

1968 was a divided year in the I Corps. The first half was characterized by the greatest combat activity of the war. III MAF, working primarily with South Vietnamese Army units, defeated the North Vietnamese forces as they came across the DMZ, expelled them from Hue, and punished them severely at Khe Sanh. Beginning with the Tet offensive in and around Hue at the end of January, the intensity was maintained into the late spring. At that point, the North Vietnamese effort shifted south against Danang.

Fixed-winged combat sorties by the 1st MAW for the year came to a total of 90,786 and helo sorties reached better than 632,000. Of the fixed-wing sorties, 14,843 were against targets in North Vietnam and the balance of 75,943 were on in-country missions with the great majority being in direct support of III MAF units. The helo sorties equated to a total lift of 939,999 troops and a total cargo lift of 109,621 tons. Total sorties for both fixed-wing and helos approached twice the numbers for 1967. The year had been a loser for the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong generally, and it marked a general shift in strategy back to the guerrilla, small Viet Cong detachment type of harassment of the countryside and the allied base establishments.

The year 1969 marked the start of the withdrawal of III MAF units from the Vietnam war. For the 1st MAW, this began in August with the redeployment of an F-4 squadron to Iwakuni and a CH-46 squadron to Futenma on Okinawa and a *Hawk* anti-aircraft missile battalion which had been in country since February 1965. August also saw the last of the UH-34 squadrons depart Vietnam. It was not a withdrawal as such but was a rotational relief by a CH-53 squadron. These August examples show the pattern for the months to follow as the overall reduction slowly went into gear through 1970.

In 1969, the 1st MAW flew a total of 57,677 fighter/attack, plus other fixed-wing sorties, in direct support of III MAF units in country, and 26,157 on missions against North Vietnamese targets and other out of country objectives. A total of 514,383 helo sorties were logged for the year, lifting 103,747 tons of cargo of all kinds and carrying 788,951 troops.

With the continued unit withdrawals during 1970, the 1st MAW sortie statistics show a marked drop as predicted above. Fixed-wing sorties dropped to 24,353 in country and to 8,083 out of country, almost a two-thirds drop in both cases from the previous year. Helo sorties dropped to 381,712 with the cargo showing an expected drop but the passenger figure actually showing a substantial increase over 1969. These differences undoubtedly reflected the

greatly increased capabilities in country of the added CH-53 units. Cargo for the year hit a total of 64,035 tons and the passenger figure totaled 824,868 troops lifted.

On April 14, Lieutenant General Donn J. Robertson, then Commanding General, III MAF, moved the headquarters to Okinawa. It had been just short of six years in Vietnam. The 1st MarDiv headed for Camp Pendleton and 1st MAW Headquarters for Iwakuni. The latter, however, was without its commanding general, Major General Alan Armstrong, who was staying behind as Commanding General, 3rd Marine Amphibious Brigade, the "clean-up" unit. This brigade was made up of the air, ground and logistic units that were to stay behind as the final phase-down was completed. It totaled 13,600 Marines, with the principal units being the 1st Marines, reinforced, with MAG's 11 and 16 in support. On June 1, Marble Mountain Air Facility was turned over to the U. S. Army, as Danang Air Base MAG-11 facilities had been to the U. S. Air Force the week before. Finally, on June 26, General Armstrong put the last 10 members of the brigade headquarters aboard a C-130 and departed for Okinawa, closing the book on this phase of the Vietnam war. A second phase, however, was in the making in the form of a North Vietnam "Easter Offensive" to come in 1972. Some of the 7th Fleet Marines would be back within a year.

It is important to mention once more the great value of the close relationship between the Navy and the Marine Corps, both air and ground. For example, the 7th Fleet battalion landing team, known as the "BLT afloat," was maintained all during the period of the Vietnam war with its helo lift of one HMM squadron. When the "crunch" was really on any aspect of III MAF operations, both the BLT and its HMM could also be temporarily deployed ashore to reinforce units that were under particular pressure. Another aspect of the benefits of the relationship was the high order commonality between Marine and Naval Aviation. This was exemplified through uncomplicated support rendered by TF-77 carriers to III MAF operations from time to time. It worked in the other direction as well through the flying of a protective barrier combat air patrol by 1st MAW fighters, particularly when TF-77 was striking the Hanoi/Haiphong targets from the extreme northern reaches of the Tonkin Gulf.

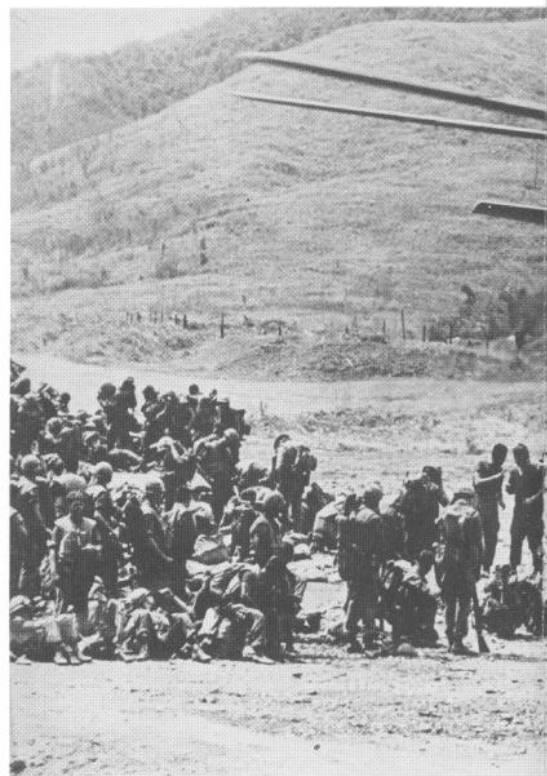
It did not take the North Vietnam government long to test the South Vietnamese forces after the departure of

their friends. On March 30, 1972, a major three-pronged attack was launched against the northern tactical zone, against the highlands toward Kontum out of Laos, and against An Loc in the south out of Cambodia.

At sea, by the end of the first week in April, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, under Brigadier General E. J. Miller, was a part of the amphibious force of the 7th Fleet. This time it was composed of four BLTs and two composite helicopter squadrons, and its mission was limited to the provision of helicopter and amphibian tractor support to the embattled Vietnamese Marines.

On April 6, MAG-15, moved into Danang with two F-4J squadrons, VMFA-115 and VMFA-232. A third squadron, VMFA-212, flew in from Kaneohe on the 14th. MAG-15 was to concentrate its efforts in the northern half of South Vietnam and along the Laotian border. A fourth squadron, VMA(AW)-224, was aboard USS *Coral Sea* but most of its work would be against targets in North Vietnam and in Laos.

On May 16, MAG-12, with VMAs 211 and 311, began operations from Bien Hoa near Saigon. MAG-12 efforts were to be concentrated in the southern half of South Vietnam and along the Cambodian border. The strikes of both MAGs in direct support of South Vietnamese troops were invariably under the direction of an airborne controller. Estimates of effectiveness of their support showed that half the enemy tanks destroyed and half of the casualties inflicted on the



A CH-53 provides helo support in Vietnam.

North Vietnamese forces were attributed to tactical air.

By late fall, the situation was somewhat restored. It was a state of equilibrium rather than a successful conclusion that had been achieved. Meanwhile in Paris, the peace talks which had been in progress off-and-on for some years were continuing.

Just before the South Vietnamese counteroffensive began at the end of June, Task Force Delta was reactivated by the Assistant Wing Commander of the 1st MAW. It was sent to Thailand to an air base called Nam Phong in mid-May and, by the middle of June, the camp was ready, the squadrons arrived, and operations began immediately. Although at first the field was completed, nothing else had been finished and the Marines promptly dubbed the place the "Rose Garden." MAG-15 redeployed to Nam Phong from Danang during June.

On January 27, 1973, after four years of "off-and-on" negotiations, the so-called Peace Accords were signed by South Vietnam, North Vietnam, the Viet Cong and the United States. It was to go into effect at midnight on the signing date. The only aspect that meant anything in the way of a gain to the United States was the return of 649 American POWs, 26 of whom were Marines.

Marine Aviation participated in the minesweeping chore with squadrons assigned to 7th Fleet carriers and amphibious shipping, both with fixed-wing fighters and electronic warfare



The OV-10 Bronco took over the observation and light-attack missions.

aircraft, and with many helicopter sorties as well.

April 1975 turned out to be a very big month in the U. S. "retreat" from Southeast Asia, as the situation in Cambodia was on just as steep a deterioration curve as that in South Vietnam. On April 1, the government of President Lon Nol collapsed when he left the country on an "official visit" to Indonesia. On April 12, President Ford gave the order to execute an evacuation plan from the U. S. Embassy in Phnom Penh for U. S. nationals and those foreign nationals who chose to leave. The operation was called *Eagle Pull* and brought 300 Marines into the compound from the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) off the coast in 7th Fleet shipping. The Marines came in by CH-53 helos and within two hours had lifted 276 Americans and other nationals to safety aboard ship. The last trip took the embassy guard Marines and the U. S. flag out just as the first Khmer Rouge artillery rounds impacted on the soccer field being used as the evacuation point.

On April 21, the collapse of the South Vietnamese government was imminent with the resignation of President Thieu. Planning for the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy and American nationals began with the visit of an advance party from the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade on April 20. The 9th MAB was composed of Regimental Landing Team 4, Provisional MAG-39, plus a logistical support group and an amphibious evacuation security force. On April 28, President Ford finally gave the order to execute the plan. The two helo squadrons, HMH-462 and HMH-463, began bringing in BLT 2/4. Three platoons were lifted into the embassy to reinforce the guard there. From Tan Son Nhut, the evacuation proceeded with the

dispatch of 395 Americans and 4,475 Vietnamese to the ships by midnight in CH-53s.

At the embassy in Saigon, things had not been as smooth. The refugees had turned into a mob. The evacuation went on all night, and while plans had called for only 100 Americans to be taken out from that point, before it was ended, 978 Americans had been lifted out and 1,120 foreign nationals and Vietnamese as well. The last 11 Marines were lifted off the roof just before 0800 with the North Vietnamese troops already well into the city.

The Vietnam war was the longest and, in some respects, the biggest war in the history of the Marine Corps. III MAF, including the 1st MAW, at its peak strength in 1968 of 85,755 Marines, represented roughly 16.3 percent of the set troop ceiling in Vietnam. From January 1, 1961, through December 9, 1972, 28.2 percent of the U.S. KIA, 33.5 percent of the U.S. wounded who required hospitalization, 4.7 percent of the U.S. prisoners and 8.0 percent of the U.S. MIA were Marines.

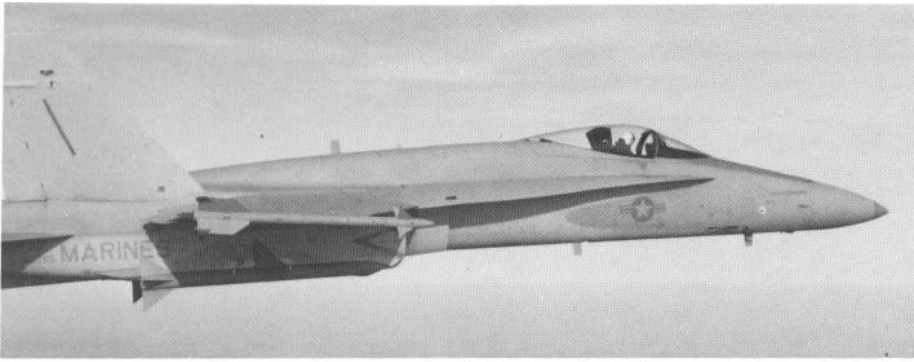
In WW II, 19,733 Marines were killed as compared to the 12,936 in Vietnam, but the wounded total came to 67,207 for WW II compared to the higher total for Vietnam of 88,589. Included among the many explanations for this difference could be such factors as the different general characteristics of the two wars; medical evacuation techniques, the different levels of usage of land mines, booby traps, and trip wires, and a host of other explanatory factors. However, evidence does point strongly to the medical evacuation time difference as one of the most plausible explanations.

Many of the specific lessons derived from the Vietnam conflict for the Marine





AV-8s brought one of the newest techniques for close air support to the Marine Corps.



The F/A-18 Hornet gives the Marine Corps the latest in jet fighter technology.

Corps air-ground team and its combat systems have become doctrine, and have received steady updating since.

With the Vietnam war a matter of history, the Marine Corps turned to the future. General Robert E. Cushman, the twenty-fifth Commandant of the Marine Corps, said: "...we are pulling our heads out of the jungle and getting back into the amphibious business...we are redirecting our attention seaward and re-emphasizing our partnership with the Navy..." In 1972, when Gen. Cushman summarized the direction the Marine Corps would take, the disposition of major units was essentially back to where it was at the start of the war. Reevaluations of old methods and tests of new approaches were part of every maneuver and exercise that could be scheduled, from small unit evolutions to division/wing size and larger.

VII. Pressing on Toward the 1980s

In 1978, to further augment the wholesale test and evaluation effort, Marine Corps Base, Twentynine Palms, Calif., was redesignated as an air-ground combat center. This provided test and evaluation of control systems and methods for all firings of combined arms and direct air support. A major effort was made to schedule both ground and air units through the center as a priority item in their training cycles.

An important development of this period was the establishment of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) organization structure. There are four major elements which are assigned: the command, ground combat, aviation combat and combat service support. The aviation combat element may range in size from a reinforced helicopter squadron to one or more aircraft wings.

A complementary concept to the MAGTF organizational structure is a prepositioning idea which places equipment and supplies, in ships, in a forward area for future link-up with

MAGTF personnel. It is called the maritime prepositioning ships (MPS) program, and is usually included in planning considerations at the MAB level only. For the marriage of the MAB personnel with the supplies and equipment, a benign area in the crisis region, with a suitable airfield, is a requirement. MPS units have no forcible entry capability whatsoever.

The malaise so prevalent and of such great concern on the campuses of the sixties was gone with the war. In its place, as far as the armed services of the country were concerned, was a refreshing response. A new pride in service in the armed forces had taken control in the early eighties.

From 1975 onward, Marine Aviation buckled down to a more encompassing realization than ever that the next performance improvements were going to be more costly in budget dollars than ever before imagined. One of the first of the "new looks" greeted some of the first Marine units to return from the war in the late spring of 1971. It was the AV-8A, the British-built Hawker-Siddeley *Harrier*, with its vertical take-off and landing capability. The second version, produced largely in the US. by McDonnell Douglas, the AV-8B, began to come into the inventory in the mid-eighties. With its advanced capabilities, it could open a whole new approach to operation of higher-powered tactical aircraft from not only small ships in the amphibious force, but also from relatively unprepared and dispersed sites ashore. The AV-8B has twice the range or payload of its predecessor.

One of the upgrade programs eagerly anticipated for the latter eighties is directed toward enhancement of the night attack capabilities of both the AV-8B and A-6E. The AV-8B will be the first to be configured. The A-6E will be upgraded to the A-6F, which will bring to this valuable all-weather attack aircraft increased capability, survivability and extended life.

In the mid-eighties, Marine Aviation began to receive its replacement for the

F-4 series fighter/attack aircraft. It is the reliable and effective F/A-18. This responsive, agile fighter and solid accurate attack weapons platform is currently planned for 12 squadrons. Two of these units will deploy to fleet aircraft carriers in continuance of the interoperability program of the Secretary of the Navy.

Also coming into the Marine Aviation inventory in the mid-eighties is the beginning of a two-year buy of 44 AH-1T attack helicopters. The receipt of this aircraft fills in some long-standing inventory blanks in this category.

In transport helos, the upgrade programs for the CH-46 and CH-53 have extended their capabilities and their inventory lives well into the next century. The CH-53E *Super Stallion*, now in the inventory, is the free world's most capable heavy-lift helicopter. Down the road is the MV-22A *Osprey* tilt-rotor aircraft which promises to exceed by a wide margin the best performance figures of any of the current helicopters. Its predicted speed and range are so improved that it is an advance of technology comparable to the introduction of the jet engine.

All of the planned programs, when added to the superior capability of the already developed upgrades and extended life programs, give Marine Aviation a sound basis indeed as the turn of the century draws closer. That it is sound in training, procedures, tactics and general employment is reflected in the fact that in the mid-eighties Marine Aviation does more, far better, than ever before. It does all this with a continuing, ever-improving safety record and day-in, day-out systems availability that represent the best it has ever achieved in its 75-year history.

Various stages of the programs briefly referred to above were realized by the early eighties when the MAU deployments to Lebanon and Grenada took place. For this depiction of Marine Aviation, it will suffice to say that, in those two operations, the aviation combat element of the MAU performed, with readiness, whatever the combat element of the MAGTF directed. Neither operation could be readily compared with the mount-out and support of the 1st Marine Brigade in the Pusan perimeter in 1950, nor to the birth of III MAF at Danang following the landing of the 9th MAB there in 1965.

The common factor in all of these post-WW II Marine Corps events and the most important one over the years is that, in each case, it was aviation Marines supporting ground Marines. This is the way the founding fathers of Marine Aviation wanted it to turn out. May it never change — in space, or wherever else the Corps is bound. ■