

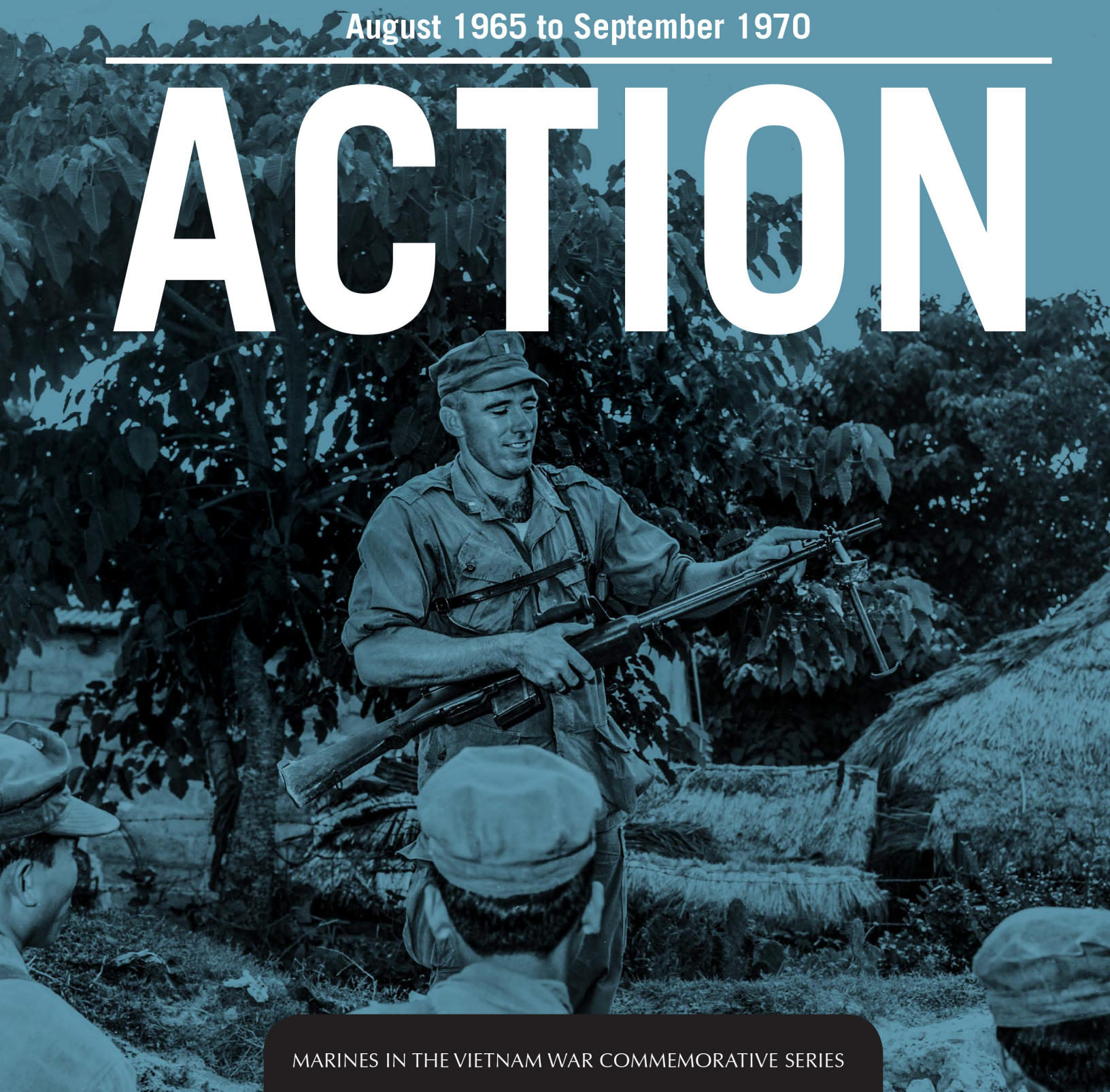
# COMBINED

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U.S. MARINES FIGHTING A DIFFERENT WAR  
August 1965 to September 1970

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# ACTION

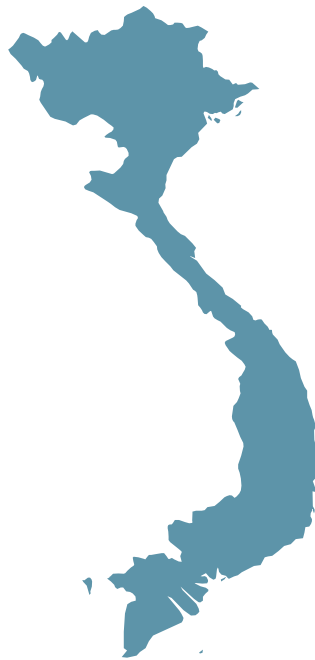


MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

# **COMBINED ACTION**

## **U.S. MARINES FIGHTING A DIFFERENT WAR AUGUST 1965 TO SEPTEMBER 1970**

MASTER SERGEANT RONALD E. HAYS II, USMC (RET)



MARINES IN THE VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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## Introduction

The Combined Action Program, renamed the Combined Action Force on 11 January 1970 when it became a separate command, was conceived and developed by the United States Marine Corps in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), where the program was initiated in August 1965.\* The Combined Action Program and its associated concepts were a natural outgrowth of the Marine Corps' involvement in several so-called Banana Wars fought in the Caribbean during the early twentieth century, when Marines advised, trained, and fought alongside native constabulary forces in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. Encapsulated in what was to become the *Small Wars Manual*, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-15, the experiences of the Marines whose cumulative wisdom was distilled in the *Small Wars Manual* was not forgotten during World War II, but it lay dormant until 1965 when guerrilla warfare during the Vietnam War demanded their rediscovery.

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\*Editor's note: in all instances, the official names of South Vietnam and North Vietnam are referred to instead of their colloquial names to distinguish between geographical and political boundaries. Throughout this monograph, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) refers to South Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) refers to North Vietnam. Additionally, because the historiography can be a bit vague about the proper use of CAP, for our purposes, CAP refers to Combined Action Platoons. When referring to the Combined Action Program as a whole, we will use the full reference and not the acronym.

There are no shortages of stories or opinions about the Combined Action Program. As any Marine will tell you, the command chronologies written at the time do not provide the whole story, nor do the narratives of Combined Action Program veterans that appeared after the war. The challenge posed when attempting an overview of such a program is the same one that historians have encountered when trying to summarize the causes of the Vietnam War. Not only was the war complex, but it was also fought under different commands within four different geographical areas with diverse populations during an eight-year period.

This historical work chronicles the activities of the Marines who served in the platoons, companies, and group headquarters of the Combined Action Program in the I Corps Tactical Zone. These Marines lived and dealt with the Vietnamese people in villages and hamlets on a daily basis. They were engaged to win the hearts and minds of the native people, all while having to defend themselves and the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets in border regions, such as the demilitarized zone and Quang Tri Province, against the depredations of the Viet Cong guerrillas and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Part of their mission included learning as much of the Vietnamese language as possible as well as the local customs and culture. In addition to these unstat- ed tasks, these young enlisted Marines were required to use

their powers of persuasion and leadership for their primary mission—to advise the RVN Popular Forces’ local militia counterparts and coordinate with all of the RVN and U.S. forces operating within their tactical area of responsibility.

Many of the successes and failures of the Combined Action Program are documented here, including the divergent opinions regarding applicability for future conflicts. The dedication, compassion, and sense of duty that Combined Action Program Marines exhibited under the most trying circumstances reflected positively on the Marine Corps and the United States. Indeed, the Combined Action Program was one of the few bright spots in a war that was both unpopular and divisive.

### **The Marine Corps’ Role in Vietnam War Strategy**

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy required all branches of the U.S. Armed Services to begin emphasizing counterinsurgency training, due in part to ongoing developments in the Republic of Vietnam and Communist-inspired insurgencies arising in such diverse places as Laos, the Republic of the Congo, Algeria, and the Philippines. One result of this new emphasis was the appointment of Major General Victor H. Krulak to be special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962.

In this capacity, Krulak went to Vietnam eight times between 1962 and 1964 to study the situation on the ground and to make recommendations as to what course the United States should take to combat the growing Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)–sponsored insurgency. As a result of his on-the-scene assessments, General Krulak, who had studied Mao Zedong’s theory of guerrilla warfare, soon realized the importance of winning the loyalty of the people, why it was important, and how to do it. Protection of the Vietnamese people, Krulak realized, was the most important ingredient for the success of any counterinsurgency campaign.

Protecting the rural population from attacks, Krulak reasoned, would result in the people rewarding the RVN government with their trust, a lesson learned from the British experience in Malaysia during the 1950s and 1960s, where they had defeated a similar Communist insurgency using the theories developed by Sir Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, who had led the British-Malaysian effort. In addition to



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

LtGen Victor H. Krulak.

safeguarding the people, Thompson reasoned that the government, in order to retain their support, would also initiate rural-development projects, provide humanitarian assistance, and improve the overall quality of life in the rural districts of the country’s rice-growing heartland.

Krulak believed that Thompson’s theory of winning the hearts and minds of the people could be applied throughout all of the Republic of Vietnam and that this would be the key to success of any combined American-RVN counterinsurgency campaign, rather than the more conventional



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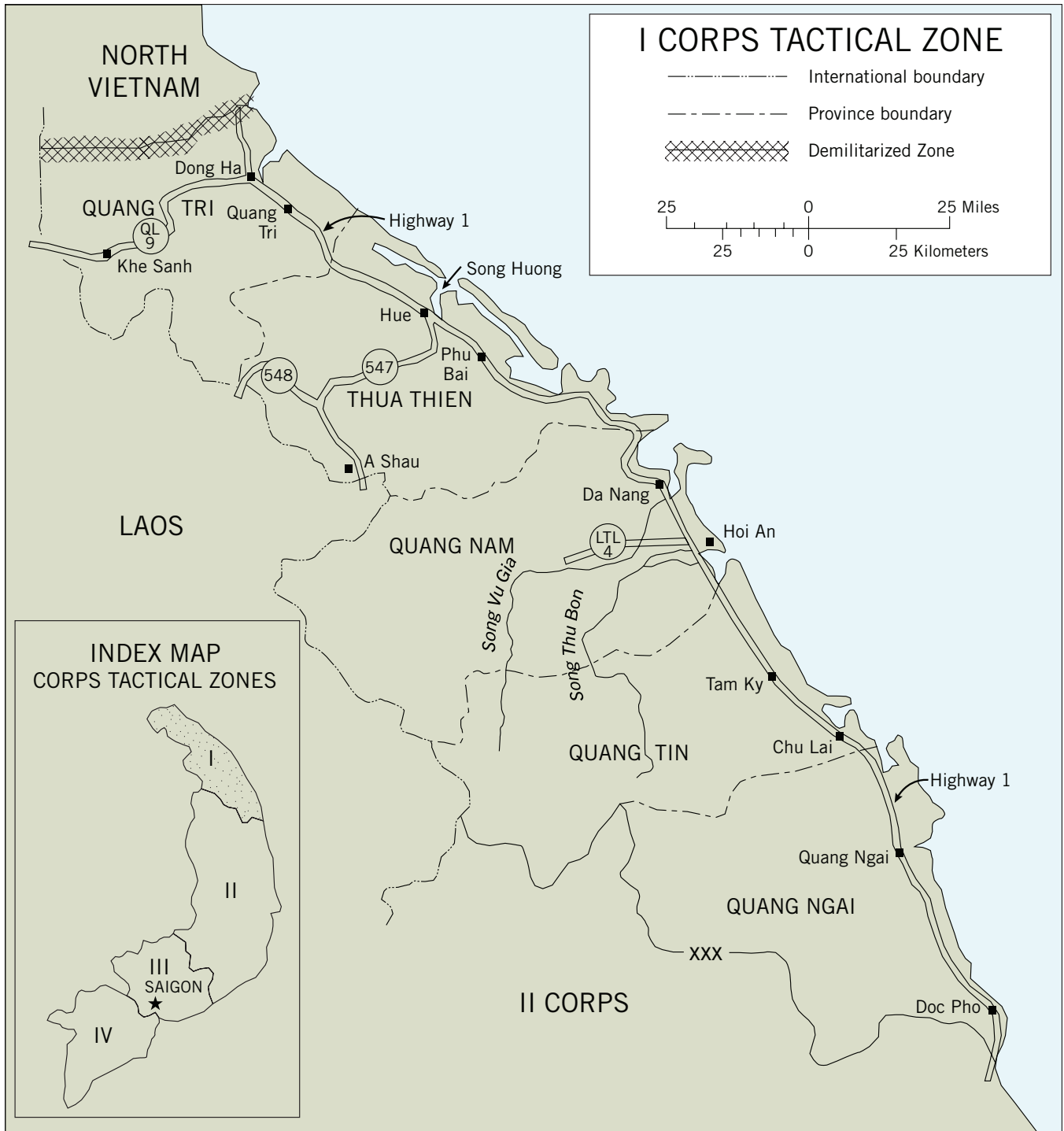
solution being recommended by the U.S. Army. The Army's leadership, influenced by General Paul D. Harkins, the commander of the U.S. Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (USMACV), sought to impose a mirror image of the U.S. Army on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), which would be trained, organized, and equipped to conduct large-scale, force-on-force operations against the Viet Cong, a strategy that preferred the heavy application of firepower as the path to victory rather than winning through obtaining the popular support of the Vietnamese people.

After his experience as the Joint Staff's special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities, Krulak was promoted to lieutenant general and assumed command of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) in 1964. To prepare the Marines under his command for what he saw as the most likely scenario they would encounter in the coming months, he instituted a large-scale amphibious training exercise, Silver Lance, that would take place on Camp Pendleton, San Diego, California, in February 1965, which featured counterinsurgency-themed events as part of the overall exercise design. Silver Lance's timing was fortuitous, as one-third of the 50,000 Marines participating in the exercise were already at sea off the California coast when President Lyndon B. Johnson made the decision to deploy U.S. forces to the Republic of Vietnam in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The 3d Battalion, 9th Regiment, 3d Marine Division, based in Okinawa, Japan, was the first ground combat unit of FMFPac to be committed ashore in the Republic of Vietnam, conducting an administrative landing at Da Nang on 8 March 1965 in what became designated as the I Corps Tactical Zone.\* The Marines in the landing force initially expected that they would be conducting counterinsurgency operations in a manner similar to what they had expected to encounter during Silver Lance. After all, they had been trained to fight both large and small bands of guerrillas, to support the training of local RVN forces, and to handle situations arising in their encounters with the local civilian populace. The Marines also had expected that they would have to deal with U.S. diplomatic representatives and the challenges posed by a bordering neutral country, Laos, used as sanctuary by the DRV.

Instead, the battalion was restricted to providing local security for the Da Nang Air Base against enemy attack and nothing more. The Marines were neither initially allowed to engage in day-to-day operations against the Viet Cong outside the base perimeter, nor were they allowed to interact directly with the local population. However, in recognition of the growing threat posed by the enemy, the force was enlarged on 7 May 1965 to include the entire 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade of more than 5,000 men but still

\*South Vietnam—the RVN—was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones referred to as I Corps, II Corps, III Corps, and IV Corps.



Adapted by History Division

remained confined to the Da Nang Air Base. The new commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), Army General William C. Westmoreland, defined its mission as the “protection of the Da Nang airbase against enemy attack.”

General Krulak, to his chagrin, noted that Marines were constructing fighting positions around the base, separated from the people they were supposed to protect, and engaged primarily in manning static defenses. Despite the presence of this large American force, the Viet Cong

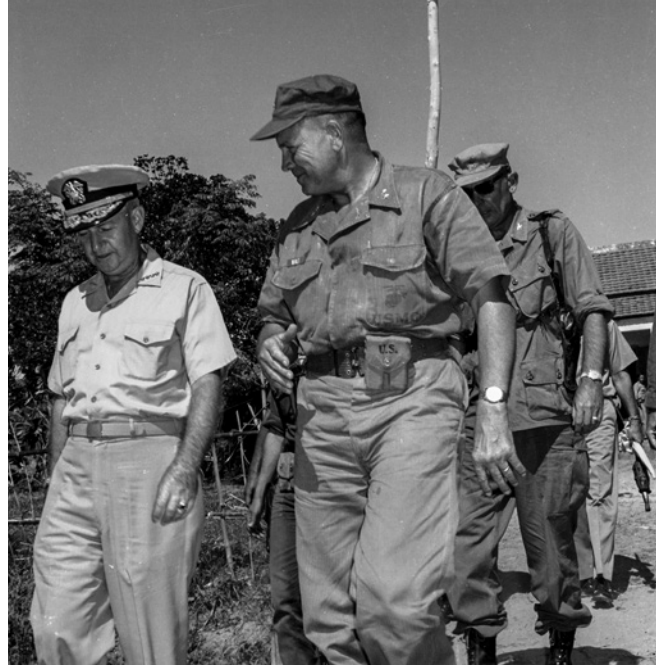


Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188991

Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Wallace M. Greene Jr., discusses military tactics used in Vietnam with Army Gen William C. Westmoreland, commanding general of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Listening to the discussion is LtGen Robert E. Cushman Jr., commanding general, III Marine Amphibious Force.

increased its operational tempo, forcing its way into local villages and intimidating the population to support its activities. In response, by the middle of May 1965, Marines were allowed to start patrolling within the 2,072-square kilometers enclave to address this growing threat and began to regularly encounter the Vietnamese people. A second airstrip at Chu Lai, 80 kilometers south of Da Nang, was constructed as a 259-square kilometer coastal enclave for the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, and a third Marine enclave of 155-square kilometers was established 80 kilometers north of Da Nang at Phu Bai, a village 8 kilometers southeast of the provincial capital of Hue.

Overall, the region comprising the tactical area of responsibility of 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, absorbed by III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) on 5 May, had expanded enormously, forming an almost continuous 2,590-square kilometer coastal enclave with a civilian population of more than 150,000 Vietnamese. Any future



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185804

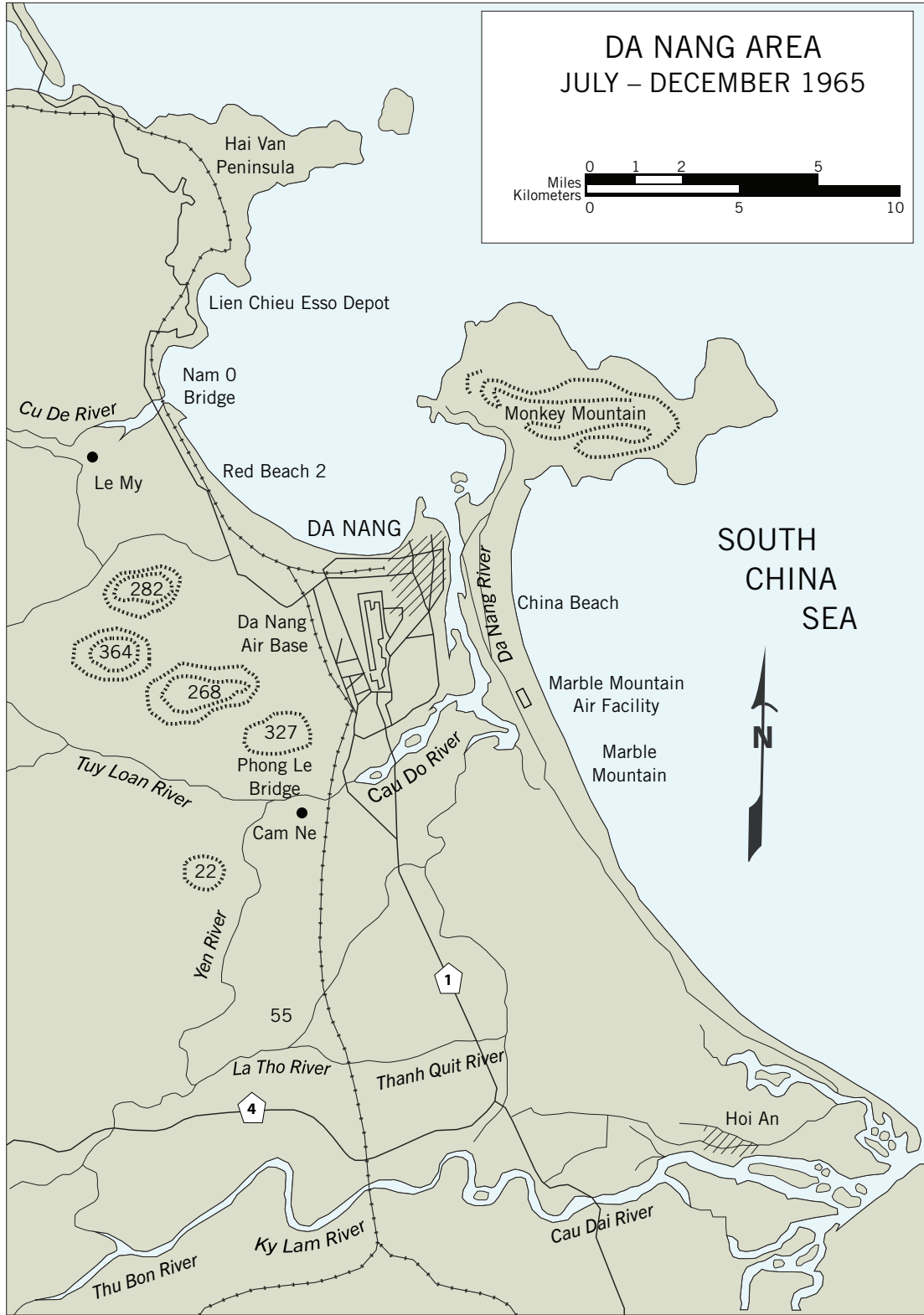
Adm Ulysses Simpson Grant Sharp Jr., commander in chief, Pacific, and MajGen Lewis W. Walt leave the village chief house at Le My. Le My is a village that the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, is protecting near Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam.

operations planned and conducted in the I Corps tactical area by the III MAF's new commander, Major General Lewis William Walt, would have to account for this large civilian presence as well as how to prevent their exploitation by the Viet Cong.

### The Village of Le My

The first real test of the Marine Corps' counterinsurgency capability envisioned by Lieutenant General Krulak came in May 1965. To protect Da Nang from a guerrilla attack from the northwest, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade was directed to extend its area of operations to encompass the valley of the Cu De River. The Marines quickly discovered that the village of Le My, located only 13 kilometers northwest of the main airstrip at Da Nang, was truly "enemy country." This village, consisting of about 700 Vietnamese living in 8 hamlets, supported 2 Viet Cong platoons of about 40 men each.





Adapted by History Division



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A1858044

LtCol David A. Clement (seated left) discusses a military action with Republic of Vietnam Army officers. The action enabled some 400 villagers to move to friendly villages away from Viet Cong terrorism. The colonel commanded the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.

Shortly after their arrival, the enemy had constructed an extensive cave and tunnel system that allowed them to evade detection by both American and RVN troops. Moving in and out at will, the Viet Cong extorted rice and money from the local population and forced the youth to join the insurgency by threatening parents and village officials with death if they did not comply. The Viet Cong rapidly consolidated control of the area, its resources, and the people, posing a growing threat to traffic along the coastal highway between Da Nang and Hue, located one mile to the east of Le My.

After receiving several reports of sniper fire coming from the village, the commander of 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, Lieutenant Colonel David A. Clement, decided to clean the guerrillas out of Le My, which happened to be located

in his battalion's tactical area of operations. He directed two companies from the 2d Battalion to sweep the area on 11 May, but his Marines soon found themselves enmeshed in the middle of an enemy stronghold. The Viet Cong reacted swiftly with small-arms fire from ambush positions and employed booby traps to kill and harass the assault by Marines, later reinforced with the Popular Forces, to provide security and prevent the Viet Cong from retaking the village. Overcoming their initial surprise, the Marines quickly cleared the enemy from the village after killing or capturing any Viet Cong who stood and fought.

Instead of moving on as they had in previous operations, Clements decided to hold the village with its surrounding hamlets after clearing them, a process that had become known as *pacification*. After constructing defensive positions, the Marines went to work filling in punji (poisonous stick) traps, dismantling Viet Cong bunkers, and otherwise demonstrating to the villagers that they were there to stay, at least for a little while. The local inhabitants reacted positively to this new development and slowly regained their sense of security and well-being after 50 suspected Viet Cong were rounded up and sent to Da Nang for further interrogation.

The Marines ministered to the health of the village by conducting Medical Civic Action Programs (MEDCAP) and vaccinating farm animals. The battalion's civil affairs officer helped to support the villagers with construction projects, while the line companies spent time training the Popular Forces, or local militia, repairing their weapons and helping them construct strong defensive positions around the village—all of which the Marines had practiced at Camp Pendleton during Exercise Silver Lance prior to sailing to Vietnam. With Le My secure, local officials returned to the town, and in cooperation with the Marines, began to rebuild it after suffering from several years of neglect by the central government in Saigon.

### Lessons Learned from Le My

The Le My experience illustrated that the pacification process, if it were to succeed, demanded the combined efforts of the Americans and the RVN. Reflecting on these lessons, the senior Marine commander of I Corps, now Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, ordered the creation of a Joint Coordinating Council that was composed of key leaders involved



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, A184867

Adm Ulysses Simpson Grant Sharp Jr., commander in chief, Pacific, talks with LtCol Clement, commanding officer, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, about the protection of the village of Le My, which is 16 kilometers northwest of Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam.

in the pacification process, including both American and RVN military and civilian leaders. Predating what would become known 40 years later as the “clear, hold, build strategy” (clear the village of insurgents, hold the village against the enemy, and build the infrastructure and relations with the Vietnamese), Lieutenant General Walt recognized that it was no longer enough to merely rid rural villages of the Viet Cong. Any successful pacification program would also have to include the long-term presence of local government forces and civilian leaders, with the capacity to connect the people to the central government with services and building projects that would improve their quality of life.

General Krulak visited Le My in May 1965, where he was warmly greeted by the district and village chiefs. As Krulak

later related, neither of the two local Vietnamese leaders spoke English, but the district chief did speak French, as did General Krulak. The district chief told him that the program only had any meaning if the Americans were going to stay. He then asked the general point-blank, “Are you going to stay?” General Krulak responded that the Marines currently defending the village would leave, but other Marine units would not be far away and that the Popular Forces would always be there to defend them. The district chief, unsatisfied, replied that Krulak’s answer was not what he wanted to hear, but it was better than nothing.

True to Krulak’s promise, during the next five years, Le My was kept out of Viet Cong control. Reflecting shortly afterward, the general stated that this painstaking, exhausting,



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, A184953

Kim Le Bat, Thuy Phy village chief, points out one of the 11 surveyed artillery concentration areas to MajGen Lewis W. Walt, commander of the III MAF. LtCol William W. Taylor (left) commanding the 3d Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, and assistant village chief Vang help explain the area and purpose of the surveyed fields of fire.

and sometimes bloody process of bringing peace, prosperity, and health to a gradually expanding safe area was something akin to a spreading inkblot, a formula for success that could be replicated elsewhere if the same process was followed. The inkblot idea was soon embraced by two retired U.S. Army generals, Maxwell D. Taylor and James M. Gavin, who were staunch advocates, but General Westmoreland did not share the sentiment.

According to reliable sources, Westmoreland told Krulak that while the inkblot idea was effective, U.S. and RVN forces simply did not have time for these actions due to the urgent need to stop the encroaching Communist forces. Undaunted, General Krulak responded: “We don’t have time to do it any other way” and stated further that if the rural Vietnamese

population were left to the enemy, successful large-scale operations in other locations would be meaningless and would eventually result in the United States and the Republic of Vietnam losing the war. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara supported General Westmoreland’s position. Although McNamara thought that Krulak’s idea was a good one, he, too, thought that it would not work quickly enough. Thus, any pacification-focused combined action program, if there were to be one, would be strictly a Marine Corps effort.

As the war continued, General Westmoreland became increasingly critical of the Marine Corps’ pacification effort, believing the Marines “should have been trying to find the enemy’s main forces and bring them to battle” instead of diverting troops to the extremely slow process of clearing,



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

A small Vietnamese girl happily accepts a package of new clothing given to her by a village elder and 1stLt Gary D. Andersen, 25, of Seattle, WA. 1stLt Andersen and a Vietnamese coworker delivered the clothing to villagers of Khan Son hamlet after students of Meridian Elementary School, Seattle, sent them to be used in the 11th Motor Transport Battalion civil affairs program. Andersen is the civil affairs officer for the Marine unit. His wife was a teacher at Meridian Elementary School.

holding, and building villages. In response, General Krulak argued that “[the Marine Corps’] efforts belonged where the people were, not where they weren’t.” According to him, the initial pacification effort was “sound in principle and sometimes effective in execution.” If the program failed in a particular village, he argued that it was usually the result of one of two circumstances—either ARVN forces were never enthusiastic about working among their own people and were not particularly good at it, or the Marines supporting the program were sometimes too eager to do too much too soon. Later, Westmoreland’s attitude toward the Combined Action Program would moderate somewhat, but during the first three years of the build-up in Vietnam, he would remain decidedly dubious about its prospects.

### **The Civic Action Program**

An integral part of the Marine Corps’ pacification campaign in I Corps was the Civic Action Program, which frequently

was carried out within the framework of the Combined Action Program, though in theory any element in III MAF could participate. They were not the same program, however, because each had different goals. The goal of the Civic Action Program was to enhance the lives of the Vietnamese people and give them a reason to support their government. The Combined Action Program, in contrast, was primarily focused on improving the security in rural areas and then performing civic actions as conditions warranted, with the Civic Action Program picking up the slack.

For the Civic Action Program to work, General Walt, the commanding general of the III MAF, wanted the Marines to listen to what the people wanted, offer them any material or advice they needed, and let the work be done by the Vietnamese people themselves. Marines were to emphasize that the RVN government was behind the program to ensure that it received the due credit for the various projects to foster loyalty among the rural population. Marines assigned to



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185358

Father Edwin V. Bobula, chaplain of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment, passes out soap to some of the 40 children at the Phu Thuong Orphanage near Da Nang. Father Bobula is responsible for procuring much of the aid given to these Vietnamese children.

the program were instructed to coordinate their efforts with those of the RVN government.

In practical terms, this meant that provincial, district, and village officials had to be involved in the program from beginning to end. Various U.S. civilian agencies, such as the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), supported the program as well and would provide needed supplies and materials, such as rice and concrete, upon a valid request from local government officials.

Civic Action projects included school additions, modifications, and renovations; concrete bases around water wells; and building materials from the Cooperative for American

Relief Everywhere (CARE) and USAID. Medical and dental doctors and corpsmen treated thousands of Vietnamese civilians by handing out bars of soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and water purification tablets. Army and Navy chaplains made frequent trips to all of the orphanages and medical clinics and performed religious services.

Civic Action, while often effective, did not address the problems of self-defense or intimidation by the Viet Cong. Many village chiefs and district chiefs were targeted by the Viet Cong for reprisals because of their cooperation with the ARVN and the Americans. Not only were the local officials often executed but so too were their families. Without



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185800

These three men, a Vietnamese police chief, an interpreter, and a Marine lieutenant, spell trouble for the Viet Cong. Both the police chief, left, and the Marine officer, right, have raised continuous havoc with the Viet Cong. Lt Paul R. Ek, from Oceanside, CA, gestures toward a suspected Viet Cong stronghold before elements of his unit make their strike.

a Marine presence in the villages and hamlets, local forces were not successful in denying sanctuary to the enemy forces.

### **Combined Action Program**

The Combined Action Program was a concept that brought together a squad of Marines and a platoon of the Popular Forces, who served as the RVN militia. The Popular Forces were at the very bottom of the ARVN military structure, as they were “poorly equipped, poorly trained, poorly led and they were paid half the pay of the [ARVN].” They did not always fight, they did not care, and they were notorious for their desertion rates. They were literally afraid of the dark

and were not willing to fight the Viet Cong at night. In a previous visit with Defense Secretary McNamara in 1962, both Krulak and McNamara stated that something had to be done about the pitiful weapons and training provided to the Popular Forces. Unfortunately, nothing was done between 1962 and 1965.

### **The Beginnings**

General Krulak stated, “It is hard to say just where the idea of Combined Action [Program] originated, but Captains Paul [R.] Ek and John [J.] Mullen, Jr., and Major Cullen [B.] Zimmerman are prominently mentioned as the

architects and General Walt, the overall Marine commander, lent his energetic support.” General Walt described the Combined Action Program as “basically simple: help the local defense forces at the hamlet level with training, equipment, support, and the actual presence of American fighting men.” Walt further explained that he could unequivocally state that the original suggestion was made by Captain John Mullen Jr., the first plans by Major Cullen Zimmerman, with the approval of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines’ Lieutenant Colonel William Taylor. The first Combined Action Platoon (CAP) was commanded by then First Lieutenant Paul Ek and commenced operations on 3 August 1965. The results were beyond the most optimistic hopes of Marine leaders.

Lieutenant Colonel William Raymond Corson, later assigned as commander of all Combined Action units, also gave credit to Lieutenant Ek for integrating Popular Force soldiers into his platoon as Marines did during the Banana Wars in Latin America and in American Samoa during World War II. Many of the senior Marine Corps officers were familiar with the 1935 revision of the Marine Corps Schools’ *Small Wars Operations*; it was renamed the *Small Wars Manual* and recounted the Marine counterinsurgency tactics employed during the Banana Wars.

Lieutenant Ek split his platoons into three squads, reinforced by Popular Force soldiers, and placed one squad in each of the three hamlets north of the Phu Bai airfield. Lieutenant Ek and the squads of Marines trained the Popular Forces, took them on patrols, and treated them as soldiers and human beings. Ek opined that the results were gratifying as the Viet Cong were being denied sanctuary; they have to shoot their way into the village. These first CAPs dealt with the inhabitants of the hamlets on a person-to-person basis, earning their trust and assistance in keeping the enemy out of the hamlets.

## **Fighting the Enemy and the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam**

Lieutenant Colonel Corson explained that both Generals Krulak and Walt were impressed with the possibilities of the venture and gave the Combined Action Program official sanction: “The response from Saigon [e.g., the Army/Joint General Staff] was summed up in the comment, ‘If you want to play around with such foolishness, you’ll have to eat the

personnel spaces out of your hide.’” No additional Marines were provided, yet Marine commanders willingly assigned men to the program.

By the spring of 1966, there were 40 Combined Action Companies operating in I Corps, the northernmost of four tactical zones. At this point, the ARVN almost destroyed the program by pulling the Popular Forces from their Combined Action Companies to defend all the district headquarters and to serve as replacements for ARVN losses. The lightly armed Popular Force troops were no match for the Viet Cong, and many were slaughtered.

Approximately 40,000 Popular Force members deserted between January and May 1966. What saved the program was the Buddhist Uprising that threatened to topple Nguyen Cao Ky’s regime.\* Ky successfully put down the Buddhists and dismissed Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, the ARVN’s I Corps commander and Buddhist supporter, and replaced him with Lieutenant General Lam Quang Thi. General Lam knew he needed the support of the Marines in I Corps and General Walt “subtly indicated” to Lam that the war was better off by leaving the Popular Forces out of the ARVN war plans. General Lam took the hint, and by the end of 1966, the Combined Action units were restored.

In 1954, the United States government backed Ngo Dinh Diem to become the head of the new nation of the Republic of Vietnam. Diem showed favoritism to Catholics by appointing them to positions of power at all levels of government, and Catholics generally enjoyed advantages throughout the RVN society. Buddhists witnessed a growth of institutions in the RVN, both secular and religious, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They constituted a majority of the Vietnamese people, and they resented the preferential treatment given to the small Catholic minority. Although they did not take part directly, Buddhist opposition to the Saigon

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\*The Republic of Vietnam was a diverse society, comprising several different ethnic and religious groups. At its founding, power was concentrated in the hands of the Catholic minority, an ongoing source of conflict with the Buddhist majority. This tension was exacerbated by other minority groups and Communist efforts to disrupt and agitate the population. These tensions led eventually to the overthrow and assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. The junta that took over following Diem’s death were unable to quell the tensions and Buddhist unrest continued, spiking from March to June 1966 in the I Corps area of operations with the unsuccessful Buddhist Uprising.



regime was partly responsible for the 2 November 1963 coup that overthrew and killed Diem.

The activities of Lieutenant Colonel William Corson's 3d Tank Battalion in the Hoa Tho village complex on the northern bank of the Cau Do River provided an excellent example of a coordinated Civic Action Program. In December 1966, the battalion's Civic Action team sponsored a farmer's meeting in the hamlet of Phong Bac. The village chief of Hoa Tho and the hamlet chiefs participated in the event; more than 80 farmers attended. They discussed raising livestock and a representative from the U.S. Army's 29th Civil Affairs Company distributed seed to the farmers. After the meeting, the village chief used the occasion to tell the people of the hamlet about the Marines. He stressed that the Marines were guests of the RVN government and that they were only trying to help the Vietnamese people in the struggle for freedom and in the fight against Communism.

By the end of 1966, Marines achieved impressive results relating to the assistance of the Vietnamese people in southern Vietnam. Marine units entered local villages more than 25,000 times with the express purpose of conducting civic actions. U.S. Navy corpsmen and doctors attached to the Marines provided medical treatment to more than 1 million RVN civilians and trained more than 500 Popular Force corpsmen. They supported schools and orphanages, assisted in the resettlement of war victims, provided basic items such as food and soap, and generally made life a little easier for the Vietnamese people. Poor Vietnamese war widows with many children were given treadle sewing machines to offset the loss of income provided by their Vietnamese husbands who were killed in combat.

## Reorganization

The Marines continued to rebuild the Combined Action Companies using badly demoralized and frightened Popular Force troops. Slowly, unit proficiency improved, even as the Marines balanced the personnel needs of the demilitarized zone battles with Combined Action Companies. Generals Krulak and Walt persisted, as they knew the Combined Action Companies had to be able to survive on their own. By the end of January 1967, these units were "an effective auxiliary rear-area defense force, but had not assumed the main responsibility of the Other War—pacification."



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185759

Drenched from a recent downpour, two Marines check reports on enemy activity in the area. LCpl Thomas E. Reilly, right, from New Haven, CT, points out the report to his squad leader, Sgt David W. Sommers, from Humboldt, TN. The sergeant's squad is responsible for the protection of more than 2,200 civilians in the coastal village of Thuy Tan near the Gulf of Tonkin. Two of the Popular Forces, who fight with the squad against the Viet Cong, look on.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marine SSgt O. R. Barritt, noncommissioned officer in charge of civil affairs, 1st Military Police Battalion, Force Logistics Command, attempts to get up as a bull prepares to charge. SSgt Barritt was thrown by the bull while attempting to wrestle it to the ground, where it could be given a shot of penicillin by a Navy hospital corpsman. The bull, suffering from pneumonia, was one of many treated during a Cow-CAP (a MEDCAP by a hospital corpsman treating a cow) in the village of Hoa Tho near here.



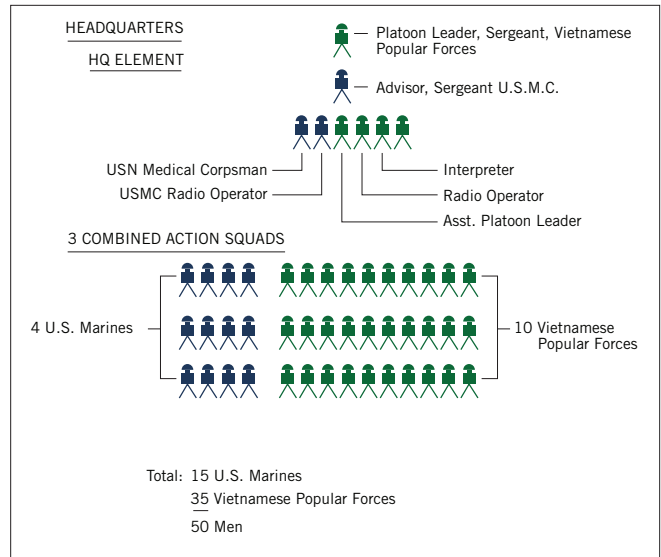
Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Reverend Lewis Myers of the Southern Baptist Foreign Missions in Da Nang smiles with his appreciation as he is presented five sewing machines by 1stLt Joseph B. Adcock, 25, from Philadelphia, MS, who is the Civil Affairs officer of Marine Air Control Group-18. The machines, donated by several churches in Meridian, Kosciusko, and Philadelphia, all in Mississippi, were used by Vietnamese refugees forced to flee their farms in the north.

In February 1967, Major General Herman J. Nickerson, commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, asked Lieutenant Colonel Corson to take over the Combined Action Program, with the backing of Generals Krulak and Walt. At this point, Marine commanders made the decision to use the Combined Action units to wage the “Other War” in the hamlet environment. Combined Action Companies became Combined Action Platoons. The company designation was dropped because the size and composition of the unit was not really a company and the acronym “CAC” (pronounced “cock”), as Corson stated, “has a rather odious connotation in the Vietnamese language.”

### Composition and Organization of a Combined Action Platoon

The Marine and Navy contribution to the Combined Action Platoon included a normal 14-man rifle squad augmented by an assistant squad leader and a U.S. Navy hospital corpsman. The RVN contribution is the standard—though rarely



Adapted by History Division

Table of organization for a “standard” Combined Action Platoon.

exact—Popular Forces platoon composed of three 10-man squads and a 5-man platoon headquarters for a total of 35 Popular Force soldiers. The Combined Action Platoon thus consisted of 50 U.S. and RVN personnel, at least on paper.

The Popular Forces’ platoon leader is shown side-by-side with the Marine advisor within the table of organization. However, the relationship is more complicated. The Popular Forces’ platoon leader had no rank, disciplinary authority, or redress to anyone above the district chief who appointed him. He was beholden to the hamlet and district chiefs for support and authority. The Marines and the Popular Forces also had a complex relationship. The Marine sergeant advisor had to use diplomacy and tact with the Popular Forces’ platoon leader and with the district chief to keep the Popular Forces in the hamlets to accomplish their missions.

Outside of combat, the Marine sergeant and the Popular Forces’ leader shared responsibility for the well-being of the entire platoon and operated on a basis of mutually agreed upon courses of action with respect to the training, administration, and allocation of “housekeeping” work. In combat, however, the Marine sergeant assumed complete command of the Combined Action Platoon and its subordinate elements. General Westmoreland ordered that U.S. commanders were prohibited from commanding RVN soldiers; this



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A188181

In 1966 in Vietnam, La Kim Bat village chief and Cpl John J. Shylo, 19, from Altoona, PA, assistant squad leader Combined Action Company 3, go over a new patrol route.

command was disregarded by the CAP sergeant by necessity to ensure survival of the CAP and to accomplish the mission. The Popular Forces' leaders did not take this as an infringement of their authority but as a role reversal—instead acting as the advisor to the Marine.

### **Missions of a Combined Action Platoon**

Because the CAP was essentially a Popular Forces' platoon, its missions were the same as the stated missions for all Popular Force platoons. These included destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility, protecting public security and maintaining law and order, protecting friendly infrastructure, protecting bases and communications axes within the villages and hamlets, organizing people's intelligence nets, participating in civic action, and conducting propaganda against the Viet Cong.

One of the sources of intelligence included the former Viet Minh. The Viet Minh were native soldiers instrumental in defeating the French during the Indochina wars from

1946 to 1954. Shortly after the French left in July 1954, there was a Geneva meeting that partitioned Vietnam into North and South, leaving the Republic of Vietnam regime fighting a Communist insurgency with U.S. aid. The Viet Minh separated into two camps: those who were Communists went to the north, and those who preferred democracy went south. Getting villagers to provide intelligence was essential to the security and well-being of all the indigenous people and the Marines.

By performing civic action projects, such as providing well water sanitation, first aid by the corpsman attached to the CAP unit, and by distributing school supplies donated by CAP relatives and friends in the United States, the Marines earned the trust and respect of the villagers, which made them more forthcoming about enemy movements. To accomplish the first mission, CAPs used a three-pronged approach. CAPs provided 24-hour military security, denying the Viet Cong access to the hamlet, essential recruits, and supplies by protecting the rice crops and by apprehending



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A800365

A daily patrol being organized by the Combined Action Program members for the Popular Forces.

Viet Cong sympathizers attempting to purchase supplies through the local markets. CAPs also performed more direct combat operations. Most of the villages and hamlets were devoid of any men from the ages of 15 to 60, as they were the essential recruits the Viet Cong needed to replace their casualties.

These three approaches effectively strangled the Viet Cong by denying them food, people, and sanctuary. The second, third, and fourth missions—protecting public security and maintaining law and order, protecting friendly infrastructure, and protecting bases and communications axes within the villages and hamlets—also were accomplished by providing relevant and credible security to the CAP's hamlet. The fifth mission, organizing people's intelligence nets, clearly reflected the unique capability of the CAP. Because the CAPs had a demonstrated capacity to fight and defeat the Viet Cong, as well as their pursuit of treating the hamlet population with respect and kindness, people in the hamlets and villages began to trust the CAP Marines and the Popular

Forces with more intelligence information without fear of reprisals. The sixth mission logically followed the first five. Civic action projects could not be performed until the hamlets were secured.

The exceptions to this were the Medical Civic Action Programs, which were carried out by the CAPs providing medical treatment. The people became accustomed to the Marines and provided necessary information concerning the hamlet. Some of the projects accomplished by the Marines, the Popular Forces, and the Vietnamese civilians working together included school construction, irrigation works, bridge and road repairs, animal husbandry, and other projects. Medical Civic Action Project personnel also taught personal hygiene and sanitation. Wells were dug using local materials, and with the assistance of other organizations—such as the USAID—materials such as water pumps or windmills were installed.

The CAP Marines were well chosen, at least initially. They were volunteers with at least four months of combat

experience in a combat line organization, normally an infantry company or battalion, and were required to have been highly recommended by their commanding officer for duty with a CAP. Nominees had to have a record of no disciplinary actions and, most importantly, no manifestation of xenophobia. The Marines' dedication to their work in the CAPs is exemplified by their willingness to serve for extended periods of time: Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson, commanding officer of all the Combined Action Groups, noted that "the extent of the Marines' belief in the value of what they were doing is attested to by the fact that approximately three out of every four CAP Marines extended their 13 month tours of duty in Vietnam one or more times."

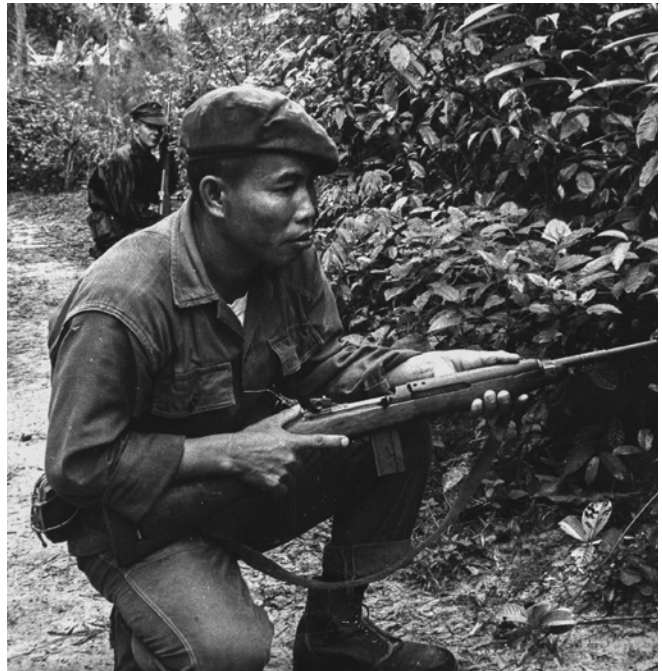
### **Components of the Combined Action Program**

#### **Combined Action Platoon School**

Combat units possessed the capability to carry out combined action missions, but they required special training to do so. CAP Marines, unlike Marines assigned to line companies in infantry battalions, had to be prepared to deal with cultural and political matters in addition to combat operations. The ability to get along well with the villagers was critical to the Combined Action Program's mission, but Marines would first need training and acculturation. For these reasons, a CAP School was set up at China Beach in Da Nang under the control of the 2d Combined Action Group (2d CAG).

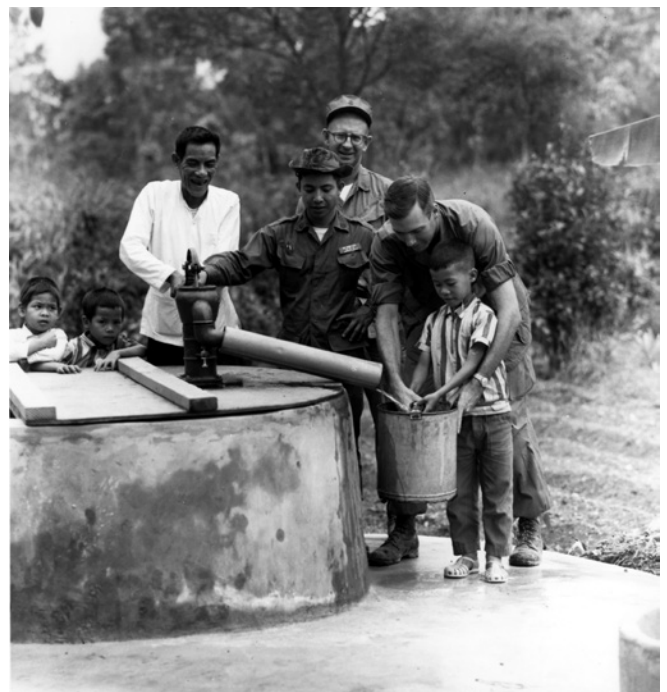
The training schedule called for two weeks of training. Once selected for Combined Action Program duty, all CAP Marines were required to attend the school prior to joining a unit. The CAP School concentrated on cultural training, Vietnamese language training, weapons instruction, and small-unit tactics. The weapons instruction was deemed very important, because most Vietnamese serving in the regional and Popular Forces were armed for the most part with obsolete weapons of World War II vintage, such as M1 carbines, Thompson submachine guns, and M1 Garand rifles. These were weapons that many of the Marines assigned to the Combined Action Program had never seen before.

A major contribution to understanding the culture and customs was provided by General Krulak himself. During 1965 and 1966, Krulak initiated the Personal Response Project. The success of pacification depended on the Marines in the regular organized units realizing that their mission was



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185710

U.S. Marines and Vietnamese Popular Force soldiers set up an ambush near a small village along the Song Nong River in the Hue-Phu Bai district of Vietnam. This was a newly formed Joint Action Company, composed of Marines and Vietnamese.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A371518

Lt Tarse, S-5/Civic Action 755 Engineer Battalion, getting water out of a newly constructed well, which was built with materials from 7th Engineer Battalion.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, A369478

1stLt George S. Dorgatt, from Chandler, AZ, conducts a class for members of X Combined Action Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, in Ky Khuong Hamlet near Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam. The lieutenant was the platoon commander of the combined Marine Corps-Popular Forces' platoon.

to protect the people, while the Vietnamese had to learn to overcome fear of the Americans. Generals Krulak and Walt knew how important attitudes were, and they knew they needed a means to determine the extent of the problem and then find a solution.

General Krulak discussed the program with the FMFPac chaplain, Navy Captain John H. Craven. In July 1966, Chaplain Craven assigned one of his new chaplains to be the FMFPac personal response officer, Navy Lieutenant Commander Richard A. McGonigal, who not only was a chaplain but also had a master's degree in sociology. In actuality, the Personal Response Project had its genesis in March 1965 when Chaplain Craven was part of Exercise Silver Lance. Silver Lance presupposed a situation in which Lancelot, an imaginary small, underdeveloped nation, became enmeshed in political upheaval sponsored by its northern neighbor, Merlin. The exercise was the creation of General Krulak, FMFPac commanding general. Chaplain Craven succeeded in urging General Krulak to assign Chaplain Robert L. Mole, then assigned to the staff of the troop exercise coordinator. Chaplain Mole began with "first-hand research in the religions, customs, and value systems of Southeast Asia."

Chaplain McGonigal arrived in Vietnam on 5 July 1966, and General Walt expressed his interest in the project and offered the support of his staff. After several surveys of more than 10 percent of Marines assigned to III MAF ending in June 1967, Chaplain McGonigal reached this conclusion:

The name of the game in Vietnam is relationships. When a Marine sees the ancient Vietnamese grandmother who smiles at him with her betel nut stained ebony teeth as a *full-fledged human being* [author's emphasis] he is ready to operate more effectively than we hoped. He becomes more careful in his use of firepower, more sensitive in dealing with refugees and a better trainer of his host counterparts.

On 17 November 1966, General Walt sent a personal message to General Westmoreland, detailing three incidents that occurred during the latter half of 1966. They were "shocking and tragic incidents" perpetrated by Marines on innocent civilians. General Walt noted that all the Marines involved in the incidents were charged and faced court-martial by the end of 1966. Walt's determination that these

incidents would not reoccur was evidenced by the actions he took. Most significantly, General Walt reiterated basic guidelines to his senior commanders to prevent any further outrages, stating that "recent events offer convincing evidence that the general attitude toward the Vietnamese people is manifestly poor and must be changed." Walt emphasized that personal attention to the responsibilities of leadership were needed to weed out those who were ineffective:

I cannot believe that our men fully understand and appreciate how disastrous their sometimes thoughtless actions can be to our efforts here. One man, through crime, or just plain wanton disregard of human dignity can undo in a few minutes the prolonged efforts of a reinforced battalion. We make propaganda for the enemy with every heedless act toward the Vietnamese as a people and as individuals. At the same time, we undo all the good that has been done. We must get this message across.

### Combined Action Program School Training Schedule

By 1969, the Combined Action Program School's CAP Course had evolved into a two-week program of instruction that emphasized the following subjects:

Vietnamese language training	13 hours
Personal response training	5 hours
Vietnamese history and politics	8 hours
Weapons	10 hours
Patrol and ambush techniques	7 hours
Map and compass use	5 hours
Support usage and requests	12 hours
Miscellaneous	4 hours

In addition to emphasizing personal response training, another area of importance was the Vietnamese language training,

for obvious reasons. There was language training available outside of the Combined Action Program School. Potential CAP squad leaders and Navy corpsmen were required to attend the III MAF Vietnamese Language School that was longer (four weeks) and more comprehensive. Some of the CAP Marines and Civic Action Program noncommissioned officers attended the four-week-long Vietnamese Language School in Okinawa, Japan.

Some Marines were sent for additional training at Staging Battalion, Camp Pendleton, California, where they had volunteered to take the Army Language Aptitude Test (later renamed the Defense Language Aptitude Battery) for possible assignment to the West Coast-based Defense Language Institute, located at the Presidio of Monterey, California. Evidence reveals that Generals Krulak and Walt originated the idea of training 10 percent of all Marines, regardless of military occupational specialty, in the Vietnamese language prior to their assignment to Vietnam. Graduates of the 12-week intensive course, taught by former Vietnamese instructors, received a category “B” military occupational specialty of 9940, which indicated that they had successfully completed Vietnamese Language Training. A list of all Marines successfully awarded the 9940 designation was then circulated among I Corps commands to allow commanders to make informed decisions as to where these Marines should be assigned, whether with CAP units or infantry battalions.

Weapons and tactics was the last area of emphasis at the Combined Action Platoon School. Most of the Marines who entered the CAPs had already served in combat and knew techniques for performing patrols and ambushes. The school basically expanded on this knowledge by providing refresher training. What the CAP Marines did not have was working knowledge of the Popular Forces’ weapons, as they were a mélange of old and new, U.S. and foreign made. Additionally, the CAP squad worked independently; there were no platoon or company elements in close proximity. Officers and senior noncommissioned officers in regular units were responsible for land navigation and for calling in artillery or air support. The school tried to make up for this by teaching students how to navigate as well as where, when, and how to call in artillery support, air strikes, and reaction support.

The Combined Action Platoon School’s military portion concentrated on teaching independent small unit tactics. One observer of the program, Marine Colonel Phillip J. Ridderhof, believed that the effectiveness of the Combined Action Platoon School in this regard was debatable. In his mind, two weeks to cover all the topics needed for a CAP unit to be successful was just not enough. To be fair, the school did have an effect on the Marines’ implementation of the Combined Action Program but could have been improved upon if more time was made available for instruction. Leaders and personnel at the Combined Action company, group, and platoon levels also received training, but the short two-day classes placed emphasis mainly on the Combined Action Program’s place within the overall U.S.-RVN effort.

The program’s emphasis on tactical and weapons proficiency was well founded. CAPs were frequently targeted by the Viet Cong for elimination due to their ability to thwart the Communists’ plan to subvert the local population. One particularly deadly action took place on Easter Sunday, 26 March 1967, when a 16-man patrol from a CAP unit operating out of the village of Van Tuong was ambushed by 100 or more Viet Cong at 0930. In the short but sharp fight that followed, the patrol, consisting of nine Marines, six Popular Force militia members, and one Navy corpsman, suffered the loss of every member killed in action except one seriously wounded Marine and one Popular Forces member. Though two nearby rifle squads from 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, were immediately redirected to lend assistance and artillery was fired in support, the patrol was overrun.

### **Medical Civic Action Program**

One of the most successful and essential parts of the Combined Action Program was the Medical Civic Action Program, often referred to as MEDCAP. The same was true of the Marine Corps’ Civic Action Program that was providing medical care for Vietnamese civilians in rural areas that lacked trained medical personnel. In the Chu Lai area, the Marine Aircraft Group 12 (MAG-12) Civic Action Team worked with the local CAP units to identify child amputees. Marines made liaison with the Quaker Hospital in Quang Ngai some 35 kilometers south of Chu Lai that specialized in providing prostheses to amputees. The Civic Action Team



provided transportation for over 30 child amputees to and from the Quaker Hospital, enabling these children to resume a more normal childhood. As an indicator of the level of effort that this eventually involved, U.S. Navy doctors and hospital corpsmen, dentists, and dental technicians working with the Marines provided more than 4 million medical treatments to rural villagers and trained about 9,000 Vietnamese nationals in nursing-type skills. Marine helicopters and land vehicles evacuated more than 19,000 sick or injured civilians to both civilian and U.S. military treatment facilities.

Albert L. Murse Jr., a sailor from Huntington Beach, California, reported for duty to III MAF Headquarters in Da Nang in August 1969. Prior to reporting to Vietnam, Murse had graduated from Basic Hospital Corpsman School. He volunteered to “go to the green side,” meaning he would attend Field Medical Service School at Camp Del Mar, Camp Pendleton, to serve alongside Marines. Murse discovered that the school was divided into two parts: the first part focused on Marine ground combat training. He learned about weapons and qualified on the range with a rifle, learned how to read a map and use a compass, patrolled, carried out ambushes, and was taught how to clean his weapon. This portion of the course culminated in the infiltration course, which all students had to successfully complete.

The second part of the school focused exclusively on combat medicine. Here, Murse learned how to save lives in the field by treating traumatic injuries and how to make sure he used the terrain to his advantage as much as possible when treating someone in the field. When he successfully completed the course, Hospital Corpsman Third Class Murse was assigned a Navy Enlisted Classification, similar to a Marine military occupational specialty, of HM8404. He was then further assigned to the Fleet Marine Force as an FMF corpsman.

Murse had been in Vietnam for only two weeks when he was assigned to the staff of the Combined Action Platoon School. While assigned to the school, he worked in the III MAF dispensary. “That was a good thing for me because I was exposed to various illnesses the Vietnamese have,” Murse later related. During a postwar interview, Murse stated that

after completion of Combined Action Platoon School,  
I was assigned to Combined Action Platoon 4-3-4.  
I think it is fair to say that they (the other platoon

members) were skeptical of me. After all, I was new in country and did not have any combat experience. The Marines in CAP 4-3-4 were seasoned combat vets and most of them were short-timers.\*

Since CAP 4-3-4 had been without a corpsman for a month and because he was new in country, Murse felt that he had to prove himself. He slowly gained the trust of his other CAP members after accompanying them outside the village on a few ambushes in the surrounding area.

Because Murse needed to be able to communicate with the villagers, he was sent back to Da Nang for the four-week Vietnamese language class held at the Combined Action Platoon School compound. There, he learned the basic Vietnamese words he needed to treat the villagers and to converse with the local people. During his tour of duty, Murse treated approximately 300 people per month from various small hamlets numbering less than 100 people.

After returning to his new unit, Murse stated, “I was concerned. I mean, being left in a hamlet, day and night, with only 14 Marines was not what I expected. I thought I would be killed for sure. Needless to say, the first two weeks in country, I was scared to death.” Murse related that one day some Vietnamese actors dressed like North Vietnamese Army soldiers came in to put on a play for the villagers. No one told Murse they were actors, and he was confused and distressed as to why the North Vietnamese Army was allowed in the hamlet. Finally, his fellow CAP members told him they were only actors, and they all had a good laugh at Murse’s expense.

During his tour of duty, Murse spent the majority of his time working and living in the hamlets of An Phu and Thuong Trach. Though Marines rotated in and out of CAP 4-3-4 as they began or completed their tours of duty, four Marines stayed in the Combined Action Platoon during the entire time Murse was there, providing a degree of continuity to the Marines’ presence.

The chief corpsman at 4th Combined Action Group headquarters once told Murse to do his best to treat all medical problems the local inhabitants might have while living in

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\*All of the previous Combined Action Program designators were changed to unit numbers, identifiable by Combined Action Group, followed by Combined Action Company, followed by CAP. For example, Combined Action Platoon 4-1-1 would be 4th CAG, 1st CAC, 1st CAP.



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A187196

HM3 Ronald L. Williams, 1st Hospital Company, 1st MarDiv, is surrounded by his patients, who are children from the village of An Tan, Republic of Vietnam, as he treats a child's infected leg.

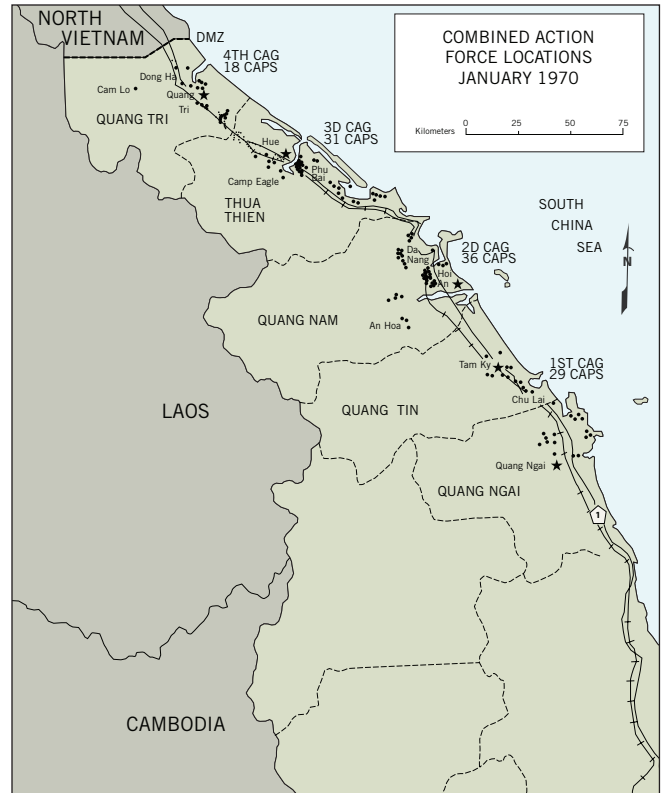
the village. If for any reason he could not treat the problem, such as a situation where urgent surgery was required, he could send villagers to 3d Medical Battalion for treatment, where U.S. Navy medical personnel would address the illness. On one occasion, Murse sent a Popular Forces' soldier to 3d Medical Battalion for possible appendicitis and another to be treated for venereal disease. Murse was provided instructions on the dosage of penicillin to be administered when the soldier suffering from venereal disease returned, who also brought along the prescribed antibiotic. After recovering, the Popular Forces' soldier showed his gratitude to Murse by presenting him with a hand-carved slingshot.

Every day, Murse and another Marine would walk around the hamlet. He would stop at each "hooch" (hut or simple dwelling) to treat anyone in need, either military or civilian. Most of the time, he dealt with typical problems, such as treatment of large boils, suturing lacerations, or treating people with a cold or the flu. Once, Murse treated a young woman with an open sore on her right breast but only after another young woman in the hamlet convinced her to seek treatment. It took several weeks for the sore to heal, but Murse made sure she was treated with penicillin to prevent a reinfection. Murse tried to educate the villagers about personal hygiene.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Sgt Lee Abrams, 25, 1st Platoon, Company B, 1st Military Police Battalion, passed out hygienic supplies such as soap, toothbrushes, and toothpaste during his daily tours of My Thi and My Da. Above, he demonstrates the correct brushing procedure to several youngsters.



Adapted by History Division

Sometimes, the situations were more urgent and required emergency treatment. And in certain instances, Murse had to face situations where he had to rely on common sense alone. In one case that occurred on 1 January 1970, a young woman was working in the rice paddy and struck an unexploded ordnance with her tool. She was struck with several pieces of shrapnel in her face, neck, and upper body. According to Murse,

We called for a MEDEVAC [Medical Evacuation] by helicopter and she was taken to 3d Medical Battalion. She returned to the hamlet several days later. In my opinion, that event really proved to the villagers that we were there to help them and that we cared about them. Up until then, the villagers were friendly but wary. Pretty soon, villagers were bringing in ordnance they found. They began showing us enemy bunkers and were giving us intelligence about the VC [Viet Cong]. I noticed a change in the way villagers accepted us. We were not strangers, intruding in their lives. We were part of their lives and we belonged to the hamlet.

I remember one elderly woman who lived by a path we would travel. Whenever she saw me, she would ask me what the time was in Vietnamese. I would tell her the time in Vietnamese and she would smile and laugh. She enjoyed that little game and to be truthful, so did I.

Albert Murse left the Combined Action Program in July 1970 when his unit was deactivated, and he was sent to work at 1st Medical Battalion in Da Nang to serve out the remainder of his time, rotating home in August 1970. Before his departure, Murse reported:

In my opinion, Combined Action Platoons were successful on a limited basis. Had the program been expanded and fully supported, it might have changed the outcome of that conflict. We were never fully staffed. At full strength, we had 11 men, sometimes as few as 9. Plus, it was very difficult to get civic action supplies for the villagers to rebuild structures that had been destroyed.

# Combined Action versus Civil Affairs

Despite sharing the same acronym, combined action and civil affairs are not the same. This misunderstanding, which arose during the Vietnam War, continues to this day, affecting how unit commanders perceive the role of Marine Corps Civil Affairs units and how to employ them on today's modern battlefield. This misperception arose because both organizations performed civic action in rural villages in the form of small-scale construction projects, medical and dental visits, and the provision of various types of materials, such as school supplies and farming utensils, to needy residents. Civic action was a key element of pacification, as seen by both the RVN and USMACV, and it was carried out by military and civilian agencies alike. However, the primary mission of the Combined Action Program was security, while the mission of the civil affairs staff elements, such as the division, regimental, or battalion G5 staff, were to serve as the primary interface between the military organization controlling the ground and the civilian population that lived there.

Normally, the Marine Amphibious Corps or Marine Division G5 was responsible for the overall supervision of the Civic Action Program within their tactical area of responsibility, including monitoring the requisition and distribution of various types of civic action supplies and materials. The Marine Amphibious Corps and Marine Division G5 staff elements did have Marines assigned whose primary role was to carry out some civic action programs as well as to ensure that supplies and materials were properly accounted for, but the majority had no civil affairs training or experience prior to their assignment to Vietnam. In fact, the Marine Corps had no standing civil affairs units at all, relying instead on the U.S. Army for assistance when missions called for a greater civil affairs capability. The Marine Corps did not create its own civil affairs unit until 1 February 1966, when the Marine Corps Reserve's 4th Civil Affairs Group was activated at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC. However, because the Marine Corps Reserve was not mobilized during Vietnam, the unit never deployed until well after the war was over. Today, the Marine Corps Reserve has four civil affairs groups, totaling more than 700 Marines, with their own military occupational specialties and schoolhouse.

## The Combined Action Groups

The early successes of the Combined Action Program in 1965 proved so encouraging that General Walt ordered their expansion in January of the following year. By the end of 1966, the number of CAPs had grown to 57, including 31 at Da Nang, 13 at Phu Bai, and the same number at Chu Lai. Now seen by Marine commanders as an integral part of the pacification program, additional administrative elements were created to handle the Combined Action Program's mushrooming growth. Initially, Combined Action Companies were created to serve as the headquarters element for several Combined Action Platoons, but as the number of Combined Action Companies proliferated, more administrative overhead was required.

The plan, by the time it had matured in 1970, called for the creation of Combined Action Groups or CAGs, which would see to the administrative and logistical needs of the

Combined Action Companies. A Combined Action Group was assigned to each of the four provinces in the I Corps tactical area of operations with one exception being the 4th CAG, which had both Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces, and was responsible for controlling between 18 and 36 Combined Action Platoons. The Combined Action Group, usually commanded by a lieutenant colonel or a major, normally reported to the 1st or 3d Marine Division assistant chief of staff for civil affairs, or G5 (redesignated since 2006 as the G9 staff section) but took tactical direction from the ground combat element who controlled the terrain. Note that the Combined Action Groups were not the same as Civil Affairs Groups, the first of which—the 4th Civil Affairs Group—was not activated until 1966. However, confusion between the two types of units continues to this day.

By 1970, Combined Action Groups had been established at four Marine enclaves: 1st CAG located in Chu Lai; 2d

# Sergeant John James Balanco

## Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Sergeant John James Balanco (MCSN: 2113184), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as Senior Advisor/Marine Squad Leader of Combined Action Platoon 0-1, Third Combined Action Group, THIRD Marine Amphibious Force, in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. On 21 January 1968 two combined action platoons and the Huong Hoa Division Headquarters in Quang Tri Province were suddenly assaulted by a numerically superior North Vietnamese Army force employing mortars, rockets and artillery. Disregarding his own safety, Sergeant Balanco fearlessly maneuvered



about the fire-swept terrain from one position to another directing the fire of his men. Repeatedly exposing himself to the hostile fire, he rapidly redistributed ammunition and ensured that each sector of the perimeter was effectively coordinated into the defense of the position. Continuing his determined efforts for thirty-six hours, he aggressively directed his men to withdraw. His heroic actions and bold leadership inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in his unit accounting for over forty enemy killed and numerous weapons captured. By his courage, aggressive fighting spirit and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of great personal danger, Sergeant Balanco upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

CAG located in Da Nang; 3d CAG located in Phu Bai; and 4th CAG located in Quang Tri Province.

On 25 October 1968, the commanding general of FMFPac, Lieutenant General Louis H. Wilson Jr., in accordance with *Marine Corps Order P5750.1A, Manual for Marine Corps Historical Program: Preparation of Command Chronologies*, directed that all Combined Action Groups and Combined Action Platoons submit command chronology reports on a monthly basis to the III MAF commanding general. General Wilson stipulated that the initial command chronology reports for 2d, 3d, and 4th CAGs should immediately be completed beginning with the month of October 1968.

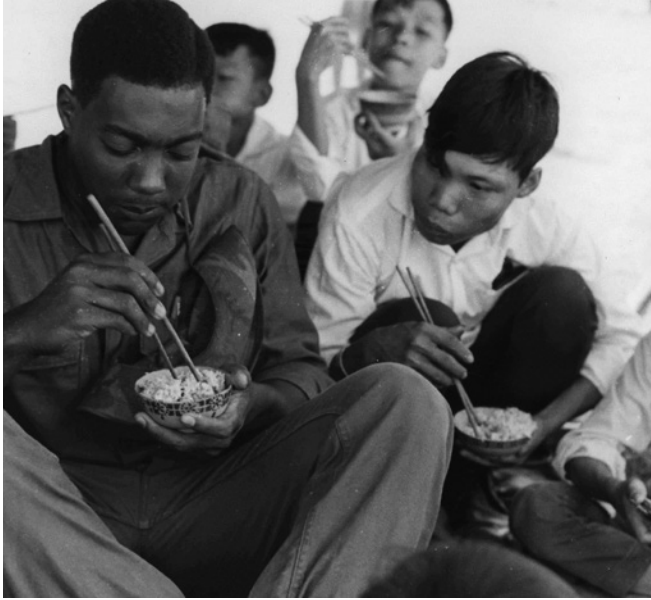
Prior to this time, Combined Action Group and Combined Action Platoon units submitted reports through the 1st Marine Division and 3d Marine Division to the commanding general, III Marine Amphibious Force, which would record any pertinent chronological information concerning the progress of the Combined Action Program occurring in their tactical area of responsibility. Under this reporting framework, however, much information was lost that would have proven useful during the following years, as commanders varied in their own assessments of the

program's effectiveness. Generals Wilson and Walt, recognizing the impact of this program, made the decision to place the Combined Action Group commanders directly responsible to the III MAF commanding general.

### 1st Combined Action Group, Chu Lai

By the end of the first six months of 1968, the 1st CAG consisted of 19 Combined Action Platoons in 18 positions plus a Mobile Training Team in Tam Ky. Mobile Training Team 1-1 was organized on 24 February 1968, and on 3 June 1968, the Civic Action Mobile Training Team School was opened and began training that day. The goal of the Mobile Training Team was to eventually train all the Popular Force members and youths in Quang Tin Province. By the end of June 1968, four Popular Force platoons had completed training and graduated.

Support for these Combined Action Platoons was provided by the U.S. Army's 198th Infantry Brigade (initially part of the Army Reserve's 99th Division), which provided reaction forces, fire support, and day-to-day logistical support from the Chu Lai Combat Base. The tactical area of responsibility for 1st CAG was from the village of Gia Tho in the



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marine PFC Bertrand Fletcher, 19, from Chicago, IL, of Marine CAG 1, enjoyed his lunch, Vietnamese style, with the aid of chopsticks provided by Vietnamese youngsters. Fletcher, as a member of CAP 1-1-4, provided security to a village north of the Marine Air Base Chu Lai.

north to the village of Phuoc Thien in the south, approximately 96 kilometers apart. Between 1 January and 30 June 1968, each Combined Action Platoon pursued an aggressive tactical posture, carrying out one daytime patrol or ambush, two night patrols or ambushes, and manning one listening post at a minimum during each 24-hour period.

The CAG 1 headquarters was colocated with the U.S. Army's 23d Infantry (or Americal) Division's headquarters at Chu Lai.\* The Combined Action Headquarters (Combined Action Company 1-1) was relocated to the Mobile Training Team 1-1 compound in Tam Ky, the Quang Tin Province headquarters. The bulk of air support, including logistical resupply, was supplied by Army Bell UH-1 Iroquois gunships, nicknamed "Huey." Fixed-wing support was requested and received through the nearest Army supporting infantry battalion.

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\*After World War II, the Americal Division was officially redesignated as the 23d Infantry Division. Americal refers to the contraction of "American, New Caledonian Division."

Subordinate units included Combined Action Companies 1-1 located in Tam Ky District, Quang Tin Province; CAC 1-2 located in Ly Tin District, Quang Tin Province; CAC 1-3 located in Binh Son District, Quang Ngai Province; and CAC 1-4 located in Son Tinh District, Quang Ngai Province. Mobile Training Team 1-1 was in Tam Ky District and Mobile Training Team 1-2 was in Binh Son District. Combined Action Platoons belonging to CAC 1-1 were located in the northern part of Tam Ky District, and Combined Action Platoons belonging to CAC 1-4 were located in the southern part of Son Tinh District.

In a report from the commanding officer of Combined Action Company 1-2 to the commanding officer of the 1st CAG, Marine Captain Ronald R. Welpott outlined some of the typical successes as well as problems his company encountered in its day-to-day operations. While Captain Welpott's report pertained to day-to-day operations in CAC 1-2, many of these same situations applied to all units throughout I Corps Tactical Zone. Captain Welpott's report described what the Combined Action Platoons represented to the Popular Forces and Vietnamese people. They saw the training of the Popular Forces and additional troops by the Combined Action Platoons as a means to provide village and hamlet security. But, more than that, the Combined Action Platoons brought artillery support, rapid helicopter medical evacuations, and coordination of forces with American soldiers. This substantially reduced the danger of accidental contact with American troops on patrol and being shot or mistaken as the enemy.

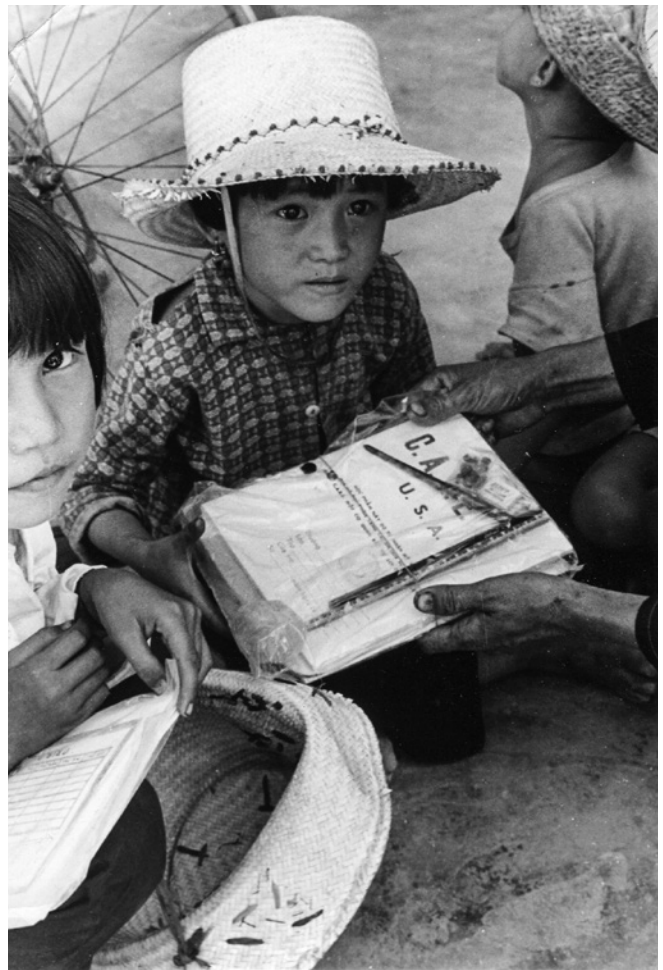
Captain Welpott stated that the CAP Marines also mitigated some of the damage and death inadvertently done to the Vietnamese people. According to Welpott, the U.S. presence "conveyed an attitude of security for the people and stability of the Government of Vietnam [the Republic of Vietnam]." He further acknowledged the problem of dealing with the Popular Forces and district chiefs in an advisory capacity—tasks that required patience and development of leadership qualities within the Popular Forces' leaders. He also stated the Combined Action officer's primary responsibility is coordination of supporting arms and operational activities with the proximate battalion in the area.

In essence, Welpott believed that the command relationship had to be "on a coordination and cooperation basis;

instead, the Combined Action Company Commander often finds himself thrust into a role of liaison representative, serving the interests of three parties—the individual Combined Action Platoons including the Popular Forces, the district chief and the Combined Action Group Commander.” The missions assigned to the Popular Forces were often in conflict with the missions of the nearest battalion in the area.

Another example Welpott gave to illustrate the situation he faced was that of the Quang Tin Province chief, who placed pressure on the Ly Tin District chief to conduct more operations. Because most of the areas in the district were either occupied or already pacified by Combined Action Platoons, the only alternative was to conduct operations in highly pacified areas or push out into the foothills where the Viet Cong were located. In the case of operating outside of the areas already pacified, any proposed mission would have to be approved by the U.S. Army or Marine infantry battalion that had responsibility for the tactical area of operations where the particular area was located. The Army was reluctant to relinquish control of certain sectors in their area, because it would conflict with their primary mission of preventing rocket attacks on Chu Lai. The Combined Action Company commander was then forced to become a mediator with all parties involved using whatever powers of persuasion and cooperation he possessed.

Captain Welpott continued by stating in his report that the mission of the Combined Action Program was threefold: to assist the Vietnamese, provide security and pacification measures to support the Popular Forces in carrying out their assigned missions, and to develop the Popular Force soldiers until they can carry out their mission unaided. To that end, Welpott believed that the so-called kill count was the yardstick measure of success of a Combined Action Platoon, along with the voluntary information funds expended, number of school kits and bar soap given away, and the number of *hoi chanhs* rallying to the government. Voluntary payments for information were made to Vietnamese for turning in ammunition or weapons, pointing out booby traps, or reporting enemy movements. Hoi chanhs were Viet Cong who took advantage of the *Chieu Hoi* program and turned themselves in to “rally” for the government. The Chieu Hoi program was an initiative of the RVN to encourage defection by the Viet Cong and their supporters to the side of



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Vietnamese children prepare to return to school with brand-new supplies given to them by the Marines of the Combined Action Platoon who live in their hamlet. The supplies were provided by the American charitable organization CARE.

the RVN government during the Vietnam War. *Chieu Hoi*, roughly translated, means “welcome with open arms.”

According to Welpott, very little consideration was given to different situations existing among districts:

The only true measure of a Combined Action Platoon/Company’s success is a comparison of the current situation using such indices as local hostility ratings, housing starts, and incidents of Viet Cong activity in the area, relative to the same measures some period of time ago. In addition, some thought should be given to our third mission and how we can carry out their missions unaided.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Sgt Johnnie Gillum, commander of Quebec 6, Combined Action Platoon, delivers a CARE self-help tool kit to a father of 12 in the village of Hoa Khanh. The kit, purchased through the Marine Corps Reserve Civic Action Fund, was distributed through CARE. Obtaining materials and tools was a large part of the Civic Action Program of Marine CAP units.

Throughout 1968, the CAP units of the 1st CAG in the Chu Lai tactical area of operations kept busy trying to protect the base from incoming rockets and mortars by continually pushing the enemy farther away. One way to bring a village back under the control of the RVN government was through the application of the aforementioned civil action projects.

Many of the civic action projects carried out in the Chu Lai area were done by the U.S. Army's 29th Civil Affairs Company, which was attached to the Americal Division, and the Marines of Marine Aircraft Groups 12 and 13 as well as the 9th Engineer Battalion. Marine Aircraft Group 12's

Civic Action officer, Major Richard F. Risner, coordinated all of the Marines' civic action projects with the Americal Division to minimize duplication of effort. Major Risner, an infantry officer by military occupational specialty, was also the ground defense officer for Subsector IV, Chu Lai Defense Command. Subsector IV encompassed the Marine airbase portion of Chu Lai Combat Base, as well as the area administered by the 1st CAG.

Major Risner was given daily intelligence briefs from the Marine Aircraft Group 12's intelligence staff officer, or G2, as well as from the Americal Division's G2. He coordinated all civic action projects with the local Combined Action Group commander and the Americal Division's G5 as well. This arrangement worked well, since the Combined Action Platoons were able to spend more time training the Popular Forces, and the Army civil affairs and Marine Civic Action units were able to concentrate on projects benefitting the villagers. During 1968, Marines from Combined Action Platoons and aviation units contributed significant amounts of school supplies, clothing for the orphanages, as well as health and comfort items for the Popular Forces.

Because the American units were contributing so much time and materials in the Chu Lai tactical area of responsibility and were achieving success, they soon became high-value targets to the enemy. One such attack came in April 1968 while Marines from Marine Aircraft Group 12 were traveling to the dedication of a new Buddhist temple in the village of Long Phu II. Marine Major Risner and Staff Sergeant Richard M. Petterson were ambushed by Viet Cong guerrillas, and they were lucky to make it back to base with minor injuries, an incident that was reported in the official U.S. armed forces newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*. Risner, who fought off the attackers with his .45 caliber service pistol, was later awarded the Silver Star in recognition of his actions.

In August 1968, Major Risner was captured by the Viet Cong while on a mission to Khuong Quang village. They had been observing his activities in the village for a number of days and knew him to be a direct threat to their ability to control the populace, something that they could not let stand. Effective civic action always attacks the root causes of the kind of instability that insurgencies feed off of, and Risner's successful efforts were doing just that; so the Viet Cong took steps to eliminate him, but once again, Risner was lucky.



After being held as a prisoner of war for three days, Risner endured terrible beatings before he managed to escape, killing one of his captors and returning back to base on his own.

### **The 2d Combined Action Group, Da Nang**

From October through November 1968, Headquarters, 2d CAG was located in District III Da Nang Special Sector, Quang Nam Province. Its eight Combined Action Companies were located in the following areas: CAC 2-1 in Hieu Duc District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-2 in Dai Loc District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-3 in Dien Ban District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-4 in Hieu Nhon District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-5 in Hoa Vang District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-7 in Hoa Vang District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-8 in Hoa Vang District, Quang Nam Province; CAC 2-9 in Duc Duc District, Quang Nam Province; and two Mobile Training Teams under direct command of the 2d CAG in Da Nang. The Mobile Training Teams were supplied by the company or group in charge and would be sent out to villages and hamlets that either had new or no CAP Marines, provide training, and move on to their next assignment.

Training played a large role in the mission of the Combined Action Group headquarters, a role emphasized by a stream of bulletins, training guidelines, and requirements that reinforced the need for Combined Action Program Marines to be trained before and during their deployment to their assigned villages. Usually these guidelines were promulgated and put into effect in a similar manner with the other three CAGs, illustrating that the Marine Corps was sincere about its intentions to win the war in the villages. This bulletin emphasized the importance of a training program for all CAP personnel, Marines, and Popular Forces. While this directive originated with the 2d CAG, the elements of training included applied to the Combined Action Platoon School in Da Nang and therefore became the de facto guideline for all Combined Action Groups, companies, and platoons throughout I Corps.

Periods of instruction in basic and specialized military subjects were regularly scheduled and were intended to enhance the effectiveness of all Combined Action Platoon personnel. The CAP squad leaders and CAC officers were made responsible for the majority of instruction for their



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

PFC Richard A. Parris (right), 19, from Dyer, IN, and HM3 David E. Boyd (center), 23, from Naeboth, Newfoundland, eat a meal of rice with a Vietnamese Popular Forces soldier in the village of Monge Hong, 34 kilometers southeast of Da Nang. Both CAP Marines are members of Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, and helped provide security for the villagers while they harvested their sugarcane and rice crop.

own personnel. To supplement this training, schools and centrally located training centers were established at the 2d CAG headquarters in Da Nang. Combined Action Company officers were required to submit their training plans in their monthly reports.

A sample of some of the more important subjects required for both Combined Action Platoon Marines and Popular Forces troops included patrolling, conducting ambushes, establishing listening posts, coordinating supporting arms, and calling for fire support missions. Additionally, they were also provided classes in requesting close air support, medical evacuation procedures, construction of field fortifications, conducting defensive operations and map reading, as well as a number of other infantry-related tasks necessary for carrying out operations in a high-threat environment. Even troop-leading procedures, including the drafting of five-paragraph

## Marine Scout Dogs in Support of the Combined Action Platoons

Marine Scout dogs were frequently employed as part of a Combined Action Platoon. Their ability to track Viet Cong or NVA troops made them a welcome asset for the thinly stretched CAPs, which needed every early warning asset they could get to stay one step ahead of the enemy. The 3d Combined Action Group command chronology for 1–30 June 1969 reported that “Scout Dogs from the 3rd Military Police Battalion were employed in the 3rd Combined Action Group Area Operations Center for the first time. Initially both K-9s took sick and were replaced shortly afterwards.” No other incidents were reported as having occurred during this period with the dog team. The next month’s report noted on 14 July that a dog handler reported movement to CAP 3-3-3, about five kilometers northeast of the Phu Thu District headquarters and was fired upon. The Combined Action Platoon swept the area at first light the following day and found blood trails. The next day on 15 July, CAP 3-3-3 and the scout dog picked up a scent about 40 meters from the area of the attack. The dog found a torn, bloody shirt and blood trails with deep footprints suggesting that one man carried another away from the scene. Nothing else developed.

Another typical instance of the usefulness of scout dogs occurred on 23 August 1969 when a so-called killer team from CAP 3-3-4, accompanied by a scout dog, saw two figures running into a bunker. The team immediately opened fire and threw a grenade into the bunker. Two Viet Cong emerged and one was taken prisoner by the team while the other one managed to escape by slipping past the Popular Forces unit providing security.

On 27 August 1969, the same Combined Action Platoon and scout dog located three spider holes, which were destroyed with explosives. On 25 December 1969, CAP 3-3-4’s scout dog discovered a booby-trapped M26 fragmentation grenade, which was destroyed before it could harm anyone. The unit’s command chronology from August 1969 through September of 1970 reported several instances when both scout dogs assigned to the 3d Combined Action Group undoubtedly saved American and Vietnamese military and civilian lives.

In 1969, Sergeant John J. Denecke Sr. served as a scout dog handler with his dog, Rex-5A31, in the 3d Combined Action Group. He wrote, “A Scout Dog Team was a big



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Cpl Thomas T. Archer, from Mobile, AL, and his scout dog, King, take point on a Mobile CAP 2-4-3 patrol through the hamlet of Thanh Taxy near Hoi An. King could smell out Viet Cong troops, their tunnels and caches, and even sense booby traps.

advantage to these [Combined Action Platoon] small units because of the dog’s ability to detect and search out the enemy much quicker than a human could. The handler was only as good as the dog and the most important asset was the handler’s ability to read his dog’s alert and act upon it.”

Although all scout dogs had similar training, no two dogs were the same and each might react differently, depending upon the situation. Denecke explained that it was vitally important for the handler to really know their dog and learn the meaning of every move the dog made, because this was the only way the dog could communicate with its handler:



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Cpl Ural Hunter carries his sentry dog, Fritz, during a rest break while on patrol with Combined Action Platoon 2-3-3 near Vieh Hao. Daily grooming for Fritz was an important job for Cpl Hunter.

The most important effect Rex had when working in the villages was the psychological one. Since the enemy worked in small numbers when trying to penetrate a village, they would avoid one where they thought a dog team was working, because they knew the dog's capabilities for early detection and also the dog's eagerness to attack if the handler thought it was needed. Never staying in one village for a long period of time was also an advantage because the enemy was never sure where you were and the dog worked best in strange areas. Most of our experiences with these small units were night ambushes and daytime search and destroy missions. Once Rex had his work collar on and we started moving out, he knew what to do. We usually walked about 20 meters out in front of the column so that if Rex did alert on anything, I could react and protect him because his job was done. The rest was up to the squad. Often we ended up ambushing the enemy who had intended to ambush us because of Rex's outstanding sense of smell and danger. A day does not go by in my life that I don't think of Rex and wish he could have come home with me. I'll never forget him as long as I live. He is the reason I am still living.

operations orders, were taught to the Marines and Vietnamese troops.\*

During this same reporting period, a number of units were temporarily attached at one time or another to 2d CAG to assist them in carrying out a variety of missions. Among these units were the detachment from Scout Dog Platoon, 3d Military Police Battalion; a detachment of Kit Carson scouts, 1st Marine Division G2; a detachment of Vietnamese interpreters and translators from III MAF; and a detachment from the Medical Section, III MAF Headquarters.

Though the Combined Action Platoons during the period noted above were characterized by heavy contact with the Viet Cong and DRV troops, morale among the Marines remained high. Often operating in remote areas in a far more austere environment than Marines serving in infantry battalions, they requested and received a far higher amount of overseas tour extensions in comparison (55 Marines extended for six months during the reporting period) for the period from 1 October to 31 December 1968.

To ensure that civic action was incorporated into the daily activities of the Combined Action Platoons, each Combined Action Company within the group was directed to assign a noncommissioned officer to work as the company's representative, who was charged with providing civic action support to the platoons in each company. This individual, who carried the awkward title of Combined Action Company Civic Action Program noncommissioned officer, reported directly to the commander of the Combined Action Company. His duties included coordinating, assisting, directing, and inspecting the civic action done by each of the Combined Action Platoons within the company. Each platoon was required to report their weekly civic action activities to headquarters, 2d CAG, on Friday of each week via the Combined Action Company Civic Action Program noncommissioned officer.

One of the duties that the Civic Action Program noncommissioned officer performed was requesting and delivering civic action commodities to each of the platoons. These commodities included a wide variety of donated items, items

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\*The five-paragraph order is a style of organizing information about a military situation for a unit in the field. The five paragraphs can be remembered with the acronym SMEAC: situation, mission, execution, administration/logistics, and command/signal.

## Kit Carson Scouts

Combined Action Platoons frequently worked with Kit Carson scouts, known as Hoi Chanh by the Vietnamese. Kit Carson scouts were former Viet Cong who had rallied to the RVN government under the Chieu Hoi Program (literally meaning “welcome with open arms”). Significant results were made using these scouts beginning in the spring of 1966. By October 1966, the program had been established on a permanent, official basis. General Robert C. Dickerson, commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, named them Kit Carson scouts because they were good soldier scouts in the tradition of the famed frontiersman, American Indian agent, and soldier.

From October to December 1966, III MAF credited Kit Carson scouts with the killing of 47 Viet Cong, the capture of 16 weapons, and the discovery of 18 mines and tunnels. These scouts turned out to be a valuable propaganda tool as the villagers believed in them more than their own government.

Another backer of the Kit Carson program was Marine Captain Stephen A. Luckey, an officer serving in the III MAF Psychological Warfare Section. He recommended the formal implantation of the program by all Marine forces fighting in Vietnam, not only because of their ability to serve as scouts and guides but for their considerable psychological warfare potential.

provided by USAID, and items purchased using funds allocated for that purpose and accounted for within each Combined Action Group’s budget. For example, for the period covering October to December 1968, the 2d CAG Civic Action Program noncommissioned officer distributed tons of food, clothing, soap, school kits, toothbrushes, farm implements, and other items to the Combined Action companies and platoons within the Combined Action Group’s area of operations. All of these items were badly needed and



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, A188083

PFC Earl T. Sessions, 19, from Greeham, SC, and a Vietnamese man lift a cement bag for a local construction site.

contributed substantially to the villagers’ increasingly positive view of the RVN government. Care had to be taken, of course, to attribute the credit to the Republic of Vietnam and not the Marines, who were merely facilitating the delivery of the goods.

In addition, the Marines of 2d CAG assisted in many building or repair projects for schools, churches, temples, pagodas, dispensaries, wells, dikes, dams, marketplaces, family dwellings, and roads. Thousands of hours were devoted to these projects, which usually involved Marines working side by side with the villagers and Popular Force soldiers to improve their homes. Medical Civic Action Programs also were an integral part of the civic action effort. Thousands of Vietnamese people were treated by Medical Civic Action Program personnel, including surgical and dental treatments carried out by Navy doctors. Corpsmen assigned to Combined Action Platoons supported this effort by recruiting and training local nurses and midwives.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

A corpsman with the Combined Action Platoon 2-5-3 bathes a group of Vietnamese children in the village to which he has been assigned.

Psychological operations, which were conducted throughout the Vietnam War, were often carried out in support of the Combined Action Program and its units. Psychological warfare or psychological operations (PSYOPs), as they were known, included leaflet drops by aircraft, armed propaganda teams, taped broadcasts from aircraft, and hand dissemination of leaflets and newspapers.

The Combined Action Group's intelligence-gathering effort, another crucial aspect of the Combined Action Program, had to be tightly coordinated due to the dispersed

nature of the Combined Action Platoons. The CAG also depended on collecting information from local Vietnamese government officials, U.S. forces, and Free World Forces, such as the Australians and South Koreans, to develop an accurate picture of the enemy's capabilities and intentions.

Despite the millions of dollars and thousands of intelligence personnel that USMACV threw at the intelligence-collection effort, the Combined Action Platoons remained the best source of accurate and timely information because of the close relationship they developed by working and living with the people. The Combined Action Platoons also worked closely with local interrogator/translator teams, counter-intelligence teams, and supporting units. In addition to the missions of the Combined Action Platoons as defined by Lieutenant Colonel Corson, commander of the Combined Action Program, 2d CAG was also assigned an additional mission, which was to support the Vietnamese cadres of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

The Revolutionary Development Cadre—an arm of the RVN government, who were responsible for educating the local villagers about their government—played a role within the RVN government's infrastructure that was similar to the Viet Cong's role within the DRV. These cadres, which remained under the control of the RVN government, had to perform any task as dictated by the local requirements and situation. To that end, the government created a handbook as a guide for all Revolutionary Development Cadres. The handbook was authorized by General Tran Thanh Phong, minister of rural development, which stated,

The objective of the Pacification and Development National Policy is to convert all villages and hamlets into secure and prosperous communities. The prerequisite for implementation of this national policy is the combination of efforts of the people, militarymen [*sic*], cadres including Revolutionary Development Cadres, and government personnel.

One of the fundamental concepts of the policy required that Revolutionary Development Cadres sacrifice themselves for their country and people, a concept that placed the national interests and benefits above that of individual, party, or religious interests. These Revolutionary Development Cadres

# Psychological Warfare

The Kit Carson program was only a part of an intensive psychological warfare campaign that began during the latter half of 1966. Captain Stephen A. Luckey and a staff noncommissioned officer were the two members of this section who developed the standard operating procedures for the Kit Carson program. On 4 August 1966, General Walt was assigned Colonel Robert R. Read as his psychological warfare officer. This section became a special staff section in September 1966 directly responsible to the III MAF chief of staff. The III MAF order establishing the section gave it four basic missions: reduce the combat efficiency of the Viet Cong; further the effort of the RVN government in establishing control; modify attitudes and behavior of special audiences; and obtain the assistance and cooperation of the South Vietnamese villagers.

General Walt emphasized the importance of the psychological warfare program to all of his III MAF subordinate commanders and urged all of them to begin implementation of this program within their commands. Since there were no psychological warfare billets in the tables of organization and no trained personnel to fill them, III MAF directed all subordinate commands to create their own psychological warfare sections. Walt also requested that Headquarters Marine Corps provide school-trained psychological warfare personnel in replacement drafts bound for Vietnam, which was done.

Colonel Read obtained operational control of the U.S. Army's 24th Psychological Operations Company, consisting of two detachments. One detachment was located in Da Nang while the other was in Quang Ngai. Read consolidated both detachments in Da Nang, creating a Psychological Warfare Operations Center in 1966. By the end of the year, III MAF had a coordinated program that included leaflets and broadcasts aimed at the enemy forces and the screening of Hoi Chanhs for assignment as Kit Carson scouts. Colonel Read stated that "the increase in former Viet Cong rallying to the Vietnamese Government [RVN] through the *Chieu Hoi* Program was in part due to the new emphasis on psychological warfare operation."

Civic Action Marines at Chu Lai provided security at night while the U.S. Army's Americal Division's supporting psychological operations unit showed films and played music

to entertain the villagers at the Chu Lai "New Life" hamlet.\* Most of the Vietnamese had never seen a motion picture before that moment. The films were designed to inform the people about what their government was doing to fight the Communist enemy in order to generate a patriotic feeling and government support among the people.

The same group of Civil Action Marines from Chu Lai also donated a black-and-white television to the An Tan village chief. Every afternoon and evening, the television was placed outside the village headquarters where many of the villagers could gather and watch programs broadcast in Vietnamese and English. The television and radio station Armed Forces Vietnam Network was located on Son Tra (or Monkey Mountain Air Force/Marine facility) near Da Nang and could broadcast news and entertainment across a wide swath of the coastline. One full hour was dedicated to broadcasting the news in Vietnamese and a Vietnamese soap opera. For most of the people, the local television and radio broadcasts were their only link to the government and the outside world. The only competition was a radio broadcast from Hanoi featuring Hanoi Hannah, the voice of the DRV.

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\*"New Life" hamlets were an RVN government program designed to safely house villagers who had been forced from their homes by the fighting. In addition to providing them decent housing with access to drinking water, the hamlets also incorporated security measures, clinical services, and other governmental outreach programs designed to earn the villagers' loyalty and cause them to switch their sympathy away from the Viet Cong.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

HM3 Jerry Keesling, from St. Peters, MO (left), and Marine Cpl E. J. Veech, from St. Louis, MO, receive information from a wounded RVN Popular Forces militiaman, now a farmer in Dong Nge hamlet, five kilometers west of Tam Ky. Keesling and Veech are members of the 12-man Mobile Training Team near the hamlet, which is responsible for training the Popular Forces and helping villagers with medical and civic organization.

were formed into platoon-size groups, armed for self-defense, and trained to help the people in determining self-administration, self-defense, self-sufficiency, and self-strengthening.

In the hierarchy of the Rural Development Cadres, the group leader was directly responsible to the district chief. While maintaining their own self-defense as well as that of their assigned village, the cadres were charged with explaining the government policy to the people, answering political questions, assisting village and hamlet officials in motivating the people, and consolidating and strengthening local government structures. In addition, they were responsible for identifying and contacting pro-Communist elements or Viet Cong cadres in their area to return to the national just

cause, which were the words used by defectors to accept the cause of the government of the RVN under the Chieu Hoi program.

The commander of 2d CAG instructed all Combined Action Platoons to support the Rural Development program cadres as much as possible, because the success of their activities reinforced the Marines' own program, though it also made them a prime target of the Viet Cong. Because the rural development teams were excellent sources of local intelligence, Combined Action Platoons would provide security and, when requested, supplement security elements of the rural development teams—providing material and/or technical assistance as available—and coordinate their activities



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Hoa Hia village chief registers residents of the new hamlet within his village.

with nearby Revolutionary Development Cadres. Should time and resources permit, the Marines also could assist in the training of the Revolutionary Development Cadres by incorporating them into classes being taught to the Popular Forces personnel assigned to the Combined Action Platoon.

The 2d CAG incorporated two different types of operational concepts in its daily activities: *static* and *mobile* operations. The static unit concept had the Combined Action Platoons operating from a fixed installation called the Combined Action Platoon compound. The compound was approximately 100 meters square and heavily fortified. These compounds generally contained living quarters for both Popular Force soldiers and Marines, fighting bunkers and

positions, ammunition bunkers, a command center, and a small sick bay.

The entire position was interlaced with sandbag-reinforced trench lines connecting all major facilities. Most had a 15–20 meter tower located within the perimeter used for observation and as a firing platform for machine guns. The entire compound was ringed by wire of all types, augmented by Claymore mines, trip flares, and booby traps. The Popular Forces and Marine elements defended the compound 24 hours a day. All patrols, ambushes, or other operations within their tactical area of operation were coordinated with the commander(s) in the same area to prevent friendly fire incidents and duplication of efforts. All of these activities had to be coordinated with adjacent Vietnamese units as well as local defense units, such as Advance Guard Youth and the rural development platoons or teams.

During hours of reduced visibility, two-thirds of Popular Force soldiers and Marines were outside the fixed compound operating within their tactical area of operation, where they conducted patrols or ambushes and occupied listening posts or manned checkpoints on key roads. The remaining one-third of the platoon guarded the compound. If the compound was attacked, the CAP commander would have a sizeable force outside the wired defenses, providing him the ability to maneuver against the attacking force.

Reinforcements were available at the Combined Action Company compound, which was generally located several kilometers away. In addition to the Combined Action Company supporting weapons, such as 60 or 81mm mortars, the Combined Action Platoon commander had a “veritable arsenal comparable to an infantry battalion’s fire support.” During the day, a few Popular Forces provided internal security and daylight patrols. The remaining soldiers spent part of the day with their families working their fields, working on civic action projects, or assisting with Medical Civic Action Programs. During formal training sessions, Popular Forces and Marines gathered to conduct the instruction.

Each Combined Action Platoon had its own unique rhythm, though they settled eventually into similar daily patterns of activity. Most of the time, days were uneventful, even routine. One former Combined Action Marine described a normal day:





Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

PFC John McClancy, from Maspeth, NY, checks the progress of the rabbit project installed in the hamlet of Lo Gaung by CAP 2-5-3 as a civic action project designed to bring a new food and income source to the local Vietnamese.

Each day, day after day, would consist of daytime watches, radio detail, day patrols, nighttime ambush sites and sometimes, killer teams. Sleep was something you got whenever you could. All of this was done with knowledge in the back of your mind that someone was trying to kill you. Becoming complacent about your daily routine was something you had to fight to prevent because when you are 18, 19 or 20 years old, you think you are bullet proof. The real reality of your situation becomes evident once again when you are looking at a wounded or dead United States Marine right in front of you. The real reality in Vietnam was, bullet proof you were not.

The mobile Combined Action Platoons had the same mission as the fixed platoons though they were not burdened by a fixed compound requiring security assets and maintenance. This additional mobility increased their capabilities to accomplish the mission. The mobile CAP Marines traveled light, with only one change of clothing and other necessities in their packs. They also carried an increased allotment of ammunition and were dependent on daily resupply from the Combined Action Company headquarters. All of their personal belongings were stored in a secure area of the Combined Action Company compound. Morale and effectiveness were enhanced by bringing in one or two individuals at a time periodically for showers, rest, and hot food.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marines, Popular Forces, and civilians together build a road from Hoa Vang to Tung Lam. Pvt Gary Hutchinson, from Easton, KS, Mobile CAP 2-5-3, helps water down the freshly poured concrete on a bridge near Tung Lam.

The mobile Combined Action Platoons operated from one site in daytime and a completely different site at night. The mobile concept called for the Combined Action Platoons to operate in several different hamlets within its tactical area of responsibility on a staggered basis, resulting in unpredictable patterns that made it difficult for the Viet Cong to anticipate their movements. The mobile Combined Action Platoon operated in one hamlet during the day, performing the same functions as a fixed platoon, making that selected daytime site their base of operations.

This base was usually composed of several different houses to enable the Combined Action Platoon commander to disperse his troops. This was also where both the Popular

Force troops and Marines rested, performed Medical Civic Action Programs, worked on civic action projects, and were resupplied by the Combined Action Company if required. They also conducted training, planned their nighttime operations, coordinated with adjacent units, and generally operated just like a fixed Combined Action Platoon would.

After dark, the mobile Combined Action Platoon would move to a predetermined night site that could be located on the opposite side of their area of operations. The important point, again, was to avoid establishing a pattern of movement. According to the unit's command chronology, this was paramount, stating that "whenever a Combined Action Platoon returned to the same general area to establish a day or



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185801

Marines and Popular Forces, loaded aboard a native sampan, move down a river in the RVN. The unit, part of the Joint Action Company, surprised and captured numerous Viet Cong with this amphibious maneuver.

night site, after 20 to 25 days have passed, different homes or buildings were selected for the CP [command post] or rest areas." After they arrived at the night site, the platoon would secure the area and conduct normal operations throughout the night. At first light, the Combined Action Platoon would move again to a preselected day site, possibly in a different hamlet, and the entire cycle would commence again.

The mobile Combined Action Platoons had many benefits. They were more effective, covering a larger area than a fixed platoon and kept the enemy off balance, because they would never know where the CAPs would appear next. The troops merged with the local population, allowing them to get closer to the people, learning their language and customs, and occasionally sharing their meals with them, quickly developing a mutual respect with the villagers. By coordinating closely with the Rural Development Cadres, regional forces, and youth groups, the Combined Action Platoons increased the level of security. Better intelligence resulted in fewer friendly fire accidents and incidents of booby traps and

attacks on Republic of Vietnam National Police Headquarters in Saigon. Additionally, the effectiveness of civic action projects was enhanced due to the close contact with more people over a larger area.

In a 25 August 1967 *Life* magazine article, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," journalist Don Moser profiled a typical day experienced by the Marines of Combined Action Platoon Echo Two or CAP E-2. CAP E-2 was located in the village of Hoa Hiep, about 19 kilometers north of Da Nang. It was composed of more than 20 Popular Force members and 19 Americans, making it larger than an average platoon. Of the 19 Americans, there were 15 infantrymen, 2 sentry dog handlers, 1 Marine noncommissioned officer in charge, and 1 Navy hospital corpsman.

Moser chronicled the growth of the program, noting that as of August 1967, Combined Action Platoons had been stationed in 75 villages in I Corps, with an additional 39 teams authorized but not yet activated or deployed. Positive publicity such as this reinforced the Marines' belief that the



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo, A193771

Marine Cpl Clair Dorius assists residents of Chieu Hoi Hamlet III in seating a new well. Although cement was provided by Force Logistics Command's supply battalion Marines, the ingenious process of constructing the well was exclusively Vietnamese. While one man inside digs beneath the concrete cylinders, water is poured around the outside and the earth is dug away. The weight of the structure sinks it into the mud hollow until another cylinder can be added.

program was becoming one of the key resources that could help win the war. As the program showed signs of promise, it was soon expanded throughout all the I Corps' area of operations.

Because of the Combined Action Platoons' success in combating the rural insurgency, the Viet Cong stepped up their attacks between January and August 1967, launching several all-out attacks on Combined Action Platoons that resulted in heavy casualties in four of the platoons. Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, commander of all CAP units in I Corps at one point, explained the make-up of the units and why they seemingly suffered such high losses. He stated that most of the platoons consisted of young Marines with a junior (and often inexperienced) staff sergeant in command, with no other senior enlisted or junior officers serving

at the platoon level. Despite their relative youth, most of the Marines assigned to the program did have combat experience, having already spent time in Vietnam.

Despite their losses, they were still eager to serve in the program, with more than 60 percent of them extending their tours of duty in Vietnam, either because they wanted to join the program or to extend their stay. They also were chosen for their attitudes toward the Vietnamese people and the Popular Forces they served with. "We've got no place for g—k-haters here," said Lieutenant Colonel Corson. According to Moser's report,

Each CAP is tasked with the objective of providing an armed and aggressive military presence in the village. Patrols are run and nightly ambushes set out to keep the Viet Cong out of the village, to keep them from collecting taxes, forcing young men to join them and from terrorizing the village. The CAP strives to help the villagers with civic action projects performed in the short time they have when not training the PFs [Popular Forces] or defending the village. Navy hospital corpsmen provide a moderate amount of medicine, advice and service. The Combined Action Platoon unit also provides guidance and materials (when available) and sometimes the labor, to help build schools and dig wells.

### **3d Combined Action Group, Phu Bai**

In the summer of 1965, the Marine Corps enclave at Phu Bai, whose mission was to protect the airfield, was under constant threat. Nightly mortar attacks were the norm. Marine infantry units were operating in the area, but their mission was to conduct search-and-destroy operations, not close-in airfield defense. Actual airfield security forces could not extend their protection beyond mortar range (1–2 kilometers) outside the base. As previously mentioned, the solution that Marine Captain Mullin, Major Zimmerman, and First Lieutenant Ek devised was to form the first Combined Action Company, which took place 3 August 1965 with First Lieutenant Ek as the commanding officer.

Lieutenant Ek had recently graduated from the Marine Corps' Vietnamese Language School in Okinawa, which made him ideally suited for the job. Among his many other tasks, he handpicked the first Marines assigned to his new

Combined Action Company. The first Combined Action Platoons belonging to what would later become the 3d CAG operated around Phu Bai during the rest of 1965; its first notable success was the suppression of the mortar attacks that had plagued the airfield for months.

Patterning their operations after some of the Viet Cong's own tactics, Lieutenant Ek set about countering Viet Cong efforts. His company soon gained an additional benefit once the CAP Marines under his command had earned the trust of the villagers, who soon began to provide the Marines with solid intelligence that made the Combined Action Program even more effective. The Combined Action Program was then implemented in the other Marine enclaves, including Chu Lai and Da Nang to the south and Quang Tri to the north.

The Viet Cong clearly understood that in order to control the villages and hamlets and gain new recruits to achieve their goal of overthrowing the RVN regime, they would have to eliminate this new threat, using so-called main force (standing units of company size or larger) units if necessary. In the past, their strategy had been to shift emphasis to the village infrastructure when main force Viet Cong units had suffered heavy losses in the uninhabited areas, and likewise strengthen main force units and move them into the rural areas when their village infrastructure was under heavy attack. The arrival of the Combined Action Platoons changed all of that, forcing the Viet Cong leadership to focus on their destruction or risk losing ground in their efforts to win over the local population to their cause.

In 1966, III MAF headquarters estimated that total Viet Cong strength in the I Corps tactical area of operations was approximately 30,000 men, counting only active combatants. Of these, 18,000 were Viet Cong cadre living in the villages and hamlets, with the remaining 12,000 serving in Viet Cong main force units. In the villages where the Viet Cong cadres held sway, Marines found a difficult environment, as local leaders passively resisted the Americans' efforts or actively supported the local Viet Cong by passing on information about the Combined Action Platoon's locations or intentions. According to one leader in the Combined Action Program, "The village infrastructure was a potent enemy of the Marines in Vietnam." At the village level, the Viet Cong infrastructure was set up as a political organization that

actually competed with the government that was backed up by armed guerrillas that controlled and taxed the population.

The People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) was the political arm of the Viet Cong and its goal was to control the village and village committee. In areas under Communist control, the village committee was normally chosen from the district level of the Viet Cong infrastructure. Local Viet Cong forces, usually of platoon size, were normally sufficient to enforce the PRP's hold on the local populace, either by intimidation or murder.

Viet Cong main force units would be brought into the area only if there was a threat too great for the local Viet Cong to handle or if they were assigned to a given area to draw their food and support. Staying too long in the same village was to be avoided if possible, because the presence of main force units would quickly draw the attention of U.S. forces, who attacked with overwhelming firepower until the Viet Cong had been driven from the area. In contrast, the local Viet Cong infrastructure was the target of the Marine CAP units.

The village committee representatives acted as the heads of the various Communist liberation associations that further organized the rural population. There were associations that drew these people to them because they worked with each of their problems. There were associations for farmers, women, students, and skilled workers. These associations were further broken down into the classic Communist cells. The Viet Cong cells were the lowest level of organization.

Each cell contained three people who comprised one operating unit. Although secrecy was attempted, most members of a cell knew who the members of other cells were, especially in small villages. The backbone of the cadres was a sort of secret police force that made sure all the villagers felt that the Viet Cong knew everything. Surveillance and intelligence were reinforced with terror and violence. Villagers cooperating with the Viet Cong protected themselves from retaliation or punitive measures. Most villagers did what they felt they had to do to survive and no more.

With the Viet Cong maintaining tight control of the people through threats of violence, the CAP Marines' foremost task was to remove the threat to their own security before they could protect the villagers. To do this, they first had to gather intelligence about the Viet Cong, which



Defense Department (Marine Corps) A185707

Cpl Earl J. Suter, from Lancaster, PA, 1st Fireteam Leader, and a Popular Forces soldier work on the construction of a bamboo barracks for the 1st Squad of the Joint Action Company, at the village of Thuy Luong, three kilometers south of Phu Bai, Vietnam.

meant that they had to gain the villagers' trust. One way to do this was to demonstrate that, once they had arrived in the village, they were there to stay. Once they had gained their trust, which could take weeks, cooperation with the villagers became the key to rooting out the Communist infrastructure and eliminating the enemy.

As the Combined Action Program expanded beyond Phu Bai and throughout I Corps, by July 1967, control of the program was undertaken by III MAF Headquarters, with a separate chain of command set up to administer it. For the Marines, this meant that the program came under the control of the assistant chief of staff of the Combined Action Program, who reported to the deputy commanding general of III Marine Amphibious Force. Later, the program was renamed the Combined Action Force and given a commander equivalent to a regimental commander. The Vietnamese equivalent to the chief of the Combined Action Program

was the Regional Forces'/Popular Forces' director of I Corps. This director reported to the Vietnamese commanding general of I Corps but did not have operational control of the Popular Forces. The Regional Forces'/Popular Forces' director mainly dealt with the administrative and supply support of the Popular Force soldiers in the field.

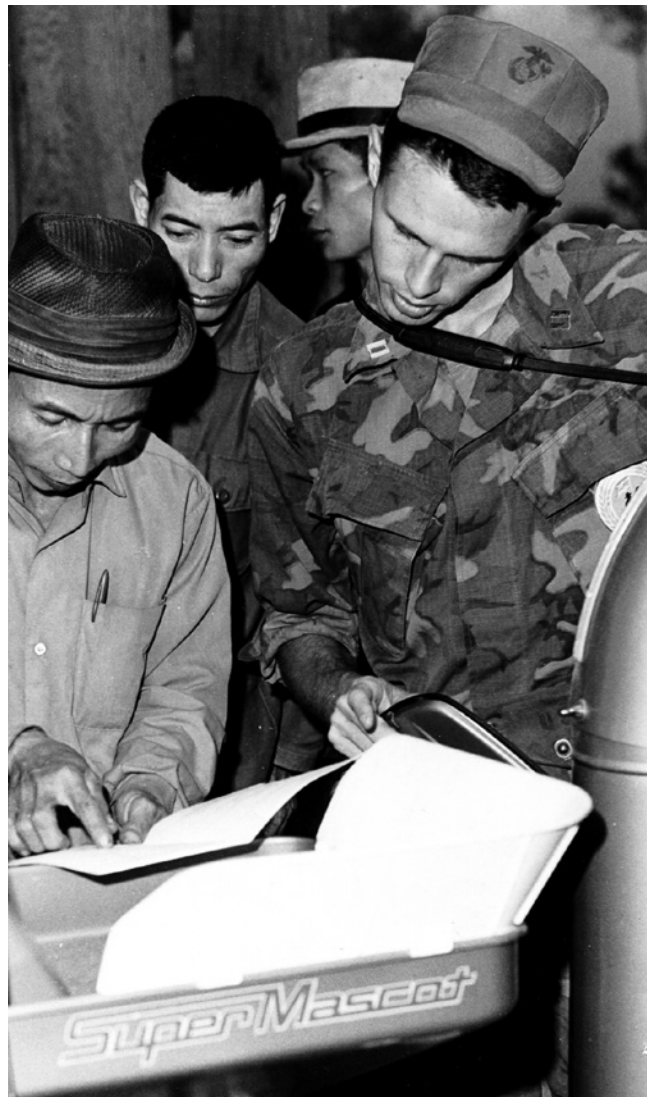
Cooperation between all of the armed forces involved was essential. In August 1965, General Walt created the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. Its membership included representatives from all the Marine Corps, the RVN government, and other U.S. agencies involved in the I Corps Tactical Zone. The mission of the Joint Coordinating Council was to be a forum for exchanging information and suggestions between all agencies engaged in or supporting the overall effort in the I Corps Tactical Zone. In March 1968, most of the Joint Coordinating Council's functions were taken over by the Saigon-based CORDS program.

The CAP units continued to operate under the general guidance of the Combined Action Program staff at III Marine Amphibious Force Headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Whitesell, who commanded 3d CAG in Phu Bai between 1968 and 1969, related that his Combined Action Platoons were spread throughout the Thua Thien Province, an area roughly the size of New Jersey. Though he was assigned as the group's commander, his role was mainly supervisory and administrative. In some cases, the 3d CAG headquarters took a very active role in operations of its assigned Combined Action Platoons, which may have come as a mixed blessing to the Marines leading each platoon, as they had come to cherish their independence and freedom to operate in the manner with which they were most accustomed.

Colonel Thomas J. Solak, who at the time was a major, was one of the officers initially assigned as the S3 (operations officer) and later as the executive officer for 3d CAG in Phu Bai from 1967 to 1968. According to Colonel Solak, the headquarters in Phu Bai served as a fire support coordination center (FSCC) for the far-flung platoons. CAP patrols would transmit their locations and routes to the Combined Action Group FSCC in Phu Bai. Their progress was actively monitored from Phu Bai and any patrol in need of help could call for and receive prearranged artillery or mortar indirect fire support. Or, if the artillery fire was insufficient and extra troops were needed, such as a quick reaction or extraction force, then the fire support coordination center could request that too.

To the ARVN, a Combined Action Platoon was little more than a platoon of local Popular Force troops augmented by a squad of Marines. The CAP was officially under ARVN military command that was exercised by the district chief, then the province chief, and finally the commanding general of I Corps Tactical Zone. For the most part, the RVN retained administrative control of the Popular Forces, leaving operational control to the III Marine Amphibious Force chain of command.

Technically, the district chief could control the actions of the Combined Action Platoon by transferring assigned Popular Force personnel to a different village without replacing them, effectively disbanding the platoon. This, however, rarely happened because such actions taken by any district



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marine Cpt R. S. McKelvey, 25, from Detroit, MI, and Nguyen Quang Thuoc look over the plans for a rice mill the villagers of Dai La purchased with the assistance of the 11th Marines Civil Affairs Office. McKelvey, the regiment's civil affairs officer, arranged for purchase of the rice mill for the village, five kilometers northwest of Da Nang.

chief would be scrutinized by the provincial chief, who would wonder where his district chief's sympathies lie—with the RVN or with the Viet Cong. Later in the war, the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces would be eligible to be drafted for the ARVN regular forces, an ill-advised action that would remove these men from their homes and place them in unfamiliar units far from their families. But until that occurred,

the Popular Force soldiers with their attached Marines would remain an effective, though irregular, counterweight to the Viet Cong in the war in the villages.

Though the stated mission of the Combined Action Group was to support the Combined Action Platoons, who in turn provided advice and support to the Popular Forces, it was the Marine CAP commanders who assumed leadership control in combat situations. Such was the trust that the Popular Forces had in their Marine counterparts that they rarely challenged Marine Corps operational control of the Combined Action Program. William R. Corson, in his book *The Betrayal*, stated: “The CAP was where the Marines lived and died alongside of the Vietnamese PFs [Popular Forces]. The CAP was the heart of the Combined Action Program and in the CAP American-Vietnamese relations were the most important.”

The ultimate goal and motto of the Marines’ Combined Action Program was to “work themselves out of a job” by training the Popular Force soldiers to take over when they left. The most important person in the Combined Action Platoon was the Marine squad leader. Usually the squad leader was a Marine sergeant whose average age was 22 and who had some combat experience. His squad members, according to an official report, were usually lance corporals, 21 years of age or younger, with five months of service in Vietnam.

Preferred candidates were high school graduates with infantry training and some combat experience. At first, the selection process took place at the unit level, normally an infantry battalion already serving in the province where Combined Action Platoons were assigned. In many instances, staff noncommissioned officers would volunteer their disciplinary problems to their commanders to get them out of the unit in hopes of getting a more cooperative replacement. Consequently, Marines with disciplinary issues would arrive as replacements in Combined Action Platoons and would continue the pattern they had established during their previous assignment in a line company. This problem was alleviated between 1968 and 1969 when 3d CAG headquarters set up a system of screening and interviewing potential replacements, which led to such noteworthy success that the CAP at Phu Bai was seen by both Marine and RVN government commanders as the model for the program.

On 17 November 1965, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, RVN commanding general of I Corps Tactical Zone, issued orders for all the Popular Force units in the Da Nang airbase area to liaison with area Marine units to set up Combined Action Platoons. This was the real beginning of the Combined Action Program. After Combined Action Platoons were authorized throughout the I Corps Tactical Zone, the program grew quickly.

By the end of 1966, the 1st, 2d, and 3d CAGs and Combined Action Platoons were located in all three of the original enclaves. There were 31 Combined Action Platoons around the city of Da Nang, 13 around the Chu Lai Airbase, and 13 around the Phu Bai Combat Base. In 1969, this total grew to its greatest strength of four Combined Action Groups—with the 4th CAG being created in 1968 at Quang Tri—and 114 Combined Action Platoons throughout the I Corps Tactical Zone. The Combined Action Groups’ American strength reached a peak that year of 1,710 Marines and 119 Navy hospital corpsmen, the same year that the body count of Viet Cong killed in action by Combined Action Platoons amounted to the equivalent of 11 Viet Cong main force battalions.

The 3d CAG headquarters was located at Phu Bai Combat Base, Huong Thuy District, Thua Thien Province, controlling the activities of five separate Combined Action Companies. The CAC 3-1 was located at Huong Thuy District headquarters, Thua Thien Province; CAC 3-2 was located at Phu Loc District headquarters, Thua Thien Province; CAC 3-3 was located at Phu Vang District headquarters, Thua Thien Province; CAC 3-4 was located at Huong Tra District headquarters, Thua Thien Province; and CAC 3-5 was located at Thonbach Thach Village, Phu Loc District, Thua Thien Province and later at Truoi Bridge headquarters, Phu Loc District, Thua Thien Province.

The first command chronology report for the 3d CAG covered the period of 1–31 October 1968. During this period, it was noted that there were shortages of Popular Force troops available for training or for day and night activities, a concern echoed in other command chronologies. A brief review of the group’s activities would show an organization constantly in motion, striving to live up to the letter if not the spirit of the program. For example, in late October 1968, Popular Force medics and Navy hospital corpsmen



# Corporal Charles Edward Brown

## Navy Cross Citation

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Charles Edward Brown (2288651), Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps, for extraordinary heroism while serving as a Squad leader with Combined Action Platoon H-8, Third Combined Action Group, Third Marine Amphibious Force in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. In the early morning hours on 31 January 1968, Corporal Brown's platoon, located in a compound at Loc Dien Village in Thua Thien Province, came under intense enemy mortar, rocket and small-arms fire. In the initial moments of the attack the enemy penetrated the perimeter and launched a vicious assault within the compound. Quickly moving to a critical bunker on the compound's perimeter, Corporal Brown rallied the three men who were defending the position and directed a heavy volume of accurate fire against the determined enemy. Despite repeated attempts by the hostile force to overrun the bunker, the Marines repulsed each assault, inflicting heavy losses on the attackers. On two occasions, the enemy utilized riot control agents in an attempt to dislodge the Marines. On each occasion, however,



Corporal Brown and his companions refused to abandon their position, even though they were not wearing field protection masks. When the ammunition supply at his position became dangerously low, he fearlessly ran across an exposed area and returned through the hostile fire with the vital ammunition resupply. Utilizing his vantage point to observe the enemy, he repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to adjust artillery fire on the enemy positions near and within the compound. Although his bunker received three direct hits from antitank rocket rounds and Corporal Brown and his three men were wounded, he resolutely continued to direct accurate supporting fires dangerously close to his position, which forced the hostile force to withdraw and abandon five enemy casualties within the compound and thirty-three in the surrounding area. His indomitable fighting spirit and unflinching determination inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in repulsing the aggressive enemy attack. By his extraordinary courage, bold initiative and unswerving dedication to duty, Corporal Brown upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

commenced Medical Civic Action projects in conjunction with the Rural Development (CORDS) medics. The goal was to achieve better relations between the Popular Forces and the cadres and increase the proficiency of their medics.

On another occasion, civic action liaison was made with the G5 (civil affairs) staff section of the Army's 101st Airborne Division to coordinate the 3d CAG's Civic Action Program. The records show that policies were constantly reemphasized, such as requiring all Combined Action Platoons to install a Marine CAP member as the civic action noncommissioned officer versus the Navy corpsman who would then become his assistant. Extensive training was performed in accordance with *III Marine Amphibious Force Order 3121.4B, Standing Operating Procedure for the Combined*

*Action Program*. This included 4,337 hours of formal training for the Marine Corps elements of the Combined Action Platoons and 5,534 hours of formal training for the Popular Force soldiers.

### The 4th Combined Action Group, Quang Tri

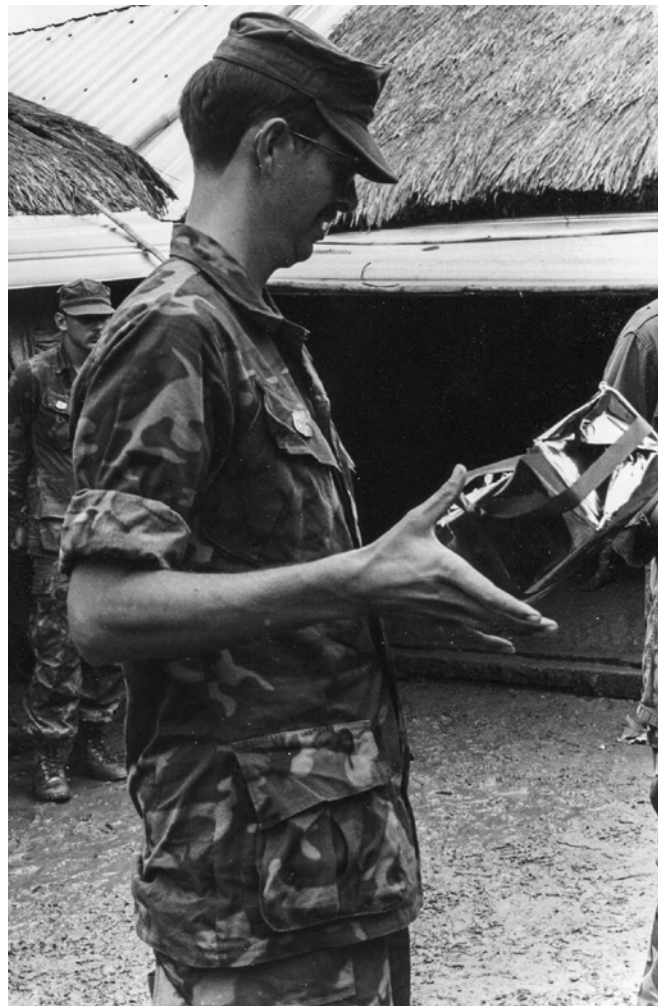
The 4th CAG's headquarters was located at the Quang Tri Combat Base in Quang Tri Province, and administratively controlled three Combined Action Companies located in the districts of Cam Lo, Mai Linh, and Trieu Phong. CAC 4-1's headquarters was located at Cam Lo District headquarters, where its CAPs 4-1-1, 4-1-2, and 4-1-3 initially operated from a fortified compound. CAP 4-1-1 was moved to Dong Ha District and was redesignated as CAP 4-1-4. CAC 4-2's

headquarters was located Mai Linh District headquarters. CAPs 4-2-1 and 4-2-2 maintained fortified compounds. CAPs 4-2-3, 4-2-4, and 4-2-5 operated without compounds in a completely mobile posture. CAC 4-3's headquarters was activated on 3 October 1968 at Trieu Phong District headquarters and consisted of four Combined Action Platoons. These included CAP 4-3-1, activated on 3 October; CAP 4-3-2, activated on 4 October; CAP 4-3-5, activated on 5 October; and CAP 4-3-4, activated on 6 October. None of the Combined Action Company 4-3's Combined Action Platoons maintained fortified compounds.

The newly activated Combined Action Platoon units were warmly welcomed nearly everywhere they were assigned, particularly in Trieu Phong District, where large crowds gathered, holding flowers and food to present to the Marines when they arrived. During the month of October 1968, a staff study was ordered to be completed on all Combined Action Platoon areas of coordination to determine whether there were any alterations or adjustments that would enable 4th CAG to best support the 90-day pacification program scheduled by I Corps to run from 1 November 1968 to 31 January 1969. This program identified 30 contested hamlets that were to receive priority attention in an effort to upgrade them to the secure category.

As the possibility arose during the fall of 1968 that the ongoing Paris Peace Accords might result in a cease-fire, III Marine Amphibious Force made tentative plans to subdivide all of its Combined Action Platoons into fireteams to support provincial Popular Force soldiers that were expected to go into contested hamlets to establish a permanent RVN government presence. In support of this plan, 4th CAG was to be assisted by the Combined Action Program director in Da Nang. When the plan went into effect at the beginning of November 1968, it greatly enhanced the 4th CAG's ability to provide assistance to the Quang Tri Province senior advisor, making him far more effective in dealing with their RVN counterparts.

At the same time, the leaders of the 4th CAG also were aware of pending developments that would soon affect the future course of the Combined Action Program. The Popular Forces were to play a more active role in ground combat operations against the Viet Cong and NVA forces operating in the I Corps Tactical Area. In support of this role,



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marine Cpl Benny Mays, from Dallas, TX, a member of Combined Action Platoon 4-2-2 located at Hai Vihn village, holds one of the presents brought to his platoon on Christmas Day by LtCol William D. Anderson, deputy director of the Combined Action Program, III Marine Amphibious Force. The gifts were from individuals in the United States who wanted to make sure Marines in the field had an enjoyable holiday.

the Popular Force units were assigned additional missions, including increasing efforts against Viet Cong, detecting and eliminating corruption and corrupt officials, installing and training of hamlet or village officials, and organizing hamlet self-defense forces. Additionally, Popular Force units were to receive training at the Vung Tau National Training Center and from mobile teams to qualify them for these new missions. Steps were taken to acquaint all personnel with the

# Lance Corporal Miguel Keith

## Medal of Honor Citation

The President of the United States of America, in the name of Congress, takes pride in presenting the Medal of Honor (Posthumously) to Lance Corporal Miguel Keith, United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty on 8 May 1970, while serving as a machine gunner with Combined Action platoon 1-3-2, III Marine Amphibious Force, in action against the enemy in Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam. During the early morning Lance Corporal Keith was seriously wounded when his platoon was subjected to a heavy ground attack by a greatly outnumbering enemy force. Despite his painful wounds, he ran across the fire-swept terrain to check the security of vital defensive positions and then, while completely exposed to view, proceeded to deliver a hail of devastating machinegun fire against the enemy. Determined to stop five of the enemy



soldiers approaching the command post, he rushed forward, firing as he advanced. He succeeded in disposing of three of the attackers and in dispersing the remaining two. At this point, a grenade detonated near Lance Corporal Keith, knocking him to the ground and inflicting further severe wounds. Fighting pain and weakness from loss of blood, he again braved the concentrated hostile fire to charge an estimated 25 enemy soldiers who were massing to attack. The vigor of his assault and his well-placed fire eliminated four of the enemy soldiers while the remainder fled for cover. During this valiant effort, he was mortally wounded by an enemy soldier. By his courageous and inspiring performance in the face of almost overwhelming odds, Lance Corporal Keith contributed in large measure to the success of his platoon in routing a numerically superior enemy force, and upheld the finest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the U.S. Naval Service.

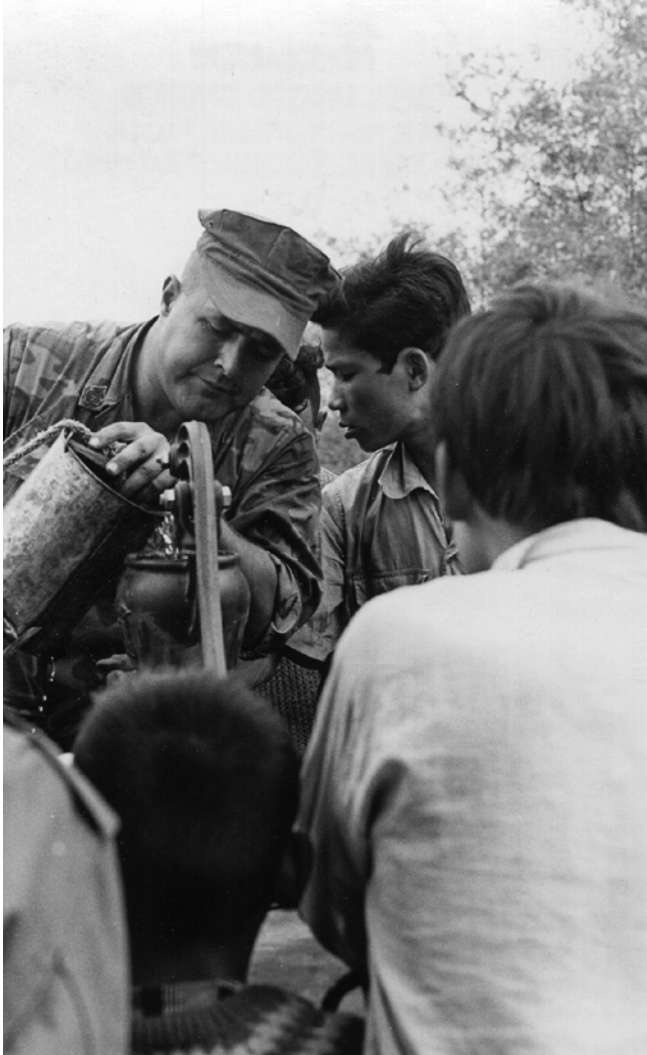
# Corporal Verner Ray Russell

## Silver Star Citation

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Corporal Verner Ray Russell (MCSN: 2225712), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Rifleman with Combined Action Platoon 0-1, Third Combined Action Group, THIRD Marine Amphibious Force, in connection with operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam. On 21 January 1968, two combined action platoons and the Huong Hoa District Headquarters in Quang Tri Province came under heavy attack by a battalion of North Vietnamese Army Regulars employing mortars, rockets and artillery. During the ensuing three hours, the enemy repeatedly assaulted the combined units' positions and inflicted heavy casualties. When a machine gun position was disabled by enemy fire, Corporal Russell unhesitatingly moved across the hazardous area to the automatic weapon, repaired it and began to deliver a heavy volume of accurate fire at the



advancing North Vietnamese. Although wounded in the leg and stunned by the concussion of an exploding rocket propelled grenade when his bunker received a direct hit, he disregarded his injuries and crawled back to the machine gun and continued to direct effective suppressive fire against the enemy. As a result of the skillful employment of his weapon, he was able to effectively counter the pressure on the weakened sector of the perimeter and inflict heavy casualties on the hostile force. For the next thirty-three hours, Corporal Russell steadfastly remained at his position, despite harassing mortar, B-40 [man-portable RPG] rocket and small arms fire, and continued to engage targets of opportunity until the North Vietnamese broke contact and withdrew from the area. By his courage, aggressive fighting spirit and selfless devotion to duty in the face of great personal danger, Corporal Russell was instrumental in the defeat of the enemy and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.



Official U.S. Marine Corps photo

Marine SSgt Jack E. Wottig of Lancaster, PA, makes final adjustments on a newly installed pump in the hamlet of Luong An, located less than 13 kilometers from Vietnam's demilitarized zone.

new developments as well as the evolution of the Vietnamese pacification program (a.k.a. CORDS), which the Combined Action Groups had been tasked to support.

According to the command chronology report for the 4th CAG in January 1969, training of Marines assigned to Combined Action Platoons and in support of the Popular Forces were to be given a priority. General military subjects were reevaluated to devise more effective instruction at the lowest levels. As a result, new techniques were applied that

met with some success. One of these included smaller capsules of instruction to be taught by the Combined Action Platoon leader in almost any environment, requiring fewer training aids without seriously disrupting operational activities. Splitting up training periods into 15- or 20-minute segments during the course of several days within a week's time brought tactical fundamentals more sharply into focus for both Marines and the Popular Forces.

Ideally, these fundamentals should be tied in or related to a specific incident or contact occurring in one of the 4th CAG's Combined Action Platoons to serve as a teaching point. Upon receiving the instruction, the troops serving with Combined Action Platoons were therefore motivated to avoid these pitfalls, so clearly illustrated in these short after action reports. So successful was this program that the Marines soon called these condensed training capsules "on-the-job training tips."

### **The End of the Combined Action Program**

As the pacification program gathered momentum and as the Republic of Vietnam's confidence in administering rural areas grew, the need for the Combined Action Program receded beginning in mid-1970. One of the drivers for this lessening need was the increased implementation of the Community Defense and Local Development Plan, a combined U.S.-Republic of Vietnam program designed to revitalize the village community by blending traditional governing methods with innovative techniques to create a viable local government that was capable of leading the rural population by demonstrating that the RVN government was capable of both defending them as well as providing basic goods and services. These had heretofore been provided through a bewildering mix of U.S. military and civilian, Central Intelligence Agency, and RVN pacification programs that often conflicted with one another and led to duplication of effort and needless waste.

With most of the villages in the I Corps tactical area now able to stand on their own for the most part without U.S. help, the Marines began to be withdrawn. President Richard M. Nixon's new "Vietnamization" policy hastened the general withdrawal. On 25 July 1970, the 4th CAG was deactivated, soon followed by the 1st CAG on 21 August. The 3d CAG was deactivated on 7 September, leaving the 2d CAG

headquarters as the only headquarters in charge of the Combined Action Program.

This development was presaged as early as May 1970, when the 2d CAG began receiving Marines that were transferred from the other groups scheduled to deactivate, absorbing them into its own Combined Action Platoons. In August 1970, the 2d CAG began deactivating its subordinate units and, by the end of 1970, all that remained under its control was one Combined Action Company and five Combined Action Platoons, all located close to Da Nang. In January 1971, the RVN government began conducting psychological operations in the Da Nang area in preparation for the deactivation of the last Combined Action Platoons.

In April 1971, III MAF Headquarters redeployed from Da Nang to its home base in Okinawa, Japan, signaling the beginning of the end of the Marine's participation in the war in Vietnam. Soon, the only Marines left other than advisors were those assigned to the 3d Amphibious Brigade. That same month, 2d CAG was removed from III Marine Amphibious Force control and placed under the control of 3d Amphibious Brigade Headquarters. A month later, on 11 May 1971, the 2d CAG was deactivated and most of its personnel redeployed; it was the last Combined Action Group to see action in Vietnam.

In his analysis of the effectiveness of the Combined Action Program, Colonel Ridderhof pointed to the problems previously cited, including shortages of trained Popular Force soldiers; lack of support from district and province chiefs; lack of cooperation and coordination between U.S. Marine and Army infantry units, as well as ARVN and Popular Force units and the government. Ridderhof concluded that "Marine Combined Action, in the end, did not work in Vietnam." But was this truly the case?

Regarding this contention, historian Peter W. Brush wrote that Secretary of Defense McNamara at one time believed in the program's potential, offering the following observation he made in 1966:

The large-unit operations war, which we know best how to fight and where we have had our successes, is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we do not have it. *Success in pacification depends on the interrelated functions of providing physical security, destroying the VC [Viet Cong] apparatus, motivating the people to cooperate*

*and establishing responsive local government* [emphasis added].

At the highest levels, both the U.S. Army and Marine Corps instinctively knew that the war could not be won solely by defeating large units of the enemy. Counterinsurgency operations would have to be conducted at some level to remove or neutralize the political influence of the National Liberation Front, especially in the rural areas of the Republic of Vietnam.\* The U.S. Army insisted, however, that the emphasis should have focused on fighting a conventional war, including the interdiction of the enemy's external support mechanisms, with pacification or counterinsurgency playing a secondary role. The Army saw large-scale conventional operations involving multiple battalions and brigades as being the key to victory and viewed small unit operations, focused on counterinsurgency, as being little more than a supporting or economy of force operation.

In contrast to the U.S. Army's strategy for winning the war, the Marine Corps instead adopted a plan from the beginning of its involvement that saw pacification of rural villages as being equally as important as conducting conventional operations. Previous Marine Corps experiences in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and especially Nicaragua included the supervision of rural development, governance, and leading local militias against guerrillas. Lieutenant General Walt, commander of III Marine Amphibious Force, was trained as a lieutenant by Marines who had participated in these Caribbean campaigns. Walt believed that many of the lessons learned in the Banana Wars were still applicable in Vietnam, and if implemented properly, they could help the Republic of Vietnam battle the Communist insurgency. Indeed, as paraphrased by one Marine who had served in Vietnam, the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual* stressed the fact that

in regular warfare, the responsible officers simply strive to attain a method of producing the maximum physical effect with the force at their disposal. In small wars, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life. The

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\*The National Liberation Front is a Vietnamese political organization formed on 20 December 1960 to help overthrow the RVN government and reunite Vietnam.

end aim is the social, economic, and political development of the people subsequent to the military defeat of the enemy insurgent forces. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population.

As a testament to the important role that the Combined Action Program played in one area, Major General Jonas M. Platt, who served as General Walt's chief of staff, noted in 1970 that there were 100,000 Vietnamese within an 81mm mortar range of the Da Nang airfield. He believed that a friendly attitude toward the Marines among the civilian population would make the more conventional mission of Marines easier. Platt concluded that one way to secure those friendly attitudes was via programs such as the Combined Action Program and Civic Action Program, which were designed to deliver government services as well as security to the rural population.

In his treatise on the Combined Action Program, Peter Brush posited that the strategy and tactics the Marine Corps developed in Vietnam were more appropriate to battlefield reality than those of the U.S. Army. Combined Action Programs might have made a telling difference had they been instituted on a wider and more comprehensive scale. The Combined Action Program, a genuine effort designed to win the war in the villages, was not uniformly successful because its platoons were too widely scattered and its personnel composition too varied to guarantee the kind of success that Generals Walt and Krulak expected.

Whether the Combined Action Program should have been adopted on a wider scale and whether it would have ultimately affected the outcome of the war remains speculation. Less speculative is how it was perceived as contributing to the prevailing American strategy for winning the war. It was never clearly understood by the American administration, and certainly not by the U.S. Army, that the whole American effort, both civilian and military, had to be directed toward the establishment of a viable and stable RVN government and state, one that the people would see as an acceptable political solution, rather than the reunification with the DRV under a Communist government. Instead, through the bombing of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and a war of attrition within the Republic of Vietnam,

the whole U.S. effort was directed to the military defeat of the Viet Cong and NVA divisions that infiltrated the Republic of Vietnam. Even if such a military defeat had been possible, it would not have achieved victory without a political solution, in the opinion of Sir Robert G. Thompson, the British counterinsurgency theorist.

The U.S. Army in Vietnam was a force trained, led, and equipped to wage conventional and nuclear warfare in Europe. The U.S. Army's insistence on fighting battles with large units ensured the NVA and the Viet Cong did their best to avoid them, though sometimes they had no choice but to seek battle. The use of massive firepower, while it did kill large numbers of Viet Cong and NVA troops, also resulted in civilian casualties and social disruption. The U.S. forces, despite their best efforts, were all too often perceived as an ally of the RVN government; neither government was frequently seen as an ally of the civilian population. As USMACV took greater control of the war, it was easier for the DRV to portray the United States as neocolonialists and the RVN government as a puppet regime. In truth, the Vietnamese people had been decimated by both sides, and the majority wanted the war to end. There were many shrines in Vietnamese homes, North and South, attesting to the slaughter over the years.

Despite its mixed results, General Krulak believed that the Combined Action Program concept still held promise for the future, stating in an account after the war:

This idea has the greatest leverage of any concept yet to emerge from this war. Here is a case where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The Marines learn from the PF [Popular Forces] and the PF, mediocre soldiers to say the least—learn from the Marines. They become skillful and dedicated units, and no hamlets protected by a Combined Action Platoon has ever been repossessed by the Communists. . . . It set the tone for what I honestly believe may be the key to the whole Vietnam War.

Other experts believed in a more balanced approach, with one expert acknowledging that the pacification and strengthening of the RVN government's rural offices had to be done in concert with the defeat of Viet Cong units and the North Vietnamese Army. The government and the Army

of the Republic of Vietnam were not up to this challenge, so the Marines, following the U.S. Army's lead, progressively increased participation in the pacification effort while also fighting the large unit war. But the Marines and the Central Intelligence Agency felt that, if pacification succeeded, it would inflict real damage on the Viet Cong units, who would have lost their sanctuaries.

General Krulak wrote afterward that he sincerely believed that, if U.S. forces could destroy the guerrilla infrastructure in the villages, the United States and the RVN would automatically be able to deny main force units as well as the North Vietnamese Army food, intelligence, taxes, and other support that it needed. His observations were echoed by Sir Robert Thompson, who felt that the Marines "made the only serious attempts to protect the rural population in the whole Vietnam War."

President Johnson's special assistant, Robert W. Komer, also concurred with the Marines' view of the war. He believed that "chasing large units around the boondocks still leaves intact the VC [Viet Cong] infrastructure, with its local guerrilla capability plus the weapons of terror and intimidation." The USMACV, as exemplified by the attitude of its commander, Westmoreland, took a negative attitude toward the Combined Action Program and the Marine pacification strategy as a matter of principle. In addition to the manpower constraints, many officers felt that the whole philosophy of pacification was static and defensive and would not win the war. USMACV concretely made its opinion felt when it refused to allocate extra troops and resources for the Combined Action Program. The ARVN high command also did not approve, because they believed that any funding or weapons issued to the Regional Forces or the Popular Forces would be wasted, when instead these should be given to them.

As previously stated, in the spring of 1966, the ARVN began removing Popular Force units involved in the Combined Action Program and started deploying them alongside RVN regular forces in offensive operations. "This was stopped when the PFs and accompanying ARVN forces were mauled," General Walt opined. "If we could convince the people that we mean to stay and that we were going to protect them from the VC [Viet Cong], then we felt their confidence in the government and themselves would return."

The argument about which was superior—pacification, of which the Combined Action Program was an important component—versus a war of attrition—continued throughout the Vietnam War, with the Marine Corps and the U.S. Army taking opposing views. Using III Marine Amphibious Force's own metrics, the Combined Action Program was deemed a success. However, the dispute between both sides of the argument stemmed from how *pacification*, described in terms of the security an area, was measured. The earliest system proposed by III MAF in 1966 looked at five basic indicators that could be objectively measured, including degrees of destruction or attrition of Viet Cong military forces in the area, establishment of local security, establishment of the government, hamlet development progress, and community activities and improvement.

Each of these indicators was further subdivided into sub-categories. By 1969, 71 percent of all villages with Combined Action Platoons were considered pacified. A certain degree of subjectivity had to be accounted for, as it required someone on the ground to observe and make judgments about phenomena that could not be readily quantified.

Indeed, one of the program's critics suggested that this was an arbitrary and statistical measure somewhat akin to the body count system used by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps to evaluate whether the attrition strategy was working. In this regard, the kill ratio in 1966 for Combined Action Platoons was 14 Viet Cong confirmed killed in action for every CAP Marine or Popular Forces soldier similarly killed. While this impressive statistic appeared to support the attrition strategy, Westmoreland's main argument against the Combined Action Program centered on the fact that the Marine Corps and its RVN allies still did not have enough Combined Action Platoons to cover the entire area, let alone to carry out search-and-destroy operations with conventional units. Combined Action Program proponents countered by stating that, although the Marines assigned to Combined Action Platoons in 1968 comprised only 1.5 percent of total Marine Corps strength in Vietnam, they accounted for 7.6 percent of Viet Cong kills, a much higher kill ratio than that inflicted by conventional forces.

The Combined Action Program's manpower benefits, cost of operations, and more efficient use of Vietnamese resources benefitted both the United States and RVN forces. One

Marine rifle squad and one Navy FMF corpsman supplemented by Popular Forces made an entire platoon, which resulted in manpower benefits. CAP Marines used captured assets resulting in a lower cost of operations and using the village resources resulted in more efficient use of those assets. According to one source, local forces operating alongside the CAP Marines had higher morale, as evidenced by the significantly lower desertion rates in comparison to other Popular Force units as well as the regular ARVN. Indeed,

[This] was concrete proof that the Popular Forces in Combined Action Platoons were more effective and motivated than those Popular Forces not in Combined Action Platoons. In 1967, the desertion rate for all Popular Forces in all of South Vietnam was 11 percent. The desertion rate for Popular Forces in Combined Action Platoons during the same period of time was *zero* percent. Combined Action increased the potential for Government of Vietnam [RVN] forces to be used in fighting the Viet Cong.

The motto of the Marines assigned to the Combined Action Program was “work yourself out of a job.” The motto nicely dovetailed with the major goal of completely turning over the program to the RVN government after the Popular Forces had been trained to the Marines’ satisfaction.

One observer concluded that, while the Combined Action Program was successful as a counterinsurgency tactic and area security program, the goal of pacification was not attained, primarily due to the RVN government’s inability to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of its people. The RVN government was simply neither willing nor prepared to support the Popular Forces after the Marines left with the funding, weapons, and ammunition the program needed to survive, despite knowing that pacification would occur only if the people thought the government was stronger and more preferable than the Viet Cong.

There was also the lack of confidence felt by the RVN troops enrolled in the program that they would not be able to function as effectively when the Marines departed. This was summed up by one observer, who stated,

No matter how effective at combating the Viet Cong, the Combined Action Platoons were still U.S.-run units and represented foreigners who would someday

leave. Unless the Government of Vietnam [RVN] was able to survive without United States troops, it would lose the war. Combined Action could have been a positive step towards preparing the Government of Vietnam to survive alone, but the effort in that direction was not there.

Another observer concluded that the Marines and the Vietnamese were not alone in praising the Combined Action Program. According to some Marine Corps colonels, many of their U.S. Army counterparts believed the Combined Action Program was a viable strategy to win the war.

Foreshadowing the future counterinsurgency doctrine of “clear, hold, build,” one Army officer confided that the only way to win the war was to use the Marine Corps’ methods: “You can’t just go bashing about the bush and take off. You’ve got to stay there and gain the confidence of the people if we’re ever going to make this pacification thing work.” Another Army officer was perplexed by the Army’s reluctance to increase the program because “the Army officers in I Corps who come into contact with it are completely sold on it and . . . cannot understand why the Army in the other Corps areas will not adopt similar programs.”

Another program with great potential for winning the war in the villages was the aforementioned CORDS, which was launched in May 1967 with the stated purpose of coordinating the U.S. civil and military pacification programs. Ambassador Komer was appointed head of CORDS, serving as one of General Westmoreland’s deputies with direct access to the USMACV commander. The top people in CORDS felt strongly that the Combined Action Program was extremely valuable and even suggested that “we would have been more successful if we had done this kind of thing all over Vietnam.”

In retrospect, even General Westmoreland belatedly considered the Combined Action Program to have been a worthwhile effort: “The Marines who lived and fought with their PF [Popular Force] counterparts . . . contributed greatly to the allied effort and deserve the greatest credit and admiration.” This begs the question, why did USMACV not expand the program beyond a mere 114 platoons or direct its adoption by the U.S. Army? This is a difficult question to answer, because Army officers, who predominated in the





Defense Department (Marine Corps)

From left to right, LtGen Robert E. Cushman, commanding general, III MAF; MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth, commanding general, 3d MarDiv; Gen Creighton W. Abrams, USA, deputy commander, USMACV; and BrigGen John R. Chaisson, commanding general, 1st MarDiv, confer during Gen Abrams visit to the 3d MarDiv at Phu Bai, RVN.

institution in charge of the day-to-day operations of the war and CORDS, which served as USMACV's pacification branch, reportedly felt so favorably about the Combined Action Platoons.

At the time, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Komer explained that it would have been too expensive for the U.S. Army to put a platoon in every village, a somewhat simplistic assertion that assumed every hamlet would require a Combined Action Platoon. Still, many military leaders at the time questioned why the Combined Action Program was not expanded throughout I Corps, as Lieutenant Colonel

Corson had suggested. No one argued then that Combined Action Platoons alone should completely saturate the RVN. U.S. and RVN forces would always need a conventional force to engage the NVA and Viet Cong units and break them down into weaker elements that a Combined Action Platoon could handle.

Regardless of the reasoning behind General Westmoreland's war strategy, there was no clear rationale for limiting the growth of Combined Action Platoons. Douglas Blauford, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations officer in Laos, claimed that senior U.S. Army leadership

were unable or unwilling to accept the conclusion implicit in the success of the Combined Action Platoons, which was that the Army's vast resources, manpower, equipment, and technology were essentially irrelevant to the kind of war that was being fought and won where it mattered most—in the villages. According to Blauford, the Combined Action Program was an alternative that was not pursued to the degree that it should have been, and it remains to this day one of the few bright spots in the U.S. war effort.

Lewis Sorley, author of *A Better War*, explained how USMACV's strategy of the war changed when the Army's General Creighton W. Abrams Jr. formally assumed command of U.S. forces in Vietnam in June 1968. According to one participant, General Frederick C. Weyand, "The tactics changed within 15 minutes of Abrams' taking command." Weyand was commander of II Corps Field Force, but during his previous assignment, had served as General Westmoreland's deputy. From this perspective, he saw a dramatic shift in the nature of the war and how it was to be conducted.

According to Abrams, the new objective of the war was not destruction of the NVA in large-scale engagements, but rather in controlling the population. The burden of the fighting was to shift to the RVN's armed forces, which were greatly expanded and impressively equipped, resulting in a force that was substantially more capable than it had been during the previous two years. Abram's envisioned that the pacification program would receive greater emphasis, which began to pay off, as more and more villages reverted to RVN control. Another indicator of the program's burgeoning success came from intercepted enemy message traffic that repeatedly reported that the pacification program was a threat to the rural insurgency that had to be overcome.

Sorley, a third-generation graduate of West Point, who served the U.S. Army on staff at the Pentagon and later as a senior civilian official of the CIA, wrote the following in 1999:

There came a time when the war was won. The fighting wasn't over, but the war was won. This achievement can probably best be dated in late 1970, after the Cambodia incursion in the spring of that year. By then the South Vietnamese [RVN] countryside had been widely pacified, so much so that the term "pacification" was no longer even used. Four million members

of the People's Self-Defense Force, armed with some 600,000 weapons, represented no threat to the government that had armed them; instead they constituted an overt commitment to that government in opposition to the enemy.

## The Future of Combined Action

All political aspects aside, many veterans of the war have argued that, as a military answer to the Viet Cong insurgency, the Combined Action Program was effective. Its utility in the economy of force role, due in part to the majority of the personnel coming from the Popular Forces, and providing a certain degree of area security in the countryside, could be employed again in a country where similar conditions occur. Indeed, the Marine Corps and Army Special Operations Forces have used variations on the Combined Action Program in Iraq and Afghanistan with some degree of success. Many aspects of the Combined Action Program could lead U.S. forces that are called upon again to support a friendly government facing a rural insurgency practically anywhere.

The Combined Action Program, properly employed, could and has promoted area security while providing training for the indigenous forces involved. The reestablishment of government, law, and order would be the responsibility of the host government, possibly with U.S. economic and developmental assistance. As shown in Vietnam, the Combined Action Program by itself will not win a counterinsurgency war, but it would provide civil authorities the time and breathing space to reestablish their presence in rural areas where active insurgencies have driven them out. The Combined Action Program is primarily a military concept that can help fight but not prove decisive in revolutionary warfare, particularly when Marines can fight and win against enemy forces but does not prove effective if no political solution is in place. Civic action also does not decisively win a war, but taken together, and guided by an interagency plan, both can achieve impressive results, as has been demonstrated in Iraqi Kurdistan, Thailand, and the Philippines. One analyst concluded that the Combined Action Program can be a useful counterinsurgency tool for future operations against an insurgency, provided that the "local forces receive training before being put in a combat environment and that the direction of the program is longer than a single unit tour (6–7

months).” Of course, this assumes that it will be U.S. armed forces, including Marines, who will be the ones embedded with the local forces.

## Conclusion

From the scholars and historians of today to the soldiers and Marines who fought and often died in defense of RVN rural villages—the *other war*—the overwhelming consensus is that the Civic Action Program and the Combined Action Program were not only noble pursuits but also were strategically effective in an economy of force role and in the limited application grudgingly allowed by General Westmoreland, the erstwhile USMACV commander.

No one can satisfactorily explain why he was so committed to a war of attrition, but the only plausible answer was that the true nature of the war in Vietnam was something that eluded him. It was not the kind of war that American military leaders like him had trained for and expected to fight. After all, World War II and the Korean War had served as the training ground for most of the senior commanders who served in Vietnam, so they fought the war in Vietnam in the same manner as they thought all wars should be fought.

Did Lieutenant General Krulak have a more prescient mind than his counterparts, or were the Combined Action Program’s detractors simply not willing to accept this new strategy? There is empirical evidence to support both and one might go so far as to argue that egos and the historical friction between the U.S. Army and Marine Corps going as far back as World War I were still in play. Whatever the reason was for not expanding the Combined Action Program throughout all four of the Corps areas in the RVN, it was deemed important enough for Krulak to unsuccessfully plead his case in person to President Lyndon B. Johnson, who stood solidly behind General Westmoreland’s vision of how best to fight the war. Vindication of Krulak came when General Abrams assumed command of USMACV in mid-1968,

relieving General Westmoreland, who became the next Army chief of staff. General Abrams, assisted by General Weyand, immediately changed the war’s strategy away from a war of attrition to that of pacification and Vietnamization.

The results were too little, too late. As public support for the Vietnam War waned and congressional proponents of the war changed their positions, the inevitable occurred. U.S. forces were finally withdrawn by 1973; funding and the provision of military equipment was curtailed as well as U.S. advisory and air support, so that by the spring of 1975, the RVN was on its own. That year, it ironically fell not to a rural insurgency, but to an NVA organized along conventional lines and equipped with modern tanks, aircraft, and equipment. None of the aforementioned scholars and historians have postulated that the outcome of the war would have been different had the Combined Action Program been embraced at the outset, but many concede that it could have made a bigger difference if it had been adopted throughout all of the RVN. If a political system supported by the populace is not in place, a military victory would be meaningless.

A fitting epitaph to the effort in Vietnam, which would just as eloquently apply to the thousands of Marines who served in the Combined Action Program, was uttered by General Lewis W. Walt, Assistant Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, who in 1970 wrote,

Many years ago, before the days of evacuation by jet aircraft, we buried our dead in the battle area. I remember one such place, the long neat rows, each graced with all we had to grace it: a fresh palm frond. Over the entrance way someone had placed an inscription on a plain board: “Here dead we lie, nor would we wish to live and shame the land from which we sprung.” The board has long since moldered away. The men for whom these words spoke were brought home long ago. But I and others can never forget those deaths, but we have no reason to regret what those men accomplished for our nation.

## Sources

This work is largely based on command chronologies, contemporary official Marine Corps and civilian press newspaper accounts, official reports, fact sheets, and instructional handbooks, as well as interviews conducted with participants immediately following some of the actions described and during the immediate postwar era. The veterans' association of Combined Action Program members had been particularly useful, especially regarding their website at capmarine.com, which is a virtual clearinghouse of information, some factual and some anecdotal, about the program. The official U.S. Marine Corps history of the Vietnam War is an excellent secondary source, particularly those volumes that contain chapters or sections dedicated specifically to the conduct of the pacification campaign between 1965 and 1971.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN	.....	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CAC	.....	Combined Action Company
CAG	.....	Combined Action Group
CAP	.....	Combined Action Platoon
COMUSMACV	.....	Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS	.....	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
DRV	.....	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
NVA	.....	North Vietnamese Army
PF	.....	Popular Forces
RVN	.....	Republic of Vietnam
USMACV	.....	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
VC	.....	Viet Cong

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# Ronald E. Hays II

## Master Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)



Photo courtesy of the author

MSgt Hays joined the Marine Corps in 1965. He was trained as an aviation electronics technician and served in all three air wings during his 21-year career. Prior to reporting to Vietnam in 1967, he was selected to attend 12 weeks of Vietnamese Language Training at the Defense Language Institute, West Coast Branch, in Monterey, California. Assigned to MAG-12 in Chu Lai, he became a member of the group's Civic Action team, and he interacted with the U.S. Army Americal Division and Marine 1st CAG as part of his duties. Upon his return to the United States, he taught avionics basic and advanced courses at Naval Air Station Memphis, Tennessee. In 1973, he returned overseas and joined MAG-15, part of Task Force Delta in Nam Phong, Thailand, near the end of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War. From there, Hays was assigned to the Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion training facility at Naval Air Station Santa Ana, California, where he taught intermediate avionics courses in support of fixed- and rotary-

wing aircraft. In 1978, he was selected to be an assistant aviation monitor at Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC. After completion of that tour of duty, Hays was then assigned to Naval Air Station Memphis, where he helped form the newly created Enlisted Aviation Maintenance Trainee Management Unit and later served as the assistant director of training at Marine Aviation Training Support Group 90. He retired as a master sergeant in 1986.



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