations. With its departure the Marine task element and the VNAF 217th Squadron reassumed the full burden of rescue operations until they were finally terminated on 10 December. During this period HMM-365 was forced to divide its flights judiciously between combat support flights and missions of mercy. (*)

(*) The magnitude of the damage inflicted upon the inhabitants of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Quang Tin Provinces by the November storms is borne out by the following statistics. In these three provinces over 50,600 houses were destroyed while 4,870 civilians were reported either dead or missing. Another 12,240 Vietnamese were forced to seek refuge at government centers in the wake of the flood. (CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 17Oct64-14Jan65.

While some of Lieutenant Colonel Koler's men were employed in evacuating the flood stricken Vietnamese, others were modifying three of the squadron's helicopters to carry a new weapons system which had been developed specifically for use by the UH-34D. The TK-1, an externally mounted combination of M-60 machine guns and 2.75-inch rocket launchers, was first used on 19 November in support of a Tiger Flight mission conducted just south of the Song Thu Bon about 17 miles from Da Nang. Two armed UH-34Ds expended 90 rockets and 500 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition on enemy positions during prelanding strikes. The effectiveness of the new system could not be determined after this particular strike, but an estimated 10-15 Viet Cong were killed in a similar action by the armed UH-34Ds the next day. The transport aircraft armed with the TK-1 escorted troop carrying helicopters regularly throughout the remainder of the year. The weapons system was phased out in 1965 when U. S. Marines jet attack squadrons began arriving in South Vietnam.

Two improvements, one in the physical facilities available to the task element and the other in the size and composition of its security detachment, were made shortly after the Marines began using the UH-34Ds in the gunship role. On 25 November, HMM-365 moved its aircraft and maintenance equipment across the airfield into a newly constructed hangar just west of the strip. The second change took place the next day when the security force from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was replaced by Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced with engineers, 81mm mortar teams, and counter-mortar radar personnel. This adjustment came in response to the reports of the growing Viet Cong threat to Da Nang. Designated the Security Detachment, Marine Unit Vietnam, the 255-man organization was under the command of Major William F. Alsop, the battalion's executive officer. Captain John Sheridan, the company commander, retained tactical control of the infantry unit.

V:85

Although responsibility for the overall defense of the Da Nang airstrip still resided with the ARVN, the enlarged security detachment greatly strengthened the Marine portion of the installation. Major Alsop divided his reinforced rifle company into two groups--one to protect the living compound and the other to defend the flight line and the new hangar. Around the living compound the engineers constructed a complex of machine gun positions, mortar pits, and ammunition bunkers. A barricade was also erected at a gate near the Marine compound which previously had been open and manned only by Vietnamese sentries. Strong defensive positions were also constructed around the task element's new hangar and flight line. This network included fox holes, barbed wire, and cleared fields of fire. As an added precaution, Company L maintained a reaction force at the living compound. This force was prepared to board trucks and rush to reinforce the critical defenses around the aircraft and maintenance facilities in the event of an enemy ground attack.

Despite the stronger defenses and the presence of the larger Marine infantry force, several security-related problems were still unsolved. One which remained outside of Colonel King's influence was the laxity of the ARVN sentries around the outer perimeter who sometimes allowed Vietnamese civilians to wander into the installation. Another was that a small village close to the Marine compound, but outside the perimeter fence, still harbored an occasional sniper. The task element commander had lodged repeated complaints about both situations with the appropriate South Vietnamese authorities but no action had been taken to eliminate them. In spite of these minor sources of irritation, the recent changes in its defenses had greatly enhanced the task element's ability to protect itself against Communist ground attacks.

While Company L was developing the two defensive positions at the airbase, HMM-365's crews were continuing to provide support for both flood relief and military operation throughout I Corps. On 7 December, 17 Marine helicopters and eight Army UH-1B transports were called upon to support an assault operation designed to trap a Viet Cong force known to be hiding in a village less than five miles west of Da Nang. Code named DA NANG SIX, the operation began at daybreak when the American helicopters lifted 240 men of the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion into the operations area. Two UH-1B gunships teamed with two armed UH-34Ds to suppress ground fire which erupted as the first wave of transport aircraft began their approach to the landing zone. One Army gunship sustained minor damage when hit three times during the exchange of fire. After the enemy had been silenced, the landing proceeded without incident and the Vietnamese rangers quickly secured their objective. In the process, nine Viet Cong were killed and four others captured along with nine rifles and one automatic weapon. Successful though it was, the action on the outskirts of Da Nang confirmed previous reports that the Communists were tightening their grip on Quang Nam Province.

Another indication of the enemy's growing strength in I Corps came only two days later when a large Viet Cong force overran an ARVN outpost four and a half miles southwest of Tam Ky. I Corps Headquarters quickly drew up plans for a multi-company search of the area even though the Communists had withdrawn from the badly damaged government position shortly after their final assault. At 0845, 18 Marine UH-34Ds (three armed) and four Army UH-1Bs (two armed) helilifted a 208-man Tiger Force from Da Nang to Tam Ky where it had orders to stage with other units for the operation. While the U. S. helicopters were in the process of transporting the Vietnamese troops to Tam Ky, aerial observers sighted a large formation of Viet Cong moving southwest from the scene of the previous night's battle. The observers immediately brought air strikes and artillery fire to bear on the enemy and blocked his escape.

Fire power contained the enemy throughout the morning while the infantry units at Tam Ky prepared to exploit the situation with a heliborne assault. The helilift was launched at 1345 with the armed UH-34Ds and UH-1Bs delivering suppressive fire around a landing zone located approximately one and a half mile southwest of the overrun outpost. Although disorganized by nearly six hours of air and artillery strikes, the Communist guerrillas opposed the first assault wave with small arms fire from a number of covered positions in the vicinity of the landing zone. No helicopters were hit during the landing, however, and the assault force managed to secure the landing zone. This accomplished, two companies from the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion were helilifted into the position without incident. After the final troop lifts the Marine transport helicopters began evacuating casualties from the outpost where eight Vietnamese soldiers and one American advisor had died and 20 ARVN and an Australian advisor had been wounded. The government's response to the enemy-initiated action, including air and artillery strikes, accounted for 70 Viet Cong killed and 39 weapons captured. While reflecting a moderate success, these statistics were little compensation for the knowledge that the Communists could destroy a well fortified position within five miles of a provincial capital.

Weather caused many Marine flights to be delayed and some to be cancelled during the closing month of 1964. But the interruptions were not frequent enough to prevent the task element from fulfilling its support commitments. The only type of support operation actually curtailed due to the monsoons was the pre-planned heliborne assault into the mountains. Brief periods of favorable weather usually enabled the Marine crews to accomplish resupply and medical evacuation missions even into the most remote areas of I Corps although delays of such flights were not uncommon.

Lieutenant Colonel Koler's HMM-365 was nearing the end of its assignment in Vietnam as 1964 drew to a close. Through 31 December the unit's helicopters had already flown over 6,700 sorties for a total of nearly 4,700 hours of flight time. Since its arrival in early October, Koler's squadron had distinguished itself not only by providing support to military units throughout I Corps but by its extensive participation in the flood relief operations of November and December. During the 30-day period after 10 November, HMM-365 had contributed a substantial percentage of its flights to the prolonged effort to rescue and evacuate Vietnamese civilians from flooded areas.(17)

FMFPac changed the designation of the task element on the final day of 1964. From that date until mid-March of the following year the Marine helicopter squadron and its supporting elements in Vietnam would be known officially as Task Unit 79.3.5, Marine Unit Vietnam.

SUMMARIZING MARINE ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM FOR THE YEAR

In many respects the expansion of the Marine portion of the U. S. military assistance and advisory program which occurred during 1964 recalled the 1962 advisory build-up. At the beginning of the year, plans already being implemented pointed toward major reductions in the Marine personnel strength which then stood at 598 men. The infantry platoon assigned to protect the helicopter task unit at Da Nang had been withdrawn in December 1963 and plans were being developed to phase out the 450-man Marine helicopter task element. Through the spring months, Marine pilots and ground crews prepared a Vietnamese squadron to operate the UH-34Ds. Despite their progress and the subsequent commissioning of the VNAF 217th Squadron at midyear, the situation in I Corps demanded the retention of the helicopter task unit.

By late summer it had become apparent that instead of a reduction in its size and scope, the Marine effort in the Republic of Vietnam stood on the threshold of renewed expansion. In September the Marines were ordered to provide additional advisors to serve with ARVN units in I Corps. Shortly after the new advisors began arriving, increased Communist pressure in the northern provinces dictated the return of the security platoon to guard the task element's compound at Da Nang. By the end of the year the security force had been replaced by a reinforced infantry company--an adjustment which raised to 730 the number of U. S. Marines on duty in Vietnam.

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CHAPTER VI

THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

AS THE FIRST DECADE OF U. S. ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE ENDS

The close of 1964 marked the end of a full decade of American political, economic, and military advice and assistance to South Vietnam. That 10 year period had seen a fragile nation born and struggle for survival only to be driven to its knees by a new brand of Communist aggression--the "war of national liberation." It had also seen the U. S. commitment to free Vietnam's defense deepen almost proportionately with the increasing threat to her national existence. But, despite growing amounts of American aid and advice, there could be little doubt that South Vietnam stood near the brink of destruction at the hands of the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies as 1964 ended.

In many respects, the disaster which befell the Vietnamese Marines at Binh Gia on the final day of 1964, marked a critical turning point in the war being waged in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland feared that the battle heralded "the beginning of the classic and final 'mobile' phase of the war." "To the South Vietnamese government," he reported, "it meant the beginning of an intensive military challenge which the Vietnamese government could not meet within its own resources." (1) Brigadier General Carl Youngdale, Westmoreland's chief of staff for intelligence and the ranking Marine assigned to Vietnam, assessed the meaning of the battle in equally distressing terms. "Binh Gia," he explained, "was just part of the whole thing." "All the reserve--the strategic reserve--was fixed: the airborne and the four Marine battalions...there was absolutely no strategic reserve left." (2) So, as 1964 ended, hope was fading rapidly among American military officials in Saigon that the ground war for South Vietnam could continue for long without the more vigorous participation of the United States.

Forces other than the distressing military situation in the South were also working to move the United States toward direct military intervention against the Communist in Indochina. Although sustained open warfare had not occurred as a result of the Tonkin Gulf crisis of early August, tensions had continued to mount between North Vietnam and the United States throughout the autumn. On 1 November, just after the cessation of the U. S. air strikes which followed the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Viet Cong mortar squads had attacked American facilities at the Bien Hoa airbase near Saigon. Four American servicemen had been killed, five B-57 medium bombers destroyed, and eight others heavily damaged in the raid. President Johnson had reacted to the attack by initiating a month-long review of U. S. policy with regard to North Vietnam. That review had culminated in early December in the adoption of a two-phased plan to discourage further North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong by expanding the air war. Phase I, approved for implementation in December, called for stepped-up air strikes against the vital Communist infiltration routes in Laos and for the intensification of covert operations against North Vietnam. Approved "in principle," Phase II involved "a continuous program of progressively more serious air strikes" against North Vietnam. The implementation of Phase II, it was agreed, would depend on future enemy actions.(3) As if to indicate that Communist policy makers had settled on a parallel course of escalation,

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Viet Cong terrorists bombed a U. S. officers quarters in
Saigon on Christmas Eve, killing two Americans and wounding
over 50 others.

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The new year, 1965, would open against this portentous combination of intensified U. S. air activities over Laos, a worsening military situation on South Vietnam's battlefields, and the existence of the Phase II contingency plans. It was this situation which would spawn a new series of events as the first months of 1965 unfolded--events which would determine the direction of American and North Vietnamese military involvement in the war for South Vietnam. In January, MACV intelligence would learn that two new North Vietnamese Army regiments, the 32d and the 101st, had infiltrated the South and had initiated combat operations. Intelligence sources would also report another NVA regiment in its first stages of formation in Quang Tri Province. When added to a unit of similar size which had appeared in Kontum Province (II Corps Tactical Zone) in the final weeks of 1964, the new arrivals would raise to four the number of North Vietnamese regiments known to be operating on South Vietnamese soil. (4)

The pace of escalation would quicken in early February. The Viet Cong would attack a U. S. installation at Pleiku in the Central Highlands on the 7th. Eight Americans would die in this incident, over 100 would be wounded, and a score of aircraft either destroyed or damaged. President Johnson would react quickly to the Pleiku attack by ordering a series of reprisal air strikes under the code name FLAMING DART. Recognizing the possibility of surprise North Vietnamese air strikes against U. S. installations in Vietnam, Johnson would also order a Marine light antiaircraft missile (LAAM) battalion to Da Nang, the American base located closest to Communist airfields. Armed with deadly Hawk missiles, the Marines would protect the growing Da Nang airbase from which many of the FLAMING DART raids were to originate.

American reaction to the Communists' escalation would not be limited to the bombing of North Vietnam. Washington also would authorize the use of U. S. jet attack aircraft to engage targets in the Republic of Vietnam. On 19 February U. S. Air Force B-57s would conduct the first jet strikes flown by Americans in support of Government of Vietnam ground units. Less than one week later, on the 24th, Air Force jets would strike again, this time to break up a Communist ambush in the Central Highlands with a massive series of tactical air sorties.(5)

While the events of February would serve to focus world opinion more sharply on the intensifying conflict already raging over Southeast Asia, March would prove the decisive month in terms of the commitment of American combat power to the war in Vietnam. On 2 March the President would order the FLAMING DART raids replaced by Operation ROLLING THUNDER --a sustained air campaign against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam designed to escalate gradually in response to continued Communist military activities in South Vietnam. ROLLING THUNDER would constitute a transition from the earlier reprisal type raids to a continuing air campaign based upon strategic considerations.

Within a week after the first ROLLING THUNDER strikes over the North the ground war in South Vietnam would also shift toward deeper and more active American involvement. On 7 March the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade--the force which had been poised in the South China Sea since the Tonkin Gulf crisis of the previous August--would finally land at Da Nang to provide protection for the air base. Although the Pentagon would announce their mission as purely defensive, the Marines would become the first actual American ground combat units on hand for use in Vietnam. With that commitment the stage would be set for a new and more dramatic phase of what was already becoming known as the "Second Indochina War."

NOTES

CHAPTER I

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from Department of Defense, United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, 12 Books (Washington: GPO, 1971) hereafter, Pentagon Papers; Foreign Area Studies Division, American University, Area Handbook for South Vietnam (Washington: GPO, 1967); Foreign Area Studies Division, American University, Area Handbook for North Vietnam (Washington: GPO, 1967); Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), hereafter Fall, Two Viet-Nams; Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution. The U. S. In Vietnam, 1946-1966 (New York: Harper & Row, 1966 rev. ed.), hereafter Shaplen, The Lost Revolution.

(2) Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 3.

(3) B. S. N. Murti, Vietnam Divided (New York, 1964), p. 49.

(4) Letter, SecState to SecDef, 18Aug54, as quoted in, "U. S. Training of the Vietnamese National Army 1954-1959," Pentagon Papers, bk. 2, sec. IV.A.4, p. 3.

CHAPTER II

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: MajGen Edward G. Lansdale, USAF (Ret.), In The Midst of Wars (New York. Harper & Row, 1972, hereafter

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Lansdale, In The Midst of Wars; Fall, Two Viet-Nams.

(2) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), "Vietnamese Naval Forces; Origin of the Species," USNI Proceedings, v. 99, no. 2 (Feb73), p. 48-58; Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.) intvw by HistDiv HQMC, dtd 10-11Feb70 (OralHistColl, HistDiv, HQMC), hereafter Croizat Interview; Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), Comments and supporting materials on draft MS, Jack Shulimson, "U. S. Marines In Vietnam," pt I (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter, Croizat Comments and Materials.

(3) Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), "Notes on The Organization of the Vietnamese Marine Corps," p. 3 (Croizat Comments and Materials), hereafter, Croizat, Notes on the Organization.

(4) Ibid., p. 5.

(5) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam At War---Vietnam: Dragon Embattled (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), v. II, hereafter Buttinger, Vietnam: Dragon Embattled II; Fall, Two Viet-Nams; The Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers. The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam, 4 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), v. I, hereafter, Gravel Edition, Pentagon Papers.

(6) Croizat, Notes on the Organization, p. 5.

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(7) A few French naval officers and noncommissioned officers remained at Nha Trang as instructors until late May 1957.

(8) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Maj J. M. Yingling, Capt Harvey D. Bradshaw, Benis M. Frank, "United States Marine Corps Activities In Vietnam," MS (HistDiv HQMC, 1963), hereafter, Yingling, et al., USMC Activities, 1954-1963; Buttinger, Vietnam Dragon Embattled, II; Fall, Two Viet-Nams.

(9) Fall, Two Viet-Nams, p. 360.

(10) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Yingling, et al., USMC Activities, 1954-1963; "Origins of The Insurgency," Pentagon Papers, bk. 2, sec I. A.5; LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret.), Comments on draft MS, Jack Shulimson, "U. S. Marines In Vietnam," pt. I (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter, Krulak Comments.

(11) "Origins of the Insurgency," Pentagon Papers, bk. 2, sec. IV.A.5, tab. 4, pp. 43, 44.

(12) Ibid., IV.B.1, p. 1.

(13) Ibid., p. 4.

(14) Ibid., p. 29.

(15) Krulak Comments.

CHAPTER III

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Gravel Edition, Pentagon Papers, v. I and

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II; "The Fall Decisions," Pentagon Papers, bk. 2, sec. IV.B. ch. V and VI. "The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-63," Pentagon Papers, bk. 3, sec. IV.B.2; David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York Random House, 1972).

(2) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from. Maj Harvey D. Bradshaw, "United States Marine Corps Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, 1964," MS (HistDiv HQMC, 1966), hereafter, Bradshaw, USMC Operations in RVN; SrMarAdv ltr to CMC dtd 24Jan64, Subj Historical Data, VNMC, hereafter, SrMarAdv ltr, 24Jan64, CinCPac Command History, 1962, hereafter, CinCPac CmdHist, 1962.

(3) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: SrMarAdv ltr, 24Jan64, Capt D. R. Christensen, "A Special Gazette Report: Dateline...Vietnam," Marine Corps Gazette, v. 47, no. 9 (Sep63), hereafter, Christensen, Dateline, Maj Alfred J. Croft, "Date-line...Vietnam," Marine Corps Gazette, v. 47, no. 9 (Oct63), hereafter, Croft, Date-line.

(4) SrMarAdv ltr, 24Jan64.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from. HQMC Msg File; CinCPac CmdHist, 1962; LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation In Vietnam, 1962-1970," Navy Review, v. 10, (1971), hereafter, McCutcheon, Marine Aviation.

(7) JCS to CinCPac, 17Jan62, 1212Z, HQMC Msg File.

- (8) CinCPac to JCS 28Feb62, 0217Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (9) JCS to CinCPac, 6Mar62, 1838Z, HQMC Msg File; DA to CinCPac and CinCUSARPac, 2Mar63, HQMC Msg File.
- (10) ChMAAG, VN to CinCPac, 26Feb, 0945Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (11) CGFMFPac to CinCPac 28Feb, 0113Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) CinCPacFlt to CinCPac, 28Feb62, 2044Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (14) CinCPac Bangkok Th to ComUSMACV, 5Mar62, 0340Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (15) ComUSMACV to CinCPac, 8Mar62, 0941Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (16) CinCUSARPac to CinCPac, 9Mar62, 2100Z, NHD.
- (17) Dir, DivAv, HQMC, Briefing Item, dtd 14Mar62, for CMC Weekly Conf., Subj. Assignment of Marine Helicopter Squadron to ChMAAG, Vietnam.
- (18) CinCPac to JCS, 14Mar62, 0712Z, HQMC Msg File.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) CinCPac to CinCPacFlt and ComUSMACV, 21Mar62, 0412Z; CinCPac Flt to ComSeventhFlt, 21Mar62, 2048Z.
- (21) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Commander Task Unit 79.3.5 ComdDiary, 31Jul-5Nov62, hereafter, CTU 79.3.5 CmdD, 31Jul-5Nov62; CG, 1st MAW, SHUFLY OpSfms, Apr-Sep62; CG, First MAW Ltr of Instruction, SHUFLY, dtd 12Nov62, hereafter, CG, First MAW, LOI; LtCol Archie J. Clapp, SHU-FLY Diary, " USNI Proceedings, v. 89, no. 10 (Oct63), hereafter, Clapp, "SHU-FLY Diary"; "Sage At Soc Trang. Marines in Viet-Nam," Marine Corps

Gazette, v. 46, no. 12 (Dec62), hereafter, Sage At Soc Trang.

(22) CG, 1st MAW to ComSeventhFlt, 30Mar62, 0700Z, HQMC

Msg File.

(23) Ibid.

(24) ComSeventhFlt to CTF 76 and CTG 79.3, 3Apr62, HQMC

Msg File.

(25) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: LtCol Robert L. Rathbun, Comments on draft MS, Yingling, et al., USMC Activities, 1954-1963, (HistDiv, HQMC), hereafter, Rathbun Comments; Clapp, "SHU-FLY Diary", CTU 79.3.5 CmdD, 31Jul-5Nov62; CG, 1st MAW SHUFLY OpSums, Apr-Sep62.

(26) Clapp, "SHU-FLY Diary," p. 46.

(27) Ibid., p. 51.

(28) CTU 79.5 ComdD, 31Jul-5Nov62.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Yingling, et al., USMC Activities, 1954-1963, p. 118.

(31) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CTU 79.3.5 CmdD, 31Jul-5Nov62; McCutcheon, Marine Aviation; Rathbun Comments.

(32) Frances FitzGerald, Fire In The Lake. The Vietnamese and The Americans in Vietnam (Boston. Little, Brown and Company, 1972), p. 42, hereafter, FitzGerald, Fire In The Lake.

(33) Joseph Buttinger, The Smaller Dragon, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), p. 92.

(34) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul-5Nov62; CG, 1st MAW, SHUFLY, OpSums, Sep-Dec62; McCutcheon, Marine Aviation; Rathbun Comments.

(35) ComUSMACV ltr to MACJ-2, dtd 29Sep62, Subj: Viet Cong Capabilities and Possible Courses of Action for Period October 1962-February 1963 (encl. D-17, CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD 6Nov62-31Oct63).

(36) Ibid.

(37) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul-5Nov62; CG, 1st MAW, SHUFLY, OpSums, Sep-Dec62; McCutcheon, Marine Aviation; Rathbun Comments.

(38) Marine Corps Emergency Action Center, Items of Significant Interest, Oct62, hereafter MCEAC Items.

(39) CTU 79.3.5 ltr to CG 1st MAW, dtd 40Oct62, Subj: Rotation of TU personnel to South Vietnam (encl. D-15, CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 6Apr-5Nov62).

CHAPTER IV

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: FitzGerald, Fire In The Lake; "The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, May-November, 1963," Pentagon Papers, bk. 3, sec. IV.B.5; Shaplen, The Lost Revolution.

(2) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Senior Marine Advisor, MACV, Monthly Historical Summaries, 1963-1965, hereafter, SMA, MACV HistSums; Col Wesley C. Noren, Comments on draft MS, Bradshaw, "U. S. Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 1964," hereafter Noren Comments; Col Edwin F. Black, USA and Lt R. P. W. Murphy, USNR, "The South Vietnamese Navy," USNI Proceedings, v. 90, no. 1 (Jan64) pp. 52-62; Croft, Date-line, p. 18.

(3) LtCol Joseph N. Smith intvw by Capt Robert Whitlow, HistDiv, HQMC, hereafter, Smith Interview.

(4) McCutcheon, Marine Aviation, p. 126.

(5) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov62-31Oct63; CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 31Oct63-14Jan64; CG, 1st MAW, SHUFLY, OpSums, Jan- , Dec63, Col Thomas J. Ross, Comments on draft MS, Bradshaw, "U. S. Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 1964," hereafter, Ross Comments, McCutcheon, Marine Aviation.

(6) CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov-31Oct63.

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Aviation Headquarters Operations Center SOP, p. 1, (encl 5, CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 18Jul-31Oct63).

(10) Col A. D. Gomez ltr to Coordinator, Marine Corps Landing Force Development Center, dtd 23Oct63, encl 1, CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD 18Jul-31Oct63.

(11) 1st MAW OpSums, 8Jun-20Oct63.

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(12) Ross Comments.

(13) CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdDs, 6Nov62-14Jan64.

CHAPTER V

(1) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff, Command History, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1964, hereafter, MACV CmdHist, "Military Pressures Against North Vietnam, Jul-Oct, 1964," Pentagon Papers, bk 4, sec. IV.C.2; Gravel Edition, Pentagon Papers, v. III; CinCPac Command History, 1964, dtd 23Apr65, hereafter, CinCPac CmdHist.

(2) Gravel Edition, Pentagon Papers, v. III, p. 501.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid., II, p. 471.

(5) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Col William P. Nesbit, Comments on draft MS, Bradshaw, "U. S. Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 1964," hereafter, Nesbit Comments; CG FMFPac On-the-Job-Training, RVN, Monthly Reports, Jan-Dec, 1964, hereafter, OJT Monthly Rpts; James C. Pickerell, "Marine Advisor: VietNam," Marine Corps Gazette, v. 48, no. 4 (Apr64), hereafter, Pickerell, Marine Advisor, Senior Marine Advisor, MACV, After Action Reports, 1964-65, hereafter, SMA, After Tour Repts; SMA, MACV HistSums; Noren Comments.

- (6) Nesbit Comments.
- (7) Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from. Capt Philip O. Brady, intvw by HistBr, G-3 Div, HQMC, dtd 26Jan66 (OralHistColl, HistDiv, HQMC), hereafter, Brady Interview; Capt Philip O. Brady, After Tour Rept, dtd 9Dec65 in SMA After Tour Repts, OJT Monthly Repts; Nesbit Comments.
- (8) Col William P. Nesbit ltr to CMC, dtd 1Sep65, SMA, MACV After Tour Rept.
- (9) Naval Advisory Group, MACV, Historical Review, 1964-65, p. 21, hereafter, NAVGP, MACV, HistRevw.
- (10) Col Raymond C. Damm intvw by Capt Robert Whitlow, HistDiv, HQMC, dtd 4May73, hereafter, Damm Interview.
- (11) NAVGP, MACV, HistRevw, 1964-65, p. 14.
- (12) CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63-14Jan64.
- (13) Statement of General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., CMC, before the House Committee on Armed Services, dtd March 1964.
- (14) Task Element 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63-16Oct64.
- (15) CTE 79.3.3.6/CG 1st MAW Weekly OpSums, 9Jul64-7Oct64.
- (16) CTE ComdD, 10Jul-16Oct64.
- (17) CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 17Oct64-14Jan65.

CHAPTER VI

- (1) General William C. Westmoreland and Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Report On The War in Vietnam (Washington, 1968), p.

N:10

95, hereafter, Westmoreland and Sharp, Report On The War.

(2) BGen Carl A. Youngdale intvw by HistDiv, HQMC dtd 24Jul73 (OralHistColl, HistDiv, HQMC), hereafter, Youngdale Interview.

(3) Gravel Edition, Pentagon Papers, v. III, p. 289.

(4) Westmoreland and Sharp, Report On The War, pp. 95, 97.

(5) Ibid., p. 98.

APPENDIX A

Senior Marine Advisors, 1954 through 1964

LtCol Victor J. Croizat	Aug 1954 - Jun 1956
LtCol William N. Wilkes, Jr.	Jun 1956 - Jun 1958
LtCol Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr.	Jun 1958 - Jun 1960
LtCol Clifford J. Robichaud, Jr.	Jun 1960 - Aug 1961
LtCol Robert E. Brown	Aug 1961 - Oct 1962
LtCol Clarence G. Moody, Jr.	Oct 1962 - Oct 1963
LtCol Wesley C. Noren	Oct 1963 - Sep 1964
LtCol William P. Nesbit	Sep 1964 -

Appendix B

VNMC Senior Marine Officers and Commandants

Maj	Le Quang Trong	1 Oct 1954 - 17 Jun 1956
Maj	Phan Van Lieu	18 Jan 1956 - 22 Aug 1956
Capt	Bui Pho Chi	23 Aug 1956 - 1 Oct 1956
Maj	Le Nhu Hung	2 Oct 1956 - 23 May 1960
LtCol	Le Nguyen Khang	24 May 1960 - 15 Dec 1963
LtCol	Nguyen Ba Lien	16 Dec 1963 - Feb 1964
Col	LeNguyen Khang	Feb 1964

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Appendix C

SHUFLY, SQUADRON, AND SUB UNIT COMMANDERS (*)

15 April 1962-31 December 1964

<u>SHUFLY COMMANDERS</u>	<u>DATES</u>
Col John F. Carey	15 Apr 1962 - 31 Jul 1962
Col Julius W. Ireland	1 Aug 1962 - 5 Nov 1962
LtCol Alton W. McCully	6 Nov 1962 - 28 Jan 1963
LtCol Harold F. Brown	29 Jan 1963 - 17 Jul 1963
Col Andre D. Gomez	18 Jul 1963 - 14 Jan 1964
Col Robert A. Merchant	16 Jan 1964 - 9 Jul 1964
Col Hardy Hay	10 Jul 1964 - 16 Oct 1964
Col John H. King, Jr.	17 Oct 1964 - 31 Dec 1964

<u>SQUADRON COMMANDERS</u>	<u>DATES</u>	<u>SQUADRON</u>
LtCol Archie J. Clapp	15 Apr 1962 - 31 Jul 1962	HMM-362
LtCol Robert L. Rathbun	1 Aug 1962 - 11 Jan 1963	HMM-163
LtCol Reinhardt Leu	12 Jan 1963 - 7 Jun 1963	HMM-162
LtCol Frank A. Shook	8 Jun 1963 - 1 Oct 1963	HMM-261
LtCol Thomas J. Ross	2 Oct 1963 - 31 Jan 1964	HMM-361
LtCol John H. Lavoy	1 Feb 1964 - 21 Jun 1964	HMM-364
LtCol Oliver W. Curtis	17 Jun 1964 - 7 Oct 1964	HMM-162
LtCol Joseph Koler, Jr.	8 Oct 1964 - 31 Dec 1964	HMM-365

<u>SUB UNIT COMMANDERS</u>	<u>DATES</u>
LtCol William W. Eldridge, Jr.	15 Apr 1962 - 3 Aug 1962
LtCol Ralph R. Davis	4 Aug 1962 - 15 Jan 1963
LtCol George H. Linnemeier	16 Jan 1963 - 4 Jul 1963
LtCol Earl W. Cassidy	5 Jul 1963 - 6 Feb 1964
LtCol Samuel G. Beal	7 Feb 1964 - 26 Jun 1964
Maj Marion R. Green	27 Jun 1964 - 14 Dec 1964
LtCol Thomas E. Vernon	15 Dec 1964 - 31 Dec 1964

(*) SHUFLY was designated Task Unit 79.3.5 from 15 Apr 1962 until 6 Nov 1962; Task Element 79.3.3.6 from 6 Nov 1962 through 31 Dec 1964.

Appendix D

Awards and Decorations, RVN, through 1964 (*)Navy Cross

Maj	Donald E. Koelper (1)	16 Feb 1964
SSgt	John C. Thompson	30 Apr 1964

Navy Distinguished Service Medal

MajGen	Richard G. Weede (2)	Feb 1962 - May 1964
MajGen	Carl A. Youngdale	25 Jan 1964 - 20 Jul 1964

Silver Star Medal

Maj	John R. Braddon	27 Apr 1964
1stLt	Phillip O. Brady	31 Dec 1964
Capt	Franklin P. Eller, Jr.	31 Dec 1964
Capt	Joseph N. Smith	27 Oct 1963 - 25 Apr 1964
Capt	Richard B. Taylor (3)	25 Nov 1962 - 31 Oct 1963

(*) Other awards, such as Navy Commendation Medals, Air Medals, and Purple Hearts are not included in this list.

Legion of Merit

Col	Earl E. Anderson	8 Jul 1963 - 15 May 1964
LtCol	Earl W. Cassidy	2 Jul 1963 - 14 Jan 1964
Col	John F. Carey (4)	9 Apr 1962 - 31 Jul 1962
LtCol	Archie J. Clapp (5)	15 Apr 1962 - 31 Jul 1962
Col	Andre D. Gomez	19 Jul 1963 - 14 Jan 1964
Col	John H. King, Jr.	16 Oct 1964 - 15 May 1965
LtCol	Joseph Koler, Jr.	7 Oct 1964 - 18 Feb 1965
LtCol	John H. La Voy	1 Feb 1964 - 22 Jun 1964
Col	Robert A. Merchant	2 Jan 1964 - 10 Jul 1964
LtCol	Clarence C. Moody, Jr.	18 Jan 1962 - 24 Oct 1963
Col	Wesley C. Noren	13 Oct 1963 - 13 Sep 1964
LtCol	Thomas J. Ross	1 Oct 1963 - 31 Jan 1964
Col	Roy H. Thompson	27 Feb 1962 - 16 Jun 1964
Col	Charles E. Warren	8 Feb 1962 - 9 Jul 1964
Col	Edwin B. Wheeler	1 Aug 1964 - 23 Aug 1965

Distinguished Flying Cross

Maj	Albert N. Allen	27 Apr 1964
Capt	William J. Burrows	27 Apr 1964
Capt	Charles E. Cannon	27 Apr 1964
Capt	William Cunningham	27 Apr 1964
1stLt	Ronald V. Debrincat	27 Apr 1964
Capt	George H. Dunn II	27 Apr 1964
Capt	George H. Dunn II	30 Apr 1964
Capt	Robert K. Ervi	31 Dec 1963
1stLt	Melvin T. Graves	27 Apr 1964
Capt	Theodore A. Heister	1 Aug 1963
1stLt	Donald A. Hodgen (6)	10 Mar 1963 - 11 Mar 1963
LtCol	John H. La Voy	27 Apr 1964
Capt	Peter A. Love	27 Apr 1964
WO	Dennis T. McKee	27 Apr 1964
1stLt	Edward P. Moore	27 Apr 1964
CWO	Robert F. Patton	5 Jun 1964
1stLt	Thomas H. Peters (7)	9 Mar 1963 - 10 Mar 1963
Capt	Eugene W. Rawlins	27 Apr 1964
Capt	Howard G. Taylor	27 Apr 1964
1stLt	Charles R. Upshaw	27 Apr 1964
Capt	William W. Wamel, Jr.	27 Apr 1964
Capt	William W. Wamel, Jr.	30 Apr 1964
Maj C	Goodell P. Warren	27 Apr 1964
1stLt	Charles C. Wood, Jr.	27 Apr 1964
Capt	Grant T. Yule	27 Apr 1964

Bronze Star Medal

SSgt	John Baran	12 Dec 1964
LtCol	Samuel G. Beal	3 Feb 1964 - 1 Jul 1964
SSgt	Clifford J. Beaver	30 Dec 1964 - 31 Dec 1964
LtCol	George A. Brigham	3 Apr 1964 - 3 Jul 1964
SSgt	Marvin I. Bryant	12 Oct 1964 - 8 Mar 1965
Cpl	Clarence L. Chester	30 Jun 1964
Capt	Don R. Christensen(8)	28 Sep 1962 - 31 Jul 1963
2dLt	Francis R. Ciccone	16 Oct 1964
SSgt	James A. Coryer	30 Jun 1964
Maj	Alfred J. Croft	1 Feb 1962 - 7 Feb 1964
LtCol	Oliver W. Curtis	17 Jun 1964 - 23 Nov 1964
LtCol	Raymond C. Damm	10 May 1964 - 1 Dec 1964
Maj	Alfred M. Gray, Jr.	11 Apr 1964 - 15 Aug 1964
Capt	James J. Harp	10 Mar 1963 - 11 Mar 1963
Cpl	Cary F. Janulewicz	9 Dec 1964
1stLt	Weston L. Johnson	10 Nov 1964
2dLt	James P. Kelliher	31 Dec 1964
1stLt	Donald H. Larson	14 Apr 1964 - 1 Feb 1965
GySgt	Richard L. Latimer	9 Dec 1964
Capt	John P. Monahan	21 Mar 1964 - 28 Feb 1965
Capt	James P. McWilliams	2 May 1963 - 9 Jun 1964
GySgt	Charles D. Peck	14 Apr 1963 - 22 Apr 1964
LCpl	James N. Phinney	10 Apr 1964
LCpl	Walter L. Rupp	24 Mar 1964
GySgt	Edmund R. Sewell	20 Sep 1964

Bronze Star Medal (Continued)

SSgt	Cecil C. Stibbens	Dec 1962 -	Dec 1964
Capt	Edward H. Walsh	28 Sep 1964 -	1 May 1964
Maj	Charles K. Whitfield	31 Jan 1964 -	20 Jan 1965
Capt	Frank Zimolzak(9)	27 Apr 1962 -	25 May 1963

Notes

Appendix D

- (1) First Navy Cross approved for Vietnam.
- (2) First Navy Distinguished Service Medal awarded for Vietnam.
- (3) First Silver Star Medal awarded to a Marine for Vietnam.
- (4-5) First Legion of Merit awards to USMC personnel for Vietnam.
- (6-7) First Distinguished Flying Crosses approved for USMC personnel in Vietnam.
- (8) One of the first two Bronze Star Medals (approved the same date) for USMC personnel in Vietnam.
- (9) One of the first two Bronze Star Medals (approved for the same date) for USMC personnel in Vietnam.

Appendix E

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

AHOC	Aviation Headquarters Operations Center
ARVN	Army of The Republic of Vietnam
ASOC	Air Support Operations Center
CG	Civil Guard
ChMAAG	Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group
CinCPac	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CIP	Counter Insurgency Plan
ComUSMACV	Commander, U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FEC	French Expeditionary Corps
FMEPac	Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific
GCA	Ground Controlled Approach (system)
GVN	Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
ICC	International Control Commission
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MABS	Marine Air Base Squadron
MATCU	Marine Airfield Traffic Control Unit
MAG	Marine Aircraft Group
MAW	Marine Aircraft Wing

MEB Marine Expeditionary Brigade

OJT On-The-Job Training

PAVN Peoples Army of Vietnam

PF Popular Forces

RF Regional Forces

RVN Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

RVNAF Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

SAR Search and Rescue

SDC Self Defense Corps

SEATO Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

SLF Special Landing Force

TACAN Tactical Air Navigation (system)

TAFDS Tactical Airfield Fuel Dispensing System

TERM Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission

TRIM Training Relations Instruction Mission

USMAAG (MAGG) U. S. Military Assistance Advisory Group

USMACV (MACV) U. S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

VC Viet Cong

VMGR Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron

VNA Vietnamese National Army

VNAF Vietnamese Air Force

VNMC Vietnamese Marine Corps