

GENERAL LEWIS WALT: OPERATIONAL ART IN VIETNAM, 1965-1967

A Monograph

by

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ABSTRACT

GENERAL LEWIS WALT: OPERATIONAL ART IN VIETNAM, 1965-1967, by MAJ Jerem G. Swenddal, 94 pages.

This monograph utilizes select elements of operational art from *ADRP 3-0* to examine how General Lewis Walt employed operational art as the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) commander in Vietnam from June 1965-June 1967. This study addresses a significant shortfall in literature focused on Corps-level operational commanders during the Vietnam War. While the concept of operational art did not exist in U.S. doctrine in 1965, this study of General Walt demonstrates the enduring principles behind operational art while suggesting several other topics for consideration and analysis.

In combat, III MAF faced a hybrid threat of North Vietnamese regular forces and entrenched Viet Cong main force and guerrilla units. Apart from the significant challenges of combat operations, General Walt found himself confronted by vague and restricting U.S. policy, ineffective U.S. and South Vietnamese civilian and governmental agencies, a complex South Vietnamese civilian and military operating environment, and competing warfighting strategies and interservice rivalries between his U.S. Army combat chain-of-command and internal Marine Corps leadership. Despite these challenges, Walt developed and executed an effective operational approach which addressed substantial enemy threats while supporting the government of South Vietnam and its military forces.

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ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command
COSVN	Central Office in South Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
NLF	National Liberation Front
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Force
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
VC	Viet Cong

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INTRODUCTION

In June 1965, Major General Lewis Walt assumed command of a newly formed III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) in Vietnam. A combat-proven leader in World War II and the Korean War, Walt pursued a unique approach to combat operations in one of the most strategically important regions of South Vietnam, the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ), which bordered North Vietnam and Laos. In combat, III MAF faced a complex hybrid threat of North Vietnamese regular forces and entrenched Viet Cong main force and guerrilla units.¹ Challenged by both conventional and insurgent forces, Walt found himself at the nexus between strategic guidance and tactical action, between his combat chain-of-command and internal Marine Corps pressures, and between competing warfighting ideologies. As with all operational and tactical commanders, Walt faced an operating environment distinct to his time and place. Current U.S. Army leaders, nonetheless, will find much familiar about the challenges that he faced. As the U.S. Army looks past the current wars towards future conflicts, an analysis of General Walt as an operational commander provides valuable insights to developing military leaders.

As the III MAF Commander in Vietnam from June 1965 to June 1967, General Walt served as the equivalent of an Army Corps commander under the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), itself a subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command (CINCPAC). In this role, he was responsible for the operational employment of all U.S. Marines and attached forces in the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Simultaneously Walt served as the senior advisor to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) I Corps Commander. This monograph utilizes the contemporary concept of operational art to analyze

¹Current military doctrine describes a hybrid threat as follows: “A hybrid threat is the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.” See Department of the Army, *TC 7-100: Hybrid Threat* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 2010), v.

General Walt as an operational commander.² This work does not assign grades, rather it examines those factors that impacted General Walt as a commander and shed light on his operational decision making. To this end, the study investigates General Walt's utilization of operational art as the III MAF Commander in Vietnam. To support this analysis, this monograph centers around a case study focused on General Walt's development and implementation of an operational approach in Vietnam between June 1965 and June 1967. This analysis is based on the following key factors: AN inconsistent and vague U.S. strategic environment; conflicting MACV and Marine Corps guidance pertaining to the operational employment of III MAF; and, enemy actions, significant events and changing operational conditions that directly impacted Walt's

²This monograph relates the current principle of operational art to a historical case study of General Lewis Walt as the III MAF Commander in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967. To conduct this analysis, criteria are established based on the current definitions of operational art, operational approach and the elements of operational art as defined by *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. While these concepts are amplified further in Section 4, their basic definitions are discussed below. Operational art did not exist as a term or a concept in U.S. doctrine until the early 1980s. Since that time, the meaning has changed and undergone multiple doctrinal revisions. While defined in current Army doctrine, exact understanding and definitions for operational art have been and remain subjects of much debate. Detailed studies of the evolution of operational art lie beyond the scope and size limitations of this paper.

In his two years of command, the Marines of III MAF conducted thousands of small unit actions and hundreds of larger unit operations. Beyond kinetic operations, III MAF employed units to conduct hundreds of civil affairs and pacification operations. The sheer scope and quantity of these operations defy easy analysis. Focus is placed on those operations that best reveal and exemplify Walt's role as an operational commander. The scope of this study makes it impossible to address all the small unit actions that occurred in III MAF TAOR from 1965-1967.

Detailed discussions of other aspects of the Vietnam War and doctrine which did not directly impact General Walt's decision making are not pertinent to this monograph. Among other issues not addressed, this monograph does not compare and contrast III MAF or General Walt with other units and leaders in Vietnam. Nor does this monograph compare, contrast and analyze the Marines of III MAF against tactical, operational and counterinsurgency doctrine of their day. With some exceptions, this monograph does not address the tactical employment of units or the detailed conduct of operations; rather, it focuses on the broader operations, their purpose/intent and their relationship to strategic objectives. Lastly, while the concept of mission command is an integral part of successful operational art, it is not the primary purpose of this monograph. Tangential studies of Walt's execution of mission command would provide an interesting topic for future study, but it does not contribute materially to understanding Walt as an operational artist and will not be discussed in detail.

operational approach. In the conclusion, this monograph assesses how General Lewis Walt overcame vague and conflicting guidance, service influences in a Joint environment, and competing warfighting ideologies to develop an operational approach that effectively arranged tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve strategic objectives.³

This monograph consists of three sections. The first section provides an overview of General Walt's military background and the strategic context of the Vietnam War prior to 1965, with specific emphasis on the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). The second section consists of a study of General Walt as the III MAF Commander. It emphasizes the changing US strategic context between 1965 and 1967 and how it applied to operations in III MAF Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). Simultaneously, it highlights the operational guidance given to Walt by General Westmoreland, the Commander of U.S. MACV (COMUSMACV), and the internal Marine Corps pressures and influences on General Walt. In addition to the internal U.S. military factors, this section concentrates on significant enemy and population related events which affected General Walt's operational approach.⁴ This section also highlights major operational

³On the origins of operational in the US Army see, Richard M. Swain, "Filling the Void: The Operational Art and the U.S. Army," in *Operational Art: Developments in the Theory of War*, ed. B.J.C. McKercher and Michael Hennessy (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1996), 164; Saul Bronfeld, "Did TRADOC Outmanoeuvre the Manoeuvrists? A Comment," *War and Society*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (October 2008): 111-125.

⁴The scope of this study makes it impossible to address all the small unit actions that occurred in III MAF TAOR from 1965-1967. For perspective, and comparison, a randomly selected III MAF command report covering October 1965 identified three major operations, three coordinated operations, and 3,520 ambushes, patrols and minor search and destroy operations during the month. See, October 1965, III MAF Command Chronology in U.S. Marine Corps, *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, CARL Library, D000847, Reel 1. Several studies detail III MAF operations during the Vietnam War. See Robert H. Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division HQ, US Marine Corps, 1977); Jack Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division HQ, US Marine Corps, 1982); Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965* (Washington, DC:

decisions made by General Walt as the III MAF commander. The third and final section consists of an analysis of General Walt as an operational commander based on the current definitions and elements of operational art.

Effective analysis of past military commanders requires a conceptual basis for examination, as there is no exact metric for assessing operational commanders. The most obvious measurement, military victory, is in itself a nebulous concept and often distracts from the true value of the analysis, which is to provide current and future military leaders insights into the thought processes and decisions made by past commanders. Good or bad, victory or defeat, in-depth analysis of past commanders should go beyond simply passing judgment on success or failure, and instead provide useful insights to thoughtful military practitioners. Viewed within the broad context of the Vietnam War, where U.S. involvement lasted four years beyond his departure, Walt's efforts were incomplete at best. However, Walt, the first of several III MAF Commanders in Vietnam, met with significant tactical and operational success against a complex and hybrid threat which established the foundation that future commanders would build upon.⁵ In the absence of a distinct victory, another means of assessment must be employed to best illustrate important lessons to contemporary audiences. This monograph utilizes the most current U.S. Army definition of operational art to analyze General Walt as an operational commander.

History and Museums Division HQ, US Marine Corps, 1978); Gary L. Telfer, Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming Jr., *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division HQs, US Marine Corps, 1984).

⁵While hybrid threat has recently become common in the U.S. Military lexicon, the term was also used during the era of the Vietnam War to describe the combination of conventional and guerrilla war. This ARPA report from the Vietnam time period describes "three major types of war in South Vietnam... 'hybrid' war is the result of a unique pattern of interaction or combinations of local and main force activity." See William G. Prince, Cristine A. Candela, and D.M. McCormick, *Analysis of Vietnamization: A Description of the War, 1967-71* (Ann Arbor, MI: Advanced Research Projects Agency, May 1972), I-2, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/522571.pdf> (accessed January 19, 2013).

A number of sources detail the development of operational art in the U.S. Army. Richard M. Swain's, "Filling the Void: The Operational Art and the U.S. Army," in the book *Operational Art: Developments in the Theory of War*, provides a comprehensive overview of the development of operational art in the U.S. Army from the end of Vietnam through the Gulf War. Another source is the Center for Military History's book *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*. This book contains essays from various authors focusing on operational art in historical conflicts. Of particular note is the essay "Operational Art's Origins" by Bruce Menning. Collectively, these sources describe how the American military experience in Vietnam served as a catalyst for significant change in military doctrine and is directly tied to the development of our current conception of operational art. With the war widely considered a strategic defeat, military planners and theorists sought to understand the apparent contradiction between overwhelming tactical victory and overall strategic failure.⁶ In the years that followed, reflective U.S. Army leaders developed the concept of operational art, largely inspired by a renaissance in Soviet military thinking. Originally conceived as a separate level of war linking tactics and strategy, the topic of operational art has been the subject of critical debate in military forums since its inception.⁷ Having undergone various forms of dissection since the early 1980s, the concept of operational art and its supporting doctrinal framework, achieve their most current articulation in the U.S. Army's recently published *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. Its relevance to contemporary

⁶One of the notable books which challenged the disparity between tactical success and strategic defeat was Harry Summer's, *On Strategy*. Among other topics, Summers relies heavily on Clausewitz's Trinity to argue, "without the commitment of the American people the commitment of the Army to prolonged combat was impossible." See Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1995), 13.

⁷Swain, "Filling the Void: The Operational Art and the U.S. Army," 147-166; Bruce W. Menning, "Operational Art's Origins," in *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, ed. Michael Krause and R. Cody Phillips (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2005), 13-16.

audiences makes it the most useful framework from which to understand General Walt as an operational commander.

ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations begins by identifying the most current Joint definition of operational art as, “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.”⁸ Consonant with the Joint definition, the manual further describes operational art for the U.S. Army as, “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”⁹ These definitions reveal several key points about operational art. First, that operational art is a “cognitive” or mental approach to developing “strategies, campaigns, and operations.” This suggests that operational art is not a staff product, but rather a mental process that results in a product. Worded differently, operational art is the *mental process* by which commanders and staffs utilize their “skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces.”¹⁰ The second key point pertains to the integration of “ends, ways, and means,” and “the pursuit of strategic objectives in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”¹¹ These quotes indicate that simple development of strategies and campaign plans are not sufficient to be considered operational art; rather, these products *must* effectively link strategic objectives and tactical actions in order to be elevated to

⁸Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, May 2012), 4-1.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

the level of actual art. *ADRP 3-0* describes the vital character of this linkage when it states, “Without operational art, tactical actions devolve into a series of disconnected engagements that do not accomplish the mission or objectives of the joint force.”¹²

While simple in definition, the cognitive and conceptual nature of operational art does not lend itself to simple examination. To be more precise, the definition of operational art as described above tends to generate more questions than it answers. To bring clarity to a complex subject, *ADRP 3-0* provides several guideposts to understanding. The first guidepost from *ADRP 3-0* answers the question of who conducts operational art. Contrary to the popular belief that only the theater commander or Joint Force Commander conducts operational art, *ADRP 3-0* states, “Operational art is applicable at all levels of war.”¹³ Relevant to this case study, this quote indicates that while General Westmoreland remained responsible for developing a Vietnam-wide campaign plan, General Walt was responsible for “planning and executing operations and activities to achieve military objectives in support of the joint force commander’s campaign plan.”¹⁴ While he was not directly responsible for translating national strategic objectives into a Vietnam campaign plan, Walt did utilize the broad guidance he received from MACV to identify, plan, and execute military operations and tactical engagements in the I CTZ.

The second guidepost reveals the concept of operational approach. Operational art is a mental process. An operational approach provides the best method of identifying what operational art “looks like.” Operational approach is defined in *ADRP 3-0* as “a description of the broad actions the force must take to transform current conditions into those desired at end state...The operational approach provides a framework that relates tactical tasks to the desired

¹²Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-1.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

end state.”¹⁵ Visually depicted as a bridge between the current conditions and the desired end state, an operational approach is quite literally a descriptive narrative or expression of the commander’s use of operational art. Inherent to the development of a successful operational approach, is a thorough understanding of both current and desired future conditions. As the following case study illustrates, General Walt utilized his “skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment”¹⁶ to achieve an understanding of his existing conditions and develop a “balanced approach” to reach the desired end state.

The third and final guidepost for operational art establishes criteria for observing and examining General Walt as an operational commander. The U.S. Army’s ten elements of operational art help commanders to “understand an operational environment as well as visualize and describe their approach for conducting the operation.”¹⁷ These ten elements are: end state and conditions, center of gravity, decisive points, lines of operation and lines of effort, operational reach, basing, tempo, phasing and transition, culmination, and risk. The elements serve as conceptual tools to facilitate a commander’s mission command functions during the planning process. It is important to note that these elements are not static. Commanders continue to refine and reframe their approach and the elements of operational art over time as conditions change. While modern commanders use some or all of the elements to assist their application of operational art and development of an operational approach, the elements also provide a useful framework for evaluating how past commanders conducted operational art.¹⁸ Though the concept of operational art and its supporting elements did not exist in U.S. military doctrine in 1965, this

¹⁵Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-2.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 4-1.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 4-2 – 4-3.

monograph demonstrates that General Walt clearly understood his role in providing the vital link between strategic objectives and tactical action on the battlefield. Select elements will be developed in greater detail in the monograph's analysis, to serve as criteria for evaluating General Walt as an operational commander. Specifically, the analysis portion of this monograph examines how and to what extent Walt used these principles to develop, refine and continuously reframe his operational approach to combat operations in the I CTZ.

Over forty years have elapsed since the last elements of III MAF departed Vietnam, and in that time, a significant body of literature has become available. This literature falls into the categories of both primary and secondary sources, with a vast amount of primary source material becoming declassified in recent years. No research about the Vietnam War would be complete without an investigation of the "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force," more famously known as the *Pentagon Papers*.¹⁹ Only recently fully declassified, this voluminous account of the Vietnam War, originally commissioned by Secretary of Defense McNamara in 1967, encompasses over 7,000 pages of research pertaining to various aspects of the Vietnam War from its origins following World War II through 1968. Contained within its text are detailed timelines, analysis and substantial primary source information, to include letters and messages between key U.S. figures.²⁰

¹⁹Chairman OSD Vietnam Task Force, *Pentagon Papers*, in the National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/> (accessed August 19, 2012). Hereafter they are cited as *Pentagon Papers*. The *Pentagon Papers* themselves, played a notable role in the Vietnam War. A partial leak of the classified contents in 1971 resulted in a very public outcry against those involved in the escalation of the war.

²⁰The *Pentagon Papers* in their entirety can be viewed on the National Archives website. See, "Pentagon Papers," <http://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/> (accessed December 11, 2012). For another online source of primary source information which is available for further study, see U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volumes I-VII (Washington DC, US Government Printing Office), <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/johnson> (accessed March 12, 2013).

Texas Tech University hosts a large online Virtual Vietnam Archive. The archive is derived primarily from donations and includes photos, sound files, messages, and documents, both primary and secondary, pertinent to the Vietnam War. While the search engine for this archive, which now includes over 3.2 million pages of scanned material, is somewhat difficult to use, records and messages pertaining to III MAF can be found. Of particular note is the large volume of cable traffic pertinent to the U.S. conduct of the war. Because the database is driven by donated material, the records are not all inclusive or easily searched by category.²¹

Intrinsic to a study of General Walt as an operation commander is a broad understanding of the Vietnam War and the strategic context of this case study. There is a growing literature on the war. Surveys of the war include Stanley Karnow's Pulitzer Prize winning *Vietnam: A History*, George Herring's *America's Longest War*, and more recently John Prados' *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*.²² Karnow's *Vietnam* provides a broad overview of the Vietnam War from the French colonial period through the fall of Saigon in 1975.²³ H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* and Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War*, provide U.S. strategic level studies with particular emphasis on the U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War. Of particular note from these sources is the role that General Greene, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, played in high level discussions pertaining to the conduct of the war and the role of U.S. Marine forces. General Greene,

²¹"The Virtual Vietnam Archive," The Vietnam Center and Archive, <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/> (accessed January 3, 2013).

²²Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2002); John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2009).

²³H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

promoted ground force and Marine Corps intervention in the war, advocated an enclave strategy and expanding military operations into North Vietnam, and was a vocal and divergent force within the Joint Chiefs.²⁴ Ultimately, these sources provide insight into strategic level decisions and discussions by President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chiefs while examining their role in the growth of American involvement in South Vietnam.²⁵

Despite the substantial role that General Walt played in a pivotal era of U.S. Marine Corps history, very little has actually been written about him. Walt's own book *Strange War, Strange Strategy* proved only moderately helpful to this monograph.²⁶ Published in 1970, prior to the complete U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the book presents an overly optimistic opinion of the war and the U.S.'s chances for success. While the book does provide some insight into General Walt's thought processes as commander of III MAF, it mostly devolves into heroic tactical-level stories of his subordinates. Some exceptions exist though as he provides a first-person account of the Buddhist Uprising in 1966, and briefly discusses the III MAF fight along the DMZ. In terms of general biographical data, two sources, the online U.S. Marine Corps

²⁴General Greene's role in the escalation of the war in Vietnam is a major theme of *Dereliction of Duty*. For information on Greene's desire to escalate the war and employ Marines, see 68, 144, 264, 268, 272-273. For Greene's pursuit of an enclave strategy in Vietnam, see 249, 303-304, 315. For Greene's support of expanding the war into North Vietnam, see 86, 314. For examples of how Greene was a divergent figure on the JCS and an occasional pawn of the President, see 271-273, 314.

²⁵Several other sources contributed to the overall strategic context and understanding for this case study. See Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967); Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, *The Vietnam Experience: Setting the Stage*, ed. the editors of Boston Publishing Company (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Company, 1981); John T. McAlister Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970). For information regarding the North Vietnamese Army, see Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986).

²⁶Lewis Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970).

official biography and C.W. Borklund's online profile of Walt in *Military Leaders Since World War II*, provide similar but limited data.²⁷ While not the primary subject of a specific work, various other primary and secondary sources refer to Walt during his time as the III MAF Commander in Vietnam. Collectively, these sources, which are discussed in further detail in subsequent paragraphs, provide a more comprehensive picture of Walt, his thoughts, his experiences and his decision making processes.²⁸

Several other important figures involved in the U.S. effort in Vietnam also wrote memoirs which contribute to understanding General Walt as an operational commander. Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, then the Marine Force Pacific (MARFORPAC) Commander,

²⁷See United States Marine Corps, "Official Biography: General Lewis Walt," https://slsp.manpower.usmc.mil/gosa/biographies/rptBiography.asp?PERSON_ID=3032&PERSON_TYPE=General# (accessed September 16, 2012). Hereafter referred to as USMC, "Official Biography: General Lewis Walt;" C. W. Borklund, "Walt, Lew." *Military Leaders Since World War II*, American Profiles (New York: Facts On File, 1992.) <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE52&iPin=ffapmlww0009&SingleRecord=True> (accessed September 25, 2012). Hereafter referred to as Borklund, *Military Leaders Since World War II*.

²⁸An aspect of this monograph deals with fact that General Walt, being a Marine General, held different perspectives and approaches to warfighting, than his U.S. Army peers. This is attributable largely to his experiences in the U.S. Marine Corps and the Corps' distinctive history and ethos. While research into these areas did not contribute materially to the writing of this monograph, they played a significant role in understand General Walt as an operational commander. Allan R. Millett's weighty but highly readable book *Semper Fidelis* provides a definitive source to understanding the heritage, ethos and warfighting ideologies of the U.S. Marine Corps and General Walt. See Allen R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the US Marine Corps* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1991). For additional information on Marine Corps history and specifically it amphibious heritage, see also Allan R. Millett, "Assault From The Sea," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50-95; Anne C. Venzon, *From Whaleboats to Amphibious Warfare: Lt. Gen. "Howling Mad" Smith and the U.S. Marine Corps* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). For information on Pete Ellis, one of the primary originators of amphibious warfare concepts and doctrine in the Marine Corps, see Dirk A. Ballendorf and Merrill L. Bartlett, *Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997).

wrote the book *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*.²⁹ With an obvious and admitted bias toward enhancing the Marine Corps' image, Krulak provides secondary source information with regard to the history of the Marine Corps. As Marine Corps history interacts with his own experiences, Krulak provided ample information with regard to his own role, interactions and opinions pertaining to the Vietnam War and operations in I CTZ. A second, personal account was written by Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief Pacific during the first part of the Vietnam War. *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* focuses primarily on strategic decisions that occurred at his level and above.³⁰ One of his primary focus areas, the bombing campaign on North Vietnam, provided little insight for this case study; however, his broad perspective of the war provided further context for this study. Finally, General William Westmoreland, MACV Commander, wrote two useful sources for this monograph's research. The first, his *Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964- June 1968*, was written at the request of President Johnson shortly after Westmoreland departed command of MACV.³¹ Organized chronologically, by year, the report provides a detailed account of the war from a first-hand MACV perspective. The second source, Westmoreland's personal memoirs entitled *A Soldier Reports*, delivers a detailed narrative of his time in command to include dates, military actions, meetings, messages and his own personal opinions and thought processes.³² General Walt and other Marine Corps leaders are frequently mentioned, along with information about III MAF operations.

²⁹Victor Krulak, *First to Fight* (Anapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), xvi.

³⁰U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).

³¹William C. Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968* (Washington, DC: US Government Publishing Office, 1969).

³²William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1989).

The detailed series of combat studies produced by the USMC History and Museums Division is indispensable to any critical study of U.S. Marines in Vietnam. This series, titled *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, presents well-researched and in-depth studies of all U.S. Marine Corps activities, separated into the following volumes: *The Advisory and Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*; *The Landing and The Buildup 1965*; *An Expanding War 1966*; and, *Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*.³³ The volumes are well-organized and cover a wide range of topics from strategic to tactical, including pacification, civil affairs, advisory missions and the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force. The Historical Branch of the U.S. Marine Corps G-3 also produced two historical studies of Marine Corps' civic action in Vietnam *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966* by Russel Stolfi and *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps Republic of South Vietnam April 1966-April 1967* by William Parker. Equally critical to a study of U.S. Marines in Vietnam is Michael Hennessy's *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*.³⁴ Sharing several parallel themes with this monograph, this book provides a critical look at U.S. Marine Corps operations in the I CTZ, nebulous U.S. strategic guidance, and service specific issues between MACV, General Walt, and the Marine Corps chain-of-command.

Several other studies provided context for this monograph. The first, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* by Graham A. Cosmas provides a wide-ranging strategic view of the war with particular emphasis on MACV, General Westmoreland and

³³See Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*.

³⁴Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary War in I Corps, 1965-1972* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997).

strategic level decisions.³⁵ The second, *Vietnam Studies: The War in the Northern Provinces* by Willard Pearson focuses primarily on the U.S. Army's contributions to the III MAF and the I CTZ during the Vietnam War.³⁶ Writing separately for the Office of Joint History, Jack Shulimson and Graham Cosmas produced a three part history titled, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968*.³⁷ This study provides an additional perspective to a multi-faceted and complex U.S. strategic picture.

A final important category of primary source material comes in the form of actual III MAF and Fleet Marine Force Pacific command histories from the period. These detailed monthly accounts include command chronologies of key events, major and minor III MAF operations, operations conducted by partnered South Vietnamese I Corps units. Other topics covered in depth are medical assistance missions, pacification operations, psychological operations, information operations, selected III MAF operations orders and other information that General Walt deemed important at the time. These documents provide not only important data for detailed research on select time periods, but give a glimpse into the mind of General Walt as a commander. From a military perspective, routine staff products reflect the nature of the staff but more importantly the nature and perspectives of the commander. Analysis of the reports produced by General Walt's headquarters provide useful insight into how Walt saw the battlefield, how he viewed and

³⁵Graham Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, US Army, 2005).

³⁶Willard Pearson, *Vietnam Studies: The War in the Northern Provinces 1966-1968* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), <http://www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/northern/nprovinces-fm.htm> (accessed December 11, 2012).

³⁷Jack Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I* (Washington D.C.: Office of Joint History, 2011); Graham Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part II* (Washington D.C.: Office of Joint History, 2012); Graham Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part III* (Washington D.C.: Office of Joint History, 2009).

categorized operations (lines of effort/operations) and those areas he deemed important enough to transmit to his higher headquarters.

The Vietnam War remains a relevant topic for historical study. Though General Walt is not the sole subject of any single composition, availability of primary and secondary sources which directly and indirectly addressed Walt provided ample evidence for this study. Taken holistically, the sources identified above provided a sufficient basis to understand General Walt as an operational commander and draw relevant lessons for thoughtful practitioners of operational art.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Under General Walt, the Marines in Vietnam pursued strategic objectives in a different manner than their Army counterparts. This difference in operational approach can largely be attributed to two broad themes: first, differences in service specific factors such as organizational history, doctrines, structure, and ethos; and second, differences in operational environment and enemy threat between the III MAF Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) and those of the U.S. Army Corps headquarters to the south. While this monograph does not expand upon the differences in service specific approaches to combat operations, a survey of those factors of strategic context which inform the case study of General Walt are appropriate. This section provides the reader with a biographical sketch of General Walt prior to 1965, with special emphasis on those specific areas of U.S. Marine Corps history that played a significant role in his development. Additionally, this section provides a strategic context for the Vietnam War prior to 1965, and highlights critical operational variables of the III MAF TAOR and Walt's role as the III MAF commander.

General Walt was a product of both his branch of service and his own experiences. In his book *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, General Walt identified two specific facets of Marine Corps history which played a role in his own personal development and the conduct of III MAF operations in Vietnam. Specifically, he credited the Marine Corps' amphibious and small wars heritage for the small, elite and professional force that landed in Vietnam in 1965. While the Marines did conduct some amphibious operations in Vietnam, they played a limited role in Walt's overall approach to combat operations. Nevertheless, Walt ascribed a significant amount of importance to the Marine Corps' amphibious character.³⁸ Walt attributed the inspiration for the Marines' population-focused approach to combat operations in Vietnam, to their service's

³⁸Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 26-27.

heritage of small wars in the Caribbean in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁹

Since its inception during the Revolutionary War, the Marine Corps has served a maritime role. Its function as an amphibious combat force came about more recently, in the early twentieth century. The requirement for an Advanced Base Force to quickly occupy and defend advanced locations to support long range naval operations, was closely tied to an interventionist turn in American foreign policy following the Spanish-American War in 1898, and more significantly, to the threat of a growing Japanese power in the Pacific prior to and following World War I. In the years between the world wars, the U.S. Marine Corps did the most to develop, test and train amphibious doctrine, technology and tactics.⁴⁰ The Marine's amphibious heritage saw its greatest expression during the Pacific campaign of World War II. By 1941, the beginning of WWII, the Marine Corps' emphasis on amphibious operations paid off with important developments in amphibious doctrine, equipment, and tactics, which were instrumental to the later success of the U.S. in the Pacific Theater. As the Corps embraced amphibious warfare, the warfighting attributes required of these operations became essential to the character, professionalism, ethos and esprit-de-corps of the Marine Corps as a service. General Walt described the impact of the Marine Corps' amphibious heritage on the Marines in Vietnam as follows:

There are three other characteristics that are by-products of our amphibious character: the aggressiveness inherent in an elite assault force; the versatility acquired by officers and men who must stand ready to land anywhere, at any time, on short notice; and the highly

³⁹Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 29.

⁴⁰For further research on the development of the Marine Corps as an Advanced Base Force prior to World War I, see Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 267-286. For information on the Marine Corps' development of amphibious doctrine, tactics and equipment following World War I, and the increased threat of the Japanese in the Pacific, see *Ibid.*, 319-343; Millett, "Assault From The Sea," 50-95; and, Venzon, *From Whaleboats to Amphibious Warfare*. For information on Pete Ellis, one of the primary originators of amphibious warfare concepts and doctrine in the Marine Corps, see Ballendorf and Bartlett, *Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet*.

professional quality of a force that must understand ground, naval, and air operations equally in order to fulfill its obligations.⁴¹

Though he did not join the Marine Corps until 1936, General Walt's operational approach in Vietnam was deeply influenced by those leaders who had served in the Marine Corps' numerous small wars of the first half of the twentieth century. He wrote:

I was reminded of my early days as a young officer, learning the fundamentals of my profession from men who had fought Sandino in Nicaragua or Charlemagne in Haiti. The Caribbean campaigns had many lessons applicable to Vietnam forty or fifty years later. I could recall the instructions of veterans of those campaigns and their lessons on tempering the fight with an understanding of the people, compassion toward them, and the exercise of good works, even in the midst of war. These lessons were spelled out in the *U.S. Marine Corps Small Wars Manual* (1940).⁴²

Similar to the growth of amphibious operations, the Marine Corps' small wars originated in the period following the Spanish American War. Following the war in 1898, U.S. foreign policy took an interventionist turn, where "military forces were used to alter the political behavior and even the institutions of another country."⁴³ Though not directly intended for military interventions in foreign countries, the Marine Corps conducted numerous such deployments at the beginning of the twentieth century. In all, the Marines conducted long term operations in China from 1899-1900; Panama from 1901-1904; Cuba from 1906-1909 and again in 1912 and 1917; Nicaragua in 1910 and 1912; the occupation of Hispaniola from 1915-1934; and landings in Mexico in 1913 and 1914. The American military also maintained a persistent presence in China from 1905 until 1941, of which the Marines were responsible for the legation guard in Peking.⁴⁴

The Marine Corps' Caribbean and Asian expeditions provided important experiential and

⁴¹Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 26-27.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³Quotation from Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 148.

⁴⁴For information on the Marine Corps' many small wars experiences, see *Ibid.*, 147-263.

doctrinal developments for the Marine Corps of 1965. The Marine Corps left these small wars with a wealth of experience in counterinsurgency and civil affairs operations. The most visible doctrinal representation of this fact was the development of the *Small Wars Manual* in 1935 (revised in 1940), which served as the basis of later Marine counterinsurgency doctrine and tactics. Beyond doctrinal changes, these small wars resulted in the development of a combat experienced force with leaders like Lewis “Chesty” Puller and Merritt Edson, who would shape both the Marine Corps and Lewis Walt in the decades to come.⁴⁵

While General Walt’s approach to combat operations was undoubtedly shaped by the Marine Corps’ heritage, his experiences and development in the Corps are equally significant. Born in Kansas on 16 February 1913, Lewis Walt graduated from Colorado State University in 1936 with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry. Throughout college, Walt was active in the student body, ROTC, and multiple sports including track, football and wrestling. Turning down job offers as a chemist and a football coach, Walt was commissioned briefly as a second lieutenant in the Army Field Artillery Reserve before accepting a commission as a Marine second lieutenant in July 1936.⁴⁶ Following his commissioning, Walt attended the Marine Corps Basic School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While at the Basic School, he was deeply influenced by one of his instructors, Captain Lewis “Chesty” Puller, already a decorated veteran of Haiti, Nicaragua and the Chinese Legation.⁴⁷ Graduating from the Basic School in March 1937, Walt spent the next four year serving as a platoon leader in the 6th Marine Regiment in San Diego (April 1937 - June 1939). In this position, he deployed to China to participate in the defense of

⁴⁵Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 262-263.

⁴⁶Borklund, *Military Leaders Since World War II*.

⁴⁷James T. Martin, “The Development of Marine Corps Junior Officers During the Interwar Period and Its Relevance Today” (SAMS Monograph, Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, 2010), 12.

the International Settlement of Shanghai from August 1937 to February 1938. Following his assignment in San Diego, Walt served as a platoon leader at the Marine Barracks in Guam (June 1939 - June 1941), and later as a company commander in the Officer Candidate School at Quantico Virginia (June 1941 - early 1942). Promoted to captain in December 1941, Walt volunteered for the 1st Marine Raider Battalion in early 1942.⁴⁸ First with the 1st Marine Raiders and later with the 5th Marine Regiment, Walt's participation in amphibious operations and development under veterans of the Marine Corps' small war, would help to shape his later perspectives on the impact of these Marine traditions on the prosecution of the Vietnam War.

Walt distinguished himself as a combat leader in numerous battles throughout the Pacific theater in World War II and rose quickly from the rank of captain to lieutenant colonel. Joining the 1st Marine Raider Battalion in early 1942, Walt saw his first combat under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Merritt Edson in the Guadalcanal operation.⁴⁹ Though he would later earn a Medal of Honor, LTC Edson was already a highly decorated veteran of the Marine Corps' small wars in Central America. Walt commanded A Company in the assault on Tulagi Island on 7 August 1942, as part of the larger Guadalcanal operation. For his actions in that assault, Walt was awarded a Silver Star. Following that assault, the 1st Marine Raider Battalion moved to Guadalcanal and participated in combat operations for the next several months. In September,

⁴⁸USMC, "Official Biography: General Lewis Walt."

⁴⁹The history of the Marine Raider Battalions in World War II is long and distinguished. Walt served with the 1st Battalion during the initial stages of its development and was deeply influenced by its commander, Merritt Edson. For additional information on the 1st Raider Battalion in WWII, see Joseph H. Alexander, *Edson's Raiders: The 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000); Jon T. Hoffman, *From Makin to Bougainville: Marine Raiders in the Pacific War* (Washington D.C.: Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1995), <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Staff/Publication%20PDFs/From%20Makin%20to%20Bougainville-Marine%20Raiders%20in%20the%20Pacific%20War%20PCN%2019000313000.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2012).

Edson was reassigned as the Regimental Commander for the 5th Marines and took Walt, recently promoted to Major, along as his regimental operations officer.⁵⁰ From October to December 1942, Walt assumed command of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines on Guadalcanal. Injured during combat operations, Walt continued to command the battalion and received a field promotion to lieutenant colonel on 22 December 1942. Shortly thereafter, the 5th Marines departed Guadalcanal and moved to Australia, where Walt recovered from his wounds while his unit conducted training for upcoming missions.⁵¹

Following a lengthy rehabilitation from his injuries, Walt participated in the assault on Cape Gloucester, New Britain from December 1943 until February 1944. Initially serving as the commander of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, and then as the Regimental Executive Officer, Walt briefly took command of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines in January 1944, for the battle for Aogiri Ridge. For his actions during the battle, Walt was awarded a Navy Cross and the ridge was renamed “Walt’s Ridge” in his honor. From February to June 1944, Walt rehabilitated from additional wounds and malaria at the Naval Hospital in Oakland, California. Returning to the Pacific in June, Walt served with the 5th Marines as the Regimental Executive Officer, in the landing at Peleliu in September 1944. On the first day of the battle, Walt was ordered to take command of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. For his actions during that operation, Walt was awarded his second Navy Cross.⁵²

⁵⁰Hoffman, *From Makin to Bougainville: Marine Raiders in the Pacific War*, 11-19.

⁵¹USMC, “Official Biography: General Lewis Walt.”

⁵²*Ibid.* For additional information on the battle for Cape Gloucester, see Bernard C. Nalty, *Cape Gloucester: The Green Inferno*. (Washington D.C.: Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1994). For additional information on Walt’s role in the battle for Aogiri Ridge, see Jon T. Hoffman, *Chesty: The Story of Lieutenant General Lewis B. Puller* (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 241-242. For additional information on the battle of Peleliu, see Gordon D. Gayle, *Bloody Beaches: The Marines at Peleliu* (Washington D.C.: Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1996),

Returning to the U.S. in November 1944, Lieutenant Colonel Walt spent the next eight years moving between academic positions in Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, and various leadership positions in Camp Pendleton and Guam. Among the positions he held were: Chief of Officer Candidate School Tactics Section (November 1944 - January 1947); G3 1st Marine Division (January 1947 - November 1947); Operations and Training Officer and Chief of Staff of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade on Guam, (November 1947 - April 1949); Battalion Commander of the Special Training Regiment at Quantico (May 1949 - September 1949); attended Amphibious Warfare School (September 1949 - June 1950); served as Chief of Tactics at Marine Corps Schools; and was the Executive Officer of the Basic School. In November 1951, Walt was promoted to the rank of colonel.⁵³

From November 1952 until August 1953, Colonel Walt served in the Korean War with the 1st Marine Division as the Commanding Officer, 5th Marines, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, and Chief of Staff of the Division. For his service with the 1st Marine Division, Walt received a Legion of Merit and Bronze Star, both with the combat valor device.⁵⁴ Returning to the U.S., Walt again served in various positions in the Marine Corps Schools from August 1953 to June 1957, including as the Director of the Advanced Base Problem Section and the Commanding Officer of the Basic School. Moving to Washington D.C., Walt served as the Assistant Director of Personnel (June 1957 – August 1959); attended the National War College graduating in June

<https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Staff/Publication%20PDFs/Bloody%20Beaches%20The%20Marines%20At%20Peleliu%20%20PCN%2019000313700.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2012).

⁵³USMC, “Official Biography: General Lewis Walt.”

⁵⁴For additional information on the 1st Marine Division in the Korean War, see Charles R. Smith, ed., *U.S. Marines in the Korean War* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps History Division, 2007), <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Staff/Publication%20PDFs/Korean%20War%20Books.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2012).

1960, and served as the Marine Corps Representative on the Joint Advanced Study Group of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (July 1960 – July 1961). Following his time with the Joint Staff, Walt was promoted to Brigadier General and assumed duties as the Assistant Division Commander of the 2nd Marine Division. In his final duty position prior to assuming command of Marine forces in Vietnam, Walt served as the Director of the Marine Corps Landing Force Development Center from September 1962 until May 1965. In May, Walt was selected to command the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in Vietnam.⁵⁵ On 5 June 1965, Walt assumed command of both the 3rd Marine Division and the III MAF.

When Walt arrived in Vietnam in 1965, he had served thirty years as a Marine Corps officer. He had been taught by and served alongside veterans of the Marine Corps' small wars, namely Chesty Puller and Merritt Edson. Walt had participated in multiple real-world amphibious assaults and commanded Marines under combat conditions at the company, battalion and regimental levels. As he assumed command of III MAF, Walt's experiences and the nature of his Marine Corps service played a significant role in his operational approach to combat operations in Vietnam.

Apart from his distinctive experiences and the Marine Corps warfighting traditions that General Walt brought to his command in Vietnam, it is important to understand the operating environment that he faced and which helped to shape his operational approach. The seeds of the Vietnam War can be traced through nearly 100 years of French colonialism in Indochina, to the birth of the Vietminh, an anticolonial Vietnamese Communist Party organization established in 1941, to the First Indochina War beginning in 1945 and ending with the French defeat by Vietminh forces at Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954.⁵⁶ The Accords

⁵⁵USMC, "Official Biography: General Lewis Walt."

⁵⁶The origins of the Vietnam War are well documented. For additional study on the

resulted in a brief cessation of hostilities and a temporary division of Vietnam into a communist north and a democratic south. From 1954 on, the U.S. increasingly supported the South Vietnamese government and military, initially through a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and later, beginning in February 1962, through the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). From 1964 to 1968 General William Westmoreland commanded MACV.⁵⁷ In that these events were significant to the broad context of the Vietnam War, they undeniably play at least a small role in shaping General Walt's operational environment and approach to combat operations in 1965. However, detailed studies of these events are well documented and lie beyond the scope of this paper. The remainder of this section will focus on those key factors which impacted Walt as an operational commander.

Although military involvement in Vietnam increased beginning in 1954, the period of 1964 to mid-1965 was critical to the introduction of significant U.S. ground forces into South Vietnam.⁵⁸ Following the November 1963 overthrow and murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the first President of the Republic of Vietnam, a series of coups throughout 1964 and into 1965

history of Vietnam, French colonialism in Indochina, the rise of the Vietminh, see Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*; McAlister and Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution*; Doyle and Lipsman, *The Vietnam Experience: Setting the Stage*; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012).

⁵⁷For information on the growth of U.S. involvement, advisory and assistance in Vietnam, see Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*, 3-14; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 3-36. For further study on General Westmoreland, see Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*; Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York, NY: Morrow, 1994). For a more controversial view of General Westmoreland, see Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

⁵⁸For further information on the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1954 - 1965, see Logevall, *Embers of War*; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*; Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*; Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part II*.

served to cast the South Vietnamese government into turmoil and weaken its military capabilities. At the same time, the threat from the Viet Cong (VC) began to grow. Combining an intensive terrorism campaign with a political offensive carried out by an elaborate system of shadow governance and further enabled by the emergence of main force units conducting sustained combat operations, the threat against South Vietnam had reached a crucial level. While the South Vietnamese proved increasingly incapable of dealing with the enemy threat, a series of direct attacks on American forces initiated a succession of U.S. reprisals against the North Vietnamese. Between 1964 and 1965, political and strategic deliberation between President Johnson's administration, the Joint Chiefs, CINCPAC and MACV set the U.S. on the path towards major ground combat operations in South Vietnam.⁵⁹

The situation facing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) at the end of 1964 and at the beginning of 1965 was a highly complex combination of internal South Vietnamese discord and encroaching North Vietnamese and Viet Cong subversive and main force military activity. The overall political situation in South Vietnam had been volatile since its inception following the Geneva Accords and had deteriorated even further since the assassination of President Diem in 1963.⁶⁰ Numerous other societal and cultural factors, such as social hierarchy and religion (Buddhism and Roman Catholicism) played a role in factionalizing South Vietnamese politics and impacted combat operations for both the ARVN and later the Marines of

⁵⁹See Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 92-98. For further and more detailed information on this period, see also *Pentagon Papers*, Parts IV,B and IV,C; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, xi-xiii; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 192-195.

⁶⁰Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 229-256, 293-327; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 8-20, 95-106, 117-120; Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 383-394.

III MAF.⁶¹

With a weak central government, the use of military forces was the only means by which the South Vietnamese President could exert authority. Prior to his assassination, Diem had divided South Vietnam into military regions, where “the [South Vietnamese] Corps commander was also usually the regional governor.”⁶² The northernmost military-political region was assigned to the ARVN I Corps and was similarly named the I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). When the Marines arrived in Da Nang in 1965, “the vast majority of the provincial and district chiefs in I Corps were officers of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces...or political appointees given officer rank.”⁶³ Later in 1965, as the Marine presence grew, Walt was assigned as the senior advisor to the ARVN I Corps commander and the III MAF TAOR was expanded to mirror the I CTZ.⁶⁴ The I Corps commander in June 1965 was General Nguyen Chanh Thi, a popular yet controversial figure, whose ties to Buddhist factions and role in a failed coup against President Diem in 1960, made him a political liability for the fragile government.⁶⁵ His removal in 1966 became the basis for a disrupting Buddhist uprising, which will be discussed later. For their part, “the Marines considered Thi a good, competent commander who had been effectively prosecuting the war in I Corps.”⁶⁶ The ARVN forces under I Corps command in 1965 included approximately

⁶¹For a detailed study of Vietnamese social and political history and motivations, see McAlister and Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution*. See also, Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 44-46.

⁶²Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 47.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 103-104.

⁶⁵Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 90, 94-94, 169; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 47-48.

⁶⁶Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 90.

“60,000 men, divided into two army (ARVN) divisions [1st and 2nd ARVN Divisions] and one regiment of 25,000 troops, a Regional Force of 12,000, and a Popular Force (militia) of 23,000.”⁶⁷ While these units suffered from poor leadership and moral, they would increase in proficiency in subsequent years, conducting both combined (with the Marines) and unilateral operations against enemy guerrilla and main force units.

As the region particularly relevant to ARVN I Corps and III MAF combat operations, the I CTZ requires a brief examination. The I CTZ was significant for its geography, population, and proximity to North Vietnam. This northernmost military region of South Vietnam consisted of five provinces (see Figure 1, from north to south): Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngi. Immediately north of the I CTZ, and contributing to its strategic significance, was the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the Ben Hai River between North and South Vietnam. To the west of the region lay Laos and to the south was the II Corps Tactical Zone. Covering over 10,000 square miles, the I CTZ spread over 265 miles in length and up to 70 miles in width.⁶⁸ Proximity to both the DMZ and Laos rendered the I CTZ highly susceptible to infiltration and influence.

⁶⁷Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 561. For a different report of ARVN forces in I CTZ see Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 48. Hennessy reports 10,000 to 16,000 personnel for each ARVN division and 3,500 for the 51st ARVN Regiment. Additionally, he records 107 Regional Forces companies, 551 Popular Force platoons and 28 Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) companies.

⁶⁸Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 3.

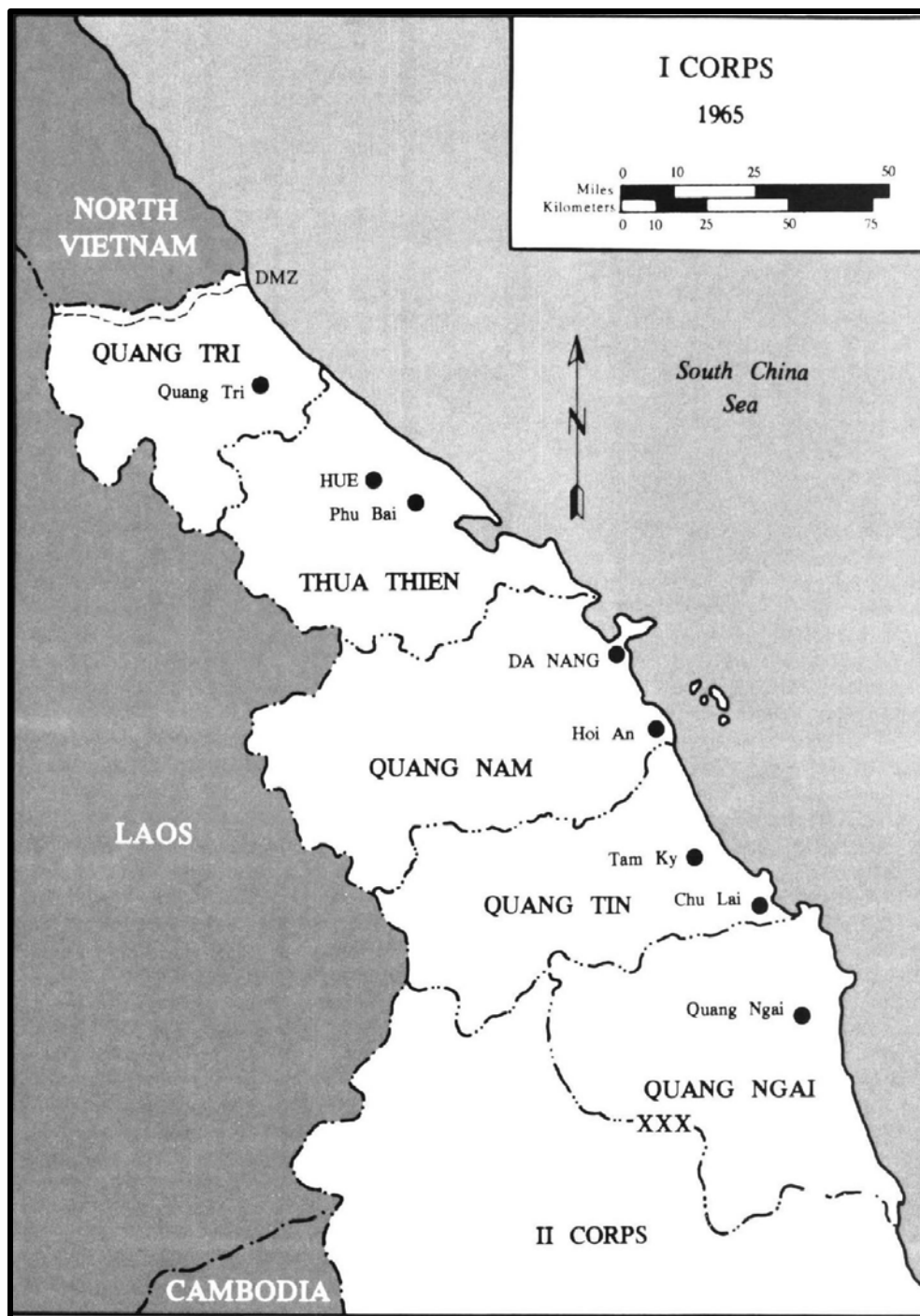


Figure 1. III MAF Tactical Area of Responsibility.

Source: Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division HQ, US Marine Corps, 1978), 13.

As much as any other factor, geography and climate permeated all facets of life in the I CTZ and had a direct effect on combat operations. The Chaine Annamitique mountain range ran the entire length of the I CTZ and dominated the western portion of the region. Between the mountains and the coast, lay a long strip of coastal lowlands with occasional fingers of the mountain range stretching toward the sea, creating separate coastal regions often referred to as enclaves. Though enclaves encompassed a relatively small portion of the entire I CTZ, “the locus of the battlefield for hearts and minds was the coastal lowlands...It was here, among the quilt of rice fields and villages, that the ‘people’s war’ raged. Squeezed between the mountains and the sea were most of the region’s 570 villages and the two national transportation routes,” and further still, “along this narrow strip lived 80 percent of the I Corps’ 2.4 million inhabitants.”⁶⁹ With the population concentrated around the coastal lowlands, the I CTZ’s major population centers were also located within these enclaves. Of significance were “Hue, the former imperial capital, and the port city of Da Nang. Each had sizable populations of 104,500 and 134,000, respectively. Of the other cities in I Corps, Quang Tri was by far the largest, with a population of nearly 100,000,” while the other province capitals in the region “each had a population ranging from 10,000 to 20,000.”⁷⁰

Closely related to geography, the weather in Vietnam played an important role in combat operations and everyday life in the I CTZ. Because of its location on the Asian continent, Vietnam experiences a variety of weather effects. Distinct weather patterns throughout the country are very much driven by latitude, geographical orientation to significant mountain ranges, direction of seasonal wind patterns, and proximity and orientation to the South China Sea.

⁶⁹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 43. See also, Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*, 76-79.

⁷⁰Ibid.

Notably, the southern portion of South Vietnam experiences substantially different rainfall quantities and seasonal patterns than those experienced in the northern provinces. Generally speaking, the southern portions of South Vietnam along with Central Highlands, Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam experience the southwest monsoon season from approximately mid-May through mid-October. While portions of the I CTZ were impacted by the southwest monsoon season, the majority of the region experienced the northeast monsoon season from approximately mid-October to mid-May.⁷¹ Unlike the wet monsoons experienced by most of Southeast Asia, “fog, wind, and noticeably lower temperatures characterize the wet season in the north.”⁷² Additionally, the northern provinces are also subject to significant rainfall from tropical storms and typhoons between July and November.⁷³ These weather conditions impacted both Marine Corps and enemy operations throughout the Vietnam War.

Apart from the factors listed above, the enemy played the most significant role in shaping and challenging Walt’s operational approach. Westmoreland reported that, “by mid-1965 the [South Vietnamese] government controlled the cities and major towns while the enemy controlled most of the countryside.”⁷⁴ The North Vietnamese accomplished this control through a combination of main force units, guerrillas and shadow governance operating under the control of regional headquarters. These regional headquarters in turn answered to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) located in Cambodia. The I CTZ fell under the North Vietnamese Military Region 5. Generally speaking ARVN and U.S. forces faced two broad communist

⁷¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 5.

⁷²Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*, 6.

⁷³Ibid. See also Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 560-561.

⁷⁴Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 97.

military threats, the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the South Vietnamese based National Liberation Front (NLF) and People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF), collectively known as the Viet Cong or VC (short for Vietnamese Communist in Vietnamese). The primary enemy threat which controlled the countryside in mid-1965 was the Viet Cong consisting of a political wing, the NLF, and a military arm, the PLAF.⁷⁵

Though they sought to portray the Viet Cong as a South Vietnamese-based insurgency group, North Vietnamese military cadres established, recruited, and trained early Viet Cong forces, and maintained influence over their employment.⁷⁶ While the North Vietnamese went to great lengths to make it appear that they had no connection with the Viet Cong, history and the facts on the ground demonstrated that "the NLF emerged as a fully developed Communist political organization imported from North Vietnam for the purpose of controlling, directing, and coordinating the insurgency."⁷⁷ The NLF controlled a shadow government system with political committees incorporated into South Vietnamese regions, provinces, districts and villages/hamlets. Similarly, the PLAF consisted of main force, local and guerrilla forces which mirrored the political structure of the NLF.⁷⁸ By 1965, these Viet Cong political and military structures had infiltrated and controlled up to a third of the I CTZ. While local (militia) and guerrilla forces primarily operated at the province level and below, Viet Cong main force units were structured as platoons, companies, battalions and regiments and operated throughout the military regions. By

⁷⁵Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 76-77, 203; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 50-56.

⁷⁶Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, 44-46.

⁷⁷Whitlow, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*, 29.

⁷⁸Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 76-77, 203-206.

mid-1965, the Viet Cong had been recruiting and building its military and political capabilities for almost five years, and both guerrilla and main force units increasingly targeted ARVN and governmental forces.⁷⁹

Emerging out of the Viet Minh's guerrilla army from the First Indochina War, PAVN, often referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), was the legitimate national armed forces of North Vietnam. Originally created and trained in China, PAVN was generally structured around a standard military model of battalions, regiments, and divisions.⁸⁰ In early 1965, the ARVN I Corps and the Marines of III MAF faced a primarily Viet Cong threat, as large North Vietnamese units did not actively challenge them until later in the year.⁸¹ Attrition of Viet Cong forces and increased capabilities of III MAF and the ARVN I Corps, forced Hanoi "to send increased numbers of PAVN regulars southward. These began as PAVN 'filler packets' in PLAF units. Then came small PAVN units and finally entire PAVN divisions."⁸² Throughout Walt's time in command, III MAF's combat operations increasingly shifted focus from the Viet Cong to North Vietnamese PAVN forces.

While it was not a significant issue during 1965, U.S. political prohibitions and Rules of Engagement (ROE) against ground force encroachment into the DMZ and the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia played a large role in III MAF operations beginning during the latter half of 1966. Well aware of these prohibitions, the NVA routinely utilized these areas to stage, resupply, refit and conduct attacks. Following numerous enemy infiltrations and attacks across the DMZ, Washington loosened some ROE restrictions on 8 May 1967, and allowed the

⁷⁹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 52-59.

⁸⁰Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, 26-56.

⁸¹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 50.

⁸²Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*, 48.

Marines to conduct operations in the southern portion of the DMZ.⁸³ With some exceptions, these political limitations continued to provide North Vietnamese forces a sanctuary from ground attack throughout the war.

In addition to the geographic, enemy and friendly operational considerations addressed above, one of the key components to understanding General Walt as an operational commander, is his unique set of command responsibilities and relationships as the senior Marine commander in Vietnam. As the III MAF Commander, General Walt was subordinate to both General William Westmoreland, the Commander U.S. Military Advisory Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), and Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, the Commander of Fleet Marine Force Pacific (COMFMFPAC).⁸⁴ General Westmoreland, a 1936 graduate of West Point and a decorated veteran of World War II and Korea, had served as the commander of the 101st Airborne Division, the Superintendent of West Point, and most recently as the commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps.⁸⁵ As the MACV Commander, General Westmoreland “exercised operational command over all U.S. air and land forces employed within the territory of South Vietnam.”⁸⁶ While Westmoreland bore responsibility for III MAF’s operational employment, General Krulak “retained administrative control over the Marine forces in the Pacific...the III MAF’s administrative – logistical chain of command remained FMFPac’s.”⁸⁷ Directly superior to both

⁸³Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 8, 23. For a more detailed and primary source description of the MACV ROE regarding Cambodia, Laos and the DMZ, see Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I, 350-353.

⁸⁴For further information on LTG Victor Krulak, see Krulak, *First to Fight*; Robert Coram, *Brute: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2011).

⁸⁵Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland*, 7-107.

⁸⁶Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 65-66.

⁸⁷Ibid.

Westmoreland and Krulak was Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Forces (CINCPAC).⁸⁸ By virtue of his position, Admiral Sharp was responsible for military operations in Vietnam, just one area within the greater Pacific theater. Though ultimately responsible, Sharp largely allowed Westmoreland to run the day-to-day operations in South Vietnam. Complicating this relationship was Westmoreland's shared responsibility for Vietnam with the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam, who served as the Chief of the U.S. Mission. Additionally, President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chiefs preferred to deal directly with Westmoreland, often bypassing Admiral Sharp. Westmoreland mitigated these competing pressures through careful communication with both Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁸⁹

As the Marine component commander for CINCPAC, General Krulak was subordinate to Admiral Sharp; however, as the senior Marine officer in the Pacific theater, Krulak also answered to General Wallace Greene, the outspoken Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. Though not responsible for operational employment of III MAF forces in Vietnam, both Krulak and Greene conducted frequent trips to South Vietnam and communicated regularly on operational matters with General Walt. Utilizing their positions outside of the MACV chain-of-command, these two generals had direct access and influence with Admiral Sharp, Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Johnson, whereby they could and did advocate Marine Corps specific opinions and strategies for prosecution of the war in Vietnam.⁹⁰

⁸⁸Admiral Sharp detailed his experiences and his opinions in, Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*.

⁸⁹Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 308-309. For information on MACV command relationships see, Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*, 36-38; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 66; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 7.

⁹⁰Krulak, *First to Fight*, 182; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 331-334; Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*, 38, 78.

General Walt's roles and responsibilities as the III MAF commander were numerous and diverse. In his most primary role, "General Walt, commanded all U.S. Marine Corps forces in I Corps and by year-end [1965] would have full control of all U.S. military personnel operating within the I Corps area."⁹¹ This control included operational control of advisory efforts in the III MAF tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). Walt typically received strategic and operational guidance from General Westmoreland through Letters of Instruction (LOI), campaign plans, official messages, planning conferences and personal meetings. This guidance provided Walt a basis for directing operations and tactics within the I CTZ. Beginning in June 1965, when he assumed command of the III MAF, Walt also assumed command of the 3rd Marine Division. As additional forces deployed to Vietnam through the remainder of 1965 and into 1966, all U.S. Marine units and those of other services that operated in the I CTZ also fell under the umbrella of the III MAF command structure. With the arrival of the 1st Marine Division in early 1966, General Walt relinquished command of the 3rd Marine Division to Major General Wood Kyle, so that Walt could more effectively exercise command and control of combat operations. The expanded III MAF command structure grew to include two Marine divisions, a robust aircraft wing, and a Force Logistic Command (FLC).⁹²

In addition to operational employment of ground and air forces within the I CTZ, Walt, as the senior Navy officer in South Vietnam, also served as the MACV Navy Component Commander (NCC). Naval forces included a Naval Advisory Group which reported directly to MACV, and Navy and Coast Guard boats which patrolled rivers in South Vietnam. More pertinent to III MAF operations in I CTZ, Walt was responsible for providing "common-item logistical support to all American forces in his area through a large Naval Support Activity at Da

⁹¹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 65.

⁹²Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 7, 77.

Nang.”⁹³ Due to his diverse mission requirements and primary focus on operations in his TAOR, Walt did not have significant capability to command and control all naval forces in South Vietnam. This issue was a topic of much discussion and in early 1966 it was determined to create a separate naval component command and relieve Walt of his specifically naval responsibilities.⁹⁴

As previously discussed, Walt also served as the senior advisor to the ARVN I Corps commander, and the III MAF TAOR purposefully mirrored the I CTZ. While Walt was responsible for advising, he did not have direct operational control over South Vietnamese Armed Forces in the Marines’ TAOR. The Marines of III MAF operated in combination and coordination with the ARVN I Corps and the success of their operational employment largely depended on the relationship between Walt and the I Corps commander. Examples of how this relationship worked can be found in Marine Corps historical records. A 14 July 1965 memorandum from General Walt to the I Corps Commander requested coordination for a reconnaissance zone for the 4th Marines at Chu Lai and made arrangements for further coordination by subordinate units.⁹⁵ Requests and coordination of this sort were typical of interaction between the III MAF and I Corps commanders and staffs. The contributions of the ARVN forces in I CTZ were instrumental to effective III MAF operations in a resource and personnel constrained environment.

⁹³Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 310.

⁹⁴See CG III MAF message “III MAF and NCC Command Relations in Vietnam” in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, Reel 1; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 7, 77; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 310-314.

⁹⁵See CG, III MAF Memorandum “Request for Reconnaissance Zone” dated. 14 July 1965 in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, Reel 1

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident on 2 August 1964 and the subsequent Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August were the catalysts for the commitment of U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam. In the months that followed, additional attacks against American forces in South Vietnam served to intensify U.S. political debate in Washington. In early February 1965, two separate attacks on Americans at Pleiku and Qui Nhon resulted in limited reprisal bombings, named FLAMING DART I & II. Shortly thereafter, on 13 February 1965, President Johnson approved a sustained air campaign against select targets in North Vietnam. This program, named ROLLING THUNDER, began on 2 March 1965.⁹⁶ Concurrently, continued political unrest in the South Vietnamese government and the questionable capabilities of ARVN forces guarding U.S. bases in South Vietnam led General Westmoreland to submit a request on 22 February 1965, for the deployment of a three-battalion Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) to provide security for the vital air base in Da Nang. Though this request met with some resistance by Ambassador Taylor, the President did approve a two-battalion MEB for this mission. On 7 March 1965, the JCS issued orders for the Marines of 9th MEB to land. Already prepared to receive the landing order, elements of the 9th MEB's two Battalion Landing Teams (BLT), arrived at Da Nang on 8 March 1965.⁹⁷

Though the Marines landed in March, General Walt did not assume command of the III MAF until 5 June 1965. From March until May, when III MAF was established, 9th MEB was the senior Marine headquarters in Vietnam and was commanded by Brigadier General Frederick

⁹⁶Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 172-175. For additional and more detailed information regarding ROLLING THUNDER, its impact, and political debate leading to its initiation, see *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.3; Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*, 63-69.

⁹⁷Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 7-9.

Karch.⁹⁸ The period between March and June is significant due to the rapidly changing national-level strategy, the accompanying expansion of the Marines' missions, and the growth of Marine combat capabilities and units in South Vietnam. During this time period, Marine commanders reacted to changing operational guidance and laid the groundwork for General Walt's operational approach. For a brief time after their landing, the Marines of 9th MEB operated under very restrictive conditions, which had only partially been relaxed when Walt assumed command. In a purposeful attempt to control the perception of an expanded ground war in South Vietnam, 9th MEB's initial mission was limited in scope. 9th MEB was directed,

to occupy and defend critical terrain feature in order to secure the airfield and, as directed, communications facilities, U.S. supporting installations, port facilities, landing beaches and other U.S. installations against attack. The U.S. Marine Force will not, repeat will not, engage in day to day actions against the Viet Cong.⁹⁹

The 9th MEB's initial tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) was restricted to a small area of land around the Da Nang airfield. Though pacification/counterinsurgency was not a task given to the 9th MEB, it was definitely something that Marine leaders were eager to carry out. Marine leaders, particularly General Krulak, quickly realized that their mission's restrictions prevented them from conducting counterinsurgency operations and detracted from their ability to protect the airbase. Krulak later wrote, "We were never going to win any counterinsurgency battles sitting in foxholes around a runway, separated from the very people we wanted to protect."¹⁰⁰

Krulak and the Marines of 9th MEB would not have to wait long for a gradual loosening of their restrictive conditions. Shortly after the Marine landing, General Westmoreland conducted

⁹⁸General Karch was the assistant division commander of the 3rd Marine Division and a veteran of WWII in the Pacific.

⁹⁹*Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.4.1. See also Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 179; Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 25.

¹⁰⁰Krulak, *First to Fight*, 181-182.

a review of the military situation in South Vietnam which he submitted to CINCPAC at the end of March 1965. Among other recommendations, his “Commander’s Estimate” detailed a request for additional combat forces to include two additional Marine battalions. The Joint Chiefs also made recommendations of their own which, while different, also proposed increasing troop presence and mission requirements. With these recommendations in mind, President Johnson held a meeting on 1 April, where he approved the commitment of two additional Marine battalions and an aircraft squadron, and further expanded the 9th MEB mission to protect the airfield at Phu Bai. Most significant to 9th MEB operations, Johnson authorized a change to the Marines’ mission restrictions, leading both Secretary of Defense McNamara and Ambassador Taylor to envision “a shift from static positional defense to at least limited offensive operations against the Viet Cong, including, in Taylor’s view, a ‘strike role’ in support of the South Vietnamese Army anywhere within fifty miles of American bases.”¹⁰¹ Following this meeting, on 14 April:

General Westmoreland provided the MEB with a concept of operations which he divided into four phases: establishment of defensive bases; deep reconnaissance patrols of the enemy’s avenues of approach; offensive action as a reaction force in coordination with the Vietnamese; and finally, ‘undertake in coordination with RVN I Corps, an intensifying program of offensive operations to fix and destroy the VC in the general Da Nang area.’¹⁰²

Additional strategic decisions were made at a 20 April 1965, conference in Honolulu. At the conference, attendees including Secretary of Defense McNamara, Ambassador Taylor and General Westmoreland, agreed that the Vietnam conflict was likely to be an extended struggle. At that time, it was decided that the “victory strategy was to ‘break the will of the DRV/VC by

¹⁰¹Quotation from Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 208. For information regarding the MACV commander’s estimate and the 1 April 1965 meeting see *Ibid.*, 203-208. See also Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 68; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 433; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 131; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 22-23.

¹⁰²Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 27.

denying them victory.”¹⁰³ Along with additional Army force increases, conference attendees recommended the deployment of three additional Marine battalion landing teams, three fighter squadrons and the opening of an air base at Chu Lai.¹⁰⁴ The President approved the conference recommendations at the beginning of May and “committed the United States to large-scale ground combat in Vietnam.”¹⁰⁵

Though constrained by orders and geography, the 9th MEB laid the groundwork for Walt’s later operational approach as the III MAF commander. In addition to securing their assigned airbases, General Karch actively worked with the ARVN I Corps Commander, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, to expand the Marines TAORs and responsibilities. Following receipt of Westmoreland’s concept of operations on 14 April, Karch sought and received permission from General Thi to allow Marine patrols up to six miles outside of their former TAORs while the South Vietnamese forces remained primarily responsible for defending villages. Marines began combined ARVN patrols in their expanded TAORs on 20 April and made their first contact with the Viet Cong on the 22nd. Overall, enemy contact remained light.¹⁰⁶ By mid-May, Marine Corps TAORs had expanded from a single defensive-enclave around the Da Nang airbase, to include enclaves around both Phu Bai and a Marine Corps constructed airfield at Chu Lai. With the approval and deployment of additional Marine Corps forces, most of the 3rd Marine Division, to include its headquarters, was on the ground in South Vietnam by the beginning of May.

¹⁰³*Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.5.71-78.

¹⁰⁴For information on 20 April 1965 meeting, see *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.5.71-78; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 29; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 13.

¹⁰⁵Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 212.

¹⁰⁶Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 27-28.

With the continued arrival of Marine forces into South Vietnam, the Marines received approval from the Joint Chiefs authorizing the establishment of an overarching Marine headquarters. Major General Collins, the commander of the newly arrived 3rd Marine Division, established the III MAF on 6 May.¹⁰⁷ Concurrent with its establishment, Westmoreland issued the new headquarters a Letter of Instruction detailing, among other things, a broad concept of operations. This concept of operation included instructions to “coordinate the defense of their three bases with General Thi; to render combat support to the South Vietnamese; to maintain the capability of conducting deep patrolling, offensive operations, and reserve reaction missions; and, finally, to carry out any contingency plans as directed by ComUSMACV [sic].”¹⁰⁸ Overall, the language of these instructions indicated a gradual shift in emphasis from base security, to increasing reconnaissance, and finally toward offensive operations against Viet Cong forces.¹⁰⁹ Immediately following the release of this Letter of Instruction, Westmoreland transmitted a similar concept of the operations to Washington by way of CINCPAC that stated:

In Stage One the units were to secure enclaves...In Stage Two the units were to engage in offensive operations and deep patrolling in cooperation with ARVN. In Stage Three they were to provide a reserve when ARVN units needed help and also conduct long-range offensive operations...once the coastal bases were secure, the troops should move to secure inland bases and operate from those.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 36.

¹⁰⁸Ibid. See also, HQ, USMACV, “Letter of Instruction Governing Operations of Elements of the III MAF in the Qui Nhon Area” in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, Reel 1.

¹⁰⁹HQ, USMACV, “Letter of Instruction Governing Operations of Elements of the III MAF in the Qui Nhon Area” in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, Reel 1. See also, Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 218.

¹¹⁰Quotation from Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 135. See also Cosmas, *MACV: The*

In the absence of further written guidance, Walt and the leaders of III MAF referred to these instructions often until they were superseded in November 1965.

Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967, 217.

WALT AS III MAF COMMANDER

This case study analyzes the important aspects of General Lewis Walt as an operational commander in Vietnam. Walt did not make decisions in a vacuum. In addition to those critical factors of strategic context developed in the last section, Walt was most influenced by those personalities and experiences that he encountered on a daily basis in the midst of his time in command. In order to understand and evaluate General Walt as an operational commander, this case study will focus on the following specific areas: further development of the impacts of Generals Westmoreland, Greene and Krulak on Walt's operational approach; the details and evolution of strategic guidance and operational conditions that shaped General Walt as an operational commander; and lastly, a broad overview of specific III MAF operations in I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) which best highlight Walt's operational approach.

Generals Westmoreland, Greene and Krulak each had a role in shaping Walt's operational approach. In that these generals did not agree on the best strategy to pursue in Vietnam and each provided differing guidance that impacted Walt's operational approach, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the major source of contention between the MACV Commander and the Marine Corps leadership. At the most basic level, Westmoreland and the Marine generals maintained distinctly different viewpoints on the correct operational employment of forces in Vietnam. While this topic is further illustrated throughout this case study, pursuit of clarity demands an initial basic understanding of the issues involved. Both General Westmoreland and the Marine leadership ultimately sought the protection of the South Vietnamese population. The two parties, however, fundamentally disagreed on how to prosecute the war. Generally speaking, while Westmoreland directed that operations focus on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units, Krulak and Greene encouraged what was commonly referred to as an enclave strategy. Westmoreland later wrote that the enclave strategy was proposed by Ambassador Taylor to prevent escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. He described the strategy as one where

American troops were “restricted to enclaves along the coast. By remaining in coastal enclaves, the theory had it, the Americans might secure critical areas while limiting their involvement and casualties, yet at the same time demonstrating to the North Vietnamese American determination to stay the course.”¹¹¹ For their part, the Marine leadership was less concerned with limiting involvement and to a greater extent with protecting the South Vietnamese population through counterinsurgency operations against local Viet Cong forces. Their version of the enclave strategy was more offensive in nature, but still relied on the basic development and enlargement of coastal enclaves instead of pursuit of main force units. As early as 1964, General Greene “ordered his staff to prepare a series of proposals, the most significant of which was a twenty-four-point plan calling for United States Marine Corps units to secure the coastal areas of South Vietnam in order to deny the Viet Cong access to a large percentage of the population.”¹¹² Also referred to as an “ink blot” strategy, the Marines proposed to pacify and secure coastal enclaves and eventually enlarge and connect them when adequate forces became available. Ultimately, the core disagreement can best be understood as a divergence in emphasis. Westmoreland emphasized large unit offensive operations before pacification and the Marine leaders believed that pacification and security of the population was the best method for defeating the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese.¹¹³ At the center of this controversy was General Walt, beholden to the operational directives of General Westmoreland and the service guidance that he received from his Marine Corps leadership. Walt’s ability or inability to placate both approaches is a major

¹¹¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 129.

¹¹²McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 69.

¹¹³Differences in strategic approaches was the subject of much debate at the time and continued to be a subject of much discussion after the war. Several primary and secondary sources discuss these differences in detail. See Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 164-165; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 194-204; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 74-77; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 11, 13-14. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV,C,5,113-115.

theme of this monograph.

Right or wrong, once guidance was issued, General Westmoreland's position as the MACV Commander should have silenced all dissent on the operational employment of ground and air forces within South Vietnam. Lacking any operational responsibility for III MAF, Generals Krulak and Greene should have had minimal impact on Walt's operational approach. That they had the impact that they did indicates the extent to which both General Krulak and Greene could and did utilize their positions to move around the MACV chain-of-command to influence leaders at all levels. In their own way, each of these three generals sought to influence Walt's approach to operations in Vietnam.

General Wallace Greene served as the Commandant of the Marine Corps during Walt's time in command and personally selected Walt to command the III MAF.¹¹⁴ A member of the Joint Chiefs, General Greene was an influential player at the national level, as well as having indirect influence on the conduct of III MAF operations. As detailed in the book, *Dereliction of Duty* by H.R. McMasters, General Greene was often a lone standout amongst the Joint Chiefs in dissenting to the conduct of the war in Vietnam. From early on in his tenure as Commandant, Greene advocated an all-or-nothing strategy in Vietnam. He shamelessly promoted Marine Corps virtues and sought an ever-expanding role for the Corps. Most significant to this case study, General Greene consistently promoted the enclave strategy for prosecuting the war.¹¹⁵ Greene's influence on Walt was well known, and "according to General Johnson [Army Chief of Staff], the Marine Corps Commandant Greene 'made a call once or twice a day from his own headquarters in Washington to Da Nang [the III MAF Headquarters]...and always had up-to-date information

¹¹⁴Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 42.

¹¹⁵For an analysis of General Greene's contribution to the conduct of the Vietnam War as a whole, see McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 68-70, 144, 249-253, 266-268, 271, 292, 314-315.

on what was going on by phone at any meeting of the JCS that we both attended.”¹¹⁶ While he was effective in shaping Walt’s operational approach, General Greene was ultimately unsuccessful in shaping the overall strategy for the war in Vietnam at the national and strategic levels.

In his book *A Soldier Reports*, General Westmoreland devotes several pages to this fundamental difference in strategy with the Marine Corps. He stated, “I believed the marines [sic] should have been trying to find the enemy’s main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population.”¹¹⁷ Though he disagreed with the Marines’ operational approach, Westmoreland had a great deal of respect for General Walt and the Marines under his command. Responding to the suggestion that he should have shifted Army units into the I CTZ instead of Marines, Westmoreland argued that the Marines naval gunfire support, organizational capabilities and ability to resupply themselves in the absences of established port facilities, made them ideally suited for combat in the northernmost province.¹¹⁸ Westmoreland also understood the sensitivities of interservice rivalry and later wrote, “I had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt that I might precipitate an interservice imbroglio... as senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution.”¹¹⁹ Rather than simply order or direct that Walt execute operations according to his wishes, Westmoreland chose more subtle means for influencing Walt and his III MAF staff. Among other methods, Westmoreland approached

¹¹⁶General Johnson quoted in Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 333.

¹¹⁷Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 165.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 166.

General Greene in an attempt to prevent his involvement in III MAF operations. Additionally, he continued to utilize official orders and battlefield visits to maintain situational awareness of III MAF activities. Going further still “he directed III MAF to conduct numerous studies and war games and reviewed and at time criticized the results. He also required the marines [sic] to plan for specific operations against enemy main force units and base areas in an effort to reduce what he thought was their excessive defensive-mindedness.”¹²⁰ Though ultimately not successful in changing minds, Westmoreland’s indirect approach to leadership combined with changes in enemy activity between 1965 and 1967, to increasingly force Walt to emphasize offensive operations towards enemy main force units.

Perhaps the most outspoken and influential of the three generals was Lieutenant General Victor Krulak. Though small in stature, Krulak was known as “Brute” due to his aggressive personality. Serving as the special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs from 1962 to 1964, Krulak developed important connections and strong opinions on how the war should be run. In both his role with the Joint Chiefs and later as the Commander of FMFPAC, Krulak reported that “between 1962 and 1968, I went to Vietnam fifty-four times for periods of five to twenty days...Everything I saw kept bringing me back to the basic proposition that the war could only be won when the people were protected.”¹²¹ Later, in his book *First to Fight*, Krulak articulated a three-part Marine Corps approach to fighting in Vietnam, which closely matched Walt’s operational approach to combat operations:

- (1) Put the primary emphasis on pacifying the highly populated South Vietnamese coastal plain... protect the people from the guerrillas...Expand the pacified areas as rapidly as possible, but only as fast as they are secure...
- (2) Degrade the North Vietnamese ability to fight by cutting off their military substance before it ever leaves the North Vietnam ports of entry...

¹²⁰Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 334.

¹²¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 194.

(3) In coordination with South Vietnamese forces, move out of our protected and sanitized areas when a clear opportunity exists to engage the V.C. Main Force or North Vietnamese units on terms favorable to ourselves.¹²²

Krulak sought to influence all levels of command from Walt through the President of the United States. In addition to his numerous visits to Vietnam, he sent Walt many messages of an operational nature. Two classified messages from Krulak to Walt in November 1965, illustrate this point. In one message dated 9 November 1965, Krulak compared the Marine's fixed defenses securing vital airbases to French positions at Dien Bien Phu. He concluded the message with his opinion of future VC plans and provides specific tactical and operational advice for helping to counter these activities. A second message dated 22 November 1965, provides similarly specific tactical and operational advice and concludes by telling General Walt, "These are just ideas—nothing more – which I offer for you to consider. You do not have to agree with me. I well realize that it is you who have the responsibility, and whatever you do gets my 100 percent backing."¹²³ Krulak also utilized his position and connections in an attempt to influence Westmoreland, Sharp, McNamara and President Johnson. At one point, Krulak drafted a seventeen-page strategic assessment of the war in Vietnam, taking it to both Admiral Sharp and Secretary of Defense McNamara, "with whom I had had extensive contact during the 1962-64 period, when I served in the Joint Staff as the focal point for the military counterinsurgency effort."¹²⁴ At a later date in 1966, he requested and received a meeting with President Johnson, where he expressed his

¹²²Krulak, *First to Fight*, 197-198.

¹²³Both messages can be found in "INCOMING MESSAGES, 01 November 1965", Folder 002, US Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 9 Aug. 2012. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1201002103> .

¹²⁴Krulak, *First to Fight*, 199-200.

opinions on the prosecution of the war in Vietnam.¹²⁵ While Krulak, met with limited success in swaying his superiors, his opinions and views are clearly evident in Walt's approach to operations in the I CTZ.

Rapidly changing strategic and operational conditions played a vital role in shaping Walt as an operational commander. Beyond broad political decisions that were made by strategic level leaders, Walt dealt with a wide range of variables which impacted his decision making and prosecution of operations in I CTZ. In addition to anticipating and responding to enemy threats, Walt had to fulfill his higher headquarters' directives, contend with South Vietnamese governmental and military issues, and grapple with fundamental differences in warfighting doctrine and operational approaches. The remainder of this case study captures relevant strategic and operational variables that influenced General Walt's operational approach to combat operations. It then provides, a broad overview of specific III MAF operations in I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) which best highlight Walt's operational approach. For purposes of clarity, this case study is organized by year from 1965 to 1967, similar to phasing and campaign planning timelines utilized by MACV and III MAF.

1965

When General Walt assumed command of III MAF in June 1965, the national-level strategy was still in flux and the Marines were still largely constrained to small TAORs around three enclave areas. The strategic-level debate between a pacification-heavy enclave strategy and attrition based approach continued until the end of July 1965, and even then, operational guidance to III MAF remained vague well into November. Despite Westmoreland's overall desire to execute offensive operations against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units, lack of

¹²⁵Krulak, *First to Fight*, 202.

sufficient forces and unclear national-level objectives largely constrained the Marines in the vicinity of their coastal enclaves throughout the remainder of the year. Later, in 1966-67, the arrival of additional forces and changes in enemy main force activity compelled a shift towards large-unit actions, but until that time, the year 1965 presented West with his best opportunity to develop and pursue his desired operational approach.

At the U.S. national and strategic level, events of June and July 1965 further escalated the U.S. ground force commitment and role in South Vietnam. On 7 June, Westmoreland presented CINCPAC and the Joint Chiefs with a request for additional troop deployments bringing total unit involvement to 44-battalions.¹²⁶ Westmoreland stressed the requirement to “assume the role of fighting the big units, leaving the bulk of the ARVN free to protect the people.”¹²⁷ Debate about Westmoreland’s request in Washington continued into July. Westmoreland made it clear in both his first message and a follow-up message at the end of June that his troop request was the initial requirement to blunt current enemy activity and that additional forces would be required in order to assume the offensive.¹²⁸ June 1965 is notable for yet another change in political leadership within South Vietnam. Due to mounting enemy and internal pressures, the existing government collapsed and was replaced by a military governing council, with General Nguyen Van Thieu becoming the chief of state and Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky becoming premier.¹²⁹

During a mid-July fact-finding visit by Secretary of Defense McNamara and Ambassador

¹²⁶Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 140.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 140-143. See also Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 234-238.

¹²⁹Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 228-230.

Lodge, Westmoreland reiterated his requirement for an initial 44-battalion deployment and outlined a general concept of the operations at that time which became the basis for later decisions and campaign plans.¹³⁰ Expanding upon earlier concepts, Westmoreland defined the following three phases:

Phase One: Commit those American and Allied forces necessary 'to halt the losing trend' by the end of 1965.

Phase Two: 'During the first half of 1966,' take the offensive with American and Allied forces in 'high priority areas' to destroy enemy forces and reinstitute pacification programs.

Phase Three: If the enemy persisted, he might be defeated and his forces and base areas destroyed during a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase II.¹³¹

On 27 July, President Johnson approved the 44-battalion request in accordance with Westmoreland's requested timetable.¹³²

In order to direct subordinate operations and provide a framework for further troop requests in 1966, Westmoreland published a concept of operations on 1 September 1965. Similar to previous guidance, Westmoreland envisioned a three-phase campaign plan for the overall conduct of the war in Vietnam. As described in MACV reports, "COMUSMACV's objective was to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US."¹³³ In addition to highlighting the three phases described above, this document tied specific, though still somewhat ambiguous, military objectives to each phase, to include tasks for subordinate units. Pacification

¹³⁰Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 141-143; *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.5.117-123; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 236-245.

¹³¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 142.

¹³²Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 244.

¹³³Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965* (HQ USMACV, 1966) 141.

was an overall goal but not specifically assigned to the III MAF.¹³⁴ The language and specified tasks in the document stress a distinct offensive spirit. For example, while directing the III MAF to destroy Viet Cong units, protect the population and support a rural construction program, the document clearly states:

Ground operations would include search and destroy, clearing, attack on VC units or bases, day and night combat and reconnaissance patrols and ambushes to find and eliminate VC forces...Overall security would be provided by vigorous offensive action to preclude the dissipation of III MAF combat units in a static security role.¹³⁵

Generally speaking, future strategic discussions would focus on the phases as laid out in the September campaign plan. While it was not strictly adhered to, it was a base document off which future campaign plans were established.

The 1 September concept of operations was a put into writing in a 21 November 1965 letter of instruction to III MAF. This was the first document to supersede their instructions of May 1965 and constituted MACV's last written directive to III MAF in 1965. In addition to tasks to defend specific U.S. bases, III MAF was directed to conduct search and destroy and clearing operations in I CTZ, and support MACV contingency operations throughout Vietnam. While similar to previous guidance, the letter of instruction made no mention of pacification in either its specified tasks or coordinating instructions, however it did expand the distance from established TAORs that the Marines could employ offensive operations.¹³⁶ For their part, III MAF

¹³⁴Ibid., 141-148. See also Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 145; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 249-250.

¹³⁵Quotation from Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965*, 144-145.

¹³⁶CDR, COMUSMACV. "Letter of Instruction to CG, III MAF" dated 21 November 1965, in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), microfilm, Reel 1. See also, Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 115.

acknowledged the receipt of the letter in their November 1965, monthly command report, stating, “III MAF forces are now cleared for combat operations not only against VC forces which place an immediate threat to established bases, but against remote areas in order to eliminate the VC from the I Corps area.”¹³⁷

For Westmoreland, President Johnson’s 27 July decision to support the 44-battalion request was viewed as approval of Westmoreland’s attrition based strategy and the end to the enclave strategy which had been the subject of much debate since its inception. Unfortunately for Westmoreland, insufficient forces were available in 1965 for immediate transition to Phase II, large-unit operations.¹³⁸ It was in these early months of his command that Walt developed his basic operational approach, an approach which he believed was compatible with Westmoreland’s instructions but also in a direction specific to III MAF alone.¹³⁹

By June 1965, Marine forces had grown from a 5,000-man MEB guarding a single air field to an Amphibious Force of 17,500 men (most of 3rd Marine Division and an aircraft wing) occupying three ever expanding enclaves at Phu Bai, Da Nang and Chu Lai.¹⁴⁰ The Viet Cong continued to demonstrate both an insurgent and main force capability, conducting small attacks and progressively more frequent sustained battles with ARVN troops. MACV began to receive intelligence indicating increased North Vietnamese combat formations within South Vietnam. Immediately, upon taking command, General Walt conducted an evaluation of the III MAF

¹³⁷“III MAF Command Chronology” dated November 1965, in *Records of the U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War Part 2: III Marine Amphibious Force Command Histories 1964-1971*, microfilm, Reel 1.

¹³⁸Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 74-77; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 144; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 244; *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.5.117-123.

¹³⁹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 77.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

mission and base areas. Based on his observations and the primarily security role of the Marine forces, he concluded that “the Marines had to extend their TAORs and at the same time conduct deeper and more aggressive patrolling.”¹⁴¹ The Marines’ primary mission was still base security. While aware of the build-up of North Vietnamese forces, they were more concerned with Viet Cong in the immediate proximity of their three base areas. Walt later stated, “I had a survey made and found that 180,000 civilians were living within 81mm mortar range of the airfield, so the Marines went into the Pacification business.”¹⁴² Understanding the need to secure the area around the airbases in order to secure the bases themselves, Walt received permission from General Westmoreland on 15 June “to begin search and destroy operations in the general area of his enclaves, provided that these operations contributed to the defense of the bases.”¹⁴³ Working closely with General Thi, Walt expanded all three defensive enclaves and began conducting more aggressive offensive operations against the Viet Cong infrastructure.¹⁴⁴

Although it is unclear when exactly General Walt first articulated his operational approach to combat operations in the I CTZ, its origins can clearly be seen in his early months of command. The writers of the *Pentagon Papers* concluded that Walt and the Marines “determined

¹⁴¹Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 46.

¹⁴²General Walt quoted in William D. Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps Republic of South Vietnam April 1966-April 1967* (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G3 Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1970) 2.

¹⁴³Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 46.

¹⁴⁴“At Da Nang, the area occupied by the 3d Marines consisted of 172 square miles and contained a civilian population of over 50,000 persons... Within the new Chu Lai TAOR of 104 square miles, there were 11 villages, containing 68 hamlets, and a civilian population of over 50,000. The area of responsibility ... at Phu Bai was much smaller, consisting of 61 square miles, but within that area civilian population numbered almost 18,000.” Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 46.

their strategy basically on their own, deriving part of it from their own traditions in the ‘Banana Republics’ and China... 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 airbase at Da Nang.”¹⁴⁵ Described as both a “balanced approach” and an “ink blot strategy,” Walt’s approach walked a fine line between competing MACV and Marine Corps strategies.¹⁴⁶ In the process of carrying out their primary mission of security within their constrained TAORs, it was inevitable that the Marines would increasingly interact with the civilian population and the Viet Cong infrastructure. Influenced by immediate operational considerations, service guidance and personal experiences, Walt pursued operations in the I CTZ along three lines of effort. Simply stated “it consisted of a counter guerrilla campaign within the TAORs, search and destroy operations against enemy main force troops outside the TAORs, and a pacification campaign within the hamlets to eradicate the VC ‘infrastructure’ and win the loyalty of the people to the government’s cause.”¹⁴⁷ Walt described his approach as a “wringing out of the VC from the land like you wring water out of a sponge.”¹⁴⁸ Generals Krulak and Greene approved of this strategy and saw it as starkly different from the way that General Westmoreland wanted to run the war.¹⁴⁹ Walt perceived his approach as primarily different in emphasis, not kind. He believed that his intended approach was well within the guidance that he had received from his higher headquarters. While

¹⁴⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.8.18.

¹⁴⁶ Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 77; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 115; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 13; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 197.

¹⁴⁷ Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 115.

¹⁴⁸ Walt quoted in *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.8.18.

¹⁴⁹ Krulak, *First to Fight*, 197-198.

he agreed with the Marine Corps generals' views on pacification, he did intend to conduct large unit operations as well.¹⁵⁰ Colonel Edwin Simmons, Walt's operations officer, described how, "General Walt's position was 'Yes, I will engage the enemy's main force units, but first I want to have good intelligence.'"¹⁵¹ As previously discussed, this balanced approach was originally envisioned as an enclave strategy, slowly pacifying and expanding the existing enclaves until they connected and formed a single enclave along the coast in the I CTZ.¹⁵² To achieve this, Walt would pursue all three aspects of his approach with varying success.

Given Walt's emphasis on the population, it is clear that Walt was an early advocate of counterinsurgency and pacification/civic action programs. Necessarily interwoven, these two lines of effort were instrumental to pacifying and expanding the III MAF's existing enclaves. Though primacy for pacification lay with U.S. governmental agencies and outside the realm of the military, Walt saw support of the population as the key victory. Ineffective U.S. and South Vietnamese efforts at pacification, led Walt to unilaterally initiate crucial changes that resulted in a cohesive application of security and civic action operations with the I CTZ.¹⁵³

When Walt assumed command, III MAF civic action efforts were in their infancy and largely consisted of medical support to the population.¹⁵⁴ Within days of taking command, Walt issued a "Concept of Civic Action in the Republic of Vietnam." In it, he "identified the government's rural problems and began to establish the mission and the concept of operations to

¹⁵⁰Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 13-14.

¹⁵¹Colonel Simmons quoted in Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 14.

¹⁵²Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 79.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹⁵⁴Russel H. Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966* (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G3 Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978), 22.

assist the Republic...The order of III MAF left little doubt that civic action in support of the hard pressed local government...would be the basis of Marine Corps action.”¹⁵⁵ Though some advances were made by the end of July, corruption within South Vietnamese government entities combined with lack of security and organization for U.S. civilian agencies prevented an effective civilian-led pacification program.¹⁵⁶ To address these issues, Walt enacted several key changes. First among these was the establishment of a Joint Coordinating Council (JCC) on 30 August 1965. With the permission and support of both General Thi, the I Corps Commander, and the lead U.S. governmental agency, Walt’s “I Corps JCC rapidly became the coordinating hub for the civil activities of most of the U.S. governmental agencies in the Northern Region of Vietnam.”¹⁵⁷ Represented on the council were members of the III MAF staff, Vietnamese governmental agencies, U.S. civilian agencies and other U.S. military services that played a role in the I Corps’ region. Meeting on a weekly basis, the council proved extremely effective at linking the efforts of the South Vietnamese government with the Marines’ combat operations. Over time, additional working committees were established under the JCC to deal with public health, education, roads, commodity distribution, psychological warfare and the Port of Da Nang. By the end of 1965, subordinate coordinating councils were established at provincial and district levels throughout the I CTZ. To demonstrate his commitment to the pacification effort, Walt assigned two Brigadier Generals as JCC council members.¹⁵⁸ Within his own headquarters, Walt underscored his efforts

¹⁵⁵Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966*, 21.

¹⁵⁶Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 79; Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966*, 34-35; *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.8.18.

¹⁵⁷Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966*, 35-36.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 143-144; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 79-80.

by transforming his G-5 Plans staff section into a staff section focused on civic action, a change which was emulated throughout the III MAF subordinate units down to the battalion level.¹⁵⁹

While pacification/civic action may have been the goal, ensuring security of vital U.S. airbases and surrounding civilian populations was the number one priority of the III MAF, and lay at the heart of the enclave strategy. In order to control the surrounding areas, “Walt and his troops accordingly launched a methodical campaign emphasizing small-unit operations to drive out the guerrillas and gradually expand secure zones around Da Nang and the subsidiary Marine bases.”¹⁶⁰ The Marines conducted countless patrol and small unit operations within their TAORs. Referred to by Walt as the “bread and butter of my command,” these combat actions were effective at detecting and destroying Viet Cong guerrilla units and political apparatus.¹⁶¹

Security in combination with pacification efforts took the form of several tactical innovations which merits mention. The first and most famous of these innovations was the Combined Action Platoon (CAP). Loosely based on similar tactical innovations in the Marines’ Small Wars in Nicaragua and Haiti, the CAP program, which was expanded in 1966-67, assigned squads of Marine volunteers to operate alongside local Popular Force (PF) platoons. The integrated units, later known as Combined Action Companies (CAC), were assigned to specific hamlets and villages and played a large role in III MAF pacification and counter guerrilla efforts. Initially started as a tactical innovation at the small unit level, Walt was personally responsible for recognizing the value of the program, expanding and spreading the program throughout the

¹⁵⁹Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 79-80.

¹⁶⁰Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 402.

¹⁶¹General Walt quoted in Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 131. Shulimson also details “In October 3d Marine Division units at all three enclaves conducted 2,877 patrols and 1,061 ambushes ... In December, the division reported a total of 9,698 offensive operations.”

Marines' TAOR in the coming years.¹⁶² The CAP program in 1965 started in vicinity of the Phu Bai airfield and had limited contact with the enemy. However, it was a source of ever increasing information on VC in the local area and forged strong bonds with the local population.¹⁶³ While an instrumental part of III MAF counterinsurgency, personnel and mission constraints prevented Walt from fully exploiting this program to the depth and degree that he desired.¹⁶⁴

Several other tactical innovations originated in 1965 and were significant to Walt's counterinsurgency and pacification lines of effort. Operation GOLDEN FLEECE began as a tactical innovation by the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in September 1965 and expanded throughout the Marines' TAOR in the next several months. Conducting aggressive patrolling, ambushes and cordon operations, the Marines worked with the local populations to prevent Viet Cong interference with the rice harvest. The program proved very successful at protecting the population and cutting the VC off from vital subsistence. Walt refined and expanded the program in the subsequent years.¹⁶⁵ Another innovation called COUNTY FAIR included "a cordon and search operation with psychological overtones."¹⁶⁶ These operations consisted of Marine Corps

¹⁶²The CAPs are prominently mentioned in most analyses of the Marines in Vietnam and other modern day commentary on counterinsurgency. See Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The US Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 16-27; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 80; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 188-190; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 166; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 133-138.

¹⁶³Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 138.

¹⁶⁴Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 131.

¹⁶⁵Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 51-54; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 191; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 138-141; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 92.

¹⁶⁶Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 141.

cordons around a village with ARVN forces conducting search and screening operations looking for Viet Cong within the village. Simultaneous to the cordon, Marines would provide subsistence and medical assistance to the village's people. Though not fully implemented until 1966, these operations were effective at identifying and capturing Viet Cong governance infrastructure at the rural level.¹⁶⁷ Walt also credited the use of Kit Carson Scouts, which utilized reformed Viet Cong as scouts, and STINGRAY operations, consisting of deep reconnaissance patrols with force recon teams, as vital to the Marines' success.¹⁶⁸ While almost all of these innovations were developed by tactical leaders within the III MAF, Walt deserves credit for recognizing and expanding these successful programs throughout his time in command.

General Walt's third line of effort in his balanced approach to operations consisted of larger unit actions against VC main force units. Contact with VC guerrilla and main force units remained limited, but had increased steadily since July 1965. The Marines were still largely constrained by their guidance of 6 May, which "restricted III MAF to reserve/reaction missions in support of South Vietnamese units heavily engaged with an enemy force."¹⁶⁹ Westmoreland relieved Walt of these restrictions on 6 August, and the Marines began to seek out combat with VC main force units. The first major operation/battle which demonstrated Walt's main force line of effort was operation STARLIGHT from 18-24 August 1965. Based on intelligence gained from previous operations and interrogations, the operation targeted the 1st VC Regiment several miles south of Chu Lai. Consisting of a coordinated amphibious landing, air assaults, and a multi-battalion attack, STARLIGHT achieved success through the combined arms application of

¹⁶⁷Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 33-39; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 92; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 141-142.

¹⁶⁸Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 43-51.

¹⁶⁹Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 69.

infantry, aviation, engineers, armor and artillery. Efforts to prevent civilian casualties were not entirely successful, and though the Marines had defeated two VC battalions, they were largely reconstituted within the next few months.¹⁷⁰ A similar operation named PIRRANHA occurred from 7-8 September, but with considerably less success. While the Marines increased large unit operations outside their TAORs over the next several months, VC main force units purposefully avoided battle. Operations through the end of November included RED SNAPPER, LIEN KET-10, BLACK FERRET, and BLUE MARLIN.¹⁷¹ Of note for this time period, Walt was occasionally granted the assistance of the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF). Built around a Marine battalion landing team, the SLF answered to the Fleet commander and Admiral Sharp, and was often used to support III MAF operations or to conduct independent targeted amphibious raids. The SLF did participate in operation STARLIGHT and would play a role in later Marine operations.¹⁷²

The last major operation of 1965, HARVEST MOON, occurred from 9 to 20 December, shortly after the release of Westmoreland's 21 November Letter of Instruction directing offensive action against VC main force units outside of the Marine TAORs. The operation was the largest combined (with the ARVN) operation that the Marines had yet conducted, and once again targeted the 1st VC Regiment. Intended to deny the enemy a base of operations, HARVEST MOON was ultimately successful but not without its flaws. ARVN forces were ambushed on the

¹⁷⁰Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965*, 162-163; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 69-83; Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 67-77; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 156.

¹⁷¹Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965*, 163-164; Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 84-97.

¹⁷²Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 193-203.

first day of the operation and Marine forces were committed earlier than anticipated. The use of supporting aviation played a key role in the battle but revealed a greater need for ground and air coordination. Apart from the significance of large-scale, combined ARVN/Marine operations, HARVEST MOON also saw the employment of Task Force DELTA. DELTA was a task organized unit under the 3rd Marine Division's Assistant Division Commander.¹⁷³ Walt made use of Task Force DELTA to meet emergent threats and extend his operational reach on several other occasions during his time in command.

1966

From the perspective of General Walt and the III MAF, 1966 proved a year of expanding capability, intensifying threat and an unwelcome deviation from his envisioned operational approach toward one of attrition. Unlike the ever-changing strategic landscape of 1965, U.S. national strategy did not change significantly in 1966 and General Westmoreland continued to emphasize his general strategic and operational themes from the year before. Apart from MACV directed guidance, Walt's operational approach in 1966 was most drastically impacted by emergent Viet Cong and North Vietnamese actions, and internal South Vietnamese political strife which came to a head in the I CTZ in March 1966. Though Walt never lost sight of his overall desired approach, factors such as enemy actions, political turmoil, and enhanced operational guidance from Westmoreland, served to bring Walt more in line with Westmoreland's attritional framework of operations.

The most significant U.S. national strategic level event in 1966 was a conference held in Honolulu from 17 January to 9 February. Beginning in November 1965, Westmoreland revised

¹⁷³Information regarding Operation HARVEST MOON obtained from Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 99-111; Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965*, 164-165.

his requirements for additional Phase II forces, almost doubling his previous request. This conference was important for several reasons. First of all, the conference “resulted in a clear restatement of America’s dual campaign objectives. Pacification, through sweeping economic and political reform...[and] fully supported the primary objective of neutralizing ‘V.C./PAVN forces.’”¹⁷⁴ Though pacification received high-level government emphasis at that time, the overall program did not see progress until well into 1967. The Honolulu conference also focused on various options for force deployment, resulting in strategic level decisions on force build-up that had little impact on III MAF operations. More pertinent to operations within Vietnam, was “a set of quantitative campaign objectives for 1966, based primarily on Westmoreland’s concept of operations.”¹⁷⁵ These objectives provided Westmoreland with measurable statistics for developing military operational objectives and perhaps more importantly, written documentation on how the Secretary of Defense, on behalf of the President, intended to prosecute the war. Westmoreland wrote, “Nothing about those goals conflicted with the broad outline of how the war was to be fought as I had worked out over months of consultation....Indeed, in setting the goals for 1966, senior civilian authorities...directed that I proceed as I had planned.”¹⁷⁶ This fact was emphasized to subordinate commanders on 2 February, when Westmoreland directed the Corps/MAF commanders to continue to operate under existing guidance. At the same time, Westmoreland counseled them to take advantage of arriving forces to undertake greater offensive actions against enemy units.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴Hennessey, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 82.

¹⁷⁵Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 256-258.

¹⁷⁶Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 160-161. For detailed discussion of these operational objectives, see Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1966* (HQ USMACV, 1967) 347-348.

¹⁷⁷Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance*

The struggle for the northern provinces of South Vietnam would dominate the majority of III MAF operations for most of 1966 and into 1967. As the area closest to the DMZ and North Vietnam, it was the most likely location for attack and infiltration by PAVN forces. Already concerned with Walt's overall approach to fighting the enemy, Westmoreland felt that with the exception of a few areas, the Marines allowed the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to move about the I CTZ at will. While at the Honolulu Conference in February 1966, President Johnson privately pressed General Westmoreland for an appraisal of the enemy's next move. Given his assessment of enemy infiltrations, recruitment and large unit employments, Westmoreland answered that they would seek to capture Hue, the traditional capital of Vietnam, and a location with major strategic and psychological importance.¹⁷⁸ Seeming to confirm Westmoreland's suspicions, intelligence sources reported in April 1966, the movement of a North Vietnamese division into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. For their part, III MAF believed the intelligence on the size of North Vietnamese forces was flawed and did not think that a regular unit offensive was imminent.¹⁷⁹ As Westmoreland's concerns about vulnerabilities in the north continued to increase, South Vietnamese political unrest in I CTZ from March to June 1966 served to distract III MAF from executing their campaign plan and encouraged exploitation by North Vietnam forces.

Command, Vietnam 1966, 341.

¹⁷⁸Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 163-167.

¹⁷⁹Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 139-140.

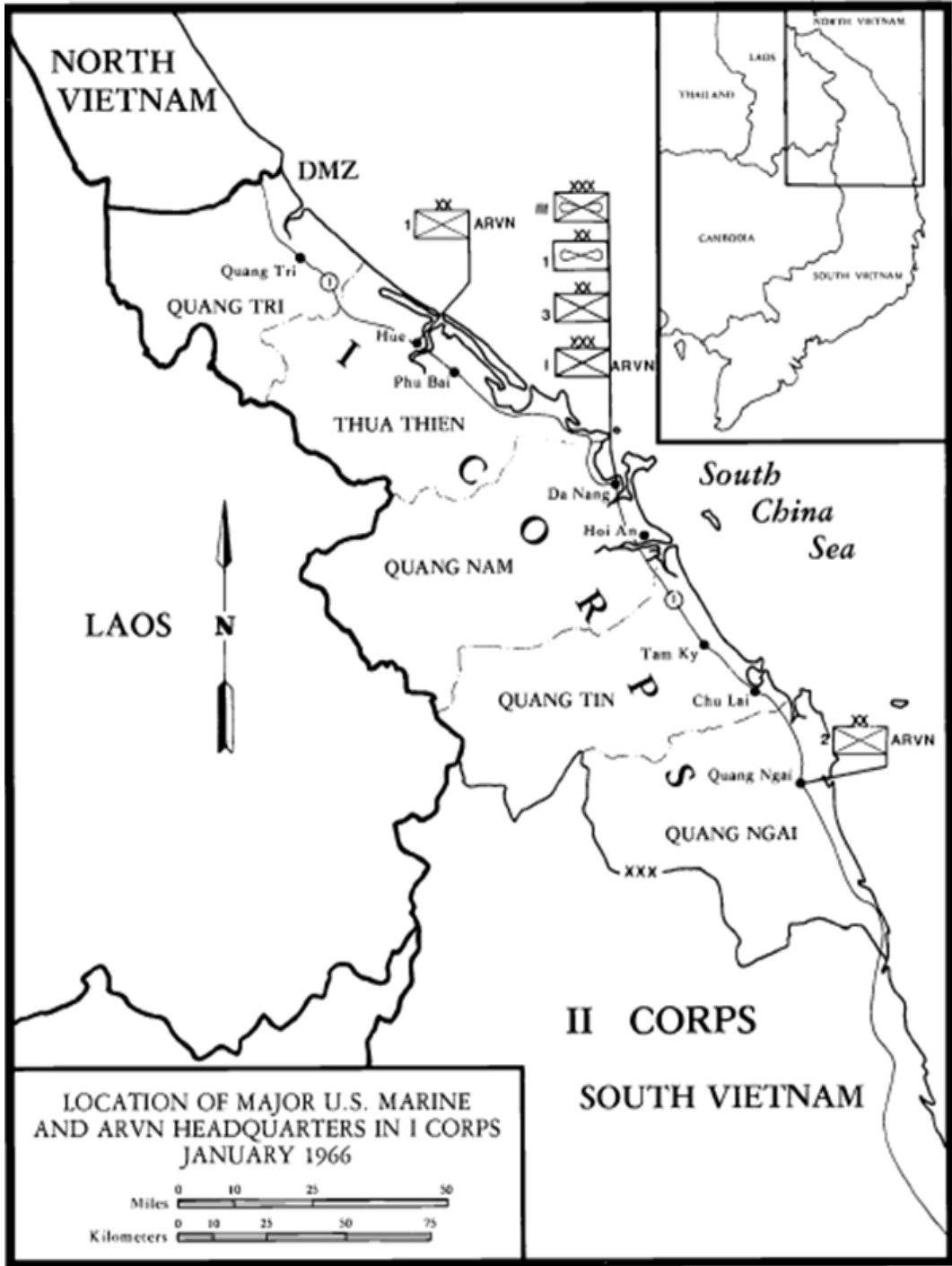


Figure 2. III MAF Tactical Area of Responsibility, January 1966.

Source: Jack Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division HQ, US Marine Corps, 1982), 4.

As an organization, III MAF changed significantly from the beginning to the end of 1966. Starting out as force of approximately 40,000 Marines built around the 3rd Marine Division and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, III MAF concluded the year with an additional division, 1st Marine Division, and a Logistics Command, totaling close to 70,000 Marines.¹⁸⁰ The ARVN I Corps still consisted of two divisions, with the 1st Division assigned to the two northernmost provinces and the 2nd Division assigned to cover the southern provinces of the I CTZ (see, Figure 2).

Concurrent to the build-up of U.S. forces, the enemy continued to infiltrate and recruit within South Vietnam.¹⁸¹ In the early months of 1966, Westmoreland increasingly believed that the NVA was utilizing both Cambodia and Laos as sanctuaries for attacks in South Vietnam and that they were massing on the border of the two northernmost provinces in I CTZ.¹⁸² Contrasting this opinion, “General Walt and his staff read the intelligence data differently. Although acknowledging some buildup of enemy forces in the two northern provinces, they saw little evidence of any major enemy all-out offensive.”¹⁸³ In a deliberate attempt to destabilize III MAF’s increasingly successful pacification campaign, the North Vietnamese purposefully encroached on the border and into South Vietnam to draw the Marines away from pacification.¹⁸⁴ Despite Walt’s belief that enemy activity did not indicate a major offensive, it was enough to convince MACV to shift III MAF forces away from pacification and towards the DMZ. The shift in emphasis within I CTZ arrested significant forward progress in pacification by the end of the

¹⁸⁰Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 4-5, 319.

¹⁸¹“Infiltration south was approaching 8,400 a month, while VC recruiting remained at approximately 7,000 a month.” Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 83.

¹⁸²Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 139-140.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁸⁴Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 98.

year.¹⁸⁵

Still operating under the mission requirement of the 21 November 1965 MACV Letter of Instruction, Walt entered 1966 with every intention of continuing with his balanced approach to operations. Anticipating the arrival of additional Marine forces in early 1966, Walt continued to focus on counter guerrilla operations against Viet Cong infrastructure, search and destroy operations against main force units, and pacification within the expanding Marine enclaves. Walt believed that III MAF along with the ARVN I Corps could “secure the entire coastal plain from Quang Tri to Quang Ngai by the end of 1966.”¹⁸⁶ Despite efforts to maintain a balanced approach, two significant events in 1966 served to force Walt to increasingly divert forces away from pacification efforts. The first, a Buddhist uprising from March to June, temporarily halted pacification operations in the Da Nang TAOR. The second event, a July 1966 North Vietnamese offensive along the DMZ caused Walt to shift considerable forces to the northern province to counter the emergent threat.¹⁸⁷

While III MAF units pursued Walt’s balanced approach, the nature of the operating environment, variances in enemy threat, and individual unit capabilities, necessitated diverse implementation in each of the Marine Corps’ enclaves. At the beginning of 1966, the central portion of the I CTZ around Da Nang remained the Marines’ main effort, where “General Walt’s highest priority was the pacification effort south of Da Nang.”¹⁸⁸ A single infantry battalion in the

¹⁸⁵Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 139-140; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 408-409.

¹⁸⁶Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 15.

¹⁸⁷Jack Shulimson. “The Marine War: III MAF in Vietnam, 1965-1971.” Academic Paper. U.S. Marine Corps Historical Center, 1996. In The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/events/1996_Symposium/96papers/marwar.htm (accessed November 3, 2012).

¹⁸⁸Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 47.

north at Phu Bai focused primarily on base defense, while the relatively capable Marine forces at Chu Lai in the south was able to conduct larger unit operations against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units conducting buildup along the southern I Corps and northern II Corps boundary.¹⁸⁹ Pacification/civic action and counter guerrilla operations during this period continued largely along the pattern established during 1965. Extensive patrolling in local areas continued at all three Marine enclaves and the I Corps Joint Coordination center continued to coordinate civic action programs along with the South Vietnamese and U.S. governmental agencies.¹⁹⁰ In pursuit of Walt's third line of effort against enemy main force units, several large operations also took place during this time. Of note, Operation DOUBLE EAGLE (28 January – 17 February) saw the reactivation of TF DELTA, the use of the 7th Fleet's SLF, and combined operations with several ARVN divisions and the 1st Cavalry Division from Field Force, Vietnam, to target three NVA and VC regiments in the southern I CTZ.¹⁹¹ III MAF units actively sought to incorporate civic action into large unit operations. In both, Operations MALLARD (11-17 January) and DOUBLE EAGLE, the Marines prepared for and employed large quantities of supplies to support civilians who were displaced from their homes and provided reparation payments to those civilians who experienced damages to their homes and property. Increasingly incorporated into this civic action effort was the use of psychological war themes against the Viet Cong and in support of the South Vietnamese government.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 15.

¹⁹⁰Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966*, 63.

¹⁹¹Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff. *Command History: USMACV 1966*, 359-361; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 19-36.

¹⁹²Stolfi, *US Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam March 1965 – March 1966*, 62-73.

A major Buddhist uprising in the I CTZ from March to June 1966 impacted Walt's operational approach and allowed the enemy time and maneuver room to prepare for future offenses.¹⁹³ On March 10, 1966, the Premier Nguyen Ky relieved General Thi, the popular and effective Vietnamese I Corps Commander. This decision resulted in immediate and enduring protests and military confrontations between government forces and a "spontaneously" formed Struggle Movement built around the politically and religiously powerful Buddhists. Indications of Communist influence within the Struggle Movement led to an even greater escalation of tensions. Beyond protests, the movement held crippling strikes, seized a radio station, and split allegiances within the armed forces. The Marines of III MAF tried to remain neutral but their operations around Hue and Da Nang came to a halt. Walt concluded that he would act to "prevent an armed confrontation between opposing factions," a course of action that he personally took part in to prevent fighting between government forces and dissident forces loyal to the Buddhist movement.¹⁹⁴ The crisis came to a close at the end of May, with government forces reentering Hue on 10 June 1966. Eventually, General Hoang Xuan Lam, the very capable former 2nd ARVN Division commander, assumed command of the ARVN I Corps. III MAF walked a tight line between the various factions and prevented a much more significant country-wide crisis. The political elements behind the Struggle Movement remained strong, bringing into question the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government. Most importantly to the Marines of III MAF, the lengthy crisis halted all ARVN pacification efforts in I CTZ and "by June estimates were that pacification had been set back at least six months."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³The Buddhist uprising is covered in greater detail by Walt in his book, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*.

¹⁹⁴Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 113-136. Quotation from, 118.

¹⁹⁵Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 89-90. See also Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 113-136; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 169-176.

These events did not occur in a vacuum. By March, the entirety of the 1st Marine Division had completed their deployment into the I CTZ and Walt was able to relinquish command of the 3rd Marine Division and focus on the larger fight. Under the new structure, the 1st Marine Division assumed responsibility for the Chu Lai enclave while the 3rd Marine Division moved forces to focus on Da Nang and Phu Bai.¹⁹⁶ In March, with additional Marine forces, Walt assigned four battalions under the 4th Marine Regiment to assume responsibility for the northern Phu Bai enclave.¹⁹⁷ The Marines at Da Nang continued to fight local Viet Cong forces throughout the political crisis. From March through June, Marine units at Chu Lai, along with the 2nd ARVN Division, conducted a series of major operations, achieving considerable success against North Vietnamese Army forces that were threatening the southern I CTZ.¹⁹⁸ In the A Chau Valley two NVA regiments attacked a Special Forces Camp along the Laotian border, forcing its abandonment after three days of heavy fighting. This valley would not be contested again for two years and would provide the North Vietnamese a vital logistics base and road network.¹⁹⁹ Against this backdrop, intelligence reports combined with numerous 1st ARVN Division contacts with NVA regular forces throughout May and June along the DMZ, convinced Westmoreland that an NVA Division was operating in the area. Though not entirely persuaded, General Walt ordered the 4th Marine Regiment to conduct robust reconnaissance in the vicinity of Dong Ha and Cam Lo in the Quang Tri province. By the end of June, 4th Marine units began

¹⁹⁶Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 75, 128.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹⁸For further information on Operations UTAH, KANSAS and TEXAS, see *Ibid.*, 109-136.

¹⁹⁹Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 124; Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: USMACV 1966*, 364.

to make contact with NVA forces.²⁰⁰

In early July, increased reconnaissance operations along the DMZ frequently made contact with NVA forces. Convinced that the North Vietnamese 324B Division had moved into the Quang Tri province, Westmoreland deliberated with Walt and the I Corps Commander, General Lam on 12 July 1966.²⁰¹ General Westmoreland, on the advice and recommendation of Walt, ordered III MAF “to move up to a division to Quang Tri.”²⁰² Reconstituting TF DELTA around seven Marine infantry battalions, to include the battalion landing team of the 7th Fleet SLF, and five ARVN battalions, III MAF conducted Operation HASTINGS from 15 July to 3 August. The Marines succeeded in driving the NVA 324B Division back across the DMZ inflicting heavy losses on the enemy.²⁰³ Later Walt would discuss the significance of this operation:

This was a turning point in the conflict. Until early 1969 my men had been widely dispersed, exercising the greatest amount of security over the greatest number of people, concentrating only when we found Viet Cong Main Force units trying to bolster the hapless and struggling guerrilla, or to protect our most vital installations against guerrilla attack. Now we were in a situation similar to that in Korea in 1950 – an army coming down from the north to seize and hold ground.²⁰⁴

Though temporarily defeated, the 324B Division was not destroyed and intelligence reports indicated that it was being joined by the 304th and 341st Divisions north of the DMZ.

Following Operation HASTINGS, a reinforced battalion was left along the DMZ at Dong Ha to provide intelligence on enemy composition and intentions. The robust reconnaissance

²⁰⁰Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 157-158.

²⁰¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 197.

²⁰²Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 159-161.

²⁰³Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 140-141; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 196-197; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 159-175.

²⁰⁴Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 140.

operation was named Operation PRAIRIE. The first enemy contact of Operation PRAIRIE occurred almost immediately, on 6 August, and stretched into October. 3rd Marine Division forces encountered significant enemy forces, resulting in yet another build-up of III MAF forces along the northern province (still under the auspices of Operation PRAIRIE). The build-up once again included the use of the 7th Fleet SLF which conducted operations along the coastline in vicinity of the DMZ.²⁰⁵ At the end of September, reacting to Westmoreland's understanding of enemy intentions, Walt reluctantly reinforced an austere Special Forces Camp at Khe Sanh, in the northwestern portion of the Quan Tri province.²⁰⁶ While this location was not attacked in 1966, it became a much contested area later on in 1967. Acknowledging the significant enemy threat in the north, Walt gave in to the inevitable and ordered the 3rd Marine Division to relocate from Da Nang to the northern two provinces on 6 October 1966.²⁰⁷ General Westmoreland moved an Army battalion from the 173rd Airborne to reinforce the 1st Marine Division which had expanded its TAOR to include those enclaves left undefended by the 3rd Marine Division.²⁰⁸ By this time, Operation PRAIRIE had ceased to exist as an operation and became the name of the new northern TAOR, which was now centered on the town of Dong Ha. III MAF fires, augmented by Army artillery and naval gunfire could range the entire DMZ. Despite considerable contact at the small unit level, no major North Vietnamese offensive occurred in the remainder of 1966. By November, the 324B Division pulled back north of the DMZ with the onset of monsoon season. With decreasing enemy contact, III MAF reduced forces to one infantry regiment and four

²⁰⁵Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff. *Command History: USMACV 1966*, 368.

²⁰⁶Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 198; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966, 195-196*; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 209.

²⁰⁷Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 197.

²⁰⁸Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 198-199.

battalions in Quang Tri, but remained prepared for an enemy offensive following the monsoon season²⁰⁹

While operations along the DMZ were ongoing, the 1st Marine Division attempted “to continue the balanced approach in the more populous south.”²¹⁰ One of the more long-term operations was Operation MACON which stretched from July into October and targeted Viet Cong units south of Da Nang.²¹¹ Operations WASHINGTON and COLORADO in the vicinity of Chu Lai targeted both North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units.²¹² Aggressive counterinsurgency patrols continued throughout the remainder of 1966. Though civic action programs suffered during the Buddhist Uprising, pacification efforts did improve following its resolution. Operations GOLDEN FLEECE and COUNTY FAIR continued routinely with great success.²¹³ The Combined Action Platoon program grew in 1966 and achieved notable results, with the number of platoons growing from five to fifty seven by the end of the year.²¹⁴ The JCC continued to coordinate III MAF and governmental efforts in support of the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development program and the population as a whole. By the end of 1966, the JCC “had become directly involved in guiding, supporting, and encouraging the growth of no less than 26 separate programs of pacification throughout the I CTZ.”²¹⁵

²⁰⁹Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966, 197-198*.

²¹⁰Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 98.

²¹¹Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 201-210.

²¹²*Ibid.*, 211-220.

²¹³Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps Republic of South Vietnam April 1966-April 1967*, 43. There were 20 COUNTY FAIR operations in July 1966 with plans to continue with at least 10 similar operations per month in the future.

²¹⁴Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 239-240.

²¹⁵Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps Republic of South Vietnam April*

Outside of the I CTZ, strategic debate had continued between Westmoreland, Ambassador Lodge, CINCPAC, McNamara, and the JCS. Though MACV forces had met with great success against enemy main force units, many of the senior leaders questioned the way ahead. On 26 August 1966, anticipating a transition to a new phase of the war, Westmoreland sent a message to CINCPAC and the other senior leaders, proposing “to review the military situation in South Vietnam as relates to our concepts; past, present, and future.”²¹⁶ His message presented his initial concept of the operations for the remainder of 1966 up to May of 1967. Maintaining a U.S. focus on enemy main force units, Westmoreland wrote, “The growing strength of US/FW [Free World] forces will provide the shield that will permit ARVN to shift ... to direct support of RD [Revolutionary Development].” This would allow, “a significant number of the US/FW maneuver battalions will be committed to tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) missions.”²¹⁷ The Revolutionary Development (RD) program was a South Vietnamese effort to conduct pacification at the village level and relieve Marine Corps forces to pursue combat operations against NVA and VC units. The program had received verbal support at the Honolulu Conference but had been plagued by troubles throughout 1966. Continued support of the program provided hope for its improvement in 1967.²¹⁸

From August to November 1966, senior leaders exchanged messages and ideas in an attempt to evaluate the progress of the war and determine a way ahead. Following a trip to

1966-April 1967, 84.

²¹⁶*Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.6.a.58.

²¹⁷Both quotations from *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹⁸Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 84-87; See also Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps Republic of South Vietnam April 1966-April 1967*, 12-86. Parker provides a detailed account of civic action in 1966, to include detailed discussions of the Revolutionary Development program.

Vietnam, Secretary McNamara sent a particularly pessimistic report to President Johnson on 14 October 1966. In it, he acknowledged some military victories but wrote, "I see no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon." McNamara further stated, "Pacification is a bad disappointment," and that "Pacification has if anything gone backwards."²¹⁹ CINCPAC and MACV held planning conferences in Honolulu and Manila at the end of October 1966. Throughout the exchange of ideas and information, several themes continued to surface: the continued infiltration of North Vietnamese and the forces required to counter them; enemy sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia; the importance of pacification; and, a proposed anti-infiltration barrier across the DMZ, an idea which would become significant to III MAF in 1967.²²⁰ On 7 November 1966, Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff set out their Combined Campaign Plan for 1967. While reemphasizing his focus on main force units, Westmoreland's plan confirmed a shift towards pacification efforts. Operations against main force units would focus on those units that directly threatened population security, while targeting guerrillas and VC networks between major operations.²²¹ MACV and the ARVN Joint General Staff decided that the South Vietnamese would bear primary responsibility for pacification, supported by American forces. Instructions given to III MAF within the campaign plan included three tasks:

To counter rapidly any threat of invasion across the I Corps borders;
To destroy Viet Cong/ North Vietnamese Army units attempting to disrupt the government's expanding control over the populated areas; and,
To ensure the security of the base areas and lines of communication that were enabling

²¹⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.6.a.82. For full text of the message, see pages 81-89.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, Source includes primary source material.

²²¹ Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967*, 421. For a detailed discussions of the 1967 Combined Campaign Plan, see *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.6.a.120-122; Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967 Volumes I-III*. (HQ USMACV, 1968) 317-326.

the government to expand its control.²²²

While the campaign plan gave increasing emphasis to pacification, it still gave priority to offensive operations against main force units. Given organic capabilities, the III MAF would find itself hard pressed to meet its operational requirements in 1967.

Despite overall increases in combat power, III MAF's goal of "pacifying and unifying its three enclaves during 1966 had been dashed."²²³ The Buddhist Uprising and North Vietnamese forces in both southern I CTZ and along the DMZ had effectively drawn necessary capability away from General Walt's pacification endeavors. At the end of 1966, General Walt continued to disagree with MACV's overall emphasis on main force units. In a letter from December 1966, Walt wrote,

the mass of infiltrators must be considered as NVA or main force VC types. As the record shows, we beat these units handily each time we encounter them. In my mind, therefore, we should not fall into the trap of expending troops unduly seeking to prevent the entry of individuals and units who pose the lesser threat to our ultimate objective, which remains the people of South Vietnam.²²⁴

Though still convinced of the validity of his underlying operational approach to defeating the enemy in I CTZ, enemy action and explicit orders from MACV prevented Walt from conducting the III MAF campaign plan as he preferred. From January to June 1967, when General Walt relinquished command of III MAF, the Marines would continue to apply limited resources to pursue their desired operational approach while increasingly devoting forces to the DMZ and main force units.

²²²Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 6.

²²³Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 319.

²²⁴Letter from Walt, dated 29 December 1966, quoted in Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 319.

1967

Westmoreland considered 1967 to be the “Year of the Offense,” where with “larger forces, added firepower, and improved mobility, we carried the battle to the enemy on a sustained basis throughout the year. Concurrently, we planned to intensify and expand the pacification effort.”²²⁵ For his part, Walt changed command in June, and never saw the fruits of his labor borne out. Generally speaking, for III MAF, the period up until June 1967 did not progress appreciably different than the latter half of 1966. The 3rd Marine Division still bore responsibility for the northern two provinces of South Vietnam, where they conducted large unit actions against North Vietnamese units south of the DMZ, and pacification and counterinsurgency operations throughout the rest of their TAOR.²²⁶ To their south, the 1st Marine Division continued to conduct a balanced approach to operations around the Da Nang and Chu Lai enclaves, while continuing to engage North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units in the southern I CTZ.²²⁷ The ARVN I Corps, still under the command of General Hoang Xuan Lam, continued to operate alongside the Marines of III MAF. Based on the Combined Campaign Plan for 1967, the Marines increasingly supported the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development program and pushed, with limited success, for ARVN forces to take over pacification operations. As at the end of 1966, operational emphasis continued to shift away from pacification and towards large-unit actions against main force elements.

Facing the Marines throughout the I CTZ and into North Vietnam were two infantry divisions located in I CTZ (2nd NVA Division in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin; 3rd NVA Division

²²⁵Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 131.

²²⁶Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 9.

²²⁷*Ibid.*, 51.

in Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, and Kontum) with four additional NVA divisions located north of the DMZ (304th, 320th, 324B, and the 32C).²²⁸ Despite heavy losses to NVA main force units in the second half of 1966, NVA units continued to infiltrate into South Vietnam to reinforce guerrilla units and conduct attacks throughout I CTZ. Attrition to guerrilla units throughout 1967 caused North Vietnamese forces to augment guerrilla forces by up to 50% by the end of the year.²²⁹ Significant enemy activity in the first half of 1967 included conventional multibattalion attacks south of the DMZ in Quang Tri province in February, March and April, and increased enemy guerrilla and main force units attacks in the Quang Nam province. A broad look at North Vietnamese strategy saw a return to emphasizing guerrilla warfare in populated areas while utilizing the DMZ and Laos as safe havens from which to conduct regular force operations into the I CTZ²³⁰

For Walt, the greatest threat to his desired operational approach was a shortage of capability and personnel. While many of these shortages were due to enemy and operational related variables, a strategic level decision to build an anti-infiltration barrier along the DMZ served to further expend III MAF's finite resources. Though construction did not begin until April 1967, the history of the barrier stretched back to 1964, when Westmoreland halted the first proposals for its construction. With increased enemy activity across the DMZ in 1966, McNamara personally pushed for the implementation of the barrier plan. Originally envisioned as a reinforced barrier stretching from the South China Sea, west along the DMZ, through the

²²⁸Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 7 - 8; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 8.

²²⁹Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 135; Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I (HQ USMACV, 1968) 330-331.

²³⁰Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 108-110.

northern panhandle of Laos to the border of Thailand, the barrier plan went through many variations between September 1966 to April 1967. Fearing that the construction and security of the barrier would fix significant forces in static positions along the DMZ, General Walt repeatedly argued against the barrier plan, proposing instead a mobile defense to prevent infiltration. Fully understanding the impracticality of the static barrier concept, Westmoreland endorsed a series of manned strongpoints. Despite continued protests from General Walt and other Marine leaders, McNamara ordered the construction of a much modified barrier plan in March 1967. The new barrier began at the South China Sea and ran inland approximately 11 kilometers, supported by six strongpoints, and a wire obstacle system. Dutifully, Walt ordered his subordinate commanders to carry out the operation. Though the final plan for the barrier was not complete until June, III MAF began initial work in April. The barrier project continued into 1968 and was a constant source of high level emphasis and consternation.²³¹

As in previous years, variable operational environments throughout the I CTZ demanded different approaches to combat operations by III MAF subordinate commanders. In the north, the 3rd Marine Division concluded Operation PRAIRIE on 31 January, which had been ongoing since August of 1965. Operation PRAIRIE II began on 1 February and pursued similar objectives of identifying NVA units along the DMZ. At the end of February, 3rd Marine Division forces made contact with sizeable NVA forces and disrupted operations against Marine Corps outposts. PRAIRIE II ended on 18 March and was immediately followed by Operation PRAIRIE III which continued to patrol and engage enemy forces along the DMZ until 19 April. Though 3rd Marine forces were tactically successful against NVA units along the DMZ during the three PRAIRIE

²³¹Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 199-201; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 86-104; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 119-121; Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*, 314-319.

operations, the NVA continued to infiltrate and engage the Marines.²³²

As the situation deteriorated, the 3rd Marine Division began another PRAIRIE operation on 20 April, which required the division to shift additional forces toward the DMZ. Concurrent with this operation, elements of the 1st ARVN Division and the 3rd Marine Division reinforced with the Seventh Fleet SLF and additional units from the south, conducted Operation LAM SON 54, Operation BEAU CHARGER, and Operation HICKORY. Operation PRAIRIE IV ended on 31 May.²³³ Operation HICKORY in particular marked the first time that a large-scale operation was conducted into the southern portion of the DMZ and signaled to the NVA that the DMZ no longer offered an unopposed sanctuary. While all of these operations targeted NVA units along the DMZ and resulted in lopsided victories for the Marine and ARVN forces, they were not decisive. Though Walt relinquished command of III MAF in June of 1967, additional operations continued in the northern portions of the Quan Tri Province throughout the remainder of the year.²³⁴

On 24 April, shortly after the start of the last PRAIRIE operation, one of the bloodiest battles of 1967 occurred at the Marine combat base of Khe Sanh. Located in the northeast corner of the Quang Tri province near the Laotian and North Vietnam borders, Khe Sanh lay astride a major PAVN infiltration route into South Vietnam. Although originally reinforced with a battalion size element in 1966 during Operation PRAIRIE, a reinforced Marine infantry company

²³²Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I, 356-358; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 108-109; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 9-20.

²³³Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I, 358-360; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 108-109; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 20-30.

²³⁴ Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 30, 95-104, 125-147.

secured the combat base in April of 1967. In what became known as the First Battle of Khe Sanh (the more well-known battle occurred in 1968), the Marines lost 155 men in heavy fighting that displayed remarkable integration of U.S. air and ground forces. Though not attacked in force again in 1967, the area would be a continual focus of enemy effort.²³⁵

Concurrent with increased enemy activity along the DMZ in early 1967, both guerrilla and main force units of the VC and PAVN increased attacks in the southern provinces of the I CTZ. With the 3rd Marine Division shifting north towards the DMZ and the 1st Marine Division assuming the additional responsibility for the 3rd Marine Division's previous TAORs, the III MAF was stretched to its limit and unable to seize the initiative from an expanding enemy threat. In response to this increased activity, "on 19 February General Westmoreland directed his Chief of Staff, Major General William B. Rosson, to develop a contingency plan for the organization and deployment of a divisional task force to the troubled northern provinces...to release Marine units for action along the DMZ and to use the new force to expand the scope of operations in southern I Corps."²³⁶ This makeshift unit was originally named Task Force OREGON and later served as the basis for the Americal Division. Large-scale enemy attacks throughout the I CTZ in late March and early April convinced both Westmoreland and Walt that a major enemy offensive was eminent. On 6 April, Westmoreland ordered the employment TF OREGON. Shifting units from other Field Forces throughout South Vietnam, TF OREGON assumed responsibility for the Chu Lai TAOR on 26 April, under the command MajGen Rosson. The task force reached full division strength in early May. The employment of TF OREGON and the subsequent shifting of Marine Corps forces are credited with stabilizing the situation in I CTZ and preventing a major

²³⁵Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 201-202; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 31-47.

²³⁶Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 77.

enemy offensive in 1967.²³⁷

While 3rd Marine Division continued to fight along the DMZ, the 1st Marine Division was heavily engaged with both VC and NVA forces in the southern provinces. One source describes how the 1st Marine Division conducted “forty-three large unit operations, involving a force of at least a battalion...during the first six months of 1967,” and during the first three months, subordinate units “carried out no less than 36,553 company-size operations, patrols, and ambushes in the Da Nang Tactical Area alone.”²³⁸ Significant among the major operations, were Operation DESOTO (27 January – 7 April), Operation UNION (21 April – 16 May), and Operation UNION II (26 May – 5 June).²³⁹ Overall, the large-unit threat combined with increased guerrilla activity to greatly reduce the emphasis placed on pacification in 1967. As in 1966, Marines conducted COUNTY FAIR and GOLDEN FLEECE operations, but on a reduced scale. MACV emphasis on relieving ARVN forces to conduct Revolutionary Development pushed Marine units further away from pacification efforts. The CAP program continued to expand but at a much slower rate than anticipated or desired.²⁴⁰

As General Walt left command in June 1967, he was not only proud of the III MAF

²³⁷For detailed information regarding the planning and execution of TF OREGON see Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 201; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 75-83; Westmoreland, *Report On Operations in South Vietnam January 1964 - June 1968*, 134; Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff. *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I, 356; Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 109.

²³⁸Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 51.

²³⁹Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff. *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967* Volume I, 364-365; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 53-74.

²⁴⁰Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 110-111; Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 590; Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*, 185-195.

accomplishments, but also highly optimistic as to the future of the Vietnam conflict. In the two years of his command Walt utilized operational art to effectively arrange tactical actions in time, space and purpose to support the MACV commander's intent. This case study has demonstrated this by highlighting major points of contention between MACV and Marine Corps strategies, detailing the evolution of strategic guidance and operational conditions that shaped General Walt as an operational commander; and lastly, a broad overview of specific III MAF operations in I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ) which best highlight Walt's operational approach.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

While the concept of operational art did not exist in U.S. doctrine in 1965, this case study established that General Walt understood his role as an operational commander who translated strategic guidance into tactical actions. More specifically, General Walt clearly demonstrated the “arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose”²⁴¹ to achieve military strategic objectives. As a subordinate commander to MACV, Walt was not directly responsible for translating national strategic objectives into a Vietnam campaign plan. However, Walt did utilize the broad guidance he received from MACV to identify, plan, and execute military operations and tactical engagements in the I CTZ. As described in the Introduction, the analysis of General Walt as an operational commander relies upon his development and implementation of an operational approach. Walt’s operational approach, as revealed by select elements of operational art, is a useful method to examine a commander’s practice of operational art. To this end, Walt’s operational approach is analyzed through the following elements of operational art: end state, center of gravity, lines of effort, basing, operational reach and culmination.

The first element of operational art is end state. An end state is defined as “a set of desired future conditions the commander wants to exist when an operation ends.”²⁴² End state as a doctrinal term was not used in 1965, making clear identification of the U.S. strategic or MACV military end states somewhat problematic. As discussed in this case study, Westmoreland had envisioned an overall campaign plan in September of 1965, with a somewhat nebulous objective “to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US.”²⁴³ A review of

²⁴¹Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-1.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 4-3.

²⁴³Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance*

MACV's yearly campaign plans reveals that while they do include concepts of operations and broad tasks for subordinate units to conduct, they all lack an identifiable end state as currently defined and utilized by the U.S. military. Similarly, a precisely identified end state is not mentioned in Westmoreland's 21 November 1965 Letter of Instruction to III MAF. Rather, in the absence of an end state, the letter provides III MAF with the mission to "conduct military operations in I ARVN Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps, and in other areas of RVN as directed by COMUSMACV, in order to assist the GVN to defeat the VC and extend GVN control over all of Vietnam."²⁴⁴ Though not an end state in modern military terms, this mission statement does provide Walt with two future conditions, the defeat of the Viet Cong and enforcement of South Vietnamese governmental control over Vietnam, which could fill that role. Later campaign plans have similar emphasis on supporting ARVN forces and defeating Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main force units. When Walt assumed command, III MAF's primary task was still to provide security to the vital air bases in the I CTZ. This task provided Walt with a clear military objective for his first few months in command and served to simplify and focus III MAF operations. It was during this time that he developed his operational approach. Later, as conditions changed, Walt was able to pursue the broad tasks and purpose from Westmoreland's instructions, where the defeat of the Viet Cong and support of the Government of Vietnam and its military were the primary military objectives. With small changes, these objectives remained unifying themes. The lack of a clearly defined strategic end state, as defined in current military doctrine, did not detract from Walt's exercise of disciplined initiative and development of an operational approach.

Command, Vietnam 1965 (HQ USMACV, 1966) 141.

²⁴⁴CDR, COMUSMACV, "Letter of Instruction to CG, III MAF" dated 21 November 1965.

A second element of operational art that bears discussion is that of center of gravity. *ADRP 3-0* defines center of gravity as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.”²⁴⁵ The process of identifying a center of gravity during planning provides a commander with a greater knowledge and understanding of an enemy’s strengths and weakness. Conversely, analysis of friendly force centers of gravity provides the commander with a greater understanding of the strengths and weakness of his own forces. *ADRP 3-0* discusses these and other points by stating, “The loss of a center of gravity can ultimately result in defeat. The center of gravity is a vital analytical tool for planning operations. It provides a focal point, identifying sources of strength and weakness.”²⁴⁶ Center of gravity analysis did not exist as an analytical planning tool in 1965, but the case study clearly illustrates that Walt determined that the support of the South Vietnamese population was the source of power for both the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese government. Its loss would result in defeat for either side. With the population as his focal point, Walt developed his operational approach to focus on the support and protection of the population in order to defeat the Viet Cong. Based on his insistent focus on main force units, it could be argued that Westmoreland viewed the North Vietnamese Army as the enemy center of gravity, and that he believed its defeat would result in an overall victory. While the debate over which general was more correct is largely academic, it is obvious from Walt’s focus on the population that he arrived at that conclusion based on an analysis of the operating environment, the enemy, and III MAF’s military objectives. This cognitive examination is the equivalent of the today’s center of gravity analysis in the U.S. military, and is an illustration of his application of operational art.

The third and most evident element of operational art utilized by General Walt, was that

²⁴⁵Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-3.

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 4-3 – 4-4.

of lines of effort. *ADRP 3-0* describes how commanders use lines of effort to “describe an operation...Commanders synchronize and sequence actions, deliberately creating complementary and reinforcing effects.”²⁴⁷ Further still, a line of effort “links multiple tasks using the logic of purpose...to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions. Lines of effort are essential to long-term planning when positional references to an enemy or adversary have little relevance.”²⁴⁸ As discussed in depth in the case study, Walt used three lines of effort to describe his “balanced approach.” His approach focused on counterinsurgency operations, defeating main force units, and pacification.²⁴⁹ Focusing these three lines of effort directly and indirectly on the population, the center of gravity, Walt was able to “link military actions with the broader interagency effort across the levels of war.”²⁵⁰ Particularly noteworthy from the case study was Walt’s development of his civic action program, to include the establishment of the JCC. Where other government agencies had failed, Walt succeeded in coordinating and integrating broad interagency and U.S. and South Vietnamese government pacification efforts in the I CTZ. Taking it a step further, these lines of effort provided him with the ability to create complementary effects, with actions such as integration of civic action programs into combat operations against main force units. Walt utilized these lines of effort and his balanced approach throughout his time in command. For his subordinate commanders, who often faced distinctly different operational environments and enemy threats, these lines of effort provided them with a means of organizing and synchronizing their combat and noncombat operations to meet Walt’s intent. This became

²⁴⁷Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-4.

²⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 4-5.

²⁴⁹Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup 1965*, 115.

²⁵⁰Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-5.

clear in the second half of 1966 and into 1967, as the 3rd Marine Division focused on engaging North Vietnamese Army units in the north and the 1st Marine Division focused on pacification around the southern enclave areas. While each division prioritized different lines of effort, they both continued to pursue the other two lines of effort to a lesser degree within their respective TAORs.

The fourth element of operational art that is clearly evident in this case study is that of basing. A base “is a locality from which operations are projected or supported.”²⁵¹ General Walt’s entire operational approach was built upon the concept of expanding enclaves that were themselves centered on vital base locations. The permanent bases of Chu Lai, Phu Bai, and Da Nang provided III MAF with vital subsistence and combat support. III MAF forces also, made use of nonpermanent base camps or combat outposts to project and sustain combat power beyond the range and endurance of support provided by the three primary base areas. One example of a smaller base camp from the case study was the combat outpost at Khe Sanh. In both 1966 and 1967, this base camp provided the Marines with a source of security, sustainment and power projection, far beyond the reach of the primary base areas. Similarly, in 1966, as North Vietnamese Army units increased incursions south of the DMZ, Walt was able to shift the 3rd Marine Division north to the main base area at Phu Bai, and the division further built a base camp at Dong Ha to command and control and support combat operations along the DMZ. Not only did Walt, build his overall approach around the use of permanent bases, but his operational employment of forces centered on the effective use of nonpermanent base camp areas.

While less identifiable, Walt’s use of basing indicates an understanding of two other elements of operational art, operational reach and culmination. Operational reach is “the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military

²⁵¹Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-6.

capabilities...Operational reach is a tether; it is a function of intelligence, protection, sustainment, endurance, and relative combat power.”²⁵² Closely related to operational reach is the element of culmination, or, “that point in time and space at which a force no longer possesses the capability to continue its current form of operations.”²⁵³ For military commanders, employing military capabilities beyond their operational reach indicates a transition to culmination. In addition to his desire to focus operations on protecting the population, awareness of these two concepts, led to Walt’s support of an enclave strategy in Vietnam. As the enemy threat and strategic guidance changed, Walt was forced to employ military capabilities beyond their original operational reach, and he took several actions to prevent culmination. One method that Walt utilized was to surge forces for a finite period of time. While III MAF did not possess the capability to project his operational reach on a permanent basis, Walt was able to reposition forces from within III MAF through the use of TF DELTA and make use of the Seventh Fleet SLF for focused operations against identified enemy threats. In 1966, as the 3rd Marine Division shifted north to deal with the encroaching North Vietnamese Army, Walt surged the bulk of those forces to the DMZ on a limited basis only. Later, as the threat decreased, Walt withdrew many of the forces and assigned a much smaller enduring presence to continue to monitor the situation. Similarly, in 1967, orders to build an anti-intrusion barrier along the DMZ combined with a resurgent North Vietnamese threat to tie up III MAF’s limited combat power and threatened to reduce III MAF’s overall operational reach. To prevent culmination, Westmoreland and Walt utilized TF OREGON to backfill vital military capability in the southern I CTZ. Walt’s awareness and mitigation of III MAF’s operational reach to prevent culmination, further demonstrated his practice of operational art in Vietnam.

²⁵²Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 4-5.

²⁵³*Ibid.*, 4-8.

Through the conceptual use of end state, center of gravity, lines of effort, basing, operational reach and culmination, General Walt developed an effective operational approach that demonstrated a clear understanding and execution of operational art in Vietnam. Although the theory of operational art did not enter U.S. military doctrine until the 1980's, it is clear that the concept is not new to modern times. Commanders have long known the vital role they play in translating broad strategic goals into tactical actions. For modern operational commanders, General Walt provides more than a simple example of operational art; rather, his experiences provide several points for consideration.

The first point of consideration relates to the command relationship between Walt and his two competing chains of command. At best, this relationship was dysfunctional, and at worst, it was dangerous. Current Joint doctrine stresses the importance of unity of action, which is the “synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.”²⁵⁴ Divergent opinions between military commanders are quite common; however, subordinate commanders who avoid proper command channels and execute their own strategies are not. The writers of the *Pentagon Papers* concluded:

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 discussion 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 implication that could even affect the ultimate chances for negotiations.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴Department of the Army, *ADRP 3-0: Unified Land Operations*, 1-3.

²⁵⁵*Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.8.17.

Unfortunately, this situation is not a complete outlier in military history. Increasingly, the U.S. military operates in Joint and Coalition environments, where subordinate units are not bound by authority or institutional loyalty to execute the U.S. national strategy or the theater campaign plan. Similar to today, Westmoreland did not have the authority to fire the interfering Marine generals, and Walt did not have the power or desire to openly defy Westmoreland. That this relationship worked as well as it did, was due primarily to the efforts of both Westmoreland and Walt to dampen interservice rivalry and communicate effectively. Westmoreland liked and respected Walt, and was willing to give him broad guidance within which to work. For his part, Walt felt pressure from both sides, and his balanced approach was carefully crafted to walk a fine line between the two strategies.

The enclave strategy pursued by the Marines was a distinctly different type of war than the one desired by MACV and the U.S. national leadership. President Johnson sought a limited war, and time was a factor in his decision making. For Westmoreland, who had to look at the broader conflict, this meant that he would have limited resources and limited means at his disposal “to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US.”²⁵⁶ These facts contributed significantly to his decision to pursue a more rapid and attrition based strategy in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, the Marines’ population-focused strategy was by its very nature slow and resource intensive. The *Pentagon Papers* provide insight into the nature of the Marines’ strategy and comment on its suitability:

the Marine concept of operations has a different implicit time requirement than a more enemy-oriented search and destroy effort...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 America deeply in the politics and traditions of

²⁵⁶Historical Branch, MACV Joint Staff, *Command History: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965* (HQ USMACV, 1966) 141.

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.²⁵⁷

By mid-1966, however, even Walt could not deny the necessity of defeating main force units. Vainglorious Marine history to the contrary, the enclave strategy was narrowly focused on their specific TAOR and was blissfully unaware of the conditions in the rest of the country. As Westmoreland later wrote, the Marine's approach "left the enemy free to come and go as he pleased throughout the bulk of the region."²⁵⁸ This worked well for the Marines in the I CTZ, where the population was geographically centered on key areas along the coast, but it also provided both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army unrestricted movement through the Central Highlands into the heart of South Vietnam. This, in turn, had a direct effect on Saigon and military regions to the south.

These issues are not meant to detract from Walt's use of operational art in Vietnam; rather, they are meant to amplify other areas for potential analysis in this case study. While a dysfunctional command relationship did prevent true unity of action between MACV and III MAF, Walt and Westmoreland were not as far apart as these issues may make it seem. Rarely has the U.S. military faced a truly robust hybrid threat, such as it faced in Vietnam. While both leaders were shaped by their own experiences, they were both unfamiliar with the multifaceted issues that they encountered within South Vietnam. They both went into the war with certain preconceptions on how it should be fought, but interestingly enough, they both eventually adopted many aspects of the others approach as time went on. Walt and the Marines are rightfully credited with many innovations in pacification and population-centric programs which were instituted on a much larger scale throughout South Vietnam in later years. Similarly, the Marines

²⁵⁷*Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.C.8.17-18.

²⁵⁸Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 165.

were increasingly forced to seek out and fight against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units. For current and future operational commanders, Walt provides a notable example of how to employ operational art in a complex military environment. Additionally, his is a cautionary tale of conflicting and vague guidance intermingled with competing service-specific warfighting ideologies, and the effect that these forces can have on the development and execution of an operational approach. At a minimum, contemporary leaders should be familiar with his case study and be prepared to confront similar tests as they face their own distinct military challenges.

This monograph examined how General Lewis Walt overcame vague and conflicting guidance, service influences in a Joint environment, and competing warfighting ideologies to develop an operational approach that effectively arranged tactical actions in time, space, and purpose to achieve strategic objectives. As the U.S. concludes its eleventh year of continuous war and looks towards a 2014 exit from Afghanistan, the military seeks to capture the hard-fought lessons of the past years and prepare for future conflicts. As military planners and theorists discuss and debate a range of topics from strategy, to doctrine, to force structures and mission requirements, many parallels can be drawn between the present wars and the Vietnam War, the nation's last sustained major conflict. From tactics to strategy, modern warfighters are learning and relearning the lessons of Vietnam. While significant literature has captured the strategic and tactical aspects of the Vietnam War, it is the operational art that ties them together. Unfortunately, little attention has focused on those Corps/MAF commander's whose understanding and application of operational art deserves the most consideration. General Lewis Walt's role as an operational commander should continue to provoke thought and analysis for current and future military leaders.

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