

# The Non-Commissioned Officers War: Combined Action Doctrine that could have saved Vietnam

A Master's Thesis

**AARON M. GRANT**  
Staff Sergeant, U.S.M.C. Ret.

Advisor: Dr. David J. Ulbrich  
Norwich University

December 6, 2013

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Sarah for dealing with the kids, changing the diapers, and keeping the house while I hovered over the books.

COPYRIGHT 2013

## CONTENTS

Introduction: What could ðsaveö Vietnam?	4
Purpose: Focus on the Non-Commissioned Officer	7
Historiography	7
Background and Civic Action	13
Defining the Vietnam War	15
CAP School and Early NCOø	17
Requisitioning	22
Doctrine	24
Vietnam, People, and Government	26
Military Forces and the Hamlet	30
The Formalization of CAP and the Tet Offensive	36
Mobile and Compound Doctrine	37
The NCO and the Mission	42
U.S. Marines in Vietnam	45
Training the Vietnamese	46
Heroism and the NCO	47
Conclusion: What could have ðsavedö Vietnam?	48
Bibliography	50

## Introduction

It can be argued that nothing could save Vietnam from communism. Given the limitations at which the U.S. government wished to conduct the Vietnam War in fear of nuclear reprisal from the Chinese, it is a miracle that the U.S. Marines had any success at all. They are a breed meant to invade, meant to take beaches and take lives. So it was a drastic step when President Lyndon Johnson sent the Marines into Vietnam on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1965. It was a commitment that once made would compel the United States to a bloody ground war against communism. Boots on the ground changed everything. The Marines landed ashore at Da Nang City in northernmost South Vietnam that morning ready for battle in a fantastic show of force, but it was to be a spectacle only. There was no enemy to engage. Instead a troop of young Vietnamese women greeted them with flowers in their hands. They proceeded to hang them on the Marines. The flirtation all the while was overshadowed by Vietnamese politicians who were grateful to see the Americans. The cheerful sight hid the fact that they were losing control of their republic. Vietnam historian George Herring described the event as an ironically happy beginning for what would be a wrenching experience for the two nations.<sup>1</sup> They were the first ground combat troops that the United States had sent, but the war had already begun. Vietnam had been flooded by American military advisors since 1950 and steadily into the 1960s. An American bombing campaign named OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER was already devastating key military targets in the north which began in February would continue for the next three years.<sup>2</sup> For the moment, the mission of the Marines was simple: to protect Da Nang from the Viet Cong (VC) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The countryside was infested with

---

<sup>1</sup> George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 468.

them. It took only a month for the President of the United States to authorize the Marines to patrol the area around Da Nang to seek out the enemy.<sup>3</sup> Saving Vietnam from communism was not going to be easy.

When the U.S. Marines are remembered in the Vietnam War, their heroics in large battles come to mind: Hue City, Khe Sanh, Kham Duc, Saigon, and Hamburger Hill are just a few. These were bloody struggles that characterized the war; these are the battles that are well documented and the people of America remember. These battles shaped public opinion about the war that by late 1969 it was clear that the people of the United States wanted out of Vietnam. The sentiment was unfortunate because after three years of fine tuning, an effective counterinsurgency was taking root. It was in its heyday, and due to the shift of public opinion in America 8,000 miles away, the effective program was ignored. To the public who just experienced 1968, that terrible year, Vietnam became the focus of all America's misfortune.

Six months after the Marines arrived the Commanding General of the III Marine Amphibious Force, Lewis Walt, sanctioned the creation of units that operated independently from their parent companies. He realized that the only way to bring the war to the VC was to fight on their level, amongst the people. The Marines were detached and paired with local Vietnamese militia called Popular Forces (PF) creating a combined effort within the village called the Combined Action Program (CAP). Their mission was simple: to destroy the VC hamlet-village infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The PF had knowledge of the terrain, the Marines had the superior training and fire support, and together they made a winning combination. It was to become one of the few successful operations of the entire war.

---

<sup>3</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> United States Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet on the Combined Action Force, III Marine Amphibious Force," Marine Corps History and Museum Division (Quantico, VA: March 1970), enclosure 4.

The purpose of the CAP was to protect the people from attack and harassment from the VC and the NVA. The Program also had a civic element, to which the Marines were perfectly suited: "to aid local law enforcement, to engender respect for the local and national government, and to promote general community welfare."<sup>5</sup> The Marines had extensive counterinsurgency experience previously in the century between 1915-1934 in Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic and knew how to wage war in third world countries. As historian Larry Cable observed, the Corps long practiced nation-building "over a quarter of a century before the term became common."<sup>6</sup> Governing the Marines was the *Small Wars Manual* (SWM) published by the Corps in 1940, a massive tome containing step-by-step instructions how to conduct war in particularly third world countries. During the conflict they strove to win over "hearts and minds;" a common phrase in connection to the Vietnam War. General Walt appointed subordinates to oversee civic action. He realized that the key to success was to fight the enemy on their level mixing with the people, protecting them, living among them, and gaining their approval.<sup>7</sup> Marines lived within the villages, set up their own command posts, and began aiding the villagers any way they could. Unofficially the CAP was formulated in late 1965, and it would mature over the next five years. This monumental task was achieved by only a handful of men scattered in the hamlets of Vietnam.

---

<sup>5</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet on the Combined Action Force," 1.

<sup>6</sup> Larry Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (NYU Press: 1988), 108.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1970), 81.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to prove why the Combined Action Program succeeded. To answer simply, the non-commissioned officer (NCO) was the reason for its success. The most effective warfighting doctrine seen in the Vietnam War was driven by NCOs who brought the war *to* the insurgency. Though it can be said that nothing could "save" Vietnam from communist control, utilizing the CAP on a larger scale would have at least provided a greater chance of success for the Americans and Government of South Vietnam (GVN). That is not to say that victory could be achieved utilizing *it* and *it* only, but the scales would have been balanced and the war more successful in its outcome had the Combined Action Program been adopted nationwide and the NCOs left to do what they do best. Why did the Combined Action Program succeed? The NCO is the sole reason.

## Historiography

When approaching the topic of the role of Non-Commissioned Officers in any war, one commonly discovers a predilection to hero-worship. It is a natural extension of the pursuit of knowledge on the experience of men in battle. Heroic tales of battle are never in short supply. What is in short supply however is the tactical information on how a battle transpires. The "how" is commonly found lacking. Information on the movement of small units, especially guerilla units, is limited to a summary of action made by superiors who spend the majority of their service behind a desk. It is impossible to record every detail of a battle, so a synopsis after action is the best a command can offer historically. When NCOs are researched, their methods leading to and during battle require a surgeon's scalpel as it were, to separate hero-worship and the din of battle, from tactics and doctrine in which they operated. Getting to this point truly glorifies the

NCO, and certainly does not take away from his experience. A true understanding of tactics and doctrine is a rare thing to find in hindsight; long after the battle has ended and the memory of events have corroded with time. This study seeks the separation of blood-and-guts and doctrine. How did the NCOs train Marines? How did they lead within and without battle? How did they meld tactics and doctrine for the mission? There are innumerable "how" questions one can ask in the pursuit of understanding battle. Understanding historiography of the Non-Commissioned Officer in any war is always difficult. Even more difficult is the historiography of NCOs in the Combined Action Program.

The two most popular books on the subject are *The Village* by Captain Francis West in 1972, and *The Betrayal* by Lieutenant Colonel William Corson in 1968. When seeking information on CAP, these books are cornerstones. Both men served in the Marine Corps and served in the CAP themselves. Corson is more rhetorical and critical of U.S. policy, while West has a more boots-on-the-ground approach. However, there are critical problems with each work. Both do not contain a bibliography. Both, though loaded with information, contain hardly any footnotes as well. West quotes Marines and the Vietnamese regularly, and it is so well written and dramatized that the reader cannot help but question it. Corson is so opinionated and bombastic that it is difficult to sift out information on the CAP. Though both these men were officers of the Program whose credibility is not questioned, their works are primarily considered lay consumption because of their lack of citation. These books are used in this study, but not with regularity because of their nature.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Francis West, *The Village* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); and William Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: Norton & Co, 1968).

Some very specific articles can be used in this pursuit. The ten most significant articles which are by definition secondary sources derived from primary evidence, are annotated according to their factual information, usefulness, and bias. All however were used in some capacity to research the Non-Commissioned Officers and the Combined Action Program. Sergeant Robert Graham's article "Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure" written in 1984 for *Military Affairs* provides insight on limited warfare and the NCO's role in it. His argument is that the failure in Vietnam largely stemmed from operations the infantryman was ordered to conduct.<sup>9</sup> Written by an infantry NCO who served in Vietnam, this article provides an informative angle into why he believes the U.S. did not win. It is also strong because he uses the recollections of veterans to give a "boots on the ground" approach to military history. It is more factual than theoretical. For most who read on the topic of Vietnam, the information that Graham utilizes is fresh. He does not seek to promote any other works he might have done, indeed he does not appear to have any others. His conclusions are that there was an overreliance on air support and re-supply which gave away positions to the communists. The one-year tours had to be done away with because it caused soldiers to not focus on the mission. The soldiers had a "lack of purpose" according to Graham because few of their assignments made sense.<sup>10</sup> His work acts as a reinterpretation of Vietnam through an infantryman's eye, and a strength of his work is that he recognizes that he does not grasp it all. The work also reinforces the view that the U.S. lost Vietnam. He relies heavily upon recollections in General Westmoreland's book *A Soldier Reports* (1976), and Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* written in 1978, which are some of the best general references for the Vietnam War.

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Graham, "Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure" *Military Affairs, Society for Military History* Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Graham, "Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure."

Samuel Popkin, author of "Pacification: Politics and the Village" written in 1970 for the *Asian Survey* at the height of the Vietnam War suggests there were problems with the pacification program at the time though the countryside was 90% pacified.<sup>11</sup> A professor at Harvard, his other works include *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* written in 1979, and this article leads to that publication. This study is a particularly credible account of Vietnamese village life under control of the GVN. Popkin interviews 400 Vietnamese peasants to come to a conclusion that the pacification program is flawed in that the needs of the peasants are particularly ignored by the GVN. Their greatest need was security, and that the GVN could not provide. There was also the need for the South Vietnamese President to legitimize his government. This is a particularly good point because the facts are that the GVN was viewed as more aggressive than the VC who though taxed the peasants more were more cognizant of the peasants than the GVN. The value of Popkin's article is that it gathers facts from the peasants themselves, and is a good use of primary material. This work brings forward new evidence about the flaws of pacification and is considered evidential in nature.

The CAP is summarized by Gunnery Sergeant Martin Bruce in "Rice Roots Empathy" published in the *Leatherneck Magazine* in August 1969. He makes good use of quotes from officers who served in the CAP. The publication is intended to be informative and had no dissenting views. He clearly uses primary material positively evaluating the CAP. He primarily interviews Col. C.R. Burroughs, CAP director for the III Marine Amphibious Force. This article makes a good companion with the "Fact Sheet on the Combined Action Force, III Marine Amphibious Force" which is cited as a primary document.

---

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Popkin, "Pacification: Politics and the Village," *Asian Survey* Vol. 10, No. 8 (University of California Press: August, 1970), 662.

T. Schwartz published "The Combined Action Program: A Different Perspective" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* February 1999. According to this article, the Combined Action Program was not as successful as many have believed. The work is heavily based on official Marine Corps publications and James Trullinger and his book *Village at War*. His research is well supported with primary documents and he is critical of the Combined Action Program. Trullinger's work is slightly biased against the government, and so sets the trend for the article. It is at the same time authoritative as it uses evidence from the U.S. Marines History and Museums Division and the Historical Branch at Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. Well cited and well researched, it truly provides a different perspective on the Vietnam War from sources both government and civilian.

Peter Brush published "Civic Action: The Marine Corps Experience in Vietnam" for *Viet Nam Generation* in March 1994. He argued that the most effective strategy in the Vietnam War was of dual nature: constructive and destructive. Researched with primary and scholarly material, it references the USMC *Small Wars Manual* (SWM), and Bing West, and Marine Corps Gazette articles. It is critical of the lack of direction and viable strategy on the part of politicians. Many historians examine the SWM, and this work is particularly valuable because it reviews civic action recognizing that it was part of the most effective strategy to win in Vietnam.

Francis "Bing" West published "Warfighting" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in June 2003. He was an infantry captain who served in a Combined Action Platoon in Vietnam in 1966. He is an authority on the subject made so by publications such as *The Village*, a book about his experience in a CAP in Vietnam, and a monograph called *Small Unit Action in Vietnam*. This particular article draws on his experience where he believes that lessons in leadership can be gleaned from studying the combined action doctrine utilized in Vietnam. He publishes this article

just after Operation Iraqi Freedom, and no doubt seeks to influence the military to adopt the same strategy in Iraq (and Afghanistan) just as was used in the CAP in Vietnam. He references his book, *The Village* as a reference in the article. Captain Westø's life work is a treasure trove of information on the CAP.

Frank Beardsley published "Combined Action" for the *Leatherneck Magazine* in April 1966. It describes Marines stationed in the Phu Bai area winning the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese. It is a localistic examination of the CAP, and what makes it so valuable is the boots-on-the-ground perspective. This article is a resource for photos and quotes of daily life in the Program. It favors the Marines as being an intelligent effective cohesive unit. Outside this bias it is remarkably informative loaded with primary information. Winning "hearts and minds" resonated at the time this article was published which was written before the official histories of Vietnam.

R. E. Williamson published "A Briefing for Combined Action" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in March 1968. The argument is made that war is made more difficult by civilian distrust of the military, and vice-versa. Research is based upon the author's extensive experience in the CAP. This article advocates for more military and language training. Written after the Tet Offensive in January 1968, this article outlines some of the struggles of the Marines on the ground, but does not mention Tet. It however seeks to legitimize the CAP most likely because many were wiped out during the invasion. This work was written when the CAP was undergoing drastic changes from "compound" doctrine to "mobile doctrine," though unfortunately that is not mentioned either.

Raymond Damm Jr. published "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in October 1998. The argument is made that the CAP was highly

successful in the Vietnam War, and that it should be re-used in future wars. This article utilizes the SWM and the Joint Operations Publication 3-0 to outline why. It is factual displaying the CAP program in its mature form not taking into account that it was a program that was fitted specifically for Vietnam. Its re-use in future wars is unlikely because Vietnam was a multi-faceted problem requiring several solutions. It is essentially a case for the SWM making it useful in the study of it, but biased towards it and other U.S. military publications.

Lastly, General Victor Krulak published "The Guerilla and Reality" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in July 1966. The argument is made that the guerilla utilizes local materials including dud artillery to make booby traps and bombs, and are not as dependent on North Vietnam as suspected. Research for this short article is based upon evidence, and the author treats much of the information presented as common knowledge at the time. The article is biased towards the military, and debunks information that the Ho Chi Minh trail is as important as it is. Between the lines is an enmity towards politicians. As he was Commanding General of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific, he had intimate knowledge of the war and is considered authoritative. He is a proponent of pacification achieved by the CAP. He was commonly at odds with General William Westmoreland as to the doctrine that ought to be used in the war.

### Background and Civic Action

In the words of historian Michael Peterson, "The Combined Action Program did not spring forth like some Athena from Zeus's forehead, mature and fully conscious."<sup>12</sup> Instead, it was the product of the Marines strategy to bring the war to the enemy and pacify the countryside. It was one of the few successful programs of the entire war beginning virtually the moment the

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 23.

Marines landed at Da Nang; and it was led at the squad and platoon level by corporals and sergeants. By 1970, there were 2,176<sup>13</sup> Marines and Corpsmen in the program, and 44 commissioned officers for a ratio of approximately 50 enlisted men per officer.<sup>14</sup> The majority of the officers occupied bases which left the leadership of the CAP to platoon sergeants and corporals who were in the field with their men. Of this number, at least half of the CAP were short-timers who required steady leadership.<sup>15</sup> The program was small compared to the 81,800 Marines serving in Vietnam by 1970.<sup>16</sup>

A few programs are foundational to understanding the CAP. The first is a program of civic action called *Golden Fleece*. Implemented in August 1965 it was the Marine Corps response to a plea from villagers to protect their rice crops from the Viet Cong. The peasants in Vietnam universally desired to keep or sell the portion of their harvest as they saw fit. They appealed to the military in the Hoa Vang District close to Da Nang and the Hieu Duc district, and Marines dispatched to protect the villagers and their harvest twice a year. Within three months, the civilians and Marines collected some 512,000 pounds of threshed rice, denying approximately 1,900 VC subsistence for 6 months.<sup>17</sup> The Marines even aided in the harvest and provided transportation of the crops to safe houses located in the villages.<sup>18</sup> A program of civic action called *County Fair* also put pressure on the VC. Implemented at the same time it expelled VC from the villages. *County Fair* used coordinated psychological warfare and combat power to comb entire villages for VC. Meanwhile, the villagers gathered together to participate in

---

<sup>13</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," 1.

<sup>14</sup> 2,050 enlisted Marines, 42 officers, 126 Navy Corpsmen, and 2 naval officers. Graham Cosmas, and Terrence Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment 1970-1971*, eds. Major William Melton and Jack Shulimson, U.S. Marine Corps History and Museum Division Headquarters (Washington DC: 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*, History and Museums Division Headquarters (Washington DC: 1997), 565.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Clifford, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the United States Marine Corps, 1900-1970* (United States Marine Corps History Division: 1973), 96.

<sup>17</sup> Shulimson, *The Landing and Buildup*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford, *Progress and Purpose*, 101.

GVN-sponsored activities.<sup>19</sup> The people would be identified, fed, given medical care, and shown pro-GVN presentations and movies. All the while the ARVN would search the hamlet for VC. The coordinated effort succeeded if not for turning up the enemy then by giving decent regard to the people, General Walt said.<sup>20</sup> These operations continued throughout the war and represent civic action at its heart.

NCOs displayed ingenuity in civic action. One example comes from First Sergeant Gene Beck whose CAP in Loi Giang village profoundly affected military/civilian relations. The Marines discovered that the fingerling fish could be used in the rice paddies to great effect. They would eat the mosquito larvae and fertilize the mud in which the rice grew. The idea was brought to the villagers and they overwhelmingly approved after seeing it in action. The fish was introduced and the villagers thought highly of the Marines. A second example of this initiative was the introduction of IR8 Philippine "miracle rice." It produced nearly a double crop for the villagers. All was done with "minimum supervision" of officers with the NCOs taking the lead.<sup>21</sup> Projects such as these are the essence of civic action in the Vietnam War.

## Defining the Vietnam War

The Marines saw the Vietnam War for what it was: an insurgency. The insurgents were almost entirely self-sufficient and operated on their own separate from Hanoi.<sup>22</sup> In support of this, General Krulak said that the VC obtained much of the supplies they needed to make war from disposed U.S. and GVN ordnance.<sup>23</sup> The Ho Chi Minh Trail flowing through Laos and Cambodia indeed furnished the VC with materials, but such was the ruggedness of the trail that

---

<sup>19</sup> Clifford, *Progress and Purpose*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Walt quoted in Clifford, *Progress and Purpose*, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Victor Krulak, "The Guerilla and Reality," *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 50, no. 7 (July 1966): 41.

few supplies got to their intended destination. Unofficial U.S. sorties and bombing campaigns in Cambodia and Laos hampered it even further. The VC therefore subsisted by being within the people, and gleaning from the extant black market, and information spies gathered for them among the GVN. The insurgency needed a counterinsurgency. The doctrine of the Marines consisted of "small, mobile, independent patrols aggressively led and free of logistics constraints which could effectively hunt down and fix guerilla units."<sup>24</sup> This is at variance with the established doctrine of the Army. The Marine Corps retained the tradition of a light infantry whose high mobility was the envy of large units. The doctrine of counterinsurgency had other benefits as well. Since the GVN was fraught with spies and the VC had a leg up on intelligence, the CAP was to prove that it could fight an intelligence war just as well as the enemy.<sup>25</sup> Where the U.S. government demanded body counts as a justification of the war itself, the small war, sometimes called the "other" war provided intelligence sometimes in lieu of numbers. The Marines simply applied lessons from the past better than did the Army: large pitched battles like those seen in the World Wars did not necessarily provide victory for either side.<sup>26</sup> Lasting victory in Vietnam was found in counterinsurgency with the active support from the Vietnamese military; something to which the CAP was well suited.

The Vietnam War was improperly defined. There are two types of guerilla warfare - partisan and insurgent. A partisan is a guerilla who operates as an auxiliary to conventional forces.<sup>27</sup> He exists as an arm to conventional forces, and is supplied and controlled by them. An insurgent is an armed guerilla who seeks revolutionary, social, and political change.<sup>28</sup> The

---

<sup>24</sup> Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 108.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 198.

<sup>26</sup> Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 179.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

insurgent can be, but is not necessarily supplied externally. They may be self-sufficient though it is not often the case. Most of all, they exist to accomplish political change. The Viet Cong were, in fact, partially supplied by the communist north, partially self-sufficient, and sought political change in the south. Dealing with an insurgency requires a consistent program redressing social and economic grievances- making the GVN work.<sup>29</sup> It also requires cooperative nation-building programs to succeed. A certain non-military doctrine is therefore needed. CAP applied pressure on all the right points to accomplish the ultimate mission of pacification. It was not that the Army could not define the difference between guerillas, it was that they in large did not apply the right doctrine to maximize their combat potential. They were, with few exceptions, a conventional force that was trying to fight an unconventional enemy.

### CAP School and Early NCOs

Armed with only a few weeks of language courses and culture classes, the Marine was sent immediately to the jungle to live in the Vietnamese hamlet. The language barrier was debilitating. The well-read Marine could speak a mere 50 words when he arrived in the field.<sup>30</sup> In this respect. Marines lamented their grasp of Vietnamese, and there was a heavy reliance upon PF interpreters by consequence. Colonel E. F. Danowitz, director of the CAP school admitted that the lack of language training devastated the Marines' welfare.<sup>31</sup> There was not enough time, however, to properly school the Marines.

Some joined the CAP thinking it would be easy duty. In the program's infancy, the Marines who volunteered had to be combat veterans and highly recommended. They had to be

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>30</sup> E. F. Danowitz in, Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

able to handle themselves in rough conditions. In the Program's infancy, every Marine was handpicked for the job. Lieutenant Paul Ek selected the first Marines. An outstanding Marine who organized the first CAP school, Ek was fluent in Vietnamese and an expert on Vietnamese culture. He said, "Because of the magnitude of the job, I picked men who were mature, intelligent, who possessed leadership capabilities and tact, the latter was most important."<sup>32</sup> It would be a setback for the platoon sergeant if he received a Marine without experience, though this often did happen. Later in the Program, commanding officers were reluctant to give up their best men, so the quality of the Marines was not always what was expected. Regardless, all had to attend a two week crash course at Da Nang and Phu Bai before they were sent into the bush. An orientation given by an officer would introduce them to the new doctrine:

We're going into these villages to stay. We're going to help them in their communities. We'll help them build new schools, bridges, roads, and new housing. We'll work very close with them to help them remain independent from the VC. We must work hard to obtain the trust of the villagers. You'll be the people who'll show the Vietnamese the spirit of the American Way.<sup>33</sup>

Lieutenant Ek said the Marines had to know "whom to call 'sir,' and whom to call 'you.'"<sup>34</sup> He educated the Marines on the customs of the Vietnamese, and the politics of the countryside. Corporal Barry Goodson gives an excellent account of the school at Da Nang. He familiarized them with booby traps, punji sticks, bouncing betties, and "homemade explosives packed with buffalo dung."<sup>35</sup> He also familiarized them with all manner of insects, spiders, and snakes of the bush. Goodson endured a rigorous schedule that began at 4 a.m. until 9 p.m. that

---

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ek in Frank Beardsley, "Combined Action," *Leatherneck Magazine* vol. 50, no. 4, (April 1966), 21.

<sup>33</sup> A speech made by a Captain at the CAP school at Phu Bai, in Thomas Flynn, *A Voice of Hope* (Baltimore MD: American Literary Press, 1994), 38-39.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ek, oral interview at USMCHC, in Jack Shulimson and Major Charles Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (United States Marine Corps History Division: 1978), 135.

<sup>35</sup> Barry Goodson, *CAP Môt: The Story of a Marine Special Forces Unit in Vietnam, 1968-1969* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 17.

concentrated on õhand-to-hand combat, special weaponry, explosives, guerilla strategy, and survival techniques.ö<sup>36</sup> The Marines received instruction on local history and Vietnamese social mannerisms by a Vietnamese officer. Everything the Corps believed that the Marine would need was crammed into a two week course. One of the officers of the school said, õMarines in CAP are ðe-trainedøto kill.ö<sup>37</sup> Instead, they were trained in the CAP school to ask questions first and shoot if necessary. This automatically placed them on the defensive, an idea that did not sit with well-trained killers.

Some of the early NCOø set precedent for those to follow. Ek recruited Sergeants David W. Sommers and John J. Cooney for the job and they began to shape new doctrine right away. Sommers and his Marines worked with the nearby PF platoon in Thuy Tan and soon began to learn from each other. The Marines had noisy and cumbersome equipment that gave away their position while on the march, so Sommers õrevampedö their equipment to maintain silence.<sup>38</sup> This became commonplace of all CAP units, some took it further than others, but all adapted their equipment in some way to survive in the bush. Later NCOø in the Program would make their Marines hop up and down prior to patrols to make sure their gear was not making noise.<sup>39</sup>

Sommersøreplacement, Sergeant Cooney set more precedents for platoon sergeants to follow. Cooney began planning nightly operations coordinating his strategy with information he received from the district police chief, or the villagers.<sup>40</sup> He set up checkpoints, and planned out ambush sites, and pre-planned artillery concentrations. Advanced in the early stages of CAP where hunkering down in a compound was the norm, Cooney set policy that no actions made by the Marines should be repetitive in nature. He would õkeep Charlie guessingö on the

---

<sup>36</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce Martin, õRice Roots Empathy,ö *Leatherneck Magazine* vol. 52, no. 8 (August 1969), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Beardsley, õCombined Action,ö 21.

<sup>39</sup> Francis West, õWarfighting,ö *Marine Corps Gazette* (June 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Beardsley, õCombined Action,ö 24.

whereabouts of the CAP.<sup>41</sup> While patrolling, the point man was always a PF soldier because they seemed to have a "sixth sense" for the VC. Because they were locals, they knew the land better than the Marines.

Sergeant Cooney performed other duties as well. He mandated that each Marine be loaded with ammunition, white phosphorous grenades, and at least two fragmentation grenades. Carrying what seemed to be an oversupply of grenades became a common practice of CAP Marines. Grenades by their nature are offensive weapons, and can polarize a battle quickly to favor a beleaguered force; especially when operating at night. The VC preferred to operate at night, and the village chiefs had to be protected. They were assassinated at an alarming rate because of their GVN affiliations. The chiefs and their families would rotate from random homes to the Marines' command post to keep from being assassinated, and it became set policy that the Marines and the PF were to satellite the chiefs for their protection. Cooney was responsible for that operation as well.<sup>42</sup>

It was dangerous working with the Marines. "The villagers know," Cooney said, "that if the Marines ever pulled out of here, the VC would move back in and torture and kill them for collaborating with us."<sup>43</sup> Sergeant Cooney had to convince them that the Marines were there to stay, and that was not easy. Every foreign power that had occupied Vietnam had left, and there was no reason to expect the Marines would have any more commitment. Taking the side of the Marines was a gamble, and that was precisely why many villagers remained politically undecided out of fear of reprisal on either side. Friendships were made between the Marines and the villagers, and it was these friendships that created more often the loyalties that kept the villagers working with the Marines. Not necessarily loyalty to the American-funded GVN, but to

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

the individuals that had direct contact with the villagers who cared about their welfare. There are many examples of NCOs re-enlisting to go back to their villages in Vietnam; a testament to their emotional attachment to the villagers and the Marines they served with. A corporal recalls his particular attachment to the children of the village:

I provided my own money to one of the kids in the village who sold popsicles everyday instead of going to school. So I gave him money to buy clothes and go to school. So that he might learn something and not grow up to be a VC. After that I also sent another girl to school.<sup>44</sup>

The Marines intended to stay until the job was done. One of their goals was to work themselves out of a job in the hamlets. The idea was to fully pacify the CAP area of operations (AO) and turn command over to the PF when they were ready. By 1970, there were over 95 PF platoons formerly trained by CAP where the Marines had finished their job and moved on. This represents approximately 350 hamlets and about 185,000 people that had seen the Marines come and go because they extinguished the VC threat. That same year the CAP was training another 114 PF platoons who protected an additional 460 hamlets, about 240,000 people. Together the Program trained over 209 PF platoons, protected about 810 hamlets, and protected 425,000 people by 1970.<sup>45</sup> For an operation that began in late 1965, these numbers are impressive. It is a fact that no hamlet that had been protected by the CAP had ever been retaken by the VC.<sup>46</sup> The Program was working.

---

<sup>44</sup> Joseph A. Trainor, No. 2202-2341-3c, Oral History Collection, History and Museum Collection, HQMC.

<sup>45</sup> All the information in this paragraph is derived from in, Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," enclosure 5.

<sup>46</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," 2.

## Requisitioning

Though it was in existence since August 1965, the CAP was not officially established until Force Order 3121.4a in July 1967. By consequence, the CAP relied solely on the initiative of Marines under the direction of NCOs from 1965-1967. On the operational level the command structure was cumbersome. On one hand, the Marines answered to the Combined Action Headquarters; III MAF, but on the other they were on an administrative chain to their parent battalion.<sup>47</sup> It was even more confusing prior to 1967, before there was a Combined Action Headquarters. They had their own command structure yet had one with their parent units. Even worse, the parent units detached volunteers to the Program with little else than their small arms and ammunition. With nothing, the Marines had to improvise. There is a saying that "there are no thieves in the Marine Corps, everyone's just trying to get their shit back."<sup>48</sup> This is as true today as it was in Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, the first commanding officer of the CAP recalls the early years:

There was no way that the Marine Corps, here read to include [Generals] Walt, Krulak, Greene, and later Nickerson, could establish an official authorized, full TO&E [Table of Organization & Equipment] organization called a CAP. COMUCMACV [General Westmoreland] adamant opposition to the CAP concept if the Marine Corps wanted a CAP program, it would have to be created out of the hide of our authorized units.<sup>49</sup>

Corson recalls how Marine Generals "looked the other way" as the junior Marines begged, borrowed, and stole from the Navy, Army, and Air Force to outfit their operation.<sup>50</sup> The

---

<sup>47</sup> Curtis Williamson, "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War" (Thesis Paper, The Air University, 2002), <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/williamson.pdf>. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Author's recollection who served in the Corps from 2000 to 2008.

<sup>49</sup> William Corson, "CAP's Formative Years." <http://www.capmarine.com>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

CAPs were well known by their "midnight requisitions."<sup>51</sup> They were completely dependent upon parent companies and neighboring branches of the military. If the CAP needed a .50 caliber machine gun, it was pilfered in pieces from various places and reassembled in the CAP compound. If a radio was needed, the CAP Marines would call in their favors, and sometimes barter or purchase the item. If a jeep was needed, the Marines would acquire the parts and reassemble the entire vehicle. General Walt paying a visit to CAP compounds never inquired of the vast array of equipment and weapons before him, indeed it has not been recorded that any general officer ever objected.<sup>52</sup> This back-channel effort outfitted the CAP in its infant years, the result of Marine doctrine clashing with General Westmoreland's plan to conduct the war.

Corporal Tony Vieira volunteered for duty in Vietnam, re-enlisting to fight in the war. He was instrumental in furnishing his CAP with much needed supplies. Vieira aided in the requisition effort serving in four different CAPs not far from My Lai in 1967-68. "We took anything that belonged to the Army- M-16s, M-79s, PRC 25s, 60-mm mortars." He goes on to say that he disassembled an entire .50 caliber machine gun and reassembled it in the CAP compound, and that "we didn't want for anything."<sup>53</sup> Most Marines and their NCOs who participated in CAP admit to requisitioning wheeled vehicles, communication equipment, weapons and ammunition, food, clothing, building supplies, and a myriad of other necessary items for the jungle. Vieira was one of many NCOs who made the mission possible with pilfered materials in the first few years of the CAP.

---

<sup>51</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 36.

<sup>52</sup> Corson, "CAPs Formative Years."

<sup>53</sup> Tony Vieira quoted in Al Hemingway, *Our War was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1994), 42.

## Doctrine

The back channel dealings of the Marines, supported by their general officers, must have infuriated General Westmoreland. The general later called the CAP an "ingenious innovation." However, at the time, he staunchly opposed it. He, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, believed that the Program was "too slow" in producing tangible results.<sup>54</sup> Westmoreland claimed that he "had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet" and fragmenting manpower would expose weakness to the enemy.<sup>55</sup> Expose a weakness perhaps, but it is a fact that 167,000 troops could have put a squad in *every* village and hamlet. This was a far lower number than the 550,000 troops deployed in Vietnam at its height.<sup>56</sup> It was Westmoreland's strategy, and that of the Secretary of Defense and the President, that the war should be directed against the VC and NVA utilizing large search and destroy tactics. The Marine Corps had to fall in line with this doctrine; but, under the guise of civic action to which the GVN and President Johnson were committed, they had leeway to stretch the limits of accepted doctrine.

The Marines came to their own conclusions. General Victor Krulak, Commanding General of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMF Pac), stated that "every man we put into hunting the NVA was wasted."<sup>57</sup> His statement represents the schism between the Army and the Marine generals. If the war was to be the simple conflict that Westmoreland hoped for, he would have to wage unconventional war, the "other war" to achieve success. In order to expel the VC from a region, the Marines needed to fight on their level of warfare, and this idea did not sit well with leaders like Westmoreland who favored conventional tactics of the Korean War and WWII.

---

<sup>54</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 202.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 175-76.

<sup>57</sup> Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (United States Marine Corps History Division, 1982), 15.

It is easy to say on the surface that Marine Corps CAP doctrine was unsurpassed, but it is more difficult to analyze why it was so. Doctrine is defined by Counter-Insurgency theorist Larry Cable as "the officially sanctioned theory of victory outlining the conduct of war on *all levels*."<sup>58</sup> The Department of Defense states doctrine is the "Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application." Vietnam was indeed a small war with many levels, and because III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) worked in conjunction with the I Corps of the Army, the basic doctrine of both are revealing. The difference between the Army and the CAP was the application of force. Historian Michael Peterson makes an outstanding point: "The CAP Marines waged war *in* the hamlets; the main force Army and Marine units all too often waged war *on* the hamlets."<sup>59</sup> The SWM completed in 1940 recognized the dilemma: "The application of purely military measures may not, by itself restore peace and orderly government because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political or social."<sup>60</sup> This statement communicates a point very similar to one the Chinese communist revolutionary Mao Tse Tung said, that "The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."<sup>61</sup> The Marines, in part because of their own experiences in small wars, had a malleable policy that bent to the needs of a counterinsurgency. They fought *among* the people just as the insurgents did. The Army, with the exception of small units such as the Special Forces and MACV Advisory Teams, fought *outside* the people.

---

<sup>58</sup> Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 35.

<sup>60</sup>The United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* , NAVMC 2890 FMFRP 12-15 (Washington: DC, 1940), I-9, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Mao Tse Tung. "Excerpts from the Writings of Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. Mao Zedong," [http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/grimsley1/h380/mao\\_che.htm](http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/grimsley1/h380/mao_che.htm)

Doctrine is not strategy. The doctrine of the Army during the Vietnam was the supreme application of firepower and conventional forces while maintaining high mobility to conduct search and destroy operations.<sup>62</sup> General Westmoreland had an intrinsic goal with his doctrine to make safe the roads and lines of communications, and to clear rail and waterways of enemy influence.<sup>63</sup> His reasoning was that the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was better suited to deal directly with the people. It was his doctrine that American forces would be best used to target the bases of the VC and NVA, and by taking them down the nucleus from which the enemy operated would be destroyed. Mixing among the people according to Westmoreland would provoke xenophobia; keeping a distance from them would lessen the probability of incidents that might arise by their mingling.<sup>64</sup> The Army was to be sufficient unto itself.

### Vietnam, the People, and Government

The Marines understood that government of Vietnam was in turmoil. The VC had infiltrated the hamlets. To understand why the VC gained such a foothold, one needs to look into the Vietnamese past. Larry Cable said it best:

During its thousand years Vietnamese society had developed a unique character: that of an armed peasantry slowly occupying the shoreline and coastal farm areas of the Indochinese peninsula. The Vietnamese was an individual strongly attached to his family, his village, his secret society, and little else.<sup>65</sup>

Vietnam was a nation defined by insurgencies, and a people accustomed to wars. French colonization began in 1858 and by 1887 the nation was under French control. After WWII Vietnam claimed independence but the French refused to vacate. The French fought a savage

---

<sup>62</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 176.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Cable, *Conflict*, 185.

war against the forces of Ho Chi Minh until their defeat in 1954. By that time, American military advisors were on the ground aiding the south against the communist north. A border through the middle of the nation was established in the Geneva Accords, and the nation was split with an anti-communist southern government backed by American dollars and military aid.<sup>66</sup> By the Vietnam War which began in 1955 and was to continue for twenty years, no generation of Vietnamese had ever known life without war and foreign control.

Cable called the people's attachment to their village "extremely localistic."<sup>67</sup> It is in part why communism seemed to be favorable over a foreign funded republic. The average Vietnamese peasant liked the basic tenants of communism which was centered on community welfare:

The Communists kept saying, "If you fight for the revolution you will have a good life." They said that to always be struggling would bring more prosperity and happiness to all the people. We thought that the Communist policy would be good, that the new social policies would be good, because that would mean everyone would share more in the economic development.<sup>68</sup>

The villager was thus torn. What they wanted most was peace, and they sought it no matter what side one was on. According to reports given to General Walt, they wanted to be able to raise crops and sell the excess, and wanted better trade for a better life.<sup>69</sup> Confusingly for the peasants, it is exactly what they heard from the GVN *and* the Communists. By 1974 according to the study done by James Trullinger, a sociologist who performed an extensive survey of the Vietnamese people, 5% of the people were supporters of the GVN, 10-15% were politically

---

<sup>66</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency. "World Fact Book: Vietnam." <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>

<sup>67</sup> Cable, *Conflict*, 185.

<sup>68</sup> James Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam* (New York: Stanford University Press, 1993), 100.

<sup>69</sup> Walt, *Strange War*, 80.

uncommitted, and the remainder supported the VC.<sup>70</sup> It is important to note that the study encompassed the villagers of My Thuy Phuong, 4 miles north of Phu Bai, and does not cover CAP villages. His study was done too late for that. However, those in CAP protected villages were more prone to support the GVN as long as the villagers believed that the Americans were going to stay.

The people cannot be lumped into a common psyche, but they were used to wars that did not necessarily take their best interests into account; many believed that the new republic did not. They in large were convinced that the communists wanted what was best for them because the GVN was unpopular. Trullinger performed a little known study in Vietnam where he interviewed Vietnamese villagers and VC officers. It is considered the most accurate record of the common sentiment of the people at the time. His interviews are verbatim. A GVN official stated:

The Communists had the idea that everyone must work together for revolution, to fight together, to help even the poorest people in the area. This is the greatest strength of that side. You know, they really do work closely to the people. They are close to the people, and encourage the people to cooperate, which is something that gives them strength. And it is something that our republican government cannot do too well.<sup>71</sup>

A peasant stated about the Americans:

I think almost everyone agreed that the Americans had to go and that the communists were the strongest ones to fight them.<sup>72</sup>

There are many interviews that paint the communists in a positive light mainly because the GVN was not working. Robert McNamara said it best in 1964: "conditions required to win such a war is a strong, stable, and effective government which has the full loyalty and support of

---

<sup>70</sup> Trullinger, *Village at War*.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 98.

the people.<sup>73</sup> The government was overthrown in Vietnam *numerous times* from 1963 to 1965 after the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Indeed, the people never had a president that was duly elected. Diem himself was *õlectedõ* by a corrupt plebiscite in 1955.<sup>74</sup> The American government supported Diem, at least initially, and therefore in the eyes of the people the Americans supported corruption. According to a report sent by McNamara to President Johnson, 40% of the Vietnamese countryside was under VC control with some areas exceeding 90%.<sup>75</sup> So when Americans took the initiative it is no surprise that they did not need the *õsay soõ* of the Vietnamese government. American leaders decided to start the bombing campaign OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER without GVN consultation, and the U.S. military quickly *õAmericanizedõ* the war with GVN compliance.<sup>76</sup> The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was falling apart. As much as 50% of the draftees in the army were deserting, and the situation was worse in the PF ranks; the local militia that the Marines would later work with.<sup>77</sup> In 1966, at least 3,015 Revolutionary Development (RD) personnel who were sent out by the GVN to proselyte among the villages were kidnapped or murdered as well.<sup>78</sup> The South~~ø~~ government exercised scant authority in the villages because VC influence was so high and the government so unstable. McNamara reported to the President that a recent GVN coup particularly upset the *õpolitical control structureõ* all the way down to the hamlets; few took the republican government seriously.<sup>79</sup> Those who did risked their lives.

---

<sup>73</sup> Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1995), 110.

<sup>74</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 239.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson March 16<sup>th</sup> 1964 in, George Herring Ed., *The Pentagon Papers: Abridged Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 87.

<sup>76</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 165.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 205-242.

<sup>79</sup> Herring, *The Pentagon Papers*, 88.

The GVN was therefore committed to *pacification* otherwise known as *civic action* to the Marine Corps, though circumstances were stacked against it. It is defined as the "military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people" and maintaining sustained, credible territorial security.<sup>80</sup> The CAP was centered upon it, implemented as a viable strategy (without an end in sight) and Americans had the bulk of the responsibility. Pacification also meant that the Viet Cong were free to take the initiative. The American and allied soldiers therefore were more beleaguered than their opponents because they had to be mindful of the political objective which was to create a respected South Vietnamese government while at the same time "winning the hearts and minds" of the people. The VC simply had to survive to win, and for the Americans survival meant getting through one more tour.<sup>81</sup> In his book *Pacification: Politics and the Village* written in 1970 at the height of the Vietnam War historian Samuel Popkin suggests there were problems with the pacification program though the countryside was (supposedly) 90% pacified at the time.<sup>82</sup> Popkin interviews 400 Vietnamese peasants to come to a conclusion that the pacification program was flawed in that the needs of the peasants are particularly ignored by the GVN. Their greatest need was security, and that the GVN could not provide.

### Military Forces and the Hamlet

The condition of the Popular Forces in 1965 was appalling. When McNamara paid a visit to Vietnam in 1962 with General Krulak, a troop of PFCs were assembled to greet them. Inspecting their arms they were found to be rusty, and their uniforms in tatters.<sup>83</sup> These were the

---

<sup>80</sup> Clifford, *Progress and Purpose*. 96.

<sup>81</sup> Graham, "Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure."

<sup>82</sup> Popkin, "Pacification: Politics and the Village," 662.

<sup>83</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, Ch. 12.

lowest paid hamlet defense forces in Vietnam at \$20 a month; they were simple militia.<sup>84</sup> They were the least trained, least regarded units in the military. McNamara remarked upon their sad state pointing at one of their rifles: "Do you think those things will shoot?" he asked Krulak. The general inspected a weapon and replied that he could not see down the rusty barrel. McNamara replied, "Well, we will have to do something about this. These may be the most important military people in all Vietnam."<sup>85</sup> A problem however was extant: the PF were deserting in droves because of fear. They also experienced hopelessness in their mission to defend their neighborhoods. Their value to the Marines however was beyond comparison. They had the potential to fight harder because they were defending their homes, if trained. They developed a rapport with the locals that the Marines used to great effect, and they also acted as interpreters. They lacked the fire support capabilities that the Marines had, they could not on their own call in air support, and they had barely enough supplies, even food to sustain them. Regardless of their shortcomings, the PF were destined to be the greatest asset to the Marines who could train them and motivate them to root out the VC.<sup>86</sup> General Walt said the members of the PF "knew every person in his community by face and name, he knew each paddy, field, bush, and bamboo clump, each family shelter, tunnel, and buried rice urn."<sup>87</sup> They also knew the VC better than the Americans. Their platoon was paired with a squad of Marines led by a corporal or sergeant to work together in their AO.

The people had become terrified by the forces that infiltrated their hamlets: the VC, the GVN, and even the Americans. More forces meant more war. The VC exacted heavy taxes, forced villagers into service, and brought war to their doorsteps, at least that was what the

---

<sup>84</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 23.

<sup>85</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, Ch. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," 1.

<sup>87</sup> Lew Walt quoted in Shulimson, *Marines in Vietnam*, 138.

Marines were told. General Krulak makes a valid observation: "The people at large were despondent and terrified. Even the village chief spent many of his nights in Da Nang because of his fear of assassination or capture."<sup>88</sup>

The VC were indeed wreaking havoc on the people, but so were the government troops. Out of frustration because their pacification mission was so difficult, they commonly abused the villagers especially when they needed intelligence. The GVN was so fraught with spies who kept the VC abreast of the ARVN's movements, that it is no wonder the soldiers unleashed their anger at the villagers who could easily be seen as the enemy. The children of the villages were perhaps the most vulnerable to VC influence. One village of 4,500 persons in Binh Nghia, for example, had 750 men that were VC according to its chief. An additional 600 were VC sympathizers.<sup>89</sup> Most children had connections with both VC *and* the Americans, and they were extremely impressionable. In the weeks before Tet, the Marines of Echo-4 CAP, north of Da Nang found a twelve year old boy who was in need of nourishment and fatally decided to take him in the compound. During the Tet offensive the Marine compound was completely surrounded and outnumbered by the VC and NVA, and the boy was seen operating an NVA radio in the battle that ensued. He spared the life of a wounded Marine on the field, but others who treated the boy with compassion were not as fortunate. The enemy was not above the employ of young boys as soldiers and spies, in this case it was both.<sup>90</sup> General Krulak and Lieutenant Colonel Corson both attested that the enemy commonly knew what the GVN and the Americans were doing as there were spies everywhere.<sup>91</sup> One peasant stated in Trullinger's

---

<sup>88</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, Ch. 12.

<sup>89</sup> Francis West, "Fast Rifles" *The Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1967), 1.

<sup>90</sup> Keith Cossey quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 87-88.

<sup>91</sup> Krulak, *First to Fight*, 198.

survey that the people told [the VC] where the soldiers were, and told them what time to attack, and helped them to escape.<sup>92</sup> Another peasant stated:

Everyone liked to help the revolutionary struggle in every way possible. Some of us did simple things like giving information to the VC on the GVN, or on police activities. Other people gave guerillas food and money. Other people helped guerillas hide. Some other people helped guerillas make traps and guns. Everyone liked to do it. We were happy to help.<sup>93</sup>

The GVN sometimes made it easy to choose sides. When the Marines moved on to another village, they expected the ARVN to come in behind them and secure it. What happened instead was rampant looting, tax collecting, and retribution against peasants who had been friendly to the VC.<sup>94</sup> The ARVN would arrest and oppress people out of revenge according to one peasant who labeled them bandits.<sup>95</sup> This caused hamlets to become infiltrated yet again necessitating the Marines to retake them later. The peasants knew too that the ARVN was involved in the black market. The villagers knew it but seldom spoke of it. American-funded humanitarian aid was often sold before the villagers could get it.<sup>96</sup> If it went through the proper channels, specifically through the ARVN, the higher likelihood it was to be pilfered and sold at a profit. Demoralizingly, American soldiers would find American items among the VC that they killed that were intended for the peasantry.<sup>97</sup>

GVN troops (the ARVN) lacked the initiative to go after the VC mainly because the communist movements were so hard to track.<sup>98</sup> The PF were there to protect! They had the same problem. By the time the Marines arrived in country they were afraid to venture out of their hamlets for good reason. The VC were being recruited in the same villages that the PF were there to protect! They had

---

<sup>92</sup> Trullinger, *Village at War*, 116.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> William Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: Norton & Co, 1968), 176.

<sup>95</sup> Popkin, *Pacification*, 663.

<sup>96</sup> Corson, *CAP's Formative Years*.

<sup>97</sup> Jack Cunningham, *Surrender was not an Option*, 1989. [www.caveterans.com](http://www.caveterans.com)

<sup>98</sup> Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 136.

the upper hand in the countryside and also infiltrated the ranks of the PF so the VC knew the movements of their enemy often before they made them.<sup>99</sup> The result demoralized all GVN troops. Supplies snaking their way through Cambodia and Laos on the Ho Chi Minh trail supported the insurgency for at least six months prior to the Marines' arrival. The GVN troops in the country needed a professional fighting force to tip the balance; their mere existence would boost morale.

The village chief was under a particular pressure to balance his relations with the VC and the Americans to keep his villagers safe. He had to be pro-GVN and hence pro-American on the outside, yet deal with the VC on some level under the sheets or else his villagers would suffer, and the chief himself murdered. A quote from a village chief to a Marine officer illuminates his particular struggle: "I believe in what you are doing and will cooperate in every way; however, if I openly endorse your presence, what happens to me when you are gone?"<sup>100</sup> The chief knew that the Americans would leave. If not wholly, then partially when Marines with valuable combat experience were re-assigned or promoted out of the hamlet. The fact of the matter is that the Marines could not fully protect the people from VC harassment. Even a well patrolled village had its incidents. For example, a village chief who aided the Americans in civic action had a grenade thrown in his house and was showered by machine gun fire.<sup>101</sup> All in a village that was considered well protected from the VC. General Walt ordered the protection of village chiefs harboring him and his family in places of safety at night while the chief worked in the village

---

<sup>99</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 88.

<sup>100</sup> A hamlet chieftain to Colonel William Kittermen, quoted in Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 258.

<sup>101</sup> Shulimson, *The Landing and Buildup*, 146.

during the day. This was only a temporary solution though; the ideal was a secure village where everyone could sleep safely at night.<sup>102</sup>

The revolutionaries had a deep reverence for Ho Chi Minh. A VC fighter explained, "We had always been very strong fighters for the Viet Minh, and we always admired Ho Chi Minh." The son of a Viet Minh leader recalled how his father always carried small picture of Ho and "sometimes took it out for strength." This was a common practice among the VC and NVA. Villagers recalled how the VC would proselyte in the name of Ho Chi Minh, and that the fighters "loved him very much." Aspiring Vietnamese students regarded Ho as their leader and tried to emulate him and carry out his struggle against "imperialist America."<sup>103</sup> As the President of North Vietnam, he was an icon to many VC and their sympathizers. Ho had deep connections with the Soviet Comintern who schooled him in Marxist/Leninist thought. His goal was to unify not only Vietnam under communism, but the whole world. Ho established communist parties in Siam, Malaya, and Singapore, and was the leader of the communist party in Vietnam.<sup>104</sup> He nearly succeeded in 1954 where as the general of the Viet Minh he ousted the French colonists at Dien Bien Phu. "It was patriotism, not Communism, that inspired me," he wrote, and his nationalistic spirit endeared him to the people. The shadow of Ho was always on the Marines as the people in large considered him a freedom fighter.

---

<sup>102</sup> Many village officials had to remove themselves at night to the enclosures of the Marines for protection, up until the program's end in 1971 this was a common practice. See Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," 4.

<sup>103</sup> Trullinger, *Village at War*, 71 & 102.

<sup>104</sup> An excellent history of the life of Ho Chi Minh was written by Mark Moyar. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ch. 1 p.1-31.

## The Formalization of CAP and the Tet Offensive

On July 17, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel William Corson became the first commanding officer of CAP. A veteran of WWII, he knew the difference between the war General Westmoreland wanted to fight and the one that had to be fought in Vietnam. Since 1950 he had been in Vietnam training the ARVN. By the mid-sixties he knew the Vietnamese people than any Marine alive. He spoke fluent Vietnamese, and could relate to the men because he was a Sergeant before he became an officer. Soon after the landing, Corson's 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalion was performing civic action in the villages.<sup>105</sup> He believed pacification to be the only way to win the war in Vietnam, and that "he didn't give a rat's ass about Vietnam."<sup>106</sup> He only sought to keep the soldiers alive using proper doctrine. The impact he had upon the CAP was profound. He streamlined the objectives of the Program to seven objectives of true pacification:

1. Destroy the VC hamlet-village infrastructure.
2. Provide public security, help maintain law and order.
3. Protect friendly political infrastructure.
4. Protect bases and LOC within villages and hamlets.
5. Contribute to combined operations with other forces.
6. Participate in civic action and PSYOPS against VC.
7. Assist in RD activities.<sup>107</sup>

The CAP platoons followed these principles for the duration of their existence. He was such a believer that the war could be won in this manner that he once said, "If you'll give me 700 Combined Action Platoons I'll win the war in six months and the taxpayers cost will be about \$45 million." This was optimistic. The war needed larger conventional forces to meet larger conventional foes, specifically the NVA when they operated against the south, and the CAP

---

<sup>105</sup> Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 248.

<sup>106</sup> Corson quoted in Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 39.

<sup>107</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," enclosure 4.

alone could not counter such masses. However, he expanded the Program as an instrument of true pacification according to Michael Peterson, which was the focus of all powers involved.

The Tet Offensive changed everything. On the night of January 31, 1968, an estimated seventy-thousand communist soldiers launched a surprise attack into more than a hundred cities and towns of South Vietnam.<sup>108</sup> It was monumentally successful. CAP platoons were overrun and the Marines slaughtered trying to defend their hamlets against the massive onslaught. As a result, American public opinion changed for the worse, and the CAP changed as well.

### Mobile and Compound Doctrine

The Program before Tet was different from the Program that developed after Tet. Beforehand, the CAP followed a compound doctrine. The compound doctrine is a *stationary* CAP that has a base and place of refuge in or near the hamlet. From this base the Marines would have supplies readily available in the event of an attack. Living amongst the peoples in hamlets, they helped the villagers and conduct civic action duties. The villagers therefore considered themselves living in predictable safe-haven to which they can turn, and so do the Marines. But there is a down side. The VC have a free reign of the larger part of the countryside and are able to predict the pattern of the Marines by studying their citadel. It is exactly what happened in the Tet Offensive. Settling in a compound creates a defensive mentality, and the VC sensing the opportunity attacked the strongholds.<sup>109</sup> Compound doctrine is generally how the Marines fought in CAP until they were overrun. However after the Tet Offensive, an arguably better mobile doctrine developed.

---

<sup>108</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 536.

<sup>109</sup> Marine Corps, Fact Sheet, 2.

Chuck Ratliff, a nineteen-year-old corporal was stationed with the CAP Alpha 6-9 at Cho Loung Van near Phu Bai. He recalls in the years from 1966-1967 were slim years because of manpower shortages. They commonly had short squads of seven Marines and a few PFCs. With these dwindled numbers the NCOs simply did not have enough men to patrol and effectively defend their compound. Ratliff's patrol ran directly into a VC patrol one night, and all were killed or injured. If it had not been for a quick reaction force sent from their compound, the VC would have slaughtered them all. "Nighttime combat patrols were very different," he recalls, because "we were looking for the enemy, and we felt some degree of failure if we couldn't find him." Ratliff served in a particularly "hot" CAP where not much later his compound was overrun by the VC. During the Tet offensive, Alpha 6-9 was *eliminated* trying to defend highway 1 on the outer reaches of Hue City. Alpha 6-9 was undermanned based upon the action seen in the AO. The close proximity to highway 1, the main artery of Vietnam, caused it to capitulate along with many other CAPs during Tet from the DMZ down to Da Nang. Ratliff's experience displays what commonly happened to CAPs before they made the full switch to mobile doctrine after the offensive.<sup>110</sup>

The simple fact was that under the "compound" doctrine the VC overran the Marines. Tiger Papa Three in the 4<sup>th</sup> Combined Action Group (CAG) located a few miles south of the DMZ was overrun multiple times in 1967.<sup>111</sup> The gruesome details of the CAP are recounted in memoirs of the Marines where all but a few were slaughtered each time. A veteran of Tiger Papa Three later called the compound at Cam Hieu a "dismal failure."<sup>112</sup> This is just one example of the many found in memoirs, and in command chronologies. Especially in the months after Tet,

---

<sup>110</sup> Chuck Ratliff quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 28-33.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Flynn, *A Voice of Hope* (Baltimore MD: American Literary Press, 1994).

<sup>112</sup> Edward F. Palm, Review of the *Voice of Hope* by Thomas Flynn, Marine Corps Gazette Book Review, October 1994.

the variable weaknesses of the compound were apparent. The Corps called the VC's mode of operation "stealthy mobility."<sup>113</sup> The VC never depended upon air support or mechanized support, or naval support for that matter. They were mobile because they carried with them everything they needed, and they were stealth because they operated on their feet. They were, in short, guerillas. The Marines quickly realized that, in order to fight them it was necessary to get to their level by becoming guerillas themselves. The transition to "mobile" doctrine meant the Marines fought the VC in a decentralized manner. They fought instead with all the gear they needed, and set up ambushes on the approaches to the hamlet. They were never in the same ambush site more than once, and were to be as unpredictable as possible so the VC could not gain the upper hand. They eschewed their old command posts preferring elusiveness instead. They operated in the bush for days on end without any contact with the outside world. Air support tended to give away positions, so the CAP units did not use air support except in extreme cases. The goals included surprising the VC with stealthiness and keeping them off balance. The VC could never execute their tactical schemes because the Marines seemed to be everywhere yet nowhere at the same time. The Marines realized too that the psychology of mobility is tactically offensive.<sup>114</sup>

The mobile CAP had some downfalls. The Marines could not focus on their civic action duties where they had in compounds. They did not have the time to focus on the civilians because their doctrine had changed. Proponents of the civic action element such as General Walt, Krulak, and Lieutenant Colonel Corson who started the CAP for civic action in the first place might disagree with the mobile doctrine. Pacifying the Vietnamese countryside was one of the goals of the GVN and the United States, and the presence of the Marines and the PF in the

---

<sup>113</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," enclosure 7.

<sup>114</sup> Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet," enclosure 7.

villages helped give legitimacy to the GVN. The villagers were better protected under the mobile doctrine, but they began to lose faith that the GVN was a stabilizing force in their community. The hamlet defense force was bogged down in guerilla warfare. Becoming a guerilla had other disadvantages too. They did not have the backup or resupply that a compound force had. The only way either could be given was by calling in air support or if by the sea, naval support, and in a combat situation that might not come quickly enough. For the Marines, it was a fierce adaptation to their way of life.

The prospect of being a guerilla produced mixed feelings among the NCOs. Corporal Barry Goodson recalls his horror when finding his CAP lived in the bush:

Oh, God. What have I gotten myself into? Here I was with only five other men, only four of whom were actually fighters (one being a corpsman), and [Sergeant] Rogers tells me we have no place to hide. The jungle was our home!<sup>115</sup>

Another corporal named Gene Ferguson states that he was scared to death of the prospect. In the compound he had some sort of safe-haven and resupply, in the bush there was nowhere to go, and no immediate re-supply. Ferguson recalls exhausting his ammunition and going days without food. He stated, "Civic action duty just fell by the wayside. I just don't think it [the mobile concept] was as effective."<sup>116</sup> Other NCOs favored the idea. Corporal A.W. Sundberg, a squad leader of three CAPs said that he preferred the mobile concept, and that he would run many patrols in a day. He also came to respect the people.<sup>117</sup> Corporal Michael Cousino who served in a CAP near Da Nang said the same of the villagers: "I learned to love the Vietnamese people." He also preferred the lifestyle of the mobile CAP.<sup>118</sup> In the end, becoming

---

<sup>115</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Gene Ferguson interview by Jack Shulimson in Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 61.

<sup>117</sup> A. W. Sundberg quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 110-111.

<sup>118</sup> Michael Cousino quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 98-99.

guerillas preserved more Marines than did the compound concept though some Marines were not necessarily on board with the idea.

Corporal Barry Goodson served in a CAP near Chu Lai from 1968-1970. His memoir *CAP Mot: The Story of a Marine Special Forces Unit in Vietnam 1968-1969* reveals how much an experienced NCO was valued in the bush. Corporals often took command of a CAP over a Sergeant if he had more experience. He passed on the wisdom of his predecessors when he said to an incoming sergeant:

[We] í have proven highly effective because we use a totally mobile approach. Our hit-and-run tactics have left the VC and the NVA confused and devastated. Being unpredictable has kept us alive and the men know that. If you set up a base of operation you are going to give the VC exactly what they have longed for - a stationary target.<sup>119</sup>

Until Goodson was wounded and left Vietnam, he was the ògo-toö man for not just the Marines, but the village chief as well. The chief recognized the good that Goodson was doing for the village. He managed civic action while patrolling night and day for the VC. Every Marine that was sent to him was quickly re-educated before he went in the bush with them. He instructed them to learn the job of everyone in the squad, and the Marines learned quickly. Goodson's leadership style was virulent and extemporaneous, novel and engaging. He imparted wisdom gleaned from the bush to a fresh Marine:

í shed all that extra gear. None of us carry food. The jungle and villagers take care of that í we never dig in. If we're not on the move, we're dead. When we fight the Cong we use natural cover and maintain an open back door. Get shed of that canteen. If your mouth gets dry, chew on a twig or a small stone. Canteens are too noisy í there's plenty of water out there and some of it will make you sick. But sick is temporary. Dead is dead!<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 132.

<sup>120</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 224-225.

The disadvantages notwithstanding, the mobile CAP had decisive results. In 1968 the entire Program registered 2,376 enemy KIA compared to the mere 451 a year earlier under the compound doctrine. 1969 saw 1,952 enemy KIA.<sup>121</sup> This was a direct result of ambush planning activities. In 1969 the number of ambushes executed by the Marines nearly doubled to a whopping 66,998 by years end. This was accomplished by 2000 Marines spread over 114 platoons in northernmost Vietnam. Every squad was running multiple ambushes a day at this rate, and the kill ratio of CAP was 6.5 VC for every 1 Marine/PF in 1969. Compared with independent PF platoons, and the conventional units of the Army and Marine Corps, this ratio was much more favorable.<sup>122</sup> Considering the size of their units, the Combined Action Platoons killed far more VC, captured far more prisoners, and captured far more weapons proportionally than any independent PF platoon, small or large conventional unit, or allied forces in I Corps Tactical Area of Operations (TAOR).<sup>123</sup>

### NCOs and the Mission

Robert Strawser, a Gunnery Sergeant said: "When I joined the Corps in 1968, a sergeant was God, a corporal was Jesus, and a lance corporal was Moses."<sup>124</sup> The Marines were obsessed with the chain of command because such great responsibility was placed upon them. Lance Corporals commonly lead patrols in CAP, and a Corporal sometimes would have command of an entire platoon. For men that were no more than 25 years of age the soldiery and maturity required to lead such a lethal operation was incredible. General Walt said of the youth:

---

<sup>121</sup> "Combined Action Force Statistics," in Marine Corps, "Fact Sheet."

<sup>122</sup> "Independent PF Platoon Kill Ratio Compared to CAP Kill Ratio 1 JAN-31 DEC 1969," in Marine Corps "Fact Sheet."

<sup>123</sup> Francis J. West, "An Area Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action," RM-5895-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1969), 4.

<sup>124</sup> Anthony Perry, "NCOs Stand Tall Again: Marine Corps renews its Faith in 'Old Sarge,'" *The Los Angeles Times* (October 4, 1987), [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/local/me-32840\\_1\\_marine-corps](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/local/me-32840_1_marine-corps).

The burden was, and remains on the young men, both enlisted and commissioned. On the one hand, they meet the enemy in close, vicious, and protracted conflict, while, on the other, they show the compassion to comfort a sick child, help rebuild a school, or assist a farmer in harvesting his crop.<sup>125</sup>

A Marine remarked that the mission was something of a misnomer. On one side he was expected to be a ruthless killer, on the other he was expected to be a saint; ðItø too much to askö he said.<sup>126</sup> The nature of his combat training was being unraveled the more he had to perform civic action duties instead of hunting the enemy. The nature of guerilla warfare was a lifestyle he had to adapt to as well. A two week crash course into this sort of lifestyle was not enough to prepare him. Indeed, it is remarkable how much doctrine a Marine was able to absorb being so full of contradictions, and the fact that CAP Marines were effective attested to the versatility of these men.

An illuminating statement exists in an official Marine Corps history concerning platoon leadership. ðA great deal depended upon the tact, and resourcefulness of each Marine, especially the platoon commander who had to maintain harmonious relations among his subordinates, the village chief, and his PFø.ö<sup>127</sup> The sergeant being the platoon commander had to be a dynamic man. Under his charge were the lives of approximately 14 Marines and a Navy Corpsman, and the PF sergeant and his approximately 35 soldiers. He had a language barrier to deal with right off the bat. He not only had to communicate with the PF sergeant, but he had work in close coordination with the village and hamlet chiefs. His fluency came quickly or he came to rely on an interpreter. He also had to maintain order and discipline among his corporals who in turn aided in the training of the PFø and the other Marines. ðIf the PFø were not trained properly, it

---

<sup>125</sup> Walt, *Strange War*, 23.

<sup>126</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 135.

was his fault<sup>128</sup> according to one corporal. Any issue had to be brought to him before it went to the lieutenant at headquarters. In fact, a testament to how well the sergeant maintained harmony, battalion commanders often heard little to nothing from the CAP unless they were under duress.<sup>129</sup>

Historian Michael Peterson called the CAP a "village nexus."<sup>130</sup> This is a proper assessment of the CAP. The hamlet and village chiefs, the village council, the religious leaders, the local PF~~s~~, the local ARVN, and RD teams had to involve the CAP in their mission planning. If the CAP was not included, the people would be jeopardized because the CAP~~s~~ offered valuable intelligence. The war in the hamlet was their business. By this standard the sergeant was the bond between multiple elements, and wielded a great deal of power. The CAP "nexus" was the sergeant or corporal where an officer normally would command his men and deal with diplomatic matters. The NCO had all the duties of a commissioned officer and was the "nexus" of the hamlet.

One example of the effective CAP efforts, Sergeant Michael Flynn was in charge of a CAP platoon in Loc An, twenty miles south of Da Nang. When the villagers heard that the sergeant~~s~~ command was transferring him out of the area, the villagers appealed to his commanding officer:

We are respectfully to submit this letter to you and will you please give permission Mr. Flynn Sergeant inhabit at our hamlet because in lapse of time he remain he win all the hearts of the whole people and he can speak Vietnamese very much.<sup>131</sup>

Flynn remained in the hamlet. A reporter asked why he extended his enlistment to return to his hamlet, and Flynn replied, "I~~s~~ become so involved with the people here, it~~s~~ become a

---

<sup>128</sup> A.W. Sundberg quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 112.

<sup>129</sup> Williamson, "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP)."

<sup>130</sup> Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 138.

<sup>131</sup> Corson, *The Betrayal*, 196-97.

personal war for me. The people were on his side. Tragically, Sergeant Flynn was killed by a VC ambush soon after. The people felt his loss, and the entire hamlet of 2,800 people personally mourned him for an entire year. Lieutenant Colonel Corson said "The people chose sides, and it was not the side of the GVN, but rather the side of the [Marine]." <sup>132</sup> The hamlet's people repulsed the VC and gave them no comfort thereafter.

### U.S. Marines in Vietnam

When one approached CAP Marines they beheld an unexpected sight. They were not dressed like soldiers at all. Sleeveless shirts, or no shirts at all, cowboy hats, bush hats, makeshift vests, cutoff shorts, and sometimes even sneakers were worn. <sup>133</sup> It was common to see beards and unshaven faces. <sup>134</sup> The ones that wore uniforms were often tattered and barely serviceable. And, nobody wore rank. Nobody wore helmets or flak jackets, or carried a pack stuffed full of gear or even canteens. These made too much noise while hunting the VC. <sup>135</sup> What one did see was a Marine bedecked with grenades and belts of ammo, lots of ammo; the things he needed in the bush. Most everything else that the Marine Corps said he needed to be effective in combat was disregarded because it reduced their effectiveness in the bush. Conventional forces that came in contact with them shook their heads in disbelief, or stared blankly at the puny squads that disappeared into the wilderness. <sup>136</sup>

The Marines and NCOs also had prices on their heads. General Walt stated that some of the Marines had a bounty of 10,000 piasters on their heads, roughly the equivalent of \$85 dollars

---

<sup>132</sup> Corson, *The Betrayal*, 197.

<sup>133</sup> Flynn, *A Voice of Hope*, 51.

<sup>134</sup> Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 28.

<sup>135</sup> Flynn, *A Voice of Hope*, 51.

<sup>136</sup> Flynn, *A Voice of Hope*, 51.

in 1970.<sup>137</sup> This was about a year's income to the average Vietnamese citizen, and is the equivalent of \$517 dollars in 2013. Other bounties were significantly larger. Sergeant Melvin Murrell from a CAP in Tuy Loan had a whopping 750,000 piaster bounty for him dead or alive.<sup>138</sup> This was the equivalent of \$6,355 dollars then, \$38,701 dollars in 2013.<sup>139</sup> In Vietnam where some families lived off the equivalent of \$5 dollars a month, this amount was a fortune. It was a source of pride for the Marines, but it also meant that no one could completely trust the villagers.

### Training the Vietnamese

Corporal Michael Cousino served in a CAP in the Da Nang area in 1968-69. He recalls training the PF's:

We had to train these jokers. What a time that was! What we did was use a show-and-tell method. We showed them how to load a weapon, fire it, clean it properly, all that. Squad tactics was a trip. We had to literally push and shove the PF's around until they got the message.<sup>140</sup>

Considering the language barrier, it was the only thing the Marines could do. Nearly all the training was "on-the-job." There was seldom time enough for the NCO's to impart all that was necessary to the PF's, they had to learn from the patrols and "trial-by-fire." It was an immense risk to the Marines because some PF platoons did not take their jobs seriously until it came down to the firefight. Being the lowest paid, least regarded units of the GVN it was hard to expect them to match up. Some CAP's experienced more volunteerism on the part of the PF's

---

<sup>137</sup> Walt, *Strange War*, 109. The exchange rate in 1970 was about 118 paisters to the U.S. dollar in Vietnam itself. On the world markets the gap was much larger. In 1970 the dollar had six times the purchasing power of a dollar in 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Corson, *The Betrayal*, 197.

<sup>139</sup> See footnote 135 for exchange rates and dollar value.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Cousino quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 98.

than did others. Corporal Michael Jenko recalls how their PF platoon was proactive in their hamlet's defense:

They went out themselves and collected all the intelligence they could and then they came back to our compound, and they sit there and they worked up all the plans down to each detail. They told how much ammo they wanted, what time they wanted to hit, and everything. The only thing the Marines had to do was coordinate the air support and go with them for morale booster because they figure we were working together.<sup>141</sup>

Others recalled how inadequate their PF's were. Sentiment towards them is split down the middle. Common negative terms used by Marines to describe them was 'lazy' or 'useless.'<sup>142</sup> Though some were veterans, the PF's in large were not the professional fighting force the Marines were. They could not be held to the same standard. Regardless, the Marines were to learn much from them about their particular village.

### Heroism and the NCO

Heroism was common in the CAP, though medals were seldom awarded. The lack of officers in the field contributed to the lack of medals given out as an officer was needed to witness the act. One exception was Sergeant John Balanco, the recipient of a Silver Star for his actions in the battle of Khe Sanh in 1968. The NVA assaulted the mountain village as part of their Tet offensive, and a few CAP's resisted the onslaught. Balanco was in CAP Oscar-1 and was witnessed by an officer as he directed the defense on the ground. He went from bunker to bunker rallying the Marines and directing their fire, all the while under a heavy barrage of small arms, rocket, and artillery fire. He was fearless and inspirational. Wounded several times in the act he kept going for thirty-six hours. He 'aggressively directed his men in repulsing the enemy

---

<sup>141</sup> Roosevelt Johnson, No.3679-1B-2, Oral History Collection, History and Museum Collection, HQMC.

<sup>142</sup> Tony Vieira quoted in Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 41. This NCO's recollections are particularly valid here because he served in 4 different CAPS spanning over two tours in Vietnam.

attack, according to his citation which also cites his "heroic actions and bold leadership" on the field. The story is well-documented unlike many engagements in which CAP NCOs commonly go unrecognized.<sup>143</sup>

## Conclusion

In closing, one must ask the question again: was there anything that could "save" Vietnam? Yes. A combination of economic, social, political, and military changes could have saved Vietnam. A long *sustained* counterinsurgency was necessary. A Combined Action Program led by Non-Commissioned Officers was part of the remedy. Corporals and sergeants and their platoons posted in *every* hamlet of South Vietnam were the nexus of the solution, but again, that is only part of it. President Johnson and his Secretary of Defense both believed in pacification, but were in such need of quick results that they discounted the only successful means in which to pacify Vietnam: the CAP. Had the CAP been implemented on a larger scale, the possibility of victory in Vietnam would have been far greater.

The simple fact was that the U.S. government was not willing to do whatever it took to save Vietnam.<sup>144</sup> It did not completely adopt the CAP, nor did it invade North Vietnam or strike out at China. Politicians feared nuclear war. At the same time, a lengthy war of attrition was hardly desirable to them as well as American people. Even if this military solution had been reached, that still left deep social, economic, and political problems that needed to be addressed to achieve victory. There was no single solution. The focus of this study is an aspect to the

---

<sup>143</sup> An excellent account of Sergeant Balanco and the Battle of Khe Sanh can be seen at, Taylor, F. Ed., "Big Tet" - The Assault on the Khe Sanh village CAPs and District HQ, USMC CAP Oscar-2 History Website, <https://sites.google.com/site/usmccaposcar/cap-oscar>

<sup>144</sup> This conclusion is reached in Lawrence Freedman, "Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist." *International Affairs* Vol. 72, No. 1 (January, 1996), p. 133-151. Royal Institute of International Affairs, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2624753>

puzzle, but it is an aspect only. Of the half million souls deployed to South Vietnam, the mere 2,000 Marines in the CAP appear to be of little consequence, but their success is lasting. The CAP prospered, and the NCO is the reason for its prosperity. More broadly, the Combined Action Program utilized on a larger scale would have provided a greater success for the Americans and Government of South Vietnam. The outcome of the Vietnam War would have far different had the Combined Action Program been adopted nationwide and the NCOs left to do what they do best: leading Marines and hunting down the enemy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Archival Sources

1st - 4th CAG Command Chronologies. Library of the Marine Corps, Archives and Special Collections Branch, Quantico, VA. [http://cap-assoc.org/Command\\_chronology\\_page.htm](http://cap-assoc.org/Command_chronology_page.htm).

### Primary Sources

Chronology of Key Marine Corps Events in the Vietnam War, 1962 - 1975. United States Marine Corps History Division Reference Branch.  
[https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Chronologies/Vietnam\\_1954-1975.aspx](https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/historydivision/Pages/Chronologies/Vietnam_1954-1975.aspx)

Clifford, Kenneth. *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the United States Marine Corps, 1900-1970*. United States Marine Corps History Division: 1973.

Corson, William. *The Betrayal*. New York: Norton & Co, 1968.

Cosmas, Graham, and Lieutenant Colonel Terrence Murray. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment 1970-1971*. Edited by Major William Melton, and Jack Shulimson. U.S. Marine Corps History and Museum Division Headquarters: Washington DC, 1986.

Cunningham, Jack. "Surrender was not an Option." 1989. <http://www.capveterans.com>.

Flynn, Thomas. *A Voice of Hope*. Baltimore MD: American Literary Press, 1994.

Headquarters United States Marine Corps. "FMFM8-2: Counter-Insurgency Operations." Washington DC, 1967. < [www.cgsc.edu/CARL/docrepository/fmfm8\\_2\\_pt1.pdf](http://www.cgsc.edu/CARL/docrepository/fmfm8_2_pt1.pdf) >.

Goodson, Barry L. *CAP Môt: The Story of a Marine Special Forces Unit in Vietnam, 1968-1969*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997.

Hays, Gene. *Civic Action, A True Story: Marines Fighting a Different War in Vietnam*. Ronald E Hays II: 2002.

Hemingway, Al. *Our War was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1994.

George Herring Ed. *The Pentagon Papers: Abridged Edition*. New York: McGraw Hill: 1993.

Krulak, Victor H. *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984.

McNamara, Robert S. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of the Vietnam War*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Neufeld, Gabrielle. *A Chronology of the United States Marine Corps, 1965-1969, vol. 4*. United States Marine Corps History Division, 1971.

Parker, William. *U.S. Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps, Republic of South Vietnam, April 1966-April 1967*. United States Marine Corps History Division, 1970.

Shulimson, Jack and Major Charles Johnson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*. United States Marine Corps History Division, 1978.

Shulimson, Jack. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*. United States Marine Corps History Division, 1982.

Shulimson, Jack, Lt Col. Leonard Blasoil, Charles Smith, and Capt. David Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*. History and Museums Division Headquarters: Washington DC, 1997.

Stolfi, Russell. *U.S. Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam, March 1965-March 1966*. United States Marine Corps History Division: 1968. 96 pp.

Telfer, Gary, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, and V. Keith Fleming, Jr. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967*. United States Marine Corps History Division, 1984.

Herring, George Ed. *The Pentagon Papers: Abridged Edition*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1993.

The United States Marine Corps. "Fact Sheet on the Combined Action Force, III Marine Amphibious Force." Marine Corps History and Museum Division in Quantico, VA: March 1970.

The United States Marine Corps. *Small Wars Manual*. NAVMC 2890. FMFRP 12-15. Washington: DC, 1940.

Trullinger, James. *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam*. New York: Stanford University Press, 1993.

Walt, Lewis W. *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*. New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1970.

West, Francis J. *An Area Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action*, RM-5895-ARPA. Santa Monica CA: Rand Corporation, 1969.

West, Francis. *The Village*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

West, Francis. *Small Unit Action in Vietnam, Summer 1966*. United States Marine Corps History Division: 1977 reprint. 123 pp.

Westmoreland, William C. *A Soldier Reports*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976.

### Oral Histories

Johnson, Roosevelt. Oral History Collection: History and Museum Collection, HQMC: No.3679-1B-2.

Trainor, Joseph. Oral History Collection: History and Museum Collection, HQMC: No. 2202-2341-3c.

### Secondary Sources

Bishop, Rebecca. "The Combined Action Marine: Projecting Another Vietnam Service Member Image." Thesis Paper. George Mason University, 2010.

Blaufarb, Douglas S. *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance*. New York: The Free Press, 1977.

Brewington, Brooks. "Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement." Thesis Paper. The Air University: CSC 1996.  
<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/brewington.pdf>

Cable, Larry. *Conflict of Myths: The Development of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*. NYU Press: 1988.

Herring, George. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2002.

Johnson, Katie. "A Re-Evaluation of the Combined Action Program as a Counterinsurgency Tool." Thesis Paper. Georgetown University, December 2008. SEST-730-04.  
<http://capmarine.com/cap/data.htm>

Jones, Grant. "United States Marine's Combined Action in Vietnam: Taking the 'Other War' to the Viet Cong." Thesis Paper. Norwich University, 2007.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Klyman, Robert A. "The Combined Action Program: An Alternative Not Taken." Honors Thesis. The University of Michigan, 1986.

Krepinevich, Andrew. *The Army and Vietnam*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

McMaster, H.R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that led to Vietnam*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Moyar, Mark. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Pavlic, Thomas. "Operational Social Influence in the Vietnam War: An Analysis of Influence Tactics used by the U.S. Marine's Combined Action Program and the Viet Cong in South Vietnam." Thesis Paper. Naval Postgraduate School: Monterey California, March 2011.

Peterson, Michael E. *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*. New York: Praeger, 1989.

Williamson, Curtis. "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War." Thesis Paper. The Air University, 2002.  
<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/williamson.pdf>

### **Secondary Sources: Articles**

Beardsley, Frank. "Combined Action." *Leatherneck Magazine* vol. 50, no. 4 (April 1966), 20-28.

Brush, Peter. "Civic Action: The Marine Corps Experience in Vietnam." *Viet Nam Generation* Vol. 5:1-4 (March 1994), 127-132.

Damm, Raymond C, Jr. "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 82, no. 10 (October 1998), 49-53.

Decker, Michael. "The MAGTF and Low-Intensity Conflict." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 72, no. 3 (March 1988), 45.

Graham, Robert J. "Vietnam: An Infantryman's View of Our Failure." *Military Affairs* Vol. 48, No. 3 (July, 1984).

Hilgartner, P. "Amphibious Doctrine in Vietnam." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 53, no. 1 (January 1969). 28.

Krulak, Victor. "The Guerilla and Reality." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 50, no. 7 (July 1966). 41-42.

Freedman, Lawrence. "Vietnam and the Disillusioned Strategist." *International Affairs* Vol. 72, No. 1. Royal Institute of International Affairs. (January, 1996), 133-151.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2624753>

Macak, Richard. "Yesterday's Doctrine for Today's Contingencies." *Marine Corps Gazette* (April, 1989). 38.

Martin, Bruce. "Rice Roots Empathy." *Leatherneck Magazine* vol. 52, no. 8 (August 1969). 24-29.

Perry, Anthony. "NCOs Stand Tall Again: Marine Corps renews its Faith in 'Old Sarge.'" *The Los Angeles Times* (October 4, 1987). [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/local/me-32840\\_1\\_marine-corps](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-04/local/me-32840_1_marine-corps).

Popkin, Samuel L. "Pacification: Politics and the Village." *Asian Survey* Vol. 10, No. 8. Vietnam: Politics, Land Reform and Development in the Countryside (University of California Press: August, 1970). 662.

Schwartz, T. "The Combined Action Program: A Different Perspective." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 83, no. 2 (February 1999). 63-72

Townsend, Patrick. "Clausewitz Would have Wondered at the way we fought in Vietnam." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 62, no. 6 (June 1978). 55.

West, Francis. "Fast Rifles." *The Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1967).

West, Francis J. "Warfighting." *Marine Corps Gazette* (June 2003).

Williamson, R E. "A Briefing for Combined Action." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 52, no. 3 (March 1968). 41-43.

Wilson, George, Jack Childs, Norman MacKenzie, Michael Sweeney. "Combined Action." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 50, no. 10 (October 1966). 28.

Wyly, Michael. "Light Infantry and Vietnam: Why generals need to study tactics." *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 74, no. 6 (June 1990). 56.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Sergeant Aaron Grant retired from the United States Marine Corps in 2008. He served a combat tour with 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was a M88-A2 HERCULES crewman in Iraq, a Combat Correspondent at Camp Pendleton, California, and a Combat Marksmanship Trainer at Quantico, Virginia. He is the author of *Iron Crusade*, a memoir of an NCO in the push to Baghdad. He received his Bachelor's Degree in American History at Empire State University in 2012. He also holds a Master's Degree in Military History at Norwich University received in 2014. He is a member of Phi Theta Kappa International Honors Society, and is a Horatio Alger Military Scholar. Mr. Grant resides in Granbury, Texas with his wife Sarah and his children.

Contact him via email at:

**[a.mg006@yahoo.com](mailto:a.mg006@yahoo.com)**

