

**UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**  
OFFICER CANDIDATES SCHOOL  
TRAINING COMMAND  
2189 ELROD AVENUE  
QUANTICO, VA 22134-5003

HIST 1005  
SEP 2014

**MARINE CORPS HISTORY 5**

**TERMINAL LEARNING OBJECTIVE.** Without the aid of references, identify significant events in Marine Corps history without omitting key components. (OCS-HIST-1002)

**ENABLING LEARNING OBJECTIVE(S)**

1. Without the aid of references, identify influential contributors to the history of the Marine Corps from 1965 to 1975 without omission. (OCS-HIST-1002s)
2. Without the aid of references, describe Marine participation in Limited-scale Operations throughout Marine Corps history from 1965 to 1975 without omitting key components. (OCS-HIST-1002t)
3. Without the aid of references, describe Marine participation in Major Operations throughout Marine Corps history from 1965 to 1975 without omitting key components. (OCS-HIST-1002u)
4. Without the aid of references, trace the history of Marine Corps Amphibious Doctrine from 1965 to 1975 without omitting key components. (OCS-HIST-1002v)
5. Without the aid of references, trace the history of Marine Corps Aviation from 1965 to 1975 without omitting key components. (OCS-HIST-1002w)

1. **A FORCE IN READINESS**

a. Following the Korean War, the Marine Corps' reputation as a "force in readiness" made them the quick-response agency for the United States (U.S.). There has been a significant amount of turmoil in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century and the Corps has been involved in many actions and conducted many operations, in both combat and non-combat roles.

b. With the cease-fire in Korea, the Marine Corps focused on further developing the Fleet Marine Force as the force-in-readiness sanctioned by the passage of the Douglas-Mansfield Act/Public Law 416. The most important development of the Korean War, the vertical assault doctrine was improved and the Navy upgraded the amphibious ships capable of carrying Marines, landing craft, and helicopters to distant shores. The Marine Corps kept its third division and wing, and command element of III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) and I Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) on Okinawa to counter Communist moves in Asia. The three division-wing force structure was paired by law to Marine Corps Cold War roles and missions.

2. **MARINE CORPS OPERATIONS PRIOR TO VIETNAM**

a. In the time period between the Korean armistice in July 1953 and March 1965, Marines faced a series of crises around the world. These included protection of American citizens in Guatemala and disaster relief in numerous countries.

b. Marines landed in Lebanon on 15 July 1958. As part of Operation Bluebat, Marines landed on Beirut's resort beaches in the midst of sunbathers to prevent an outbreak of civil war. They occupied Beirut International Airport for 102 days. American diplomats offered the withdrawal of the Marines as a reward for moderation by radicals in the Lebanese government who threatened civil war if they did not get their way. Diplomacy prevailed, and the Lebanese crisis subsided.

c. **The Cuban Missile Crisis.** In October 1962, Nikita Krushchev the Soviet Premier escalated military assistance to Cuba. The thought of Soviet missiles only 90 miles from American soil was too much for President John F. Kennedy to countenance.

(1) The President ordered a naval blockade of Cuba. Marine air units staged to provide air support for whatever mission was needed.

(2) II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), in addition to its own strength, assumed control of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) from California, and prepared for amphibious assaults in Cuba. Meanwhile, Marine forces at Guantanamo Bay were reinforced.

(3) The Soviets declined to challenge the naval blockade, and the Russian ships carrying the missiles returned to Russia. Slowly, the alarm faded, and gave Headquarters Marine Corps an opportunity to assess their performance.

d. Marines deployed to the Dominican Republic in April of 1965, Marines landed in a Latin American country for the first time in 40 years. The Lyndon B. Johnson administration deployed 20,000 troops (of which 8,000 were Marines) to help settle the situation. They were there in response to the assassination of the Dominican dictator. Johnson feared that Fidel Castro's Communist influence would cause the creation of another Communist state in the Caribbean. There was some fighting (9 killed and 30 wounded) but eventually an Inter-American Peace Force was constituted of contingents from five different Latin American countries and by 6 June all of the Marines had left.

### 3. MARINES IN VIETNAM

a. Almost as soon as the French left the divided country of Vietnam, the Communist North (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [RV]) had begun to subvert the non-Communist South (Republic of Vietnam [RVN]). American advisors flowed into the country to prop up a series of fumbling, corrupt, aimless administrations. The more energetic and better-led DRV would have overrun the RVN in no time without the support of America. After a matter of years, the administration of so many American advisors became too confusing, and a central command structure, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) led by Army General (GEN) William C. Westmoreland, a future Chief of Staff of the Army was established in Saigon, the capitol of the RVN.

b. President John F. Kennedy appreciated the effect of "Special" Forces against the guerilla campaign waged by the DRV. One of Kennedy's principal advisors on unconventional warfare was Marine Major General (MajGen) Victor Krulak. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Krulak immediately clashed with Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson. With the support of the current Commandant, Krulak moved from Washington to Hawaii to become FMFPac. As such, he ensured that his Marines would "understand the doctrine of counterinsurgency and would be ready to fight that kind of war." (Coram, p. 279)

c. The hawkish Johnson and his administration geared up for a confrontation between communism and democracy in this little-known corner of the world. As time progressed, and the ineffectual RVN became more and more unstable, Johnson ordered covert bombing missions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail <sup>1</sup> Westmoreland, by 1964 was becoming uneasy about the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) security provided for his air bases, including the one at Da Nang.

d. To understand the effect of the Vietnam War on the Marine Corps, one should review Chapter 18 of Allan R. Millett's excellent "*Semper Fidelis: the History of the United States Marine Corps*." He begins with a statistical look at the Marine Corps' longest war, (up to that point).

(1) During the 6 years of Marine Corps combat action (1965-1971), "794,000 Americans served as Marines." (Millett p. 560).

(2) III (MAF)<sup>2</sup>, at its peak, numbered 85,755 Marines, more than had landed at Iwo Jima or Okinawa.

(3) The Marine Corps suffered "101, 574 killed and wounded, or almost 4,000 more casualties than World War II." (Millett p. 560).

### 4. THE VIETNAM WAR

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<sup>1</sup> The famous Ho Chi Minh Trail (not actually a physical trail, but a logistical pipeline) wove down from North Vietnam through Laos. Despite desperate methods (carpet bombing, countless fighter-bomber sorties bombing empty stretches of jungle, and even chemical warfare, Agent Orange to destroy the jungle canopy), and mounting casualties, the Americans were never able to successfully interdict the trail.

<sup>2</sup> Gen William Westmoreland, the Army Four-Star commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) insisted that the Marine Command Element, formerly the 9<sup>th</sup> MEB, change its name to III Marine Amphibious Force, because the term "Expeditionary" was too reminiscent of French "Expeditionary" forces that had battled in the Indochina War.

a. **The Gulf of Tonkin Incident**

(1) In August 1964, the destroyers USS Maddox (DD-731) and Turner Joy (DD-951) were conducting electronic data-gathering missions along separate areas of the coast of Vietnam. North Vietnamese PT boats attacked Maddox on 2 August 1964. On 4 August, Maddox and Turner Joy, were again patrolling (this time together) when Turner Joy radar reported numerous small high-speed targets approaching from two directions. Lookouts on Turner Joy even reported torpedo wakes inbound. The destroyer employed evasive procedures and no hits were scored. In the meantime, Turner Joy and aircraft from the carrier USS Ticonderoga claimed two PT boats sunk.

(2) These two incidents became known as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. In both instances, American forces easily repelled the enemy craft, (there has since been debate about whether the second attack ever actually occurred). In any case, the incident gave Johnson the excuse he needed to go to Congress, and ask for forces to stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

(3) The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by Congress in August 1964, authorized the President to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” It allowed the President to use force to assist any member of the South East Asia Treaty Organization.

b. **Da Nang**

(1) In 1964, top-level discussions regarding the Marines’ role in Vietnam were taking place. There was a clear need to assist the RVN in securing the I Corps Tactical Zone, or Military Zone I, (more simply, to Marines forever, Eye-Corps). I Corps comprised the northernmost five provinces of South Vietnam, and terminated in the north at the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ). Looking at a map, it would seem that the Marines would present an effective blocking force between the DRV and RVN. This was not the case, however, since the DRV were more than comfortable skirting around through Laos to the west, and attacking wherever along the narrow country of South Viet Nam they chose. I Corps was the most heavily populated area of Vietnam at the time, ‘a population density of 2,000 people per square mile, in contrast with a national density of 210 per square mile” (Millett, p. 563). Terrain varied from mountain ranges to flat, sandy coastal areas. Along the rivers, there were corridors of rice-growing land, with gooey clay soil that was almost impossible to move units through. The units were forced to walk along dikes between rice paddies, easy targets for snipers and booby traps.

(2) Regardless, the city of Da Nang was the logical spot for the first beachhead in the war. Located in the heart of a trouble spot (I Corps), and possessing natural and man-made strategic assets, (a naturally protected harbor and one of only three jet-capable air bases in South Vietnam), the city was an obvious choice. Cashing in on the habitual relationship between the Navy (who would be supplying the troop buildup) and the Marine Corps (as a potent land combat force), President Johnson soon gave the Marines the go-ahead to occupy the area.

(3) The first Marine ground combat units in Vietnam were elements of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB). On 8 March 1965. Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 3/9 performed an unopposed amphibious landing on the beach north of Da Nang. Two hours later, BLT 1/3 landed at Da Nang air base in Marine KC-130 transport aircraft. 1/3’s immediate task was to provide security to the airbase and the Marine squadrons operating from the base. They secured the airfield and 3/9 occupied a ridgeline overlooking the base.

(4) By May, with the arrival of more BLT and fixed-wing squadrons, the 9th MEB was dissolved to be replaced by the III MAF (see endnote II).

(5) As MACV policy evolved, Marine forces were dispersed to three enclaves in I Corps. From north to south, these were, Chu Lai, near the DMZ, Phu Bai, guarding an Army Radio Intel Unit and auxiliary airfield south of Hue City, and of course, around the burgeoning base at Da Nang.

(6) It is important now to draw distinctions between the enemies that the Marines would encounter. Guerilla forces in the South, called Viet Cong (VC), were usually comprised of people from the local area. With their knowledge of the local terrain, both geographic and political, they were especially difficult to smoke out. The classic frustration for the Americans in Vietnam was that the guerilla fighters or the VC cell commanders would infiltrate the local villages and deceive the Americans as if they were one of the ordinary villager. Separate and

distinct from the Viet Cong were the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)<sup>3</sup>, the regular, professional military of the DRV. Though relatively lightly armed, they were capable of great feats of logistics and endurance that allowed them to strike hard at one spot, then melt into the jungle, and re-appear later where they saw a weak spot in the defenses. They were not guerillas, but they were lightly armed, agile and capable of amazing bravery and discipline. They looked down on the Viet Cong units, and seldom worked together. If they did, the VC might be used to soften up or probe a position before sending in the regulars to administer the coup de grace. Between the two, they were a fierce and crafty enemy who held their own against two major western powers for decades, and ended as the eventual victors in their war.

c. **Offensive Operations**

(1) **Search and Destroy**. The Army commander GEN Westmoreland, who had a distinguished record from World War II and Korea, advocated a "search and destroy" strategy against the Viet Cong. Army units patrolling the countryside destroyed and burned any structures and occasionally entire villages that appeared to be used by the Viet Cong.

(2) **Clear and Hold**. The Marines attempted a "clear and hold" or "ink blot" strategy, which relied on clearing coastal enclaves, such as Da Nang, of enemy presence and then gradually moving out into the countryside to "clear and hold" villages one by one. Neither of these strategies met particular success, and both demanded increasing numbers of troops in order to achieve any success. The Marines then tried a new approach, one designed to "win the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese and defuse the emotional attraction of Communism.

(3) **Marine Pacification**. One of the most effective tactics the Marines used in winning the trust of the Vietnamese people was **pacification** waged through the **Combined Action Program (CAP)**. The concept created units of Marines and Vietnamese, known as Combined Action Platoons. Each platoon held three squads of local Vietnamese militiamen<sup>4</sup>, and a U.S. Marine rifle squad with a corpsman<sup>5</sup>. Because the CAPs lived in the villages, the villagers gained confidence in the CAPs fighting ability and appreciated the security and labor the platoon provided.

d. **Operation Starlite, 18 August 1965**

(1) Though firmly believing in the strategy of pacification, III MAF engaged in major combat operations when the opportunity presented itself. In August 1965, the III MAF Commander, MajGen Lew Walt received intelligence from the local ARVN Commander that a main-force VC regiment was in a village on the Batang Peninsula. After confirming the presence by radio intercepts, Walt decided to mount the first regiment-sized assault since Korea in order to reduce the fortified peninsula just 15 miles from the city of Chu Lai and 55 miles south of Da Nang. The Viet Cong had been fortifying the peninsula since 1963, using it as a marshalling and recovery area for VC units throughout I Corps. It also gave the VC a relatively safe base of operations near the vital communications complex at Chu Lai.

(2) On 18 August 1965, Operation Starlite commenced as Regimental Landing Team 7 launched a multi-axis attack. One battalion attacked from the north, another battalion conducted a heli-borne assault from the west, and a third conducted an amphibious assault from the southeast. Viet Cong losses were around 700 killed versus 200 Marine casualties. Operation Starlite showed that vertical envelopment, naval gunfire, close air support, and aggressive infantry maneuvering were more than a match for the lauded tenacity of the VC.

(3) Despite this victory and similar results during Operation Piranha in September, the VC maintained a presence on the Batang Peninsula throughout the war. The infamous My Lai massacre occurred in the southwest of the peninsula.

e. **Operation Utah 4-6 March, 1966; The Marines Meet the NVA**

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<sup>3</sup> NVA will be used in this class to designate the People's Vietnamese Army, People's Army of Vietnam, or North Vietnamese Army. Literature uses all three to describe the North Vietnamese Army but the more commonly used NVA will be used in this text.

<sup>4</sup> Usually the very old or the very young, because whenever the RVN "fortified" a village, they usually conscripted all the military aged males into the ARVN.

<sup>5</sup> The corpsmen were a valuable tool for winning hearts and minds, for many of the remote villagers, the corpsman might be the only trained medical provider a person would ever see.

(1) Three Marine battalions investigating reports of downed aircraft in the southern Quang Ngai Province, ran into a regimental-sized enemy force. In the battle that ensued, which came to be named Operation Utah, the enemy troops proved better disciplined and better trained for combat than the VC the Marines had fought previously. They were men of a regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiment, trained and equipped by the Soviet Union. For many of the Marine Commanders, this was the first time they had seen an enemy force that was willing to stand and fight, and they quickly took steps to block any escape routes, and to overpower the enemy.

(2) Despite crippling heat, re-supply difficulties, (the NVA concentrated heavy fire on any approaching helicopter), once again, aggressive infantry tactics, vertical envelopment and supply, close air support, and aggressive artillery support were successful in dislodging a formidable enemy from prepared fortifications.

f. **The DMZ**

(1) The fight along the DMZ was particularly onerous for the Marines of III MAF. Marines are by nature ill-suited to occupation duty, yet here on the DMZ, they were forced to develop a defense-in-depth against the NVA. The NVA had freedom of movement that was denied to the U.S. Forces, through Laos. The Marines were denied permission to direct any offensive fires against the actual DMZ itself, so the Communists moved artillery and ground divisions into that area, rendering them untouchable to the Americans.

(2) The second dangerous mission for the bases along the DMZ was logistics. Supplying fixed bases that were frequently (if not constantly) under enemy fire became increasingly dangerous. River delivery of essential supplies, using LST's was carried out only with extreme danger, and the casualty numbers began to reflect that. The DMZ resembled World War I trench warfare more than a jungle war.

(3) The North Vietnamese gave more and more focus to I Corps. From 1965 into 1967, I Corps' share of overall enemy casualties in Vietnam climbed from 13 to 44 percent. In the maneuver and pacification campaigns of 1965, the ratio of North Vietnamese to Marine casualties was 10:1. During the static defense of the DMZ, that number dropped to 3:1. "The bases (along the DMZ) became synonymous with frustration, discomfort, and casualties: Khe Sanh, the Rockpile, Ba Long, Ca Lu, Camp Carroll, Cam Lo, Cua Viet, and Gio Linh." (Millett, p. 584).

g. **Khe Sanh, April – May 1967 (The Hill Fights, or the First Battle)**

(1) A key piece of terrain in Quang Tri province (nearest the DMZ) is a mountain plateau near the Laotian border named Khe Sanh. The Marines built a firebase on the plateau as the western anchor of the DMZ defensive line. The plateau's weakness was its location at the end of long overland supply routes (Rte. 9) that afforded numerous ambush possibilities and three hills that dominated it.

(2) On 24 April 1967, a patrol from Khe Sanh ran headlong into a previously undetected enemy force. The patrol had unknowingly tripped a trigger (prematurely for the NVA) on preparations for an assault on Khe Sanh. The NVA planned to seize three hills overlooking the base, Hills 861, and 881 North and South. III MAF knew well that this was key terrain, and determined to keep the hills at all costs. Khe Sanh (currently garrisoned by a company from 1/9) was reinforced by 2/3 and 3/3. Their mission was to drive the NVA off the high ground, and in a series of brutal battles called the Hill Fights, they did just that. Using massive close air support and artillery support, in addition to bitter ground fighting, the Marines killed over 900 NVA soldiers, while sustaining 580 killed and wounded. The NVA withdrew, and the Marines put garrisons on top of each of each hill.

(3) By the end of May, with things quieted down, the garrison of Khe Sanh was reduced again to one Battalion, and the rest of the summer of 1967 was fairly quiet. Only one disquieting event occurred in August. The supply convoy was ambushed on Route 9, a highly vulnerable east-west supply route. This would be the last overland supply convoy for Khe Sanh.

(4) Problems with maintaining a major base without an overland supply route were compounded by the weather that accompanied the monsoon season. MACV was adamant that the base remain as a defense against a NVA attack down Route 9 to the coast. III MAF was frustrated by this narrow vision, especially since the fast-moving NVA could bypass Khe Sanh anytime they wanted to. For GEN Westmoreland, the information (in December 1967) that the NVA was massing around the base was the final straw. He saw Khe Sanh as developing into the major set-piece battle that he craved. In an unpopulated region, Khe Sanh would also allow unrestricted use of U.S. firepower.

(5) During the rest of 1967, the III MAF remained squared-off against four NVA divisions along the DMZ. LtGen Walt was replaced by a future Commandant, LtGen Robert Cushman. Cushman pursued a much more conciliatory strategy with MACV. Marine air power had come of age in the close air support missions of the last two years, and had refined their craft to an art. Despite repeated attempts (and partial success) by the Air Force to assume command of all air assets in the Vietnamese Theater, they remained primarily on call for their brethren and South Vietnamese allies on the ground.

#### **h. The Second Battle of Khe Sanh: 21 January – 6 April 1968**

(1) In December 1967, two divisions of NVA troops moved into the area around Khe Sanh. As the situation developed, III MAF moved 1/9 into Khe Sanh to reinforce the 26th Marines (-) who were holding the fire base and the three hill garrisons. On 2 January 1968, increased enemy activity prompted III MAF to send the remaining elements of the 26th Marine Regiment to Khe Sanh. For the first time since the Battle of Iwo Jima, the 26th Marines were together in combat.

(2) On 20 January 1968, a North Vietnamese defector came into the firebase and gave the Marines there detailed information about the NVA plan of attack. Shortly after midnight on 21 January, Hill 861 was attacked by around 300 NVA. Despite massive artillery support, the NVA breached the wire, and were only driven out by fierce hand-to-hand combat.

(3) Almost simultaneously, the main base was slammed with mortar and rocket fire hundreds of 82mm mortar rounds, artillery shells, and 122mm rockets slammed into the compound as Marines dived into bunkers and trenches. The main ammunition dump was one of the first things hit, over 1,500 tons of ammunition was destroyed, about 98 percent of what was stored there had burned and exploded for days after. Luckily, the NVA didn't use this opportunity to attack the main base. Parts of at least two NVA divisions moved into the attack. The NVA were heavily reinforced with artillery and air defense units, and on 24 January, NVA artillery debuted in the conflict by saturating all the Khe Sanh positions with 130 and 152mm fire. The Marines and ARVN dug deeper, and prayed for a break from the Vietnamese New Year (Tet) Cease Fire on 29 January. That was not to be, in fact, the Tet Offensive of 1968 began that month.

(4) Attacks continued at varying levels of intensity (including the first use of NVA armor at the Special Forces Camp of Lang Vei, just inside Laos on the base's western flank), through January, February, and March of 1968. A Marine Direct Air Support Center (DASC) on Khe Sanh gave final direction to possibly the most concentrated application of aerial firepower in the history of warfare." Air power was also responsible for the logistic maintenance of the base. An estimated 185 tons of supplies were required per day during the height of the siege. For most of the winter battles, fog blanketed the firebase until noon or after. If the aviators made it through the limited visibility, planes loaded with supplies were tempting targets for the massed anti-aircraft fire of the NVA. When the craft made it through the gauntlet of fire to land, they became targets for artillery and mortars. Finally, all supplies had to be air-dropped into the encircled base. This does not include the special challenges of supplying the hill outposts. Despite the challenges, only four Air Force cargo planes were destroyed by enemy action during the entire siege of Khe Sanh.

(5) As at Dien Bien Phu, the attackers also began trenches to get themselves into attack position with relative cover from direct fire. Unlike Dien Bien Phu, the defenders had awesome air and artillery superiority on their side. Finally, on 1 April, a combined Marine and Army force was able to break the NVA choke hold on Route (Rte) 9. Elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division entered Khe Sanh on 8 April, and on 11 April, Marine engineers reported Rte. 9 open.

(6) It is interesting to note that the fire base at Khe Sanh was maintained for exactly one week after the departure of GEN Westmoreland from MACV. His successor, GEN Creighton Abrams ordered the base destroyed and evacuated, and the last troops left the area on 6 July. Controversy still rages about the need for this battle on the American side. Even on the North Vietnamese side, no overall strategic reason for this battle has ever been confirmed.

*"Khe Sanh Combat Base, site of the most famous siege and one of the most controversial battles of the American Vietnam War, sits silently on a barren plateau surrounded by vegetation-covered hills often obscured by mist and fog. It is hard to imagine as you stand in this peaceful, verdant land that in this very place in early 1968 took place the bloodiest battle of the Vietnam War. . . But little things help you picture what the history books say happen here. The outline of the airfield remains distinct (to this day nothing will grow on it). In places, the ground is literally carpeted with bullets and rusting shell casings. — Vietnam, A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit"*

i. **Hue City, 31 January – 24 February 1968**

(1) Hue is located on the coast in Thua Thien province midway between Da Nang and the DMZ. Until Tet, both sides had spared the city from heavy fighting, partly out of deference for its tradition as the center of Vietnamese culture. An ancient citadel with stone and masonry walls several feet thick surrounded the “old city” north of the Perfume River. South of the Perfume River, the “new city” was home to a MACV Advisors compound and Hue University. Despite its symbolic and strategic value, only a handful of ARVN troops defended the city.

(2) On 31 January 1968, seven battalions of NVA occupied most of the city. Surprisingly fierce defense by ARVN troops kept the Communists from occupying the ARVN HQ, inside the citadel, and the MACV Compound on the south side of the river. Marines, based in nearby Phu Bai slowly moved into the city. They were hampered by an almost total lack of intelligence regarding the enemy’s location. The battle became in essence, a series of meeting engagements that soon devolved to the most intense street by street, house by house fighting that the Marines had experienced since Seoul in 1950.

(3) Marines fought house-to-house for the first time since the Korean War. At first, they were denied air and artillery support because senior military commanders did not want to destroy the ancient imperial capital. But when casualties mounted and the Marines faced assaulting the Citadel, air support was approved.

(4) By 14 February, the last NVA were driven from the old city. Marines counted over 5,000 bodies in the rubble, 142 Marines had died and 857 were wounded. Slowly, the story of a massacre of 5,000 to 6,000 civilians by the NVA and Viet Cong began to emerge.

j. **Results of the Tet Offensive**

(1) Militarily, U.S. forces estimated the enemy suffered over 15,000 killed and 65,000 wounded during the four month offensive. The enemy was largely spent, and III MAF, thanks to the assumption by Army units of the defense of the DMZ was in a position to carry out raids against enemy base camps. Pacification efforts continued throughout I Corps.

(2) Politically, Tet was a major victory for the Communists. The Tet Offensive is viewed by many as the point at which American attitudes turned decisively against the war. When GEN Westmoreland requested 206,000 more troops, the Johnson Administration recoiled, instead choosing to scale back the bombing of North Vietnam, limit troop numbers, and began peace talks in Paris with the Communists. In the fall election of 1968, Richard M. Nixon took over from Lyndon B. Johnson, who refused to run for re-election. He ran on a promise to stop the draft and to provide “peace with honor.” The new watchword for the war became “Vietnamization,” turning the responsibility for the active prosecution of the war to the South Vietnamese.

k. **Operation Dewey Canyon, January – February 1969**

(1) In late January 1969, the 9th Marines reinforced by elements of the 3d Marines moved into the A Shau Valley in southwestern corner of the Quang Tri province near the Laotian border. 3d Marine Division Commanding General, MajGen Raymond Davis, who won the Medal of Honor in Korea planned a complex operation to attack NVA bases along the Laotian border. His plan included totally heli-borne assaults, supported by leapfrogging artillery to hilltop firebases cleared as they progressed.

(2) The enemy reacted slowly to this bold excursion. But in mid-February, they struck back at the Marines with superior forces. Dewey Canyon was one of the Marines' best operations. While the grunts slugged it out on the jungle floor, helicopters braved monsoon rains. The Marines were entirely supported by helicopters in the trackless area.

(3) Marine gunners in helos leapfrogged across the mountains to keep pace with the infantry sweeps, turning mountain peaks into firebases. The Marine air group flew 1,617 sorties in support.

(4) The operation is considered one of the best applications of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force concept. In Dewey Canyon, 130 Americans were killed and 932 were wounded. The Marines killed over 1,600 enemies and destroyed numerous enemy caches of weapons and supplies.

l. **Vietnamization**

(1) In 1969, President Nixon announced his plan for “Vietnamization” of the war. He intended to gradually phase U.S. troops out of the country as the war effort was turned over to the South Vietnamese government.

(2) In the summer of 1969, III MAF began its withdrawal from Vietnam. Marines worked to turnover their operations to the South Vietnamese Marine Corps and ARVN. Meanwhile, the pacification program received renewed effort, and reached its peak in the winter of 1969-1970 with 1,700 Marines and Navy corpsmen. The NVA fell back across the borders to await the end of the U.S. withdrawal. The VC spent the fourth phase largely buying time as well, avoiding Marine forces and content with launching occasional ambushes and artillery attacks. By the end of June 1971, the last Marine combat troops left Vietnam.

## **5. THE POST-VIETNAM MARINE CORPS**

### **a. The Fall of Saigon**

(1) Until the fall of Saigon in 1975, about 60 Marines remained in South Vietnam as advisors to the South Vietnamese Marine Corps.

(2) Operation Eagle Pull. At this time there were also Communist forces fighting for control of Laos and Cambodia. In April of 1975, Communist forces in Cambodia routed the National Government's troops and moved on the capital of Phnom Penh. American civilians were in danger. The embassy called for the evacuation of all Americans on 12 April. Two companies from 2d Battalion 4th Marines were helo-lifted into Phnom Penh. As Marines secured several landing zones, civilians boarded the helicopters. In two hours, the Marines evacuated several hundred civilians and left Phnom Penh to the oncoming Communists.

(3) Operation Frequent Wind. In March of 1975, the North Vietnamese Army began their final offensive of the war. As NVA armor entered the outskirts of the city and NVA artillery landed around the U.S. Embassy, U.S. Forces launched Operation Frequent Wind, the final evacuation of Saigon. It proved to be a much more complex operation than Eagle Pull due to larger numbers of people. The evacuation had been going on for several days with Marines acting as security aboard ships. However, on 30 April, large numbers of Americans and Vietnamese still remained to be evacuated. Over the next 20 hours, Marine helicopters flew 530 sorties, evacuating almost 7,000 people from Saigon. Marine ground units flown in from California provided security during the evacuation. Four Marines lost their lives in the operation. They were the last Marines to die in Vietnam.

### **b. Manpower**

(1) The Marine Corps has always relied on its elite image. Maintenance of this image included a reliance on volunteers, but the heavy losses in Vietnam and downturn in military-service acceptance forced the Corps to accept draftees in the late 1960s.

(2) The other services began appealing to youth by offering civilian career training and beer in the barracks. The Marine Corps continued its image with marketing slogans such as "A Few Good Men" and "We Never Promised You a Rose Garden." This hampered recruiting in a society bent on immediate self-gratification. The Marine Corps also struggled to meet its recruiting goals in the early 1970s. In 1973, only 46 percent of all Marines held a high school diploma, and over 55 percent were of age 20 or younger (for comparison, as of 30 September 1992, over 99 percent of Marines held a diploma, and 34 percent were 20 or younger). Fiscal year 1974 saw a 10,000 Marine recruit shortfall. Young men were not interested in volunteering for military service.

(3) In 1975, Gen Louis H. Wilson, Medal of Honor winner on Guam, became Commandant and threw his weight behind "The Great Personnel Campaign," which to this point had been waged by staff noncommissioned officers and officers without much effective direction from Headquarters. He stopped the downward spiral of the Corps' culture by stressing quality over quantity and by instituting numerous policy changes that improved life for all ranks. The Marine Corps recovered its esprit de corps and fine public image in time for the 1980s.

### **c. Marine Scout Sniper Program**

(1) Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock, a Marine sniper with 93 confirmed kills, gained notoriety for his outstanding marksmanship. He once recorded a kill from 2,250 meters (1.47 miles) using a personally modified M2 .50 caliber machinegun. He was such an effective killer that the North Vietnamese put a bounty of \$30,000 on his head. (Typical bounties for other snipers ranged from \$8-\$2,000)

(2) The Viet Cong called him "Long Trang," or the "white feather sniper," because of the white feather he wore in his boonie cover. He only removed the feather one time while he was sniping a NVA General. According to legend, a platoon of North Vietnamese snipers were assigned to kill him. Other Marine snipers began wearing white feathers in their caps to confuse the enemy snipers, showing their devotion to this team member.



(3) Gunnery Sergeant Hathcock received a Silver Star for an incident in which he singlehandedly, over the space of several days, killed 16 North Vietnamese soldiers. He pinned them down in an open area, and shot each one as they attempted to get up and run away.

(4) He and other Marines clearly demonstrated the worth of snipers as a cost efficient and highly effective tool in combat. As a result, sniper training became a permanent part of the United States Marine Corps.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mcesg.marines.mil/About/MCESGHistory.aspx>

**NOTES:**

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