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# VIETNAM HISTORICAL DATA

**By Jack Shulimson**

*Professional Marines as well as the professional historian must exploit the historical record.*

**O**NE learns through experience, and a large part of the experience of the Marine Corps in Vietnam is contained in the documentation being maintained by the Historical Branch. The escalation of the war since 1965 has created a corresponding expansion in the amount of paper generated. At the present moment in the Archives Unit of the Historical Reference Section (located in Room 3129, Navy Annex Building), there are approximately 300 cubic feet of record material pertaining to the Marine Corps role in South Vietnam. As important as this body of material is to history, it is obvious that this information has value for many diverse types of operating and staff agencies of the Marine Corps.

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Throughout the years, the Marine Corps has required several types of historical reporting: command diaries, after-action reports, special action reports, etc. But there was no single program which affected all Marine units and tied these loose records into one cohesive package. This ended in July 1965 with the inauguration of the command chronology. It not only replaced the command diary but required all Marine units down to the squadron/battalion level, separate posts and stations, and special detachments to report at least twice a year. Units assigned to WestPac submit their chronologies on a monthly basis. At the same time it implemented the chronology program, the Marine Corps set down historical reporting guidelines for the Marine field historian. (See Colonel Frank C. Caldwell, *Every Marine a Historian*, GAZETTE, Mar. 66.) In conjunction with this new reporting system, the Marine Corps was the first of the armed services to experiment with the tape interview. Over 2,000 taped interviews of Vietnam veterans are now in the Historical Branch Oral History Collection. All of these programs have been modified from time to time, and in January of this year, the Marine Corps published its *Manual for the Marine Corps Historical Program*, MCO P5750. 1A. For the first time, "the policies governing the administration of the historical agencies of the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Historical Program" are set forth under one cover. Section II of this manual describes in detail all of the reporting procedures mentioned above.

As the command chronology is the basic working document, or what historians call "primary source material," it is appropriate to discuss its content. The first part contains a sequential listing of significant events of the unit for the period covered by the report, as well as the names of all commanding officers and principal staff officers. As valuable as this portion of the command chronology may be, its attachments and supplements are often of even more significance. These should include operational plans and orders, journals, periodic reports from units and general and special staff sections, after-action reports, intelligence summaries—in other words all the raw material of history, out of which the historian can attempt to recreate the past.

In actuality, there are as many variations in the quality of these documents as there are commanders. On the whole, the chronologies are complete and detailed without too much chaff, but there are some that are not worth the price of scrap paper. In order to improve this situation, a Marine officer from the Historical Branch in October 1966 visited WestPac to give further guidance to the units in Vietnam. The resulting periodic

avalanches of paper into the archives present another set of problems to the Historical Branch, mainly that of control.

These chronologies furnish skeleton outlines of Marine activities, but there are several other sources which round out and supplement these periodic reports. Fundamental to the development of the Vietnam historical data base has been the cooperation of other Marine Corps agencies with the Historical Branch. One of the most important has been the close working relationship with the Command Center. Through an understanding between the head of the Historical Branch and the Director of the Command Center, much of the holdings of the Command Center are retired to the historical archives one year after their creation, including the "Items of Significant Interest," Status of Forces, and various message traffic. The Historical Branch is also the recipient of various messages from its parent division—G-3—and has been able to build up a sizeable message file. Integral components of this file are the daily situation reports from CG, FMFPac and CG, III MAF.

An aspect of the war that has been overshadowed by the buildup of U.S. troop strength has been the American Advisory Program with the Vietnamese Armed Forces. It is still an essential aspect of the overall allied and Marine effort. The Historical Branch here at home through an agreement with the Senior Marine Advisor in Saigon has received a great deal of the documentation relating to Marine advisors with the Vietnamese Marine Brigade and with ARVN forces. These records consist of after-action and periodic reports to the Senior Marine Advisor. Additionally, there are after-tour reports of Marine advisors just prior to their reassignment.

There are other groups of records in the archives, although small in size, which contain significant information for any serious student of the war. These include the command diaries of the Marine Task Element in Vietnam which cover six month periods from 1962 - January 1965.

The Historical Branch holds command diaries of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) dating back to August 1964 during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis. The 9th MEB hit the front pages of the newspapers of the world when 3/9 landed across Red Beach near Danang and 1/3 arrived by air from Okinawa. But most Marines know that the MEB was an entity long before the historic events of 8 March 1965. The special landing forces of the Seventh Fleet have long been a feature of American power in the Western Pacific. These battalion landing teams and helicopter squadrons have submitted either command diaries or now chronologies to cover their period afloat.

On 6 May 1965, the III MAF was formed in Vietnam and submitted command diaries for the

## Success and even failures are recorded in the archives . . .

months of May and June 1965. Since July 1965 the Marine command has sent back command chronologies under the new historical reporting system.

In addition to these series of formal reports, the Historical Branch has received other segments of records from the field. LtGen Krulak visited III MAF many times and his reports to the Commandant have been retired to the archives. Viewpoints of other Marine general officers can be found in the annual General Officers Symposium, whose published portions are part of our collection. Gen Greene, before his retirement as Commandant, made a special arrangement with the Historical Branch concerning his personal and official papers. Most of the general's papers have become part of the holdings of the Historical Branch collection. A large part of the personal files have a severely restricted access; however, much of it is available for official purposes. With Gen Greene's example, perhaps other retiring senior Marine officers will be induced to add their papers to the Marine Corps' historical holdings. Despite our efforts to retain all relevant documentation, too many offices find it more convenient to burn classified material rather than to check with the archives to determine whether their records may have historical significance.

The records that have been discussed so far are classified by the historian as primary source material (first hand or eye witness accounts). Secondary sources (accounts or evaluations after the events have occurred), however, have their place in the historical records. A good secondary source provides the historian with a guide to primary record material and furnishes an interpretation of events that the historian can use as a gauge to counterbalance his own independent evaluation.

Of significance to the Marine Corps are the products of FMFPac. Since October 1965, FMFPac has published a document entitled "Operations of III MAF in Vietnam." The first in this series covered the months March-September 1965 while the remaining volumes deal with one month segments. Recently CG, FMFPac has come out with a two-volume history of III MAF for the period 1965-67. All of these documents are helpful to the military historian interested in Vietnam.

Marine Corps commands have not been the only ones to produce narrative analyses of their operations. The Amphibious Force Commander of the Seventh Fleet, CTF 76, published a classified history of amphibious landings in Vietnam for the period 1965-66. Both ComUSMACV and CinCPac have completed command histories for 1965 and 1966. Copies of all these documents are in the Marine archival collection.

The Historical Branch has been busy in de-

veloping its own data base material as well. In 1964, the Writing Section prepared a classified study at the request of the Secretary of Defense, covering the activities of the Marine Corps in Vietnam during the years 1954-63. This was followed by a history of the Marines in Vietnam during 1964. In January 1966, a classified chronology of events for the period 1954-65, entitled *Commandant's Vietnam Chronology* was given limited distribution and the Vietnam Unit of the Writing Section has been updating the chronology every month. Further, the Historical Branch has recently published two unclassified Historical Reference Pamphlets, *Vietnam Small Unit Action, Summer 1966* and *Marine Corps Civic Action, March 1965-March 1966*.

The Branch is now working on a series of monographs covering six month segments of Marine operations in Vietnam. The first of these studies for the period January-June 1965 has been completed and sent to the field for comments. These comments of participants then will become part of the historical record. Authors are already working on the next two monographs in this series. Eventually the Marine Corps plans to publish in book form a history of the Marines in Vietnam which will correspond to volumes on World War II and Korea.

It should be understood, however, that not all material pertaining to the role of the Marines in Vietnam is to be found in the records maintained by the Historical Branch. The Naval Historical Division contains one of the best military archives in the Washington area. Its Operational Archives Branch, located in the Washington Navy Yard, contains much of the documentary material concerning Marine Corps amphibious operations, movements, and logistic support. The Army, Air Force and Joint Chiefs of Staff all have significant historical programs and their historians are most cooperative in providing information and in making their files available to serious researchers.

The Marine Corps Historical Program has been and is very ambitious. But it would be presumptuous to say that all has gone as planned. The perennial problems of record preservation and information retrieval still remain. Hopefully, computer technology may eventually prove helpful in these areas. Above all, it must be remembered that the historical records of the Marine Corps are not only the concern of the Historical Branch but of every Marine. Much of the success and even failures of the Marines in Vietnam are recorded in the historical archives. The Vietnam historical data base already exists; it only remains to be exploited, not only by the professional historian but also by the professional Marine.

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