



Vietnam 1965

Enigmas and Contradictions

By R.R. Keene

Prior to 1965, most Americans knew nothing about the country of Vietnam. When President Lyndon B. Johnson authorized the first U.S. ground combat forces in Vietnam, that quickly changed.

Clad in starched sateen utilities, with World War II-era camouflaged helmets, belt suspender straps, leather boots, linseed-oiled-wooden-stock M14 rifles slung over their shoulders and 7.62 ball ammunition with 20-round magazines and bandoliers, 100,000 Americans stepped smartly into an Asian world with combat pay, "free" postage, tax-free pay and free helicopter rides into hard-to-pronounce places they had never heard of—Da Nang, Hue and Chu Lai.

For most Marines, the Vietnam War started in March 1965 and ended 10 years later on April 30, 1975, when the last Marine CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter

lifted from the American Embassy rooftop in Saigon.

Back home, unprecedented things happened in 1965: Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X was shot to death in New York, and race riots in Los Angeles resulted in 34 deaths. The first campus protests

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against the war swelled, and 25,000 people marched on Washington, D.C.

It was also a time when the baby boomer generation started coming of age. The Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Minnesota Twins to win the World Series, and the Green Bay Packers came out on top of

the Cleveland Browns to win the National Football League's championship. Marine veteran Lee Marvin grabbed an Academy Award for "Cat Ballou." "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C." was the second-most popular show on TV just behind "Bonanza." There were 35 million women in the United States, and a good many of them donned miniskirts.

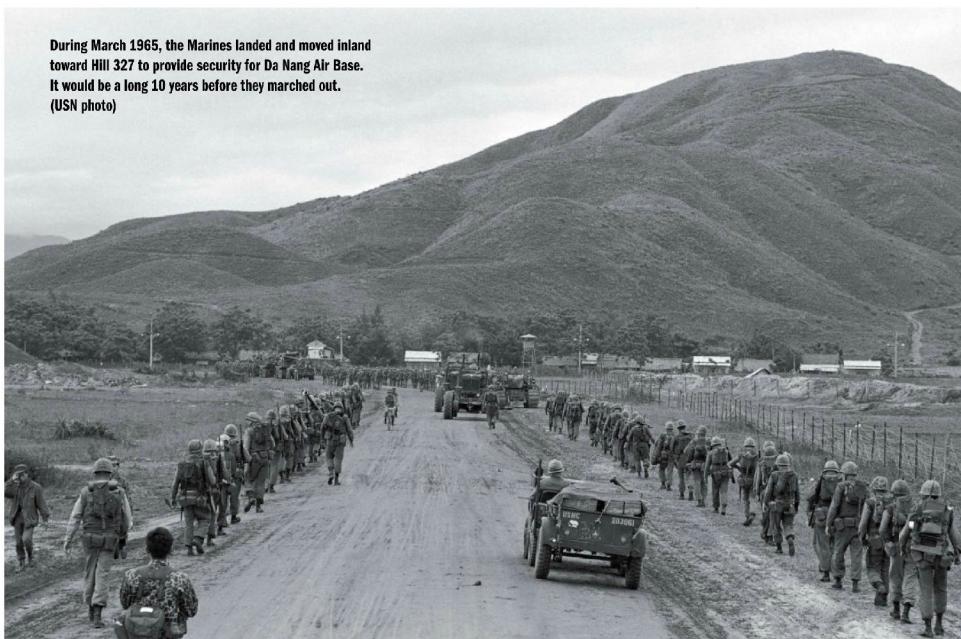
President Richard M. Nixon would later say, "Vietnam was the least understood war in our history." He was right. "Many myths that were created by the antiwar movement and the media during the war persist to this day," according to retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Otto J. Lehrack, in his book "Road of 10,000 Pains: The Destruction of the 2nd NVA Div. by the U.S. Marines, 1967."

The Vietnam War always has been shrouded in deceptive enigmas and contradictions. Robert Coram in his book, "Brute: The Life of Victor [H.] Krulak, U.S. Marine," recalls President John F.

During March 1965, the Marines landed and moved inland toward Hill 327 to provide security for Da Nang Air Base.

It would be a long 10 years before they marched out.

(USN photo)



Kennedy asking Lieutenant General Krulak and Joseph A. Mendenhall of the State Department to go to Vietnam in 1962 and assess the situation. Krulak reported the South Vietnamese could be relied on as staunch allies. Mendenhall said the South Vietnamese could not be relied on. President Kennedy asked the question that became a metaphor for the war: "Have you two gentlemen been to the same country?"

A kaleidoscope of existential and inscrutable pieces that could not be made to fit together, at least in Western minds, Vietnam had an exotic, primitive beauty that made one wish to visit under more amiable circumstances, but it was no place to fight a war. Sweltering heat; deluges of monsoon rain that chilled bone marrow; rugged, stubborn ridges of razor-sharp rock, triple jungle canopy; and muddy rice paddies fertilized with human excrement. It was inhabited by an array of poisonous, blood-sucking, carnivorous insects and animals. The most dangerous inhabitants, however, were those fellow human beings who belonged to the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong (VC) and the professional soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army.

Insurgency tactics against the South Vietnamese government had started changing at the end of 1964 and into 1965. At a village called Binh Gia, east of Saigon, two South Vietnamese battalions, one of which was the 4th Battalion of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps, fought two VC regiments. The communists didn't hit, run and fade as they had before. They rose and struck as spitting cobras, decimating the battalions and inflicting heavy casualties.

Only 40 miles away in Saigon, U.S. Army General William C. Westmoreland, United States Military Assistance Command (USMACV), took heed: "It meant the beginning of an intensive military challenge which the Vietnamese government could not meet with its own resources."

By the end of January, anti-government and anti-American riots erupted in Saigon, "The Paris of the East," and the old capital at Hue, South Vietnamese Premier Tran Van Huong was ousted. McGeorge Bundy, special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson, reported the situation in South Vietnam was "deteriorating, and without new U.S. action, defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks or perhaps even months, but within the next year or so. There is still time to turn



The landing at Da Nang was unopposed, and leathernecks of the 9th MEB—with the morning sun at their backs—waded through not only the surf, but also visiting dignitaries, media and curious onlookers. (USN photo)

it around, but not much."

GEN Westmoreland said: "We must face the stark fact that the war has escalated."

Okinawa-based leathernecks of 1st Bn, Ninth Marine Regiment and ships of the U.S. 7th Fleet's Navy Task Group 76.7 cautiously positioned off Da Nang. In

February, the VC attacked the U.S. compound at Pleiku in the Central Highlands and killed nine Americans and wounded 128 others. President Johnson ordered air strikes against North Vietnam, announced the withdrawal of U.S. dependents and declared: "I have ordered the deployment to South Vietnam of a [Marine] HAWK air



It wasn't long before photos such as this one of 1st Plt, G/2/3 near the village of Li Mai were common of American fighting men on patrol looking for what proved to be an elusive enemy.



STAFF/FRANK BURKE

Mortars, with their high trajectory, proved invaluable in the often quick and close skirmishes. An 81 mm mortar crew with D/1/4 launches a 9-pound round with a bursting radius of 30-by-20 yards.

defense battalion. Other reinforcements, in units and individuals, may follow."

They did. At 9:18 a.m., March 8, 1965, more Marines waded ashore across Red Beach on the western edge of Da Nang Harbor. It signaled the first significant use of ground troops in Vietnam. The 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade was ordered in because of its self-sustaining capabilities and was to land in an "inconspicuous way." The MEB was met by a large "Welcome, Gallant Marines" sign and Vietnamese VIPs, and pretty girls in the traditional *ao dai* dress presented *leis* to 3,500 leathernecks as representatives of the world's media recorded and reported.

The Associated Press took a photo of an unsmiling 9th MEB CG, Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, wearing a garland of flowers. He would later remark, "That picture has been the source of a lot of trouble for me. People say, 'Why couldn't you have been smiling?' But you know, if I had to do it over, that picture would be the same. When you have a son in Vietnam and he gets killed, you don't want a smiling general with flowers around his neck as the leader at that point."

The missile batteries had been installed to protect against potential air attacks from the North Vietnamese Air Force or in the event the Chinese entered the fray. Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., 23rd Commandant of the Marine Corps, and LtGen

Krulak wanted the Marines in a defensive perimeter.

According to historian Allan R. Millett in "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps," the base also would be used to escalate the war if needed or as a staging area to protect an American withdrawal should President Johnson order the mission ended. There was also a change typical of the times.

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According to Millett, American Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor and GEN Westmoreland said the Marine expeditionary brigade would be designated as the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade. "Expeditionary," they insisted, "sounded too French." Thus, the senior Marine command in country also became III Marine Amphibious Force vice III MEF.

For the Marines, Vietnam would come to mean I Corps ("Eye Corps"), the northernmost of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) tactical zones.

Thirty to 70 miles east to west, bordered by the Demilitarized Zone and North Vietnam on the north, and the mist-shrouded Annamite Mountains straddling Laos to the west, it stretched south along the South China Sea more than 200 miles to Due Pho in Quang Ngai Province.

The area was home to 2.5 million people, mostly farmers and fishermen including members of the local VC cadres. Millett writes: "Of the estimated 150,000 VC faced by the South Vietnamese government, perhaps a third were doing political work and staging raids in I Corps in early 1965." They had become extremely effective in guerrilla warfare and terrorism and using the "yoke of communism" to squeeze peasants in the rural countryside for taxes, confiscating their rice harvests, and intimidating and often murdering clergy, educators and civilian officials.

The ARVN countered with 60,000 men: two divisions, one regiment and regional forces defending the cities, towns and transportation systems. Low morale and a lack of leadership and equipment restricted almost all to a defense posture.

As more Marines went ashore, they fanned out into an 8-mile perimeter that included occupying Hill 327 overlooking the whole of Da Nang Air Base to the east.

It was tense but quiet when the chatter of machine-gun fire and tracers and flares lit up the night sky over Hill 327: VC sappers were making their first perimeter probes.

Nonetheless, Da Nang and the surrounding area became a swarm of Marine activity. The Force Logistics Command was created to deal with the rapid piling up of equipment on Red Beach. Elements of 2/4 arrived by KC-130s from Marine Transport Refueler Squadron 152 and took fire with little impact. Hawaii-based 3/4 soon followed. Major General William R. "Rip" Collins, commander of the Third Marine Division, also arrived from Okinawa. F-4B Phantoms of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 531 deployed their drag chutes as they touched down at Da Nang. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163, already veterans of Operation Shufly, had their UH-34 Seahorses at the north end of the air base apron near HMM-162.

Between the runways and Vietnam's Highway 1, the First Marine Aircraft Wing headquarters, commanded by MajGen Paul J. Fontana, took on a foreign legion setting quartered in old French barracks. Across the Han River, III MAF headquarters, soon to be commanded by MajGen Lewis W. "Lew" Walt, WW II veteran with two Navy Crosses, could be seen by looking beneath an old Vietnamese water tower.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had made it very clear: "The U.S. Marine Force



Above: In April, leathernecks from 2/4 were flown north approximately 40 miles to the northern enclave of Phu Bai to await the word to move to the defensive positions vacated by members of 2/3. (Photo by GySgt R.F. Ayers, USMC)

Below: Back at Da Nang, members of K/3/9 carved out and fortified defensive positions on Hill 327 using sandbags and help from earth-moving equipment and Marine engineers. (Photo by GySgt R.F. Hallahan, USMC)



will not, repeat will not, engage in day-to-day actions against the Viet Cong." GEN Westmoreland ordered the Marines to protect Da Nang from attack, but the "overall responsibility for the defense of Da Nang area remains a RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) responsibility."

The UH-34 helicopters from Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 16, however, were permitted to fly resupply and strike missions for the ARVN. On March 31, an air task force with 17 UH-34 helicopters of HMM-163 airlifted a battalion of ARVN paratroopers 25 miles south toward the Quang Tin provincial capital of Tam Ky.

As the aircraft flared into the landing zone, they were punctured with incoming rounds. "U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965," by Jack Shulimson and Major Charles M. Johnson, USMC, summarizes what happened: First Lieutenant Wendell T. Eliason, who was flying wingman for Lieutenant Colonel Norman G. Ewers, squadron commander, was killed as they touched down in the landing zone. Another UH-34 had absorbed numerous rounds also; the pilot,

1stLt Dale D. Eddy, "was wounded in the neck," and his crew thought him dead. His copilot, 1stLt James E. Magel, was severely wounded. The bird crashed. Wounded crew chief Sergeant Cecil A. Garner released his M60 machine gun from its door mount and headed out with Magel for cover.

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In came another UH-34 piloted by Maj Bennie H. Mann Jr. The helicopter took concentrated heavy fire as it landed. LtCol Ewers said Mann's crew chief, Staff Sergeant Stanley J. Novotny, jumped out and ran to rescue the downed crew. He "somehow found the strength single-handedly to lift the conscious, but para-

lyzed" 6-foot, 200-pound Eddy out of the downed aircraft. Lieutenant Magel would die of his wounds. Maj Mann was awarded the Navy Cross, and SSgt Novotny received the Silver Star.

Two more airlifts of 25 Marine and 10 Army helicopters came under heavy fire, but they delivered a battalion of ARVN into the zone. The Marines had two KIA and 19 wounded.

On the ground, heat and humidity caused BG Gen Karch to restrict defensive patrols and heavy work to the cooler hours of early and late afternoons. The patrols encountered no VC. "The first American casualties were inflicted by another Marine when two men from a three-man listening post left their positions to investigate suspicious movement to their front. The two men apparently lost their way in the dark and came upon their remaining partner from the rear. He turned and opened fire, mortally wounding his two comrades."

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By May, Sikorsky UH-34 Seahorse helicopters of MAG-16 had been taking fire while flying resupply and strike missions for the ARVN. The helicopters' permanent in-country base, Marine Corps Air Facility at Marble Mountain, would not be completed until later in the year. These helicopters are heading south returning to their hangars at the northern end of the Da Nang air base in May. (USMC photo)



wasn't working. According to J. Robert Moskin in his book "The U.S. Marine Corps Story," when the Commandant, Gen Greene, visited Da Nang, he told the press that the Marines were in Vietnam to "kill Viet Cong."

By then, there were 16,500 Marines in Vietnam.

In late April 1965, ships of the U.S. Navy had dropped anchor in the mouth of the Truong River some 55 miles south of Da Nang, and on a stretch of beach began off-loading, according to one officer, "every plank of matting the Marine Corps had in the Far East," i.e., hundreds of 2-by-12 slabs of interlocking aluminum matting, each weighing 144 pounds. Seabees anchored a SATS, a short airfield for tactical support, the first to be built in a combat zone. The A-4 Skyhawk jets from MAG-12 would take off with extra lift from jet-assisted takeoff (JATO) bottles attached to the fuselage and land with the help of arresting gear.

For all intents and purposes, the Marines and Seabees of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 10 had constructed an aircraft carrier in a sea of sand. Soon, just north at a place called Ky Ha, a helicopter pad was laid for the UH-34s and UH-1s of MAG-36.

LtGen Krulak had given them 30 days to complete the SATS runway. The other military services and engineers scoffed, saying it couldn't be done. Twenty-five days later, 4,000 feet of the aluminum matting was in place. On June 1, a Marine Attack Squadron 225 A-4C Skyhawk piloted by LtCol Robert W. Baker took off as the flight lead on a mission six miles north of the "expeditionary" field. By then, LtGen Krulak had sent a message to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: "Chu Lai operational this date." Marine close air support had taken another new meaning.

"Chu Lai" was how the Vietnamese pronounced the Mandarin Chinese characters for Krulak's name. Krulak's son, Gen Charles C. Krulak, 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, later told author Otto Lehrack that Chu Lai literally means "Little Man," an apt description given LtGen Krulak's short stature.

Back then, southern I Corps was home to stubborn and tenacious cadres of Viet Cong. It was the heart of the country's rice bowl. The farmers during good years could harvest three crops a year. The Viet Cong was not unwelcome in the areas south of Chu Lai below the Tra Bong River.

LtGen Krulak recognized this and insisted on a rapid buildup and integration of Marine air operations into what was III MAF's pacification attempt to clear the area in southern I Corps and northern II



Above: Marines on patrol became a common sight, but they still fascinated the local citizens such as the people crammed aboard this bus. (USMC photo)

Below: Marines under fire take cover in a cemetery near Hoi-Dong-Xa beach near Chu Lai, May 6-7 as Seabees and Marine engineers constructed the SATS airfield. One Marine is armed with the 40 mm M79 grenade launcher, which provided a boost in firepower to Marine rifle squads. Its explosive projectile filled the gap between hand grenades and the minimum effective range of the 81 mm mortar.



Corps of VC and win over the populace.

Only a short distance north, near the Batangan Peninsula, the village complex of An Cuong runs to the edge of the South China Sea. From there the 1st Viet Cong Regiment reinforced with North Vietnamese regulars quietly made their way north toward the Marine perimeter eight miles away at Chu Lai.

Editor's note: Our Vietnam series in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the start of the war continues next month with an article about Operation Starlite by LtCol Otto Lehrack, USMC (Ret).

