Vietnam War, 1954–1975

Throughout the 1950s, the United States increasingly sought to contain Communism, with its greatest challenge emerging in Southeast Asia following France's defeat by the Communist Viet Minh in the First Indochina War. The 1954 Geneva Accords temporarily divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, establishing a Communist North and a non-Communist South. Tensions between the two states escalated, and a Communist insurgency known as the Viet Cong formed in the South, aiming to overthrow the government in Saigon with military and financial assistance from North Vietnam. The conflict soon became a proxy battleground in the broader Cold War, as U.S. leaders viewed the struggle as part of global efforts to stop Chinese- and Soviet-backed Communism from spreading. As a consequence, the United States committed extensive political, economic, and military support to South Vietnam in an effort to preserve that nation's independence, marking a significant and prolonged chapter in Marine Corps history.

The Advisory and Combat Assistance Era, 1954–1964

The Marine Corps began its involvement in the Vietnam War on 2 August 1954, when Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat arrived as a liaison officer with the newly formed United States Military Assistance and Advisory Group to the Republic of Vietnam. For the next eight years, Marines primarily focused on advisory and staff roles. That changed in mid-April 1962, when Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 (HMM-362), led by Lieutenant Colonel Archie Clapp, deployed to provide combat support to South Vietnam's regulars and militia, called the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), in defeating the insurgency that had expanded to 20,000 Viet Cong.

The pivotal event that led to the deployment of American ground troops to Southeast Asia occurred on 2 August 1964, when North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the destroyer USS *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin. The incident, and a reported second attack two nights later against USS *Turner Joy* (DD 951), prompted Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 10 August, granting President Lyndon B. Johnson "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces

of the United States and to prevent further aggression." By the New Year, Communists began attacking American facilities and advisors. Following Viet Cong attacks on the Da Nang Air Base at the end of February 1965, the president authorized the deployment of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB), which went ashore at Da Nang on 8 March to become the first U.S. ground combat troops in South Vietnam. With the landing, the number of Marines in South Vietnam jumped from 200 to more than 5,000.

The Buildup, 1965

To prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam, President Johnson authorized a buildup of combat power. Among the reinforcements sent to U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV), the U.S. headquarters in the country, were a U.S. Army brigade and Australian, New Zealand, and South Korean forces. On 6 May, the 9th MEB was deactivated and III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) was established along with the 3d Marine Division (Forward), both of which were under the command of Major General Lewis W. Walt. The additional Marines allowed III MAF to establish combat outposts called enclaves in the populated coastal areas of Phu Bai, Chu Lai, and Qui Nhon to protect air and logistics bases. During the coming months, American troops dispersed across four corps tactical zones in South Vietnam. III MAF was responsible for the I Corps Tactical Zone, made up of South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces. Though the Marine area of operations was not the largest corps tactical zone in the country, it shared borders with North Vietnam and Laos, had 2.6 million people, and was larger in area than Connecticut at 16,000 square kilometers.

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With the objective of separating the Viet Cong from the population, III MAF designed a balanced approach of pacification operations inside the hamlets and villages, counterguerrilla operations around the enclaves, and search and destroy operations away from towns and villages. The idea was to push the Viet Cong away from the villages and spread security out like an ink blot until the pacified areas were connected. Central to this ink-blot strategy was the Marine

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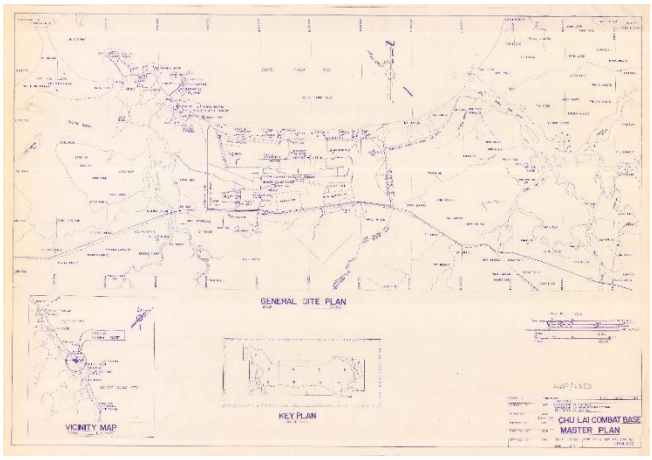
Corps' unique approach to pacification. Security assurances came from the Combined Action Program (CAP), which used platoon-sized formations composed of a reinforced squad of Marines and militiamen. Marines based the concept on the Corps' experience during the small wars of the early twentieth century, with the platoon living in hamlets and villages to ensure security and train local forces to defend their community.

In August, the senior U.S. commander in South Vietnam, Army General William C. Westmoreland, instructed the Marines to range out from their base areas to conduct search and destroy operations against main-force Viet Cong. As a result, Marines initiated the first major U.S. ground offensive of the war on 18 August 1965 with Operation Starlite. A reinforced regiment attacked the *1st Viet Cong Regiment* in a remote coastal base area before the enemy could attack the installations and units at Chu Lai. With air, artillery, and naval fire support, the Marine battalions conducted a river crossing, a helicopter-borne assault, and an amphibious landing to trap the Viet Cong on the Van Tuong Peninsula. The operation ended on 24 August and resulted in more than 600 enemy killed at the cost of 45 Marines dead and 203 wounded.



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- For more information, see:
  - ***The Path to War: U.S. Marine Corps Operations in Southeast Asia 1961–1965***
  - ***The Greene Papers: General Wallace M. Greene Jr. and the Escalation of the Vietnam War, January 1964–March 1965***

- ***The First Fight: U.S. Marines in Operation Starlite, August 1965***
- ***Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment***

An Expanding War, 1966–1967

Within six months of landing at Da Nang, the number of Marines in South Vietnam had grown from around 5,000 to 38,000. The Communist political infrastructure nevertheless remained intact, and the Johnson administration resolved to double the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam in 1966. This led to the arrival of the 1st Marine Division headquarters, which took control of the 500-square-kilometer Chu Lai tactical area in late March before receiving reinforcements. By June, there were 270,000 U.S. service personnel in the country, 54,000 of whom were Marines. Floating off the coast was the Seventh Fleet's amphibious ready group and special landing force, which served as Pacific Command's strategic reserve. Confronting the expanded U.S. force was more than 260,000 PAVN and Viet Cong troops.

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In summer 1966, III MAF opened a new front in the I Corps Tactical Zone. Intelligence from Marine reconnaissance units indicated that a North Vietnamese regular division had infiltrated South Vietnam through the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Enemy units crossing the DMZ broke with North Vietnam's usual practice of funneling troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of footpaths and small roads in Cambodia and Laos that fed the Communist war effort in South Vietnam. This new North Vietnamese threat meant that the enemy was pressuring the Marines from two sides, forcing III MAF to protect both the western and northern approaches to the coastal population centers.

In response, the 3d Marine Division sent five infantry battalions and an artillery battalion to search the remote, rugged, and sparsely populated hills of Quang Tri Province from 15 July to 3 August in Operation Hastings. The Marines engaged five battalions of North Vietnamese troops near a dominating terrain feature called the Rockpile. Unlike the Viet Cong main-force troops who preferred to sidestep Marines and concentrate on the RVNAF, the well-equipped,

highly motivated troops of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) stood and fought with good coordination of small-arms, machine-gun, and mortar fire.

In early October, III MAF reshuffled its two divisions to wage a conventional campaign along the DMZ and a pacification campaign in the coastal lowlands. The 3d Marine Division displaced from Da Nang to Phu Bai to command the war in the two northern provinces and serve as a blocking force against the PAVN. It also opened a forward headquarters at Dong Ha, the city that lay astride the crossroads of the vital Routes 1 and 9. The 1st Marine Division left a brigade-sized force at Chu Lai and displaced to Da Nang to command pacification operations in the three central and southern provinces.

During the first half of 1967, elements from the 3d Marine Division constructed a strongpoint defense of mutually supporting combat bases and firebases in the thick jungles along Route 9 to serve as a barrier line against PAVN infiltration. In April, the enemy struck at the most remote position first, at Khe Sanh, where two Marine battalions drove off a PAVN division. The clashes were only a prelude to a summer full of PAVN attempts to cut the line of communication along Route 9. Nearer the DMZ, Marines repelled significant PAVN attacks in a 150-square-kilometer box that Marines dubbed "Leatherneck Square." The northwest corner of the square, an exposed position on a plateau at Con Thien, was particularly frustrating for Marines who endured endless enemy mortar, artillery, and rocket attacks coming from inside North Vietnam. To reduce the pressure on Con Thien, the Marines conducted battalion-sized operations inside Leatherneck Square in June and July 1967, among them Operations Cimarron and Buffalo.

Throughout the rest of 1967, the 3d Marine Division continued their attempts to block PAVN infiltration, the 1st Marine Division focused on destroying Viet Cong units and dismantling Communist infrastructure, and Special Landing Forces Alpha and Bravo executed 40 amphibious landings in support of the divisions. By the end of the year, Marines had conducted 11 significant operations of battalion size or more extensive, more than 356,000 more minor unit patrols, and killed nearly 18,000 enemies. The cost had been high, though, with 3,000 Marines killed.

- For more information, see:
  - ***Hill Fights: The First Battle of Khe Sanh, 1967***
  - ***Hill of Angels: U.S. Marines and the Battle for Con Thien, 1967 to 1968***

- ***Combined Action: U.S. Marines Fighting a Different War, August 1965 to September 1970***
- ***The Mobility War: Marine Corps Helicopter Operations in Vietnam, 1962-1975***

The Defining Year, 1968

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General Westmoreland and USMACV planned for 1968 to be "the year of decision" by killing more enemy troops than the Viet Cong and PAVN could replace and consolidating gains in pacification. The Communists, however, vowed to continue the war despite its growing cost. Fearful that Saigon was becoming more self-sufficient, Hanoi prepared a military offensive that they hoped would inspire the South Vietnamese to mount a popular uprising against the government. In December, USMACV received intelligence of massive enemy troop movements. By mid-January, it was clear the enemy was moving toward the major cities and provincial capitals across the country.

The Communists launched the massive Tet Offensive against 105 cities and towns throughout South Vietnam after midnight on 30 January, when many were celebrating the Lunar New Year. Enemy forces attacked the population centers in the Marine area of operations, including Da Nang and the old imperial city of Hue. U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese troops repulsed all the attacks except at Hue. It would take 26 days of dogged house-to-house fighting to expel the North Vietnamese regulars from the city, as Marines, more accustomed to fighting in the steamy jungle, learned the brutal and bloody lessons of urban warfare. While Tet raged, another drama played out at the isolated outpost of Khe Sanh. For 77 days, the 26th Marines held the embattled base against intense pressure from PAVN units, who hurled as many as 1,000 shells a day into the Marine position. Marine tenacity and

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American air power inflicted grievous losses upon the enemy in return, and the Army's 1st Cavalry Division broke the siege on 6 April.

The Tet Offensive was a Communist tactical failure. Apart from the sharp fights at places like Khe Sanh and Hue, American and RVNAF units absorbed the assault and threw back the attackers within days. Despite the tactical failure, the offensive was a political victory for the Communists. Any confidence that the South Vietnamese had in their government's ability to protect the country was eroded. In the United States, too, Americans were skeptical of the administration's assurances that the Communists were losing when they watched scenes of fighting on their televisions, none more dramatic than Viet Cong guerrillas on the embassy grounds in Saigon.

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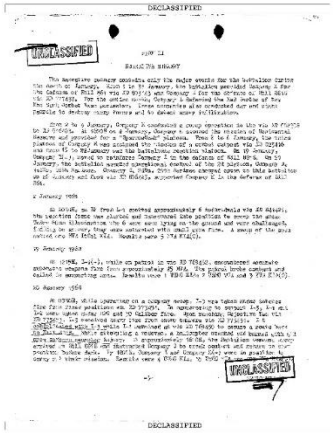
- For more information, see:
  - ***Ringed by Fire: U.S. Marines and the Siege of Khe Sanh, 21 January to 9 July 1968***
  - ***Death in the Imperial City: U.S. Marines in the Battle for Hue, 31 January to 2 March 1968***
  - ***Close Air Support and the Battle for Khe Sanh***



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The war ground toward its climax in the middle of 1968. USMACV's strategy was manpower-intensive, leading to the largest American force of the war in August 1968 at 540,000 troops. The Marine Corps' involvement in the war peaked in June at 87,000 Marines—49 percent of the entire Service. The same month, Army General Creighton W. Abrams became commander of USMACV. General Abrams articulated what he called a one-war strategy, ostensibly replacing his predecessor's attempts to search for and

destroy the enemy with the decision to clear and hold the countryside.

High Mobility and Stand Down, 1969

Courtesy of Robert Donoghue

At the beginning of 1969, the 3d Marine Division began implementing a new approach to combat operations that broke from its earlier defensive posture along the DMZ. The division's new commanding general, Major General Raymond G. Davis, introduced a high mobility concept—an air assault strategy that used helicopters to insert infantry-artillery teams into enemy-held terrain. High mobility emphasized short-term, mountaintop fire support bases from which artillery supported infantry clearing operations in remote enemy base areas. The best example of this concept was Operation Dewey Canyon, a regimental offensive in western Quang Tri Province aimed at attacking the PAVN's logistics network and disrupting another Tet-style offensive. From 22 January to 18 March 1969, Colonel Robert H. Barrow's 9th Marines advanced south into the Da Krong Valley along the Laotian border, establishing a series of mutually supporting artillery firebases on cleared hilltops, while infantry companies conducted aggressive patrols through the valleys below. The operation stood out not only as one of the last major Marine offensives of the war but also for its innovation in air-ground coordination and logistical execution. Reflecting the intensity and valor of the campaign, Marines and Navy corpsmen earned 4 Medals of Honor, 6 Navy Crosses, and 55 Silver Stars, while the 9th Marines received a

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Presidential Unit Citation for their exceptional performance.

Only days before Operation Dewey Canyon began, Richard M. Nixon was sworn in as president and inherited a difficult war with limited options for success. Constrained by public opinion and lacking clear national objectives, Nixon and his advisors determined that they had little choice but to seek a peace settlement and begin withdrawing U.S. forces. This approach, known as "Vietnamization," aimed to shift combat responsibility to the South Vietnamese military while negotiating with the Communists. The policy preserved the appearance of U.S. commitment while reducing American involvement. For the Marine Corps, this meant a gradual reduction in troop numbers.

The redeployment of U.S. combat units unfolded gradually over 14 phases from July 1969 to November 1972, reducing troop levels from 550,000 to 27,000. As part of the first phase, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, departed Da Nang on 14 July 1969, with the rest of the 9th Marines following soon after. By July 1971, only 542 Marines remained in South Vietnam—down from more than 81,000—while 12,948 had been killed and 78,963 wounded. These remaining Marines served in advisory, liaison, staff, or security roles across the country, with the largest group being 195 from Sub Unit One, 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO). Others were stationed at the U.S. embassy in Saigon, the consulate in Da Nang, or embedded with the Vietnamese Marine Corps.

- For more information, see:
  - ***On Our Terms: U.S. Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon, 22 January to 18 March 1969***
  - ***The Mobility War: Marine Corps Helicopter Operations in Vietnam, 1962-1975***

Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970–1972

With U.S. combat forces withdrawn, North Vietnam launched a spring offensive on 30 March 1972 to topple the South Vietnamese government. The Easter Offensive was a large-scale, conventional invasion involving more than 120,000 troops attacking across three fronts. In the face of the onslaught, Marine advisors and naval gunfire liaison teams played a vital role in stiffening RVNAF defenses, expertly coordinating air and naval firepower that bought precious time and helped prevent a total collapse. Nowhere was this more evident than at Dong Ha, where

U.S. Marine Captain John W. Ripley and Army Major James E. Smock assisted a Vietnamese Marine battalion in halting the PAVN's advance. Under relentless enemy fire, Ripley spent nearly three hours swinging beneath the Cua Viet River bridge to carefully place explosives. His successful detonation of the span denied the PAVN a critical crossing point and helped blunt their southern thrust on the first day of the offensive—an act of extraordinary bravery for which he was awarded the Navy Cross.

The United States responded to the Easter Offensive with overwhelming air and naval power, including Marine aircraft from Japan. Despite reinforcements, Dong Ha fell on 28 April, forcing a South Vietnamese withdrawal to Hue. Marine Aircraft Group 15, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, and ANGLICO teams supported South Vietnamese forces repel further enemy advances, including defending Hue and supporting the successful RVNAF counteroffensive to retake Quang Tri City in September. These gains broke the momentum of the offensive and convinced North Vietnam by June that it could not win militarily. Hanoi shifted its focus to negotiations, and on 27 January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords officially ended U.S. combat and support operations in Vietnam. Just two days earlier, Private First Class Mark J. Miller, a rifleman from the same company that first landed in Vietnam in 1965, became the last Marine killed in action in the war.

The Bitter End, 1973–1975

As part of the Paris Peace Accords, all U.S. forces were to withdraw from South Vietnam within 60 days, leaving only 200 Americans to protect the embassy and oversee aid. As 23,300 troops—including 1,200 Marines—prepared to leave, the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam conducted a prisoner exchange, with 26 Marines among the 555 returned. One, Lieutenant Colonel Harlan P. Chapman, captured in 1965, became the first Marine repatriated, greeted by Lieutenant General Louis H. Wilson Jr., to whom he replied, "Thank you, General, but I never left." The final prisoners of war departed Hanoi on 29 March 1973.

North Vietnam never abandoned its goal of reunification, launching a final offensive in early 1975 that rapidly overran provinces and collapsed South Vietnamese defenses. On 30 March, Da Nang fell, leading to a maritime evacuation of 70,000 civilians and setting the stage for the final assault on Saigon. Meanwhile, Communist forces closed in on the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The evacuation of Cambodia, called Operation Eagle Pull, began the

morning of 12 April when Marines evacuated 287 people from the embassy without any casualties. Days later, PAVN troops surrounded Saigon, prompting Operation Frequent Wind on 29 April to evacuate Americans and select South Vietnamese. Marine aircrews evacuated more than 2,200 people during the operations, with four Marines killed. On 30 April, South Vietnam surrendered, ending the war after two decades. Just days later, however, Cambodian Communist forces seized the American-flagged container ship SS *Mayaguez*, prompting a rushed U.S. rescue mission off the Cambodian coast that resulted in heavy Marine casualties and became the final recognized battle of the conflict, with the fallen remembered as the last names etched into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

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The Vietnam War left a profound and lasting impact on both the United States and the Marine Corps. Of the 730,000 Marines who served between 1965 and 1975, approximately 500,000 deployed to the region. Of those, 13,091 were killed in action and 88,594 wounded—accounting for nearly one-third of all U.S. casualties and exceeding total Marine casualties from World War II. While Marines had much to be proud of in their conduct and professionalism, the war also exposed deep challenges. The Corps left Vietnam fatigued and confronted with serious concerns about readiness, training, and its identity as the nation's elite expeditionary force.

- For more information, see:
  - ***Marine Advisors with the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units, 1966–1970***
  - ***Marine Advisors with the Vietnamese Marine Corps***
  - ***Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment***

To see all of History Division's Vietnam War publications, **click here**.