

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP LEJEUNE IN THE VIETNAM ERA

Following its Cold War policy of containment, the United States supported the government of South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, against the Communist-backed government of North Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Military advisers were sent to the country as early as the mid-1950s, when Vietnam gained its independence from France. By the early 1960s the United States was deploying an increasing number of personnel to provide military support and training to the South Vietnamese military. The U.S. presence escalated quickly. In 1964 the U.S. had 14,000 troops in South Vietnam; by 1966 there were more than 200,000 troops in the country. The American military presence would peak in 1969, when there were 543,000 troops in Vietnam. The U.S. buildup of personnel was a result of the inability of the South Vietnamese to cope with the increasing strength of the Communist-led forces and America's desire to stop the Communist threat to a friendly democracy.

Having contributed to the early advisory effort in Vietnam and made several Cold War sorties into the region, the Marine Corps landed the first U.S. ground combat unit, the 9th MEB, at Da Nang on 8 March 1965.

As with the Korean War, the U.S. government had not and would not issue a formal declaration of war against Vietnam. In general, Americans initially supported the U.S. intervention in the beginning; however, as the fighting progressed and intensified with no perceived success and poorly understood goals, many Americans began to protest the involvement in what was beginning to be considered a "civil war." Antiwar protests were held in major American cities. In 1965 the United States attempted to hold peace negotiations with North Vietnam, but the offers were refused and the fighting continued. The Tet Offensive of January 1968, in which most South Vietnamese provincial capitals were attacked by Communist forces, fueled the antiwar feelings in the U.S.

A new policy of disengagement was initiated, which led to the signing of an armistice in 1973 and the discontinued financial support of the conflict. The American combat troops withdrew as the North Vietnamese, in violation of the armistice, pursued their objective of overrunning the South. The vast majority of Marines, the I Corps Tactical Zone, or "Eye Corps," had fought in the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. For the first time since World War II two Marine divisions (the 1st and 3rd) had been committed to combat, along with elements of the reactivated 5th MarDiv. Although they gained military victories, the Marines found that their efforts against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were offset by political, social, and psychological events beyond their zone of action.

On 29 April 1975 Saigon fell to the Communists. On 30 April the last Marine, Master Sergeant Juan Valdez, boarded a CH-46 helicopter atop the American Embassy in Saigon and ended the American presence in the country. The war ended 21 years after the first advisers had been sent to South Vietnam. Marines had been the first American ground troops into Vietnam and were the last to leave.



During the Vietnam era 794,000 men and women served as U.S. Marines, 448,000 of whom were sent overseas. Of this number, 41,000 were African-American Marines and approximately 2,700 were women, including Master Sergeant Barbara J. Dulinsky, who was the first female Marine assigned to a combat zone. At its peak strength in 1969 the Corps totaled 314,917. In 1968, III MAF (Marine Amphibious Force), the senior Marine headquarters, which had 85,755 Marines, constituted a larger force than those that made the landings at Iwo Jima and Okinawa in World War II. Also in 1968, the III MAF commander and future Commandant, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, had some 163,000 Marines and soldiers, mostly from the Army's XXIV Corps, under his command, which was more than any other Marine general in history.

The Corps suffered 101,574 casualties, which exceeded their World War II totals. Marines had made up only one-tenth of all U.S. forces in Vietnam but had suffered one-fourth of the casualties. Fifty-seven Marines were awarded the Medal of Honor, 44 of which were awarded posthumously.

Life at Camp Lejeune

During the 1960s construction continued at Camp Lejeune, but housing was still a problem. The quarters at Berkeley Manor were completed in 1962, and a \$1 million renovation of the Tarawa Terrace complexes (I and II) had taken place. Although there were about 4,810 units of family housing on base, almost half of Camp Lejeune's population of 60,000 military personnel and dependents were forced to live off base. Unfortunately, segregation in the local community remained a problem, with the result that HQMC routinely sent African-American officers to Camp Pendleton in order to avoid off base housing discrimination.

In 1967 the Marine Corps Supply Schools (MCSS), still located at Camp Geiger, was redesignated as the Marine Corps Service Support Schools (MCSSS). In 1968 Force Troops, including its subordinate 2nd FSR, began to move to its new home in the French Creek complex, which was still under construction, although its headquarters was to remain at Hadnot Point. Marines from the 8th Motor Transport Battalion, 8th Communications Battalion, and the 8th Engineer Support Battalion were agreeably surprised to find that they had traded their 1942- vintage, squadbay barracks for modern, motel-like structures. These barracks, which were part of the Modular Unit Design Project, had two- to four-man rooms and many civilian amenities. This was the first phase of a master plan that would eventually and incrementally provide modern quarters for all Camp Lejeune unaccompanied enlisted personnel by the base's fiftieth anniversary in 1991. The new construction resulted in the destruction of many of the World War II-era barracks that had housed Marines from 1942 through Korea and Vietnam. Those stationed at the base welcomed the new barracks, which were infinitely more modern and more comfortable than the older buildings.

During the decade of the 1960s Camp Lejeune's military population hovered around 32,000, with all its commands, particularly MCB and Force Troops, under strength in order to support the insatiable manpower demands of Southeast Asia. In 1967 the 2nd MarDiv could muster only three infantry battalions at any given time. Personnel quality, not quantity, however, became the most serious problem. Camp Lejeune was a virtual transient facility, with most of the Marines stationed there either having just returned from Vietnam or scheduled



shortly to be en route. In 1967 the 2nd MarDiv endured a turnover rate of 128 percent.

MCAS (Helicopter)

Marine helicopters first commenced operations in Vietnam in 1962 and played a significant role in the subsequent conflict. In the late 1960s MAG-26 became noteworthy as the largest aircraft group in the Corps, containing HMM-162, -262, -264, -265, and -365; HMM-461; VMO-1; MABS-26; and H&MS-26.

In 1968 the Camp Lejeune air facility was redesignated and became the first Marine Corps Air Station (Helicopter), or MCAS(H), which reflected the air station's development from a small training base in the 1950s to a major Marine airfield and the only MCAS devoted entirely to helicopters. In June 1969 Marine Helicopter Training Group (HMTG)-40 was activated at New River. The group enjoyed the comforts of a three-story, air-conditioned barracks. Other additions to the air station facilities included a 13,000-square-foot training building, also air-conditioned, that was constructed at the station to train personnel and to service the new CH-53 helicopters; an operations building; an airfield lighting system; and a new hangar, with a 25 percent addition to the existing hangar and more ramp space for parking helicopters. With the increase in personnel during the Vietnam period, the air station also developed its own amenities, including a movie theater, miniature golf course, an outdoor swimming pool, hobby shops, picnic areas, tennis and basketball courts, a 10-lane bowling alley, increased medical and dental facilities, and a 50-man BOQ with mess hall. An elementary school was provided for dependent children, and in 1965 the new school was dedicated and named in honor of Lieutenant Colonel Armond H. Delalio, generally recognized as the pioneer Marine Corps helicopter pilot.

At the air station, the pilots of MAG-26, who were destined to serve in Vietnam, participated in specialized training, as did their ground counterparts, to assist them in preparing for combat.

Training

One of the major training innovations to prepare Marines for Vietnam was the 2nd MarDiv Guerilla Warfare Center, which was built at the southwestern tip of the Camp Lejeune complex about one mile northwest of Sneads Ferry. Courses lasting from one day to two weeks provided Marines instruction in the fundamentals of guerilla warfare and successful counter operations with practical application. Through the Personal Response Program, Marines were lectured on Vietnamese society and customs. This program was an effort by the Corps to familiarize Marines with the environment they would be entering and to avert crimes committed by servicemen against civilians.

Racial Tensions at Camp Lejeune

During the late 1960s the tensions arising from Vietnam were approaching their height. A lack of popular support for the war coupled with larger societal problems in the country, including the use of illicit drugs, placed a strain on the usual organizational cohesion of the Corps. Racial tensions were of



Training aboard riverine craft (above) and amphibious landing training (below) continued to be mainstays at Camp Lejeune during Vietnam.



paramount concern to the Marine Corps, which, along with the Navy, had been the last of the armed services to integrate (1949). Young African-American Marines entering the Corps during this period of new racial awareness felt discriminated against by the institution and organization of the Corps.

MCB Camp Lejeune mirrored much of the racial tension in American society at large. During the first eight months of 1969 alone there were 160 race-related assaults, muggings, and robberies aboard Camp Lejeune. The worst incident, and the one that finally focused command attention on the issue, occurred the evening of 20 July 1969. After an evening of celebrating prior to the deployment of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, the next day to Spain, 15 white Marines were injured at the hands of a group of black Marines, estimated to be between 30 to 50 members. Attacks occurred as the celebration was breaking up and the men were heading back to their barracks. One victim, Corporal Edward E. Bankston, who had been wounded in Vietnam three times, died seven days later from head wounds he received during the attack.

A special subcommittee of the House of Representatives Armed Services committee determined that several factors had led to the violent outbreak, but primarily that "Camp Lejeune and the Marine Corps have a race problem because the Nation has a race problem." The tensions were not confined to the Marine Corps but were also being felt in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as in the civilian population, as race riots erupted in several cities across the country.

The subcommittee further concluded that the race problem at Camp Lejeune could be attributed in large part to a lack of effective communication between the enlisted men and the junior officers and NCOs. A shortage of mature leadership at the NCO and junior officer level, as well as a deterioration in discipline at the base, aggravated the problem since many of the African-American Marines felt they could not confide in their commanders without fear of reprisal.

Efforts at Resolution

In an effort to alleviate perceived discrimination, the Marine Corps, for example, allowed African-American Marines to express racial pride by permitting modified "Afro" haircuts and sanctioned "Black Power" salutes on informal occasions. Authoritative and conciliatory methods helped to mitigate the racial friction that had weakened Corps organizational strength. Base officials worked closely with the Jacksonville and Onslow County governments to alleviate segregation, and as early as 1963 Major General Alpha L. Bowser was able to report that Jacksonville's movie theaters, restaurants, and taverns had been desegregated.

The Marine Corps was officially integrated but lapses and oversights occurred. A study directed by base commander Major General Michael P. Ryan at the onset of racial violence in 1969 reported that bigotry and prejudice were practiced not only by white businessmen in Jacksonville, but also within the Corps itself. Finally recognizing that the drug and race problems were not mere aberrations of leadership failure that would soon pass, the Corps accepted them as reflections of societal conditions that deserved substantial attention from the highest levels.