MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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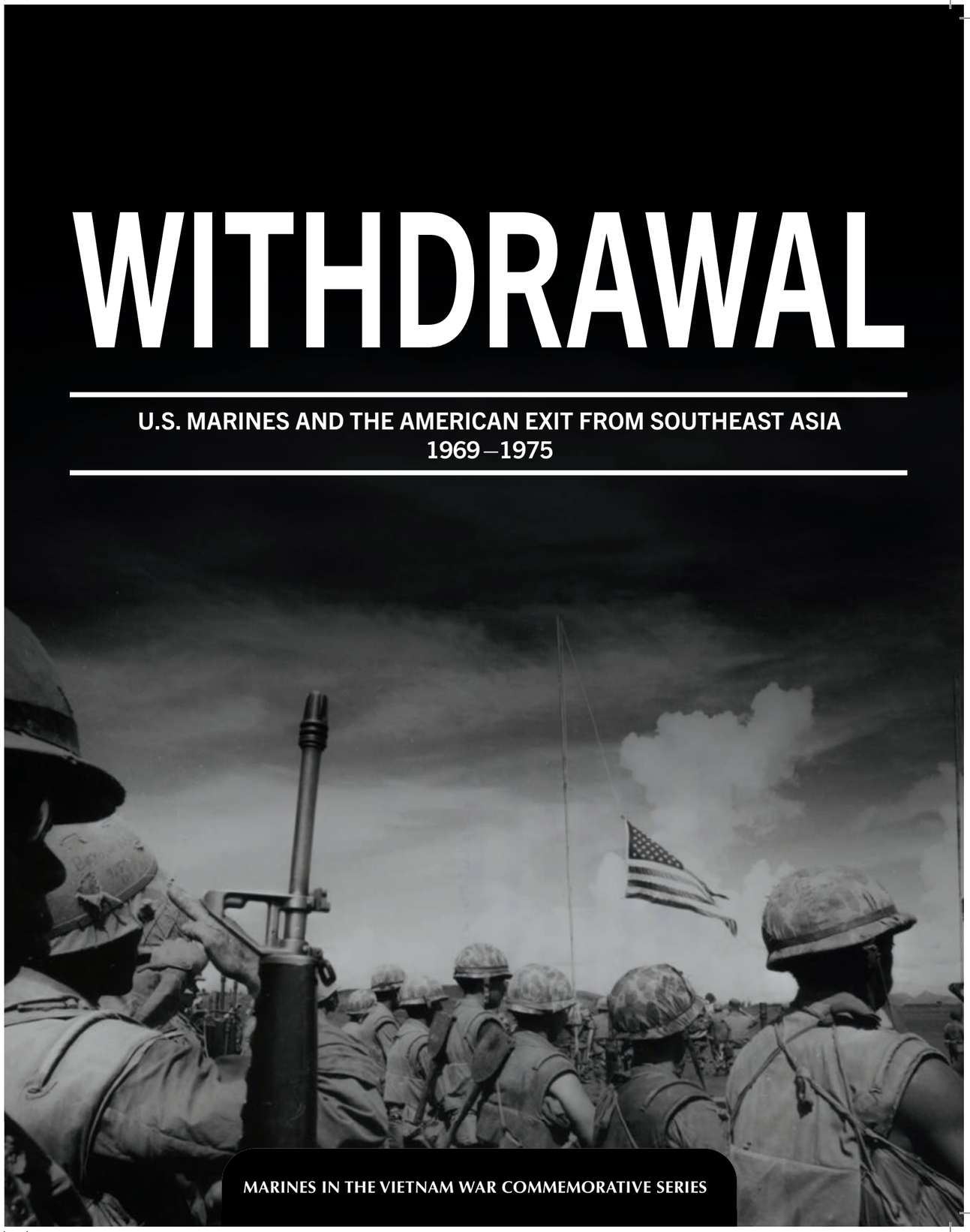
WITHDRAWAL

U.S. MARINES AND THE AMERICAN EXIT FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA 1969–1975



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U.S. Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, and South Vietnamese soldiers (out of frame) from the 2d Regiment, 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division, salute their respective national flags during a memorial service at Khe Sanh, 19 June 1968. Meanwhile, U.S. and North Vietnamese delegations in Paris were holding some of the first meetings to negotiate an end to the war. Talks would eventually break down, and Marine Corps involvement in South Vietnam would continue for another seven years.

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U.S. MARINES AND THE AMERICAN EXIT FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

1969–1975

SETH A. GIVENS, PHD

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Redeployments, 1969–1971[1]

At Da Nang on 14 July 1969, Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson Jr., commander of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) and the most senior Marine in the Republic of Vietnam, addressed the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The troops stood in formation in the shadow of USS *Paul Revere* (LPA 248) at Da Nang's deepwater pier. The day represented "a turning point," Lieutenant General Nickerson said, for the South Vietnamese could now "say to their American friends, 'We can do more. We ask you to do less'." Shortly afterward, the battalion embarked on *Paul Revere* and set sail for Okinawa, becoming the initial Marine unit to leave South Vietnam as part of the first phase of President Richard M. Nixon's redeployment program of 25,000 troops. The rest of the 9th Marines left on 13 August, more than four years after the regiment's initial elements became the first Marine combat troops to arrive in the country.

The redeployment of American combat units was a long, incremental process that mirrored the U.S. military's gradual buildup in South Vietnam. It consisted of 14 phases between July 1969 and November 1972 that lowered the number of troops from 550,000 to 27,000. The Marine Corps left within the first seven phases, going from 81,337 Marines on the eve of its first redeployment to 547 after its last in July 1971. By then, 14,600 Marines had lost their lives, and 90,452 had been wounded in Southeast Asia. Marines remained in South Vietnam for another four years, serving in advisory and support roles until April 1975. Only in the dramatic closing moments of the Vietnam War, during the American exit from Saigon, did Marines finally leave. They were the last U.S. troops to withdraw, ending 21 years of American involvement in South Vietnam.[2]

Nixon and Vietnamization, January–June 1969

By the end of 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration was pursuing complicated parallel efforts in South Vietnam. It was negotiating peace with North Vietnamese

[1] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section—including quotes—is derived from Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1988); Graham A. Cosmas and LtCol Terrence P. Murray, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970–1971*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1986); and *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954–1973: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, rev. ed., Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Divisions, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1985).

[2] Report, Marine Corps Command Center, "WestPac Unit Locations," 30 June 1969, attached to FMFPAC Monthly Status of Fleet Marine Forces for June 1969, Reference Files, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, hereafter HD Archives; Report, Marine Corps Command Center, "Strengths," 7 July 1971, and report, "USMC/Enemy Casualties in SEAsia," 7 July 1971, both attached to FMFPAC Monthly Status of Fleet Marine Forces for July–September 1971, Reference Files, HD Archives.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800469

Marines from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, embark on USS *Paul Revere* (LPA 248) at Da Nang Harbor, 14 July 1969.

diplomats in Paris while fighting North and South Vietnamese Communists on the battlefield. The administration was also training and equipping the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF)—composed of the national Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the provincial Regional Forces, and the local Popular Forces—to defend the government of Vietnam while contemplating various withdrawal scenarios. These efforts reflected the larger U.S. strategic incongruities of using military means to achieve the political end of guaranteeing a free and democratic South Vietnam. Without defining what victory meant, it was difficult to determine the end of the American military mission in Southeast Asia.

Within hours of taking office on 20 January 1969, President Nixon initiated discussions with civilian and military advisors about the situation in South Vietnam. Nixon had inherited not only Johnson's war but also his predecessor's limited options for either military or political success. Nixon understood that domestic politics constrained his ability to pursue the war more aggressively. He faced a Democratic-controlled Congress that could threaten his political objectives, both those within Southeast Asia and those unrelated to South Vietnam.[3] More importantly, the American public would not tolerate an escalation after Johnson's policy changes in spring 1968 that had halted the bombing of North Vietnam, opened negotiations in Paris, and capped the number of troops in South Vietnam.[4] In the face of these challenges, Nixon and

[3] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 227–28, 288, 298.
[4] David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 41.

LBJ Library, photo by Yoichi Okamoto

President Lyndon B. Johnson, right, and his successor, President-elect Richard M. Nixon, talk in the Oval Office on 12 December 1968.

his advisors concluded that without more definable national war aims beyond defending a free and democratic South Vietnam, no strategy could counterbalance Saigon's questionable capabilities, anticipate enemy reactions, and meet broader U.S. objectives in the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union and China. They therefore determined that they had little choice but to pursue a peace settlement and withdraw some or all U.S. forces.[5]

This raised the dilemma of withdrawing without the appearance of defeat. Nixon's response was a policy known as "Vietnamization," a dual-track approach of negotiating with the Communists while turning over responsibility for fighting the war to a strengthened South Vietnamese military. The administration believed this not only kept open the possibility of a negotiated settlement but also improved the RVNAF's ability to force the withdrawal of Communist troops from South Vietnam. The policy also served the political ends of weakening a vocal antiwar movement at home and demonstrating to the world that the United States would honor its commitments.

Before making Vietnamization public, Nixon told his South Vietnamese counterpart, President Nguyen Van Thieu, that he was contemplating a gradual withdrawal. This did not surprise or anger the South Vietnamese president, who had first raised the issue of replacing American combat troops after defeating the enemy's Tet Offensive in 1968. North Vietnam's

[5] Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 1969–1973*, Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015), 94–95.

leader Le Duan and the Communist revolutionary organization in the south, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), had believed their general offensive would spark a popular uprising. U.S. troops and the RVNAF, however, blunted the attacks within a week. From February through May, they killed 32,000 troops a month from North Vietnam's regular forces, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), and the NLF's military arm, the Viet Cong.[6] Having rendered the Viet Cong combat ineffective, the RVNAF looked to expand the government's control of villages and hamlets by pushing out the enemy and spreading security and civic programs using a technique known as pacification. President Thieu gambled that committing the RVNAF to carrying more of the troop burden—or "de-Americanizing" the war—would buy time and good will from the American public and incentivize the United States to continue providing resources to defeat the Communists. This would set conditions for a long-term arrangement, Thieu hoped, that mirrored U.S. commitments to West Germany and South Korea in logistics, finances, and military support.[7]

For these reasons, South Vietnamese officials attempted to convince their American counterparts throughout 1968 that the RVNAF should begin replacing American units. These conversations occurred with members of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), and its commander, U.S. Army General Creighton W. Abrams. General Abrams believed that the ARVN and the other forces that made up the RVNAF still had to improve in training and modernization to face the combined threat of the competent PAVN and the rebuilding Viet Cong.[8]

Abrams's measured approach and desire to win the war ran counter to Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's objective of quickly extricating the United States from a war that he saw as damaging to the nation at home and abroad.[9] After a trip to South Vietnam in March 1969, Laird returned to Washington and recommended to Nixon the withdrawal of 50,000–70,000 troops by the end of the year. His recommendation led to National Security Study Memorandum 36, a directive to "Vietnamize" the war. The memorandum expected withdrawals of combat units would begin on 1 July 1969, with the United States transferring the combat role to the RVNAF as soon as 31 December 1970 or as late as 31 December 1972.[10]

Executing National Security Study Memorandum 36 fell to USMACV, which recommended withdrawing combat troops in six redeployment phases over 42 months. Abrams and his planners envisioned a force of 270,000 troops remaining in South Vietnam to serve as base security, emergency combat reserves, and combat, logistics, and advisory support to the RVNAF. The USMACV plan came to be known as the "cut-and-try" approach, since it dictated that the United States begin each withdrawal increment only after assessing levels of enemy activity, pace of the RVNAF's improvement, and developments in peace negotiations in Paris.[11]

Abrams planned for the first redeployment in July to consist of two divisions. USMACV selected the 3d Marine Division because, Abrams reasoned, "it could go to Okinawa [as a strategic reserve]; because it would be leaving the area to the 1st ARVN Division, recognized by all as the strongest and best ARVN division; and finally, because northern I Corps has one of the best security environments in the country for the people." The second unit marked for the July redeployment was the U.S. Army's 9th Infantry Division, operating in the IV Corps Tactical Zone, the southernmost of the four military and political regions in the country.[12] The RVNAF had taken over fighting in the region months before, making the 9th Infantry Division a candidate for illustrating an early success of Vietnamization.[13]

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[6] The term *Viet Cong* is a colloquialism meaning "Vietnamese Communist" that originated in the 1920s to differentiate the group from Chinese Communists. While some have assigned pejorative value to the term, it is used here purely as a descriptive identifier.

[7] David L. Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2023), 14–15, 19; and George J. Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam's Shattered Dreams* (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), 361.

[8] Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, United States Army in Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2006), 146.

[9] James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 14.

[10] National Security Study Memorandum 36, "Vietnamizing the War," 10 April 1969, folder "National Security Study Memoranda (NSSM's)–Nos. 1 thru 42," box 365, NSC Files, Nixon Papers, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA.

[11] Cosmas, *MACV*, 150–51.

[12] There were four tactical zones in the Republic of Vietnam. North to south, they were I (pronounced "Eye," and where Marines operated), II, III, and IV Corps Tactical Zones.

[13] Cosmas, *MACV*, 148.

South Vietnam Corps Tactical Zones

Map courtesy of Pete McPhail, adapted by MCUP

The Marine Corps was skeptical of the initial USMACV proposal to withdraw one of the two Marine divisions operating in the I Corps Tactical Zone, where PAVN troops infiltrated through the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and across the border with Laos. Both Lieutenant General Nickerson at III MAF and Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse Jr., commanding general of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPAC), the regional Marine headquarters, argued that USMACV's plan ignored Marine air-ground team doctrine. The two "took up the cudgel," according to Lieutenant General Buse, and explained to USMACV that Marine infantry, aviation, and logistics elements must redeploy together for training and strategic reserve purposes. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman Jr., made the same argument within the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) after USMACV submitted its plan. The other Service chiefs agreed with General Chapman and further cautioned against removing all of the 3d Marine Division at once. The RVNAF was adequate at pacification in the lowlands of the I Corps Tactical Zone, but their combined-arms capabilities in the conventional war against the PAVN along the border and in the mountains were questionable. The JCS argued that pulling out the entire 3d Marine Division would weaken the zone against a PAVN attack and endanger an escalation of the war that could pull American troops back into South Vietnam. The chiefs recommended an incremental withdrawal instead, and USMACV revised the plan. One regimental landing team (RLT) would leave with its associated air and logistics units during the first phase on 15 July, and the two remaining RLTs would begin redeploying during a second phase that would begin on 31 August.

Nixon took the redeployment plans with him to Midway for an 8–10 June meeting with Thieu to assess the war. Thieu agreed to the first phase of withdrawals, and he emphasized that the two allies had to use the "troop replacement" as proof that the war was favoring anti-Communist forces and was not a retreat.[14] In a joint statement, the two presidents announced the withdrawal of the 25,000 American troops from South Vietnam.[15] The following month, Nixon announced his new national security policy, later dubbed the "Nixon Doctrine," which amounted to Vietnamization expanded for all of Asia. The United States, he pledged, would honor its treaty commitments and provide a shield against nuclear threats and aggression. It would not commit troops in an ally's defense, though, only military and economic assistance.

Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, WHPO 1269-20

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and President Richard M. Nixon at Midway, 8 June 1969, announcing the first phase of the American withdrawal.

Operation Keystone Eagle: Leaving while Fighting, July–September 1969

The initial redeployment of American combat units occurred under Operation Keystone Eagle. Elements of the 9th Marines were in the field for Operation Utah Mesa, sweeping the area east of Khe Sanh, when they began hearing the first rumors of a withdrawal. "No one believed it," Private First Class Jim Brondyke said. Within days, the Marines received official word that they were redeploying to Okinawa. "You should have seen

[14] Memorandum of conversation, Nixon and Kissinger with Thieu and Duc, 8 June 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), *1969–1976,* vol. 6, *Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970*, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Carolyn Yee (Washington, DC: Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, 2006), Document 81.

[15] Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 392.

the morale boost!" Brondyke told a journalist. "We could have humped another 30 miles."[16]

The 9th Marines transferred its mission and area of operations to the 3d and 4th Marines and redeployed with its supporting elements. For the aviation element redeploying with the RLT, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) selected Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 334 (VMFA-334), Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (HMM-165), and the 1st Light Antiaircraft Missile Battalion. When III MAF discovered that it was short of filling the 8,388 Marine slots that USMACV had allotted, it added an additional 1,294 troops from engineer, headquarters, and logistics support units.

On 23 June, the first infantry battalion scheduled to leave, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, stood down at Vandegrift Combat Base in Quang Tri Province. It made its way to Da Nang by truck and aircraft during the next three weeks. Meanwhile, the U.S. Army's 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment (part of 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division), had left on 8 July as the first American unit to redeploy during Operation Keystone Eagle.[17] On 25 July, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, embarked on *Paul Revere* and sailed for Okinawa. The same day, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, made its way to Quang Tri Combat Base, where a line of honored guests that included General Abrams bade it farewell. The battalion departed with the regimental headquarters on 1 August. The 9th Marines completed its redeployment when the 3d Battalion left on 13 August. The initial fixed-wing and rotary-wing elements of the 1st MAW left the same day. HMM-165 embarked on USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) at Da Nang and sailed for Okinawa that night. Farther down the coast, VMFA-334 loaded its equipment at Chu Lai, and its aircraft began departing for Iwakuni, Japan, on 24 August.

All 8,388 Marines scheduled to redeploy in Keystone Eagle left South Vietnam by 30 August. Their departure reduced III MAF's strength to 72,355 personnel. The withdrawal of the 14,000 soldiers from the 1st and 2d Brigades, 9th Infantry Division, and 2,000 Army reservists and Navy personnel lowered the number of American troops in South Vietnam to 525,000.[18] The redeployment of the 9th Infantry Division was significant, as it removed the last U.S. ground combat unit from the IV Corps Tactical Zone. By 31 August, USMACV had met Nixon's goal of removing 25,000 troops in the first stage toward ending direct American involvement in the Vietnam War.

With the exit of the 9th Marines, the 3d Marine Division lost one-third of its combat power in the I Corps Tactical Zone. The division realigned its forces, sacrificing unit integrity to cover the zone. The size and mountainous terrain of the area of operations, however, made this economy-of-force mission difficult.[19] The division therefore pulled its infantry units from the extreme western frontier and turned the region into a reconnaissance zone. Teams from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and 3d Force Reconnaissance Company operated independently along the border with Laos, collecting intelligence on enemy infiltration, troop movements, and base areas for the 3d Marine Division, III MAF, and USMACV.

The III MAF disposition and strategy otherwise remained the same in 1969 as it had for the past year. The 3d Marine Division—now composed of the 3d Marines, 4th Marines, 12th Marines, and six battalions of armor, infantry, and artillery from the U.S. Army—was headquartered at Dong Ha and operated throughout Quang Tri Province in conjunction with the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the 1st ARVN Division. To the southeast, the 1st Marine Division—composed of the 1st Marines, 5th Marines, 7th Marines, and 11th Marines, with armor, amphibian tractor, and reconnaissance units—was headquartered at Hill 327 outside Da Nang and conducted offensive and pacification operations in Quang Nam Province. Also under III MAF's direct control was the Army's 23d Infantry Division, which was headquartered at Chu Lai and operated in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces.[20] The 2d Republic of Korea (ROK) Marine Brigade, located at Hoi An, received operational guidance from III

[16] As quoted in SSgt Bob Bowen, "The Ninth Moves Out," *Leatherneck* (November 1969): 24.

[17] USMACV Command History, 1969, vol. 1, IV-16, Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS, hereafter Ike Skelton Library.

[18] Report, Marine Corps Command Center, "Military Forces in RVN," 29 August 1969, attached to FMFPAC Monthly Status of Fleet Marine Forces for August 1969, Reference Files, HD Archives.

[19] Seth A. Givens, *On Our Terms: U.S. Marines in Operation Dewey Canyon, 22 January to 18 March 1969,* Marines in the Vietnam War Commemorative Series (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2021), 5–6.

[20] The 23d Infantry Division is widely known as the Americal Division. This publication uses its numerical designation.

MAF but was under the direct authority of the commanding general of Korean forces in Saigon. Supporting all III MAF elements were the 1st MAW and Force Logistic Command, located at Da Nang. Offshore, Marines in the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force, composed of a rotating battalion landing team (BLT), helicopter squadron, and supporting elements, continued to serve as the USMACV floating reserve.

While III MAF maintained its posture during the first withdrawals in July and August, the enemy modified its tactics after a year of defeats that had put them in political and military disarray. Hanoi maintained pressure on U.S. forces and the RVNAF rather than waiting for the Americans to leave, believing that this would dissuade the United States from sensing it could win and reversing its decision to negotiate while withdrawing. North Vietnam's Politburo, the senior party leaders who made policy, concluded that they could not pursue a quick, decisive victory with general offensives and uprisings as they had attempted in 1968.[21] Publicly, Hanoi boasted that Vietnamization proved the bankruptcy of the American war effort, but Communist officials privately worried that RVNAF mobilization would siphon off the recruitment pool to rebuild the crippled Viet Cong.[22] Instead of initiating additional conventional offensives, the Politburo and the NLF pursued a more conservative approach, waging revolution while rebuilding politically and militarily. They prepared to conduct a protracted campaign of guerrilla and sapper attacks rather than full-scale military confrontation. This would, Hanoi acknowledged, be a "long and complicated" process, but Communist leaders hoped to grind down the Americans and South Vietnamese.[23]

USMACV and III MAF had a sense of this change in summer 1969, which they confirmed after capturing a complete copy of the enemy's plans. Abrams studied the document and concluded that USMACV's approach of linking large-unit and pacification operations, or what he called his "one-war concept," remained sound. Like the North Vietnamese, he argued that it was vital to maintain pressure on the enemy to preempt an offensive while Vietnamization was underway. Despite losing 25,000 troops in Keystone Eagle, he called for aggressive platoon- and company-sized sweeps to keep the Communists from concentrating against the pacification program. Larger operations along the borders would disrupt base areas and supply lines. Abrams therefore saw no difference between protecting Vietnamization and winning the war.

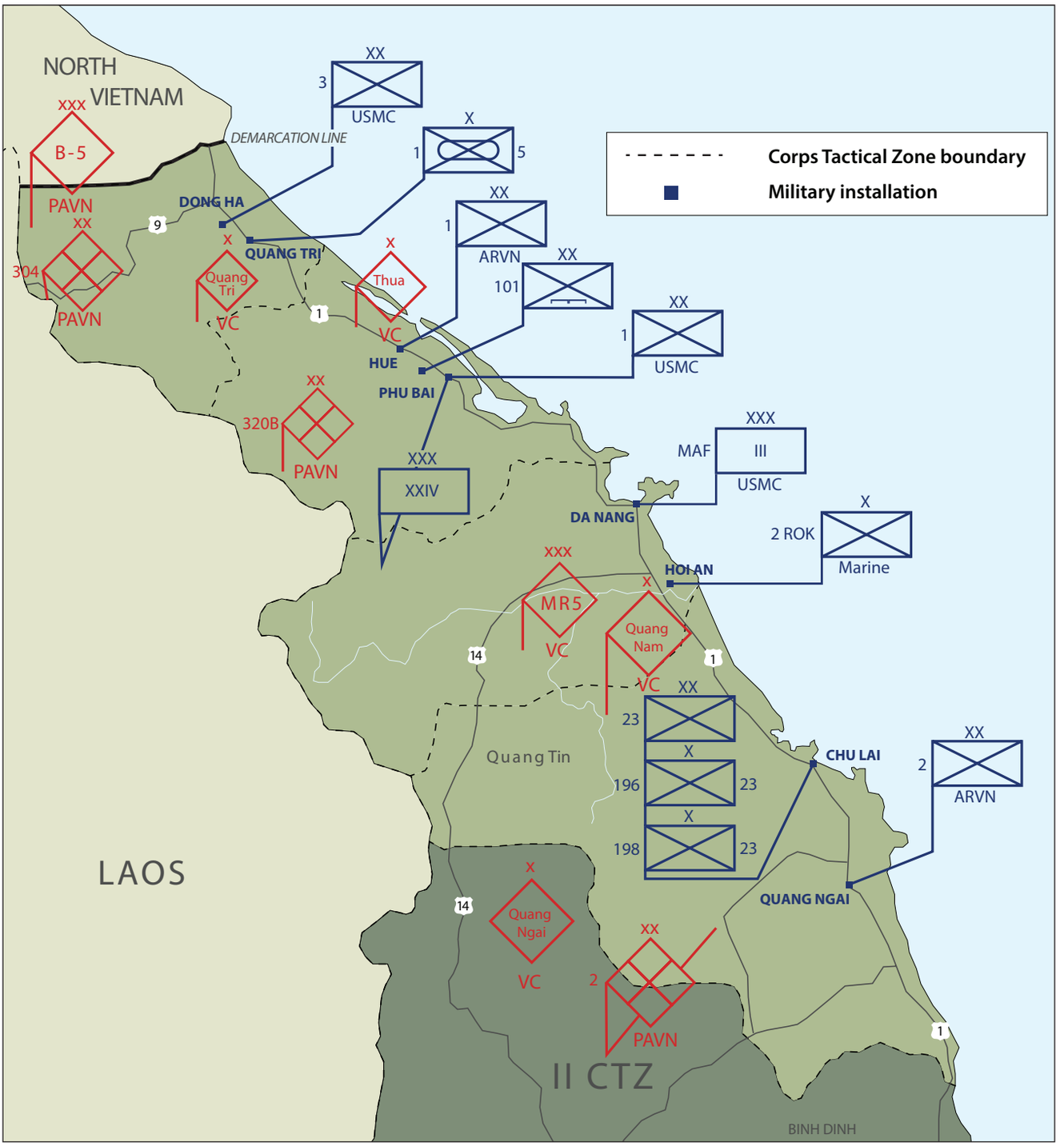
Operation Keystone Cardinal: Politics of Leaving, September–December 1969

These operations took place in summer and fall 1969 while III MAF, USMACV, and the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral John S. McCain Jr., planned for more withdrawals. The first phase of redeployments created a momentum in the United States that was difficult for the military to slow. Former Johnson administration officials and Democrats in Congress publicly clamored for a quicker exit from South Vietnam, making Nixon eager to protect his political flank and outmaneuver his rivals. On 19 June, he mentioned a reduction of more than 100,000 troops by the end of 1969, a number that surprised some in his administration. Nixon's proposed reduction occurred as a struggle broke out between advisors over the nation's exit strategy. Laird continued to argue that the United States should cut its losses, but the JCS and National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger cautioned against abandoning the "cut-and-try" approach.[24]

Nixon's instincts helped him see the benefits of both positions. Like Laird, he had a keen political intuition and knew the American people's patience had a limit, but he was also willing to use force and avoid becoming the first American president to accept defeat in a major war. "There are three wars," he once told his advisors: "on the battlefield, the Saigon political war, and U.S. politics." He understood that lowering the level of forces in South Vietnam served him well at home, but he instructed his advisors not to "confuse our policy with the U.S. political dialogue."[25] Nixon's policies in summer 1969 therefore attempted to project strength to the North Vietnamese while reassuring the American public that he was making moves toward an exit. Nixon and Kissinger offered Hanoi gen-

[21] William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 300–6.
[22] Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 173, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316222591.
[23] As quoted in Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 307.
[24] Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit*, 87–99.
[25] Minutes of NSC Meeting, "Vietnam," 22 September 1969, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. 6, Document 120.

Allied and enemy units in the Corps Tactical Zones, June 1969



Map adapted from Adrian G. Traas, *Transition, November 1968–December 1969*, U.S. Army Campaigns of the Vietnam War series (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2018), 10.

National Archives 66394145

With the exception of the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, who is not present, this photograph represents the senior leaders who orchestrated the withdrawal. From left to right: President Richard M. Nixon, USMACV Commander Army Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen Earle G. Wheeler.

erous terms while threatening military escalation through "a series of blows" if Hanoi refused to negotiate in good faith.[26] The escalation plan, code-named Duck Hook, targeted the enemy's warmaking capabilities via an air and naval offensive and mining Haiphong Harbor. The North Vietnamese agreed to secret meetings in parallel with the official public talks, the first of which took place in Paris on 4 August between Kissinger and Hanoi's former foreign minister, Xuan Thuy. The South Vietnamese were not consulted about the backchannel talks.[27]

In deference to those calling for a continued drawdown, Nixon directed the military on 16 September to initiate the next troop withdrawal. Phase II, code-named Operation Keystone Cardinal, was the redeployment of 40,500 troops, including the rest of the 3d Marine Division and the Army's 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, by 15 December 1969. Nixon settled on pulling out 65,500 personnel rather than Laird's recommended 100,000, lowering the authorized troop ceiling to 484,000. By using Duck Hook to threaten escalation while withdrawing, Nixon hoped to give himself time to secure the honorable exit from South Vietnam that he had promised on the campaign trail.

III MAF selected the 3d Marines and its supporting elements to stand down first for a 1 October redeployment. When the press learned that the regiment was leaving before the president made his public announcement, journalists

[26] Correspondence, Nixon to Ho Chi Minh, in *Richard Nixon: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1969*, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States Series (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), Document 426.

[27] Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 20.

flocked to Elliott Combat Base (a.k.a. The Rockpile). This led to "some comic-opera exchanges" in the command post for regimental commander Colonel Wilbur F. Simlik, who said he had to play it awfully dumb" while journalists peppered him with questions. The Marines in the ranks found the situation less humorous, and their attitudes toward fighting had changed after Nixon announced the first withdrawals. The "war was winding down and supposedly going to end in the near future," Lance Corporal Ken George from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, remembered. "Why get killed now?"[28] Despite the planned withdrawal, the uncertainty of when the regiment would be pulled out negatively impacted morale, especially when the enemy seemed to have heard the same rumors and resumed ambushes on patrols.

Keystone Cardinal built on the lessons of its predecessor, owing in part to a 3d Marine Division report that became the baseline document for subsequent phases.[29] The process of redeployment began with the White House and Department of Defense determining the number of troops and timetable for each redeployment. USMACV considered where it could cut while still maintaining a balanced force and divided that total by Service. The component commander then decided which units would redeploy. For the Marine Corps, FMFPAC made its selections in conjunction with III MAF. The two headquarters based their decisions on maintaining a prescribed personnel strength and balancing the logistics of moving units and equipment to bases in the region or the continental United States. CINCPAC and the JCS then accounted for global needs and approved or modified the list while determining the destination of each redeploying unit and the timetable for sea and air movement.

Since Marine units were filled with troops who had varied end-of-tour dates, most did not redeploy with the same men who had fought alongside them. The Marine Corps had organized what it called "mixmastering," a personnel transfer process that moved Marines nearing the end of their 12-month tour to units redeploying while sending noneligible troops to commands remaining in South Vietnam. Elements redeploying to Okinawa and Japan experienced less mixmaster turnover compared to those returning to the United States, as the Marine Corps attempted to maintain unit integrity and combat readiness for contingency purposes. Mixmastering proved unpopular in the units that remained behind. Enlisted personnel resented the prospect of starting over in a new unit, while commanders struggled to contend with plummeting morale and the siphoning off of experienced Marines. Those returning home dealt with a range of emotions. While they were happy that they survived, some Marines such as Lance Corporal James R. Puckett "felt guilty because I was getting out early and there were people that were still spending a year over there."[30]

The Marines who prepared to leave during Keystone Cardinal followed the same process that the 9th Marines had established months before. On 20 September, elements from the 3d Marines left Vandegrift Combat Base. They moved to secure cantonments; mixmastered their personnel; turned in equipment, rations, and ammunition; and packed for shipment. While the regiment began its phased withdrawal, a realignment of remaining Marine and U.S. Army forces took place, with III MAF converting large swaths of territory into reconnaissance zones. On 6 October, the last of the 3d Marines left Da Nang and sailed for California. The 3d Marine Division had only one maneuver element remaining, the 4th Marines, which had struggled to locate PAVN units that seemed to be pulling back. Before leaving the area altogether, though, the enemy harassed the Marines with rocket, mortar, and sapper attacks while units crated and packed their equipment. "They know we're leaving," First Sergeant Joe Moreno from the 3d Shore Party Battalion explained, "but they've got to give us a parting shot."[31] Marine intelligence analysts believed the PAVN slipped back into North Vietnam to wait for the 3d Marine Division to withdraw. Analysts predicted the Communists would then attack to exploit the crucial time between the 3d Marine Division's exit and the 101st Airborne's screening of the 1st ARVN Division while it assumed control of the old Marine headquarters at Dong Ha.

[28] As quoted in Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor: The Marines at War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 337.
[29] Headquarters, 3d Marine Division, "Lessons Learned, 3d Marine Division Redeployment, June through December 1969," 8 January 1970, folder 1, box 11: Vietnam, January–December 1970.
[30] James R. Puckett interview with Betsy E. Tolstedt and Dorothy Carskadon, undated, James R. Puckett Collection, Veterans History Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, accessed 1 April 2024.
[31] As quoted in MSgt Tom Bartlett, "Parting Shot," *Leatherneck* (February 1970): 34.

Meanwhile, the 4th Marines were left with the difficult task of maintaining a tactical posture while, as regimental commander Colonel Gilbert R. Hershey quipped, "picking up the brass and policing everything else that people had left." Throughout September and October, the 4th Marines closed or turned over the installations along Route 9 that thousands of Marines had called home—Cates, Vandegrift, Elliott, Russell, Fuller, Dong Ha—and retrograded east to Quang Tri Combat Base before boarding amphibious ships bound for Okinawa. Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 (ProvMAG-39) stood down at the same time. Its units—HMM-161, HMM-261, and Marine Observation Squadron 6 (VMO-6)—relocated south from Quang Tri Combat Base to Phu Bai and fell under Marine Aircraft Group 36 (MAG-36). Meanwhile, the Special Landing Force conducted its final operation, called Operation Defiant Stand, which ran from 7 to 19 September. BLT 1st Battalion, 26th Marines (BLT 1/26), and elements of the 2d ROK Marine Brigade searched and cleared an enemy sanctuary on Barrier Island south of Da Nang. Afterward, the Special Landing Force reconstituted with Okinawa-based units. It remained off the coast but was not permitted to land in South Vietnam without JCS permission.

The 3d Marine Division headquarters boarded aircraft on 7 November bound for Camp Courtney, Okinawa, where they were to form I Marine Expeditionary Force to control FMF elements in the Western Pacific not committed to South Vietnam.[32] Before their departure, there was a ceremony at the Da Nang City Hall. The speakers included I Corps commanding general Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, who recalled in his remarks the 3d Marine Division's forward elements landing at Da Nang in 1965. Lieutenant General Lam thanked the Marines for supporting South Vietnam "at the critical moment we needed you most" and assured the Americans that they would "leave behind a strong and prosperous nation" capable of "assuming the burden of this war." The last element of the 4th Marines embarked on USS *Tripoli* (LPH 10) at Da Nang on 20 November. Their departure ended more than four years of combat service for the 3d Marine Division in South Vietnam.

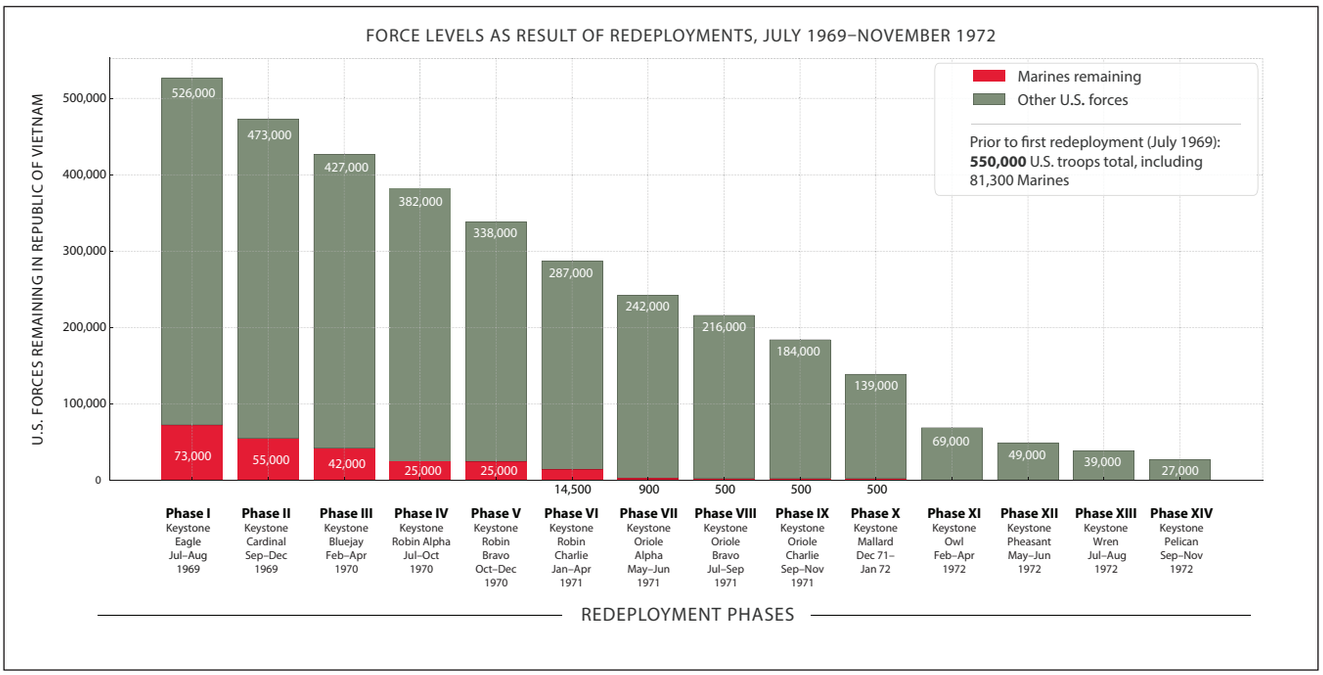
Jonathan F. Abel Collection,
Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

A Marine from the 11th Engineer Battalion uses an Eimco bulldozer to demolish Vandegrift Combat Base, which played an important role during the 9th Marines' operations in western Quang Tri Province.

During Keystone Cardinal, 18,464 Marines withdrew from South Vietnam. Joining them were 14,000 soldiers from the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne; 2,600 airmen; and 5,400 sailors. Their departure put American strength in South Vietnam at around 472,000. Nixon reported these withdrawals to the American people in an address on 3 November. He framed his remarks around how he proposed to "win America's peace." His address was the culmination of the four-month struggle among presidential advisors over the U.S. exit strategy. Nixon ultimately abandoned Duck Hook after determining that Hanoi would endure and the American public and Congress would not tolerate an escalation. He returned to Vietnamization, concluding that it was the only reasonable route toward a potential negotiated settlement and peace at home. Moreover, Vietnamization offered the United States the ability to save face by preparing Saigon to stand on its own. As Nixon told the American people, his decision was "not the easy way," but it was "the right way."[33]

[32] The Marine amphibious force (MAF) in South Vietnam was called a Marine expeditionary force (MEF) elsewhere. The nomenclature difference was because of Vietnamese sensitivity toward the word *expeditionary*, given that the French force in the First Indochina War was called the French Far East Expeditionary Corps.

[33] "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," 3 November 1969, in *Nixon Public Papers, 1969*, Document 425.



Adapted from Headquarters Marine Corps "Status of Forces" reports, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

Operation Keystone Bluejay: Inter-Service Issues, January–April 1970

Nixon demonstrated his commitment to Vietnamization on 15 December when he announced a further reduction of 50,000 troops by 15 April 1970. The president warned Hanoi that he would "not hesitate to take strong and effective measures" if he believed "increased enemy action jeopardizes our remaining forces in Vietnam."[34] In truth, it was inter-Service tensions that threatened to derail the third redeployment phase, codenamed Keystone Bluejay, more than the PAVN or Viet Cong.

Disagreement between the Services increased after the first redeployment in June 1969. Abrams hoped to withdraw all 81,000 Marines from South Vietnam as quickly as possible. This had the dual purpose of simplifying command and control in the I Corps Tactical Zone and retaining Army infantry battalions for as long as possible by filling withdrawal slots with Marine aviation units. The Marine Corps, while it had no major objections to the redeployment of the 3d Marine Division in the first two redeployment phases, protested Abrams's proposal to withdraw all of III MAF in Keystone Bluejay. Headquarters Marine Corps reasoned that the Service did not have the logistics or administrative capacity to redeploy all remaining units at once. In private, though, ingrained fears about the Marine Corps' survival came to the fore. Commandant Chapman and his staff worried that they might lose out to the other Services in upcoming political battles over budgets, roles, and missions if Marines were the first out of combat in South Vietnam. Both the Army and the JCS had their own reasons for rejecting Abrams's plan. The Army complained that it would be difficult to shoulder the burden alone, and the JCS wanted to retain combat representation from all Services. In December 1969, the chiefs ordered USMACV to plan accordingly. Abrams's compromise was to redeploy one RLT in Keystone Bluejay—the 12,880 troops of the 26th Marines and its supporting elements—but he made clear that all Marine combat units but a 13,800-man Marine amphibious brigade would leave South Vietnam by the end of 1970.

The episode highlighted the challenges facing the commands in South Vietnam. Anticipating the size and timing of additional withdrawals was difficult, but mitigating the impact

[34] "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," 15 December 1969, in *Nixon Public Papers, 1969*, Document 486.

of redeployments on remaining forces or Saigon's survival was nearly impossible. Within four months, III MAF had 33 percent of its forces drawn off with little preparatory planning, requiring a major realignment of ways, means, and ends.[35] It attempted to maintain tactical integrity to prevent the enemy from exploiting any advantage the withdrawals created. To this end, III MAF ensured that ground combat forces retained proportionate combat and logistics support. Complicating planning was the changing complexion of the force structure. By early 1970, there was a balanced force of Marines and soldiers from the U.S. Army and ARVN operating in the I Corps Tactical Zone. With each redeployment, remaining commands had to realign their tactical areas of responsibility. This meant sharing battalion and regimental boundaries with unfamiliar units, requiring communication, compromise, and trust that was sometimes difficult to build.

These changes also applied to the command relationships that Abrams had tried to simplify since early summer 1969. In the I Corps Tactical Zone, there were two American headquarters, the Marine-led III MAF and the subordinate Army-led XXIV Corps controlling forces in the northernmost two provinces. At the end of 1969, III MAF had control of the 1st Marine Division, the 1st MAW, the 23d Infantry Division, and the 2d ROK Marine Brigade, while XXIV Corps controlled the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), and the 101st Airborne. With decreasing Marine combat power in South Vietnam, USMACV attempted to reorganize the tactical zone and solve the issue of an Army corps reporting to a dwindling Marine headquarters. Both the Commandant and III MAF opposed a gradual Army takeover, however, once again arguing that the air-ground team was doctrinally organized and critical to combat effectiveness.

Despite Marine objections, Abrams decided in February 1970 to give XXIV Corps command of all U.S. troops in the I Corps Tactical Zone. III MAF became a subordinate command to XXIV Corps, yet it kept control of its air-ground team and operations within its area of responsibility. While Nickerson was satisfied with the arrangement, Army Lieutenant General Melvin Zais resented having to issue orders as XXIV Corps commander to the 1st Marine Division through III MAF Headquarters. Abrams ended Zais's objections by stressing that Marine doctrine dictated the command arrangement. The formal exchange of roles between III MAF and XXIV Corps occurred on 9 March. As the senior command in the tactical zone, XXIV Corps moved its personnel and equipment from Phu Bai to III MAF facilities at Camp Horn, Da Nang, and the Marine headquarters moved to nearby Camp Haskins. At the same time, command of III MAF passed to Nickerson's successor, Lieutenant General Keith B. McCutcheon.[36]

Despite the command issues, III MAF executed the Keystone Bluejay movements beginning at the end of January 1970.[37] During the next month, numerous Force Logistic Command, headquarters, aviation, engineer, and communication detachments left. The 26th Marines and its combat support elements followed between 11 and 19 March. At the same time, several fixed-wing and rotary-wing squadrons from the 1st MAW redeployed. Among them were Marine Attack Squadron 223 (VMA-223) and VMFA-542, which redeployed to Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, California. One of the 1st MAW's group headquarters, MAG-12, transferred its attack squadrons to MAG-13 and departed on 28 January for Iwakuni.[38]

III MAF completed its Keystone Bluejay redeployments on 19 March. The phase ended officially on 15 April with the U.S. Army redeploying 29,500 soldiers from the 1st Infantry Division and the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. The departure of those two units was significant, as it removed one of the three American divisions protecting Saigon and the last American brigade in the Central Highlands of the II Corps Tactical Zone. The Air Force withdrew 5,600 airmen from the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing, and the Navy reduced its strength by 2,000.[39] The exit of 12,880 Marines put III MAF's strength at 42,672, with more than one-half in the 1st Marine Divi-

[35] Percentage is derived from subtracting the 26,851 Marines who left in the first two redeployments from the 80,637 Marines who were in III MAF as of 30 June 1969. For the source of that data, see Marine Corps Command Center, "WestPac Unit Locations," 30 June 1969, 15-1, attached to Status of Marine Forces report for June 1969, Reference Files, HD Archives.

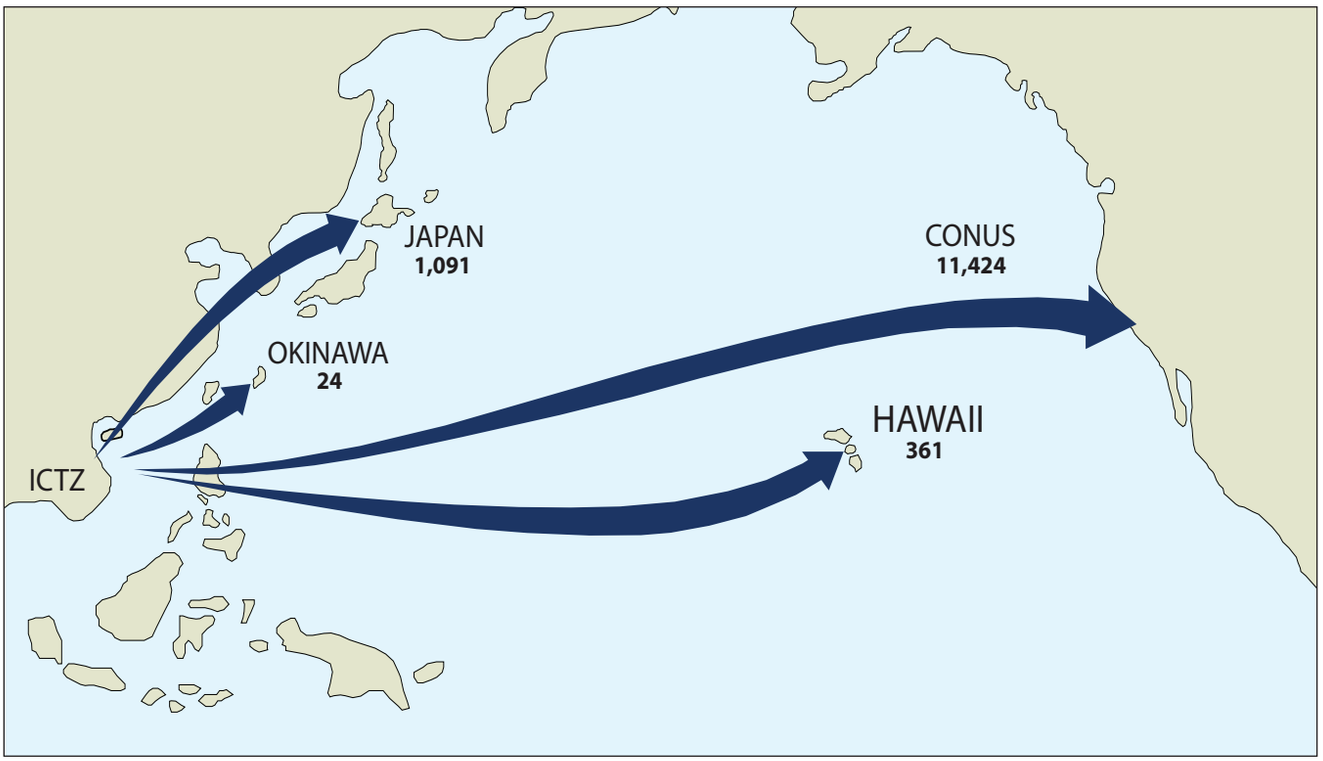
[36] III MAF Command Chronology (ComdC), 1 April–30 April 1970, HD Archives.

[37] 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion ComdC, 1–31 January 1970, HD Archives.

[38] MAG-12 ComdC, 1–31 January 1970, HD Archives.

[39] USMACV Command History, 1970, vol. 1, IV-10, Ike Skelton Library.

Marines redeployed during Keystone Bluejay, February–April 1970



Map based on FMFPAC Operations, 1970, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

sion. One month later, on 20 April, Nixon announced that he would reduce the authorized strength by 150,000 troops during the next year, including all FMF Marines. This would lower the ceiling to 260,000, the number the Department of Defense had set in November 1969 as the size of the transitional support force. After reaching the new ceiling, the United States would commence withdrawing its remaining combat forces, leaving only a 43,000-troop Military Assistance Advisory Group that was to be in place by 1 July 1973 and remain indefinitely.[40]

Discipline Issues and Tensions within the Force

While navigating inter-Service tensions, Marine leaders in South Vietnam also grappled with internal disciplinary issues that threatened units' ability to both fight and redeploy. Like all the armed forces, the Marine Corps reflected the nation's tumultuous reevaluation of the post–World War II political, social, and cultural consensus that underpinned how Americans viewed themselves and their role in the world. The Tet Offensive had shattered public perception that the war was winnable, fueling an antiwar movement that rejected conscription and the Cold War premise that democracies should be protected from Communism. The expanding antiwar movement was a component of larger currents in society, including the civil rights movement and a growing counterculture that questioned authority, stressed individuality, and eschewed traditional social norms regarding drugs and sex. These ideas, along with both the subtle and overt changes to the nation during the preceding years, went to South Vietnam with deploying personnel. There, they mixed with a pervading disillusionment about fighting and dying in a war whose relevance to the United States was difficult to define. By the time units began redeploying, the changing climate stressed tra-

[40] Cosmas, *MACV*, 158–60.

ditional Marine Corps values and military discipline to their breaking points.

Discipline issues were structural as much as they were social, and both impacted the Services equally. The U.S. military's individual rotation policy for personnel deployed to South Vietnam produced a constant churn in the force that made it difficult to maintain continuity. By 1968, the Marine Corps struggled with retention and replacement, as most of its junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) separated from the Service rather than deploy for a second combat tour. It was difficult to replace those Marines with qualified and motivated recruits and officer candidates, as the antiwar movement had a damaging effect on recruitment. As a result, Marine combat units at the company level and below came to rely on lieutenants with minimum training, experienced NCOs who received temporary commissions, and junior enlisted who were quickly promoted into leadership roles. These Marines faced a daunting challenge. They had few mentors with multiple combat tours on whom they could rely for advice, and they were leading troops who increasingly felt angst and discontent toward the war, the Marine Corps, and their own officers and NCOs.[41]

The lack of discipline manifested in many ways, many of them minor infractions and insubordination. Gunnery Sergeant Joseph Lopez, an infantryman who was on his third tour in early 1969, commented that telling "a man to square his cover away" or that "he [is] out of uniform" made some Marines "look at you like he was gonna kill you. Never did I ever see anybody give a superior NCO the looks that these young men give us nowadays."[42] A lack of discipline did have cascading consequences in the field, however. In 1968 alone, 40 Marines were killed and 309 wounded in 1st Marine Division due to accidental discharges.

The most pernicious and extreme disciplinary issue that threatened to erode unit cohesion was Marine fratricide, called "fragging" because of the common use of a fragmentary grenade in the crime.[43] While fragging occurred in both support and combat units, motivations varied. Marines exacted revenge for imagined wrongs, intimidation, and racial reasons. Some were angry about military discipline while others murdered a leader before their perceived overzealousness got Marines killed in the field.[44] The Marine Corps viewed the initial cases of fragging in 1966 as isolated, but it began keeping statistics in 1968 after an uptick in reports. Investigations proved challenging, however, as it was difficult to determine premeditated assaults from enemy action or friendly fire accidents. Intimidation kept eyewitnesses from talking, and it was nearly impossible to learn anything from crime scenes. As Lance Corporal Johnnie M. Clark put it after his company's first sergeant lost both legs in a fragging incident, "I knew there would be an investigation, but even Sherlock Holmes couldn't find fingerprints on a grenade."[45] A Marine judge advocate later estimated that there were between 100 and 150 incidents throughout the war.[46] Regardless of how pervasive fraggings actually were, the threat gave some leaders pause when making decisions and impinged on their willingness to enforce discipline.[47]

Drug use, by contrast, was prevalent in combat and support units by 1969. Marijuana was the drug of choice for Marines, given a robust and persistent South Vietnamese black market that supplied troops who were bored, looking for an escape, or rebelling against military life. Drugs were contained to rear areas beginning around 1967, as Marines operating in the jungles and hills of I Corps agreed that it was, according to Sergeant James Austin, "hard enough fighting the elements, the insects, [and] inferior weaponry. We sure didn't need nothing screwing around with [our] brains."[48] By 1968, the Marine Corps had taken note of troops using drugs, leading to a staff paper at the annual General Officers' Symposium that found drug use "a problem" but considered the number of users not "alarming or threatening to the combat efficiency or the public image of the Marine Corps."[49] Only a few months later,

[41] Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968,* Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 564–65.
[42] LtCol Gary D. Solis, *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam: Trial by Fire*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1989), 124.
[43] Solis, *Trial by Fire*, 110.
[44] Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year,* 566; and Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 110–11.
[45] Johnnie M. Clark, *Guns Up!* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 122–23.
[46] Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 110–11.
[47] Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 566; and Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 110–11.
[48] Sgt James Austin, as quoted in *No Shining Armor*, 149.
[49] As quoted in Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 565.

however, marijuana usage exploded, including within combat units at base areas. During the first six months of 1968, the 1st Marine Division opened 17 investigations into drug use. In the last 4 months of the year, the division opened 24 investigations each month. The issue became widespread by 1969, as nearly one-half of all military cases tried in South Vietnam involved marijuana.[50] Some commanders estimated that one-half of their men possessed or used drugs. III MAF attempted to deal with the crisis by educating Marines on the moral evils, legal consequences, and hazards of drugs. When that initiative failed, it instructed leaders to search living quarters, work areas, and vehicles and to enforce naval regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Enforcement was difficult due to intimidation, peer pressure, a code of silence, and officers and staff noncommissioned officers looking the other way. The problem persisted while units remained in South Vietnam, as leaders struggled to devise a standardized approach to an issue that they had ignored until it was too late.

The Marine Corps was more proactive with racial issues. Like much of the U.S. military, the Service had a complicated record with race and had instituted equality policies and measures in response to federal decree rather than on its own initiative. It was not until June 1942 that African Americans were permitted to join the Marine Corps. Despite President Harry S. Truman's executive order in 1948 directing the armed forces to desegregate, the Marine Corps did not complete full integration until June 1962.[51] Even with desegregation, some Black servicemembers had bitter experiences with prejudice and discrimination inside the Marine Corps. Black Marines' relationship with leadership was often frayed, and many complained about slow promotions and ostracization.[52] These reinforced a longstanding suspicion of the military in Black culture, as did the use of conscription during the Vietnam War. Though African Americans constituted 12 percent of the population, they accounted for 13.4 percent of inductees into the military in 1966. That number rose to more than 16 percent by 1970.[53]

The draft and discrimination in the military converged with the antiwar and civil rights movements to make many African American troops wonder why they were fighting a war abroad when they struggled for equality at home. The rise in Black nationalism and Black militancy, particularly the Black Panther Party, both fed and drew fuel from the antiwar movement, increasing tension within African American communities. The assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 sparked urban riots across the country, exacerbating racial tensions even more.[54] The Services were not immune to the violence, and Marine Corps leaders were shocked when a race riot at a Camp Lejeune noncommissioned officers club on 20 July 1969 resulted in 1 dead and 14 injured. On 15 September, a riot broke out at the brig at Camp Pendleton, California, when those incarcerated protested conditions and guards' behavior.[55] Shortly thereafter, Marine and Navy personnel at installations in California formed the Movement for a Democratic Military, an antiestablishment and antiwar organization modeled after the Black Panthers.[56]

Racial slurs, intimidation, and race-related clashes also occurred in South Vietnam and increased as the war progressed, especially between Black and White radicals, estimated at 1 percent of the force. Some Black Marines resorted to flaunting military regulations as a protest against their poor treatment. "By acting in unity," Lance Corporal Gene Johnson said, "we can make our protest much stronger."[57] Most Black and White Marines worked well together in both the rear and in the field, but self-segregation occurred. Troops understood that entering off-duty or liberty areas of the opposite race was dangerous.[58] For African Americans serving in Vietnam, compounding negative experiences and a lack of understanding among the rank and file as to whether they were winning the war, resulted in the war becoming increasingly unpopular by the time of redeployments. In a 1969 poll of members

[50] Shulimson et al., *The Defining Year*, 565–66; and Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 126.
[51] Maj Christopher Browning, "Segregation versus Integration: The Racial Policy of the Marine Corps from 1942–1962" (master's thesis, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2013), 21.
[52] Wallace Terry II, "Bringing the War Home," *Black Scholar* 5, no. 2 (October 1970): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1970.11431010.
[53] James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 23.
[54] Terry, "Bringing the War Home," 7.
[55] Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 124.
[56] David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 107–8.
[57] As quoted in Terry, "Bringing the War Home," 13.
[58] Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 127–28.

from all the Services in South Vietnam, 32 percent of Black troops argued for a complete and immediate withdrawal, and 24 percent argued for a reduced battle rhythm and a pullout as soon as the RVNAF could support themselves. By comparison, only 11 percent of Whites called for an immediate withdrawal while 46 percent argued to wait until the South Vietnamese were self-sufficient.[59] African American Marines' dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war, in turn, eroded discipline in the ranks.

Strained race relations eventually compelled the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, Major General William K. Jones, to send a confidential letter to his subordinate commanders in mid-1969, reminding them that all Marines, "regardless of race, color, creed, or rank," had "certain basic human rights" and "the right to fair and equal treatment." Those rights, he argued, "must be vigorously observed." Major General Jones's 1st Marine Division counterpart, Major General Ormond R. Simpson, argued a few months later that racial conflict was his division's largest problem.[60]

Commandant Chapman was concerned about reports of racial tension in Vietnam and the difficulties some Black Marines were having adjusting to garrison life after their return from deployment. Noting that Marines found "discrimination outside the main gate and occasionally within it," Chapman endeavored to "eradicate" every "trace of discrimination" within the Marine Corps.[61] In an effort to address the matter, the Commandant issued an All Marine Corps Activities (ALMAR) directive on 2 September 1969 titled "Racial Relations and Instances of Racial Violence within the Marine Corps." In it, Chapman hewed closely to the Service's traditional views of a colorblind institution that balanced loyal fraternity with firm discipline. The ALMAR made concessions allowing for the Afro hairstyle and the raised fist of the Black Power salute or dap handshake as long as they were directed "between groups or individuals" and not "when rendering military courtesies to colors, the national anthem, or individuals."[62] The traditional Marine Corps approach stressing unity, however, did not fully resonate with all Marines. "They say I'm just a Marine," Private Allen E. Jones commented, but "how can I forget eighteen years of being black and all that being black means in this country."[63]

Leaders who had to enforce the new regulations had their own questions with the Commandant's approach. While Chapman's intent was clear, the imprecise wording regarding haircuts did little to clarify the situation and created yet more friction between some African American Marines and the noncommissioned officers charged with enforcing regulations. Even III MAF requested clarification on the issue from FMFPAC, but none came. In the absence of further guidance on racial tensions from Headquarters Marine Corps, III MAF dealt with the issue at the unit level. Within months, the Marine Corps began developing a program at the Service-level to study and institute measures to combat racial conflicts, though these new strategies did not arrive in South Vietnam before the withdrawal was complete.[64]

Operation Keystone Robin: Death of "Cut-and-Try," April–October 1970

As those on the ground struggled with deteriorating morale amid the shifting American approach to the war, the Service chiefs juggled the personnel issues with an increased pace of withdrawals. Nixon's announcement on 20 April 1970 that he would reduce the authorized strength by 150,000 troops during the next year signaled an end to the cut-and-try gradualism. Rather than basing withdrawals on the level of enemy activity, RVNAF training progress, and negotiations in Paris, the White House set a target troop ceiling in South Vietnam for USMACV to achieve over several increments within one large redeployment, code-named Keystone Robin. Nixon reasoned that the change was because of Vietnamization's success. The United States, he argued, had "reached a point where we can confidently move from a period of 'cut and try' to a longer-range program for the replacement of Americans

[59] Terry, "Bringing the War Home," 9.
[60] Solis, *Marines and Military Law*, 127–28, 131.
[61] "CMC Explains Message: 'The Purpose is Two-Fold'," *Globe* (Camp Lejeue) 25, no. 37 (12 September 1969): 12; and see p. 2 of ALMAR 65: "Racial Relations and Instances of Racial Violence within the Marine Corps," 2 September 1969, folder "Public Statements, CMC, 1969," box 18, Leonard Chapman Papers, HD Archives.
[62] ALMAR 65, 5.
[63] As quoted in Westheider, *African American Experience in Vietnam*, 42.
[64] White Letter, Commandant of the Marine Corps to all General Officers and Commanding Officers, "Education Program in Race Relations, Information Concerning 5 Apr 1971," folder 3, box 1, White and Green Letters Collection, HD Archives.

National Archives CC49936

USMACV Headquarters building at Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon—what some called "Pentagon East."

by South Vietnamese troops."[65] It remained unclear, however, if Vietnamization was achieving its objective of making the RVNAF a viable, self-sufficient force, as the enemy had been biding its time, marshaling resources, building up combat power, and waiting for the Americans to leave.

USMACV had already recognized the enemy's strategy of patience but concluded that Keystone Robin's 260,000-troop ceiling by 1 July 1971 was a "realistic planning objective."[66] Abrams and his staff changed their assessment in March 1970, though, and cautioned against making withdrawals in large increments after seeing indications that the enemy was preparing a major spring offensive. Five enemy regiments had moved between the III and IV Corps Tactical Zones, and there was an increase in the movement of supplies through Laos. Abrams reported to CINCPAC and the JCS that pulling out too many troops too early could undermine South Vietnamese progress. After taking over new areas in the last U.S. withdrawal phase, the RVNAF needed a "breathing spell," Abrams said.[67]

Abrams made his assessment as the war spilled into Cambodia, leading to an American response that had compounding effects on redeployments. For years, Hanoi had used Cambodia as a PAVN sanctuary and moved men and supplies down a network of footpaths and small roads in Cambodia and Laos known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Vietnamese presence in Cambodia eventually led to a popular uprising that grew into a civil war by March 1967 between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge, a Communist guerrilla force.[68] By March 1970, when Abrams cautioned against redeploying too many troops, the anti-Communist Cambodian prime minister, Lon Nol, deposed the monarchy in a coup. On 12 March, Lon Nol demanded that PAVN and Viet Cong forces leave Cambodia within 72 hours. In response, the Vietnamese Communists secured the border region and armed the Khmer Rouge. This led to Nixon backing Lon Nol and authorizing an incursion into Cambodia to preempt an enemy offensive in South Vietnam, disrupt enemy logistics, and protect Vietnamization.[69] On 29 April, 10,000 U.S. Army and 5,000 ARVN soldiers entered Cambodia. For three months, those forces severed enemy supply routes in the border areas and kept Communist units off balance.[70] The operations created a political backlash in the United States, as Americans viewed U.S. troops entering Cambodia as an expansion of the war. The unrest culminated in campus protests, most notably at Kent State University, where Ohio National Guardsmen killed four demonstrators on 4 May. In Congress, Nixon lost the support of moderates, who allied with hardliners to build an antiwar consensus that increasingly reined in presidential powers and reduced the budget for the war.[71]

This political sparring in Washington impacted redeployments by summer 1970. Nixon and Kissinger had sympathized with Abrams's qualms in March over the end of cut-and-try

[65] "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," 20 April 1970, in *Richard Nixon: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1970*, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States Series (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), Document 126.
[66] As quoted in Cosmas, *MACV*, 161.
[67] Cosmas, *MACV*, 161–62.
[68] Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 307–14.
[69] Cosmas, *MACV*, 293; Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit*, 146–47; and Veith, *Drawn Swords*, 402–3.
[70] USMACV Command History, 1970, vol. 1, V-9.
[71] Robert Davis Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 164–66, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610707.

and delayed redeploying a majority of the 150,000 troops to the latter half of the 1 July 1971 window. This led Nixon to announce on 3 June that the first increment, Keystone Robin Alpha, would withdraw 50,000 personnel by 15 October 1970. Despite Nixon and Kissinger's desire to delay further redeployments, they had to relent when Congress and Laird, angry about the Cambodian campaign, used Pentagon budget constraints to justify removing American troops at a quicker pace. As a result, Nixon was forced to announce Keystone Robin Bravo, another 40,000-troop withdrawal that was to be completed by 31 December 1970.[72]

The quarreling in Washington added to USMACV's difficulties with each reduction. Despite the RVNAF's advances by mid-1970, replacing U.S. units with ARVN troops was not a one-for-one exchange. Beginning with the first redeployment in July 1969, Abrams and his staff tried to manage the inherent dangers of a force losing its combat power and resources. The national leadership's abandonment of cut-and-try's measured approach accelerated these problems and signaled to USMACV that it should focus on prosecuting the retrograde rather than the war.[73]

By midsummer 1970, USMACV and Lieutenant General McCutcheon's staff at III MAF drafted plans for 18,600 troops from the 7th Marines and its supporting elements to redeploy by 15 October in Keystone Robin Alpha. Another 10,600 from the 5th Marines and its supporting elements would leave by 31 December in Keystone Robin Bravo. III MAF Headquarters would follow at the beginning of 1971, leaving the 12,600 Marines remaining in South Vietnam to fall under the 3d Marine Amphibious Brigade (3d MAB). The brigade would take over as the Marine component headquarters until the ultimate retrograde of Marine combat units in Keystone Robin Charlie, to be completed by 30 April 1971.

No sooner had the staffs finished their plans than Service-level considerations threw the sequencing of withdrawals into turmoil. During the first week of August 1970, the JCS concluded that the reductions in defense spending affected the Army's budget and manpower to a degree that the Service could not maintain its allotted troop strength in South Vietnam and meet its other global commitments. The JCS approved Abrams's suggestion of drawing down Army strength more quickly and retaining III MAF units in the I Corps Tactical Zone, now redesignated Military Region 1.[74] The Marines slotted for Keystone Robin Alpha would still redeploy, but the Marines marked for Keystone Robin Bravo would remain in South Vietnam. The soldiers drawing down from Military Regions 2 and 3 accounted for all but 1,900 of the 40,000-troop Keystone Robin Bravo increment.

The attempts to minimize the Army's manning problem shifted the turmoil to the other Services. For the Marine Corps, Commandant Chapman prepared for "severe personnel turbulence." Abrams's plan delayed the redeployment of III MAF headquarters and the formation of the 3d MAB by six months. This disrupted personnel assignments and separations throughout the FMF and impacted FMFPAC's efforts to make I Marine Expeditionary Force operational in the Western Pacific until III MAF could reestablish its headquarters on Okinawa as the theater Service component headquarters. Marine Corps Headquarters worked to offset strength deficiencies in Okinawa and Japan, proposing everything from pulling Marines from duty stations in the United States to increasing the Marine Corps' recruitment goal. Chapman's solution was to revise the personnel redeployment criteria. Enlisted Marines in units deactivating or redeploying to the United States after March 1971 would either stay in South Vietnam or transfer to a new unit in the Western Pacific.[75] Chapman's policy may have been the only feasible option, but it was unpopular even among senior leadership. When confirming receipt of this order to III MAF, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, Major General Charles F. Widdecke, warned McCutcheon that he believed the "morale and faith in the Marine Corps" of the "disappointed Marine" would be "altered accordingly."

McCutcheon had the more immediate concern of maintaining a balanced Marine air-ground task force. The size of the force left in South Vietnam after 15 October would be too large for a MAB but too small for a MAF. During earlier planning for Keystone Robin Alpha, III MAF planners

[72] Cosmas, *MACV*, 158, 160, 164.
[73] Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 163.
[74] The nomenclature change was only for the tactical zone. The South Vietnamese headquarters in Military Region 1 remained I Corps.
[75] "Redeployment Cuts Some Tours," *Sea Tiger* 6, no. 33 (14 August 1970): 1.

Kenneth Koldys Collection (COLL/5791), Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

A Marine looks toward the Que Son Mountains, where the 7th Marines executed Operation Imperial Lake from September 1970 to May 1971.

had violated the rules for balancing combat and service and support elements, assuming the 5th Marines would redeploy soon after the 7th Marines and could operate without its full complement of supporting elements for the limited amount of time that it would be the sole Marine ground combat element in South Vietnam. With the 5th Marines facing the prospect of fighting for upward of five additional months, III MAF revised the troop list for Keystone Robin Alpha to retain support units already standing down.

The withdrawal picked up momentum in August after the necessary changes. Units from the 1st MAW either left the country or relocated to Da Nang, leaving it with MAG-11's four fixed-wing squadrons at Da Nang Air Base and MAG-16's six helicopter squadrons at Marble Mountain Air Facility. While the 1st MAW repositioned around Da Nang, the 1st Marine Division initiated a month of offensives that began on 31 August, meant to take advantage of the combat power it retained and to cover the upcoming redeployments. The first, Operation Imperial Lake, was the 7th Marines' assault into the Que Son Mountains, the high ground that dominated Da Nang from the south and where PAVN and Viet Cong units had base areas. The initial stage of Imperial Lake yielded little contact with enemy troops, who chose to retreat into caves rather than fight. This and follow-on operations nonetheless had the desired effect of disrupting enemy operations around Da Nang.

III MAF and XXIV Corps held a ceremony for the departure of the 7th Marines on 1 October, and the regimental command group departed Da Nang that night. The exit of its battalions during the next two weeks ended the 7th Marines' five years in combat and left the division with only the 1st and 5th Marines. Other units that left were HMM-161,

VMFA-122, Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VMCJ-1), and the command and support elements of MAG-13.[76] The final Marines who redeployed as part of Keystone Robin Alpha set sail from Da Nang on board USS *St. Louis* (LKA 116) on 13 October. The increment reduced III MAF's strength to 24,527. In total, 50,000 American personnel withdrew by Keystone Robin Alpha's 15 October 1970 deadline.

Back to the Beginning, October 1970–January 1971

With the most recent departures, III MAF's tactical area of responsibility shrank to its smallest size since the first months of Marine involvement in the war. One year prior, III MAF had commanded two Marine divisions, two Army divisions, and one Marine aircraft wing. It operated along the length of the I Corps Tactical Zone's 250 kilometers of coastline and the width of the DMZ from the South China Sea to Con Thien. By October 1970, it had two regiments and two aircraft groups operating within a 50-kilometer fan from Da Nang. This reduction in size and area of responsibility meant Marines focused on defending Da Nang through pacification, not searching for and destroying enemy units. After five years of fighting, the Marines were back to the same area of operations and mission that the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade had in March 1965.

III MAF's economy-of-force mission was set out in I Corps and XXIV Corps' combined campaign plan for fall 1970 and winter 1971. Lieutenant General Lam shifted from search-and-destroy operations in the mountains to attacking enemy base areas and the Viet Cong administrative apparatus in villages and hamlets. The objective was to break the NLF's political hold on the populated areas and pave the way for the Saigon government and the RVNAF to rebuild and defend the nation after the Americans departed.

USMACV and the RVNAF had worked for years to refine pacification. By 1968, the Americans and South Vietnamese had developed a strategy that tasked regular military units with clearing populated areas of enemy forces so that the Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF), could destroy Communist political organization in villages and hamlets.[77] With security established, the government of Vietnam would hold elections and institute economic and civic programs. The Marine Corps had invested early in pacification activities, devising efforts like the Combined Action Program (CAP) in 1965 that integrated

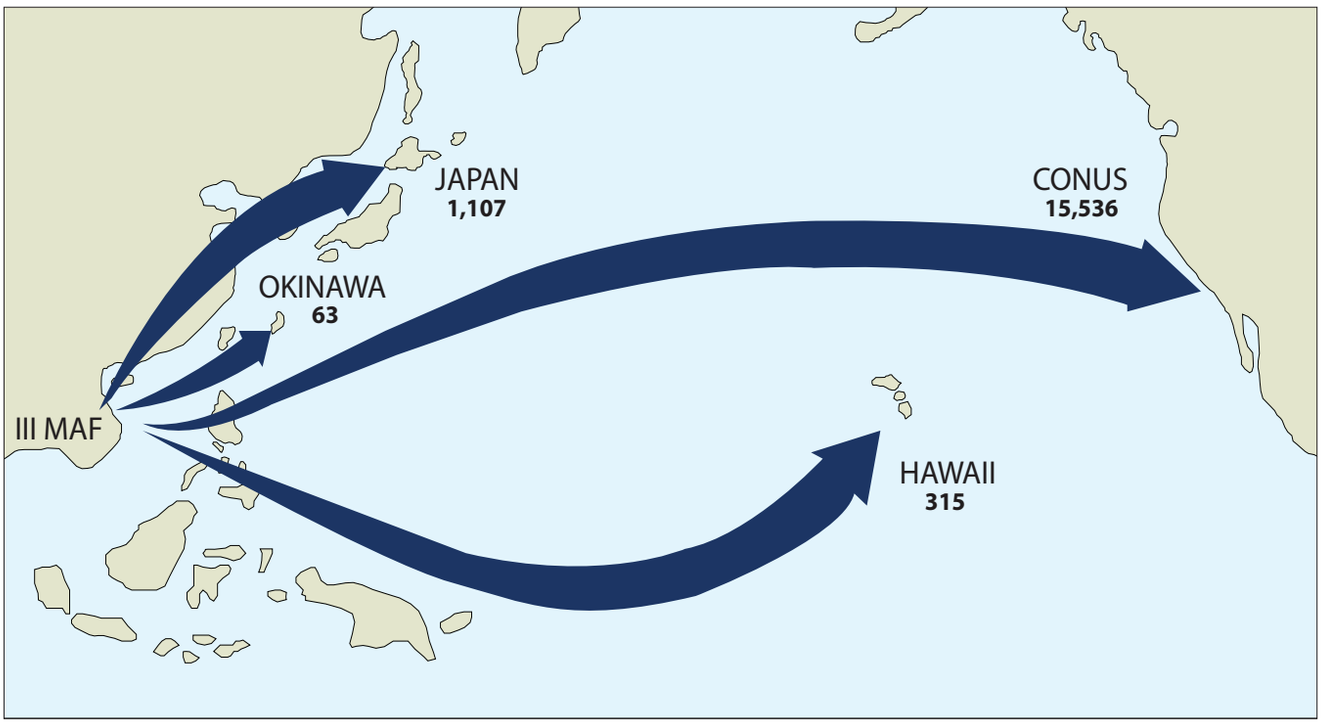
Defense Department (Marine Corps) AMD2437-3

The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, strikes the colors and hands over An Hoa Combat Base to the 1st Battalion, 51st ARVN Regiment, as part of the Keystone Robin Alpha realignments.

[76] USMACV Command History, 1970, vol. 1, IV-24.

[77] American troops referred to these forces by their acronym, RF/PF, pronouncing it phonetically as "ruff-puffs."

Marines redeployed during Keystone Robin Alpha, July–October 1970



Map based on FMFPAC Operations, 1970, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

Marine squads and RF/PF platoons. The Marine approach and the broader national pacification strategy yielded results by 1969. The government of Vietnam considered 94 percent of the 2.9 million people in Military Region 1 as living in pacified communities. The positive figures were deceptive, though, as the enemy was still active and tenacious. South Vietnamese leadership nonetheless sought to build off the perceived successes and set a goal of 100-percent pacification for 1970.

To cripple the Viet Cong and achieve the government of Vietnam's plan for 100-percent pacification of the 2.9 million people in Military Region 1 for 1970, Lam planned to launch Operation Hoang Dieu on 22 October. Reflecting Vietnamization's goal of placing RVNAF forces at the forefront, South Vietnamese units, particularly RF/PFs, would search every hamlet in the province for Viet Cong. I Corps commander Lam tasked the U.S. Army's 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron, ROK Marines, and the 1st and 5th Marines with destroying enemy base areas in the Quang Nam hills. Four tropical storms and typhoons hit Quang Nam Province in October just as Hoang Dieu began, however. During the last typhoon, 17 inches of rain fell in eight days. The resulting flooding killed 200 civilians, displaced 240,000 more, and ruined 55 percent of the year's rice crop. The rains halted military operations and required units in the lowlands to seek refuge on higher ground. III MAF had anticipated the rains and emplaced disaster-control procedures, but patrols were nonetheless caught in the field—both the 1st and 2d Battalions, 1st Marines, lost men while crossing swollen streams.

III MAF shifted from offensive to rescue operations as a result. MAG-16 evacuated 11,000 South Vietnamese in 1,120 sorties by the end of October, much of it in 500-foot cloud ceilings, high winds, driving rain, and darkness.[78] As the flood waters receded at the beginning of November, helicopters delivered tons of supplies, and Marine engineers repaired roads and bridges. The typhoons likewise disrupted enemy opera-

[78] The international aviation standard for altitude is feet rather than meters.

tions, forcing units to move from their usual hiding places. The Viet Cong movements happened to correspond with I Corps' efforts to locate the enemy in Hoang Dieu. Allied troops caught the enemy in the open and killed 1,180 Viet Cong by the time the operation ended on 30 November, impacting the Viet Cong's ability to recruit and field forces.

Keystone Robin Bravo came to a close while these operations ended. As no Marines redeployed, ground unit changes were confined to the U.S. Army. By mid-December, only the 173d Airborne Brigade remained to support the RVNAF's tenuous hold on Military Region 2.[79] Three U.S. Army divisions in Military Region 3 protected the capital at the beginning of 1970; by the end of the year, there was one division, one brigade, and one regiment. The effect was a consistent pressure on RVNAF units to expand their areas of operation.[80]

Regardless of the growing strain on the RVNAF, the Vietnamization of the war continued apace into early 1971 as allied units redesignated their zones of operation as tactical areas of interest. The change was more than semantics and reflected the increasing authority of the RVNAF, which was now responsible for overall operational success and providing tactical direction to the allies. The pattern of the war did not otherwise change. The enemy struggled to maintain capabilities in Quang Nam Province due to the floods, combat losses, deteriorating morale, and difficulty recruiting. They avoided Marine units but kept pressure on the government by concentrating on assassinations, kidnappings, and attacking ARVN and RF/PF units. To disrupt these attacks and erode Communist military and political strength, South Vietnamese forces, with assistance from III MAF and the 2d ROK Marine Brigade, mounted a provincewide campaign in early 1971.

The South Vietnamese and Americans intended these operations to spoil what they anticipated would be an enemy offensive around the Tet holiday for the fourth year in a row. Their hunch proved correct when Communist troops launched a spring offensive against allied units and positions in Quang Nam on the night of 31 January. The offensive lacked the size and ferocity of past years, however, and the 1st Marine Division and the 1st MAW killed 375 PAVN and Viet Cong at the cost of 11 Marines dead and 202 wounded. Even so, as with previous offensives, while K-800 failed militarily it still demonstrated the enemy's "continued presence to the civilian population despite allied deterrent operations," according to III MAF's intelligence section.

Despite the offensive, American combat deaths in South Vietnam continued to decline due to diminishing enemy activity, U.S. forces being more cautious, and the redeployments. More than 9,100 Americans were killed in action in 1969. That number fell to 4,100 the next year, with South Vietnamese combat deaths exceeding Americans killed everywhere but Military Region 1 by mid-1970.[81] After a year of Vietnamization, the RVNAF had taken over a large share of operations. By December 1970, new recruits for its national, regional, and local components swelled it to 986,000 troops, and the ARVN achieved its force ceiling of 390,824 soldiers. Concerted efforts from South Vietnam's Joint General Staff and USMACV to improve a poor training and education system were also a success. Modernized facilities and improved instructors increased the quality of troops graduating from training centers and schoolhouses, allowing the RVNAF to assume a greater burden of the war.[82] It was, however, "a constant headache," according to Chairman of the Joint General Staff General Cao Van Vien, to maintain full strength with constant deaths, discharges, and desertions.[83]

Operation Lam Son 719, January–March 1971

Nixon interpreted the RVNAF achievements as evidence that Vietnamization was working. He and Kissinger still anticipated a major enemy offensive and requested an RVNAF incursion into Laos to disrupt the enemy's 1971 campaign timetable.[84] Operation Lam Son 719 was a combined, multiphase operation that targeted border base areas and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. U.S. support was limited to logistics, artillery, and aviation, as Congress had restricted American ground forces from crossing the border the month before with the Cooper-Church Amendment. Congress did not, however,

[79] Andrew J. Birtle and John R. Mass, *The Drawdown, 1970–1971* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2019), 35–38; and USMACV Command History, 1970, vol. 1, V-8.
[80] Birtle and Mass, *The Drawdown*, 42–43.
[81] Cosmas, *MACV*, 258.
[82] USMACV Command History, 1970, vol. 2, VII-33–34, Ike Skelton Library.
[83] Gen Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse*, Indochina Monographs series (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1985), 44.
[84] Cosmas, *MACV*, 320–21.

limit supporting operations inside South Vietnam, allowing U.S. Army forces to secure the border approaches in Military Region 1 in Operation Dewey Canyon II at the end of January. The operation was the first phase of Lam Son 719 and cleared a path for a South Vietnamese armor-airborne task force—composed of two infantry divisions, the RVNAF Marine and Airborne Divisions, two armored brigades, and one ranger group—to stage at Khe Sanh.[85]

Unbeknownst to commanders, the PAVN had been massing forces in Laos since mid-1970. The North Vietnamese later claimed they used 60,000 troops. While the number was more likely around the 22,000–25,000 that USMACV estimated, that force was still larger than the 17,000 soldiers the ARVN committed to the operation.[86] Lam Son 719 shaped up to be a climactic fight, as Washington and Saigon intended it to show the success of Vietnamization and justify the continued redeployment of American troops.[87] The enemy, though, saw an opportunity to discredit the policy and destroy some of the RVNAF's best units in a corps-sized battle of annihilation.[88]

The South Vietnamese ran into problems early during the movement into Laos on 8 February 1971. They executed an armor thrust on the low ground while airmobile troops leapfrogged to establish hilltop fire-support bases on the flanks. The narrow and pockmarked Route 9 slowed the armor advance to a crawl as it moved toward its objective, an enemy logistics hub near the Laotian town of Tchepone. PAVN commanders had anticipated the flight paths and landing zones of the U.S. Army helicopters carrying the South Vietnamese force. The two sides bludgeoned each other until early March, when increased U.S. direct support allowed the RVNAF to take Tchepone. Able to claim at least a limited victory, Thieu hastily withdrew his forces before the PAVN could regroup.[89]

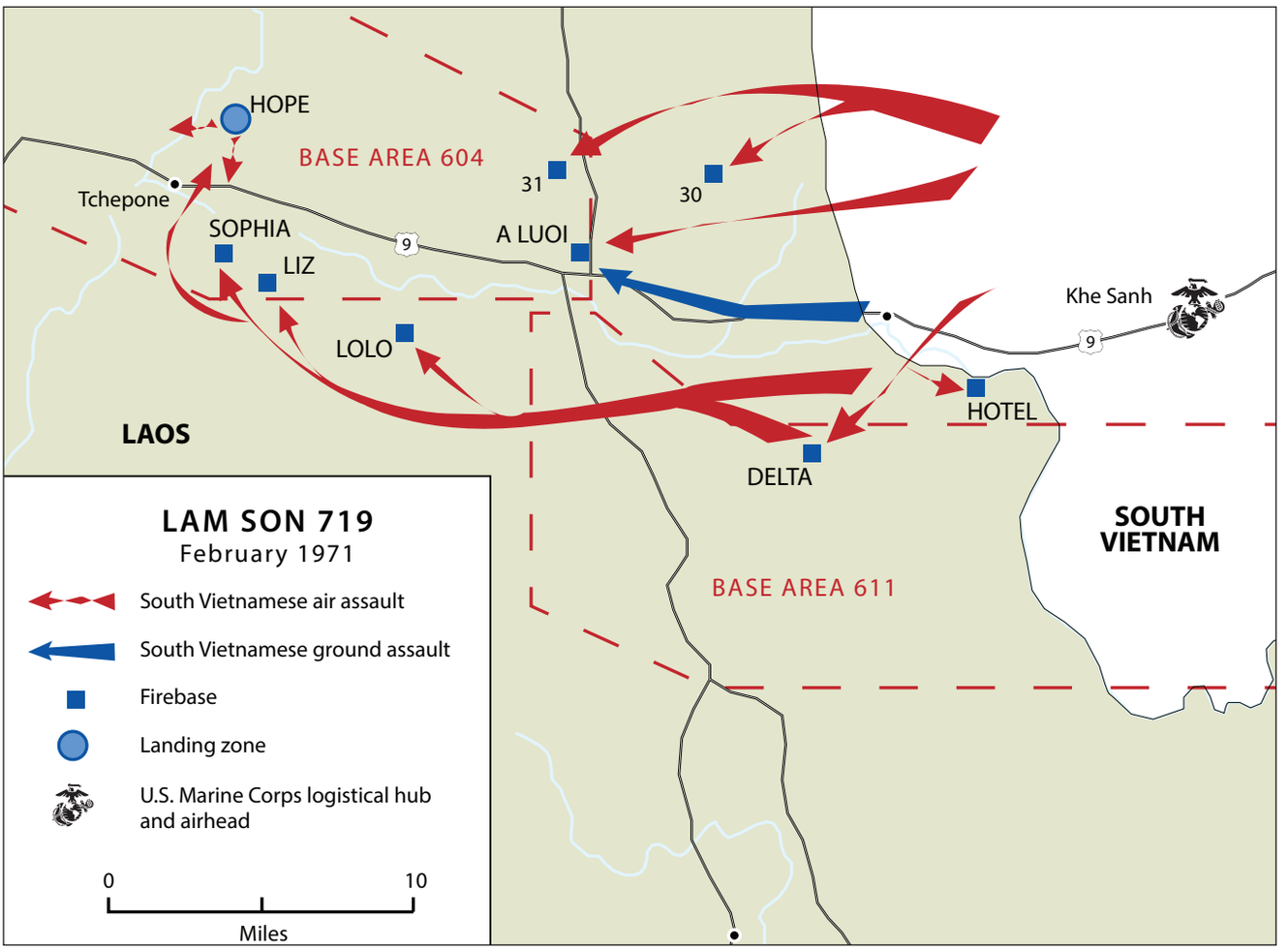
III MAF contributed supporting operations and forces to Lam Son 719. The 1st Marines, still contending with the last attacks of the K-800 Spring Offensive, increased patrols along Route 1 to defend the supply lines from Da Nang to Quang Tri Province. Eighty kilometers off the coast of North Vietnam, Amphibious Ready Group Alpha (ARG Alpha), with the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (31st MAU) embarked, made an amphibious demonstration and thereby successfully delayed PAVN forces from responding to the operation in Laos.

Direct Marine involvement in Lam Son 719 was in air support. Fixed-wing aircraft from the 1st MAW received tasking from the Seventh Air Force, which controlled Joint tactical and strategic aircraft. In February, 1st MAW fixed-wing support flew 509 sorties and dropped 1,183 tons of ordnance. Marine rotary-wing support came from HMH-463, which fell under the operational control of the U.S. Army's 101st Combat Aviation Group. In the first phase of the operation, Marine Sikorsky CH-53D Sea Stallion heavy-lift helicopters moved supplies and equipment to staging areas in Quang Tri Province. As the operation progressed, the CH-53s flew into Laos, which required escorts from Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 (HMLA-367). HMH-463 flew 2,992 sorties, lifting 6,500 tons of cargo and 2,500 passengers while losing one CH-53. This was modest compared to U.S. Army aviation, which flew 45,828 sorties into Laos and took the brunt of the enemy contact, with 102 helicopters destroyed and 601 damaged.

Far from being the rout of PAVN forces that Washington and Saigon had hoped for, Lam Son 719 proved costly by the time it ended on 25 March. The RVNAF lost 1,549 troops killed and 5,483 wounded, around 45 percent of the attacking force. American casualties were 215 killed and 1,149 wounded.[90] Abrams and CINCPAC took solace in the South Vietnamese and Americans inflicting far more damage on the PAVN, which suffered an estimated 13,000 killed and 16 of 33 infantry battalions were rendered combat ineffective. Allied forces failed to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but they succeeded in disrupting PAVN logistics for the short-term, destroying 90,000 gallons of fuel and oil and 1,250 tons of food. The operation achieved its objective of spoiling an enemy offensive in Military Region 1 for 1971. The PAVN went on the defensive and even removed one division from

[85] MajGen Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monographs Series (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1979), 58–64.
[86] Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975,* trans. by Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 274; USMACV Command History, 1971, vol. 2, E-17, Ike Skelton Library; and Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 127.
[87] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 167.
[88] Cosmas, *MACV*, 331.
[89] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 145–46.
[90] Nguyen, *Lam Son 719*, 129.

Lam Son 719



Map courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History

South Vietnam. While the operation revealed deficiencies in South Vietnamese command and control, fire-support coordination, and communications security, it did not discredit Vietnamization as Hanoi had hoped.[91]

Operation Keystone Robin Charlie: Drawing Down to the 3d MAB, March–April 1971

While Lam Son 719 was underway, III MAF made final preparations for the exit of all Marine combat units from South Vietnam. Far from being a simple matter of redeploying the remaining Marines, the final two withdrawals were as complex as the first had been. The complicating factor was standing down III MAF and standing up the 3d MAB without reducing pressure on the enemy during the last increment of Nixon's 150,000-troop withdrawal, code-named Keystone Robin Charlie. Before setting a redeployment schedule within Keystone Robin Charlie's 1 January to 30 April 1971 window, the Marine Corps first had to confirm what the 3d MAB's mission would be, what forces would be required to execute it, and how long the brigade would operate.

These discussions began in late summer 1970 amid the turmoil of Keystone Robin Bravo. During conversations with

[91] Cosmas, *MACV*, 336.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) 207-1

Marines supported the RVNAF during Operation Lam Son 719 in multiple ways, including this convoy from Company C, 11th Motor Transport Battalion, delivering supplies to Khe Sanh Combat Base.

the other Services, Headquarters Marine Corps and III MAF ensured that the 3d MAB would avoid a static defensive role and have a security mission around Da Nang. They had no influence, however, on USMACV's and XXIV Corps' vacillation throughout fall 1970 about who was to relieve the 1st Marine Division in Quang Nam and when the relief would happen, leaving the Marines unable to finalize withdrawal plans. Those answers came during a 26 January 1971 conference between III MAF and XXIV Corps, where Army representatives confirmed that the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, 23d Infantry Division, would relieve the Marines in three stages during Keystone Robin Charlie between 13 April and 7 May. This relief was part of the larger transfer of authority in Military Region 1 between the Marine Corps and Army, with the 23d Infantry Division's two other brigades taking over Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces.[92] This clarity allowed for III MAF planners to devise a troop list that would give the 3d MAB a balanced force to conduct the Marines' final combat operations in South Vietnam. III MAF then finalized plans to remove 12,400 troops in Keystone Robin Charlie, including the 5th Marines and the headquarters of III MAF, the 1st Marine Division, and the 1st MAW. The remaining

[92] Birtle and Mass, *The Drawdown*, 57.

15,500 Marines and sailors in South Vietnam would form the 3d MAB, composed of the 1st Marines, the squadrons of MAG-11 and MAG-16, and the requisite combat support and service units.

The outstanding issue was the length of the 3d MAB's deployment. Following a debate inside the JCS, Abrams announced that the 3d MAB would serve as the Marine headquarters in South Vietnam for one to three months and redeploy between 1 May and 30 June 1971.[93] The brigade would be part of a 29,000-troop withdrawal that would lower American strength in the country from 284,000 to the required ceiling of 255,000 by 1 July. III MAF approved the 1st Marine Division's plan to execute a tactical withdrawal of the 1st, 5th, and 11th Marines from the Que Son Mountains and the areas outside of Da Nang. The first realignment began on 13 February, when the 5th and 11th Marines began extracting battalions from Operation Imperial Lake and turning over areas of Quang Nam Province to RF/PF units. Between 3 and 24 March, the 5th Marines transferred their tactical area of interest to Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 1st Marines and moved toward Da Nang for embarkation. On 24 March, the 11th Marines headquarters stood down and gave control of the remaining batteries to its 1st Battalion, which stayed to serve as the 3d MAB's artillery element.

By mid-February, the 1st MAW prepared for departure. HMH-364 flew its final mission on 16 February, and VMFA-115, the last McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II squadron in the country, ceased operations on 22 February. Much of the MAW was still engaged in Lam Son 719 or meeting aviation requirements elsewhere in Military Region 1. This led XXIV Corps to request USMACV postpone the redeployment of HML-167, HMM-263, HMH-463, and Marine Air Support Squadron 3. USMACV concurred and slated those squadrons to redeploy later with the 3d MAB rather than the 1st MAW. The change lowered the number of Marines who redeployed in Keystone Robin Charlie to 11,358 and meant that 821 Marines had their tour extended by one to two months.[94]

Even so, the pace of the Marines' exit quickened in March. All the 5th Marines except its 1st Battalion embarked on USS *Denver* (LPD 9) on 23–24 March and set sail for Camp Pendleton.[95] By the end of the month, the 11th Marines, minus its 1st Battalion, was on its way to Pendleton along with VMO-2, the aerial eyes of 1st Marine Division. VMFA-115 had already redeployed to Iwakuni.[96] Of the remaining supporting units, many left small detachments for the 3d MAB and embarked for home stations.

The flood of Marines moving toward Da Nang meant turning over or closing some of the last facilities and fire support bases in the 1st Marine Division's tactical area of interest. The Marines handed control of their major ground ammunition depot, Ammunition Supply Point 2, and 6,800 tons of munitions to U.S. Army Support Command on 15 March. The 1st Engineer Battalion transferred Camp Faulkner, its home near Marble Mountain, to a mechanized cavalry element of the 23d Infantry Division on 27 March. The sprawling combat base at Landing Zone Baldy, northwest of Chu Lai, went to the ARVN the same day. As they had since the first redeployments in summer 1969, Marines razed any position or facility that the U.S. Army or RVNAF did not want. As some of the last Marine units in South Vietnam, there was more finality to closing the places that Marines had called home. Troops followed Commandant Chapman's orders to leave behind nothing worth more than "five dollars."

The 1st Marines occupied the final positions outside of Da Nang and were spread from the Hai Van Pass north of the city to the Que Son Mountains in the southwest. With dwindling resources and support, the regiment tried to maintain pressure on the enemy. Meanwhile, the Viet Cong barraged the RVNAF, the government, and the South Vietnamese people with propaganda and terrorism. On 29 March, when much of the 1st Marine Division was leaving, Viet Cong and PAVN units launched the K-850 campaign to disrupt pacification as the final withdrawal of Marines approached. Enemy units attacked hamlets and towns and fired rockets at installations around Da Nang. The 51st ARVN Regiment counterattacked over the next four days, removing the enemy from the area.

The K-850 campaign continued into the first week of April, but the tempo of attacks declined. III MAF interpreted the only periodic rocket barrages and PAVN and Viet Cong troops remaining in the lowlands to mean that the enemy's objec-

[93] Cosmas, *MACV*, 174–75.
[94] Cosmas, *MACV*, 178.
[95] 5th Marines ComdC, 1–21 March 1971, HD Archives.
[96] VMO-2 ComdC, 1–31 March 1971, HD Archives.

tive was political and psychological. The message to the South Vietnamese population, it seemed, was that the RVNAF could not protect them once the Americans left. I Corps' response to the enemy presence was reminiscent of how the Americans waged the war in Military Region 1 during the previous five years, with saturation patrolling in the populated coastal lowlands and large sweeps of PAVN sanctuaries in the mountains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.

In the wake of the attacks, USMACV directed the 1st Marines to launch Operation Scott Orchard into the enemy's base area west of An Hoa on 7 April. III MAF questioned the rationale for the operation, doubting the accuracy of USMACV's intelligence that the enemy was holding American and allied troops in a camp in the hills of western Quang Nam, but the return of prisoners of war was a significant political and diplomatic issue in the United States. For the operation, a composite 105mm and 155mm battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, reopened Fire Support Base Dagger, and five companies under the control of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, swept the area. After five days of breaking through the dense jungle, the Marines ended the search after determining that there was no prison compound and the enemy had left the area well before.

The long-awaited activation of the 3d MAB came on 14 April with the departure of III MAF and the arrival of the 196th Light Infantry. In a ceremony with 100 high-ranking U.S. and South Vietnamese guests at the Force Logistic Command compound northwest of Da Nang, Lieutenant General Donn J. Robertson, who had succeeded McCutcheon as the III MAF commander in December 1970, cased the colors and activated the 3d MAB. III MAF had been one of the largest combat commands in the Marine Corps' history and had overseen much of the American war effort in South Vietnam's northernmost provinces since 7 May 1965. Its strength peaked in 1968 with more than 150,000 Marine, Army, and Navy personnel.

After the ceremony, Lieutenant General Robertson left to reestablish III MAF on Okinawa and replace I Marine Expeditionary Force as the headquarters of Marine ready forces in the Western Pacific. Widdecke and the 1st Marine Division staff boarded aircraft for Camp Pendleton. Two weeks later, Nixon and a host of dignitaries visited to welcome the division home. During a ceremony, Nixon presented the division with its eighth Presidential Unit Citation in front of 15,000 Marines and their families. "As I welcome you home," the president said, "I can say to you that the Nation is proud of you. I can say to you, you come home mission accomplished" and "in terms of personal heroism there is no question about the verdict of history."[97]

The 1st MAW left South Vietnam for Iwakuni, but its commanding general, Major General Alan J. Armstrong, stayed to assume command of the 3d MAB and its 13,600 troops. The brigade's ground combat element was the 1st Marines, with support from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, and the 3d 8-inch Howitzer Battery. Fixed-wing support came from MAG-11's VMA-311 and Marine All Weather Attack Squadron 225 (VMA[AW]-225). The disproportionately large rotary-wing support from MAG-16—HML-167, HML-367, HMM-262, HMM-263, and HMH-463—was the result of the Lam Son 719 redeployment postponements.[98] The remaining elements of Force Logistic Command supplied the brigade, while sundry support came from the 2d Combined Action Group, the 1st Military Police Battalion, and a company from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion.

When the 3d MAB became the senior Marine echelon in South Vietnam, it was less a headquarters that controlled combat operations than one that oversaw the continued withdrawal of Marine forces. Some of its elements, like one battalion from the 1st Marines and one battery from the 11th Marines, had ceased combat operations in the days before the brigade stood up. The schedule for the standdown and departure of the 3d MAB's remaining elements became clearer after 7 April, when Nixon announced the removal of another 100,000 troops by 1 December, declaring that "American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end." This next large, long-term withdrawal was part of the president's new military and diplomatic effort to end the war and achieve his goal of a "total American withdrawal from Vietnam" through Vietnamization. The administration aimed to reduce the troop strength to 60,000 by January 1972.[99] By then, all Marine combat units would be gone, as USMACV placed all the 3d MAB in the first increment of 29,000 troops, code-named Keystone Oriole Alpha.

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[97] As quoted in GySgt Ed Evans and Cpl Donald E. Lee, "The 1st Returns," *Leatherneck* (August 1971): 35.
[98] MAG-11 ComdC, 1–31 May 1971, HD Archives.
[99] As quoted in USMACV Command History, 1971, vol. 2, F-7.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) 1-290-71

LtGen Donn J. Robertson (left), commanding general of III MAF, passes colors to MajGen Alan J. Armstrong, commanding general of 3d MAB, 14 April 1971.

As a result, the brigade focused on redeploying in the next one to three months while handing over the last parts of its tactical area of interest.

The enemy chose to keep the pressure on the South Vietnamese during this transfer of responsibility. On 26 April, PAVN and Viet Cong units launched the second phase of the K-850 campaign in Quang Nam, with more limited ground attacks and rocket and mortar barrages. The enemy avoided American positions and targeted RVNAF units and installations; an exception was a rocket attack on the Da Nang airfield that ignited 500,000 gallons of jet fuel and aviation gasoline. For the most part, though, the Communists focused the second phase of their campaign on terrorism and political hectoring in hamlets.

Operation Keystone Oriole Alpha: The Final Withdrawals, May–July 1971

Keystone Robin Charlie ended on 30 April 1971 after 11,911 Marine and Navy personnel redeployed. The Army took up the majority of the 60,000 spaces when it redeployed more than 41,000 soldiers from Military Regions 2 and 3. Many of the slots went to the first Army units to arrive in South Vietnam six years earlier, including the 173d Airborne and two brigades of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).[100] The withdrawal of the 173d Airborne completed the redeployment of U.S. Army units from Military Region 2. In Military Region 3, only the lone brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division remained to support the RVNAF.[101] At the same time, Abrams redesignated the Army's field force headquarters in Military Regions 2 and 3 from I and II Field Forces to Second and Third Regional Assistance Commands and combined them with existing Army advisory groups. This change was to reduce the large field force headquarters and shift their functions from military operations to advice, support, and pacification. There was no reorganization in Military Region 1,

[100] USMACV Command History, 1971, vol. 2, F-7.
[101] Birtle and Mass, *The Drawdown*, 63.

Leonard Chapman Collection (COLL/3611), Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

President Richard M. Nixon and Commandant Leonard F. Chapman review the 1st Marine Division after its return to Camp Pendleton, CA, 30 April 1970.

however, as XXIV Corps still contended with an enemy threat that required a large contingent of American combat forces.[102]

Keystone Oriole Alpha began one week after Keystone Robin Charlie ended. On 7 May, all 3d MAB ground and air operations ceased and the 196th Light Infantry again expanded its tactical area of interest to include Da Nang and the airbase. Battery C, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, fired the last of the 2.5 million rounds that the battalion shot during the war. They cleaned and inspected their 105mm howitzers before turning them over to the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC). The last Marine infantry battalion in the field—the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines—stood down, and VMA-311 and HMM-262 flew their last sorties. The other helicopter squadrons remained operational only for noncombat missions. The Marines in the 2d Combined Action Group departed their villages, and the 1st Military Police Battalion handed over its airfield security mission to an RF group. The same day, the 3d MAB transferred its headquarters cantonment, the old 1st Marine Division command post, to the 196th Light Infantry.

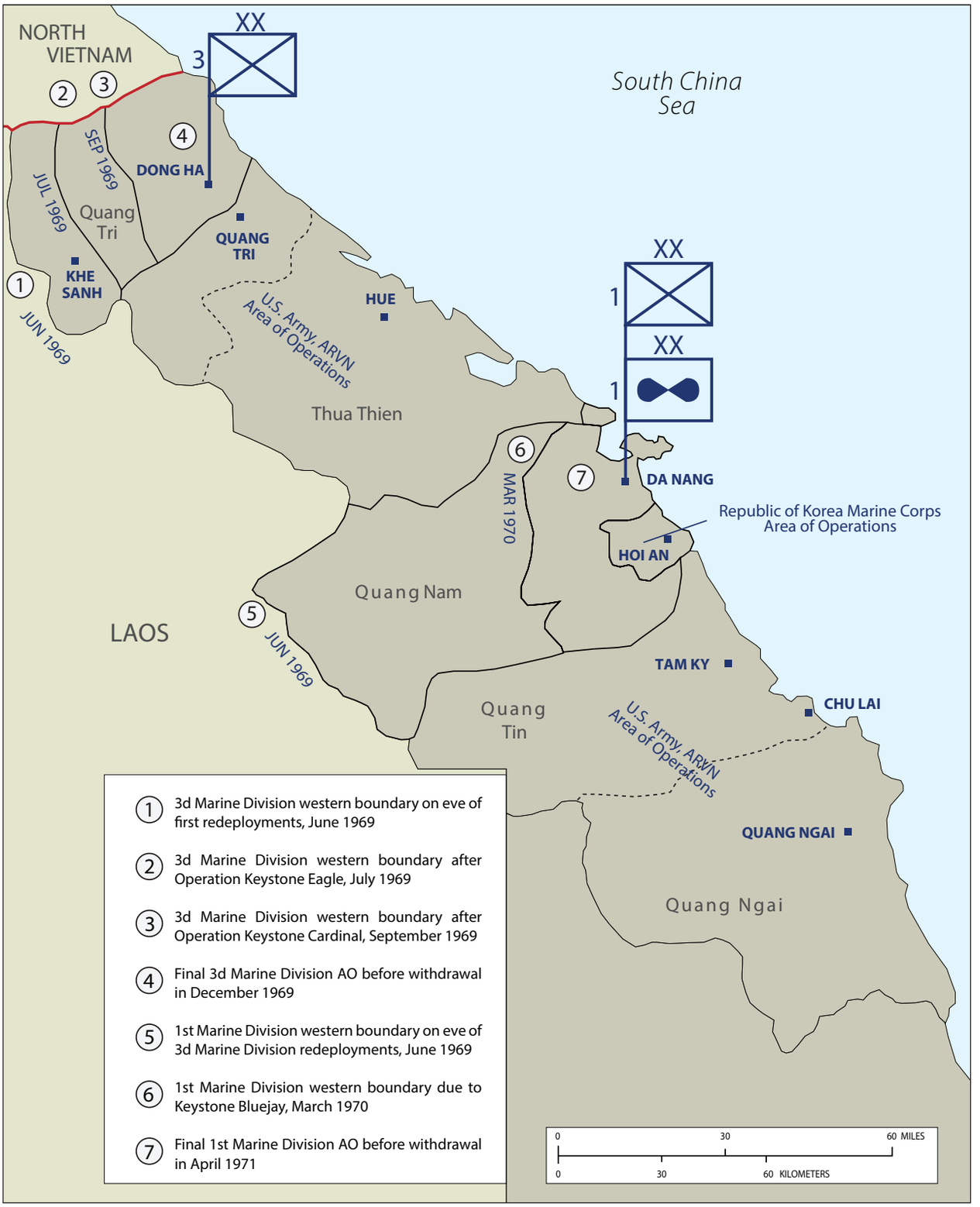
Throughout the rest of May, the brigade's elements transferred their installations and began embarkation procedures. VMA-311 flew its aircraft to Iwakuni, and HMM-262 and HMM-263 boarded ships for home stations. The last of the 1st Marines redeployed to Camp Pendleton on board *Denver* on 1 June along with the remaining troops from the 11th Marines. The 1st Marines were the last of eight Marine infantry regiments to leave South Vietnam. The helicopter squadrons redeployed in late May and early June. The last in country, HML-167, left Marble Mountain on 15 June and flew aboard USS *Dubuque* (LPD 8), ending the Marine rotary-wing operations in South Vietnam that had begun in 1962.[103]

The last Marine-controlled installation, Force Logistic Command's Camp Brooks at Red Beach, Da Nang, went to the U.S. Army on 4 June. Its turnover meant the Marine

[102] Cosmas, *MACV*, 210–11.

[103] HML-167 ComdC, 1–10 June 1971, HD Archives.

Withdrawal of U.S. Marine Corps combat units from the I Corps Tactical Zone, 1969–1971



Map courtesy of Pete McPhail, adapted by MCUP

Corps, according to Major General Armstrong, "went out of the real estate business" in South Vietnam. The Army and RVNAF now controlled all of Military Region 1, where Abrams focused the bulk of his remaining forces. By June 1971, seven of the nine American brigades still in South Vietnam were in Military Region 1. The final ship to leave the country with Marines on board was *St. Louis* on 25 June. The next day, Armstrong, the last 10 members of his staff, and 53 Marines from the brigade boarded an aircraft and flew to FMFPAC Headquarters at Camp Smith, Hawaii. On 27 June, the 3d MAB deactivated. Their movement ended the redeployment of 13,590 Marines in Operation Keystone Oriole Alpha and Marine combat units' direct role in the Vietnam War.[104]

The III MAF retrograde from South Vietnam required a degree of planning and preparation as complicated as any campaign it waged during the war. The Marine Corps was able to withdraw and redeploy entire regimental combat teams often within only a few months between warning order and execution. Each phase required coordination at every echelon, from the Joint Chiefs down to the battalion and company level. Twenty battalion's worth of units had to be earmarked for redeployment, more than 80,000 personnel either redeployed or mixmastered, the equipment and material that sustained Marines either removed or transferred to the South Vietnamese, multiple tactical areas of responsibility reshuffled, more than 40 major facilities transferred or razed, numerous shipping and air movements coordinated, manifests constructed and checked, and so on. It is testament to both planners and commanders alike that III MAF executed the withdrawal with an impressive attention to detail while simultaneously remaining in contact with the enemy. A small number of Marines remained in the country after the departure of the brigade. A transitional support force of 542 Marines, the lowest number in Vietnam since 1963, were spread throughout the country performing liaison, advisory, staff, and guard functions. The largest contingent was 195 members of Sub Unit One, 1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO). Its small teams were located in various RVNAF headquarters from the DMZ to the southern tip of the country in the event that South Vietnamese troops required naval gunfire support. Company F, Marine Security Guard Battalion, had 156 men at the U.S. embassy in Saigon and the consulate in Da Nang. The 68 officers and enlisted of the U.S. Marine Advisory Unit, Naval Advisory Group, were in Military Region 1 assisting the Vietnamese Marine Corps' one division. The advisors served on staffs down to the battalion level and assisted with training, logistics, and staff functions. There were also Marines serving as advisors to units from the ARVN, Vietnamese Navy, and territorial forces. The remaining Marines in South Vietnam were in Da Nang, serving on the USMACV staff or in a detachment operating an air-defense system. As Vietnamization intended, the primary Marine Corps and Army efforts by mid-1971 were advisory.

Now relieved of direct missions in South Vietnam, III MAF became the Pacific Command's immediate reserve and a regional force. While III MAF settled into its theater role, U.S. personnel continued to redeploy from South Vietnam. There were three more increments between 1 July 1971 and 31 January 1972 that reduced the troop ceiling from 254,700 to 139,000. The increments, code-named Keystone Oriole Bravo, Keystone Oriole Charlie, and Keystone Mallard, removed 115,700 troops, among them 20 maneuver battalions and 20 artillery battalions from the U.S. Army and 9 U.S. Air Force fighter/attack squadrons. The Army redeployments included the units that relieved the Marine infantry regiments, leaving the defense of Military Region 1 entirely to the RVNAF.[105]

With more perspective about the success of Vietnamization by mid-1971, Abrams judged the RVNAF still needed "corrective attention" in its structure and doctrine. It relied too heavily on aviation and artillery rather than infantry fire and maneuver, suffered from weak leadership at all levels, and had crippling desertion rates as well as corruption and patronage.[106] The RVNAF that USMACV and Vietnamization helped build was a territorial defense force, competent at pacification and counterinsurgency. Its only mobile reserve was the RVNAF's Marine division, the airborne division, and a nine-battalion ranger force. Still, by the time U.S. combat forces left, the RVNAF appeared capable of handling the dual threats of the Viet Cong's guerrilla campaign and the PAVN's limited infantry attacks. As long as the enemy continued its same approach and level of commitment, the South Vietnam-

[104] Cosmas, *MACV*, 175–76.

[105] USMACV Command History, 1971, vol. 2, F-1-1.
[106] Cosmas, *MACV*, 274–75.

Location of U.S. Marines, July 1971–February 1972

Map based on Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC, and LtCol Curtis G. Arnold, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The War that Would Not End, 1971–1973,* Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1991), 8.

ese had the potential to continue their strides toward becoming independent.[107]

Easter Offensive, March 1972–January 1973[108]

By most measures, the war appeared to favor Saigon by the end of 1971. South Vietnam's successful advances in pacification, political development, and economic stabilization had wrested the strategic initiative away from Hanoi. Vietnamization was also in its final phases, with USMACV halting American ground combat operations and preparing to reduce the 139,000 troops remaining in South Vietnam to 60,000 by 1 July 1972. The final redeployments had a diplomatic and political impact on Hanoi officials, who believed the quickening American exit strengthened Nixon's prospects of reelection. Open hostility between the Soviet Union and China, Hanoi's primary sources of military and diplomatic support, complicated matters. Ideological disagreements over Marxist-Leninist doctrine in the early-1960s had turned into geopolitical competition between the Soviets and Chinese by the early 1970s. Nixon and Kissinger maneuvered to exploit the rift with what they called triangular diplomacy, dangling better relations with Moscow and with Beijing in exchange for the two powers pressuring Hanoi to seek peace. Le Duan and other hardliners balked at the pressure to settle and sought to win the war militarily.[109]

North Vietnam hoped to undermine Vietnamization and Nixon's triangular diplomacy, leaving the American president little choice but to negotiate a peace favorable to the Communists.[110] Hanoi's hopes for a decisive victory hinged on a conventional attack in the spring. Le Duan believed armor and heavy artillery could weaken the RVNAF and allow Communist forces to seize as much territory as possible in Military Regions 1, 2, and 3. In late 1971, the North Vietnamese began moving 10 of their 13 regular divisions to border areas with units that fielded Soviet T-54 medium tanks, 130mm guns, 160mm mortars, 57mm antiaircraft guns, surface-to-air-missile batteries, and shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles.[111] USMACV saw the movements and prepared for the offensive while overseeing the departure of a Thai division, an Australian task force, and the 2d ROK Marine Brigade. On 13 January 1972, USMACV learned that Nixon had relented to domestic political pressures for an accelerated withdrawal. The command's ceiling would reduce to 69,000 troops by 1 May, leaving Abrams with 15,000 fewer troops than he expected by spring. It was a force capable of little more than defending and supplying itself.[112]

Opening Moves

The North Vietnamese launched their offensive on 30 March in Military Region 1. The attack, which Hanoi named Nguyen Hue but Americans referred to as the Easter Offensive, began at noon with an artillery preparation against ARVN units along the DMZ and VNMC brigades on hilltop outposts in western Quang Tri Province. More than 12,000 rocket, mortar, and artillery rounds landed on a series of firebases that the South Vietnamese boasted was a ring of steel. The indirect fire paved the way for a three-pronged infantry attack into Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. The enemy aimed to roll over the positions that Marines had spent years defending and seize Dong Ha, Quang Tri City, and Hue.

Around 30,000 troops from the *304th* and *308th PAVN Divisions* and three separate infantry regiments crossed the DMZ with two armor regiments. The force advanced south on Route 1 toward Dong Ha, the northernmost city in Military Region 1. Meanwhile, the *312th PAVN Division* crossed into South Vietnam from Laos and pushed down Route 9, approaching Dong Ha from the west. Farther south, the *324B PAVN Division* attacked from Laos, along the boundary separating Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and toward the imperial capital of Hue. The scale of the offensive shocked the South Vietnamese, who only had the untested 3d ARVN Division and two VNMC brigades, with nine battalions of

[107] Cosmas, *MACV*, 277.
[108] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section—including quotes—is derived from Maj Charles D. Melson and LtCol Curtis G. Arnold, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The War that Would Not End, 1971–1973*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1991); and *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954–1973: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 2d ed., Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Divisions, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1985).
[109] Cosmas, *MACV*, 346, 353.
[110] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 233–34.
[111] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 126.
[112] Cosmas, *MACV*, 353–54.

artillery, armor, and rangers in support, to block four PAVN divisions.

When the enemy attacked, some of the nearly 70 members of the Marine Advisory Unit were in the field with VNMC units. Brigade 258 was defending Dong Ha, and Brigade 147 was arrayed in a semicircle on hilltops and ridgelines facing the Laotian border to defend the approaches to the coastal lowlands. The outposts were on their own, as the simultaneous enemy attacks and poor weather prevented close air support. The Marine advisors fought alongside their VNMC counterparts until forced to withdraw. Captain Ray L. Smith, recipient of two Silver Stars during a previous tour and a future major general, received the Navy Cross for his actions at Nui Ba Ho. Major Walter E. Boomer, a future Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, led survivors from Fire Support Base Sarge through the jungle to the brigade headquarters at Mai Loc, where the remnants of the battalions consolidated. At the fight below the DMZ, a five-man team from Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO, was instrumental in directing naval gunfire at Gio Linh while PAVN troops swarmed their position. Their spotting allowed ARVN troops to escape south when the base fell, but two team members, Lieutenant David C. Bruggeman and Corporal James F. Worth, died during the fighting.[113]

The ring of steel collapsed on 2 April. The inexperienced 3d ARVN Division elements fled down Route 1 with their families. In the west, VNMC Brigade 147's position at Mai Loc became untenable after the 56th ARVN Regiment commander surrendered Camp Carroll along with its 1,500 troops and 22 artillery pieces.[114] The VNMC battalions and their American advisors withdrew in good order down Route 9 toward Quang Tri City. The enemy's unrelenting pressure forced the RVNAF to concede much of Quang Tri Province and contract its defensive perimeter around Dong Ha. By the end of 2 April, PAVN units controlled every South Vietnamese position north and west of the city.

The Defense of Dong Ha

The Cua Viet River became integral to the RVNAF defense of Dong Ha. As a natural obstacle along the *308th PAVN Division*'s axis of advance, the river provided an opportunity for the South Vietnamese to hold the line at the city's northern outskirts. Two bridges spanned the Cua Viet: a railroad trestle and a two-lane, 150-meter-long vehicle bridge that U.S. Navy Seabees built in 1970. Defending the bridges was the 3d Battalion, VNMC Brigade 258, under the command of Major Le Ba Binh and with Captain John W. Ripley as the Marine advisor. The battalion was positioned as a blocking force on the southern bank with orders to defend the spans "at all costs." Faced with stopping the enemy's armor advance down Route 1, Major Binh declared over Vietnamese and American radio channels that "as long as one marine draws a breath of life, Dong Ha will belong to us."

As the South Vietnamese maneuvered into position early on 2 April, PAVN heavy artillery hit the battalion with an "absolute firestorm" of a barrage, according to Captain Ripley. It "seemed to come from three different directions," ripping apart several blocks of buildings.[115] In response, Ripley requested a naval gunfire mission from an ANGLICO team at Ai Tu, eight kilometers south. The ANGLICO team coordinated fire from USS *Buchanan* (DDG 14), a guided-missile destroyer in the South China Sea. *Buchanan*'s 5-inch guns halted enemy infantry attempting to cross the railroad bridge and then interdicted the *36th PAVN Regiment* on the river's north bank, shelling the area for more than an hour. Two regiments of enemy armor appeared near the river around noon. Republic of Vietnam Air Force Douglas A-1 Skyraider attack aircraft destroyed 11 tanks, and the 20th ARVN Battalion, 1st ARVN Armored Brigade, destroyed 6 more. The enemy armor nonetheless pushed south. At 1215, Sergeant Huynh Van Luom from the 3d VNMC Battalion stared down an enemy tank crossing the highway bridge and disabled the vehicle using an M72 light antitank weapon. Sergeant Luom's heroics stalled the enemy attack, but the South Vietnamese Marines and Ripley surmised that it was only a matter of time before the PAVN overwhelmed them.

Ripley and his U.S. Army advisor counterpart with the 20th ARVN Tank Battalion, Major James E. Smock, requested permission to destroy the bridges from Marine Lieutenant

[113] 1st ANGLICO ComdC, 1 April–30 April 1972, HD Archives.

[114] LtGen Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, Indochina Monographs Series (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1980), 29–30.

[115] Maj John W. Ripley interview with LtCol Curtis G. Arnold, 21 August 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives, hereafter Ripley interview.

Captain Ray L. Smith
Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Captain Ray Louis Smith (MCSN: 0-102290), United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism during the period 30 March to 1 April 1972 while serving as advisor to a Vietnamese Command group numbering approximately 250 Vietnamese Marines located on a small hilltop outpost in the Republic of Vietnam. With the Command Group repulsing several savage enemy assaults, and subjected to a continuing hail of fire from an attacking force estimated to be of two-battalion strength, Captain Smith repeatedly exposed himself to the heavy fire while directing friendly air support. When adverse weather conditions precluded further close air support, he attempted to lead the group, now reduced to only 28 Vietnamese Marines, to the safety of friendly lines. An enemy soldier opened fire upon the Marines at the precise moment that they had balked when encountering an outer defensive ring of barbed wire. Captain Smith returned accurate fire, disposing of the attacker, and then threw himself backwards on top of the booby-trap-infested wire barrier. Swiftly, the remaining Marines moved over the crushed wire, stepping on Captain Smith's prostrate body, until all had passed safely through the barrier. Although suffering severe cuts and bruises, Captain Smith succeeded in leading the Marines to the safety of friendly lines. His great personal valor and unrelenting devotion to duty reflected the highest credit upon himself, the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Colonel Gerald H. Turley, the acting senior advisor to 3d ARVN Division. Lieutenant Colonel Turley, who also had taken command of the division's forward headquarters at Ai Tu while the division's main headquarters displaced to Quang Tri City, learned that I Corps wanted to preserve the spans for a counterattack. Rather than wait for a response from higher headquarters at Saigon, Turley ordered Ripley and Smock to destroy the bridges at 1205.[116]

The two Americans repositioned 500 pounds of TNT and plastic explosives that ARVN engineers had placed beneath the highway bridge. As Ripley recalled from his time in the U.S. Army's Ranger School, it was necessary to torque the entire span to drop a bridge. He swung from the girders for two-and-a-half hours, placing the explosives on a diagonal line across the width of the bridge. Often in plain view of the enemy on the north bank, Ripley thought, "Man, if this isn't hanging it in the wind, nothing is."[117] Shortly after Smock positioned the final charges under the railroad trestle, Ripley detonated the charges on both bridges. The explosions dropped the two spans, denying the *308th PAVN Division* a crossing point over the Cua Viet. For his actions, Ripley was awarded the Navy Cross.[118]

With no suitable alternative to the bridges at Dong Ha, the North Vietnamese regrouped and probed along the RVNAF perimeter in Military Region 1 from 3 to 8 April. In the meantime, Communist forces launched the second and third phases of their general offensive in the rest of the country. On 5 April, three PAVN divisions attacked Military Region 3 from Cambodia and headed due south toward Saigon. Their objective

[116] Col G. H. Turley, USMCR (Ret), *The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors, Vietnam, 1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1985), 157–58; and Col Gerald H. Turley interview with LtCol Curtis G. Arnold, 31 July 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

[117] Ripley interview.

[118] Vicki Vanden Bout, "Ripley at the Bridge," *Leatherneck* (April 2022): 25.

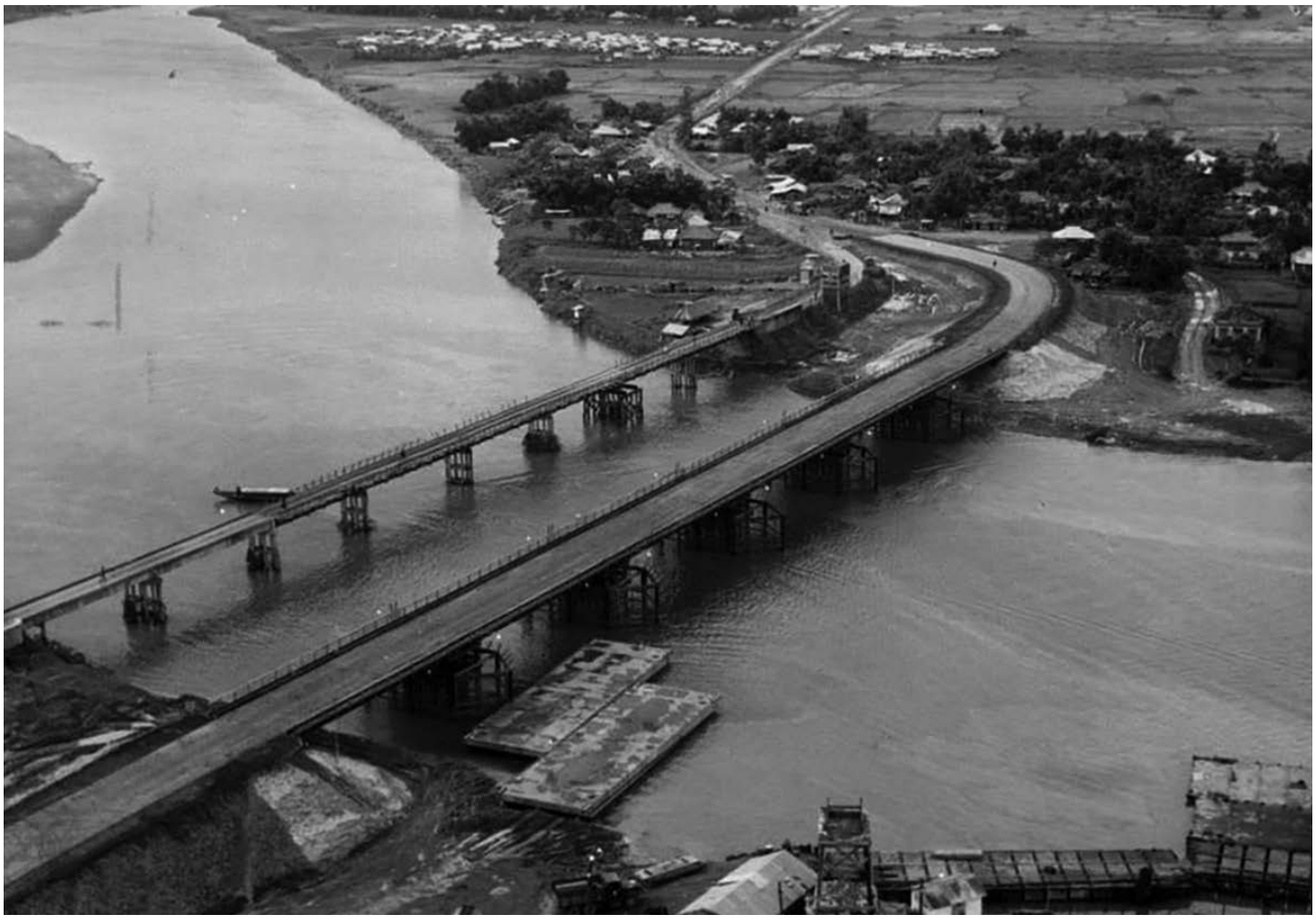


Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy Seabee Museum, Port Hueneme, CA

The Dong Ha Bridges over the Cua Viet River, looking from the bank where the RVNAF made their stand. The section of the vehicle bridge nearest the barges is where Capt John W. Ripley swung from the girders for two-and-a-half hours to place explosives that dropped the span and denied the enemy a crossing point.

was to take An Loc in Binh Long Province and advance on the capital, prompting President Thieu to order his senior commanders to defend An Loc "to the death."[119] Simultaneous Communist shaping operations for the third phase began in Military Region 2. Three PAVN divisions and supporting Viet Cong units aimed to seize the provincial capitals of Pleiku and Kon Tum, which would collapse the RVNAF defense in the Central Highlands and cut South Vietnam in half. On 7 April, PAVN and Viet Cong forces launched local attacks in Military Region 4 to undermine Saigon's pacification efforts in the Mekong Delta. By the end of the second week of April, 10 ARVN divisions were engaged in a conventional fight against 10 PAVN divisions across the entire country. The new enemy attacks bloodied the South Vietnamese forces in Military Regions 2, 3, and 4, but still failed to land a knockout blow.[120]

Reinforcements Arrive

The North Vietnamese wagered that their three-pronged attack would overwhelm the RVNAF leadership and paralyze Saigon into indecision about where to commit its reserves. They had not, however, anticipated the degree to which U.S. forces would support South Vietnam. Nixon viewed the offensive as a personal affront, and he correctly assumed that Le Duan believed he could discredit Vietnamization while

[119] As quoted in Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 135.

[120] Truong, *Easter Offensive*, 145–46; and Cosmas, *MACV*, 358.

the United States stood by for fear of the political cost of reacting with force. When weighing his options, the president concluded that doing nothing would be costly to American standing in the world, and he came to the simple if not stark conclusion that, as he told Kissinger, "We lose if the ARVN collapses."[121]

Nixon responded to the Easter Offensive by punishing the North Vietnamese with air and naval power. On 2 April, he lifted the naval gunfire, tactical air, and artillery restrictions on military targets 40 kilometers north of the DMZ, restraints that his administration had put in place before his groundbreaking diplomatic trip to China in February 1972. Within days, he authorized CINCPAC and USMACV to conduct air strikes in North Vietnam up to the 20th parallel for the first time since 1968. By 16 April, U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft were attacking petroleum and surface-to-air missile sites in the Haiphong area, North Vietnam's major port. With a mandate from the president, the JCS increased the flow of aircraft into theater, adding to those that arrived at the beginning of the year in anticipation of the offensive. The number doubled between January and April to give commanders 480 tactical aircraft and 139 strategic bombers in Thailand and Guam.[122]

Okinawa-based Marine squadrons offered leaders a valuable source of aviation in the region. On 4 April, when advisors presented Nixon with the choice of sending either Air Force or Marine aircraft, Nixon told Kissinger, "The Marines are better." He reasoned that "the Marines will do a better job. Let's do whatever does a better job."[123] On 6 April, the JCS ordered the 1st MAW to deploy two fixed-wing squadrons to South Vietnam. Less than five hours after receiving the order, 12 F-4B Phantoms from VMFA-115 and 15 F-4Js from VMFA-232 touched down at Da Nang from Naval Air Station Cubi Point. The forward headquarters of MAG-15 arrived on 9 April to command the squadrons and 984 Marines. Some of the group's F-4s flew their first sorties in support of the U.S. Air Force's Seventh Air Force that day.[124] A third squadron, VMFA-212, joined MAG-15 on 14 April, and the aircraft group expanded its area from Hue to Military Regions 1 and 2. Marine fixed-wing support for Military Region 3 arrived a month later when MAG-12 deployed to Bien Hoa Air Base. The group's aircraft, Douglas A-4E Skyhawk attack aircraft from VMA-211 and VMA-311, protected Saigon and supported the 5th ARVN Division, the 21st ARVN Division, the 3d ARVN Ranger Group, and the 3d ARVN Armored Brigade. This rapid influx of Marines into South Vietnam risked violating Vietnamization manpower restrictions, but the Marine Corps placed the newly arrived Marines on temporary additional duty status to skirt the issue.

Naval reinforcements also arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two aircraft carriers, USS *Constellation* (CV 64) and USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63), joined USS *Hancock* (CV 19) and USS *Coral Sea* (CV 43) off the coast. Together, these ships made up Task Force 77, Seventh Fleet's Attack Carrier Strike Force. MAG-15 and Task Force 77 squadrons flew missions over Laos and North Vietnam to maintain air superiority, interdict lines of communication, and attack economic targets. Marine units that supported Task Force 77 included Marine All-Weather Attack Squadron 224 (VMA[AW]-224), VMFA-333, Marine Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 (HMA-369), and detachments from VMCJ-1, VMCJ-2, and Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 15 (H&MS-15).

By the end of the month, there were 27 destroyers and 2 cruisers off the coast firing at targets in North and South Vietnam. There was a corresponding personnel increase in ANGLICO's Sub Unit One to coordinate and control fires from the growing number of ships on the gunline. When the Marine Corps made a call for qualified fire support coordinators, 102 Marines volunteered to augment the 89 team members already in South Vietnam. Within days of the offensive, Seventh Fleet's amphibious force, Task Force 76, steamed from Okinawa; Hong Kong; and Subic Bay, the Philippines. Embarked was the 9th MAB, which III MAF commander Lieutenant General Louis Metzger activated on 9 April. The MAB commander, Brigadier General Edward J. Miller, organized his Marines into an RLT and a composite helicopter

[121] Memorandum of conversation, "Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs," 3 April 1972, in *FRUS, 1969–1976,* vol. 8, *Vietnam, January–October 1972,* eds. John M. Carland and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: Office of the Historian, Department of State, 2010), Document 50.
[122] Hunt, *Melvin Laird*, 231–32, 234.
[123] Memorandum of conversation, Nixon and Kissinger, 4 April 1972, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. 8, Document 57.
[124] 1st MAW ComdC, 1 January–30 June 1972, HD Archives.

squadron. To reinforce the 9th MAB, Lieutenant General Metzger formed the 33d MAU on 11 April.[125]

Though the United States amassed combat power off the coast of South Vietnam, Nixon's self-imposed restrictions on introducing ground troops in South Vietnam meant the Marines were prevented from executing their amphibious assault mission. The president wagered the enemy did not know that, however. It was better, he argued, to "leave the threat of marines hanging over [the North Vietnamese]."[126] The III MAF elements instead prepared for evacuations, demonstrations, and helicopter and amphibian tractor support to the VNMC. By mid-April, U.S. air and naval reinforcements were battering the enemy's lines of communication in North and South Vietnam, bolstering an unsteady RVNAF defense.

Loss of Quang Tri City

After pouring more men and materiel into Military Region 1, the PAVN attempted to destroy the RVNAF in Quang Tri Province with a major attack on 18 April. Starting at 1830, the *304th* and *308th PAVN Divisions* struck at the western approaches to Dong Ha and Quang Tri City to split the South Vietnamese defenses. Tactical air support and tenacious fighting from the VNMC Brigade 147 and the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade prevented an initial breakout. Dong Ha collapsed on 28 April after the armored brigade commander withdrew a squadron from the defensive line along the Cua Viet River to Quang Tri City. Panicked infantry followed the tanks south, leaving open the defenses that the PAVN had been attempting to break.[127] By midday on 30 April, the South Vietnamese Marines, now the only troops standing in the way of the *304th PAVN Division*, received orders to evacuate the Ai Tu Combat Base and pull back to the new defensive line at Quang Tri City. Marine advisors Major Emmett S. Huff and Captain Earl A. Kruger stayed behind to destroy classified material and equipment from the tactical operations center. To cover the brigade's withdrawal, Captain Kruger directed and controlled tactical air strikes and artillery and naval gunfire missions against the pursuing PAVN units, actions for which he received the Silver Star.

Due to another blunder, the new defensive line at Quang Tri City was short-lived. Running low on fuel and ammunition and receiving intelligence that enemy troops would unleash a 10,000-round artillery barrage at 1700 on 1 May, the 3d ARVN Division commander, Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, instructed his subordinates on 30 April that the VNMC Brigade 147 would hold Quang Tri City while infantry and rangers would establish a defensive line on the southern bank of the Thach Han River. Meanwhile, armored units would reopen Route 1 to the south to preserve the division's lines of communication. At 1215 on 1 May, Major Glen Golden watched as the 3d ARVN Division chief of staff walked into the command post and radioed all subordinate commanders that Brigadier General Giai "has released all commanders to fight their way to the My Chanh River [in Hue]." This caught Major Golden and everyone in the command post "by complete surprise."[128] I Corps commander Lieutenant General Lam, who was in Hue, countermanded Giai's order 30 minutes later, telling the division troops to "stand and die." It was too late, however, as Giai's original order had the effect of a dam breaking. Soldiers abandoned their positions and streamed toward Hue, 50 kilometers south, in an unorganized column intermixed with refugees. Once again, the South Vietnamese Marines found themselves alone. The brigade commander, Colonel Nguyen Nang Bao, concluded that the situation was hopeless and ordered his troops to withdraw, which they did in an organized manner at 1430 on 1 May. By 2 May, the 3d ARVN Division was combat ineffective, and the enemy controlled all of Quang Tri Province.

Stabilization at Hue

The situation appeared bleak for South Vietnam after its northernmost province fell. In Military Region 3, enemy soldiers laid siege to An Loc. RVNAF troops defended the provincial capital with support from VMA-311, whose constant attacks on the PAVN's line of communication on Route 13 led the enemy to name it the "Road of Death." In Military Region 2, Communist troops had cleared a path to attack

[125] 9th MAB ComdC, 9 April–30 April 1972, HD Archives.
[126] Memorandum of conversation, National Security Council Meeting, 8 May 1972, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. 8, Document 131.
[127] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 38–39.
[128] LtCol Glen Golden interview with LtCol Curtis G. Arnold, 3 July 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

Captain Earl A. Kruger
Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Captain Earl Allan Kruger (MCSN: 0-101214), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving in the Republic of Vietnam from 28 to 30 April 1972. Captain Kruger was serving as the Assistant Advisor for operations to defend the Ai Tu Combat Base in Northern Quang Tri Province. Other friendly forces had been forced to withdraw leaving Marine Brigade 147 as the only tactical unit to defend the Northern approach to Quang Tri City from attacks by the invading North Vietnamese Army Division. At 1400 on 28 April, a massive and devastatingly accurate enemy artillery barrage struck the Brigade Tactical Operations Center and continued for 48 hours. On each occasion, with complete disregard for his own safety, Captain Kruger left the relative safety of the Tactical Operations Center bunker and moved to an exposed observation post within the front line defense positions in order to accurately and effectively direct and control tactical air strikes, allied artillery and Naval Gunfire missions. His actions were materially responsible for destroying most of the enemy armor and blunting the enemy attack within the Ai Tu defensive wire. When an alternate Command Post was established, Captain Kruger fearlessly moved through the fire swept Ai Tu Combat Base to carry communications equipment across a distance of 3,000 meters of open ground. The evacuation of the Ai Tu Combat Base rendered on 30 April, he volunteered to remain at the Command Post to destroy classified equipment and to coordinate the Naval Gunfire and air support covering the Marine withdrawal. His actions significantly contributed to Brigade 147's success in repelling three separate enemy attacks against Ai Tu Combat Base, and directly assisted the subsequent withdrawal of the Brigade. Captain Kruger's devotion to duty, courage under fire, exemplary professionalism, and outstanding leadership served as an inspirational example to the Vietnamese Marines and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

the city of Kontum, the linchpin of the defense in the Central Highlands.[129]

With the South Vietnamese reeling in Military Region 1, PAVN units shifted their attention to Hue. Marines had fought one of the war's largest battles in the city during the 1968 Tet Offensive, costing the Marine Corps 142 killed and almost 1,100 wounded, while the enemy had suffered between 2,500 and 5,000 dead. Four years later, the city had not lost any of its significance. As the imperial capital from 1802 to 1945 and then an administrative hub for the French, Hue was culturally important for both North and South Vietnam. Strategically, its location astride Route 1 made it the last hurdle before Da Nang, the center of gravity in Military Region 1. The fate of South Vietnam's northern provinces therefore rested on whether the RVNAF could make a stand at Hue.

Dissatisfied with the performance of his I Corps commander, President Thieu replaced Lieutenant General Lam with Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong on 3 May. Lieutenant General Truong had been the IV Corps commander in Can Tho and, USMACV believed, South Vietnam's most competent field general. Thieu told Truong that he wanted no more withdrawals; the RVNAF would hold

[129] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 50.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800147

LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam was the Military Region 1 commander from 1966 until the Easter Offensive. Here, he bids farewell to LtGen Donn J. Robertson, III MAF commanding general, on III MAF's redeployment in April 1971.

at Hue, at what was called the My Chanh Line.[130] Truong fixed command and control problems that plagued I Corps during the first month of the Easter Offensive by establishing a forward headquarters in Hue.[131] He returned the three marine brigades to the VNMC division commander, Brigadier General Bui The Lan, and tasked them with guarding the northern approaches to the city. Truong's only other capable force, two regiments of the 1st ARVN Division, defended the southern approaches. He also convinced the Joint General Staff to send the Airborne Division, which he placed between the soldiers and Marines on the line.[132]

[130] Melson and Arnold, *The War that Would Not End*, 92.
[131] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 53.
[132] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 50, 54, 56–57.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800720

LtGen Ngo Quang Truong became Military Region 1 commander after LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam's poor performance.

While the I Corps commander reorganized his command and prepared for a counteroffensive, Kissinger was in Paris demanding that the North Vietnamese abandon their offensive. The Americans were negotiating from a position of weakness, however, and Kissinger returned to Washington on 3 May with counterdemands from Hanoi's lead negotiator, Le Duc Tho. Nixon's intent to destroy North Vietnam's ability to continue its offensive placed at risk his diplomatic initiative of détente with the Soviet Union. Despite this, he announced on 8 May the need to protect South Vietnam and the remaining American troops. He ordered the mining of North Vietnamese harbors and a full-scale air campaign. Nine aircraft from *Coral Sea*, including three Marine Grumman A-6A Intruders from VMA(AW)-224, began the mining operation called Pocket Money, while Nixon delivered his speech. The mines had a three-day delay before arming, allowing foreign ships to leave the harbor. Operation Linebacker, the bombing of North Vietnam up to a small buffer on the Chinese border, began on 9 May. Aircraft targeted bridges, marshaling yards, rolling stock, and oil storage. Nixon's military objective for the escalation was to strangle the enemy's ability to supply the offensive. Politically, he hoped to signal American resolve while persuading Moscow and Beijing that they should convince Hanoi to negotiate.[133]

Truong ordered a series of limited attacks and raids to disrupt the PAVN and provide time for a RVNAF counteroffensive. This was the first example of direct support from the 9th MAB and its 6,042 troops and 46 aircraft, the largest concentration of amphibious forces of the war. Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knights and CH-53s from HMM-164 lifted 1,138 South Vietnamese Marines from the 3d and 8th VNMC Battalions on the morning of 13 May. The one-day operation, called Song Than 5-72, caught the *66th PAVN Regiment* unaware. The two VNMC battalions attacked from behind the enemy positions, forcing the North Vietnamese to break contact and escape. The operation was not only a success—the VNMC killed 240 PAVN soldiers, knocked out three tanks, and destroyed two 130mm guns—but was also significant for its joint coordination. Apart from U.S. Marine helicopters, there were also Marine advisors on the ground, ANGLICO spot teams controlling naval gunfire and ARVN artillery, U.S. Army armed helicopter escorts, and Seventh Air Force controllers directing tactical air support.

South Vietnamese Marines launched a helicopter and amphibious assault southeast of Quang Tri City on 24 May. They planned the operation, named Song Than 6-72, in coordination with the 9th MAB and Task Force 76, which together provided amphibious lift and fire support. Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses bombed the beach as 20 amphibian tractors

[133] Cosmas, *MACV*, 360; and Hunt, *Melvin Laird*, 245.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800686

South Vietnamese Marines board a Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight from the 9th MAB's HMM-164 during the defense of Hue.

Defense Department (Navy) 1151899

Heavy cruiser USS *Newport News* (CA 148) stands by after shelling targets during Operation Song Than 6-72, while U.S. Marine amphibian tractors return from inserting South Vietnamese Marines at Wunder Beach.

from BLT 1st Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 1/4), and BLT 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (BLT 1/9), carried the 7th Battalion, VNMC Brigade 147, from U.S. Navy amphibious ships. HMM-164 inserted elements of the 4th Battalion, VNMC Brigade 147, and the 6th Battalion, VNMC Brigade 369, near Quang Tri City. The South Vietnamese Marines engaged the surprised *18th PAVN Regiment* and then returned to their brigade on the My Chanh Line. The operation disrupted PAVN preparations to attack the perimeter around Hue and led to the VNMC launching two more attacks north of the river in June. By the end of the operation, I Corps gained the initiative, killing 991 enemy troops and retaking southern Quang Tri Province.

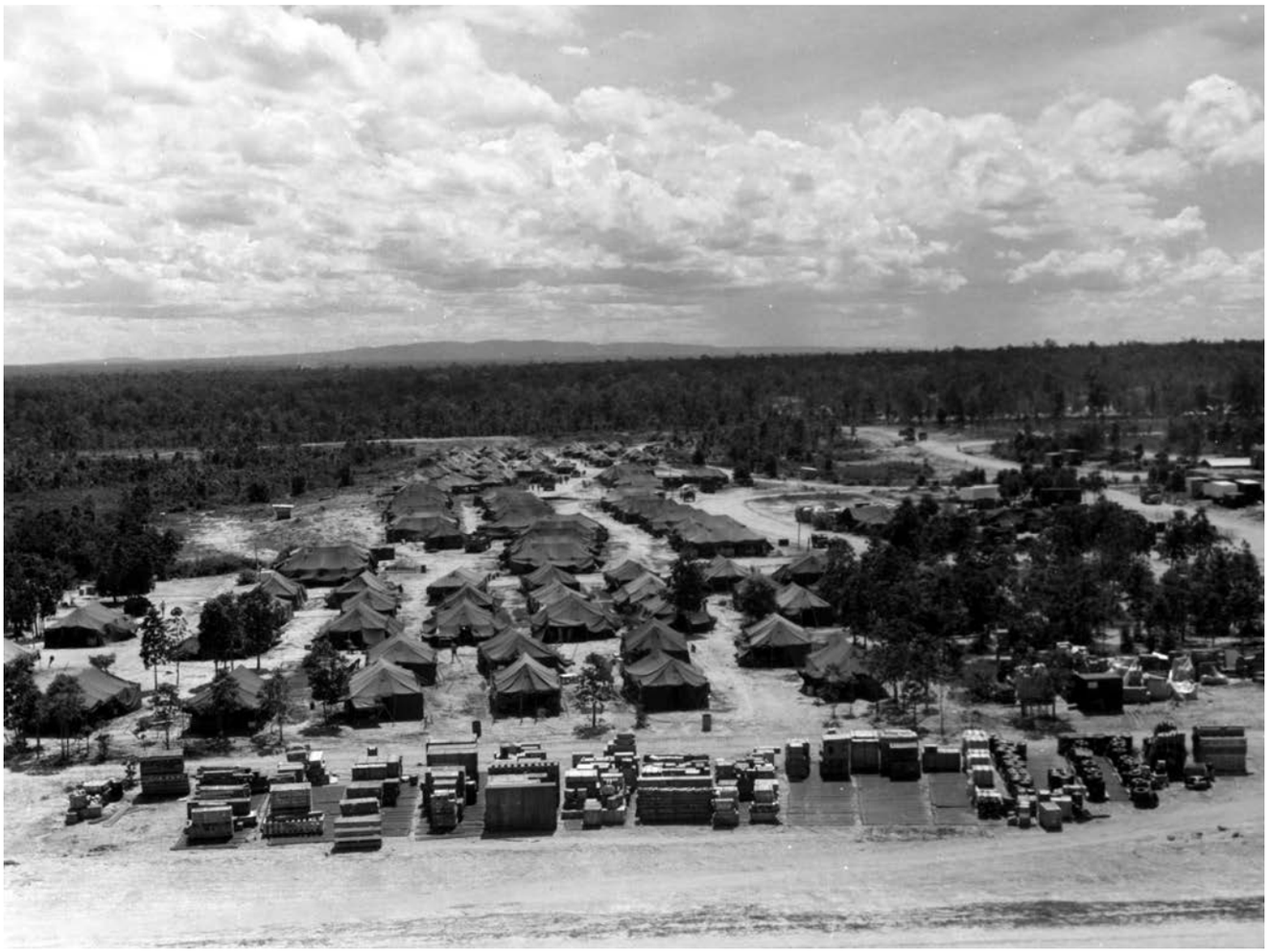
The flexibility of Task Force 76 and the close relationship between U.S. Marines and the VNMC were integral to the successes and led to the PAVN faltering in Military Region 1 at the My Chanh Line. Despite advancing to the gates of Hue, the Communists failed to take the city and suffered more than 2,900 killed in May. By 27 June, the VNMC pushed the defensive line four kilometers north of the river. New I Corps leadership, RVNAF spoiling attacks, massive naval and tactical air support from the U.S. military, and PAVN exhaustion accounted for the South Vietnamese stabilizing Military Region 1. The same was true throughout the rest of the country. Improved weather and reinforcements allowed tactical air to counter the enemy's artillery advantage in Military Regions 2 and 3. South Vietnamese troops defeated the PAVN at Kontum and were on the cusp of victory at An Loc, preventing the Central Highlands from falling and Saigon from being attacked. Operations Pocket Change and Linebacker also had a noticeable impact, as North Vietnam struggled to supply its forces arrayed on three broad fronts.

Throughout, the Marine Corps deepened its commitment to providing around-the-clock air support. At the end of May, III MAF deployed its air contingency battalion, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, to Da Nang and Bien Hoa to protect the squadrons there. Two weeks later, MAG-15 moved to a training base in Nam Phong, Thailand, where it fell under the command of a new organization: Task Force Delta. The MAG, now composed of VMFA-115, VMFA-232, and VMA(AW)-533, became an all-weather fighter/attack group with night capabilities, allowing it to fly near-constant fighter-cover and ground-attack missions over Military Regions 1 and 2. The austere conditions led troops to nickname the airfield the "Rose Garden," a wry affirmation that the Marine Corps had indeed made good on its claim in a recent recruiting campaign that "we don't promise you a rose garden."

The sum of these allied gains compelled North Vietnamese leadership at the beginning of June to accept that they had failed to alter the military and political balance of power in their favor.[134] Moreover, Le Duan's miscalculation of Nixon's response brought the war back to his country for the first time since 1968. U.S. aircraft devastated North Vietnam's infrastructure, destroying bridges, rail lines, and industrial plants. The American mining of harbors meant external aid could not get in and exports could not get out, increasing the prospect of dreary deprivation once again. On the battlefield, the PAVN and Viet Cong killed 10,000 and wounded 33,000 RVNAF troops but failed to destroy the resilient South Vietnamese military. The Communists had taken swaths of territory but neither held the vital objectives, nor did they incite a general uprising against the Saigon government. Indeed, their offensive killed 25,000 and displaced 1 million South Vietnamese civilians, making it difficult to convince southerners who had family members in the RVNAF that Hanoi's troops were liberating the country from invaders. The Communists' losses mirrored what they incurred during the Tet Offensive in 1968, with 40,000 killed and 60,000 wounded—more than double what they inflicted on RVNAF units.[135]

Hanoi therefore abandoned hope of defeating the Saigon government with a decisive military victory in mid-June 1972. Le Duan decided instead to end the war against the Americans through the secret negotiations in Paris. Despite the shift to a "strategy of peace," as Le Duan called it, the North Vietnamese could not suspend the war outright. Their forces had to hold territory to negotiate from a position of strength. Doing so could set the political conditions for their long-term plan of convincing the Americans to leave and then dismantling and replacing the Saigon regime. In the short term, that strategy required the tired, wounded, and now inadequately supplied PAVN units to fight a delaying action against an American-

[134] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 255.
[135] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 194.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A26870

The Rose Garden at Nam Phong, Thailand, Task Force Delta's base of operations from June 1972 to September 1973.

backed South Vietnamese counteroffensive whose objective was to regain every meter of lost territory.[136]

Operation Lam Son 72

That counteroffensive, called Operation Lam Son 72, began in Military Region 1 on 28 June. On the eve of the operation, after five days of preparatory fires, a special amphibious task group from Task Force 76 conducted a feint at the mouth of the Cua Viet River. To make the demonstration appear convincing, 9th MAB landing craft, amphibian tractors, and helicopters carried VNMC units to within 5,000 meters offshore before returning to their ships. The real attack came from the RVANF's Marine division and airborne division attacking abreast of one another up Route 1. The South Vietnamese Marines advanced along the coast, while the paratroopers kept to the foothills to their left and aimed to take Quang Tri City.

The VNMC battalions soon ran into entrenched PAVN units. To counter the enemy's advantage, Brigadier General Lan ordered a vertical envelopment, flanking the positions via 9th MAB helicopters. B-52 Arc Light missions prepared the landing zone, and HMM-164 and HMM-165 met sporadic enemy resistance as they inserted the 1st and 4th Battalions

[136] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 260; Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 196; and Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 55.

from VNMC Brigade 147. When the PAVN attempted to use the beach to flank the South Vietnamese Marines with armor, Task Force 76 ships, 4,000 meters offshore, leveled their guns and destroyed the tanks and armored personnel carriers. The support from both the 9th MAB and Task Force 76 allowed the VNMC battalions to break through the enemy defenses and make a rapid advance.

The South Vietnamese airborne division had a tougher time on the left. The paratroopers, who were unsteady after spending weeks fighting in the Central Highlands, met entrenched PAVN units determined to stop the South Vietnamese at the outskirts of Quang Tri City. During the initial fighting, Marine Corporal John E. Parton, an ANGLICO naval gunfire spotter attached to the 3d ARVN Airborne Battalion, died while knocking out an enemy machine-gun position, an action for which he posthumously received the Silver Star. The airborne division's troubles halted the VNMC advance along the coast by 7 July, since pushing on would expose the South Vietnamese Marines' left flank. To take Quang Tri City and keep the counteroffensive moving, Lan attempted to cut Route 560, the PAVN avenue for resupply northeast of the city. On 11 July, the 9th MAB once again assisted the marines with HMM-164 and HMM-165 lifting the 1st Battalion, VNMC Brigade 258, to the left bank of the Vinh Dinh River. Meanwhile, two other battalions made a ground attack from the east. The helicopter assault force encountered small-arms fire from *320B PAVN Division* soldiers when landing, damaging 28 of the 34 helicopters. A Soviet SA-7 surface-to-air missile brought down one CH-53, killing 2 Marine crewmembers and 43 of the 50 South Vietnamese Marines on board.

The enemy defended the area well, and the 1st VNMC Battalion only seized and consolidated the landing zones. During the fighting, the U.S. Marine advisor to the battalion, Captain Lawrence H. Livingston, formed and led an assault force of survivors in hand-to-hand fighting against PAVN troops. Captain Livingston, who had already received a Silver Star for his actions two months earlier, later received the Navy Cross for leading the attack. The battalion's ANGLICO team, First Lieutenant Stephen G. Biddulph and Corporal Jose E. Hernandez, both received Silver Stars for tending to wounded South Vietnamese Marines and directing naval gunfire. The VNMC brigade cut the PAVN supply route by 14 July and consolidated their positions on the northeast corner of Quang Tri City one week later. In the last phase of the fighting, ANGLICO Marine First Lieutenant Edward G. Hayen II died as the result of enemy artillery, and an advisor with VNMC Brigade 147, Captain David D. Harris, had to be evacuated with severe wounds from the same action.

The 9th MAB and Task Force 76 once again supported the South Vietnamese Marine division on 22 July with air, artillery, and naval gunfire striking positions on the enemy's weak left flank for more than three hours before B-52s prepared landing zones. HMM-164 helicopters, with U.S. Army gunship escorts from Troop F, 4th Cavalry (Air Cavalry), lifted the 5th Battalion, VNMC Brigade 258, four kilometers to the north of the brigade's two other battalions, which were advancing with armor support. During two days, the marines fought toward each other, killing 133 enemy troops and seizing a critical road junction. Lan commented afterward that the accurate naval gunfire from Task Force 76 and the skill and courage of the 9th MAB helicopter crews "allowed the VNMC forces to aggressively attack."

The VNMC units isolated Quang Tri City's northeast outskirts by the end of the month, and the paratroopers exhausted themselves after advancing to within 200 meters of the enemy strongpoint, the nineteenth-century citadel in the center of the city. The RVNAF's airborne division withdrew on 27 July, leaving VNMC Brigade 258 to take the rest of the city. The fighting turned into an artillery and mortar duel for much of August. The South Vietnamese had the advantage of air support, however, and ANGLICO teams played an important role directing American and South Vietnamese aircraft. While VNMC Brigade 147 beat back PAVN attempts to reopen routes for artillery and mortar ammunition resupplies, VNMC Brigade 258 ground closer to the citadel from the south in house-to-house fighting.

I Corps made an all-out bid to seize the citadel on 9 September. There were three separate operations to accomplish the task. The rested and refitted South Vietnamese airborne division protected the Marines' southern flank by attacking three key military installations at La Vang. The next day, the 9th MAB and Task Force 76 conducted another amphibious feint, this time with 400 ARVN rangers at the mouth of the Cua Viet River. The gambit worked, drawing enemy strength away from Quang Tri City. Simultaneous to the amphibious diversion, an artillery barrage and air strikes hit enemy

Captain Lawrence H. Livingston
Navy Cross Citation

The Navy Cross is presented to Lawrence H. Livingston, Captain, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism on 11 July 1972 while serving as Senior Advisor to the 1st Vietnamese Marine Corps Infantry Battalion during a heliborne assault into enemy-held territory northeast of Quang Tri City, Republic of Vietnam. When the battalion encountered unexpectedly heavy enemy fire while disembarking into the landing zone, and sustained numerous casualties, Captain Livingston moved throughout the hasty positions taken by the scattered and hesitant element and formed the Marines into an assault force. Despite the continuing heavy concentration of hostile fire, he began the assault on the initial objective—a treeline approximately 50 yards distant. Although blown from his feet by explosions and periodically delayed to reform and redirect his casualty-riddled force, he forged ahead, leading the Vietnamese Marines into the enemy-infested trench lines of the objective and a subsequent hand-to-hand battle. Upon seizure of the initial portion of the trench line, Captain Livingston shed his combat equipment, emerged from the trench line, and exposed himself to a hail of enemy fire to reach and carry his wounded naval gunfire spotter to a position of relative safety. Captain Livingston's repeated acts of heroism in the face of heavy enemy fire reflected great credit upon himself and the Marine Corps and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

troops behind the citadel's five-meter-high walls. VNMC Brigade 147 attacked from the northeast, attempting to cross the Thach Han River, while VNMC Brigade 258 engaged in close-quarters fighting on the fortress's southern wall. Marines from the 6th Battalion, VNMC Brigade 369, were the first troops to enter the citadel on the night of 9 September, but the battle to extricate the defenders took another six days. On 16 September, the South Vietnamese finally hoisted their flag over the rubble of the fortress.

The recapture of Quang Tri City was the climax of the RVNAF counteroffensive, but it had come at a high cost. Between June and September 1972, the VNMC suffered 3,658 casualties, nearly 25 percent of the Service's strength. During the final 10 days of the battle, there were 150 VNMC casualties per day.[137] American tactical support proved crucial to the successes in that same time frame, with 3,381 air sorties and 525 B-52 strikes in support of the marines alone.

Peace Talks

A lull followed the battle for Quang Tri City as both sides rested and refitted after three months of fighting. The political stakes remained high during the counteroffensive, with Hanoi and Saigon vying for a military advantage to use as diplomatic leverage in the stalled public negotiations in Paris. Le Duan had not yet implemented his strategy of peace, but, like Nixon, he balanced his diplomacy with events on the battlefield. Moreover, he wanted to avoid handing the Americans a political victory by reopening official negotiations so close to the U.S. presidential election.[138] For Thieu, his focus was retaking all of Military Region 1 before negotiations resumed. Six PAVN divisions remained in Quang Tri Province, however. Wanting to preserve momentum and take advantage of not just the lull but the 9th MAB and Task Force 76's presence off the coast, the VNMC pushed north after the recapture of Quang Tri City.

[137] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 71.

[138] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 261.

Beginning on 7 October, VNMC Brigade 147 mounted several operations to seize important towns and road junctions. The ultimate objective was to control the area north of the Cua Viet River, given that the waterway was crucial to the defense of Quang Tri City and the economic vitality of the entire province. Enemy resistance proved stiff throughout October. The PAVN were determined to keep the river as a natural obstacle to the territory they controlled. Monsoon rains arrived the second week of November, halting the VNMC advance almost five kilometers short of the Cua Via River and making for a miserable existence for both sides. PAVN units inched toward the brigades to shield themselves from American tactical air and naval gunfire. ANGLICO teams remained with the VNMC units and were active with naval gunfire missions in the inclement weather, as heavy rain grounded tactical aircraft. Moreover, as they had since the beginning of the Easter Offensive, South Vietnamese commanders relied on American fire support instead of their organic artillery.[139] Task Force 76 ships therefore fired twice as many rounds as South Vietnamese 155mm howitzers during November and December.

These events occurred while North Vietnamese and American representatives met in Paris. Nixon had surprised Hanoi in July by dropping his requirement for a mutual withdrawal of forces. Le Duan, in turn, surprised the Americans by abandoning his demand that Thieu resign. In a meeting on 8 October, Le Duc Tho handed Kissinger a complete draft agreement, something that neither side had done, indicating the North's willingness to act on their strategy of peace. The draft was a breakthrough, as the North Vietnamese finally accepted the American-backed two-stage solution of a ceasefire first and then a diplomatic settlement. For the latter, Hanoi proposed negotiations in Saigon after the suspension of hostilities between the Vietnamese parties, leading to new elections. This meant Thieu would determine the future of his country as an equal with the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, the NLF-led challenger state that was ostensibly independent of Hanoi but was actually a North Vietnamese puppet organization. In exchange for Hanoi accepting the Thieu administration's continued existence and returning all American prisoners of war, the United States agreed to end its military involvement in South Vietnam, remove all mines from the North's waterways, recognize the Provisional Revolutionary Government, accept the presence of PAVN forces in South Vietnam, affirm South Vietnamese self-determination, and pay for reconstruction in Indochina. On 26 October, Kissinger disclosed the secret diplomacy and unveiled the resulting nine-point agreement, declaring that "peace is at hand."[140]

Peace was elusive, however. Thieu knew about the backchannel talks, but he believed his ally would consult with him before those negotiations transitioned into drafting a settlement. When the Americans handed him the text of an agreement and he saw the terms, however, Thieu was incensed to the point of, he said, wanting "to punch Kissinger in the mouth."[141] He denounced the draft settlement, calling it "a surrender of the South Vietnamese people to the Communists."[142] Nixon was sympathetic and requested that North Vietnam sit for another round of talks. Le Duan at first refused but relented after the American president won a landslide reelection in November. Hanoi accepted five of the six proposed changes from the Americans in late November, but they objected to wording regarding the DMZ in early December. The language, Hanoi believed, recognized two separate Vietnamese states, a la Korea and Germany, which the North rejected for its cascading political and military implications up to and including the return of U.S. forces. Negotiations broke down as a result.[143]

Incensed, Nixon ordered Operation Linebacker II, the largest bombing campaign of the war against North Vietnam, running from 18 to 29 December. B-52s flew more than 700 sorties and dropped 20,000 tons of bombs while losing 15 aircraft to North Vietnamese air defenses. The "Christmas Bombing" devastated the industry and infrastructure around Hanoi and Haiphong, taking the country to the brink of destruction and astonishing its leadership. Unbeknownst to Nixon, the Politburo had decided unanimously hours before the first bombs fell that they would accept the language concerning the DMZ. The North Vietnamese, however, did not notify the White House of their concession until 10 days later.

[139] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 172–73.

[140] Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 57, 80, 159–63, 198–99.
[141] As quoted in Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 90.
[142] As quoted in Craig R. Whitney, "Thieu Calls Draft Accord 'Surrender to Communists'," *New York Times*, 1 November 1972, 93.
[143] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 199–200.

LBJ and Vietnam Collection, LBJ Presidential Library A6588-2A, photo by Yoichi Okamoto

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu stares at a world map during a break in meetings with President Lyndon B. Johnson at U.S. Pacific Command headquarters, Camp H. M. Smith, Honolulu, HI, on 19 July 1968. The meetings focused on U.S.-South Vietnamese military and diplomatic coordination in light of the stalled peace talks with North Vietnam in Paris.

Talks resumed on 8 January 1973, and Le Duc Tho accepted the proposed changes from the November discussions, including the DMZ language. In addition, Hanoi made other concessions, allowing a small contingent of U.S. advisors to remain in South Vietnam after the ceasefire and reducing the number of PAVN forces below the DMZ in exchange for Saigon releasing political prisoners.[144]

Both sides agreed to sign the peace agreement on 27 January 1973. For U.S. forces, the agreement brought an end to combat and support operations. Officially, the Vietnam War was over. Only two days prior, Private First Class Mark J. Miller became the final Marine to be killed in action in South Vietnam when he died in a 122mm rocket attack at Bien Hoa Air Base. Ironically, Private First Class Miller was a rifleman in Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the first company of Marine combat troops to arrive in South Vietnam on 8 March 1965.[145]

End of U.S. Involvement in Southeast Asia, January 1973–May 1975[146]

The terms of the Paris Peace Accords stipulated a ceasefire in-place and U.S. forces withdrawing from South Vietnam

[144] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 158, 202–3, 206–8.

[145] 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, ComdC, 10 January–28 February 1965, HD Archives.

[146] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section—including quotes—is derived from Maj George R. Dunham, USMC, and Col David A. Quinlan, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973–1975*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1990).

National Archives 27580141

Secretary of State William P. Rogers signs the Vietnam Peace Agreements on 27 January 1973, solidifying the terms that Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho negotiated.

within 60 days. USMACV had to carry out this final task of redeploying the last troops while dismantling itself. The problem fell to Army General Frederick C. Weyand, who had succeeded Abrams as USMACV commander on 30 June 1972. General Weyand and his staff had been planning for the last redeployment and the permanent basing of a 15,000-personnel Military Assistance Group since fall 1972. The peace accords invalidated those plans, as no American advisory force would stay. Instead, the United States would leave 200 personnel to protect the embassy in Saigon and oversee aid transfer, returning to an arrangement that existed before the Americanization of the war 10 years before.[147]

Operation Countdown, January–March 1973

The execution of the final withdrawal was called Operation Countdown. At the time of the accords, there were around 23,300 American and 35,000 South Korean troops in South Vietnam. Many of the Americans were from U.S. Army helicopter, air cavalry, and logistics units, but a contingent of 1,200 Marines remained. USMACV began the last redeployment of U.S. troops and equipment after the signing of the accords. The complete American withdrawal would occur in four increments, each scheduled to take 15 days, for a total of the agreed-on 60 days.[148]

MAG-12, the final Marine fixed-wing aviation unit in South Vietnam, flew the Marine Corps' last combat sorties

[147] Cosmas, *MACV*, 381, 383, 400; and Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 208.

[148] Cosmas, *MACV*, 397.

from Bien Hoa on 26 January. MAG-12 and its 600 Marines began departing South Vietnam within 24 hours of the ceasefire. The group's two squadrons, VMA-211 and VMA-311, began their retrograde the same day. VMA-311's return to Iwakuni ended eight years of involvement for the squadron in the war, totaling 54,625 combat sorties.

Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO, and the Marine Advisory Unit were the last Marine units in South Vietnam. Sub Unit One's teams remained in the field until 17 February, when they ceased to have an operational mission. During the next three weeks, individual members boarded flights for new duty stations.[149] On 14 March, Sub Unit One transferred to FMFPAC and deactivated, ending eight years of supporting the RVNAF. After the unit's deactivation, FMFPAC commander Lieutenant General Louis H. Wilson Jr. commented that the ANGLICO spotters should be given "considerable credit for stemming the tide" of the PAVN invasion of Military Region 1 during the Easter Offensive. The Marine Advisory Unit likewise stood down before the ceasefire. Relieved of their duties with the VNMC battalions, advisors converged on the VNMC division command post at Huong Dien and held a final formation in front of Brigadier General Lan. The Marine Advisory Unit deactivated on 29 March after supporting and serving with the VNMC for 18 years.

For the time being, Task Force Delta (MAG-15) remained at the Rose Garden at Nam Phong, Thailand. With air operations over South Vietnam complete after 26 January, it concentrated on missions in Laos and Cambodia. In Laos, the squadrons attacked North Vietnamese targets for the next month until a ceasefire went into effect there. MAG-15 remained at the Rose Garden under instruction from the JCS to support regional contingencies, including enforcing the ceasefire agreement, recovering American prisoners, and clearing mines in North Vietnamese waters.

Like MAG-15, Marines afloat during Operation Countdown turned their attention to supporting the recovery of American prisoners of war and demining North Vietnamese waters. With its mission over, the 9th MAB Headquarters stood down and deactivated on 9 February. III MAF assumed operational control of the 31st MAU, assigning it contingency evacuation and security missions. The amphibious ready group and Marines on board ships nonetheless remained off Da Nang, ready to respond to any contingency in Military Region 1 within 12 hours.

The American agreement to demine North Vietnamese waterways was of considerable importance to Hanoi, as the thousands of mines laid during Operation Pocket Money had effectively brought North Vietnam's economy to a halt. The demining effort, designated Operation End Sweep, fell to the Seventh Fleet's mine countermeasure force, called Task Force 78. It formed at Subic Bay on 24 November 1972 around Helicopter Mine Countermeasure Squadron 12 and Mine Flotilla 1.[150] Early in the planning, it became apparent that Task Force 78 lacked the resources to accomplish such a complex and urgent task. After the JCS and CINCPAC directed FMFPAC to augment the task force with CH-53s, the 1st MAW sent HMM-165, HMH-463, and elements of HMH-462 and HMM-164. By the first week of December, Task Force 78 was composed of 10 ocean minesweepers, 9 amphibious ships, 6 fleet tugs, 3 salvage ships, 6 destroyers, 45 helicopters, and more than 5,000 personnel.

Elements arrived near Haiphong on 23 February 1973, and operations began on 7 March. Sweeping the harbor at 25 knots, Marine CH-53s towed MK-105 hydrofoil sleds through the water, using electromagnetism to detonate mines. Mine-clearing began in minor channels five days later. Politics interrupted End Sweep multiple times, as North Vietnam periodically failed to comply with prisoner-exchange stipulations in the peace accords. This stretched the operation into July, seven months after the task force formed. When the Marines returned to III MAF on 24 July, they and the other squadrons had swept 43,000 kilometers of water. HMH-463 flew 2,147 hours while HMM-165 flew 1,690 hours in the effort, making the North Vietnamese waters safe for shipping.

Operation Homecoming, January–March 1973

The transfer of prisoners began once preparations for Operation End Sweep were underway. Like the American promise to withdraw its forces within 60 days, the North Vietnamese

[149] Sub Unit One, 1st ANGLICO, ComdC, 1 February–14 March 1973, HD Archives.

[150] RAdm Brian McCauley, USN, "Operation End Sweep," *Proceedings* 100, no. 3 (March 1974): 18–25.

Marine Corps Historical Collection

A Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion from HMH-463 sweeping for mines in North Vietnamese waters during Operation End Sweep.

pledged to return captive Americans in the same time frame.[151] The Viet Cong also agreed to transfer more than 5,000 South Vietnamese civilian and military prisoners to the Saigon government in exchange for some 26,000 of its people. The repatriation of prisoners was important to both the American public and national leaders, a symbol of the peace with honor that Nixon had promised when he announced the accords. According to a Department of Defense tally, there were 1,618 American prisoners of war (POWs) and missing in action (MIA) in Southeast Asia as of 11 March 1972. That number did not include those presumed killed in action with no remains recovered, which added an additional 1,000 servicemembers. Of the 1,618 POW/MIAs, 90 Marines were missing and 25 were assumed to have been captured.[152] The enemy captured another four Marines during the Easter Offensive. Only when North Vietnamese and Viet Cong representatives handed over prisoner lists to the U.S. delegation in Paris on 27 January 1973 could the Marine Corps corroborate the information about how many of its personnel were in captivity. The rolls contained 585 names: 555 U.S. military personnel, 22 U.S. civilians, and 8 foreign nationals. Of the military person-

[151] Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2000), 491.

[152] See table on p. 29 of *American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1972: Hearings before the Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session,* pt. 3, *3 February to 16 March 1972* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1972).

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A9000163

Released prisoners cheer as their Lockheed C-141 Starlifter takes off from Hanoi's Gia Lan International Airport, the second freedom flight on 28 March 1973.

nel listed, 26 were Marines. Though 555 next of kin received the news that their loved one was still alive, more than 1,000 learned from the Department of Defense that their family member remained missing.[153]

The Marine in captivity the longest was Lieutenant Colonel Harlan P. Chapman, a Vought F-8E Crusader pilot from Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron 212 (VMF[AW]-212) who went down near Hanoi on 5 November 1965. The last Marine taken prisoner was Captain James P. Walsh, an A-4 Skyhawk pilot from VMA-211 who PAVN soldiers shot down near the Cambodian border on 26 September 1972. On 12 February 1973, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong began moving prisoners from the Hoa Lo Prison, which American occupants referred to as the "Hanoi Hilton," and jungle camps in South Vietnam. The initial phase of Operation Homecoming began that day, as the North Vietnamese released the first 116 prisoners and the Viet Cong released 19 prisoners. Among them were four Marines. The subsequent prisoner releases were irregular due to delays in negotiations at the exchange sites. As a result, the remaining Marines went through the repatriation process during five days in March. The last Marine to leave captivity was Captain William K. Angus, a Grumman A-6 Intruder bombardier/navigator from VMA(AW)-224, who was released on 28 March.

The second phase of Operation Homecoming, which also began on 12 February, was the movement of the now-freed prisoners to Clark Air Base, the Philippines, via U.S. Air Force Military Airlift Command aircraft. Awaiting them was a red carpet, a color guard, and a receiving line with CINCPAC Admiral Noel A. Gayler at its head. Once at the base, the

[153] Davis, *The Long Road Home*, 492, 511.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A26897

FMFPAC commanding general LtGen Louis H. Wilson Jr. (right) greets LtCol Harlan P. Chapman at Hickam Air Force Base, HI, 14 February 1973.

returning POWs underwent physical and mental evaluations, received medical treatment, were debriefed to learn the whereabouts of missing servicemembers, and made phone calls home.

During the final phase of the operation, 36 Military Airlift Command flights took the personnel to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. The first Marine to return was Lieutenant Colonel Chapman on 14 February. FMFPAC commander Lieutenant General Wilson welcomed Chapman back to the Marine Corps, to which Chapman retorted, "Thank you, General, but I never left." By the end of March, all 26 Marines in captivity had returned to the United States and were in seven naval hospitals throughout the country. There, they received medical care and reunited with family and friends. Headquarters Marine Corps debriefed the returnees more fully, learning the fate of others like Captain Donald G. Cook, the first Marine captured in the conflict. The Viet Cong took Captain Cook prisoner on 31 December 1964 when he was an advisor to the VNMC. He died in captivity of malaria on 8 December 1967, and his remains were never recovered.

Six hundred captives were recovered during Operation Homecoming. In addition to the 585 prisoners whom North Vietnam transferred, the Chinese government and the Pathet Lao, a Communist movement in Laos, released 15 captives.[154] For the American returnees, their repatriation culminated on 24 May 1973, when President and Mrs. Nixon hosted them at the White House. The event was the largest in White House history, with 1,300 guests gathered in a tent on the South Lawn for dinner.[155]

Despite the celebrations, the military, government, and the American people were committed to accounting for those still missing, a desire that became entrenched in American society and popular culture during the ensuing decades. Today, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) is the inheritor of the mission and continues to locate and return remains with teams of historians, archeologists, anthropologists, and forensic odontologists. Since the beginning of Operation Homecoming, the United States has recovered and identified 1,061 Americans lost during the war. The most recent case was Captains Ralph J. Chipman and Ronald W. Forrester, an A-6 pilot and bombardier/navigator from VMA(AW)-533 who were shot down over North Vietnam on 27 December 1972. DPAA positively identified their remains on 4 December 2023, and they were buried in American Fork, Utah, and Arlington, Virginia, respectively. As of 2024, DPAA lists 1,574 Americans as still unaccounted for from the Viet-

[154] Davis, *The Long Road Home*, 511.

[155] Transcript, "Remarks at a Reception for Returned Prisoners of War," 24 May 1973, in *Richard Nixon: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1973*, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States Series (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), Document 163.

White House Historical Association/National Archives

President Richard M. Nixon greets the crowd at the U.S. POW dinner on the White House South Lawn, 24 May 1973.

nam War.[156] For the families of those missing whose cases are still open, they await their loved ones' return.

Withdrawal Complete, March 1973

The last American troops departed South Vietnam when the final known prisoners of war left Hanoi on 29 March. This concluded Operation Countdown and U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, although the United States left a residual force of less than 200 servicemembers. Marines made up the bulk of that number, with 143 in the embassy guard in Saigon. The remainder of the Joint personnel were at Tan Son Nhut, where they watched USMACV dissolve in a simple, somber ceremony on 29 March. A new organization, the Defense Attaché Office (DAO), replaced USMACV. Though it had no advisors or support units in the field and a smaller staff than its predecessor, the DAO retained much of the advisory functions of USMACV and occupied the same buildings. Among its duties was to advise the RVNAF and supervise a military assistance program. General Weyand furled the colors and astounded the attendees when he delivered a five-minute farewell address in Vietnamese. "Our mission has been accomplished," he told the crowd. "I depart with a strong feeling of pride in what we have achieved and in what our achievements represents."[157] Those achievements

[156] Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Personnel Profile for Capt Ralph J. Chipman and Capt Ronald W. Forrester, accessed 20 September 2024; and "Vietnam War Accounting," Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed 20 September 2024.

[157] As quoted in Cosmas, *MACV*, 400.

were difficult to judge after a decade of effort. The cost was easier to assess: 58,220 Americans died in Vietnam between 1956 and 1973, 41,000 of those in action.[158]

The responsibility of defending South Vietnam now fell entirely to the RVNAF, which could no longer rely on U.S. air support or advisors. Before USMACV's dissolution, General Weyand assessed RVNAF capabilities. He concluded that it could defend against threats below a general offensive, but the RVNAF still suffered from the same deficiencies as before Vietnamization: uneven leadership, poor discipline, and insufficient logistics, mobility, and fires to defend against conventional attacks. The South Vietnamese also lacked a maintenance program that would keep complicated American equipment operational. Saigon's ability to build those capabilities with U.S. aid diminished when Congress slashed financial assistance to South Vietnam from $2.1 billion to $1.1 billion for fiscal year 1974. Vietnamization had succeeded in withdrawing U.S. forces, but whether it built a nation capable of defending itself was unclear.[159]

The U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia did not dissolve completely with the withdrawal from South Vietnam but shifted to neighboring countries. Management and coordination of military operations in Cambodia, Laos, and, if necessary, North and South Vietnam went from USMACV to the newly formed United States Support Activities Group (USSAG), a Joint headquarters at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.[160] By summer 1973, the Seventh Fleet off the Vietnamese coast and Seventh Air Force in Thailand constituted the U.S. combat presence in the region. The Marine components of the Seventh Fleet maintained the mission that they held during combat operations as part of Task Force 76. The 31st MAU remained Amphibious Ready Group Alpha's helicopter-capable landing force, and the 9th Marines was Amphibious Ready Group Bravo's (ARG Bravo's) landing force.

Most of the American servicemembers who left South Vietnam but remained in the region went to Thailand, raising the number of U.S. troops in that country to 35,000, the majority of whom were tactical aviation units. Task Force Delta, still at Nam Phong, was the Marine contingent in Thailand. After the ceasefire in South Vietnam, its squadrons shifted to air operations in Cambodia against the Khmer Rouge, which had grown to a capable force of 60,000 fighters who were better outfitted and trained than the Cambodian Army. With the Communist guerrillas threatening to overrun Phnom Penh and overthrow the Khmer Republic, American leaders offered support to the Cambodian Army. VMFA-115 and VMFA-232 flew 12–20 sorties per day until the monsoon season halted the Khmer Rouge's offensive at the end of June. Congress stopped funding the mission shortly thereafter, ending all U.S. air operations in Southeast Asia on 15 August. Task Force Delta stood down, and MAG-15 aircraft began withdrawing on 30 August. By 21 September, the Marines had left Nam Phong. Between June 1972 and September 1973, the task force flew 30,998 hours in 10,215 sorties and dropped 24,584 tons of ordnance.

Communism Advancing, September 1973–March 1975

While the United States wound down its involvement in Southeast Asia, leaders in Hanoi debated their next moves. They had not abandoned their goal of complete victory over the Republic of Vietnam when they signed the peace accords. The Politburo's preference for 1974 was to continue the revolution through the political process of forming a new government in Saigon. They were not above resuming the war, but a military option would take time. Revolutionary forces in the south were exhausted from years of fighting and required more recruits and weapons. Even with a rested and refitted force, Hanoi understood that overt military activity risked violating the accords and provoking a response from the South Vietnamese, or, more worrying, the Americans. The Soviets and Chinese, also fatigued after providing materiel support for years, had the same concern of American reengagement. They refused to increase military aid to the North Vietnamese, instead counseling their ally to delay reunification for the next few years and concentrate on strengthening their damaged military and economy.[161]

[158] "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," National Archives, 29 April 2008, accessed 29 August 2023; and "Defense Casualty Analysis System," Department of Defense, accessed 21 November 2024.
[159] Hunt, *Melvin Laird*, 247–48.
[160] Its official name was United States Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force. This volume uses USSAG.
[161] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 219.

Saigon was suspicious of Communist intentions and defiant about adhering to the peace accords. South Vietnamese leaders believed that the Americans and North Vietnamese had foisted peace terms on them, placing them at a political disadvantage due to the requirement to recognize the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. Prior to the accords going into effect, President Thieu ordered the RVNAF to defend every meter of territory. His instruction was a virtual impossibility that tied down his forces to static defenses, including the Marines and airborne troops who comprised the nation's general reserves. To improve their political positions, both North and South Vietnam made last-minute land grabs before the ceasefire. In January and February 1973 alone, the RVNAF lost 7,545 men killed and 33,504 wounded. Despite the casualties, South Vietnam liberated large chunks of occupied territory, compelling Hanoi to issue its own order to hold every meter with the intent of undermining the Thieu government and preparing for the last, triumphant stage of the revolution.[162]

In summer 1973, Viet Cong commanders unilaterally decided to launch deep strikes into RVNAF-held territory. Their aggressiveness made North Vietnamese leaders anxious about how the Americans, Chinese, and Soviets would react. By fall 1973, though, political events in the United States changed North Vietnam's strategic calculus. On 7 November, Congress passed the War Powers Act, limiting a president's ability to commit the nation to armed conflict without congressional consent. At the same time, President Nixon was embroiled in a scandal involving his administration's cover-up of its role in a break-in at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC, in June 1972. Hanoi viewed both events as positive indications that the United States would not reenter the war, emboldening them to pursue their political objectives.[163]

Communist troops seized the initiative and increased attacks in late 1973. By spring 1974, they had made inroads into the Central Highlands. Fresh infusions of military assistance from Moscow reinvigorated the PAVN and Viet Cong. By contrast, the RVNAF reeled from the effects of further cuts in U.S. assistance. Years of subsidization had tied South Vietnamese military capabilities to U.S. military aid, but Congress reduced financial assistance to Saigon again, down to $700 million for fiscal year 1975 from $1.1 billion. The dwindling aid had a deleterious effect on a country that had, as General Cao Van Vien of the Joint General Staff put it, "very little to contribute to the war effort except manpower and blood."[164] To make matters worse, inflation suppressed the buying power of the U.S. dollar. Saigon's prospects of rebuilding the RVNAF in the near term were dim as a result. These fiscal realities laid bare the organizational and doctrinal issues that Saigon struggled to overcome. The United States and South Vietnam built the RVNAF to fight as a technologically advanced, mobile military force, but these capabilities waned without robust funding or external support. The RVNAF's deficiencies, coupled with continued poor senior leadership and internal corruption, signaled potential disaster for the South Vietnamese if the Communists waged an offensive on the scale of 1968 and 1972.

By summer 1974, RVNAF artillery units were forced to ration ammunition, providing enough breathing space for the Communists to operate that Le Duan estimated they would win a "big and decisive victory" within three years.[165] One month later, on 9 August, President Nixon resigned after the House Committee on the Judiciary uncovered damning evidence about his personal involvement in the Watergate scandal. His successor, Vice President Gerald R. Ford, lacked the foreign policy experience and political capital to act with the same freedom as previous Cold War presidents. Judging the climate in the United States, Hanoi was confident that now-President Ford could not overcome congressional restraints, leading a North Vietnamese official to remark that the Americans would not return to South Vietnam "even if you offer them candy."[166]

Le Duan was ready to deliver the coup de grâce with an offensive beginning in December 1974. He ordered his forces to obliterate the RVNAF and seize all major cities, including Saigon. Learning from previous offensives, the North Vietnamese planned to sequence their campaigns to overwhelm

[162] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 222–23; Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 130–31; and Veith, *Drawn Swords*, 482–88.
[163] Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 223–24.
[164] Vien, *Final Collapse*, 46.
[165] As quoted in Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 225.
[166] As quoted in Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 225.

Communist-held areas during ceasefire, January 1973

Map based on Maj George R. Dunham, USMC, and Col David A. Quinlan, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973–1975*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1990), 205.

the South Vietnamese. By the first week of January 1975, PAVN and Viet Cong troops overran the lightly defended Phuoc Long Province in Military Region 3. The Communist victory threatened Saigon and proved to Hanoi that the Americans would not interfere with the next phase of the offensive set to begin in March.[167]

Simultaneous with Hanoi's offensive, the Khmer Rouge resumed their efforts to defeat the Cambodian regime on 31 December 1974. Rather than attacking Phnom Penh, they targeted the convoys that delivered 80 percent of the capital's supplies via the Mekong River. A siege of Phnom Penh was a potential catastrophe, as refugees attempting to escape the civil war had driven up the population from 650,000 to 2.5 million.[168] The last convoy arrived on 27 January 1975 but ran into Khmer Rouge naval mines on its return trip, making the river impassable and isolating the regime. The Communists then spent the next two months destroying Cambodian outposts. In an attempt to avert disaster, the United States launched a limited airlift to supply the besieged capital with food, fuel, and ammunition. It was unclear what the situation in Cambodia meant for South Vietnam, but it was not lost on U.S. leaders that, after 10 years of fighting against the expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia, they faced the prospect of Cambodia falling to the Khmer Rouge.[169]

By the time the Khmer Rouge encircled Phnom Penh, the North Vietnamese had opened the second and ultimately final phase of their offensive at the beginning of March.[170] The Communists' main effort came in the Central Highlands, with supporting actions in Military Region 1 against Quang Tri City, Hue, and Da Nang.[171] The South Vietnamese had 192,000 troops compared to the Communist strength of between 149,000 and 167,000, but Thieu's orders to defend everywhere meant the RVNAF had no defense-in-depth or a general reserve. The offensive did not surprise the South Vietnamese—they had tracked the PAVN for months and knew Hanoi's intentions. Regardless, they did not have the means to thwart it.[172]

As a consequence, Thieu decided to abandon major portions of the country to consolidate around the populated areas, which added to the growing crisis. On 12 March, he directed I Corps to leave its prepared positions and establish a perimeter around Hue and Da Nang. Thieu further ordered the RVNAF's Airborne Division to redeploy from Da Nang to Saigon to defend the now-threatened capital. These movements created widespread panic, as civilians had come to view the Airborne Division as professional soldiers who were their only means of protection. The sight of paratroopers withdrawing south was therefore a signal that the government was abandoning them and the northern provinces.[173] Some soldiers of the 1st ARVN Division, tasked with slowing the PAVN advance at Hue, also sensed their abandonment and began fleeing south with their families. Realizing the hopelessness at Hue, Truong ordered the division to make its way to Da Nang. As in the Central Highlands, bedlam reigned, and the PAVN caught the retreating columns of soldiers and civilians in a natural choke point in the mountains above Da Nang. Much of the same happened in the Central Highlands.

On 14 March, Thieu ordered II Corps to withdraw from Pleiku and establish a new defensive perimeter in the coastal lowlands.[174] Aware of what II Corps was attempting to do, the *320th PAVN Division* routed the South Vietnamese during the withdrawal, trapping around 160,000 fleeing civilians and 75 percent of the corps' 20,000 soldiers. The inept withdrawal of a vital area in the Central Highlands had cascading consequences, as the Communists were able to overrun six provinces within 10 days and effectively cut South Vietnam in half.

In tactical terms, the Communist advance in Military Region 1 was similar to the Easter Offensive three years earlier. By 1975, though, PAVN strength, war fatigue, a paucity of aid, and the lack of U.S. firepower accentuated the RVNAF's inherent problems. These issues led to the attempted defense

[167] Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 338.
[168] Chamberlin, *Cold War's Killing Fields*, 318.
[169] See, for example, memorandum of conversation, Ford with congressional leaders, 5 March 1975, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. 10, *Vietnam, January 1973–July 1975*, eds. Bradley Lynn Coleman and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: Office of the Historian, Department of State, 2010), Document 182.
[170] Backchannel message, Deputy Chief of Mission Lehmann to Ambassador Martin, 17 March 1975, in *FRUS*, *1969–1976*, vol. 10, Document 188.
[171] Col William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1985), 147–56.
[172] George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–1975* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 116–17.
[173] Vien, *Final Collapse*, 110; and Duiker, *Communist Road to Power,* 342–43.
[174] Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 341.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) 7711275

A flotilla of South Vietnamese barges, boats, and sampans approaches USNS *Sergeant Andrew Miller* (T-AK-242) off Vung Tau.

north of Da Nang failing and a breakdown in discipline and unit cohesion.[175] A tidal wave of South Vietnamese refugees and troops flowed into Da Nang. U.S. intelligence estimated that refugees had doubled the city's population from 500,000 to 1 million people.[176] Many of them feared enemy reprisals, as around 70 percent of all southerners had worked for the government or had a family member who did. They had already seen what reprisals looked like during the 1968 Tet Offensive, when Communists murdered 2,800 civilians with governmental ties in Hue.

Da Nang went into paralysis when most of the police force deserted.[177] Order broke down further as ARVN soldiers entered the city intent on stealing whatever means of escape they could find. A riot broke out when the soldiers turned their weapons on civilians, leaving the city in chaos. After PAVN troops cut off all land routes out of the city, escape by air or sea became the only options remaining. The situation became more desperate when the Saigon government suspended air evacuations from Da Nang on 28 March after two days of crowds mobbing aircraft. Soldiers swarmed the final flight out, a World Airways Boeing 727, cramming 290 people into the fuselage, including 7 in the wheel wells. The crew was forced to take off on a taxiway through a mass of people unlucky enough to be stranded. Without air evacuation, the sea became the only escape route.[178]

On 28 March, Consul General Albert A. Francis ordered all Americans to leave Da Nang. Those who remained moved

[175] Vien, *Final Collapse*, 109.

[176] Special National Intelligence Estimate, "Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam," 27 March 1975, in *FRUS*, *1969–1976*, vol. 10, Document 195.

[177] Telegram, Deputy Chief of Mission Wolfgang J. Lehmann to Department of State, "Highlights of NVA Offensive—Summary for Period Ending Noon March 27," 27 March 1975, in *FRUS*, *1969–1976*, vol. 10, Document 194.

[178] Thomas G. Tobin, Arthur E. Laehr, and John F. Hilgenberg, *Last Flight from Saigon*, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, vol. 4, monograph 6 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978), 18.

to the consulate and evacuated with the staff and the Marine security guard detachment on the morning of 29 March. The Americans snuck to a dock near the consulate and boarded a barge that took them and panicked South Vietnamese to the Military Sealift Command (MSC) ship SS *Pioneer Contender.* The merchant ship had arrived because the Ford administration requested MSC assistance after recognizing that the air evacuation was insufficient. The crew lashed the barge to *Pioneer Contender* and made for open water while small boats ferried refugees who clamored over each other to get aboard. In another example of desperation, a group of South Vietnamese commandeered USNS *Greenville Victory* (T-AK-237), forcing the captain at gunpoint to steam for Vung Tau, a coastal town 70 kilometers from Saigon. The Seventh Fleet commander ordered a cruiser and a destroyer to come aside *Greenville Victory* with their guns trained, resolving the incident peacefully.

Evacuation operations ended in Military Region 1 on 30 March when PAVN units entered Da Nang without a fight. American ships ferried 70,000 South Vietnamese from Da Nang to the island of Phu Quoc in the Gulf of Thailand in only a few days. The fall of the city meant all five northern provinces were in PAVN hands, surprising both Saigon and Hanoi. The offensive swallowed up Military Region 1 and much of Military Region 2 in three weeks of unbroken Communist victories, consuming with it the majority of I and II Corps. Around 16,000 South Vietnamese troops escaped Military Region 1, among them 4,000 South Vietnamese Marines. There were, however, few identifiable units left. The Politburo met in Hanoi two days after Da Nang fell. Leaders decided to capitalize on their successes and deal a death blow to the Republic of Vietnam. On 2 April, PAVN units received the order to attack Saigon, launching the Ho Chi Minh Campaign.[179]

Marines Return, March 1975

U.S. officials watched the twin crises in Southeast Asia with the sober realization that there was little they could do. With no reasonable military option, the Ford administration sought to deliver aid to Cambodia and South Vietnam. These attempts had little chance of success given Congress's opposition to adding to the $111 billion in defense funds that it had sent to South Vietnam since 1965.[180] Moreover, Americans were suffering from war fatigue. A Gallup poll in February 1975 revealed that 78 percent of the country opposed additional aid.[181] The administration therefore found it difficult to explain how an additional infusion of funds would prevent the collapse of the Saigon government.[182]

Marine Corps History Division Collection

A Marine from the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, holds a South Vietnamese child on board SS *Pioneer Contender*.

[179] Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 344–45.

[180] "Special Message to the Congress Requesting Supplemental Assistance for the Republic of Vietnam and Cambodia," 28 January 1975, *Gerald R. Ford: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1975*, vol. 1, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States Series (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), Document 53.

[181] Veith, *Drawn Swords*, 540.

[182] Chamberlin, *Cold War's Killing Fields*, 327.

Defense Department (USN) K107687

Elements of Headquarters and Service Company and Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, embark on USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) at White Beach, Okinawa, to serve as members of the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group.

While the administration debated how to proceed, it ordered Marines to sail to the South China Sea. By chance, the 9th MAB was in the area after III MAF had reactivated it on 26 March to participate in a landing exercise in the Philippines. Under the command of Brigadier General Richard E. Carey, the brigade became the Marine headquarters that responded to the unraveling situations in Cambodia and South Vietnam. On 28 March, 9th MAB received orders to assist in the evacuation of Americans citizens and select South Vietnamese from Military Region 1. The previous day, the 33d MAU activated, with Colonel Alfred M. Gray Jr. commanding. The ground and aviation elements—BLT 1/4 and HMM-165—embarked on ARG Bravo ships at Okinawa and departed in haste.

The speed of the PAVN offensive changed the situation on the ground in South Vietnam and put American operational planning in flux. BLT 1/4's original orders were to establish and protect evacuation sites in the Da Nang area, but PAVN troops overran the city before the Marines' departure. While the BLT embarked, there was a flurry of messages between the JCS, Task Force 76, III MAF, and the 33d MAU. The Marines received orders to proceed to two coastal towns between Da Nang and Saigon—Qui Nhon and Nha Trang—and assist with evacuations. The battalion became a shipboard security force to maintain order and discipline on evacuation shipping, negating the need for the MAU or a landing team with their amphibious capabilities. BLT 1/4 instead deployed with only its command group and organic rifle companies, redesignating as Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group. The group's four companies spread across ARG Bravo's ships, split between Security Forces Alpha through Delta. ARG Bravo arrived off Nha Trang on 2 April and began taking on refugees two days later. After three days, all Navy ships stopped embarking South Vietnamese to reconfigure ARG Bravo. Marines went aboard MSC ships to serve as reinforced platoon-sized security forces, confronting thousands of starving and anxious people, some of

whom were armed. By 9 April, Marines and sailors of the task force assisted in evacuating more than 30,000 refugees to the island of Phu Quoc. Meanwhile, the ARG steamed back to Subic Bay to pick up the newly reorganized 33d MAU, composed of BLT 1/9 and Logistics Support Unit 1/9, and prepared for the evacuation of Americans from South Vietnam.

Operation Eagle Pull, April 1975

Meanwhile, Seventh Fleet and USSAG responded to the crisis in Cambodia. American officials had known since the end of February that the United States was "approaching the crunch point" in the country, according to U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia John Gunther Dean. The ambassador and others saw little prospect of increased aid overcoming Communist strength and the republic's leaders' preference to fight each other rather than the Khmer Rouge.[183] Brokering a peace also seemed unrealistic, given the Khmer Rouge's recent successes. These realities led Kissinger, now secretary of state as well as the national security advisor, to share Dean's fear that "Operation Eagle Pull will be the manner in which the United States departs sooner rather than later from Cambodia."[184]

Operation Eagle Pull was USSAG's emergency evacuation of Americans from Cambodia. Planning had begun in April 1973, with the USSAG regularly updating its assumptions to keep pace with changes in Cambodia. Within days of the Khmer Rouge resuming its offensive at the beginning of 1975, CINCPAC ordered the Seventh Fleet to place ARG Alpha on alert in anticipation of executing Eagle Pull. The 31st MAU, ARG Alpha's special landing force, was composed of BLT 2d Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 2/4), HMH-462, and Logistic Support Unit 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. The ARG arrived in the Gulf of Thailand in late January 1975. By then, USSAG planners determined rotary-wing evacuation was essential to Eagle Pull and selected 20 U.S. Air Force Sikorsky HH-53 Super Jolly Green heavy helicopters based in Thailand to join the 12 Marine CH-53 Sea Stallions from HMH-462 on board USS *Okinawa* (LPH 3). As the situation deteriorated and the number of potential evacuees climbed, the JCS realized more lift capacity was needed. On 16 March, the Joint Chiefs directed the Navy to send an attack aircraft carrier to the Gulf of Thailand and the Marine Corps to supply another heavy helicopter squadron. Two days later, USS *Hancock* departed its homeport of Naval Air Station Alameda, California, and steamed to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where it embarked the Kaneohe Bay–based HMH-463 and set sail on 26 March.[185]

While *Hancock* steamed west, the Khmer Rouge overran the last of the government's strongholds on the Mekong on 1 April, freeing five regiments to attack the capital. The government collapsed the same day, and Prime Minister Lon Nol fled the country. On 2 April, Ambassador Dean requested the insertion of the Eagle Pull command element, which arrived at the capital's Pochentong Airfield the following day. From 4 to 10 April, flights of Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft evacuated hundreds of Cambodians with ties to the U.S. government, leaving only 50 embassy employees and a manageable number of evacuees for the helicopter option. That option became necessary by 10 April as the Khmer Rouge closed to within artillery range of the airfield, forcing the Americans to end fixed-wing evacuations.

The Eagle Pull command element selected a soccer field 900 meters northeast of the embassy as a landing zone. Landing Zone Hotel, as it was dubbed, was not the closest option but it was the safest, as a row of apartment buildings masked the field from the Khmer Rouge on the opposite bank of the Mekong. Embassy personnel were ready to leave on 11 April, but *Hancock* had just arrived and was not prepared to deploy HMH-463. USSAG decided to delay the evacuation by one day, giving the Marines two squadrons for insertion of the landing force and extraction of the evacuees. The Air Force HH-53s stood by to act as sea and air rescue.[186]

The operation began the morning of 12 April when ARG Alpha launched 12 CH-53s from HMH-462. The helicopters were loaded with Marines and corpsmen from BLT 2/4 and left *Okinawa* in flights of three aircraft every 10 minutes for the 200-kilometer journey to Phnom Penh. The first flight entered Cambodian airspace at 0743. Shortly before

[183] Telegram, Ambassador Dean to Secretary Kissinger, 26 February 1975, in *FRUS,* 1969–1975, vol. 10, Document 178.
[184] Dean telegram to Kissinger, 26 February 1975, Document 178, and Minutes, Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 27 February 1975, Document 180, in *FRUS*, *1969–1975*, vol. 10.

[185] Malcolm Muir Jr., *End of the Saga: The Maritime Evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, Department of the Navy, 2017), 13; and HMH-463 ComdC, 21 March 1975–14 May 1975, HD Archives.
[186] HMH-463 ComdC, 21 March 1975–14 May 1975, HD Archives.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A706258

USS *Hancock* (CV 19) underway for Vietnamese waters after picking up HMH-463 in Hawaii.

0900, BLT 2/4 secured Landing Zone Hotel. The first evacuees loaded onto the helicopters and departed, making room for the inbound flights. The process repeated until the embassy officially closed at 0945. Dean boarded a helicopter carrying the last American flag to fly over Phnom Penh. HMH-462 evacuated 287 people, 84 of whom were U.S. citizens.

Helicopters from HMH-463 extracted BLT 2/4 as Khmer Rouge fighters attacked the landing zone with 107mm rocket and 82mm mortar fire. The last of the Marines lifted off at 1059 as enemy mortarmen zeroed in on the landing zone. Eagle Pull went "just exactly the way it was planned," according to HMH-462 commander Lieutenant Colonel James L. Bolton, as Marines, sailors, and airmen executed the operation within the timetable, at times under fire but without casualties.[187] Early on 13 April, HMH-462 flew the refugees to U-Tapao, Thailand, before ARG Alpha set sail for South Vietnamese waters to rendezvous with Task Force 76.

Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975

As Cambodia collapsed, the PAVN divisions consolidated in Military Regions 1 and 2 and prepared for the advance on Saigon. They planned to use the new road network that radiated from Saigon to close on the capital from the north and south in a quick pincer movement. The enemy made gains until the 18th ARVN Division halted the *10th PAVN Division* at Xuan Loc. U.S. and South Vietnamese military leaders interpreted the hard-earned victory as the successful establishment of a new defensive perimeter outside Saigon. They were unaware, however, that the PAVN units had been halted because they had outrun their logistics.

Believing that the tactical situation was in hand, the Americans halted refugee evacuations, and Task Force 76 returned to Subic Bay on 17 April for repairs. The same day, the

[187] LtCol James L. Bolton interview with 1stLt James R. Eckel, 9 July 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A150858

Marines from BLT 2/4 scramble out of Landing Zone Hotel as Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallions from HMH-463 flare to land.

9th MAB took the opportunity to reorganize, forming around Regimental Landing Team 4 (RLT-4), ProvMAG-39, and Brigade Logistic Support Group. A new shipborne security force formed simultaneously. The Amphibious Evacuation Support Force, composed of 10 72-man detachments from Okinawa-based units, relieved the Amphibious Evacuation RVN Support Group at Subic Bay on 18 April.

Task Force 76 learned shortly after arriving in Subic Bay that the PAVN had renewed its offensive. The task force embarked the detachments on *Dubuque*, USNS *Sgt. Truman Kimbro* (T-AK-254), and *Greenville Victory* and set sail for South Vietnam on 19 April. While underway, the restructured 9th MAB prepared for the evacuation of U.S. personnel from South Vietnam, originally called Operation Talon Vise but renamed Operation Frequent Wind. Task Force 76 arrived off the South Vietnamese coast late on 19 April. During the next week, the task force, MAB, and DAO staff at Tan Son Nhut collaborated to finish planning for Frequent Wind. Only a request for evacuation from the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham A. Martin, could initiate the operation.

Meanwhile, the ARVN forces holding Xuan Loc withdrew south on 20 April, leaving the eastern approaches to Saigon undefended. With nothing standing between PAVN units and the capital, the American consulate at Bien Hoa closed. The Marine detachment made the 20-kilometer drive southwest, where it joined the Marine Security Guard, Saigon. The PAVN advance created a political crisis in the capital. On 21 April, Thieu resigned and flew to Taiwan. He left feeling betrayed about the peace that the Nixon adminis-

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A150913

One of the planning sessions for the evacuation of Saigon held on board USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19). The 9th MAB commander, BGen Richard E. Carey, is seated at the table to the far right. To his right is 4th RLT commander and future Commandant, Col Alfred M. Gray, commander of ProvMAG 39, Col Frank G. McLenon, and commander of BLT 1/9, LtCol Royce L. Bond.

tration had brokered, later commenting, "We had to stay in South Vietnam," but the Americans could leave whenever they wanted.[188] Vice President Tran Van Huong replaced Thieu and lasted only one week. The National Assembly replaced him with General Duong Van Minh on 28 April. As the situation worsened, American citizens and third-country nationals began leaving from Tan Son Nhut, the air base inside Saigon where the DAO compound was located. Beginning 21 April, flights departed Tan Son Nhut every 30 minutes. Sea evacuation resumed when the Amphibious Evacuation Support Force arrived off the coast on 25 April.

By the end of the month, PAVN troops had the capital nearly surrounded. They began rocketing Tan Son Nhut on 27 April, sending Saigon's citizens into a panic. Those standing in line at the DAO compound for processing and a flight out of the city became desperate. Some parents heaved their children over the perimeter fence to the relative safety of the other side. The deteriorating security situation prompted Ambassador Martin to transfer a squad of embassy Marines to the DAO compound to help with refugee processing. The squad joined the 3d Platoon, Company C, BLT 1/9, which had arrived from *Hancock* on 25 April to serve as the DAO security force and prepare for helicopter operations.

On the morning of 29 April, PAVN troops launched a rocket attack at Tan Son Nhut that signaled the final push on Saigon. Rockets hit a checkpoint outside the DAO's main

[188] As quoted in Rudolf Augstein, Johannes K. Herausgeber Engel, and Erich Böhme, "Die Amerikaner haben uns verraten," *Der Spiegel,* 10 December 1979, 197–213.

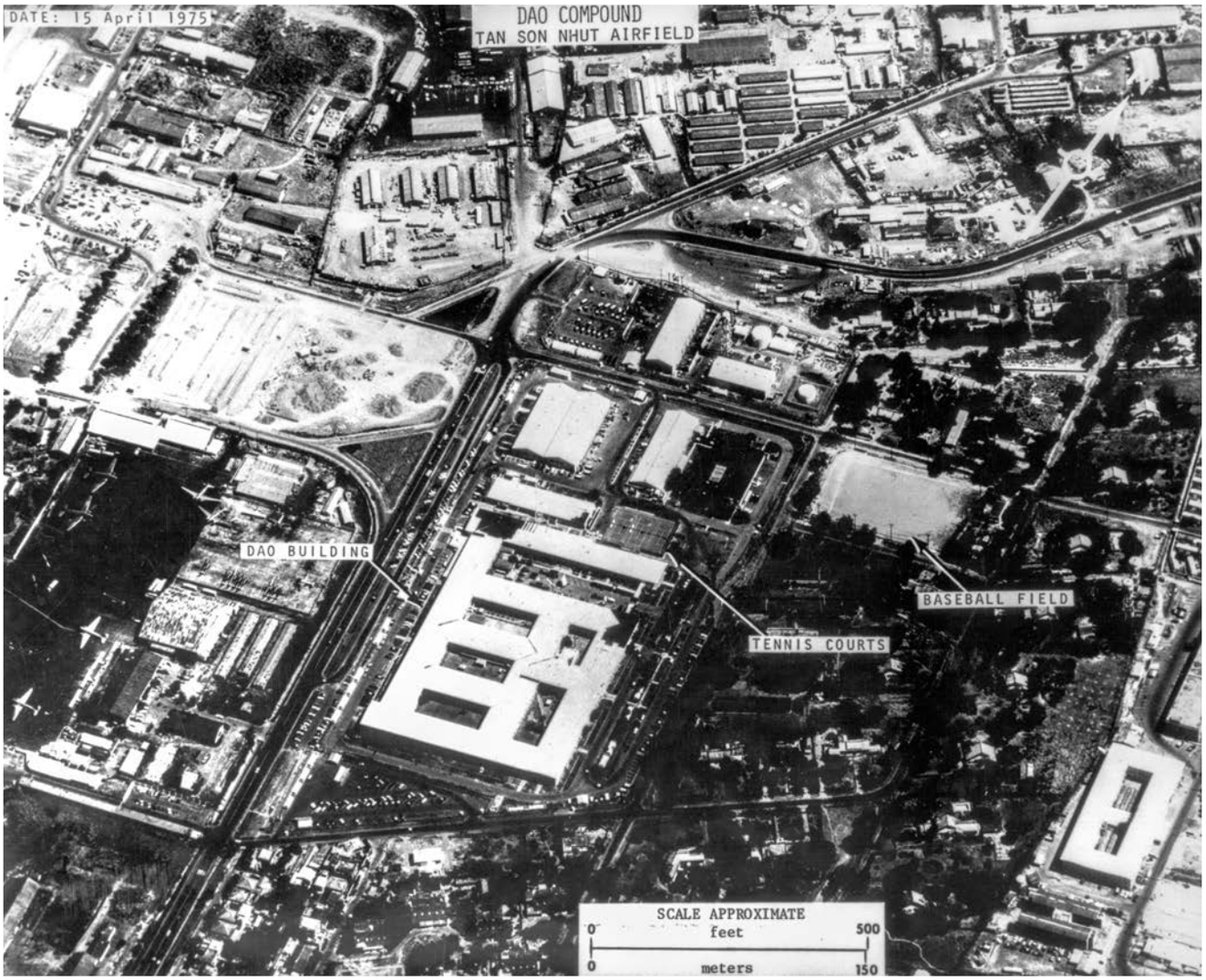
Defense Department (Marine Corps) A150966

The aftermath of the enemy attack on the Tan Son Nhut airfield on 29 April 1975, with a Lockheed C-130 Hercules burning on the taxiway.

gate, killing Corporal Charles McMahon Jr. and Lance Corporal Darwin D. Judge. The two were the last Marines to die on South Vietnamese soil. The rocket barrage also destroyed one taxiing U.S. Air Force C-130, while two others narrowly escaped. The enemy attack led the Republic of Vietnam Air Force to move aircraft from Tan Son Nhut to Thailand. Pilots jettisoned bombs and external tanks as they taxied, strewing obstacles across the apron, taxiway, and runway. The PAVN attack, debris, and ARVN soldiers attempting to mob aircraft led Army defense attaché Major General Homer D. Smith to advise Ambassador Martin that the evacuation should pivot from fixed-wing to rotary-wing.[189]

Martin hoped to stay in Saigon to project calm and evacuate as many South Vietnamese as possible. The closure of Tan Son Nhut, however, triggered instructions from President Ford via cable on 29 April that, if the airport shut down, the ambas-

[189] MajGen Ira A. Hunt Jr, USA (Ret), *Losing Vietnam: How America Abandoned Southeast Asia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 156–57.



Marine Corps History Division Collection

Aerial view of the Defense Attaché Office compound in Saigon, the center of military planning in South Vietnam. The headquarters building (Pentagon East) is near the center of the photograph, with the airfield to its left and potential landing zones marked to the right.

sador was immediately to "resort to helicopter evacuation of all repeat all Americans, both from the DAO compound and from the embassy compound."[190] With an order from the president, Martin conceded. In doing so, the evacuation of South Vietnam became a military operation, and Martin relinquished control to USSAG Air Force commander Lieutenant General John J. Burns. At 1051 on 29 April, Lieutenant General Burns issued the order to execute Operation Frequent Wind.

The operation did not start well. Indicative of issues in a Joint operation, there had been confusion about the definition of *L-Hour*. USSAG defined it as the moment helicopters launch, but Marine doctrine defined it as when helicopters touch down in a landing zone, a difference of four hours in this case. USSAG and Task Force 76 were still grappling with the issue on the morning of 29 April. Increasing the confusion, the 9th MAB did not receive the execute order until 1215 on

[190] Backchannel Message, Kissinger to Martin, 29 April 1975, in *FRUS, 1969–1975*, vol. 10, Document 271.

29 April, 90 minutes after issuance, due to a communications error between USSAG and the Task Force 76 flagship USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19). The delay sent HMH-462, HMH-463, and RLT-4 scrambling, with vital daylight hours gone. Many of the aircrews had little sleep due to false alarms over the previous few nights, leaving everyone "pretty well on edge," according to CH-46 pilot First Lieutenant Joseph J. Rogish.[191]

The first of three waves of helicopters, composed of 12 CH-53s from HMH-462, touched down inside the DAO compound at 1506. Marines from BLT 2/4 disembarked and went to their assigned positions to establish security. The landing zones were near the headquarters building, referred to as the Alamo. A second set of landing zones, called the Annex, was located near the Base Exchange. Between the two areas, there were six landing zones, three of which accommodated three helicopters at a time.[192] Brigadier General Carey and Colonel Gray, the 9th MAB and RLT-4 commanders, had been at the compound since 1350, where they established a command post to coordinate the evacuation. When the initial Marines from BLT 2/4 disembarked at the Alamo, American and South Vietnamese evacuees took their place on board the departing CH-53s. Subsequent flights brought the rest of the 865 Marines and took on evacuees. By 1540, the first group of civilians landed on task force ships.

The Joint air-ground team, which included Air Force HH-53s from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, settled into an efficient process. An Air Force C-130 Airborne Battle Command and Control Center (ABCCC) controlled the helicopters after making landfall, relaying information about altitude, route, and checkpoints. The ABCCC handed off the helicopters on approach to Marine landing zone controllers on the DAO headquarters rooftop. The controllers provided information about wind direction and enemy activity along the route before directing pilots to landing zones. Knowing each helicopter's load capacity and remaining fuel, landing zone marshals determined how many evacuees could go on every aircraft. Guides then escorted the select number of evacuees from staging areas to the helicopters. Pilots immediately left once loaded and received outbound information from the ABCCC while reporting the number of passengers. Over water, or "feet wet," the helicopters transferred from the ABCCC to two controllers, ProvMAG-39's Tactical Air Coordination Center on board *Blue Ridge* and the Navy's Helicopter Direction Center on board *Okinawa*. Once unloaded and refueled, the helicopters took off and repeated the process.

The Marine and Air Force helicopters continued flying into the night on 29 April. Low-hanging clouds and a haze over Saigon had limited visibility since the beginning of the operation, and conditions deteriorated after sundown. The light from numerous fires burning throughout the city reflected off the low cloud ceiling and gave the impression, according to pilot Captain Edward J. Ritchie, "that you were seeing a strange movie about the Apocalypse." At the landing zones, pilots could no longer see nearby obstructions or each other, so teams on the ground pointed vehicles' headlights at the landing zones and sourced portable lighting equipment. All the while, the enemy continued to fire small arms, rockets, and artillery at the air base.

The operation at the DAO compound ended at 2205, seven hours after the first helicopter landed. The joint effort evacuated 395 Americans and 4,475 South Vietnamese and third-country nationals. BLT 2/4's attention then turned to the embassy, where an ad hoc evacuation had been ongoing since shortly after the first Marines landed at the Alamo. It was a surprise to the Marines when the ambassador's staff notified the 9th MAB that more than 2,000 people at the embassy needed extraction, as no one had planned for a major evacuation outside of the DAO compound. Brigadier General Carey ordered adjustments to helicopter priorities, and the ABCCC divided aircraft between the compound and the embassy.

The Alamo and the Annex at the DAO could accommodate multiple helicopters, but the embassy compound had only two landing zones: the lawn and a small rooftop landing pad. Neither were large enough for CH-53s, so the majority of the aircraft committed to the new extraction site were the smaller CH-46s from *Hancock*. The first flights arrived at 1700 but only after the felling of a large tree in the parking lot that obstructed the landing zone. The evacuation operations at the embassy required a security force, so Brigadier General Carey repositioned three BLT 2/4 platoons from the

[191] 1stLt Joseph J. Rogish interview with 1stLt James R. Eckel, 7 July 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives, hereafter Rogish interview.
[192] See p. 59 of Report, 9th MAB, "Operation Frequent Wind, 1975," 5 August 1975, HD Archives.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A150961

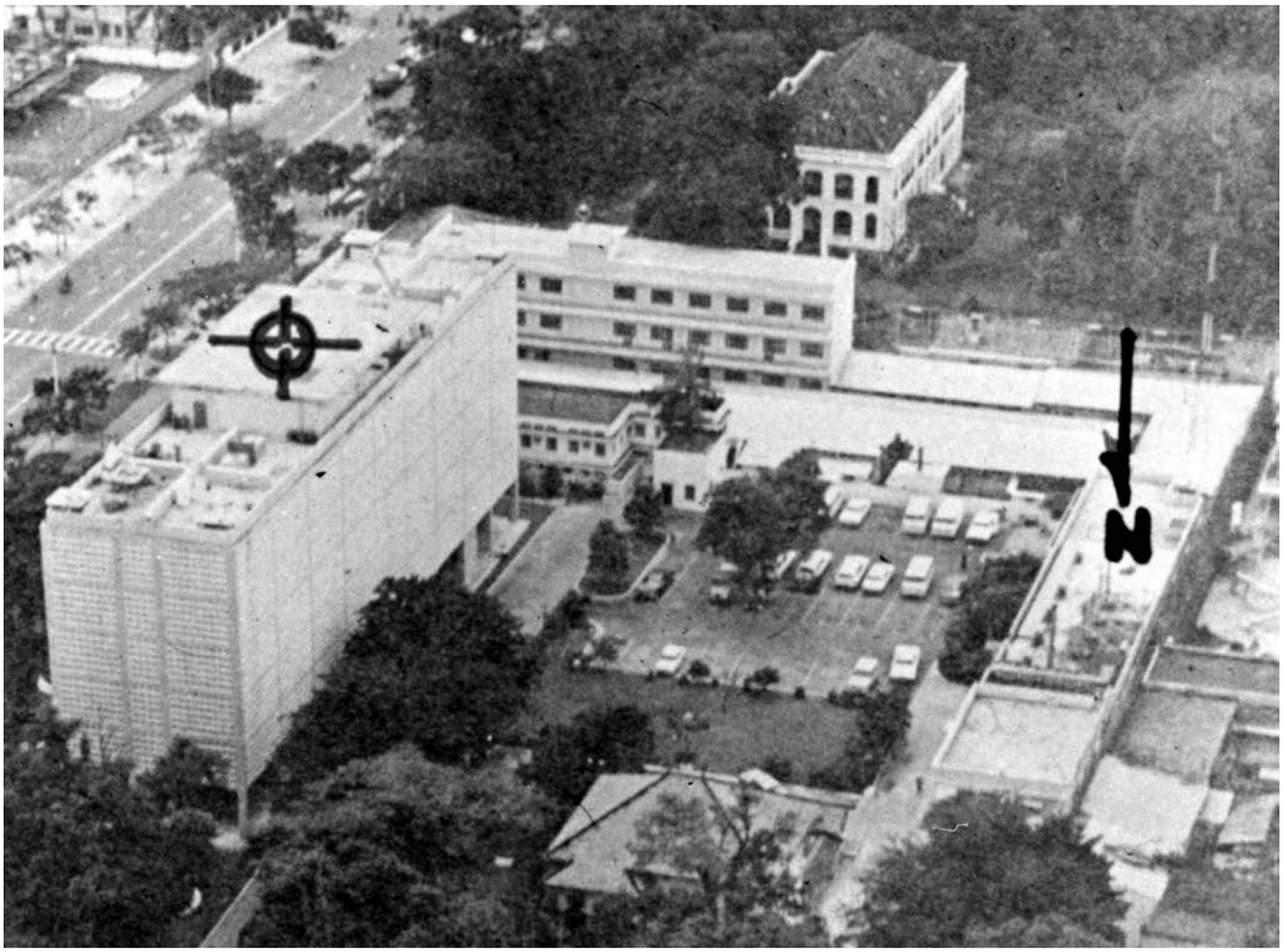
South Vietnamese evacuees board Marine CH-53 Sea Stallions at Landing Zone 39, a parking lot next to the Defense Attaché Office headquarters building at Tan Son Nhut airfield.

DAO. The troops arrived at the embassy between 1900 and 2100, when operations at the DAO were winding down. The Marines at the embassy welcomed the reinforcements, as they had been struggling to contain the South Vietnamese trying to climb the compound's walls and the crowd inside the grounds that was increasing in size and aggressiveness.

The number of Marines at the embassy grew to 171 after a landing zone control team from BLT 1/9 arrived to supervise flights. The team leader, First Lieutenant John J. Martinoli, realized that "communications was really a problem down there" after discovering that aircrews were using a range of different radio frequencies. Fortunately, the mission and landing zone procedures were straightforward enough that pilots understood where to land.[193] The flow of helicopters to the embassy slowed at midnight, with the only aircraft arriving being those that did not get a full load at the DAO compound. The cause was Task Force 76 commander Admiral Donald B. Whitmire unilaterally suspending flights out of a concern for flight safety. Weather conditions had deteriorated, he argued, and aircrews were over their 12-hour flight limit. After strenuous objections from the 9th MAB to Task Force 76, and FMFPAC to Pacific Command, flights resumed. By 0215, CH-53s and CH-46s were landing every 10 minutes.

During the pause in flights, the final Marines remaining at the DAO compound withdrew after midnight, 30 April, while enemy troops closed in. Before they left, explosive ordnance disposal Marines from BLT 2/4 ignited thermite grenades placed throughout the DAO buildings. The explosions and fires collapsed walls and roofs, destroying the buildings from where senior commanders had managed the American war effort in South Vietnam since August 1967. As the last CH-53 to leave Tan Son Nhut took off, Colonel Gray stood near the

[193] 1stLt John J. Martinoli interview with Maj Walter G. Smith Jr., 23 May 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives, hereafter Martinoli interview.



Marine Corps History Division Collection

The American embassy in Saigon. The two landing zones were on the roof of the embassy building (indicated by crosshairs) and the parking lot in the center. Marines cut down the tree in the parking lot to make room for CH-53 Sea Stallions, but crews still had to avoid other trees, several multistory buildings, walls, gates, a radio tower, parked vehicles, and thousands of refugees and evacuees in the three-acre compound.

back of the cargo bay watching the compound burn and "just remembering everything" from the parts of eight years that he had spent in South Vietnam. "To me," he said later, "it was a hard thing" to witness the American withdrawal.[194]

At the embassy, the number of evacuees increased. From the rooftop, First Lieutenant Martinoli watched as South Vietnamese refugees climbed over the walls and flooded the courtyard. Ambassador Martin appeared on the roof and told the Marines, "Everybody in that compound is leaving."[195] Martin's declaration revealed a problem: No one had told the aircrews how many Americans remained at the embassy. Civilian personnel coordinating the extractions on the ground were evasive about the numbers, as embassy staff and State Department and CIA officers felt honor bound to save the South Vietnamese who had helped them for years. They knew the evacuation would end when the last American left, so they drew out the operation by placing a minimal number of Americans on each helicopter and filling out the manifest

[194] Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr. interview with Dr. Fred Allison, 3 March 2017, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

[195] Martinoli interview.

with South Vietnamese. This created a "poor situation" that left the Marine aircrews "in the dark most of the operation as to what we really had left to move," according to First Lieutenant Rogish.[196] The slowness of the evacuation had not gone unnoticed in the White House, where officials received real-time updates. They became angry when they realized that Ambassador Martin was drawing out what was supposed to be a one-and-a-half-hour operation.[197]

The White House intervened by ordering Ambassador Martin to leave Saigon, which he did on board a CH-46 at 0458 on 30 April. Remaining in the compound were the Marine Security Guard detachment, 9th MAB Marines, and Seabees. When the crowd of approximately 10,000 people realized that they might be left behind, they attempted to force their way into the embassy buildings. The gates to the grounds gave way before the remainder of the American troops were inside the main building, requiring them to fight their way to safety. They barricaded the stairways and withdrew to the rooftop. Helicopters evacuated the ground security force until there were only 11 Marines left. These last Marines were nearly marooned, as the task force mistakenly believed the ambassador was the last American to leave the embassy. A CH-46 from HMM-164 returned to retrieve the remaining Marines, taking off from the rooftop at 0758 as the final Marine helicopter to leave South Vietnam.

During the evacuation operation at the embassy, Marine aircrews transported 978 Americans and 1,120 South Vietnamese to ships. Approximately 7,000 people evacuated by air and sea during Operation Frequent Wind. For the Marine Corps, the success came at the cost of four Marines. Corporal McMahon and Lance Corporal Judge died in the rocket attack at Tan Son Nhut, and Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea, pilot and copilot of a search-and-rescue CH-46, were lost at sea when their helicopter crashed into the water on approach to *Hancock*.

Two hours after the Marines left the embassy rooftop, General Minh surrendered the country unconditionally to the North Vietnamese. After 20 years, the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist. There were still Americans in South Vietnam, however. On the morning of 30 April, Francis T. McNamara, consul general at Cam Tho, about 125 kilometers southwest of Saigon, led 300 people down the Bassac River on two landing craft. On board were former and current staff, their families, and the consulate Marine detachment, the last Marines in South Vietnam. The group made the 70-kilometer trek to the coast, dodging enemy gunfire from the riverbank at one point, only to find that a U.S. Navy ship was not there to meet them as planned. Consul General McNamara decided to head out to sea even though it was nighttime and the craft was not designed for the open ocean. After scanning the horizon for beacons for seven hours, the group eventually found and boarded *Pioneer Contender*.

Throughout April 1975, U.S. forces evacuated around 130,000 refugees from South Vietnam. The operation shifted from evacuating refugees to processing them in the Philippines and then Guam for settlement elsewhere. Called Operation New Life, the resettlements began on 24 April and continued until 1 November. Marines shifted from evacuation efforts to operating a refugee processing center on Guam with troops from Marine Barracks Guam and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. The majority of South Vietnamese processed through Guam relocated to the continental United States during the summer of 1975 in Operation New Arrivals, but 1,546 people who wanted to reunite with their families repatriated to Vietnam on 15 October on board the ship *Thuong Tin I*. One of the four processing centers for Operation New Arrivals was located at Camp Pendleton. The operation at Camp Pendleton ran until 31 October 1975, when the Marines placed the last of 50,000 refugees in American society.

Mayaguez *Incident, May 1975*

U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia appeared over with the conclusion of Frequent Wind. On 12 May 1975, however, Khmer Rouge forces seized SS *Mayaguez*, an American-flagged container ship that was steaming in international waters off the Cambodian coast. The Khmer Rouge took *Mayaguez*'s captain and 39 crew members hostage just after 1400 and set sail. U.S. assets in the area tracked *Mayaguez* until they lost contact at 1645. Six hours later, they located the ship and followed it to Koh Tang, Cambodia's largest island, where it dropped anchor. Realizing the nation's reputation had been diminished in the wake of the withdrawals, President Ford

[196] Rogish interview.
[197] Meeting Minutes, Washington Special Actions Group, 29 April 1975, in *FRUS, 1969–1975*, vol. 10, Document 273.

Defense Department (Marine Corps) A150858

Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, boarding party searches SS *Mayaguez* while USS *Harold E. Holt* (DE 1074) remains alongside, 15 May 1975.

opted to use military force to rescue the crew, reassure regional allies, and deter enemies. The president ordered the military to prevent the Khmer Rouge from taking *Mayaguez* and its crew to the Cambodian mainland, 50 kilometers northeast of Koh Tang.[198]

The United States prepared a Joint operation that used the same forces as Frequent Wind. Ships from Seventh Fleet's amphibious ready groups made for the Gulf of Thailand, where they joined the carrier *Coral Sea* and its group, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Henry B. Wilson* (DDG 7), destroyer escort USS *Harold E. Holt* (DE 1074), and store ship USS *Vega* (AF 59). CINCPAC selected head of USSAG Lieutenant General Burns as the local commander for the operation. A task force composed of the Air Force's 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron and 21st Special Operations Squadron formed after the JCS ordered all the Seventh Air Force's operational heavy helicopters—9 rescue-configured HH-53s and 10 assault-configured HH-53s—to fly to U-Tapao. The assault component, Task Group 79.9, was composed of BLT 2d Battalion, 9th Marines (BLT 2/9), and Company D (-) (reinforced), 1st Battalion, 4th Marines (D/1/4). The units flew to Thailand on board Air Force Lockheed C-141 Starlifters on 14 May. Meanwhile, the staffs of Task Group 79.9 and USSAG planned simultaneous operations: a boarding of *Mayaguez* and an assault on Koh Tang. A dearth of intelligence about the crew's status, the island's terrain, and the enemy's size and disposition made planning frustrating, however, as did repeated inter-

[198] Meeting minutes, National Security Council, "Seizure of American Ship by Cambodian Authorities," 12 May 1975, box 1, National Security Council Meetings File, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI, hereafter Ford Library.

ruptions from higher echelons. By midnight on 15 May, the headquarters finalized the plan.

Four hours later, Marines departed U-Tapao on board 11 Air Force helicopters. On board eight of the helicopters, the 180 Marines of BLT 2/9, constituted the Koh Tang assault force. The remaining three helicopters transported the boarding party, composed of D/1/4 and supporting elements, to *Harold E. Holt* at 0625. Almost two hours later, the first Marine, Corporal Paul R. Coker, scrambled aboard *Mayaguez*. Captain Walter J. Wood, the commander of Company D, followed next "rather ungracefully," he later recalled, as the two ships had begun to drift apart when he prepared to leap. The two Marines "had some difficulty tying the two ships up," but succeeded after five minutes.[199] Marines next went to their assigned areas, beginning with the bridge and the engine room. They found the ship deserted, declared it secure at 0820, and displayed the American flag at 0822.

The simultaneous operation on the beaches of Koh Tang did not go as smoothly. Eight helicopters approached the island at dawn. The landing zones were the western and eastern beaches, 350 meters apart on the northern peninsula of the island. From prepared positions, Khmer Rouge troops fired small arms, mortars, and rockets at the first helicopter to land on the western beach as it disembarked its Marines. The HH-53 took engine and transmission damage and ditched less than two kilometers offshore. Another helicopter diverted on its way to insert Marines and rescued all the crew but Air Force Staff Sergeant Elwood E. Rumbaugh, who was lost at sea. The wingman made a second attempt to land but aborted after taking damage. The helicopter flew back to Thailand with Marines still on board, including the assault company commander. The HH-53 that had picked up the aircrew of the downed helicopter managed to disembark its Marines but limped away with a critically wounded flight mechanic.[200]

On the eastern beach, the first flight also received heavy fire. A rocket-propelled grenade exploded one of the HH-53's fuel tanks, killing the copilot. Six Marines and two corpsmen died when the helicopter crashed and exploded in the water off the beach. Enemy fire cut down 3 more Marines as they attempted to make it ashore, forcing 13 survivors to swim out to sea to await rescue. One of the Marines, a forward air controller, used an Air Force survival radio while doing the backstroke to call in air strikes.[201] *Henry B. Wilson* recovered the survivors four hours later, though a Marine had drowned by then. The destroyed HH-53's wingman also crashed on the beach, but the aircrew and platoon survived. No other flights attempted to land on the eastern beach, which isolated the 21 Marines and 5 airmen. On the western beach, three HH-53s took extensive damage to deliver more Marines.

After a fraught morning, there were 109 of the planned 180 Marines on Koh Tang. The bulk were in two groups on the western beach. In the south was BLT 2/9 commander Lieutenant Colonel Randall W. Austin, with 28 Marines from the battalion staff and a mortar section and only three rifles among them. The main body of 60 Marines from Second Lieutenant James V. McDaniel's 1st Platoon, Company G, was more than 1,000 meters north. In between were rocks and vegetation that made locating the enemy difficult. "There were a lot of bad guys between us and where we wanted to go," Lieutenant Colonel Austin remembered, "and we weren't sure how many of them were on our flank or rear or anywhere else."[202] The main body attempted to advance down the western beach toward Austin's command group. They immediately encountered well-fortified and entrenched Khmer Rouge troops, resulting in the death of Lance Corporal Ashton N. Loney.[203] Throughout, "the enemy was still shooting at us," Corporal Gilbert C. Lutz from 1st Platoon recalled. The Khmer Rouge were anywhere from 5 to 15 meters away, "but we couldn't see them."[204] To break the deadlock and still achieve the objective of searching for the *Mayaguez* crew, Austin knew he needed the second assault wave that was supposed to assist in clearing the island. There were limited options for aircraft, however. Only 3 of 11 helicopters in the first wave had not been damaged or destroyed. The Air Force managed to add two more HH-53s and prepared to insert

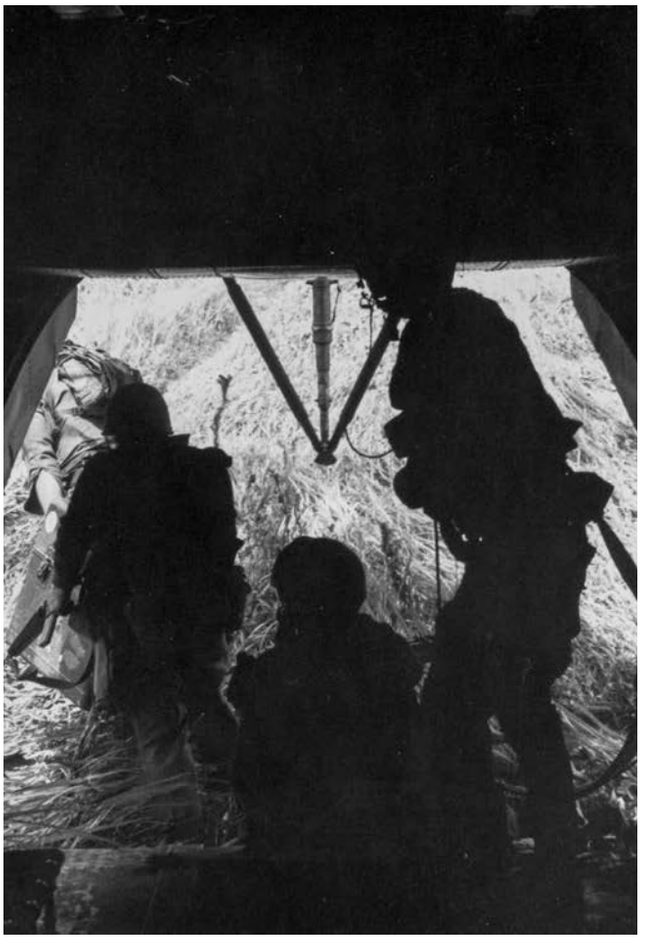
[199] Capt Walter J. Wood interview, no interviewer or date, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives, hereafter Wood interview.
[200] Capt Thomas D. Des Brisay, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang, 29 December 1975*, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, vol. 3, no. 5 (Washington, DC: Office of Air History, United States Air Office, 1985), 107–10.
[201] Des Brisay, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang*, 112–13.
[202] Col Randall W. Austin interview with Maj George R. Dunham, 10 December 1984, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives, hereafter Austin interview.
[203] Des Brisay, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang*, 119–20.
[204] Cpl Gilbert C. Lutz interview with SSgt J. W. Carr, 9 June 1975, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

127 Marines from BLT 2/9, while tactical aircraft rocketed and strafed the island.[205]

The Americans did not realize that the *Mayaguez* crew had never been on Koh Tang. The hostages were instead on board a captured Thai fishing boat called *Sinvari*. American fixed-wing aircraft had spotted the boat northeast of Koh Tang early in the morning on 14 May. The aircrew reported seeing 30–40 Caucasians and two gunboats acting as escorts. No one could be certain that the pilots had spotted the crew, but President Ford wanted to be sure that the captors did not move the Americans to the mainland. In an unprecedented example of presidential oversight of a military operation, Ford and the National Security Council had been monitoring the crisis and had real-time communication with the aircraft. During a National Security Council meeting on 13 May at 2240, Washington time (0930, 14 May, Cambodian time), Ford ordered the gunboat escorts sunk and the fishing boat sprayed with tear gas.[206]

During the attacks, aircraft sank one gunboat and convinced the other to turn around. *Sinvari*, however, continued toward the port city of Kampong Som after being tear-gassed.[207] When it arrived, the local Khmer Rouge commander refused to take the hostages, fearful that the U.S. aircraft loitering overhead would attack. The captors left for an island 30 kilometers away, where they freed the crew at 0715 on 15 May and told the Americans to sail the Thai fishing vessel *Sinvari* back to *Mayaguez* and order the aircraft to stop their attacks. At 0935, an American aircraft spotted *Sinvari* in open water. At 1015, *Henry B. Wilson* picked up the *Mayaguez* crew and the Thai fishermen whom the Khmer Rouge had held hostage for five months.[208]

The Joint Chiefs sent a message to USSAG after recovery of the crew to "immediately cease all offensive operations against Khmer Republic related to seizure of *Mayaguez*." A breakdown in communication led the airborne controller to call off the second wave as the helicopters carrying



Marine Corps History Division Collection

LtCol Randall W. Austin and his command group scramble out of Jolly Green 43 on the west coast of Koh Tang.

the Marines were making the four-hour flight to Koh Tang. After learning his reinforcements were not coming, Austin, still cut off, informed higher headquarters that he remained engaged with enemy troops and needed more Marines. USSAG ordered the helicopters to head for Koh Tang once again. With no air cover on their approach, the helicopters met a barrage of Khmer Rouge fire, forcing one HH-53 to abort. The remaining four helicopters managed to land on the western beach, disembarking an additional 100 Marines and evacuating the wounded. Lieutenant General Burns faced the prospect of 222 Marines defending themselves through the night. Deciding it was too risky to keep the Marines on Koh Tang, he ordered an extraction. At 1415 on 15 May, helicopters tried but failed to rescue the 21 Marines and 5 airmen

[205] Des Brisay, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang*, 122–23.
[206] Meeting minutes, National Security Council, "Seizure of American Ship by Cambodian Authorities," 13 May 1975, box 1, National Security Council Meetings File, Ford Library.
[207] Meeting minutes, National Security Council, 13 May 1975.
[208] Christopher J. Lamb, *The Mayaguez Crisis, Mission Command, and Civil-Military Relations* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, 2018), 54.

Department of the Air Force Art Collection

Assault on Koh Tang by Ronald Wong. An HH-53 (call sign Knife 31) from the Air Force's 21st Special Operations Squadron taking fire while another HH-53 (call sign Knife 21) is already down on Koh Tang Island's northeastern beach, 15 May 1975.

on the eastern beach. The Navy and Air Force then coordinated their planning for another attempt, doing so without informing Austin.

At 1730, the joint rescue attempt began on the eastern beach. A small craft from *Henry B. Wilson* provided suppressive fire with its four mounted M-60 machine guns, and an Air Force North American Rockwell OV-10 Bronco forward air controller coordinated attack aircraft. The Americans ashore withdrew while maintaining contact with the Khmer Rouge, who had come within hand-grenade range. Shortly after 1800, helicopters extracted the isolated Marines and airmen, leaving only the Marines on the western beach. The evacuation of the western beach began at 1830 without any warning to the Marines. Austin had prepared to stay the night, but he anticipated an extraction and had his Marines ready when the first helicopters approached. He was able to get a message to USSAG, telling them, "If we're going to start this, we're going to finish it. We cannot get halfway through this thing and say, 'Well, it's getting too tough, it's too dark'," which would leave a small force to defend itself throughout the night.[209] With only three helicopters to lift 200 Marines, the withdrawal was phased, requiring the force to shrink its perimeter after each group left. After dark, Marines marked landing zones with flashlights. While Navy and Air Force aircraft continued to provide suppressive fire, the gig from *Henry B. Wilson* sank one Cambodian gunboat. Helicopters took the Marines to *Han-*

[209] Austin interview.

Second Lieutenant James V. McDaniel

Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Second Lieutenant James V. McDaniel, United States Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism on 15 May 1975 as Platoon Commander, First Platoon, Company G, Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Reinforced), Fleet Marine Force, while engaged in the recovery of S.S. MAYAGUEZ which had been seized in the Gulf of Thailand by units of the Cambodian Navy. Landing on Koh Tang Island in the first helicopter of the initial assault wave, Second Lieutenant McDaniel's helicopter team immediately came under intense enemy fire. Quickly organizing his small force, he attacked inland, securing a landing zone for subsequent waves. Given the mission of neutralizing an enemy automatic-weapons position, he organized an eight-man patrol. After moving thirty meters through dense undergrowth, the patrol came under a fierce enemy attack, instantly killing his point man and wounding five out of the eight Marines, including Second Lieutenant McDaniel. Painfully wounded and with complete disregard for his own safety, he moved to the front of his patrol, aiding the wounded Marines and directing fire into the enemy. Although in pain from multiple fragmentation wounds and under intense enemy fire, he personally carried two wounded Marines back to friendly lines. Only after ensuring that the wounded Marines were being treated did he accept medical aid and then immediately returned to his Platoon where he directed the defense in his area, routinely exposing himself to enemy fire for the remainder of the day. As the extraction of the Marine force began, he remained in the landing zone, personally ensuring all members of his Platoon were extracted. By his daring actions, inspiring leadership, and undaunted courage in the face of grave danger, Second Lieutenant McDaniel upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

cock and the newly arrived *Coral Sea*, whose presence made the retrograde more expedient. The withdrawal still took 1 hour and 40 minutes, ending at 2010.

In the confusion of darkness, the deafening sound of the helicopter rotors and turbines, enemy small-arms fire, and close air support, three members of a machine-gun crew did not get on the final helicopter that left Koh Tang. Moreover, BLT 2/9 mistakenly left behind Lance Corporal Loney's body. Investigators later determined that the last time Marines saw Lance Corporal Joseph N. Hargrove, Private First Class Gary C. Hall, and Private Danny G. Marshall was when they were ordered to move back to the final defensive position at 2000, 10 minutes before the final extraction. Their remains were never recovered. Their names are the last on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, as the U.S. government considers the action in which they died as the last battle of the Vietnam War.

The operation to recover the *Mayaguez* crew resulted in 11 Marines killed, 41 wounded, and 3 missing. Navy casualties were two corpsmen killed and two wounded, while the Air Force lost two airmen killed and six wounded. Nearly one dozen Marines and airmen received awards for their actions. Second Lieutenant James V. McDaniel, commander of 1st Platoon, Company G, BLT 2/9, received the Navy Cross. Four

Marines received the Silver Star: Lieutenant Colonel Randall W. Austin, commanding officer, BLT 2/9; First Lieutenant James D. Keith, executive officer, Company G, BLT 2/9; First Lieutenant Michael S. Eustis, artillery liaison officer, BLT 2/9; and First Lieutenant Terry L. Tonkin, forward air controller, BLT 2/9.

Conclusion

The Vietnam War cast a long shadow on the United States and the Marine Corps. During 20 years of military involvement in Southeast Asia, the country lost more than 58,000 Americans. Between 1965 and 1975, approximately 500,000 of the 730,000 men and women who served in the Marine Corps deployed to Southeast Asia. Of those deployed, 13,091 were killed in action and 88,594 were wounded—nearly one-third of all American casualties and almost 14,000 more than the 87,940 Marines killed and wounded in World War II.[210] The human toll was more quantifiable than the wounds to the Marine Corps' élan and self-perception as the nation's elite fighting force. The Service exited South Vietnam tired and facing existential questions from within and without about its mission, roles, and capabilities. In a climate where the public was skeptical of the military and the government was dubious of Marines' touted elitism, the Marine Corps sought to do as Commandant Chapman quipped after the war: "It's all over and done now. We got defeated and thrown out. Best thing to do is forget it."[211]

For two decades, the Marine Corps attempted to do just that while also honoring those who fought and died. The trouble was that there was no forgetting Vietnam. The Marine Corps after 1975 was a product of the war. Marine leaders' experiences in South Vietnam informed their desire to restructure as a highly mobile amphibious force-in-readiness, their demands for a leaner force with high physical and discipline standards in the all-volunteer force, their resolve to reform their approach to fighting in the maneuver warfare movement, and their understanding of Service cooperation in the age of jointness. By the early 1990s, with the Marine Corps' post-Vietnam revitalization efforts deeply rooted and blooming, the pretense of forgetting the war to focus on the future diminished. Marine Corps leaders' firsthand experiences as junior officers and enlisted in South Vietnam influenced the ways that the Service used its combat experience to answer post–Cold War questions. Leaders anticipated increasing unrest in the developing world, and they studied and implemented the lessons Marines learned during the Battle of Hue City to prepare for waging military operations in urban terrain. These preparations paid off during the Global War on Terrorism in places like Baghdad in 2003 and Fallujah in 2004. By then, some Marines were digging even deeper into their predecessors' tactical developments. Chief among them was the Combined Action Program, whose hard-earned lessons informed approaches to counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan.[212] There were other, less-publicized innovations during Vietnam that provided lessons, too, such as units' integration of defected enemy troops (Kit Carson Scouts), small reconnaissance patrols that operated in enemy-controlled areas (Sting Ray patrols), operations that protected rice harvests (Golden Fleece), and a concept where fixed-wing aircraft provided fire support to large formations of helicopters during resupply missions (Super Gaggle).[213]

In the long term, then, the Marines Corps did not heed Commandant Chapman's advice to forget about South Vietnam. As part of their instruction at the recruit depots, all Marines today learn about Khe Sanh, the Tet Offensive, Ripley at Dong Ha Bridge, and the Battle of Koh Tang Island. These exist alongside other historical examples that the Service deems representative of what makes a Marine. "All were called to serve and did so with honor, courage, and commitment," Commandant General David H. Berger said on 29 March 2021, National Vietnam War Veterans Day. "From a Marine who grew up in the Marine Corps learning so much from these Vietnam-era Marines, thank you all for your selfless service to our nation. *Semper Fidelis*."[214]

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[210] "Marine Corps Casualties: 1775–2015," Marine Corps History Division, accessed 20 September 2024.

[211] Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 596; and Gen Leonard F. Chapman interview with Martin Russ, 30 July 1976, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, HD Archives.

[212] Dr. Nicholas J. Schlosser, "Marine Corps' Small Wars Manual: An Old Solution to a New Challenge?," *Fortitudine* 35, no. 1 (2010): 9.

[213] Michael F. Morris, *Corps Competency?: III Marnie Amphibious Force Headquarters in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2024), 220–21.

[214] "National Vietnam War Veterans Day 2021—Gen. David Berger," Department of Defense, 29 March 2021.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABCCC	Airborne Battle Command and Control Center
AF	store ship
ALMAR	All Marine Corps Activities
ANGLICO	Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company
ARG	Amphibious Ready Group
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BLT	Battalion Landing Team
CA	heavy cruiser
CAP	Combined Action Program
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific Command
ComdC	command chronology
CV	aircraft carrier
DAO	Defense Attaché Office
DDG	guided-missile destroyer
DE	destroyer escort
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DPAA	Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency
FMF	Fleet Marine Force
FMFPAC	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
FRUS	*Foreign Relations of the United States*
HD	Marine Corps History Division
HMA	Marine Attack Helicopter Squadron
HMH	Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron
HMLA	Marine Light Helicopter Squadron
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
H&MS	Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff

LCC ..... amphibious command ship
LKA ..... amphibious cargo ship
LPA ..... amphibious transport ship
LPD ..... landing platform dock
LPH ..... landing platform helicopter
MAB ..... Marine Amphibious Brigade
MAF ..... Marine Amphibious Force
MAG ..... Marine Aircraft Group
MAU ..... Marine Amphibious Unit
MAW ..... Marine Aircraft Wing
MIA ..... missing in action
MSC ..... Military Sealift Command
NCO ..... noncommissioned officer
NLF ..... National Liberation Front
PAVN ..... People's Army of Vietnam
POW ..... prisoner of war
ProvMAG ..... Provisional Marine Aircraft Group
RF/PF ..... Regional and Popular Forces
RLT ..... Regimental Landing Team
ROK ..... Republic of Korea
RVNAF ..... Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
T-AK ..... dry cargo ship
USA ..... United States Army
USAF ..... United States Air Force
USMACV ..... United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
USMC ..... United States Marine Corps
USMCR ..... United States Marine Corps Reserve
USN ..... United States Navy
USNS ..... United States Naval Ship
USSAG ..... United States Support Activities Group
Viet Cong ..... Vietnamese Communists
VNMC ..... Vietnamese Marine Corps
VMA ..... Marine Attack Squadron
VMA(AW) ..... Marine All Weather Attack Squadron
VMCJ ..... Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron
VMFA ..... Marine Fighter Attack Squadron
VMO ..... Marine Observation Squadron

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Photo courtesy of Stephen Collins, *Leatherneck,* adapted by MCUP

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