



## I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You Part I: The War In Viet Nam, 1967

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USMC, Viet Nam, 1966-67

### Part I Section 2: Setting Up CAP In Phuoc My

We moved into the village because the Popular Forces were powerless to stop the Viet Cong from rocketing the American air base at nearby Dong Ha. As had happened in Phu Bai, Da Nang, and other air strips in South Vietnam, the Viet Cong were using the outlying villages as a base for attacks on US military bases. The VC would set up their rockets in the marketplace, practically on Hue's doorstep, fire off a few rounds, then disappear into the surrounding hamlets. With each attack the villagers knew with dreaded certainty that the Americans would soon follow. These follow-up visits through the villages had almost always proven fruitless.

The villagers knew that the Americans would kill a few of the VC and add the bodies to their daily body count. Then they would return to Dong Ha to sleep surrounded by miles of barbed wire, machine guns, and heavy artillery. The cooperative villager, however, had to curl up at night with little more protection than his wife and children. Even as the Americans were back-slapping each other on another successful **Search & Destroy** operation, retribution from the Viet Cong would be certain and severe. So the villagers simply said nothing. Throughout the war they paid a dear price for their silence.

In an effort to resolve the security problem, the USMC established the **Combined Action Platoon** program (**CAC/CAP**) in 1965. A squad of 13 Marines with one Navy Corpsman was assigned to select villages. These Marines and Navy Corpsman took up residence in the village and attempted to rid the village of Viet Cong influence. During the early years CAP duty was voluntary. For those volunteers the criteria were quite simple: each volunteer had to have some combat experience, and he must show no signs of xenophobia. Long before the term "Politically Correct" evolved, xenophobia was a politically correct substitute for racism. While not fool-proof, the process managed to staff the CAP units with many who were open to an understanding of the plight of the villagers.

On March 10, 1967, twenty-six dien cai dau (**crazy in the head**) Hoa-ky (**American**) Marines, and two Navy bac-si (**corpsmen**) suddenly appeared in Phuoc My Hamlet, the first hamlet south of Lai Phuoc. Because the area was heavily infested with Viet Cong, Papa 2 started as a double CAP (Papa 2/4). With the zeal of terrified missionaries we built a permanent compound on an island just off Highway 1.

Our new home was surrounded on three sides by rice paddies, each no less than 70 yards deep. Not really an island, the fourth side merged with Highway 1 to the east. Railroad tracks sat unused and rusting less than 100 yards west. West of the railroad tracks, the other seven hamlets that made up the village of Trieu Ai followed the river to the southwest. The nine hamlets of Trieu Ai village surrounded us like a necklace. That first afternoon it looked more like a noose.

Khe Sanh was thirty miles northwest of Lai Phuoc, in the far corner of Quang Tri Province. It sat awaiting its destiny as the site of the spiritual death of the American forces in South Vietnam. Within rifle shot of Khe Sanh were Hills 861 and 881 North & South, sites of the "Hill Battles" of April and May, 1967. Highway 9 traveled west to east, parallel to the Demilitarized Zone, from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. It passed the Rockpile, Razorback, Con Thien, and Cam Lo.

As we surveyed our surroundings that first afternoon, few of us really believed we would survive the night. The village of Trieu Ai consisted of more than 15,000 potentially hostile Vietnamese villagers. As we hurriedly dug our foxholes, we had visions of hordes of Viet Cong screaming out of the hamlets under the cover of darkness. Sleep was impossible. If abject

terror was not enough to keep us awake, illumination did. As radioman, I spent hundreds of tax dollars that night as we kept Papa 2 and the surrounding hamlets lit up like Times Square on New Year's Eve. But nothing happened. Not a single shot was fired in our direction. No mortars, rockets, or hand-grenades broke the serenity of our first night on the island.

At the outset we brought little more than one more complication into Co Hue's life. In the past, when Americans had passed through Lai Phuoc, she could always hide in her parent's little cafe on the edge of the marketplace. Now the Americans were sitting in her hideout planning their activities with the local PF Sergeant and Village Chief. There was danger in appearing too supportive of these Americans. The villagers learned very quickly that the Viet Cong had placed a bounty on our heads. It didn't pay to be too close to us, should someone decide to try and collect that bounty.

Co Hue had a problem. In spite of the potential danger, she found she rather enjoyed being around the gregarious American Marines. In a short time the marketplace in Lai Phuoc began to take on the appearance of a stage full of puppeteers as we communicated in a mixture of unintelligible Vietnamese, French, and English. Our verbal efforts were punctuated by an invent-it-as-needed form of sign language. Listening to us she must have noticed that "Toi Hoa-ky" (***I am American***) sounded more like "Toy Wakee." Her friends in the PF platoon taught us to say, "Anh beaucoup dien cai dau." (***You are very crazy in the head.***) That usually came out, "You beaucoup dinky-dow." Through repeated usage we were pretty good at "Toi khong biet," (***I do not understand.***)

Eventually we learned that the villagers could not understand English any better simply because we shouted it at them. Nor did it help to speak slowly. English was a foreign language, and all our verbal gymnastics did not change that one iota.

Being around all these American Marines, Hue could easily become an innocent victim. There were already any number of ways that she could become a statistic. So she reacted to this new group of Wakees as she had to all the others: she stayed aloof and distant. She sat in her parents' little restaurant when the CAP Marines and PFs sat drinking beer, talking, and gesturing at each other.

I should say, she was aloof...until I arrived in the cafe one day with something totally amazing...something she just couldn't resist. It was a unique little machine that you could talk into, and it talked back to you! In your own voice and words! Wow! Those rich Americans have the neatest little things!

Forgetting her shyness and fear for one afternoon, Hue, and several other girls ranging in age from 6 to 16, each took the microphone to my tape recorder in hand and recorded songs on one of my taped letters home. On that tape, I describe to my family and friends the image of Co Hue standing with the microphone in hand, disheveled hair in her eyes, and a few strands in the corner of her mouth.

I had a false tooth while in Vietnam, but I seldom wore it. I would show up in the village, smiling my toothless smile. As I walked the village, smiling and waving at the villagers, my most memorable feature became my gap faced smile. Hue noticed, and she put that in her heart with other important thoughts. She would remember that silly fact for the next twenty-eight years.

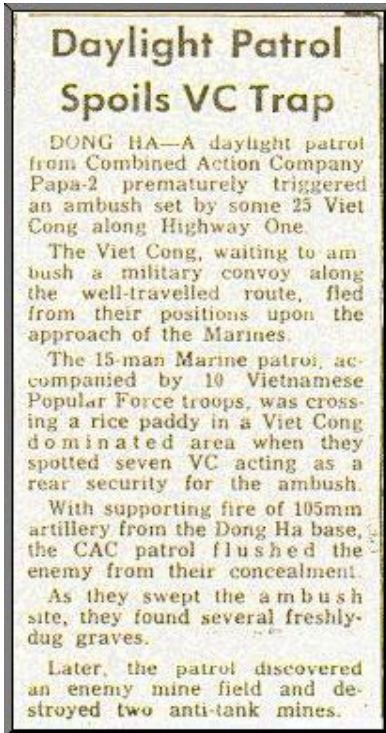
Militarily we had many early successes. We had skirmishes with local Viet Cong during 57 of our first 63 days in Trieu Ai Village. Some of them were of major significance to the village. We located a cache of 1,200 lbs. of rice that had been taken from the village to feed the VC camped in the surrounding countryside.

That was military, and that was our prime responsibility. However, the other aspect of the CAP program involved the civic action role of CAP Marines. As armed diplomats, we stood the gap between the people of the village and all adversaries, be they our allies or enemies. We were not concerned with rank, status, or political preferences. We could not permit any actions within our TAOR (***Tactical Area of Responsibility***) that would endanger our efforts.

One of the spoils of victory is the forced implementation of political ideologies. We had to demonstrate to Hue, and her fellow villagers, that we respected their rights to human dignity. One tear gas grenade tossed into the marketplace by a passing American serviceman could set us back months in our efforts. Much as the Viet Cong demands could sway the villagers in our favor, tear gas grenades in the village could be equally devastating to our purposes. There were enough despicable acts perpetrated by both the Viet Cong and the Allies alike to keep the villagers in a constant state of confusion.

One day a 2nd. Lieutenant brought a platoon of cooks out from Dong Ha for some trigger time. We could virtually guarantee at least one fire-fight with the local Viet Cong, perhaps more. Our platoon sergeant, Phil Prince, was not in the compound at the time. I had the responsibility of dealing with the lieutenant. When he asked me who would be guiding his

platoon that day, I called for our best PF, Ha Si Phu. The lieutenant looked at Ha Si Phu and said, "No damned gook is going on patrol with my men."



Ha Si Phu, affectionately referred to as the "One Eyed Wonder," had lost an eye as a child. As a result, he could not join the South Vietnamese Army. So he chose the Popular Forces. Day after day Ha Si Phu saved my life, and that of almost every Marine in the compound. He did so by identifying dangers long before we did. We seldom worried about stepping into punji pits, those razor sharp bamboo stakes dipped in buffalo dung and buried below ground level. He would spot Viet Cong ambushes long before we approached the killing zones.

Dozens of Marines from the 1st. Bn., 9th. Marines owe their lives to Ha Si Phu. He spotted a Viet Cong ambush set up along Highway 1 in the sand dunes south of Ai Tu. The ambush was waiting for a convoy of the 1/9 traveling from Phu Bai to Dong Ha. Their rear guard had not spotted us, so we had the element of surprise. With some help from the Marines of 1/9, we routed them, and the VC had no recourse but to flee the area.

The lieutenant had insulted one of our most beloved PFs. Indirectly he had insulted all of our villagers. So an armed diplomat, in the uniform of a 23 year old Marine Corporal, had to give orders to a 2nd. Lieutenant. It took a few radio calls to my company commander, and I endured a few threats from the lieutenant, but eventually Ha Si Phu and I led a better informed lieutenant and his platoon out on patrol.

Ha Si Phu performed up to his usual standards. At the end of the day the lieutenant reached into his pocket and took out a Hertz "We're #1" button. In a fitting gesture of apology, he pinned it on Ha Si Phu's shirt pocket. Ha Si Phu did not know what it was,

but you would have thought he had just been awarded the Medal of Honor.

In early May something happened to Co Hue that sealed our friendship for life. A company of South Vietnamese Rangers had set up camp on the outskirts of the hamlet. While they were near the village, I went into Lai Phuoc with Brian Newton, from Rochester, N.Y., and one other Marine.

As we approached the cafe we saw Hue crying softly in front of the little mud hut she called home. Co Hue didn't do anything loudly. She even cried softly. I asked her what had happened. She ran her hands across her breasts and body and pointed inside the cafe. Somebody inside had been molesting her. Hue, and all the other children of Lai Phuoc, had become our family. For weeks we had shared many pleasant moments with them. Through it all, Co Hue had wanted nothing more than to be left alone.

She was humiliated. I asked what she wanted us to do, and she said that she wanted them out of the cafe. We stepped inside and were confronted by a group of six officers from the South Vietnamese Ranger unit. Hue's parents were huddled fearfully in the front of the room. I asked what they wanted us to do. They told us they wanted the men out of their home. I asked the officers to leave. There was some talking and laughing, but they did not move. I asked again.

One of the officers jumped out of his seat and lunged at me. He had to pass Brian Newton; Brian decked him. There was confusion, then the sound of breaking glass. Another officer broke a beer bottle and was attacking Brian from behind. My unidentified Marine friend dealt with him in much the same manner. The other officers picked up their friends and left.

I was feeling very fortunate that I had come to Lai Phuoc with two of the larger Marines in Papa 2. I had it made. I did all the talking, and my large friends did all the fighting!

We returned to the compound fully believing that the issue was over. It was not. Within a few hours police from Dong Ha, along with some American MPs, came to the compound to arrest the three of us. Sgt. Prince, a former Parris Island Drill Instructor and a career Marine, was not one to be trifled with. As he was to remind me years later, nobody was taking **his** Marines from **his** compound. We heard a commotion and looked up as the village chief came running down Highway 1 and into Papa 2. He was highly agitated. Co Hue and her parents had told him about the incident. To the village chief this was a personal affront to him and to the people of Trieu Ai. We had learned that village chief was a position of high respect. The chief had a few choice words with the police, and they left the compound. We were put on something resembling house arrest and were not permitted to visit the village again until the Vietnamese Rangers left the area.