

## OPERATION HIGHLAND

Initial USMACV strategy for the use of U. S. military forces in Vietnam involved three phases of execution. The first phase consisted of arresting the losing trend, stifling the enemy initiative, and providing security to populated areas to the maximum extent possible. General Westmoreland anticipated that this process would require the rest of 1965 for execution. The second phase would be to mount major U. S. and allied offensive actions, seizing the initiative from the enemy, destroying his forces, and thus improving the security of the population. The third phase would involve final destruction of the enemy's guerrilla structure and main force units remaining in remote base areas. To initiate the first stage of this strategy, USMACV committed Marine Corps units farthest north (in the zone of the South Vietnamese I Corps), where the Marines' ability to supply themselves over the beaches in an area of few ports and airfields could be best used, and U. S. Army forces in the Central Highlands and adjacent coastal areas (II Corps) and in the area around Saigon (III Corps). Initially, no U. S. troops were committed in the Mekong Delta (IV Corps), where regular NVA units were not as yet deployed, VC operations were a lesser immediate threat, and three ARVN divisions were already in the field. The U. S. ground command structure was built around a field force concept, rather than that of normal corps headquarters. USMACV chose this course for two reasons. First, it intended to organize and operate in conformance with the South Vietnamese corps zones and did not wish to confuse matters by introducing additional corps designations into those zones. Second, it desired a more flexible headquarters than a corps, which was structured to control several divisions rather than the separate brigades initially committed. As a result, the 1st Brigade's higher headquarters in 1965 was Field Force Vietnam (initially Task Force Alpha) established at Nha Trang to control operations in the II and III Vietnamese Corps areas.<sup>19</sup>

While the 1st Brigade was acclimating itself to Vietnam and securing the area at Cam Ranh Bay needed for developing a port capable of supporting deployment of additional U. S. military forces, the first major battle involving U. S. troops had occurred to the north at Chu Lai. There the III Marine Amphibious Force surrounded the VC 2d Regiment and defeated it decisively in Operation STARLIGHT. In spite of this success, USMACV headquarters was apprehensive in mid-1965 that the enemy intended to cut South Vietnam in half along a line from Pleiku in the highlands to Qui Nhon on the central coast. USMACV had already decided to deploy the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), formed on 1 July 1965 from assets of the 11th Air Assault Division (Test) and the 2d Infantry Division, to An Khe between Pleiku and Qui Nhon and to give it the mission of opening and holding Route 19, the major artery along the anticipated enemy axis. The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division was given the mission of securing the An Khe base area in Operation HIGHLAND. The assignment was given urgency by the events of 18-19 August, when a battalion-sized VC force overran the U. S. Special Forces camp located at the district capital of Dak Sut in the Central Highlands, 100 miles northwest of An Khe. It was suspected, but not confirmed, that the attack had been supported by elements of the NVA 101st Regiment.<sup>20</sup> In addition, men of the 1st Brigade were aware

that An Khe's historic importance had been demonstrated a decade previously when an entire French regiment (Mobile Group 100) had been annihilated in a Communist ambush in the An Khe Pass.

The scheme of maneuver for Operation HIGHLAND called for the 1st and 2d Battalions, 327th Infantry, to secure the An Khe area; the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry was to secure the An Khe Pass; and a composite force, Task Force Hansen, commanded by Major Marcus W. Hansen, Executive Officer, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry was to secure Highway 19 and provide convoy security from Qui Nhon to An Khe. The 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry moved overland from Cam Ranh Bay to Nha Trang, from whence it air assaulted into An Khe. The battalion encountered no resistance and by the evening of 23 August had secured the An Khe airfield. Between 22 and 25 August, other elements of the brigade moved by truck from Cam Ranh Bay to Nha Trang, then by LST to Qui Nhon. The 1-327th and the 2-502d assaulted westward to clear Highway 19, with the 1-327th then air assaulting to secure the An Khe Pass. Following link up with the 2-502d, the 1-327th moved on to An Khe to share responsibility for the defensive perimeter with the 2-327th. Meanwhile, Task Force Hansen consisting of Troop A, 2-17th Cavalry, and the reconnaissance platoons of the three maneuver battalions, moved up Highway 19, establishing strong points at critical terrain features. Having accomplished its mission without incident, the 1st Brigade settled in at An Khe to await the arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). While tasked with security for the An Khe - Highway 19 - Qui Nhon line, the brigade developed a system of overlapping patrols and a series of sweeping operations to find, fix, and destroy the enemy. In the process of these twenty-three operations, most conducted in the Son Con Valley, northeast of the An Khe Pass, the combat soldiers of the brigade earned their Combat Infantryman Badges. The most significant of these actions was Operation GIBRALTAR.

<sup>19</sup>Westmoreland, "Report," pp. 100, 103.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, pp. 98-99, 108-109; Tolson, Airmobility, 1961-1971, pp. 61, 68.