As the strength and effectiveness of US/FWMA forces had mounted during 1965, General Westmoreland was able to adopt an increasingly aggressive strategy designed to destroy the enemy and to seize the initiative. During 1966 as US/FWMAF strength in RVN more than doubled, COMUSMACV carried the fight to the enemy even more strongly in spite of increased infiltration (50,000 accepted, 79,000 possible). As the year progressed, General Westmoreland's troops launched sustained attacks against VC strongholds, while at the same time securing base areas and major population centers. His forces fought in regions which had been for many years under exclusive control of the VC. US operations were designed to seize and destroy VC command and operation centers, supply bases, and training areas. The aggressiveness of US/FWMA forces encouraged the RVNAF which, grew more aggressive. Spoiling attacks kept the enemy off balance and snatched from him the option he had so long enjoyed of fighting in places of his own choosing, at times and on terms most favorable to him. Improved intelligence, resulting from a greater willingness of the rural population to furnish information on the VC/NVA, brought more effective large-scale attacks on known enemy formations. Operations were no longer of short duration. Security measures to protect rice- and salt-producing areas, both vital to the rural economy, were emphasized. Air operations in RVN concentrated on logistic and combat support of ground troops. ARC LIGHT strikes disrupted enemy plans and kept him in a constant state of confusion. Naval operations designed to prevent infiltration by sea were in full swing. During the year naval bombardment of coastal areas added fire power of a new dimension to operations against the enemy.1

The US Strategy is Challenged

The US strategy in Vietnam was publicly questioned in early 1966. General James M. Gavin, USA (Retired), charged in an article in the February 1966 issue of Harper's Magazine that the United States was stretching its forces

"beyond reason" in an ill-advised effort to secure all of RVN. He maintained that the United States should not try to secure RVN in this manner but should withdraw all of its forces into a series of strong coastal enclaves, cease bombing NVN, and seek a solution to the war through the United Nations or a conference in Geneva. This criticism of US strategy by a reputable military leader, along with the growing criticism of the national policy from several other responsible quarters, disturbed high Administration officials. As a result the Joint Chiefs of Staff were directed to examine the value of General Gavin's proposals.2

The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not agree with General Gavin. They informed the Secretary of Defense on 3 February that the "enclave" strategy contained significant deficiencies and that its advantages were more illusory than real. By forfeiting the initiative, abandoning solid negotiating levers, conceding large land areas to the enemy and alienating the GVN and other friendly governments, the "enclave" strategy would abandon national objectives. Its military consequences, the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, would lead to US/GVN defeat in RVN or ultimate US abandonment of Southeast Asia.3

General Wheeler presented these same arguments in Congressional testimony. In an appearance before a Congressional committee considering military appropriations in early February, General Wheeler denied that, as General Gavin had charged, the United States was attempting to seize all of RVN. "Our objectives out there are--and General Westmoreland's strategy is--to defeat, together with Vietnamese forces, the main force of Viet Cong units and the North Vietnamese forces . . . ." He said that the United States was assisting the GVN to establish security for its population in a "police type" operation, and to assist the GVN in establishing conditions for maintaining a free government.4

3. (TS-GP 4) JCSM-76-66 to SecDef, 3 Feb 66 (derived from JCS 2343/759), JMF 9155.3 (17 Jan 66).
4. (U) Transcript of CJCS testimony before Senate Committee on Armed Services, Feb 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Feb 66.
The Honolulu Meeting Goals

At the Honolulu meeting of 7-8 February, the United States and the GVN renewed their pledge to fight aggression in RVN. Although the emphasis at the meeting centered on economic and social matters, the authorities of the two countries conferred on the combined military program and announced a policy of "growing military effectiveness and still closer cooperation."

At this meeting military leaders of the two nations developed six specific goals to be achieved in RVN during 1966: 1) attrite, by year's end, VC/NVA forces at a rate as high as their capability to put men into the field; 2) increase the percentage of VC/NVA base areas denied the VC from 10-20 percent to 40-50 percent; 3) increase the critical roads and railroads open for use in RVN from 30 percent to 50 percent; 4) increase the population in secure areas from 50 percent to 60 percent; 5) pacify the four selected high-priority areas, increasing the pacified population in those areas by 235,000; 6) ensure the defense of military bases, political and population centers, and food-producing areas now under GVN control.

The JCS Strategic Concept

Shortly after the Honolulu meeting, the Joint Chiefs of Staff restated, with little change from the pattern established in 1965, the strategic concept of operations by US/FWMAF in RVN. They informed the Secretary of Defense on 1 March that the US strategy recognized the interdependence of political, economic, sociological, and military factors in the war. In coordination with the GVN, US/FWMA forces apply discriminate military force to achieve "a stable and independent non-communist government in South Vietnam."

6. (TS) CINCPAC Briefing for SecDef, "Southeast Asia Programs," 8 Jul 66, JMF 9155.3 (8 Jul 66).
TOP SECRET

The Joint Chiefs of Staff listed US military objectives in Vietnam as follows: 1) to cause NVN to cease its control, direction, and support of the communist insurgency in SVN and Laos; 2) to assist the GVN to defeat the Viet Cong and NVN forces in SVN; 3) to assist the GVN in extending its dominion and control over SVN, including suppression of guerrilla activity; 4) to deter the CHICOMs from direct intervention in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the Western Pacific and to be prepared to defeat such intervention if it occurred.

The military tasks facing the United States had to be accomplished therefore both in NVN and RVN. The United States, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff, must selectively destroy the NVN military capabilities, reducing its capability to import and distribute war materials. In addition, the United States must destroy other "high-value" targets in NVN in order to punish that nation increasingly for its part in the war. In RVN the task was to find, harass, pursue, and defeat VC/NVA units, destroying their bases and disrupting their LOCs in the country and outside it. At the same time the people of RVN must be protected from communist "subversion and oppression" and selected areas within the country liberated from VC control. All US military operations had to be closely coordinated with those of the RVNAF and to be meshed as well with the other US programs, political, economic, and sociological, in RVN.

This concept, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had been integrated with and was designed to support GVN Rural Construction and the USMACV/JGS Combined Campaign Plan for CY 1966. US/FWMAF/RVNNAF forces would carry out search-and-destroy operations, clearing and securing operations, and civic actions in areas of primary (national) and secondary (CTZ) priority. These forces would also defend GVN centers and critical installations. As a rule, US/FWMA forces would not secure areas in support of the GVN Rural Construction program except around their bases. On the other hand, every US tactical unit in the field had its own civic action program in the areas around its base--securing rice crops, protecting harvesters, and giving emergency medical assistance--all actions which would develop popular support for the GVN.

Operations against the VC outside of secure areas would be carried out by US/FWMA forces and RVNAF reserves. The main body of the RVNAF would defend GVN installations and clear and secure areas. Search-and-destroy operations against the VC/NVA and their base areas would aim at whittling down the
VC/NVA main forces, but not as part of the Rural Construction effort. Because of the heavy enemy buildup in several areas of RVN, the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted "the prime focus" of large, combat capable units of the US/FWMA forces and the RVNAF directed to the search-and-destroy operations.

Clearing operations, conducted tactically in the same manner as search-and-destroy operations, would be the first step in the Rural Construction program sequence of "clearing, securing, and developing." But without sufficient trained follow-on troops to reestablish effective GVN control, the clearing operations would be of little value. In theory, regular forces, US or ARVN, would provide initial security, with the RF and PF gradually taking over. Concurrently, GVN cadre and local GVN officials would be introduced into the structure. National Police would maintain civil law and order, carry out population and resource control measures, and eliminate VC agents, terrorists, and political elements.

In the past, local ARVN commanders, lacking troops, had drafted the RF and PF for offensive actions against the hard-core VC/NVA units. With the introduction of sufficient US/FWMA forces into key areas during 1965, the picture had changed. A balance of force in favor of the GVN had taken place in these areas. By early 1966 the RVNAF were being used as the concept had long provided.

**Carrying Out the Strategy: Combat Operations**

As 1966 began, General Westmoreland admonished his commanders to smash the VC and to destroy the NVA units in the RVN. He directed them to "find, fix and destroy" the enemy by sustained, aggressive actions, applying the tactical principle of economy of force in securing the critical bases and the principle of mass in attacking and destroying enemy units. His commanders in all the CTZs where US/FWMA combat forces operated during 1966 followed these orders with marked success. (See Map).

As the battle on the ground developed during 1966 it became apparent that the enemy was still firmly resolved to win. In reaction to the US buildup, the NVA increased its

efforts, massing its forces wherever possible to mount large-scale assaults, relying heavily on "sanctuary" areas in Laos, Cambodia, the DMZ, and in NVN. The pattern of infiltration changed markedly, as, hampered by increased US pressures in Laos, NVN began moving large numbers of men and substantial quantities of materiel directly into RVN, through the DMZ. It was in the northernmost zone, I CTZ, that the most serious threats to friendly forces developed and here that some of the fiercest fighting of the year took place.

General Westmoreland relied heavily on the "spoiling attack" to smash the enemy formations before they had built up. Aided by improved intelligence on enemy locations, he was generally successful. As the enemy resorted to building up in areas outside RVN where he could not be reached by COMUSMACV's ground forces, General Westmoreland sought changes in policy that would allow additional air and ground actions in these areas.

On 5 February COMUSMACV informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that his spoiling attacks had disrupted enemy plans for large-scale attacks. There had been fewer VC attacks since the December ceasefire, and he attributed this to the beating the VC had taken in the last months of 1965. The VC were, at least for the movement, avoiding actions which would expose their troops to greater friendly firepower. There was no evidence that the enemy was reverting back to his earlier small-scale warfare, but it was quite clear that the US/FWMAF/RVNAF had seized the initiative in some areas. As the enemy brought his forces together into larger formations, he was more exposed to friendly intelligence, and the US/GVN frequently had been able to strike him before he was ready to attack. The VC had been forced, temporarily at least, on the defensive. General Westmoreland called attention to several current operations--JEFFERSON, VAN BUREN, and WHITE WING--all of which he believed had upset VC plans.9

But there were clear indications that the enemy was continuing to position his forces to conduct large offensive operations. "In the immediate future," COMUSMACV predicted, "the VC will continue widespread terrorism, harassment, propaganda . . . and will increase the number of small,

hit and run attacks in an attempt to control the population and prevent the US from making any significant gains in reconstruction." COMUSMACV added that the VC/NVA would launch mass attacks whenever they believed such assaults would succeed. But they were finding it more difficult to mass forces undetected and to gain the essential surprise.

The most serious defeat incurred by friendly forces in the early part of 1966 resulted from an attack by a VC main force of three, possibly four, battalions on an isolated Special Forces Camp at A Shau near the Cambodian border on 9-10 March. Despite strong efforts to control the enemy assault with air attack, the VC overran the camp. Over 250 members of the friendly force, mainly CIDG, were killed or missing, but 103 were successfully evacuated. The loss of this border surveillance post opened up the A Shau valley, which the enemy soon developed into a major logistic base.10

General Westmoreland reported in the first week of April that, following a series of successful operations in the I CTZ (A Shau excepted), a lull had set in. He felt that this might be associated with an increased VC/NVA buildup in Quang Ngai and Quang Tri provinces which could lead to "heavy campaigning" there. On the other hand, he said, it was possible that the enemy was lying low in order not to "embarrass" the so-called Struggle Movement then in full swing around Da Nang and Hue.11

Deputy Secretary of Defense Vance visited the scene of the fighting in early April. From RVN he reported to the President that the US/RVNAF were doing well militarily and continuing to impose heavy losses on the VC/NVA. "We are putting heavy pressure on their base areas," he said, "and on the movement of men and supplies within South Vietnam." The campaign was going best in the I CTZ and III CTZ areas. He noted that the enemy was making a massive effort to move the maximum number of men and supplies into RVN before the rainy season. US planes were taking a substantial toll.

11. (TS) NMCC, Telecon, COMUSMACV to NMCC, 042025Z Apr 66, JCS IN 97633. See Ch. 38.
but NVN would be able to move in more men and supplies than they needed for "the present level of operations." [12]

In early June COMUSMACV reported that the period of the current southwest monsoon was perhaps the most critical of the war thus far. The enemy had built up his combat structure greatly, with most of the increase coming in the form of NVA organized units. In spite of this expansion, the enemy was finding it hard to keep his units at effective strength. Illness and combat losses had caused a high rate of attrition, but "the enemy has plenty of fight left in him." [13]

Stepped-up air interdiction in Laos and NVN, said COMUSMACV, had cut down the enemy's rate of logistic buildup by as much as 50 percent, but he still had enough supplies to support limited objective campaigns in a number of areas. Since the monsoon would favor the enemy "because of restrictions placed on our use of air," General Westmoreland forecast that the enemy would use his present forces where he had the best chance of success—the plateau area, with a primary effort in Kontum, Pleiku, and Dalac Provinces, where he could operate out of Laos and Cambodia. His secondary efforts would likely be north and east of Saigon and in the I CTZ north of the Hai Van pass and in Quang Ngai province.

Increased Pressure in I CTZ

On 30 May General Westmoreland had reported to the US Mission Council an increase of enemy movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail and in the Laos panhandle area. A buildup of NVA forces in Cambodia across the border from Kontum, Pleiku, and Dalac Provinces had also been detected. As the enemy began to move it was crucial to beat him to the punch whenever and wherever possible. He observed, however, that his resources to deal with this problem were limited, especially if the enemy struck at a number of places at one time. [14]

By mid-July COMUSMACV reported that the NVA 324B division had crossed through the central and western portions of the DMZ.

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12. (S) Msg, DepSecDef 1886-66 to Pres, 8 Apr 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Apr 66.
into Quang Tri province. The division, believed to be highly professional, well equipped and trained, was being supplied across the DMZ. Another large NVA force, 15,000 men, was reported to be in Laos between Tchepone and the border, and prepared to reinforce the new NVA division. A second NVA division was said to be poised just across the DMZ in NVN. COMUSMACV reported that the enemy might attempt a two-pronged attack in Quang Tri, across the DMZ and from Laos against posts along Highway 9, with a secondary attack south of Hue to cut Highway 1 and pin down reserves at Phu Bai.15

General Westmoreland believed that the recent interdiction of enemy infiltration routes in Laos had forced the NVA to find new routes across the center and western portions of the DMZ. "... I believe the enemy finds his planned offensive actions blunted in III corps, II Corps and southern I Corps, and that he will go for broke in the northern I Corps. We must spoil his efforts and take advantage of the opportunity to destroy his forces with all means available."16

General Westmoreland had already moved against this enemy threat to I CTZ. US Marines and ARVN forces had launched Operation HASTINGS on 15 June, following preparatory bombing by ARC LIGHT forces. Supported by tactical air, B-52 strikes, artillery, and naval gunfire, major elements of the US 3d Marine Division and units of the 1st ARVN division and the ARVN Airborne Brigade struck the enemy hard.

Operation HASTINGS consisted of a number of sharp, small unit engagements with an occasional large encounter such as that of 18 July when a US Marine battalion took on an enemy force estimated at 1,000. In this battle US artillery and air support inflicted casualties of approximately 50 percent on the enemy.

The enemy fought tenaciously from a major base in the rugged hills north of Quang Tri, supported by two main LOCs across the DMZ. He had stockpiled supplies in and north of the DMZ. Fortunately, the air campaign against the "extended battle area" north of the DMZ had destroyed much of the enemy's stockpiles and left him unable to sustain his forces in a

16. Ibid.
major campaign. On 30 July General Westmoreland reported that the 324B Division had been "dispersed and apparently demoralized." He no longer considered it an effective fighting force. Some enemy troops remained in Quang Tri, but many of them had moved back across the DMZ into NVN. On at least three occasions NVA troops had broken and run in the face of US Marine attacks.17

Enemy casualties were extremely heavy. US Marine commanders estimated that during July 2,400 NVA and VC had been killed by US Marines in Operation HASTINGS and attendant actions in the area.

In discussion with the US Mission Council on 2 August, General Westmoreland stated that since Hanoi had moved a whole division through the DMZ, he assumed that they planned to push even more personnel, including large units, into RVN by that route. Air operations and sea surveillance off the coast near the DMZ had been effective, he said. The basic task now was to develop a strong defensive posture on the ground south of the DMZ. He was pressing ahead with plans to accomplish this.18

The defeat of the NVA 324B Division was only temporary, and the enemy buildup in I CTZ soon resumed. In September General Westmoreland reported that the current buildup in Quang Tri Province and in, and just north of, the DMZ "constitutes a direct threat" to US/FWMA forces in I CTZ and to Quang Tri and Thu Thien Provinces. His intelligence showed that the 324B Division had been reinforced by the 341st NVA Division and that two other NVA divisions might either be in place or on the way. South of Route 9, the NVA had made extensive preparations and was already probing friendly positions. General Westmoreland feared that the enemy was preparing to "liberate" the two provinces. With the improvement of weather in the next month, the enemy could again move men and equipment into the area through Laos and engage COMUSMACV's flank from the west. At the same time, worsening weather in II and III CTZs would work to the enemy's advantage there. Utilizing his Laotian

18. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV 6595 to CINCPAC, 1 Aug 66; (S) Mission Council Memo 100, 4 Aug 66; OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Aug 66.
routes, he could reinforce large-scale diversionary attacks further south in coordination with a main assault through the DMZ and against the US/FWMA eastern flank.19

Up to this time, as in Operation HASTINGS, COMUSMACV had used spoiling attacks to disrupt the enemy before his buildup was complete, but it now appeared that the enemy was employing a new tactic--building up in the sanctuaries of the DMZ and in NVN to prevent spoiling attacks. "Since we are unable," said COMUSMACV, "to exercise the initiative in moving ground forces into the DMZ or SVN, we are left with firepower alone as the instrument for attack. I consider it imperative in this regard that we utilize aerial delivered fire power and naval gunfire in this situation . . . ."20 General Westmoreland devised several operations, basically air, to destroy and disperse the enemy and his logistic support concentrated north of the DMZ and in Laos.

On 21 September, General Westmoreland traced the course of the enemy's efforts during the earlier parts of the year to concentrate in strength for offensive operations and the disruption and defeat of these efforts by US/FWMA/RVN forces. Nevertheless the enemy still retained considerable offensive capability, and COMUSMACV believed he would try to achieve a "dramatic victory" in the hope of influencing US public opinion prior to the November elections.21

COMUSMACV had directed intensified preparations to meet powerful enemy attacks against such isolated bases as Khe Sanh, Duc Co, and Loc Ninh and to counter enemy infiltration through the Laos Panhandle in the forthcoming dry season. Greater use of air power in the southern DMZ and southern NVN would help forestall a major enemy offensive. In the area just south of the DMZ, the enemy had been disrupted by the B-52 strikes and by tactical air and artillery. But he continued to move across the DMZ, and had set up a bridgehead in the rugged hills of Quang Tri.

19. (TS-GP 3) Msg, COMUSMACV 41191 to CINCPAC, 13 Sep 66, JCS IN 99085.
20. Ibid.
To bolster the forces in the North, in early October General Westmoreland directed certain US units deployed from other CTZs or diverted enroute from the CONUS to reinforce the I CTZ. These were principally 175mm gun units which, once emplaced, would be capable of delivering supporting fire throughout Quang Tri province from Khe Sanh to the sea. In addition, forces of the 3d Marine Division were redistributed in the I CTZ to improve command and control, and a US Army airborne battalion was deployed to the area.

By the end of the year the enemy had still not succeeded in establishing a major base area in Quang Tri Province although he continued to maintain at least two divisions in the immediate vicinity of the DMZ and to infiltrate through the zone.

II CTZ

The II CTZ, the largest of the four Corps areas, was the scene of fierce fighting in 1966. In actions ranging from isolated patrol contacts to large-scale coordinated operations, US/FNMAF and RVN forces sought out the enemy and attempted to destroy him. On several occasions, improved intelligence gave evidence of large enemy buildups, and operations were launched against these concentrations. But the enemy evaded contact and dispersed. Encounters on a smaller scale involving clashes with small groups of local VC were more effective in the first months of 1966. Between 24 January and 4 February, Operation MASHER claimed nearly 800 enemy killed. Because the designation MASHER was felt by some Washington authorities to have inhumane connotations which were bad for public relations the name of the operation was changed to WHITE WING. Future operations were given nicknames in keeping with this policy.

As the scope of the NVA infiltration through Laos and the buildup of the sanctuary in Cambodia continued to grow, abetted by the onset of the southwest monsoon, General Westmoreland became concerned with the danger of a multi-pronged coordinated offensive in widely scattered areas of

the II CTZ. He began operations in mid-year east of the Cambodian border, pushing westward to flush out and keep the pressure on the enemy in the border area. As the scale of enemy activity increased, it became necessary to commit the 1st Cavalry Division (AM) to support elements of the US 25th Division in the area. Results of these operations, in terms of enemy casualties and in preventing the enemy from getting set for his vaunted offensive, were satisfactory and effective. Simultaneously with these operations, COMUSMACV also carried out operations of varying scale against enemy troops in the coastal lowlands, with the intent of driving out all VC units of battalion size and of destroying enemy resources wherever they could be located.

Indicative of the effectiveness of these operations, more than 1500 VC were killed in four separate operations during June in the II CTZ.24

Operations along the coast during October, in which combined US/ROK and ARVN forces participated, severely mauled the enemy, killing more than 2,000 and capturing or destroying large quantities of arms, ammunition, and food-stuffs. These operations in II CTZ opened a large area that had been enemy-dominated and -controlled for several years. In the border areas, continuous friendly pressure kept the enemy off balance as he sought to avoid contact and in many cases the enemy was forced to retire into Cambodia to escape destruction.25

III CTZ

The III CTZ was the remaining Corps area where US combat forces operated during 1966. Here, differences in terrain, population factors, and enemy disposition and objectives made it necessary to conduct a campaign somewhat different from those fought in the CTZs to the north. A large, low-lying area, split by several major waterways and containing large population centers around Saigon, the III CTZ also contained major US bases and such formidable enemy strongholds

25. Ibid.
as War Zones C and D and the mangrove swamp area, Rung Sat Special Zone. The main objectives of the campaign in this area were to increase security of the territory and to extend the area under GVN control. In I and II CTZs the primary emphasis in operations was on locating and destroying enemy forces and resources, but in III CTZ the emphasis was on the seizing and clearing of territory. In so doing US forces became engaged in heavy fighting.

Early in 1966 General Westmoreland directed that, while continuing to secure critical installations, LOCs and national priority areas in III CTZ, his forces would initiate operations to destroy VC troops and bases in the area around the Michelin Plantation and extending northwest to War Zone C in Tay Ninh province. The goal was to eliminate War Zone C as an enemy operating base. Beginning in late April, US and ARVN forces struck into Tay Ninh, discovering and destroying large stores of enemy materiel and disrupting enemy plans for offensive operations. The success of these attacks against areas that had long been considered his private domain had a demoralizing effect on the VC. His troops, in large numbers, scattered and fled into Cambodia.26

Pressure on enemy base areas continued and in early June two brigades of the US 1st Infantry Division pushed into War Zone C, in Operation EL PASO II. Within a month nearly 800 enemy had been killed and huge quantities of his war supplies captured. In spite of his losses the enemy was able to recoup and resupply from nearby bases in Cambodia. By early November he had rebuilt his 9th VC Division and slipped it into Tay Ninh province to launch attacks on local objectives. But before he was ready to attack, the enemy collided with a US brigade and the resulting Operation ATTLEBORO, fought in the snarled thickets of War Zone C, became the largest operation of the war to date. In the course of the battle allied forces employed 19 battalions, the first Corps-sized operation of the war.

The enemy lost 1,100 killed in War Zone C, but more important, friendly forces achieved a limited denial to the enemy of an area that had been a communist stronghold for 30 years. US/FWMA forces deployed in the III CTZ grew from

15 maneuver battalions at the beginning of 1966 to 36 maneuver battalions at year's end. The ARVN strength increased from 48 battalions in January to 57 battalions in December. 27

The Delta - IV CTZ

The United States had no ground combat troops in the delta region although several thousand US combat support forces operated in support of the ARVN there. In the entire area the VC moved about freely and received a large portion of their support from this rich region. It was obvious to US planners that until US combat troops were introduced no real military gains would be made in the delta. There were, however, valid arguments against such deployments. The ARVN was proud of its unilateral role in the delta and, it was feared, would resent US "intrusion." The delta was thickly populated and introduction of US combat forces could lead to civilian resentment, have an adverse effect on the economy, and give rise to other social and political problems. From a military standpoint there were also substantial problems in finding sufficient dry land for a base and in determining just how US forces would operate in the virtually impassable swamp of the IV CTZ. 28

General Westmoreland studied the problem throughout 1966. Early in the year he had struck upon a concept entailing the use of a Mekong Delta Mobile Afloat Force (MDMAF). The concept involved the stationing of a US division in an area ashore where it could operate in and around the shore lines of the Mekong and Bassac rivers, supported by two USN River Assault Groups (RAG) and by sufficient converted LSTs to house a brigade. Brigades of the division would be rotated from land bases to the floating base. The US 9th Infantry Division, slated to arrive in RVN in late 1966 and early 1967, was selected as the unit to go to IV CTZ, if the plan was approved. On 5 July, the Secretary of Defense approved the activation of an MDMAF to include the two RAGs.

27. Ibid.
28. Unless otherwise indicated information in this Section is derived from (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) COMUSMACV Command History, 1966, pp. 133-143.
At the same time CINCPAC had requested two additional RAGs that were not part of the MDMAF. The Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral McDonald, supported this request. He informed the Secretary of Defense that the RAG, which was designed to support one infantry battalion, reinforced, was a valuable adjunct to operations in the delta, particularly when supplemented by the helicopter. Not only could the two RAGs be used in the delta, but they could be effectively employed in support of US forces in the Rung Sat Special Zone and in Long An province in the III CTZ. The two additional RAGs could, if necessary, also be used to add to the effectiveness of MARKET TIME and GAME WARDEN. Admiral McDonald recommended that the Secretary support not only the MDMAF for operations in the IV CTZ but also the two additional RAGs. The Secretary of Defense, however, did not approve the two additional RAGs at this time.

On 1 August COMUSMACV published a planning directive for operations in the delta, establishing 1 January 1967 as the date when all actions, including time-consuming dredging and construction to prepare the ground and facilities for the force, would be completed. Concurrent preparations would ready Army and Navy units to occupy facilities; operations from the base would begin about 31 January.

General Westmoreland reported to CINCPAC on 20 September that demands for his forces in the other areas of RVN made it doubtful that US forces could be sent to the delta in requisite numbers until the late spring of 1967 at the earliest. He had deployed one US battalion to the southern province of III CTZ, Long An, which was really a part of the delta. He planned also to send a US 105mm howitzer battalion to the delta at the request of the CG IV CTZ later in the year. Both of these deployments would render valuable experience when larger US deployments were made. Together with these preparations, he was dredging an area west of My Tho where, by the spring of 1967, he would establish a brigade-sized facility for use in intensifying heliborne and riverine operations by US forces in the northern delta area.

These actions raised the question in the US Mission Council of the wisdom of sending US combat troops to the delta. The CG of ARVN forces in the delta was known to oppose introduction of US forces in his area. The US Ambassador, although he recognized the political, social and economic complications that might arise from such action, informed the Secretary of State that if US ground forces did not move into the delta the present stalemate there might not be broken.31

In October COMUSMACV briefed the Secretary of Defense on the MDMAF, stressing the requirement for two additional River Assault Squadrons of about 50 boats each. The US 9th Infantry Division would be the principal "riverine ground force." The Australian Task Force and elements of the US 25th Division, located in III CTZ, would also be used from time to time in these operations.

On 21 November COMUSMACV proposed to the Ambassador the deployment of the first US battalion of the MDMAF in January 1967. The Ambassador concurred but specified a careful "monitoring" of such deployment with a proviso that if the social, economic, and political consequences were unfavorable to overall US objectives, operations in the delta be curtailed.32

General Westmoreland told the Ambassador on 8 December that he had two main objectives in placing US combat forces in the delta. First, he intended to step up operations against VC units and base areas. Secondly, he meant to provide security and support to expand Revolutionary Development. As a valuable side effect, placing US forces along the southern and southwestern approaches to Saigon would complete a security ring around the capital to interdict VC LOCs. He assured the Ambassador that he would abide by the "monitoring" requirements.33

The first elements of the US 9th Infantry Division landed in Vietnam on 19 December. COMUSMACV estimated that a battalion TF from the division could move to Dong Tam, its delta base, by late January 1967.

31. (S) Msg, Saigon 6837 to State, 24 Sep 66, JCS IN 32073.
32. (S) Msg, Saigon 11978 to State, 29 Nov 66, JCS IN 57660.
33. (S) Msg, Saigon 14308 to State, 27 Dec 66, JCS IN 40106.
By the latter part of 1966, the military situation in RVN had improved substantially. The Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out this improvement to the Secretary of Defense in a memorandum of 14 October 1966. They noted that, since the entry of US and Free World forces into RVN, these forces had enjoyed an almost unbroken series of victories. Such enemy victories as had occurred had been at the expense of the RF and PF. The Joint Chiefs of Staff predicted that the enemy would probably be able to replace his heavy combat losses, but stated that he had suffered many bloody defeats with consequent impact on morale. They added that there was evidence that the VC was being compelled, increasingly, to resort to forced conscription to fill its ranks. Even the NVA, in replacing casualties to the 324B Division, had been required to use about 50 percent conscripts. There was also a drop in NVN infiltration during the third quarter of 1966, and NVA/VC ground combat operations were smaller, less frequent, and of shorter duration than in the early months of 1966. General Wheeler attributed this to the attrition of enemy supplies by the air campaign against NVN and by the aggressive combat operations conducted by COMUSMACV's forces.

34. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-672-66 to SecDef, 14 Oct 66, JMF 9155.3 (14 Oct 66). (TS) Ltr, CJCS to SecState, 8 Feb 67, w/encl, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 14, ROLLING THUNDER 53.