

Thailand ^{20 OCT} Buildup ⁷² Reported

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The United States since May has sent about 3,000 Marines, mostly airmen, to Nam Phong as part of a big shift in military personnel from South Vietnam to Thailand.

Military sources in interviews said Nam Phong in northern Thailand is fast taking on the characteristics of Danang during the early days of the Vietnam war—complete with Marine riflemen patrolling outside the base.

Officially, the Pentagon lists an American military presence of 45,000 men in Thailand, but does not break the total down by service or area.

"I wouldn't quibble with 3,000," said a Pentagon official yesterday when told this was an estimate Marines gave for their number at Nam Phong.

As many as 3,000 Marines plus a varying number of Seabees, with one recent estimate of 2,000, constitutes a much bigger American presence than has been described previously by the U.S. command.

The Pentagon has been saying in recent weeks that there are about 45,000 American servicemen in Thailand. It does not break them down by service. Defense officials have said about 1,000 must be Marines since that number had been transferred from South Vietnam to Thailand.

Back in June, the U.S. command announced that Marine pilots and planes had been sent from Danang in South Vietnam to Nam Phong to gain greater security. But few details were given out as a tight secrecy lid was clamped on the old air strip at Nam Phong formerly used by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Interviews with military sources in Washington and elsewhere brought these other disclosures about the buildup at Nam Phong:

- Thai soldiers have been accompanying Marines on armed night patrols outside the perimeter of the base ever since summer, when an American and a Thai patrol mistakenly shot at each other in the

dark. The Thai government has steadfastly insisted that it allows no American combat operations on its soil—as distinguished from providing space for U.S. airplanes which go into combat outside Thai-

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land. Pentagon officials have maintained that providing base security does not constitute ground combat.

- Marine planes, airmen and support forces went to Nam Phong not only from South Vietnam but from Japan and Okinawa as well. The contingent from Japan were F-4 fighter-bombers from the Marine Air Group 36 at Iwakuni—a fresh indication that Thailand will build up as an American outpost as the U.S. military presence in Japan declines.

- Mortars are frequently fired at Nam Phong. This could indicate that Nam Phong will draw fire just as Danang did after the Marines landed there in 1965 to secure the air strip.

At the Pentagon, Cmdr. Joseph J. Lorfano, public affairs spokesman on Southeast Asia, said yesterday that there have been "no sapper attacks" or other hostile activity at Nam Phong.

A Marine trooper from Nam Phong insisted that 122 millimeter mortars were being fired at the base regularly, though inaccurately. He said his superiors told the men the explosions were dud bombs being detonated. "I know incoming when I hear it," said the Marine in discounting the no hostile action claim.

- Seabees are building a hospital at Nam Phong instead of relying on medical facilities at the Udorn air force base some 40 miles away. The hospital testifies to the permanent plans for the base and, in the view of some Marines, the possibility of combat in the area.

Task Force Delta was the name of the operation to refurbish Nam Phong for the First Marine Air Wing. Two

companies of Marine combat troops from the Third Battalion of the Third Marine Division flew into Nam Phong on June 3 and 4. The North Vietnamese offensive was threatening Danang at the time.

The combat troops were supposed to protect the two battalions of Seabees flown in a few days ahead of them to improve the sparse base of overgrown bush and four buildings. But Marine riflemen found themselves spreading wire around the base besides going out on patrol.

A Thai army training base is also at Nam Phong in a separate compound. The American security effort is concentrated on protecting the 100 or so Marine F-4 and A-6 fighter-bombers and helicopters at the base.

Nam Phong is directly west of the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam, putting its planes in easy combat range of both Vietnams and Laos. The base also has a few C-130 transports converted for refueling fighters, thus extending the range of those based at Nam Phong.

One source estimated that the troop presence at Nam Phong has been as high as 6,000, with two battalions of Seabees at about 900 men each; an air wing of 4,500 people; and the rest Marine riflemen and military police.

In addition to the buildup at Nam Phong, the U.S. Air Force earlier this year reopened its fighter-bomber base at Takhli, north of Bangkok, home of the F-111 recently sent back into action.

Another part of the buildup in Thailand this summer was the doubling of B-52s at Uta-pao to about 80 planes. The future status of U.S. air strength in Thailand is one of the issues in the current peace negotiations, but not the paramount one.