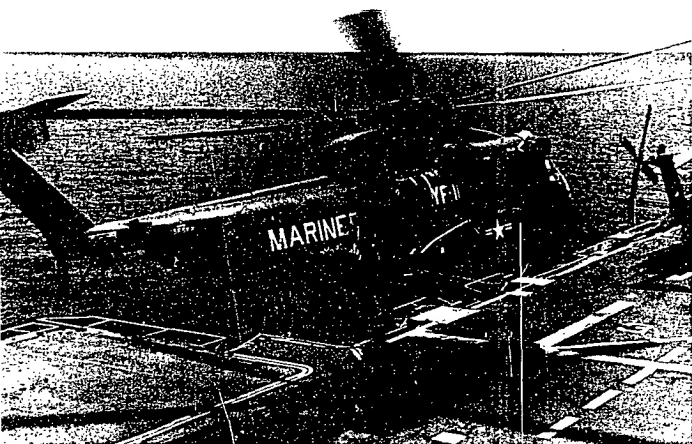


Frequent wind

Part Two Planning

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and
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A significant number of unknowns faced 9th MAB planners who were denied the luxury of estimating a best course of action.



Ninth Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB) headquarters began final planning for the noncombatant emergency evacuation (NEMVAC) operations from the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) on 11 April 1975. The first operation plan (OPLAN) was issued on 18 April. Its included tasking had been predicated upon the organizational concept of a MAB structure which included subordinate Marine amphibious units. When the organizational structure was changed to a doctrinal MAB, a sec-

ond OPLAN was required. The preparation, promulgation, and modification of the ingredients of this plan are described below.

Command relationships

The Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac) had designated the Commander, United States Support Activities Group, Thailand (USSAG) as his coordinating authority for NEMVAC operations in the RVN. The headquarters of USSAG were collocated with the headquarters of the Seventh Air Force (7 AF) at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand (NKP). The Commander, USSAG was double-hatted as the Commander, 7 AF. In addition to exercising operational control (OPCON) over all U.S. forces assigned in Thailand, the Commander, USSAG/7 AF would likewise exercise OPCON of the 9th MAB or elements thereof once they crossed the coastline or were ashore in RVN. This was the "feet dry" command relationship. While afloat, or with wet feet, a command relationship prevailed whereby the commander of the amphibious forces assigned to the Seventh Fleet would exercise OPCON over the 9th MAB. The amphibious force was designated as Task Force 76 (TF 76). The 9th MAB was assigned the designator Task Group 79.1 (TG 79.1). The parent organization of the 9th MAB, the III Marine Amphibious Force, carries the designation: Task Force 79 (TF 79). A clear understanding of the command relationships, particularly the dual command relationship of the Commanding General, 9th MAB (CTG 79.1), is to the reader's advantage while the description of the planning evolution continues.

See figure # 1.

Senior headquarters plans

The USSAG headquarters developed a con-

cept plan (CONPLAN) which provided for several different methods of evacuation from RVN. The alternative courses of action ranged from evacuation by commercial aircraft or sealift, initially, to subsequent extraction of refugees by military airlift or sealift. These latter options foresaw the requirement to introduce limited numbers of ground forces to provide security for the points of embarkation or evacuation. In USSAG terminology these forces were referred to as "ground security forces" (GSF), a less aggressive sounding euphemism for landing forces.

On 5 April 1975 a new dimension was added to USSAG's CONPLAN, i.e., helicopter evacuation involving not only Marine helicopters, but Marine landing forces as well. This conceptual course of action signified an escalation of requirements. It set in motion the ships and men which resulted in the assembly of a large amphibious task force, with a Marine Amphibious Brigade embarked, off the coast of South Vietnam. The requirements attendant to this plan dictated that the force include as many helicopters as could be assembled and lifted. On 5 April, there was one amphibious assault ship, *USS Okinawa* (LPH-3), in the Western Pacific. The attack carrier *USS Hancock* (CVA-19), configured for helicopter operations, was due to arrive off the coast of RVN about 10 April. The requirement for helicopters would drive the eventual configuration of a second attack carrier, *USS Midway* (CVA-41), for helicopter operations.

As the month of April progressed, the brigade received additional directives from USSAG. Contained therein were a new alternative, and amplifying instructions pertaining to the original courses of action. Through its "feet wet" chain of command the 9th MAB received additional instructions. These directives were for the most part complementary to the USSAG's; however they did contain additional taskings. The brigade headquarters became, in effect, a conduit in which were melded the various plans of the dual chain of command. The 9th MAB staff, particularly the G-3 Section, under the direction of LtCol R. D. White, was required to examine every minute aspect of the envisioned operation to ensure that the parallel planning cogs did in fact mesh. Where they did not, the brigade rectified the differences.

The mission

It was obvious from the beginning that a significant number of unknowns faced the MAB.

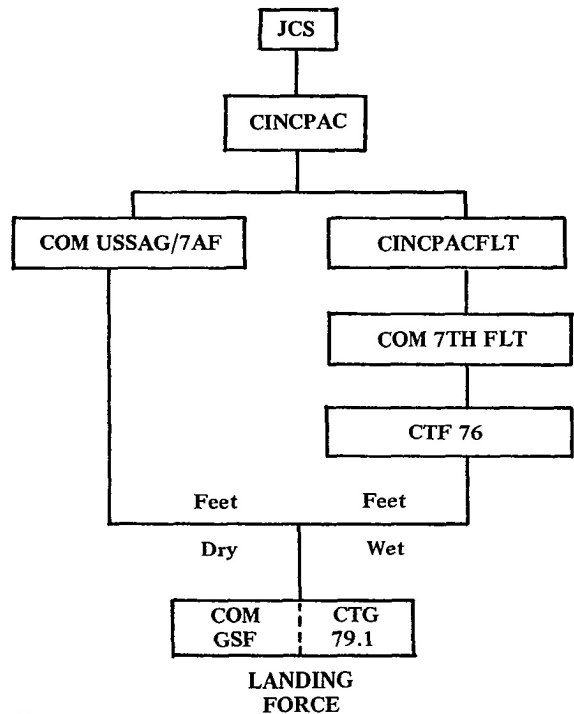


Figure 1: Operational control of 9th MAB.

As the planning progressed, it was clear that the initiative belonged to the enemy and it was assumed it would remain there. Until the NVA/VC revealed their final scheme of attack, no single course of action on the part of the U.S. forces appeared more likely to be pursued than any other. It was also correctly assumed that a helicopter evacuation would probably not be executed until the Saigon government was close to total collapse. Consequently, it was clear that the brigade would not know until the last minute from which one or several of the potential evacuation sites the uncertain number of evacuees would be extracted. The 9th MAB planners were denied the luxury of estimating a best course of action and developing deliberate plans accordingly. It was necessary to develop detailed plans for all courses of action, as best they could be interpreted to impact upon the MAB. The enemy's final moves would drive the resultant operation. It was important that the essence of the wide-ranging alternatives be captured in a comprehensive statement.

The deduced mission of the brigade encompassed a spectrum of alternatives which ranged from providing a limited number of small security teams for rooftop landing zones in Saigon to an amphibious landing on the Vung Tau Peninsula which would be required to secure a major evacuation/marshalling

area. The mission took into account the requirements to provide landing forces for the security of landing zones in the Saigon area, specifically at the Defense Attache Office (DAO)/Air America Complex at Tan Son Nhut airfield, the Newport Pier on the Saigon River, and such other evacuation sites that authorities in Saigon would designate. Also included were additional requirements to provide landing forces for similar security missions in the Can Tho area. The requirements, common to all of the alternatives, to provide evacuation helicopters and to provide Marine security detachments for employment aboard Military Sealift Command (MSC) shipping were also included. Potential evacuation sites are displayed in Figure 2.

Initial liaison with Saigon

After arriving off Vung Tau on 10 April, one of the first orders of business was to make contact with officials in the U.S. Embassy and the DAO in Saigon. In addition, a III MAF liaison team had been sent to Saigon via US-SAG headquarters to assist in the advance planning.

On 11 April, the III MAF liaison team visited and briefed the MAB staff on the situation in Saigon. This visit was of vital importance for it opened the door to future liaison. When the MAF team left the ship that day it was asked to inquire into the possibility of 9th MAB commanders and key staff officers visiting Saigon for the purpose of conducting a reconnaissance of potential evacuation sites. This was approved, and the next day a delegation of air and ground officers spent the day in Saigon.

Upon their return to *Blue Ridge*, they reported to the Commanding General that the two prime evacuation sites were the DAO/Air America Compound and the Newport Pier. They brought back schematics and photographs of these facilities. Further, they advised of a situation which would complicate preparations for an evacuation. Any overt preparations for evacuation could become a self-fueling prophesy, thus speeding the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. Outwardly, business would be conducted as usual by U.S. officials. Therefore, evacuation planning and preparations would be conducted *sub rosa*.

Armed with the report of his reconnaissance team, the Commanding General was granted permission to conduct a personal reconnaissance and a courtesy visit to the area.

The next day, 13 April, he flew to Saigon, taking with him Col A. M. Gray, CO, 33d MAU. During his visit the CG talked with the Defense Attache and the CinCPac and CinCPacFlt representatives in Saigon. He made a personal reconnaissance of the DAO/Air America Compound, Tan Son Nhut airfield, the Newport Pier, and various LZ's throughout Saigon. While en route to and from Saigon, he reconnoitered the Vung Tau Peninsula. The following day Task Force 76 was ordered back to Subic Bay, thus depriving the brigade staff of six on-scene days for planning.

The advance command element

As a result of the initial on-station time off Vung Tau commencing on the 11th of April, the importance of a full-time direct representative of the CG at the DAO Compound was realized. With this in mind, the CG requested, and got, permission to insert an Advance Command Element, 9th MAB, consisting of his Deputy Brigade Commander, a communications officer, an air officer, and explosive ordnance disposal personnel. The element was added to gradually, as necessary, to include additional naval aviators, landing zone control teams, and communicators.

The Advance Command Element assembled at Okinawa on 18 April and departed for the Naval Air Station, Cubi Point. Initially, the element consisted of Col W. W. Taylor, Deputy Commander, 9th MAB; LtCol

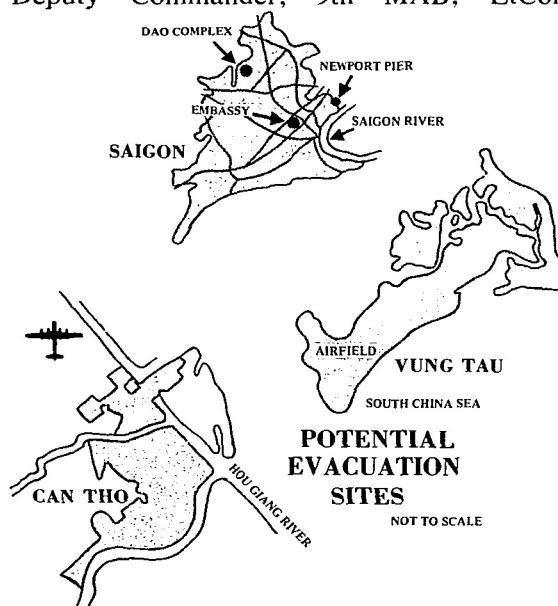


Figure 2

"One of the plans for assembling evacuees was to collect them at approximately a dozen billets throughout Saigon."

D. J. Verdon, Communications Officer; Maj D. E. Cox, Air Liaison Officer; Capt R. J. Mc Manus, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist; and MSgt W. East, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist.

During the evening of the 18th, the command element was briefed by Col J. M. Johnson, the G-3, III MAF, who had just recently returned from Saigon.

On the morning of the 19th, the advance element departed Cubi Point, ostensibly for Saigon. At Tan Son Nhut, however, the Marines were directed to proceed to NKP. During the evening of the 19th and the morning of the 20th, the element received comprehensive briefings, primarily concerned with intelligence, from the USSAG staff. Col S. H. Batchelder, Jr., who had served as the GSF Commander during EAGLE PULL, the evacuation from Phnom Penh, conducted a detailed briefing. Early on the afternoon of the 20th, the advance element returned to Saigon and established a command post in the DAO Compound.

Possible evacuation sites

As previously mentioned, there were several potential evacuation sites identified by USSAG and other headquarters:

◀ **Newport Pier**—This facility, situated adjacent to the Long Binh Bridge along the Saigon riverfront, featured four deep-water berths and a number of ramps and landings for assorted tugs and smaller craft. Parking lots provided nine CH-53 landing spots. Newport was envisioned as a large scale evacuation site accommodating up to 100,000 evacuees by waterborne means. A minimum of one battalion would be required to secure the pier. In addition to AESF detachments which would search and screen the evacuees, and provide internal security for the ships, there would be a requirement for reinforced rifle platoons to provide external security for the ships during the perilous voyage down the Saigon River to the South China Sea. Insertion of the landing force could be by helicopter or up the Saigon River on ships. Extraction was equally flexible. It should be noted that this possible evacuation site was considered viable as late as 29 April.

◀ **DAO/Air America complex**—Situated adja-

cent to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, this complex was the primary potential evacuation site considered by the DAO and the Marines in Saigon. Numerous landing zones were available, with some preparation, in the DAO Compound, the Annex, and across the highway on the Air America apron. Up to two infantry battalions would be required to provide security for this complex. If the scope of the operation were broadened to provide security for fixed-wing evacuation flights out of Tan Son Nhut, it was conceivable that all three battalions would be required. The DAO Compound was divided roughly into two separate areas, one called the Alamo and the other the Annex. The Alamo housed the main headquarters building and the Emergency Command Center. The Annex consisted primarily of the Exchange and a gymnasium.

◀ **Can Tho**—A CONPLAN had been developed for moving up the Bassac River to Can Tho, about fifty miles southwest of Saigon, for evacuation of many as 2,000 people. In support of this plan MAB elements were prepared to insert and extract by helicopter or waterborne means.

◀ **Saigon Rooftops**—One of the plans for assembling evacuees was to collect them at approximately a dozen billets throughout Saigon. Helicopters would then transport them to the DAO/Air America Complex for further processing and marshalling. Fire team size elements were envisioned as rooftop security and landing zone control teams in support of this plan.

◀ **U.S. Embassy**—With only one rooftop LZ, restricted to a single CH-46 or smaller aircraft at a time, the Embassy was never seriously considered as a mass evacuation site. It was envisioned that the number of evacuees from this site would not exceed 100 people. An additional LZ was considered available in the courtyard parking lot, but only after a large tree and lesser obstacles had been removed.

◀ **Vung Tau**—The largest potential evacuation site, and the one that plagued planners from the beginning to the end, was Vung Tau. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, as well as the remnants of RVN Army and Marine units, had retreated to the Vung Tau Peninsula by mid-April. Many of them had hopes of being

sealifted from there to safe havens. It was conceivable that the MAB would be committed to an amphibious landing to secure the airfield and port facilities in order to develop a major marshalling/evacuation center. The estimated size of the force required to secure the vital areas ranged from one battalion landing team to the entire brigade. Until the very last, Vung Tau would be something of an enigma.

Planning: RLT-4

Based upon the MAB mission, RLT-4 promulgated its OPLAN on 20 April 1975 with specific tasking to subordinate units. Collocation and close coordination with the brigade staff resulted in the publication of detailed annexes in the brigade's plans. In most cases these annexes were in sufficient detail to suffice as annexes for the RLT plans. Employing these procedures assisted in relieving some of the communications backlog that was occurring aboard *Blue Ridge*. The dual chain of command was taxing the communications facilities to their limit. The various organizations involved in the operation were so widely dispersed that the majority of the voluminous plans issued by the various headquarters were transmitted in message format. It was essential therefore, that the brigade and its subordinate organizations implement procedures that would minimize or eliminate duplication of communications.

Early on 28 April, the situation around Vung Tau began to show signs as being one of the most viable planning requirements. The peninsula was now isolated and contained hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking passage to safe havens. To ensure proper readiness, BLT 3/9, supported by BLT 1/9 was directed to accelerate its planning for possible deployment on Vung Tau.

During the evening of 28 April the situation in Saigon changed totally as to the potential tasking of the RLT. Since the primary means of evacuation at this point was via C-130 aircraft from Tan Son Nhut, the RLT was tasked to provide security for Tan Son Nhut airfield. As a result of this tasking, appropriate orders were issued. The next morning, 29 April, the complexion of the operation again changed. The runways at Tan Son Nhut were blocked. The C-130 operations were suspended, and it was a *fait accompli* that the DAO/Air America Complex would be the primary evacuation site.

The RLT units were placed on alert in ac-

cordance with previously issued plans. BLT 2/4 was tasked to provide security for the DAO Compound and BLT 1/9 was directed to be prepared to provide security for the Air America Compound. BLT 3/9 was held in reserve.

Helicopter planning

As planning progressed there were many details involving air operations which had to be resolved. It was absolutely essential that the MAB helicopter flow plan be coordinated with that of USSAG. The forward extension of USSAG headquarters, the airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC) would be controlling the helicopters into and out of the landing zones once they were "feet dry" over land. Communications with USSAG via message resolved this matter.

It had been necessary for PROVMAG 39 to develop a helicopter flow schedule that would support the scheme of maneuver ashore for the insertion of the landing force, evacuation operations, and the extraction of the landing force. The flow schedule had to include inherent flexibility to allow for insertion, evacuation, and extraction from all of the potential evacuation sites, and to allow for multi-deck operations within the task force. Finally, the helicopter flow schedule had to be one that could be controlled by the ABCCC "feet dry" and the helicopter direction center (HDC) "feet wet."

Second among the major planning considerations was the clarification of L-Hour. To Marines, it meant the time that a helicopter would touch down in a landing zone. To the Air Force, it meant that time that a helicopter would launch, a definition used during the evacuation from Cambodia on 12 April. Once clarification was sought, L-Hour was defined for all forces as the time that the first helicopter would touch down in a landing zone.

A major concern for the CG, 9th MAB was the potential requirement to conduct the operation during periods of inclement weather, or at night. Ceilings of less than a thousand feet and reduced visibility below that normally considered for visual operations were contemplated. Planning included a capability to conduct the operation under instrument conditions. Admittedly, normal operational parameters could not be met, e.g., an approved helicopter let down would not be available, perhaps only limited navigational aids would be available. Plans were formulated and promul-

"When a tropical storm threatened . . . the crews were prepared and could have conducted the entire operation under instrument conditions."

gated to all air crews. Ship's radars were integrated into a makeshift air control system which was tested during command post exercises.

When a tropical storm threatened from 25 April onwards, the crews were prepared and could have conducted the entire operation under instrument conditions. Likewise, since L-Hour was unpredictable, it was imperative that extensive plans for night operations be prepared. Accordingly, equipment was gathered, plans were exhaustively reexamined, and the crews were conditioned to fly a portion, or if necessary, all of the operation at night. This planning was completed notwithstanding some well meaning reservations on the part of higher headquarters about subjecting the air crews and helicopters to these adverse flying conditions. The CG had complete confidence that if weather conditions permitted the takeoff of the helicopters, his Marines could complete the job.

Overall helicopter planning included aircraft availability, landing force insertion and extraction rates, cycle capability, and deck availability.

Elements of the force had been deployed and at sea for extended periods in preparation for the Cambodian evacuation. They had been maintaining very high aircraft availability rates. This was, of course, the result of many factors to include a highly motivated group of Marine maintenance men on the scene, and a superbly responsive Navy supply and support system.

The thirty-four Marine CH-53's had been augmented by ten USAF helicopters of the H-53 type, which were embarked aboard *USS Midway* (CVA-41). This gave a total troop lift and evacuee transport capability of forty-four CH-53's and twenty-seven CH-46's. Based upon most recent experience, it appeared reasonable to plan for an initial launch capability of forty CH-53's and twenty-four CH-46's.



For the landing force insertion and extraction the helicopter flow was developed to accommodate two battalions (1,680 people). Helicopter employment and assault landing tables were developed accordingly.

The cycle rate of ninety minutes was based on a round trip to the furthest potential evacuation site, the DAO Complex, from the average modification of location (MODLOC) station in the South China Sea.

Deck availability was an important planning factor. The desired troop transport helicopter was the CH-53. Among the various helicopter-capable ships in the task force (including *Midway* and *Hancock*) there would be thirty CH-53 operational spots available for the initial launch.

The battalion landing teams were disposed among the various amphibious ships in such a manner that maximum tactical unit integrity was maintained. This was necessary to meet the requirement for operational flexibility dictated by the various courses of action. Depending upon the course of action selected, a greater or lesser amount of pre L-Hour transfers and crossdecking was necessary. When forces are spread throughout a fleet of the magnitude and disposition of Task Force 76, there is a direct correlation between the magnitude of the crossdecking and the complication of the process; this holds true for the amount of time consumed. Suffice to say, there were as many crossdecking options as there were alternative courses of action.

Tactical Air Planning

Very detailed and elaborate air plans were distributed by USSAG/7 AF to cover the operation. These plans were simplified and purified to meet the requirements of the landing force. The only major deficiency was a lack of helicopter escort aircraft. Fortunately, the MAB organization provided an ideal gap filler in the form of Cobra gunships. Also, Navy carrier deck alert aircraft would also be called into action if and when required.

The CG made one major point with regard to the application of tactical air: a strong show of retaliatory force with an armada of fixed-wing aircraft would be a major deterrent against anti-aircraft fires directed at the helicopters, and also against rocket and artillery

fires directed at the landing zones. This concept was endorsed by all of the commanders. Along with the entire tactical structure of 7 AF, the Seventh Fleet committed all available aircraft from two attack carriers, *USS Enterprise* and *USS Coral Sea*, for round-the-clock air support.

This umbrella of air combined air superior close air support, interdiction, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare aircraft. Also included were the AC-130 gunships (Specter) whose night strike and suppression capabilities were highly effective and respected. Weapons capabilities were studied and re-studied to provide the best support offered by available aircraft.

Throughout the planning stage the primary concern was getting the helicopters into and out of Saigon over a belt of anti-aircraft weapons. It was considered that the heavy umbrella of fixed-wing aircraft capable of immediate retaliation would be a prime deterrent against the daytime use of SA-7, and light and medium anti-aircraft artillery. During hours of darkness the enemy line-of-sight gunners would have difficulty in acquiring our aircraft. In order to avoid or be relatively safe from small arms fire, the approach and retirement altitudes were planned to be high enough to place the aircraft out of effective range of these weapons.



As the situation worsened in and around Saigon, increased numbers of liaison trips (almost daily) were made into the city. Contact with the Defense Attache and the Ambassador revealed that the DAO/Air America Complex was beginning to emerge as the most logical helicopter evacuation site. Even at this stage there was no one who could say with any degree of prudence that this would be the evacuation site. By 26 April it was apparent the plan for insertion into the DAO/Air America Complex should provide the flexibility to tailor the landing force selectively to the existing conditions in and around the complex. The CG knew that the force should be large enough to provide adequate security. His dilemma was twofold: the force must be large

enough to provide a strong deterrence; however, every extra man that was inserted had to be extracted. Too many could create serious problems later. With these factors in mind, the CG announced four planning options varying in force application. These were:

- First, the hostile threat, requirements for crowd control and security, and the number of evacuees could be such that a battalion-size landing force would be required in the DAO Compound. Insertion and extraction would be by helicopter into and out of the landing zones at the PX parking lot, the softball field, the tennis court, and the north and south parking lots. The other options were developed from this basic option.

- Second, with similar security conditions envisioned as the primary option, an additional battalion command group and one company could be inserted into the Air America Complex, with the capability of building to a full battalion, if necessary. This would provide for additional landing zones, enhance security of the DAO Compound, and permit faster evacuee and landing force extraction by helicopter.

- Third, should the situation allow, only two companies and a battalion command group would be inserted into the DAO Compound using only the landing zones in Alamo itself. This option envisioned minimal hostile threat and a relatively small number of evacuees.

- Fourth, the CG could elect to conduct the evacuation with no landing force at all. Naturally, this option would be exercised only if a totally permissive atmosphere prevailed.

Liaison with USSAG/7 AF

Midway through the planning phase, the G-3 Plans Officer, Maj R. K. Young, was sent to USSAG headquarters to act as the 9th MAB Liaison Officer for Operation FREQUENT WIND. He remained there until the operation ended.

Direct communication with 9th MAB headquarters on *Blue Ridge* from NKP was difficult. Circuits were available to the Deputy Brigade Commander in Saigon. These circuits were used daily to clear up questions relative to the operation.

As per existing doctrine, a liaison officer is required in a joint operation for interface in basic procedures and terminology. The MAB Liaison Officer remained in the USSAG Operation Center during the conduct of the operation. Throughout the action, numerous ques-

tions arose concerning size of units, equipment carried, and capabilities. *This type of face-to-face contact is of critical importance when developing and maintaining cross-tell between key commanders.*

Communications planning

Early in 1975 a periodic update to the standing evacuation contingency plan had been undertaken. This would reflect new procedures and changes and ensure currency of all material.

At that time it was decided to write one communications plan which, when modified by fragmentary order, would support NEM-VAC operations in Southeast Asia. The largest potential organization was planned for, ensuring that it contained within it each of the smaller organizations. Minor changes were required for execution under the operational control of USSAG.

The planned nets and assigned frequencies and call signs were combined with frequency and circuit designators and the chosen organizational structure was entered into a master radio plan. This plan was placed in a computer in order to allow for flexibility in making changes and incorporating last minute details. Upon receipt of a warning order specifying force composition, the entire radio plan could be issued in appropriate format directly from the computer. A fragmentary order designating what nets and circuits to activate, and promulgating any unforeseen changes would allow the plan to support any of the potential organizations for operations of any specified duration.

Upon return to Subic Bay on 17 April, and subsequent restructuring of the 9th MAB into a MAB Headquarters, an RLT, a Provmag, a BLSG (Brigade Logistic Support Group), and an Amphibious Evacuation Security Force (AESF), communications planning took a new direction. The original communications plan computerized input had provided for this doctrinal structure.

Logistics planning

When the BLSG was activated on 19 April, it was composed of a headquarters element and three logistic support units (LSU). It was determined that a small highly specialized command and control headquarters element imposed over the existing LSUs would provide the most effective logistical support organization within the space limitations and the time constraints.

The three LSU's had previously been under the operational control of the BLT's or MAU's which they were supporting. Upon change of OPCON to the BLSG, they became part of a larger logistical operation.

Under the MAU concept, the material assets of the LSUs were for the sole support of the designated BLT. Under the BLSG concept, the assets, while primarily for the support of the designated BLT, were also available for the support of the entire landing force.

Supply and maintenance support for the operation was envisioned as being minimal once execution was directed. The landing force would be supported from mobile dumps at sea. This would ensure that the number of support personnel ashore would be kept to a minimum.

It was also necessary to equip and support the Amphibious Evacuation Security Force detachments which were sent to the various MSC ships supporting the evacuation of Vietnamese refugees. Rations, medical supplies, ammunition, and other equipment were assembled and distributed to the detachments.

Each of the three LSU's was assigned primary, secondary, and tertiary responsibilities for supply, maintenance, and beach area operations support of the landing force. The assignments were based on the physical and personnel assets of the individual LSU and any specific contingency option which it was to support.

Rules of engagement

The rules of engagement (ROE) for a NEM-VAC operation must be restrictive in nature to ensure that only the minimum force required to complete the mission is exerted. Nevertheless, these rules must provide the commander with enough flexibility to increase prudently and rapidly the degree of force required when the situation warrants an escalation. The ROE developed for the evacuation of Saigon which were incorporated into the 9th MAB OPLAN, provided the operating forces with just such flexibility.

Both air and ground commanders, though they might be exposed to heavy hostile activity, were directed to comply with the basic principles of the ROE by using only the amount of force required to complete the mission.

The ROE as finally adopted provided the 9th MAB with the guidelines and flexibility required for such operations, and should be a

valuable source for planning future NEM-VAC operations.

A new option

At the beginning of the last week in April, USSAG published its final option for NEM-VAC operations in South Vietnam. Although it was a proposed concept, the Commanding General determined that there was sufficient credibility to the plan to warrant the MAB's consideration. A new MAB operation plan was written in support of the final option.

Encompassed in the new option was an evacuation from Tan Son Nhut air field by fixed-wing aircraft or helicopter, a sealift, a helicopter lift from Newport Pier, and the establishment of an evacuation site on the Vung Tau Peninsula. This plan envisioned that the number of refugees would range from over one thousand up to almost a quarter of a million people. The plan included an amphibious task force with a MAB reinforced by two fixed-wing airlifted battalions, and a specially configured Marine evacuation security force for employment aboard MSC shipping.

The new MAB plan offered a concept of operations as follows:

▶ A battalion size landing force from the ATF, or introduced from out of theater by fixed-wing aircraft, would secure a perimeter in the vicinity of Tan Son Nhut Air Base/DAO Compound to permit evacuee assembly and control for fixed-wing evacuation. If/when the fixed-wing evacuation was no longer feasible, the landing force would withdraw to the DAO Compound and continue the evacuation by helicopter. Upon completion, the landing force would extract by fixed-wing aircraft or by helicopter.

▶ A battalion size landing force direct from the ATF or from Tan Son Nhut, after introduction by fixed-wing aircraft, would be inserted by helicopter at Newport Pier to secure an assembly area which would permit the evacuation of refugees by helicopter or by MSC shipping. Upon completion, the landing force would extract by either ship or helicopter.

▶ Up to a brigade size landing force would land on the Vung Tau Peninsula and provide protection and control of port facilities, the airfield, and the refugee marshalling areas within the force evacuation beachhead. Vung Tau would be used as an interim processing area for subsequent movement to designated safe havens. The landing force would be extracted by helicopter and across the beach, or

at piers.

The alternatives considered by the CG were these:

- RLT 4 would land at Vung Tau. Two airlifted battalions would land in Saigon, one to be employed at DAO/Tan Son Nhut and the other to be lifted by helicopter to the Newport Pier.

- RLT 4 would land two BLT's at Vung Tau, one BLT would be lifted by helicopter to Tan Son Nhut/DAO. One airlifted battalion would be landed at the Vung Tau airfield for link up with the RLT. One airlifted battalion would be landed at Tan Son Nhut for helilift to the Newport Pier.

This plan was issued late on 28 April, which was to be the eve of the FREQUENT WIND execution.

Advance command element

Command arrangements in Saigon for evacuation were complicated, and a "business as usual" posture was still being maintained. Overt preparations for evacuation would have been inconsistent with the attitude that was being conveyed. Liaison between the brigade and U.S. officials in Saigon overcame some of the difficulties. It was obvious, however, that an allout, last minute effort would be required to ensure the success of the operation. The DAO had been assigned nominal responsibility for NEMVAC, and the vast preponderance of efforts took place within that organization. The DAO had evolved a structure of its own for handling the impending emergency. It provided for an Emergency Action Group organized on a part-time basis, under the Emergency Command Center (ECC).

While the DAO gave the outward appearance of conducting business as usual, on a daily basis the Emergency Action Group, with the blessing of the ECC, actively engaged in planning for NEMVAC operations. When the massive fixed-wing evacuation of Americans was ordered, the DAO was promptly tasked with this evolution. This fixed-wing evacuation was an all consuming task which required a full time effort on the part of the entire staff. The immediate effect was the arrival of literally thousands of Vietnamese at the DAO Compound.

Of the many deleterious effects that this operation had at DAO, perhaps the most serious from the standpoint of Operation FREQUENT WIND was a curtailment of preparations by the Emergency Action Group and the ECC. Both their people and their assets be-

came completely absorbed in the fixed-wing effort, which reached a peak of 7,500 persons per day, with as many as 5,000 refugees remaining overnight in the DAO Compound. Security became extremely difficult due to a shortage of people and an overwhelming number of refugees.

Late in April the security problem in the DAO Compound was eased when a Marine rifle platoon was inserted. This unit from BLT 1/9, under the command of 1st Lt B. P. Thompson-Bowers, assumed responsibility for Annex security.

The major problem encountered by the Advance Command Element during this period was an almost total abandonment of planning for helicopter evacuation. The sheer volume of the on going fixed-wing evacuation virtually crippled any other effort. Preparations underway by the ACE continued, but they could best be described as lonely, unnoticed matters.

Preparation of helicopter LZ's

Upon arrival on 20 April, it was apparent to the Advance Command Element that a great deal of preliminary helicopter planning had already been accomplished. The plan briefed was essentially the plan followed on 29 April. Although much had been done in the way of preliminary planning, preparations to make the DAO Compound suitable for helicopter operations had begun on only the smallest scale. This was therefore the obvious and immediate problem.

By late evening on the 20th, the proposed landing zones had been inspected. The obvious obstacles and needed improvements were noted and the first engineering efforts for Landing Zone 35 soil stabilization were effected.

The next engineering efforts were to clear and mark for day and night operations selected rooftop landing zones throughout the city of Saigon. For the reason cited previously, these activities were pressed under cover of darkness. Obstacles were removed and wind socks and luminescent markings were installed on 13 preselected building rooftops designated as American evacuee assembly points.

At the DAO Compound landing zone improvements were necessary in each of the several locations in order to provide the landing force with a wave capacity of 12 CH-53s. See Figure 3. Concurrent with the development

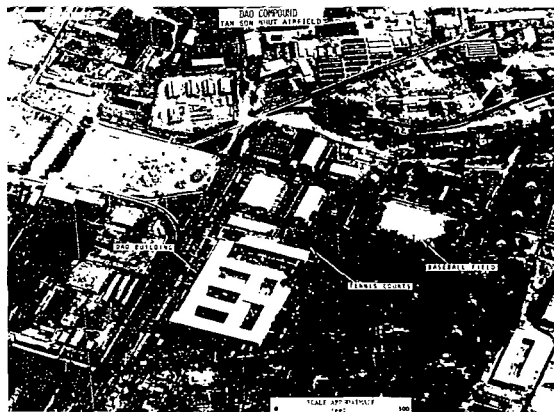


Figure 3

of the landing zone improvement program, a briefing was presented on the proposed interface between evacuee staging and processing and the evacuation helicopter lift. The actual landing zone improvements were accomplished very slowly, because of a shortage of labor and because DAO priorities were directed to the fixed-wing evacuation.

Throughout this period, the plan was discussed and refined. Visual aids were devised by the ACE and were provided for the briefings of air crews.

Throughout the landing zone improvement period, the DAO Complex was visited by members of the 9th MAB, RLT-4, and PROV-MAG-39 staffs. Landing zone progress was inspected and reported daily through staff visits to DAO or visits to *Blue Ridge*.

On 25 April, the ACE air liaison officer, Maj Cox, briefed the Commanding General, his principal staff, and the staffs of both RLT-4 and PROV-MAG-39. Included in the briefing aboard the *Blue Ridge*, was a 35mm slide presentation of the DAO landing zones, obstacles to flight, aerial checkpoints, and the ingress/egress route between the task force and Saigon. He was then briefed by the MAB staff on the plan for employment of the landing force in the DAO/Air America Complex. Further, upon his return to Saigon, he briefed the Defense Attache on the MAB plan as it related to helicopter operations, landing zone organization and evacuee processing.

Also on 25 April, the landing zones were declared ready for use. All LZ's were marked with CH-53 "footprints" in luminescent paint. The measurements were taken from the CH-53 NATOPS Flight Manual and the "footprints" were placed to provide maximum ro-

tor-to-rotor to obstacle clearance. Where the landing zone surface could not be painted, iron rods were installed to which standard USMC marking panels could be attached prior to L-Hour.

Communications preparations DAO

On 20 April, the Communications Officer of the Advance Command Element received a comprehensive briefing on the communication facilities and services resident in the DAO Compound. Additionally, a cogent summary of the telecommunications organization was presented. Upon completion of the briefings, a walk-through of all facilities was accomplished.

As a result of the physical inspection of installed communication assets within the ECC, it was determined that existing equipment and facilities, with the addition of one receiver-transmitter, would meet the requirements of the landing force commander once he was ashore. The additional requirements were quickly provided by the MAB and positioned within the ECC.

A small contingent of communications support troops and equipment from the 9th MAB Headquarters afloat were also sent to the DAO Compound. Support personnel continued to be added until their final strength was 18 Marines. Equipment introduced was necessary to support the simultaneous operation of three landing zone control parties. Specifically, each party had the capability to communicate from each zone on high frequency, very high frequency, and ultra high frequency.

During this period a number of visits and updates of information were exchanged with the CEO, 9th MAB and the RLT-4 Communications Officer. Daily consultations were accomplished to ensure receipt of the latest information and understanding of stated or perceived problem areas.

EOD Operations

The task assigned to the explosive ordnance disposal specialists who had arrived in Saigon with the ACE was to prepare for destruction designated controlled areas within the DAO Compound.

By the evening of 29 April Captain McManus and Master Sergeant East had completed preparations and only the order to execute was necessary. At approximately 2400 on the 29th, and just prior to the lift off of the last helicopter from the DAO Compound, the

order was given. Within minutes, the destructive action was completed, leaving nothing of value.

Business as usual comes to a halt

Business as usual came to an abrupt halt on the evening of 28 April when three A-37 aircraft bombed Tan Son Nhut airfield. Concurrent attacks by fire on adjacent ammunition dumps led even the most dubious observer to realize that the noose around Saigon had tightened. At that time some 800 to 2,000 evacuees remained in the DAO Compound. Routine evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft had been planned for 29 April. At 0400 on that date the NVA/VC interdicted both Tan Son Nhut airfield and the DAO Compound with high velocity artillery. The result at DAO was two Embassy Marines killed. Following the attack, a tour of the area disclosed calm and absolutely no panic. Security had been increased and only one gate to the Alamo and to the Annex remained open. Tan Son Nhut had numerous fires and rounds continued to fall in that area. No large numbers of Vietnamese were accumulating around the DAO.

With the impact of the artillery and obvious proximity of combatant forces, the decision was made to continue evacuation by tactical transports (the old reliable workhorses, the C-130s) which had been staged for this massive lift. The first lift for the C-130s was staged and departed for Tan Son Nhut. Unfortunately, no more than two flights departed before Tan Son Nhut was closed by aircraft and vehicles abandoned on the runways, the SA-7 threat (VNAF aircraft had been shot down by these missiles in the vicinity of the airfield that morning), and the continuing artillery barrage. In the meantime, evacuees continued to arrive at DAO. Unfortunately, no valid information was available regarding numbers of evacuees, either American or Vietnamese, and it literally seemed that the Vietnamese "pipeline" was open wide.

It was anticipated that a maximum of three rooftop lifts by UH-1Es and one CH-53 lift from the Embassy courtyard would remove all remaining Embassy evacuees. All others were to proceed to DAO by bus for evacuation from that site.

At approximately 1000 the decision was made in Saigon to evacuate by helicopter. The long awaited execution of FREQUENT WIND was at hand—the Marines were on stage. **The curtain is raised next month.**