

## Viet Nam: Past and Present

## Marines' Great Effort: Securing Da Nang

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DA NANG, South Viet Nam.

Last fall, the battle cry of the U. S. Marines here was: "We'll be in Hoi An by New Year's Day 1966." Today, they estimate it will be New Year's 1968.

Hoi An is a provincial capital, only 15 miles south of the strategic air base of Da Nang. The change in the Marines' mood illustrates the changing role of American troops in Viet Nam — and some of their problems.

"We could easily have fought our way to Hoi An," one Marine said recently. "But then, we would have had to fight our way back. The essential problem of this war is not moving your front lines forward. It is keeping your rear covered."

The key to the problem lies in getting and keeping the support of the rural population. Without it, most authorities believe the war could go on for years.

So it was decided to halt the Marines' advance until the Vietnamese could win over the local population. The decision brought dissent from within Marine Corps ranks and sneers from Army colonels, who claimed "the Marines are afraid to go out and find the Viet Cong." But gradually, the Marine effort outside Da Nang, under the direction of Marine commander Maj. Gen. Lewis Walt, began to dovetail with the work of the Vietnamese government.

## 3D DIMENSION

"In a conventional war, progress is measured by an advancing front line," one official explained. "But in this war our outlying positions are constant. Progress must be measured in the third dimension. We must go down into the population to dig out the Viet Cong infrastructure and then rebuild the local anti-Communist government."

The result of this co-ordinated effort was the Five Mountain Villages Campaign, less than 10 miles southwest of Da Nang and 15 miles from Hoi An. It is the principal current pacification program and a pilot case for the future.

"If this plan doesn't succeed here, it's not going to succeed anywhere else in the country," an official said. "We'll really be in serious trouble then."

The project already has run into some serious trouble.

The five villages of the campaign are subdivided into 19 hamlets, covering a 20-square-kilometer area. In the complex dwell 42,000 people, of whom about 7 per cent are believed to be related to Viet Cong. Snuggled among lush rice paddies, the villages are surrounded by the five peaks of mountains containing gray and salmon-colored marble. "These marble mountains would make a great tourist attraction, but you'd be killed going out there," one Marine said.

The pacification campaign has three components: U. S. Marines are assigned to secure the outer limits of the area, patrolling to prevent the invasion by Communist

units; Vietnamese paramilitary troops maintain security in the villages; Vietnamese civilian teams distribute goods, wage psychological warfare, take censuses, and attempt to undo the Viet Cong's existing political devices and to bring the villagers to the government's side.

"The role of the U. S. Marines is like an egg," an official said. "Our front lines, on the rim of the area, are the shell—but like a shell, the lines can be broken. The vital installation—the Da Nang air base—is the yolk, and we also defend that. The white is the countryside, which we are trying to pacify and solidify."

On Oct. 18, the Vietnamese forces began their effort, using one headquarters company and four understrength line companies of the 59th Regional Forces Battalion. A civilian cadre of 327 persons was moved in from provincial headquarters. The Vietnamese commander put them through a two-week retraining course. They were joined by five Vietnamese People's Action Teams (PATs), of 10 persons each, who were responsible for census taking and other activities.

To each village, the Vietnamese commander sent one

Regional Forces company and one People's Action Team. In each of the 19 hamlets, he put a civilian cadre team.

"During the third week of the campaign, a 50-man Viet Cong platoon broke through the Marine blocking position. They were in our area shooting things up. They hit us hard," an official related.

"Five Regional Force troopers and several cadremen were killed. Each of our armed companies was understrength, so we had 15-man platoons where we should have had 35 men. Fighting against 50 Viet Cong, of course, we lose against those odds."

"Until that we were just beginning to get the confidence of the people—but after that, the people clammed up and wouldn't tell us anything. And it also hurt the morale of our cadre. One whole 11-man team took off—but the district chief talked them into coming back," the official went on.

"Then, four nights later,

*This is the last article in a four-part series on the Viet Nam war appraising its progress thus far and its prospects.*

the same Viet Cong platoon hit us again. They slipped in between two Marine patrols, attacked the Regional Force headquarters unit of 17 men, killed several civilian cadre and kidnaped two women working with a drama unit. We haven't seen the women since. One of the American Marines saw action from 50 yards away—but he couldn't open up with his machine gun—he would have killed more friendly than enemies.

"Of course, the Marines can't stop all small-unit infiltration. It would take Marines shoulder-to-shoulder to do that. And once you had that, the Viet Cong would mortar them from across the river, which they've already started doing," he said.

Since the late November action, the Vietnamese and the Marines have slightly reinforced the area. Now the Marines are not only holding the outer perimeter by extensive patrolling, they also are responsible for the securing of the civilian cadre in 11 of the 19 hamlets. Vietnamese troops defend the remaining eight.

## TRY AGAIN

By mid-December, "we started pacifying again and things were moving slow, but good," the official said. "The people began giving us good intelligence and were turning in some Viet Cong. For the first time, on a Sunday afternoon, families from Da Nang would come to the villages to visit their relatives. More than 100 families moved back into the area—but none of the people were of draft age."

On one night in late December, however, the Viet Cong launched four harassing attacks. They hit the central command post with mortars and struck another People's Action Team, killing several.

Gradually, the cadre force fell from 331 to 304. Besides attrition, there were substantial problems with the cadre because of inadequate training

and the fact that they were not natives of the villages in which they were working.

The PATs—equipped, paid, and trained for political activity and intelligence work by an arm of the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency—had their own troubles. They were better armed than the Vietnamese troops, and the local commander wanted to use them for military security. They refused. One team defected and another had to be transferred because of local conflicts.

"The biggest headache is that we can't move our Vietnamese troops and cadre out of this 20-square-kilometer collection of hamlets until we have villagers here who can defend the area," the official said. "There's not one young man here between the ages of 10 and 38 whom we can recruit. We've lost the middle

generation, and no one has begun to find an answer to that problem."

Before the Marines reach Hoi An—with their backs protected—80 square kilometers of land must be pacified. At that, the Marine estimate of New Year's Day, 1968, is not far away.