

C. III Marine Amphibious Force

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To what extent the growing Marine emphasis on pacification was a factor during the period before the Honolulu conference is impossible to determine; the timing and evidence would suggest that the impact of the Marine strategy was greatest in the period after Honolulu, as they became more sure of the rightness of their approach, and as they garnered more and more publicity for it. Nonetheless, in the first eleven months of their mission in I Corps, the Marines had gotten deeply into the pacification program. The Marines thus became the most vocal advocates within the Armed Forces for emphasizing pacification more, and search and destroy less.

The Marine deployments and mission are covered in earlier decision studies in this series and will thus be treated only briefly here. The emphasis of this section is not on the influence the Marines had on the Honolulu conference, but on the way the Marines gradually moved into their new role, and the difficulties with it. The material here applied, therefore, equally to the pre- and post-Honolulu periods, throughout which the Marine successes, as they reported them, had a growing impact on the thinking of civilian and military alike, in Saigon, CINCPAC, and Washington.

The Marines landed their first troops -- two Battalion Landing Teams -- in Da Nang in March of 1965. Their original mission, "to secure enclaves in the northern region of Vietnam containing air and communications installations, was simplicity itself." 29/ (From "U.S. Marine Corps Civic Action Efforts in Vietnam, March 1965-March 1966, a study done by the USMC Historical Branch, SECRET; hereafter referred to as MC History; from un-paged draft.)

By the time of the Honolulu conference the Marines -- by now organized into the III Marine Amphibious Force -- had changed their mission considerably, and to a degree then unequalled among other American units was deeply engaged in pacification operations.

A monthly report issued by General Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, indicates the evolution of Marine thinking on their mission. Reviewing the first seven months of their deployment in I Corps, the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, wrote in September, 1965:

"The Mission assigned III MAF was initially confined to airfield security. Subsequently, a limited offensive responsibility was added, which has gradually grown to an essentially unrestrained authority for offensive operations. Finally, and largely on its own, III MAF has entered the pacification program, with the bulk of its pacification efforts taking place since June." [Emphasis added] 30/

One month later, after chronicling their successes, the report indicated the major shift in strategic thinking which was taking place at General Walt's headquarters in Da Nang, and at General Krulak's in Hawaii:

"While accomplishing all this the Marines were feeling, with growing impact, a cardinal counterinsurgency principle: that if local forces do not move in promptly behind the offensive effort, then first line forces must be diverted to provide the essential hamlet security, police and stabilization. The alternative is to risk the development of vacua, into which the VC guerrilla can flow. This condition grew during the period. The Popular Forces and police were inadequate in numbers and in quality to do their part of the job, as the Marines did theirs. This operated to complicate the Marines' problem by making the civic action effort more difficult, by permitting harassment of our forces, and by making possible a suicide attack on the Chu Leo and Marble Mountain areas.

"The end of the period saw the 676 square mile III MAF area of influence more stable, more prosperous, and far more hopeful, but it saw also an urgent need for efficient regional or local forces to take up their proper burden, so the Marines can maintain the momentum of their search/clear/pacification efforts. It is plain that the most efficient way to bring this about is to give III MAF substantial authority over the RF or PF serving in this area, in order that they may be properly trained and properly led." 31/

This summary, written in the headquarters of the man often regarded as the philosopher of the Marine Corps, shows the Marines in the process of swinging their emphasis around -- turning away from the offensive against the enemy waiting in the nearby hills, and towards the people and the VC guerrillas among the people inside their TAOR.

It was a crucial, difficult decision for the men who made it. Significantly, the indications are strong that the decision was made almost entirely inside Marine Corps channels, through a chain of command that bypassed COMUSMACV and the civilian leaders of our government, and ran from General Greene through General Krulak to General Walt. The files do not reveal discussions of the implications, feasibility, cost, and desirability of the Marine strategy among high-ranking officials in the Embassy, MACV headquarters, the Defense and State Departments. Yet in retrospect it seems clear that the strategy the Marines proposed to follow, a strategy about which they made no secret, was in sharp variance with the strategy of the other U.S. units in the country, with far-ranging political implications that could even affect the ultimate chances for negotiations.

It should be clear that the Marine concept of operations has a different implicit time requirement than a more enemy-oriented search and destroy effort. It is not within the scope of this paper to analyze the different requirements, but it does appear that the Marine strategy, which General Walt sometimes described as the

"wringing out of the VC from the land like you wring water out of a sponge," is slow and methodical, requires vast numbers of troops, runs the risk of turning into an occupation even while being called "pacification/civic action," and involves Americans deeply in the politics and traditions of rural Vietnam. The strategy can succeed, perhaps, but if it is to succeed, it must be undertaken with full awareness by the highest levels of the USG of its potential costs in manpower and time, and the exacting nature of the work. Instead, the documents suggest that the Marines determined their strategy basically on their own, deriving part of it from their own traditions in the "Banana Republics" and China (where Generals Walt, Krulak, Nickerson, and others had served in the 1930's), and partly from an attempt to solve problems of an unprecedented nature which were cropping up inside their TAORs, even on the edge of the great air base at Da Nang.

As it was, the Marine strategy was judged successful, at least by the Marines, long before it had even had a real test. It was applauded by many observers before the VC had begun to react to it, and as such, encouraged imitators while it was still unproven.

The Marine dilemma was how to support the pacification effort without taking it over. They thought they had succeeded in doing this by "self-effacing support for Vietnamese rural construction" after August of 1965, but there is much contradictory evidence on this point. The Marines themselves, according to the classified historical study they recently produced, understood that their pacification work had "to function through local Vietnamese officials. The tendency to produce Marine Corps programs or to work 'democratically' through individuals had to be strictly controlled. Only Vietnamese programs could be tolerated and support of these programs had to take place through Vietnamese governing officials..." 32/

But despite their good intentions to work through the existing GVN structure, the Marines found in many cases that the existing structure barely existed, except on paper, and in other cases that the existing structure was too slow and too corrupt for their requirements. And gradually the Marines got more deeply into the politics of rural Vietnam than they had intended, or presumably desired.

Their difficulties were greatest in the area of highest priority, the National Priority Area (as it was to be designated in October 1965) south of Da Nang. In a nine-village complex just south of the air base, the Marines urged upon the GVN successful completion of a special pacification program which had been designed by them in close conjunction with the Quang Nam Deputy Province Chief. The nine villages were divided into two groups, and the first phase, scheduled for completion first in December of 1965, included only five of the villages, with only 23,000 people living in them. By February, 1966, the plan had slipped considerably, and the projected completion date for the first

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five villages was pushed back to April, 1966. The GVN and the Marines considered their control to extend to over 16,000 of the 23,000 people in the area, but, according to an Embassy evaluation of the area, only 682 were young men between the ages of 17 and 30. It was clear that the Marines were trying to pacify an area in which the young men no longer lived, having either been drafted, joined the VC, or gone to Da Nang to work for the Americans. "The basic problem posed by this lack of manpower must be solved before the area can be expected to participate in its own defense," the Embassy report said. "Until it is solved, the Marines and the ARVN will remain tied to defensive mission involving them with the population. No one in Quang Nam sees any immediate solution to this dilemma." The report concluded with a description of how over-involved with local politics the Marines were becoming, unintentionally, and said:

"The plan, despite the valiant efforts of the Marines, is in trouble, caused by a confused and fragmented chain of command, a lack of skilled cadre, inability to recruit locally RF and PF -- and the open opposition of the VNQDD." 33/

The VNQDD, or Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, was the political party controlling the provinces of Quang Ngai, Quang Nam, and Quang Tin. The Marines knew little about them, although, according to the study, all the village chiefs in the area were VNQDD members. The VNQDD were not supporting the priority area plan because they had not been consulted in its formulation, and for this reason, and others, the report predicted the failure of the plan, despite the heavy Marine commitment.

Like Hop Tac, it was an unusually difficult situation, but it illustrates the problems that the Marines, and any other U.S. troops that got deeply involved in pacification, confronted in Vietnam.