KEEPING THE FISH OUT OF THE WATER:
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS COMBINED ACTION
PLATOONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The United States is often criticized for using ineffective strategies and tactics to fight the Vietnam War, but the United States Marine Corps attempted to use strategies and tactics it considered appropriate for a counterinsurgency war in Vietnam. As part of its counterinsurgency plan, the Marine Corps used Combined Action Platoons, and whether or not these units were effective as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war is the topic of this study. This study concludes that Combined Action Platoons were not a successful counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. To the extent the Combined Action concept might have been well-conceived and successful, it was overwhelmed by a number of problems. The conflict over strategy between the Marine Corps and the US Army hampered the development and the performance of the Combined Action Platoons. Other critical problems for the Combined Action Platoons resulted from the weakness of the government of the Republic of South Vietnam and the strategic ability of the North Vietnamese Army. The primary problem was that Vietnam was a poorly chosen battlefield, and the war was unwinnable. This study of the US Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons is a qualitative study based on research in a variety of primary and secondary sources. Research at the US Marine Corps Archives at Quantico, Virginia was especially useful for acquiring original information related to the Combined Action
Platoons (CAP) in the Vietnam War. Primary sources for the study included books written by participants in the war, and veterans of the CAP. A collection of the private letters of a CAP veteran was also used. Among the secondary sources for the study were books by historians who studied the war, and books by counterinsurgency theorists who study counterinsurgency warfare.
DEDICATION

The first people I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother and father, Rachel Hollys Easterling and George Riley Easterling. I also dedicate it to my wife, Mary E. Quinn, and my family. Among my family members, I especially dedicate it to Riley Grace Goch, who always had a smile to make me feel better. Last, I dedicate my dissertation to the memory of my friend, Guy Richard Barattieri.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Walter L. Hixson, for his assistance in helping me complete my Ph.D. studies. I doubt I could have accomplished this without his help. The other members of my committee, Dr. Wilson, Dr. Sheng, Dr. Heiss, and Dr. Figler, helped me more than they know with their teaching, their advice, and their examples of what it means to be a scholar and a teacher. My friend, Dr. Larry Fallis, was a source of advice and inspiration. The staff members in the history department were always courteous and helpful when I needed them. Among my friends who gave me support and advice are John Wunderle, Bill Eckels, and Joe Green. I thank you all for your patience, your help, and your encouragement. The success I achieved in accomplishing this work is due to your help.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the Vietnam War one of the greatest challenges US military forces faced was finding effective ways to fight the guerrillas of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Among the various attempts, one of the most innovative was the Combined Action Platoon program (CAP) of the United States Marine Corps. The CAPs were platoons comprised of a squad of approximately fourteen US Marines and a Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) militia platoon of approximately thirty-five men. The Marines and the PFs in these small units learned to live and work together as they performed their mission of fighting the NLF guerrillas and pacifying the villages of Vietnam. This study assesses the effectiveness of the CAP program as a counterinsurgency tactic during the war.

The Cold War was a defining feature of world politics after World War II, and it played a central part in the Vietnam War. Shortly after World War II ended the United States and other nations became concerned with the ambitions of the Soviet Union in Europe as the Soviets solidified their control over Eastern Europe and the U.S increasingly assumed the role of stopping the spread of Soviet communism. This confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union became more rigid, and this Cold
War eventually affected a great deal of the political, economic, and military interactions of many of the nations of the world. ¹

After World War II the French attempted to regain control of their colony of French Indochina, a struggle that took on added significance in the context of Cold War. Led by the nationalist and communist Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam declared itself to be an independent state at the end of World War II, but the French soon used military force in an attempt to reassert control over their former colony. This resulted in the French Indochinese War that lasted from 1946 to 1954.² Initially the US opposed the French effort to attain colonial control of Indochina, and because of this the US gave the French little support for the war. For various reasons including China’s becoming a communist state in 1949, the anti-communist stance of the US increased. The French war in Indochina was no longer seen as a colonial war, but instead it was seen as part of a larger war against international communist expansion. The US backed the war extensively until all French will to continue the fight was crushed in the catastrophic defeat at Dienbienphu in 1954.³ A settlement of the war divided Vietnam into the areas of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. This was intended to be a temporary division until an election in 1956 unified the country under one government, but as the French withdrew from its former colony, the US increased its support for the government of a newly created South Vietnam.⁴

² Ibid., 20-21.
The US backed South Vietnam as an independent state, but opposition to the new government soon grew. The elections scheduled for 1956 were rejected, and South Vietnam declared itself to be the independent Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem. However, Diem’s rule was brutal as he attacked those he saw as his enemies. Truong Nhu Tang was a founding member of the National Liberation Front (NLF) who said Diem soon made himself a dictator with a narrow base of support and” Most damning of all, he had murdered many patriots who had fought in the struggle against France and had tied his existence to the patronage of the United States, France’s successor.” Tang said Diem’s actions made acceptance of his presidency impossible because” The country had settled into an all too familiar pattern of oligarchic rule and utter disregard for the welfare of the people.” In addition to this he said,” We had a ruler whose overriding interest was power and who would use the Americans to prop himself up- even while the Americans were using him for their own strategic purposes.” The choice for Tang became clear, and he said,” As far as I was concerned, this situation was intolerable.”5 In 1960 Tang and others who felt similarly toward Diem’s rule formed the NLF. The NLF sought out help from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) partly because as Tang said,” Ho Chi Minh was the spiritual father, in the South as well as the North, and we looked naturally to him and to his government for guidance and aid.”6 For the NLF two of its primary goals were to

4 Ibid., 35, 39.


6 Ibid., 68.
overthrow Diem’s government and to unite South Vietnam and North Vietnam through negotiations.\(^7\)

In the early 1960’s the situation for Diem’s government grew more precarious as the NLF grew in strength and the GVN military forces were defeated in an increasing number of engagements by the NLF guerrillas. The US deepened its commitment to the GVN by sending more military equipment and advisers to the Army of Vietnam (ARVN), but this did not reverse the situation. In a combination of crises in November 1963, Diem was assassinated and killed in a coup and President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. In South Vietnam the government became more unstable as one military coup followed another. In the US Lyndon B. Johnson became president following Kennedy’s assassination, and Johnson expressed a strong desire to support the GVN in its war with the NLF. Johnson used a supposed DRV naval attack on US Navy ships in the Vietnamese Gulf of Tonkin as a pretext to retaliate with air attacks on targets in the DRV. These attacks were also used by Johnson to encourage the US Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which gave Johnson the power to use any force he thought necessary to help the GVN government in its war.\(^8\) The situation worsened in February 1965 when a guerrilla attack on the US camp at Pleiku in South Vietnam killed and wounded a number of US servicemen. In response Johnson ordered a series of air attacks on the DRV that evolved into a continuing campaign of air attacks on targets

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\(^7\) Ibid., 71.

above the DMZ. The GVN military position continued to deteriorate until in early 1965 US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander, General William C. Westmoreland requested US troops to keep South Vietnam from falling to the guerrillas. Initially a relatively small force was sent to provide security for the airbase at Danang, but soon additional US troops were sent to South Vietnam, and their mission was expanded to fighting the war on the ground. 

The commitment of military forces of the United States to the war in the Republic of South Vietnam was increasing at a rapid pace by the summer of 1965, but some of the US military units found they still had too few men with which to defend those areas for which they were responsible. The United States Marine Corps base at Phu Bai was the northernmost of three Marine bases set along the northern coastal area of South Vietnam, and the Third Battalion of the Fourth Marine Regiment (3-4) was stationed at Phu Bai to protect the base and the air facilities located there. As the Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) was expanded for 3-4, the regimental staff became concerned as to whether they had a sufficient number of troops to provide security for the enlarged area. Defending the aircraft at the airbase was one of the most important responsibilities of the Marines, and the regimental staff thought the airbase was vulnerable to mortar attacks that could be initiated from the Vietnamese hamlets near the camp. The Civil Affairs officer for the regiment was Captain John Mullen, and he suggested a way to

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10 Ibid., 7, 23.

solve the problem to the regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel William Taylor. Mullen was aware the South Vietnamese had militia units at both the regional and the local level. At the regional level the militias were the Regional Forces (RFs), and at the local level the militias were the Popular Forces (PFs). These troops were technically under the control of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). However, in actuality, the South Vietnamese province chiefs controlled the RFs and the South Vietnamese village or district chiefs controlled the PFs. Mullen told the regimental commander that he thought the militia forces in the villages around the base could be used to help in the defense of Phu Bai.¹²

The request to use the South Vietnamese PFs in the defense of the camp may have shown how concerned the Marine commander was about the protection of Phu Bai. The military ability of ARVN troops was not highly respected by most Americans, and the PFs were among the most disdained of the South Vietnamese forces. In most cases, they were considered to have inadequate training, motivation, leadership, equipment, and pay. There was little to encourage someone to become a member of the PFs, but one of a limited number of benefits was that the militia member could serve close to his home. In spite of these concerns, Colonel Taylor asked for the use of some PFs, who were controlled by the district and the village chiefs, and he was allowed to have limited control of six PF platoons.¹³


The US Marines used the PF troops to create an innovative unit comprised of both Marines and South Vietnamese PFs. A Vietnamese-speaking Marine lieutenant named Paul Ek was assigned to organize the unit, and he began requesting enlisted volunteers from among the Marines in the infantry companies of the battalion. The volunteers were then formed into the standard Marine Corps squad formation of fourteen men with a sergeant or a corporal as the squad leader, and each squad was also assigned a US Navy Corpsman (medic). After the four squads were organized, they were each combined with a Vietnamese PF platoon of approximately thirty-five men to create a Joint Action Platoon, and together the Joint Action Platoons formed a Joint Action Company.\textsuperscript{14} The name of the Joint Action Platoons was later changed to Combined Action Platoons, and the name of the Joint Action Companies was changed to Combined Action Companies (CACs).

The mission of these units was more than simply to provide a greater degree of protection for Phu Bai, though. The Marines and the Vietnamese lived together in the villages the PFs were responsible for protecting, and they worked as an integrated unit in this effort. The Marines improved the military training of the Vietnamese troops, and they helped the Vietnamese villagers with various projects in the villages. Together, the PFs and the Marines defended the villages from the NLF, and they attempted to keep the guerrillas from entering the village to acquire the food, the supplies, the recruits, and the intelligence regarding allied forces that they needed to sustain their operations. These initial efforts showed the benefits of the program and by 1966 similar units were formed.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
in DaNang, Chu Lai, and Quang Tri. In November of 1965 the name of the units was changed from Joint Action Companies to Combined Action Companies, and the platoons were renamed Combined Action Platoons.

The idea of the CAPs was to more effectively fight the NLF by using the strengths of the Marines to improve the PF militia, and by using the strengths of the PFs to improve the Marines. Basically it combined a fourteen-man squad of US Marines with a platoon of South Vietnamese PFs. A US Navy Corpsman assigned to the Marine squad gave medical care to the Vietnamese in the village. Also, the Marines helped the village with various civic projects, such as digging wells and building schools. The men of the PF platoon were invaluable to the Marines in many ways. The Vietnamese knew the surrounding area, the people of the village, and the enemy. They could guide the Marines on the patrols the platoon conducted, they knew which villagers were friendly, they knew which families had relatives among the NLF, and they knew the habits and the fighting techniques of the NLF. As they came to know each other, the Vietnamese gave the Marines a better understanding of the culture and of the language of Vietnam.

To evaluate the CAP program as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war, it is necessary to define the concept of tactics. Tactics can be defined as the fighting that accomplishes the chosen strategy. Or,” Tactics means the dispositions for, and the control of, military forces and techniques in actual fighting. Put more shortly: strategy is the art

15 Klyman, 15.
and conduct of war, tactics the art of fighting.”¹⁸ So, the CAP program was a tactic chosen by the United States Marine Corps to fight the war in Vietnam.

There are varying opinions as to whether or not the CAP concept was an effective counterinsurgency concept during the Vietnam War. It may be that the CAPs were an odd and rather romantic part of the war that captured the imagination of some journalists and counterinsurgency enthusiasts. The CAP program may also have been a tactic of questionable worth that took men from the infantry battalions where they were needed for the main task of the hard fights with the main force units of the NLF and the NVA. Possibly the CAP concept was simply the best bad idea among many bad counterinsurgency ideas to come out of the Vietnam War, Or, it may be that the CAP program was never given adequate support to truly see how well it could work as a counterinsurgency tactic. Looking at how the CAP units performed can help answer some of these questions.

The strategy used by the United States in the Vietnam War is important for this study of the CAP program. There are two types of strategy that need to be defined, and the first of these is national strategy. National strategy can be defined as, “The art and science of developing and using the political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives.”¹⁹ The national strategy of the United States in the Republic of Vietnam was

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detailed in a National Security Action Memorandum approved by Johnson in November 1963. This memorandum stated the” central object of the United States in South Vietnam is to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy.”\textsuperscript{20} The second type of strategy is military strategy that can be defined as” The art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, or the threat of force.”\textsuperscript{21} When the United States committed ground combat forces to fight the war in Vietnam in March 1965, a military strategy was conceived to fulfill the US strategic objectives in Vietnam.

Much of the warfare conducted by the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in the Vietnam War was basically guerrilla warfare. Guerrilla warfare is the method of warfare counterinsurgency is intended to fight, and so it is necessary to understand it to analyze the effectiveness of the CAP program as a counterinsurgency tactic. Also, because counterinsurgency is a method of warfare used to fight against guerrilla warfare, some of the basic ideas of counterinsurgency warfare need to be discussed to evaluate the CAP program as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war.

Guerrilla warfare is one of the oldest methods of warfare, and it is arguably one of the best ways for a weaker force to fight a stronger enemy. The guerrillas can hide from a better-equipped and more numerous army, and strike quickly at supply columns and inattentive groups of soldiers. The guerrillas can disperse in a moment when the enemy


\textsuperscript{21} Weigley, xvii.
attacks, or when the enemy is too strong. A fundamental rule for guerrillas is to retreat before strength, and to attack weakness.

One of the most basic points in understanding guerrilla warfare is to realize guerrillas depend on the people for their existence, and because of this the guerrillas need the support of a significant percentage of the local population if they are to be successful. On many occasions guerrillas avoid detection by government troops by posing as civilians to blend in with the local civilian population. Also, the guerrillas frequently hide in remote camps to avoid opposing forces. In either of these situations the guerrillas depend on the people not to betray them. In addition, the guerrillas usually depend almost exclusively on the people of the local population for food, intelligence, recruits, and supplies. For these reasons a guerrilla movement cannot exist without the support of a substantial number of the people in the country.22

Military historian C.E. Callwell writing about the problems of fighting against guerrilla forces said guerrilla warfare is “The form of warfare in which most irregular warriors excel and in which regular troops are almost invariably seen at their worst.”23 Callwell’s viewpoint suggests how difficult it is for even a well-trained army to fight against guerrillas. Guerilla warfare has always been difficult to fight against, and it became even more so during the latter part of the twentieth century.

Communism offered a revolutionary ideology that changed guerrilla warfare in the twentieth century. In the Chinese Civil War, Mao Zedong blended the political ideology of communism with guerrilla war to conceive the potent hybrid of revolutionary

warfare. Mao saw the political indoctrination of the people as critical for the success of revolutionary warfare. His objective was the creation of a communist state, “Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail,” he declared, “as it must if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people and their sympathy, cooperation, and assistance cannot be gained.”

This allegiance of the people was gained partly through relentless political education of the people. Propaganda was so important because a new society with a new ideology was the objective. In the introduction to Mao Zedong’s book, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Samuel B. Griffith, the translator, said “A revolutionary war is never confined within the bounds of military action. Because its purpose is to destroy an existing society and its institutions and to replace them with a completely new state structure, any revolutionary war is a unity of which the constituent parts, in varying importance, are military, political, economic, social, and psychological.”

So, the attack of revolutionary war on a society was not exclusively military; instead, the attack was a political, an economic, a social, and a psychological attack on the existing society. Because of this the military attack of the guerrillas might be contained, but the war could be lost in the end because of the erosion of the existing society by the success of the economic, social, and psychological elements of revolutionary war. This was an elusive quality of revolutionary war that made it an especially powerful form of guerrilla warfare.

The Vietnamese used revolutionary warfare with stunning results when they overthrew French colonial control during the French Indochinese War (1946-1954), and

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25 Ibid., 7.
also in the Vietnam War. Of the guerrilla wars during the post- World War II period, the Chinese model of revolutionary war was probably used in its purest form outside of China in these two conflicts. General Vo Nguyen Giap of the NVA embraced Mao Zedong’s teachings of revolutionary war. Not only did we fight in the military field but also in the political, economic, and cultural field,” he wrote,” In the cultural field, we had to develop the culture of the Resistance imbued with a mass character and to heighten patriotism and hatred…”26 There were some changes as a result of the circumstances of the wars, but for the most part the Vietnamese followed the Chinese pattern of revolutionary warfare during both the French Indochinese War and the American War.

Revolutionary warfare generally has three phases, and for the most part the NLF and the NVA followed these three phases during the Vietnam War. In the initial defensive phase the revolutionary cadres teach the people the political principles of the revolution, and the cadres develop a political infrastructure network among the people. The second phase uses guerrilla warfare to expand the geographical area and the percentage of the population under the control of the revolution. As the revolution gains more control over the land and the population of the country it gains access to more of the food, the recruits, and the intelligence guerrilla forces need to exist and to succeed. Also, during this phase main force units of battalion size are trained and equipped, but these units are seldom used in combat during this phase of the revolution.27 Instead, they are formed primarily for use in the third stage of the revolution. The third phase of revolutionary warfare starts after the revolutionary forces grow in strength to achieve a

rough parity between their forces and those of the government. At this point the guerrillas continue to fight the government army, but now the main force battalions organized during the second phase confront the government forces in open combat to take complete control of the country.\textsuperscript{28}

A guerrilla war can be a formidable challenge, and counterinsurgency is a method of warfare a government in power uses to fight an insurgency. There are variations, but there are two basic ideas as to how a counterinsurgency war should be fought. The first of these is to use overwhelming and indiscriminate force to kill as many of the guerrillas and the people who support them as possible. In doing this many homes, farms, and businesses are destroyed, and many innocent people are also killed. The objective of this approach is to destroy the guerrillas and to destroy their means of subsistence, and it is also meant to create such a fear of the government that none of the people will support the insurgency.\textsuperscript{29} Apart from the ethical questions inherent in this policy, creating a fear of the government also creates a great hatred of the government. The government can never have any trust in the people after this, and if the government becomes weak it is probable the insurgency will start again.

The second approach is to fight a counterinsurgency war as if it were a mirror of the insurgency. The insurgency has an ideological base that challenges the ideology of the government in power, and the government attacks the ideology of the insurgency. The allegiance of the people of the country is seen as the true prize and strength for both

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 52.
\item \textsuperscript{29} John A. Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 28.
\end{itemize}
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sides.\textsuperscript{30} The ideological appeal of the insurgency has political, economic, social, and psychological elements, and the counterinsurgency has to find ways to neutralize and discredit each of these. Social, economic, and political reforms are among the ways this can be done. Also, propaganda that may include appeals such as those to historical patriotism and traditional values can be used. The use of military force is the smallest element in this approach. The army systematically clears the populated areas of guerrillas and then prevents the guerrillas from returning to these areas. In doing this the army is careful not to harm the people as it pursues the guerrillas, and the soldiers are trained to treat the people of the country well. Winning the support of the people and keeping them physically separated from the guerrillas is the most important part of this approach. Without the support of the people, and access to the people, the guerrillas lose the food, the intelligence, and the recruits needed for the existence of the insurgency.\textsuperscript{31}

The concept of pacification is a basic part of this second approach to counterinsurgency. In an insurgency the guerrilla forces are dependent on the civilian population for support. Guerrillas often hide among civilians to avoid being attacked by government forces, but it is also necessary for them to get food, recruits, and intelligence about government operations from the civilian population. Without this support a guerrilla force cannot survive.\textsuperscript{32} One technique government forces have for separating the guerrillas from the civilian population and for gaining the loyalty of the civilian population for the central government is pacification. In this process the government

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Bernard B. Fall, \textit{Street without Joy} (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1964) 374-375.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Nagl, 28- 29.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Trevett, 179- 180.
\end{itemize}
prevents guerrillas from contact with the civilians by creating a security screen of troops around civilian areas. After this has been accomplished the government troops work to find any guerrilla agents among the civilians, and throughout the process of pacification government forces continue to look for guerrilla agents among the people. When most of the guerrilla threat is removed, the government forces attempt to increase the loyalty of the civilians to the government in various ways such as addressing any grievances the people have toward the government, and by convincing them that the guerrillas are not working for the best interests of the people of the country. The government forces also work to create local government loyal to the central government and economic activity capable of supporting the civilian population.

The reality of counterinsurgency is usually somewhere between the more brutal and the more benign examples of counterinsurgency warfare described here. However, it is usually more similar to the brutal example. Some persuasion of the people may be attempted, but terror, intimidation, and indiscriminate killing quickly become the rule. The military historian Douglas Porch put it well when he said counterinsurgency warfare tactics” place the crosshairs on the people in a process of escalation inherent in war and are seldom population- friendly. The people are not so much biddable as they become targets of force and coercion, and the competition devolves not into one of governance but into intimidation by both sides…” The truth is that much of the nature of any war is

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33 Ibid., 151.
34 Ibid., 187- 188.
simply a matter of vicious killing, and this is especially true of guerrilla war. Fighting enemies who hide among people who frequently support them and suffering losses from ambushes, snipers, and booby traps can become insanely frustrating. It is all too easy and seemingly effective to lash out with mindless brutality.

Much of this was true of the Vietnam War, but it was not true of all of it. There was a good deal of idealism in the effort of the US in Vietnam, despite the overall catastrophic effect of the Indochine war. Many of the pacification programs in the war were intended to help the people. Also, not all of the US soldiers who went to Vietnam were soulless killers while they were there. Many went because they thought they were helping the people of a weak country defend themselves from totalitarian aggression, and these soldiers were sincere in their desire to help the people while they were there. The CAP program may or may not be an example of these more humane attempts on the part of the United States. If they were, and if they were an effective counterinsurgency tactic in Vietnam, it might be reasoned that a more effective counterinsurgency war that truly tried to help the people could have been fought in Vietnam if the program had been handled differently. This is a question that needs more discussion, and this study will address it.

This study will fill a gap in existing research by analyzing CAP performance as a counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. Little has been written about the performance of the Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War, and even less has been written about the CAP concept as a tactic of counterinsurgency. During the war two

books were written about the CAP platoons, and both of these are fine primary sources. William R. Corson published his book in 1968, and it is a harsh indictment of the way the war was fought. In The Betrayal, Corson says that the CAPs were effective as a counterinsurgency tactic, but he does not go into much detail regarding what they did to make them effective. The second book is a one year history of the experiences of a CAP platoon in a Vietnamese village. The author, F.J. West, spent a good deal of time in the village with the CAP platoon as he was doing his research, and as a result, The Village, (1972) is a good primary source for this study. One of the strongest endorsements of the CAP concept came from former Central Intelligence Agency official, Douglas Blaufarb. In his book, The Counterinsurgency Era,(1977) he speaks highly of the CAPs as a counterinsurgency tactic that he thinks should have been widely used in the war by both the US Army and the US Marine Corps. Further support for the CAP idea as a counterinsurgency tactic was provided in 1984 with the publication of First to Fight by Victor Krulak. In his detailed account of how the US Marine Corps thought the war should have been fought, Krulak has the CAP platoons as a central part of an extensive pacification plan. The other side of the controversy the US Army and the US Marine Corps had over how the Vietnam War should have been fought was presented by Westmoreland in 1976 when his book, A Soldier Reports, was published. Westmoreland thought the US forces should concentrate on finding and fighting the main force NLF and NVA units, and should give the job of pacification to the South Vietnamese forces, He thought the U. S. forces would waste their strength if they were utilized in duties similar to those of the CAP platoons.


38 Krulak, 197.
The evolution of counterinsurgency policy in Vietnam is dealt with extensively in Larry E. Cable’s book, *Conflict of Myths, The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (1986). In the book he mentions the CAPs as one of the better tactics of the US Marine Corps in Vietnam, but he only mentions this in passing, and he does not go into detail as to why he thinks this. In 1989 the most comprehensive history of the CAPs was published, and this is the best history of the CAPs written to this date. Michael E. Peterson wrote, *Combined Action Platoons*, and the book’s worth is increased because Peterson was able to draw from his own experiences as a CAP veteran. The history of the CAPs in Vietnam is detailed in this book, and Peterson discusses some of the strengths and the weaknesses of the program as the war progressed. He thinks that more support for the CAPs and better organization would have made them more effective. Still, he does not go into detail regarding their worth as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war. During this period Major Andrew Krepinevich published his important book, *The Army and Vietnam*, in which he argues the United States should have used a counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam instead of relying on the search for large unit battles that Westmoreland favored. He sees the CAPs as a central component of a counterinsurgency strategy, and he thinks the CAPs performance demonstrated some of the best techniques of counterinsurgency theory.\(^\text{39}\) As we can see, then, many distinguished writers have said the CAP program was, or could have been, a good counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

Some of the history of the Vietnam War written after the 1980’s had differing opinions regarding the worth of the CAP program in the Vietnam War. A good deal of

the negative thinking about the CAPs during this period can be attributed to revisionism in Vietnam War history that thought the war should not have been fought using a counterinsurgency strategy. However, some historians of the Vietnam War who wrote during this time still made favorable references to the CAP program. In his history of guerrilla warfare, *War in the Shadows*, (1994) William B. Asprey says that a number of counterinsurgency experts thought highly of the CAPs as a successful counterinsurgency tactic. He says that because Westmoreland continued to pressure the US Marines to conduct the large-scale search and destroy operations Westmoreland favored, the Marines had too few men to use to expand the CAP program. The infantry battalions needed every available man when they went looking for battle with the main force NLF and NVA units.40 Further support for this idea was provided by Michael A Hennessy in his book, *Strategy in Vietnam*, (1997) in which he says the Americans did not take advantage of the successes of the CAPs. He goes on to say there were various reasons for this, but the primary reason was that Westmoreland did not want US forces engaged in a counterinsurgency role in the war.41

In 1997 another primary source was published. This book, *CAP Mot*, relates the experiences of Barry L. Goodson who served in a CAP unit during the war. This is a detailed account of the day-to-day life of Goodson, his fellow Marines, and the Vietnamese with whom they interacted. The great detail in this book makes it a good source for studying the counterinsurgency methods of the CAPs. During this period some revisionist historians began to argue that if conventional military methods had been

40 Asprey, 955.

applied differently, the war in Vietnam could have been won. Many of these historians rejected the idea that the war should have been fought using a strategy of counterinsurgency. In his book, *A Question of Command*, (2007) Mark Moyar supports this idea, and he says the CAP program was an unnecessary drain of needed manpower. He thinks the CAPs had few benefits, and those benefits did not justify taking men away from the regular infantry units where they were needed for the search and destroy missions.

In 2013 Douglas Porch published his book, *Counterinsurgency*. In his work Porch sweeps aside the controversy over whether a conventional or a counterinsurgency strategy could have won the Vietnam War. Instead, he says the war in Vietnam was unwinnable for the United States, and it should not have been fought. Those who contend a counterinsurgency strategy could have won the war are misguided, in his view. He thinks advocates of counterinsurgency warfare place too much value on the ability of counterinsurgency methods to win wars, and that the fundamental question of strategy should be the primary consideration.\(^{42}\)

In a 2014 book, *To Defend and Befriend*, John Southard examines the cultural difficulties experienced by the Vietnamese and the Marines as the CAPs operated in and around the Vietnamese villages.\(^{43}\) Southard also looks at the problems inter-service rivalries created for the CAP military operations during the war.\(^{44}\) This book gives a

\(^{42}\) Porch, 177.


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 142-143.
detailed account of the lives of the CAP members, but it does not go into detail as to why the CAPs were or were not a useful counterinsurgency tactic.

After analyzing the historical literature of the Vietnam War related to the CAPs, it is evident there is no extensive discussion of why the CAP program was, or could have been, effective as a counterinsurgency tactic. Using counterinsurgency ideas to evaluate the CAP performance during the Vietnam War will help show whether or not the CAP program might have been a fundamental piece of a successful, general counterinsurgency strategy in the war. Also, a study of this sort may show that this thinking is misguided, and that the CAPs have been overrated in their performance and their potential as a counterinsurgency tactic. In either event, the study will help resolve some of the differences between those who think a conventional approach was best in the war, and those who think a counterinsurgency approach would have brought about better results.

Washington gave Westmoreland responsibility for choosing a military strategy for the war, and he decided on a military strategy of attrition. One important reason he chose this strategy was that the US government wanted to confine the war to South Vietnam. Even though the war in South Vietnam was directed and supported by North Vietnam, the US did not want to invade North Vietnam and risk a confrontation with the Chinese such as occurred in the Korean War. Westmoreland also chose a strategy of attrition because he thought the NVA and The NLF had progressed to the third phase of revolutionary warfare. Main force units of the NVA and the NLF were fighting pitched battles with the ARVN in an effort to topple the government of South Vietnam, and in Westmoreland’s opinion these main force units were a constant threat, and they had to be destroyed before full attention could be turned to pacification. The objective of this
military strategy of attrition was to kill NVA and NLF main force unit troops until the NLF and North Vietnam either lost the will to resist, or they were unable to field an effective fighting force. North Vietnam was sending many of its soldiers into South Vietnam, but because he thought the NVA and the NLF had limited manpower available, Westmoreland thought the strategy of attrition would succeed. Also, Westmoreland thought the number of recruits available for both the NLF main force units and guerrilla forces would be fewer as the ARVN pacification efforts gained more control of the populated rural areas for the South Vietnamese government. As the ARVN gained more control of the populated rural areas from the NLF guerrillas there would be fewer recruits available for the NLF. Because of this the NVA would have to provide an increasing number of their own forces to make up for the losses, and Westmoreland thought the high demand for more troops would mean the NVA replacements would be less effective because they would have little training.45

The primary tactic Westmoreland chose to accomplish his strategy of attrition came to be known as the search and destroy operation. These operations sent US infantry forces of multi-battalion strength and larger to find the main-force NVA and NLF units, to fight them, and to inflict heavy casualties on them. If the strategy of attrition were to be successful, it was critical for the tactic of search and destroy operations to find and destroy the main-force units of the NVA and the NLF.46

Westmoreland thought it was important to have a strong pacification program in the Vietnam War, but he did not think US troops should play a central part. Instead, he

wanted the ARVN troops to concentrate on pacification duties because he thought they were more compatible with the Vietnamese people. He also thought there was the potential for negative incidents between US troops and the Vietnamese people if US troops were used in pacification duties. It may be that Westmoreland also thought US casualties would be increased if US troops conducted pacification programs. Most importantly, though, Westmoreland thought attacks by large NLF and NVA units could disrupt pacification efforts, and because of this he placed his first priority on destroying the main force enemy units. He thought pacification that included the destruction of local NLF guerrilla forces could be accomplished more easily after the majority of the NVA and NLF regiments and battalions and the threats they presented to pacification were eliminated. So, Westmoreland saw the destruction of the main- force enemy units as his primary mission for the war and pacification as a secondary mission.

Westmoreland’s plan for the war, then, was to use a military strategy of attrition to defeat the enemy. This meant he wanted US forces to kill the soldiers of the NVA and NLF main- force units in such overwhelming numbers that eventually they could not be replaced. Westmoreland had confidence the fighting ability of US troops, the mobility helicopters gave US troops, and the fire support of US air and artillery for US troops would defeat the enemy forces in a battle. As far as pacification was concerned, Westmoreland wanted the ARVN to conduct most of the pacification efforts. He thought the main- force NLF and NVA units were a threat to pacification until they were destroyed, and he saw the NLF guerrillas as a lesser threat. He wanted to concentrate on

47 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 146.
48 Ibid., 149.
destroying the main-force enemy units, and after this was accomplished he would concentrate on pacification and the destruction of the NLF guerrilla forces.

Westmoreland’s strategy was not without its critics, though, and some of these were a number of the highest-ranking generals in the Marine Corps. Among these was Lieutenant General Krulak, who became a vocal critic of Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition. Krulak was the Commander in Chief, Pacific when the war began, and in this capacity he was responsible for supplying and training Marines in Vietnam, but he did not have direct command over them. However, during 1965 Krulak watched events in South Vietnam as the military strategy of attrition was practiced and the fighting intensified. In December of 1965 he became concerned enough about the conduct of the war to write a report that was especially critical of the strategy of attrition. In his analysis Krulak said if the intention of attrition was to kill enemy soldiers until there were too few to replace them, or until the enemy lost the will to fight, the strategy probably could not work. He thought the objective could not be accomplished without an unacceptable loss of American and ARVN lives. He estimated the NVA and the NLF had available manpower of approximately 2,500,000 men. At the time he wrote, he said, two and a half enemy soldiers were being killed for every American or ARVN soldier who died in combat. If this ratio continued, and if the current ratio of ARVN to American deaths continued, he calculated 165,000 ARVN soldiers and 10,000 Americans would die to reduce enemy forces by twenty percent. 49 Rather than using what he saw as the failed strategy of attrition, Krulak proposed a different strategy.

49 Krulak, 198-199.
Krulak wanted to use an enclave military strategy for the war. This was a variation of an “oil spot” strategy that would occupy and pacify an area and then work outward from the occupied area to gradually control and pacify an increasingly larger area. He chose this strategy because as he studied Vietnam Krulak saw that eighty percent of the people in South Vietnam lived in the fertile, coastal regions of the country where the majority of the country’s rice crop was grown. These regions only extended inland for a few miles, and they only made up a small percentage of the country, but these coastal areas and the off-shore waters produced large amounts of fish, salt, and rice. In contrast to the coastal regions, the interior of the country was not good for rice cultivation, and it had a small population. However, it was mountainous and much of it was covered with heavy vegetation, and this is where the NVA and the main force NLF battalions and regiments hid themselves. Krulak knew much of the food supply for these units was obtained from the coastal regions of South Vietnam. If the enemy were denied this source of food, food could be brought down the trails from North Vietnam, but this would mean fewer military supplies could be brought to the fighters. Krulak thought a more likely possibility was that the NVA and the NLF units would attack the coastal areas to gain access to the food of the region. If this were the case the Americans would be in the favorable position of fighting defensive battles where their artillery and air power could give them a distinct advantage. To take advantage of this situation Krulak wanted to establish heavily-defended enclaves in the coastal regions of South Vietnam. As the Marines expanded the enclaves, they would eventually pacify and control all of the rich, food-producing areas of the coast, and the enemy would be blocked from the food needed to feed its troops.  

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 196-198.
Soon after US Marines were committed to South Vietnam in March of 1965, they began to put an enclave strategy into practice. The Marine Corps was given responsibility for the five northern-most provinces in South Vietnam that together comprised the region designated as I Corps, and Marine Corps Major General Lewis Walt, who favored the enclave strategy, was placed in command of the Marines in I Corps. Located along the coast of I Corps was one of the heavily-populated, rice-producing coastal regions of South Vietnam, and the Marine Corps established three base areas along this coast. The two bases at either end were approximately one hundred miles apart, with Chu Lai located in the south, Danang fifty miles to the north of Chu Lai, and Phu Bai located fifty miles north of Danang. Even though the Marines were under the overall command of Westmoreland, who favored a strategy of attrition, they had some freedom of action within I Corps, and they began to use an enclave strategy in I Corps. The strategy was intended to gradually move out of the three base areas to secure and pacify the territory between them. While this one large enclave was being created along the coast of South Vietnam, the Marines would also be expanding the enclave inland to eventually cover all of the heavily-populated, rice-producing area of this coastal region.51

The Marine Corps had mixed results with its early attempts to find tactics to accomplish pacification in its enclave strategy. If the enclave strategy were to be successful, it was vital to keep the guerrillas away from the people where they could get the food, the recruits, and the intelligence the guerrillas needed. The Marine battalions were able to push the NVA, the NLF main force units, and some of the guerrillas away

from the populated areas, but many of the guerrillas filtered back to the villages and the
hamlets. The ARVN was supposed to move in behind the Marines to pacify the areas
the Marines cleared, but the Marines became disillusioned with the performance of the
ARVN. One Marine colonel said “The ARVN came not to stay, but to loot, collect back
taxes, reinstall landlords, and conduct reprisals against the people.” After the Marines
cleared an area southwest of Danang, the South Vietnamese sent Regional Force (RF)
and PF units into a number of villages to perform pacification activities. There were some
Marine units positioned close to the villages for protection, but the guerrillas avoided the
Marines and attacked the villages where RF and the PF units were located. The NLF
guerrillas decimated a number of the PF and RF units and the pacification project in this
area was abandoned. Experiences such as these convinced the Marines they would have
to do most of the pacification work themselves.

The Marines experimented with pacification programs, and they had a number of
successes. In the village of Le My close to Danang Marine infantry units drove the local
guerrillas away from the village and started a pacification program in the village. They
gave the PFs in the village training to improve their military proficiency, and they helped
the PFs build better physical defenses for the village. Also, schools and a marketplace
were built. In another area villagers asked the Marines to protect their rice harvest so
the guerrillas could not take what they considered to be their share of the harvest as a tax.

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53 Ibid.
55 Krulak, 183- 185.
The Marines set up a perimeter defense of the harvest area, and the guerrillas were not able to get any of the rice the villagers harvested. Because of the success of this Golden Fleece operation, as these rice harvest protection operations were called, operations such as these were frequently conducted to protect rice harvests. Also, the Marines conducted what were known as County Fair operations. In these operations the Marines would surround a village and an ARVN unit would search the village for guerrillas. The identification cards of the people were checked, and any people suspected of being guerrillas would be detained. As this process proceeded, the people of the village were fed, and often music and entertainment were provided. Because these operations were somewhat festive in nature, they were called County Fairs. These various programs accomplished some pacification tasks, but they were still not very effective.

The central problem was that the Marine infantry units could not stay in the villages to prevent the NLF guerrillas from returning, and without protection from NLF retribution the people would not give their allegiance to the Marines. All of the Marine infantry companies and battalions were needed for the constant patrolling necessary to find NLF and NVA threats. The patrolling was important for locating evidence of the presence of guerrillas, and for disrupting any of their plans for attacks. The patrols were conducted throughout the Marine enclave area, and also in the areas beyond the enclaves. When NLF or NVA units were detected the Marines had to be poised to attack them immediately, and because of this the Marines could not afford to have their infantry units tied down in security duty in the Vietnamese villages. In the village of Le My the Marine

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56 Ibid., 191.
57 Ibid., 187.
infantry unit had to leave the village after helping to improve the defenses of the village and building schools and a market place, and the local PF’s were left with the responsibility of protecting the village from the NLF guerrillas. In the villages where the rice- harvest protection operations were conducted, and in the villages where the County Fair operations were performed, the situation was similar. The Marines had to leave for their other duties, and the PF’s were left to protect the villages from the guerrillas. The glaring problem was that the PF’s had generally shown they were incapable of fighting off the guerrillas by themselves. The PFs could not provide security from the guerrillas for the people, and security from the reprisals of the guerrillas was the cornerstone of any pacification program that would convince the people to give their loyalty to the Marines.

Many people involved with US pacification programs were slow to appreciate how critical security was to the process of pacification. In 1968 an official involved with pacification programs said, “Over the past six years there have been a number of pacification programs, none of which have really succeeded. Actually, we never found out whether or not these pacification programs would work because the first basic requirement, security, has never been achieved.”58 He indicated he finally understood the importance of keeping the guerillas away from the Vietnamese people when he said, “The types of commitment we are asking them to make would probably result in their getting their throats cut by the Vietcong.”59 The official realized security was the primary factor in pacification, and he concluded by saying, “Whether security is 10% of the total

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59 Ibid., 263.
problem to be resolved or 90%, it is, inescapably, the first 10% or the first 90%.”60 It is
difficult to understand why in 1968 so few US government officials understood the
importance of security in the process of pacification.

However, the CAPs appeared to show promising results in their first months of
existence, and it looked as if they might be the key to counterinsurgency in the
Vietnamese villages in the Marine enclaves. The few Marines in each CAP and the PFs
they trained often became a lethal force to fight the guerrillas. The CAPs conducted a
large number of day and night patrols and ambushes in and around the villages to keep
the guerrillas away. In doing this, the PFs were invaluable to the Marines because most of
the PFs had grown up in the villages where they were stationed, they were well-
acquainted with the area, and they knew many of the civilians in the villages personally.
In some instances the PFs personally knew the guerrillas against whom they fought. The
CAP members were also creating good relations with many of the Vietnamese people
because when they were not looking for the guerrillas they performed pacification tasks
in the villages. Medical care was provided for the people on a regular basis, and the CAP
members helped to repair roads and construct buildings. Partly because of their
pacification activities, the CAPs thought they gained the good will of some of the
Vietnamese civilians. Importantly, the CAP members were a constant presence among
the people, and they let both the civilians and the guerrillas know they intended to stay
and defend the villages. Also, the Marines and the PFs in the CAPs were starting to keep
the guerrillas out of the villages, and this along with the cooperation of some of the

60 Ibid., 263.
people meant the CAPs could begin to more effectively keep the guerrillas away from the food, the recruits, the supplies, and the intelligence the guerrillas needed to survive.

In early 1967 the successes of the CAPs encouraged the Marine Corps to officially make the CAP program a primary part of its plan to pacify the enclaves. The first CAP began operating in the summer of 1965, and by the end of 1967 the Marines expanded the program to include seventy-nine CAPs operating in the three Marine enclaves of Chu Lai, Danang, and Phu Bai. It became clear that the CAP program needed to succeed in order for the enclave strategy to succeed.

So, there were basically two military strategies used by US ground forces in the Vietnam War. Westmoreland used the military strategy of attrition, and he primarily used the tactic of search and destroy missions in an effort to accomplish his attrition strategy. The other military strategy was the enclave strategy advocated by some of the leading generals of the United States Marine Corps. For this strategy the Marine Corps used the CAP program as one of the central tactics to accomplish the enclave strategy.

Of course, the United States did not accomplish its objectives in South Vietnam, and some place much of the blame for this failure on Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition and his tactics of search and destroy operations. A common criticism of the search and destroy operations was that US infantry units of battalion strength and larger pushed through the jungle for weeks on end looking for the NLF and the NVA main force units without finding them. The author William J. Lederer said” On the average, out of every 1,000 ‘search and destroy missions’ the US Army has fired at the enemy less than twenty

61 Ibid, 189.
times.” 62 In those instances when US forces did find them, the NLF and the NVA soldiers almost always chose the time and the place for the battle. The NVA and the NLF used the tactic of “moving and pinning” in which they lured US troops into a fight with a small force, and then attacked the flanks and the rear of the US unit with larger guerilla forces. 63 The US forces were usually ambushed in an area the enemy chose, and the NLF and NVA units only fought until they decided to disengage from the battle and disperse their forces. The NLF and NVA then rested and resupplied their soldiers until they were ready to choose another time and place to fight the American forces. 64 US Army General Alexander Haig described these operations well when he called them “a demented and bloody form of hide-and-seek.” 65 The strategy of attrition was intended to bleed the enemy until he either had too few soldiers left to continue the fight, or he lost the will to fight. The reality, though, was that, for the most part, the NVA and the NLF decided the number of casualties they would suffer because they decided when, where, and for how long they would accept battle with US troops. The ineffectiveness of the search and destroy operations was considered by many to be one of the important reasons for the failure of the strategy of attrition.

Some critics of the conduct of the war thought the enclave strategy proposed by the US Marine Corps should have been used more extensively than it was. Among the supporters of the enclave strategy were US Army generals James Gavin and Maxwell

64 Lewis Sorley, Westmoreland, 92.
65 Ibid.
Taylor. The British counterinsurgency authority, Robert Thompson said a strategy should have been put into practice in South Vietnam to gain control of the highly-populated areas where the majority of South Vietnam’s food was produced. In his thinking” Militarily the whole object is to expand the government controlled areas in an offensive campaign strategically directed both to improve the assets available to the government and to deprive the enemy of them.” This was a succinct description of the enclave strategy used by the Marine Corps.

If the enclave strategy were to be successful, though, the CAP program had to be successful. The CAP program was a key tactic in the enclave strategy, and opinions regarding its worth varied. Richard Clutterbuck was a British counterinsurgency expert who observed the Vietnam War, and he was impressed with the CAP program. In his opinion, in 1968 the CAPs were one of the only encouraging signs in the war for the American forces. One of his reasons for thinking this was that the CAPs did not come into the villages during the day and leave in the evening, as many other allied units did. Instead they lived among the people and defended them from NLF intimidation. Lederer studied the war closely, and he stated flatly that the CAP program comprised” the only successful American project of any kind whatsoever in Vietnam.” While the CAP program had its proponents, it also had its critics, and among the most important and influential of these was Westmoreland. He wanted a strategy of attrition and tactics

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66 Krulak, 186.
67 Robert Thompson, No Exit from Vietnam, 168.
69 Lederer, 186.
of search and destroy missions to destroy the main force units of the NLF and the NVA. For the large battles Westmoreland was seeking, the US infantry units would need every man they had. So, in Westmoreland’s opinion, CAPs were taking men needed for the battalions’ big fights to perform the pacification and security duties he wanted done by the ARVN. The historian Mark Moyar studied the CAPs, and he did not think any positive results the program created justified the number of US troops needed for the CAP program. He saw the CAPs as a useful stopgap measure to improve the leadership abilities of the PFs, but while he saw them as useful for that purpose, he did not think they accomplished much civic action in the villages. Performing civic action was a part of their mission, and it is an important counterinsurgency activity. Importantly, Moyar agreed with Westmoreland’s tactics of search and destroy operations, and he thought the infantrymen assigned to the CAPs would be more useful in the infantry battalions for the battles with the NLF and the NVA main force units.

Ideally, the CAPs had to accomplish a number of functions to work well as a counterinsurgency tactic within the Marine Corps enclave strategy. Their most basic responsibility was to provide security for the Vietnamese people by keeping the guerrillas out of the villages, and away from the people. As they kept the guerrillas out of the villages, the CAPs also needed to make every effort to block the guerrillas from getting food, recruits, supplies, and intelligence regarding government operations from the people of the villages. The CAPs also needed to find and eliminate any guerrilla agents or members of the guerrilla infrastructure among the people in the village. Also, the CAP

70 Westmoreland, 165-166.

members had to gain the loyalty of the people, and develop intelligence sources among
the people of the villages. It was also necessary for the CAPs to do civic action and
economic projects to improve the living standards and the economic conditions of the
village. Psychological operations needed to be conducted to discredit the guerrillas and to
promote the loyalty of the people of the village to the central government. Local
government also needed to be developed and strengthened with the intention of
improving the control of the central government over the villages.

Looking at the CAP program as a counterinsurgency tactic will be valuable
because this aspect of the history of the CAP program has been overlooked for the most
part, and the CAP concept may have been a promising counterinsurgency tactic in the
Vietnam War. The historian John Prados said” Almost all accounts of CAPs are either
dry recitations in official Marine Corps official histories or close to the earth visions of
single villages, and there has long been room for broader studies.”72 Evaluating the CAP
program with counterinsurgency concepts will help determine whether the CAPs were an
effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. If they were, and if they were not
used well, then this may point to an alternate strategy the United States could have used
in Vietnam in which the CAPs would have played an integral part. The reverse has to be
considered, also. By using counterinsurgency concepts to evaluate the performance of
CAPs in Vietnam, it may be determined that the CAPs were not successful as a
counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. They may have simply been a romantic
idea that captured the imagination of writers and historians, and they may have had little
use as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war. So, a study of CAPs within the framework of

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counterinsurgency concepts should provide a better understanding of CAPs as a counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War, and a better understanding of how the CAPs were used in the war.

Tentatively, the argument for this study is that the CAP program had potential as a counterinsurgency tactic, but it was not used well in the Vietnam War. The performance of the CAP program suffered because of the conflict between the US Army and the US Marine Corps over the appropriate strategy and tactics for the war. Also, the ineffectiveness and the corruption of the GVN inhibited the ability of the CAPS to conduct their counterinsurgency missions in a better manner. Initial considerations seem to show that in the villages where they were located the CAPs accomplished a number of counterinsurgency tasks. The CAPs trained the local militia to make it more militarily proficient, and they defended the villagers from the guerrillas. Because they separated the villages and the villagers from the guerrillas, the CAPs accomplished the important counterinsurgency function of separating the guerrillas from the food, the recruits, the supplies, and the intelligence necessary for the success of a guerrilla force. The CAPs, though, may not have been able to perform some of the more sophisticated aspects of counterinsurgency, such as rooting out the hidden political infrastructure of the guerrillas that existed in most villages. The reason for this may be that the CAPs were not given adequate training and support to accomplish these more sophisticated requirements of counterinsurgency. For instance, there appear to have been few, in any, psychological operations and intelligence units used in coordination with the CAP platoons. Also, there were few Vietnamese linguists assigned to the CAPs, and little Vietnamese language training was given to the CAP members.
Some of the counterinsurgency efforts of the CAPs were successful, but these successes may have been limited because virtually the only people truly involved in the CAPs seem to have been enlisted Marines who had little training for the more sophisticated techniques of the difficult job they were assigned. Also, it looks as if the CAP program was not made a part of a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan in a designated area. A comprehensive plan might have located the CAPs close to each other to progressively control an expanding area. To make this idea successful it would have been necessary to have psychological warfare units, civic action units, and mobile strike forces working in close support of a widening network of CAP-controlled villages. It seems, though, the CAPs were established in a haphazard way, and it certainly seems they were not given very much training and support. As a result of this, it appears the CAP units were not as successful as they might have been.
CHAPTER II

THE START OF THE COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS

The Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) were composed of fourteen Marines, a US Navy Corpsman, and a platoon of approximately thirty-five South Vietnamese Popular Forces militiamen. For various reasons there were usually even fewer Marines and fewer militiamen in these units. Led by a Marine sergeant or corporal, the Marines lived in the villages with the PFs and helped form the two groups into combat forces capable of defending Vietnamese villages that often included thousands of people and covered an area of a number of square miles.

In the early months of 1965, the situation in the Republic of Vietnam was going from bad to worse. A dizzying series of political coups had occurred during the previous year until some political stability appeared to have taken hold with the coming to power of Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu. This was small consolation, though, because the government’s war against the National Liberation Front (NLF) was progressing badly. Shortly after he took office, Ky said the situation was getting more difficult for the South Vietnamese forces,” In the Central Highlands… at least one regular North Vietnamese Army division had invaded this region. More troops had reinforced Vietcong units throughout the highlands with thousands of well-trained North Vietnamese regulars, including many leaders… the number of Vietcong incidents had increased
dramatically. In short, the enemy was on the verge of cutting South Vietnam into two parts.”

The quality of the guerrilla forces and their increased aggressiveness were certainly factors in creating the crisis for South Vietnam, but a primary reason for the crisis was how effectively the guerrillas fought against the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). An example of this was the battle of Ap Bac fought in the Mekong Delta in January 1963. In this battle an ARVN force including mechanized troops and helicopter support attacked an inferior number of NLF fighters. Instead of retreating, the NLF force stood and fought the ARVN. The NLF unit defeated the ARVN troops and destroyed a number of helicopters and armored personnel carriers. ² In the last days of December 1964, a major battle that continued for four days was fought close to the Vietnamese village of Binh Gia. The enemy destroyed two battalions of ARVN troops and inflicted serious casualties on the relief force sent to help the South Vietnamese forces.³ The South Vietnamese were losing battle after battle to the enemy, and General William C. Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), sounded especially discouraged when he said, “The enemy was destroying battalions faster than they could be reconstituted and faster than we had planned to organize them under the ARVN’s crash build-up plan.”⁴ An enemy growing stronger and battlefield

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defeats might not have been critical if the ARVN had a strong sense of purpose and good morale. However, one significant sign of crumbling ARVN morale was a desertion rate of 5,000 to 7,000 men per month. 5 Some of these men may have simply gone to their villages to help with the crops, or to take care of family business, but the majority probably left to avoid the fighting. If matters were left to pursue their course, South Vietnam could soon lose the war, and it looked as if only more military help from the United States could prevent defeat.

Many South Vietnamese felt alienated from the ARVN because they saw it as an army originally formed by the French, and this may have been part of the reason for its poor morale and its poor performance. One scholar said, “ARVN had, as we say, a birth defect resulting from the difficulties and weaknesses inherent in the circumstances of its formation. It was a creation of the French colonial administration, set up and trained by the French.”6 This made it hard for the South Vietnamese to identify with ARVN as their army protecting their country, but the problem was aggravated because, “ARVN’s high-ranking soldiers were almost without exception products of French military academies or officers who rose within the ranks of the French expeditionary corps.”7 For the South Vietnamese people, and for the enlisted men who served in the ARVN, it was probably difficult to feel any great loyalty or pride for an army that appeared to be an extension of their colonial past.

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5 Ibid., 101.

6 Bui Tin, From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002), 16-17.

7 Ibid., 16-17.
In the United States President Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors were trying to find ways the United States could help prevent the South Vietnamese from being defeated by the insurgents. The defeat appeared to be imminent, and the solutions appeared to be few. US military assistance for the South Vietnamese was massive by this time. By the end of 1964 military advisers were serving down to battalion level with the South Vietnamese troops. In addition, MACV trained, equipped, and developed the South Vietnamese armed forces, and some combat support was supplied with US helicopters. 8 Still, the advisers, the equipment, and the training were not enough to avert the current crisis.

The position of most of the decision makers in the United States was that the NLF guerrilla organization in South Vietnam was created by and controlled by North Vietnam. 9 They either did not understand or would not acknowledge the NLF was formed as a response to the corruption and injustice of the South Vietnamese government (GVN), and a nationalistic desire to unite the two Vietnams into one country.10 It was thought that if North Vietnam would end its support of the guerrillas, the South Vietnamese could defeat the rebellion. This thinking guided the US response when the US forces were attacked at the Pleiku base in South Vietnam on February 7, 1965. Some of the US helicopter units supporting South Vietnamese troops were stationed there, and Washington saw the attack in the Central Highlands as a message from the North

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8 Ibid., 59.


Vietnamese to either stop US intervention in the war or suffer the consequences. Eight US servicemen were killed in the attack, and over one hundred were wounded. The attack also did extensive damage to the camp. The US saw the attack as a direct challenge from the North Vietnamese, and the US quickly struck back by sending aircraft to hit targets in North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{11}

Matters soon worsened with an NLF attack against US forces at Qui Nhon in South Vietnam on February 10, 1965, only three days after the attack at Pleiku. In this attack twenty-three US soldiers were killed and twenty-two were wounded. The United States responded with more bombing attacks on targets in North Vietnam. The Pentagon decided these air attacks on North Vietnam would continue, and concern for the protection of other US air facilities in South Vietnam grew because of the recent attacks on US bases. The airbase at Danang was considered a prime target for the enemy because of the importance of the aircraft there in conducting the bombing attacks in North Vietnam, and the decision was made to land US Marines at Danang for the purpose of guarding the airbase.\textsuperscript{12} On March 8, 1965 US Marines began an amphibious landing in Danang harbor. The landing was unopposed, and many of the people there to greet them were young Vietnamese women who welcomed them with leis of flowers. Other Marines were flown into the Danang airbase, and over the next few days, two battalions of

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Marines and some supporting units set up positions to guard the base. Their mission was clear; they were to defend the airbase and not to conduct offensive combat activities.

As the leaders in Washington decided what was to be done, and as the generals gave the troops orders, the Marines dug their defensive positions around the airbase at Danang. Philip Caputo was a lieutenant in this first group of Marines to arrive in Vietnam, and in his book, *A Rumor of War*, he wrote his impressions of the enlisted men in the platoon he commanded, “Most of them came from the ragged fringes of the Great American Dream, from city slums and dirt farms and Appalachian mining towns.” He went on to say, though, the Marines gave these men, “… self-respect. A man who wore that uniform was somebody. He had passed a test few others could, He was not some down-on-his-luck loser pumping gas or washing cars for a dollar-fifty an hour, but somebody, a Marine.” They had gone through hard training, and they were told they were the best fighting men in the world. Most of them truly believed this, and many were proud to the point of arrogance. This was to be a great adventure, and they would have stories to tell.

The Marines worked, and they sat in their defensive positions and watched for the enemy. As they did this, they felt the intense heat of South Vietnam. The weather is always a consideration for people, but it is a greater concern for people who live outside. Caputo said, “Temperatures were irrelevant- the climate in Indochina does not lend itself to conventional standards of measurement.” He continued to say, “the only valid

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13 Ibid, 12, 14-16.

measurement was what the heat could do to a man, and what it could do to him was simple enough: it could kill him, bake his brain, or wring the sweat out of him until he dropped from exhaustion.”¹⁵ As the Marines guarded the airbase they endured the boredom of their assignment, and they endured the crushing heat of South Vietnam. They were ready for a fight, and many were eager at the prospect. They did not have long to wait.

The situation for ARVN forces was no less desperate because US Marines were guarding Danang, and the ARVN troops continued to be defeated by the NLF fighters. On April 1, 1965 President Johnson authorized the commitment of additional US troops to Vietnam, and he lifted some of the restrictions on their use in combat.¹⁶ This was not enough, though, in General Westmoreland’s opinion. He thought the South Vietnamese were dangerously close to being defeated, and only the use of US troops to help them fight the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) could save South Vietnam.¹⁷ In late July of 1965, Johnson approved Westmoreland’s request for a large increase of US troops in South Vietnam. Also, Westmoreland received permission to use US combat troops to fight the enemy throughout South Vietnam.¹⁸ The gloves came off, and ground combat units of the United States were now fully committed to the fight in South Vietnam.

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.


¹⁷ Westmoreland, 140.

¹⁸ Ibid., 143-144.
After they were given the mission of fighting the enemy, the first months of combat were confusing for the Marines, and in many ways combat continued to be confusing during the war. The men would go into the “bush” as it was called, on what were known as search and destroy operations. However, “There was no pattern to these patrols and operations. Without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place.”\(^{19}\) In this confused situation, death could come at any time, and from any direction. There might be a single shot from a sniper, or a number of shots would shatter the heavy heat. Or, mortar rounds would explode close to or among the men. Even the ground the Marines walked on was not safe. A man could be walking and suddenly be consumed by the blast of a booby trap he had stepped on. The guerrillas would not stand and fight; they hit and ran. The Marines were confused, and they were angry.\(^{20}\) To add further to the combustible nature of this confusing situation, Caputo said the Marines were told in a briefing to be careful not to shoot civilians. If a Vietnamese was armed, he or she was a guerrilla. However, if a Vietnamese ran, this was also a guerrilla, and could be killed. It was suggested that the Vietnamese might be a civilian running because he was scared. Finally, the officer said those in higher command had said that as far as they were concerned, any dead Vietnamese was a dead guerrilla.\(^{21}\) The Marines rarely saw the guerrillas but they often saw civilians, and often some of the civilians could be guerrilla fighters. The officers who commanded the Marines did not

\(^{19}\) Caputo, 95.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 74.
know with any certainty who was a guerrilla and who was a friend. The potential for indiscriminate mistakes was great.

From the time he was a cadet at West Point Westmoreland showed strong leadership ability. After commanding artillery units in combat in World War II, he went on to lead a regiment of paratroopers in the Korean War. In these capacities he served with distinction, and he later commanded the elite 101st Airborne Division. Problems were mounting in South Vietnam in the early 1960’s and the US needed a strong leader to head the military assistance program for South Vietnam. With his distinguished record Westmoreland appeared to be an excellent choice for the position, and he was placed in command.

Westmoreland studied the military theory of the NLF and the NVA, and he watched how the guerrillas were fighting the South Vietnamese. He saw them using the concepts of revolutionary war that Mao Zedong developed to win the Chinese Civil War. The Vietminh used this same form of warfare to defeat the French in the French Indochinese War (1946-1954), and revolutionary warfare was being practiced by the NLF and the NVA in South Vietnam during the current war. Basically, Westmoreland saw three phases in revolutionary warfare. In the first phase the guerrillas were on the defensive. They tried to gain control of the population, and they conducted small guerrilla actions against the government. As their strength grew they moved into the second phase, and regular combat units were formed, the pace of attacks increased, and the regular combat units attacked government forces. In the third phase, the guerrillas greatly

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increased their strength, and large guerrilla units went on the offensive to defeat the
government’s forces and to take complete control of the country. In early 1965
Westmoreland saw that the enemy was forming into larger regimental and division sized
units, and they were attacking and defeating South Vietnamese forces with bold and
frequent attacks. He concluded the enemy was moving into the third phase of
revolutionary warfare, and strong action needed to be taken quickly.

Westmoreland conceived three phases to fight the war. In the first phase US
troops would protect the large logistical bases being constructed for the influx of more
troops. If a large concentration of NLF or NVA troops was discovered, or if opposing
forces presented a threat, US troops could be quickly sent to fight them. In the second
phase, US forces would gain the initiative and attack and eliminate guerrilla base camps.
Going after the base camps could also force the large units of the NLF and the NVA to
fight, and give US forces the chance to destroy them with superior firepower. The third
phase would be combat with the remaining large units, and here the large NLF and NVA
units would be destroyed or driven from the country and blocked from returning to South
Vietnam. While US troops were accomplishing this, the ARVN would be working
primarily on pacification among the people of South Vietnam. Westmoreland said the
ARVN had “greater compatibility” with the people than the Americans did, and he
thought they would be better suited for the pacification role.

23 Westmoreland, 54.
24 Ibid. 145.
25 Ibid., 145-146.
The strategy Westmoreland chose for the war was one of attrition. He intended to have US forces kill so many of the NLF and NVA soldiers that eventually the enemy would not have enough soldiers to replace those who had been killed. The evidence of the success of this strategy would be the reaching of the “crossover” point where more NLF and NVA soldiers were being killed than were either being recruited to the NLF in South Vietnam, or were being sent into South Vietnam from North Vietnam. Westmoreland’s thinking was that North Vietnam and the NLF had a limited source of manpower, and this supply of manpower would be further lessened as the ARVN pacified more of South Vietnam and restricted NLF access to potential recruits in the pacified areas. Because US government policy limited him to fighting the war within South Vietnam, Westmoreland said he saw no acceptable alternative to using a strategy of attrition to fight the war.\(^\text{26}\)

There were other strategies proposed by respected military figures, but Westmoreland chose a strategy of attrition. A strategy of attrition is brutal, and the violence inherent in it is immense. The war in Vietnam was going to be fundamentally a counterinsurgency war, and much of the war would be fought in populated areas. Because of this the potential for high numbers of civilian deaths was great. Much of the loss of life among the civilians of Vietnam during the war could arguably be traced to Westmoreland’s decision to use a strategy of attrition.

The basic tactic to accomplish the strategy of Westmoreland’s plan for the war would be US battalions and regiments pursuing and engaging the battalions and the

\(^{26}\)Ibid, 153.
regiments of the NLF and the NVA. These were the search and destroy missions.\textsuperscript{27} When US troops first began fighting in South Vietnam, this approach may have had some merit because large guerrilla units were running rampant throughout the country as they inflicted a series of defeats on the South Vietnamese forces, and the confidence and the momentum of the guerrillas had to be broken. Only US forces of at least battalion strength would stand a chance of defeating these units in pitched battles. Also, US troops needed to show the enemy they could beat them in a fight, and they needed to show the enemy they were in South Vietnam to defeat them. Westmoreland counted on the mobility helicopters gave US infantry to out-maneuver guerrilla forces in combat, and he also thought the US forces could crush them with artillery and air power when the enemy was locked in battle with the infantry. This was the sort of war the US military usually waged in the past, and it did it well. As Russell F. Weigley said, Westmoreland believed in, ”…carrying the war to the enemy, and at winning victory by the means sanctioned by the most deeply rooted historical American conceptions of strategy, the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces and of his ability to wage war.”\textsuperscript{28} How long using large US infantry units to seek out NLF and NVA forces should have remained the principal focus of US actions is an important question, though. As time passed, fewer of these operations made contact with the opposing forces. Still, Westmoreland persisted with his chosen course of action.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 152.

The use of search and destroy tactics in the first part of the war had mixed results. An early battle perceived as a success for search and destroy tactics was the battle of the Ia Drang valley in November 1965. This battle took place after a series of sweeps succeeded in locating a large unit of the NVA that decided to stand and fight the Americans. The battle ended with over 1,200 NVA soldiers being killed. However, over three-hundred US soldiers also died in the fighting.29 Some of these early search and destroy operations found the enemy, but many did not. One of the first US Army units sent to Vietnam was the 173rd Airborne Brigade commanded by Brigadier General Ellis Williamson. After his unit conducted some of these operations, Williamson sounded disgusted with the tactic when he said, “I hope that we have conducted our last ‘search and destroy’ operation. I am thoroughly convinced that running into the jungle with a lot of people without a fixed target is a lot of effort, a lot of physical energy expended. A major portion of our effort evaporates into the air.”  30 One reason operations were not finding the guerrillas was that they were based on poor intelligence. This was a problem that persisted, and later in the war US Army General Fred Weyand showed his frustration with the problem, “In South Vietnam, the sole basis for effective, meaningful operations is specific intelligence information,” he went on to say, “without it, the commander is left groping almost aimlessly.” 31 While some of the search and destroy operations found the guerrillas, many did not, and the lack of good intelligence on NLF and NVA movements was a one reason for this. The US troops used for the search and destroy sweeps might

29 Westmoreland, 157.


31 Ibid., 93.
have been used more effectively in small-unit patrolling and pacification efforts. Of course, the NLF and the NVA had agency in this situation, and how they reacted to the search and destroy tactics was important as to whether or not the tactics were successful.

When US troops entered the war the NVA and the NLF confronted an unfamiliar enemy, and they knew they would have to develop tactics to use against the immense power of the U.S military. The NLF and the NVA had an advantage when they started fighting US troops because many of their officers and non-commissioned officers previously fought the French in the French-Indochinese War. Also, some of the NLF soldiers had been fighting the ARVN for quite some time. Both the French and the ARVN used tactics similar to the search and destroy operations of the Americans, and because of this the NLF and the NVA already had a number of proven tactics to use against US search and destroy operations. The primary problem they faced was how to deal with the helicopter mobility and the massive firepower of the Americans. In the Ia Drang valley battle the NVA saw how the US troops fought, and the lessons they drew from the battle were distributed to all of the NVA troop commanders. US helicopter mobility was swift and US firepower was tremendous, but the NVA saw weaknesses in the way the Americans used these strengths. The Americans usually strafed and bombed an area before helicopters landed troops, and as a result of this the Americans lost the element of surprise in these attacks. Because of this, any NVA troops in the area could quickly move to evade the bombing and the following infantry assault from the helicopters. Two of the key tactics the NVA decided to use against US troops after the Ia Drang valley battle were based on close quarter-fighting and surprise. In a battle the NVA wanted to get as close to the US. infantry as they could, so the Americans would be
hesitant to use artillery and air support because it might hit their own troops. The NVA commanders were told to watch the patterns of activity and movement of the Americans during the search and destroy operations, and to see how the Americans reacted to NVA sniper fire and attacks while they were on these operations. Using this information the NVA would use diversions to lead the US troops into areas where carefully planned ambushes were prepared. If the ambush was successful, the NVA forces could also have additional ambushes prepared along roads or in landing zones the Americans would be likely to use to bring reinforcements to the ambushed American unit. In all situations where they fought the Americans, the NVA commanders were instructed to make the fight as lethal as possible in a very short period of time. After the fight was ended, the NVA troops would quickly leave the area. In this way the NVA attempted to inflict as many casualties on US forces while avoiding the punishing power of American artillery and airstrikes that would inevitably be called in to support the ambushed US troops.32

Participating in the search and destroy operations was physically trying and mentally and emotionally confusing for the U. infantrymen. In many ways these operations were as physically demanding, or worse, than some of the Pacific island campaigns of World War II such as Guadalcanal and Okinawa. The heat and the humidity were crushing, and during the monsoon season it would sometimes rain continuously for weeks on end. As the men walked through and lived in the jungles and the forests of Vietnam, leeches, parasites, funguses, malaria, and dysentery were common problems. Through all of this they carried heavy loads of weapons and ammunition in case they had to fight the guerrillas. Even when they did not find the enemy, the

32 Bui Tin, 94.
infantrymen were routinely subjected to the dangers of sniper fire, booby traps, and mortar attacks that often killed and wounded men. A Marine infantryman said they walked around as if they were in a fog, because they had little idea what they were trying to accomplish on many of the operations. Their primary interest was to save their own lives and the lives of their fellow Marines. As far as the Vietnamese civilians they encountered were concerned, the Marines were indifferent or hostile toward them, and they made few efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of the people.33 Often the infantry units were sent into areas on sweeps to see if the guerrillas would initiate a fight. So, in effect, the US units were bait. In these cases the guerrillas had the initiative, and they would fight in prepared positions in areas they chose.34 However, US commanders placed their faith in the idea that when the guerrillas fought US troops the weight of US firepower could be brought to bear on them, and killing the NLF and NVA soldiers would win the war of attrition.

General Westmoreland chose the strategy of attrition and the tactic of search and destroy operations for the war in Vietnam, but within the United States Marine Corps there was significant disagreement with this approach. Some of the key US. Marine Corps generals responsible for planning and fighting the war thought a more classic counterinsurgency strategy would be appropriate in Vietnam. Part of the reason for this may have been the influence fighting counterinsurgency campaigns in the Caribbean during the early part of the twentieth century had on the institutional memory of the

33 Igor Bobrowsky interview, September 11, 1984, Klyman Collection, Folder 7, Box 1, United States Marine Corps Historical Center, Quantico, VA.

Marine Corps. Major General Lewis W. Walt became the commanding general of the III Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam, and he said he learned his skills as a junior officer, “from men who had fought Sandino in Nicaragua or Charlemagne in Haiti.”

The lessons of counterinsurgency warfare in the Caribbean related to young officers may have been formative to some degree, but this should not be overemphasized. Both Marine Commandant General Wallace M. Greene and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak were in favor of an approach to the war that placed more emphasis on counterinsurgency. They wanted a counterinsurgency strategy that placed more emphasis on pacification in Vietnam, and US Army General Maxwell Taylor and US Army General James Gavin agreed with this assessment.

So, the choice of a strategy that was more in keeping with counterinsurgency theory may have had more to do with a professional military evaluation of the problem, and less to do with the experiences of the Marine Corps in the Caribbean wars.

Among the Marine Corps generals, Krulak was one of the most vocal, and arguably one of the most abrasive, proponents of an alternative strategy in Vietnam. After graduating from Annapolis Naval Academy Krulak became a Marine Corps officer and served with distinction during World War II. He was a decorated combat veteran, and he was also an officer of intellect and vision. One important part he played in the war was in

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the development of the landing crafts necessary for amphibious landings. Also, in 1946 Krulak began working on the revolutionary concept of using helicopters to carry troops into combat. His work helped to create the helicopter assault concept for the Marine Corps and for the US Army. As the possibility of the United States having to fight against guerrilla movements in the future became more of a probability, Krulak closely studied insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare. In 1962 he was chosen as Special Assistant for Counter-Insurgency and Special Activities, and in this capacity he reported directly to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and also met on a regular basis with President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy studied insurgency warfare, and he saw insurgency warfare as a serious challenge for the US. Partly because of this the insurgency in the Republic of Vietnam became a central focus of Washington’s attention. Krulak went to Vietnam eight times between 1962 and 1964 in an effort to find how the US. could help the Republic of Vietnam win the guerrilla war being fought there. During these visits Krulak increased his understanding of the problems the South Vietnamese were facing, and the problems inherent to a counterinsurgency war. On several occasions he met with Sir Robert Thompson, who had played an important part in helping the British win a counterinsurgency war in Malaya, and Krulak was impressed with some basic principles of counterinsurgency Thompson gave him. Thompson told Krulak, “The peoples’ trust is primary. It will come hard because they are fearful and suspicious. Protection is the most


38 Ibid., 179.

important thing you can bring them. After that comes health. And, after that, many things—land, prosperity, education, and privacy to name a few." Krulak became convinced that a complete understanding and practice of these ideas was necessary for the counterinsurgency war to be won in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{40}

In 1964 as the commitment of US. troops to the ground war in Vietnam was approaching, Krulak was designated the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. In this position he was responsible for the training, equipping, and supplying of all the Marines in the Pacific, but he had no operational control over them in Vietnam when the war started. Because he anticipated the United States would probably soon be fighting in South Vietnam, Krulak implemented a rigorous training program for the Marines that included many of the lessons he had learned about counterinsurgency warfare.\textsuperscript{41} Once the war began Krulak was very vocal in his opinions of how the war should be conducted.

In early 1965 US troops were fighting in Vietnam using a strategy of attrition and tactics of search and destroy missions, as General Westmoreland directed. Krulak disagreed with this strategy, and in June of 1965 he developed a comprehensive, alternative strategic approach for the war that reflected his knowledge of counterinsurgency warfare, his knowledge of the NLF and the NVA, and his knowledge of Vietnam. The goal to be attained in Vietnam was not the territory of the country, he thought, it was the wealth of the country and the control and the loyalty of the population.

\textsuperscript{40} Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 180.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 180, 182.
He saw that two-thirds of the population and approximately three-fourths of the rice production in South Vietnam were in the coastal regions of the country and in the Mekong Delta. The essence of his concept was if these areas were controlled by the ARVN and their allies the NLF would be cut off from the food, the recruits, and the sources of intelligence among the people that are essential for the continuation of an insurgency. 42

Krulak proposed an enclave strategy to separate the majority of the people, and the majority of the wealth of South Vietnam from the guerrillas. This was essentially an” oil-spot” counterinsurgency strategy that would clear the guerrillas from an area, and then progressively clear them from areas adjacent to the cleared area. Along the coastal region of northern South Vietnam the Marines had established three enclaves at Chu Lai, Danang, and Phu Bai, and Krulak said these would be the initial enclaves that would expand and then merge together along the coast of South Vietnam. To merge the enclave areas, US forces and their allies would conduct operations to clear the guerrillas from the areas adjacent to the enclaves until the enclaves controlled the population and the rich agricultural regions of the coastal region. Krulak thought if this were done, and if similar efforts gained control of the Mekong Delta, the guerrillas would be forced back into less populated areas of the interior. In these areas a smaller population would mean US forces could more easily detect the movements of the guerrilla soldiers. Also, in the less-populated areas, there would be fewer potential recruits available for the guerrillas, less

42 Victor H. Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam, June 1965”, Klyman Collection, Box#1, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
food for their soldiers, and less intelligence information available from the population about allied forces.  

Krulak also thought the guerrillas had one basic tactic, and they used that one tactic to defeat the French and to inflict many defeats on the South Vietnamese forces. The NLF and NVA forces would choose an isolated position to attack and would then carefully plan to attack it. As they prepared the attack, they would locate the likely routes of approach relief forces would take to rescue the attacked position, and along these routes they placed ambushes for the relief forces. In the fight the damage done to the attacked position was important, but the attack on the more vulnerable relief columns was calculated to do the most damage.  

This was the tactic the guerrillas used to attack fixed positions, but Krulak knew they also used this tactic to lure search and destroy forces into prepared ambushes where the relief forces sent to support the attacked unit could be ambushed. His proposed solution was to eliminate isolated positions with their vulnerable lines of support and supply and to keep fixed positions within the enclaves. Instead of using search and destroy operations to look for the guerrillas, an aggressive practice of continuous patrolling and ambushes outside the enclave areas would be used to disrupt them and to discover any concentrations of their forces. When guerrilla concentrations were discovered, attacks on them could be made based on sound intelligence. In addition,

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.
operations would be conducted to clear the guerrillas from areas adjacent to the enclave areas in order to expand the enclaves.  

In Krulak’s opinion, the enclave plan would take the initiative from the guerrillas by denying them the opportunity to use the one tactic that had been so successful for them in the past. If the guerrillas were denied access to the food and the people of the coastal region, the NLF and the NVA would have to attack the defenses of the enclaves. Here the US forces would have the benefit of prepared defensive positions and US air and artillery support. The guerrillas also might attempt to attack communication lines between the enclaves, but surveillance in those areas would be extensive, and it would not be easy for the guerrilla forces to conduct the planned ambushes they favored. Also, relief forces and air and artillery support from the enclaves could attack them.

The enclave strategy would lessen many of the guerrillas’ strengths and capitalize on the strengths of the allied forces. For the NLF and the NVA to be successful, it was critical for them to have access to the people. Among the people they could get the food, the recruits, and the intelligence necessary for the insurgency to succeed. Without intelligence they were blind, without recruits they had no soldiers, and without food they would starve. Krulak proposed a classic counterinsurgency enclave strategy that would take away the guerrillas’ strength and capitalize on the strengths of the allied forces.  

Krulak was convinced his strategic approach to the war based on an oil-spot concept of pacification was the correct strategy to use in Vietnam, and he made his

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.
thinking known to both General Westmoreland and to McNamara. In a discussion of this alternative strategy Westmoreland told Krulak he thought the oil-spot strategy Krulak proposed was good, but he said it would take too much time. Of course, by saying this Westmoreland was implying the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy missions could win the war more quickly. Krulak got to the heart of the matter when he responded, “I suggested to him that we didn’t have time to do it any other way” and Krulak criticized the effectiveness of search and destroy tactics directly when he continued, “if we left the people to the enemy, glorious victories in the hinterland would be little more than blows in the air- and we would end up losing the war.”47 Krulak’s frustration with the situation in Vietnam seems to have been growing, and in November of 1965 he wrote to McNamara telling him the war in the highly populated regions of South Vietnam was being fought over the minds of the people, and to win this war the guerrillas had to first be kept away from the people. He said after a security shield was placed between the people and the guerrillas, the NLF political infrastructure could be eliminated within the cleared area. McNamara’s reply to Krulak was similar to Westmoreland’s; he said the idea had merit, but it would take too long.48

In June of 1965 Marine Corps Major General Lewis W. Walt took command of the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) in South Vietnam that was responsible for I Corps, comprised of the five northern-most provinces in South Vietnam. After he joined the Marine Corps before World War II, Walt served in combat in the Pacific with a

47 Krulak, First to Fight, 186.

48 Ibid, 186.
Marine Raider Battalion. These were specialized units trained for guerrilla warfare behind Japanese lines, and this experience may have increased Walt’s understanding of insurgency warfare. During the war Walt received a number of decorations for his heroism. Walt then served in the Korean War before his later assignment in South Vietnam. Walt agreed with the enclave strategy Krulak proposed, and when he evaluated the situation in Vietnam after he assumed command of the III MAF he became even more convinced an approach more oriented to an enclave strategy was necessary.49

General Westmoreland was the commander of all the US military forces in South Vietnam, but Walt was allowed to use some freedom of interpretation in his actions because he was a senior regional commander. Rather than giving Walt direct orders, Westmoreland gave him broader missions to accomplish. Walt was than able to use his own judgment as to how to accomplish the missions. As a result of this, Walt was able to pursue the enclave strategy he favored in I Corps, to some extent.50

The plan Walt implemented for the three Marine bases of Chu Lai, Danang, and Phu Bai was similar in concept to the enclave strategy Krulak presented for the war. He established a main line of heavily-constructed bunkers capable of supporting each other as the main defensive line for each base. In the event of a major guerrilla attack, the Marines could fight off the attack from these positions. At a distance of approximately 4,000 meters in front of this line was a line of manned outpost positions from which a mobile defense was conducted. He stressed that constant patrolling throughout the area

49 Shulimson and Johnson, 46.
50 Westmoreland. 166
be conducted to keep the guerrillas from concentrating forces, to gather intelligence, and to give advanced warning of potential attacks on the base defenses. Small reconnaissance patrols were also sent far beyond the perimeters of the enclaves into areas that had previously been areas of safety for the guerrillas. When the patrols found guerrilla camps or guerrilla movement, they could call for air strikes or artillery attacks on the guerrillas. This helped to keep the guerrilla fighters off balance in areas that were previously safe havens, and because of this it showed them they were not the only hunters in the war, they were now the hunted.

While the plans for the base defenses were being put into place, the Marines innovated to find ways the local South Vietnamese forces could help the Marines more effectively defend the enclaves. In the Chu Lai area, joint patrols comprised of local South Vietnamese defense forces and Marines patrolled through the area, and the Marines brought PF units to their camps for training. In the Danang region, South Vietnamese Regional Forces and Marine units coordinated their various military operations. Also, on patrols and operations in the Danang area Marines used PF militiamen as interpreters and guides. Altogether, these measures added to the defense of the Marine enclaves by capitalizing on both the strengths of the South Vietnamese forces and the strengths of the Marines.

51 Shulimson and Johnson, 48.
52 Ibid. 179.
53 Ibid. 138.
Pacification was a critical part of the enclave strategy the Marines were practicing in the I Corps area, and the Marines were trying different ideas in an effort to find methods that would work. In one of the first instances, the Marines thought by occupying the Vietnamese village of Le My close to the Danang perimeter defensive line they could improve the airbase defenses. Patrols in the area of the village encountered sniper fire, and a battalion operation was conducted to drive the enemy from the village. When the NLF fighters were driven out of Le My, the Marines secured the village and questioned the men they found there. Later a few of the men were sent to Danang for further questioning. After a few days South Vietnamese Regional Forces and Popular Forces took over security duties in Le My and the Marines moved into a defensive perimeter position around the village. The South Vietnamese forces then did further screening of the people in the village in an effort to eliminate any remaining guerrilla elements. Shortly after this, the Marines helped the people build medical dispensaries, schools, bridges, and a market place in Le My. To improve the protection of Le My, the Marines trained the PF’s and helped them set up defensive positions.\(^{54}\) In this attempt the Marines gave a partial definition of their idea of pacification when their civil affairs officer said their intent was, “to create an administration, supported by the people, and capable of leading, treating, feeding, and protecting themselves by the time the battalion was moved to another area of operations.”\(^{55}\) Whether or not the Marines would be able to accomplish these objectives was vital for their goal of pacifying the Vietnamese villages. However,

\(^{54}\) Ibid. 38- 39.

\(^{55}\) Capt. Lionel Silva, interview by MSC, Quantico, February 2, 1966, No. 37, Oral History Collection, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
this was one of the first Marine pacification projects, and initially it appeared to work well enough that it became a model for future Marine pacification efforts.\textsuperscript{56}

Even though the pacification of LeMy had gone well, there were still some problems. When Krulak visited the village he spoke with the district chief who was happy with the improvements the Marines helped make possible. The district chief showed Krulak the schools and the dispensaries, and then he asked Krulak if the Marines would stay. Krulak told him Marines would be close to the village, and they would help the people if the NLF fighters returned. In the meantime the PF’s would be in charge of security for Le My. The district chief was not happy with this response.\textsuperscript{57} Thompson stressed to Krulak the importance of protection for the people in counterinsurgency pacification operations, and Krulak agreed with Thompson’s advice. The pacification of Le My gave the people of the village access to dispensaries for their health and schools for their education, but all of this would mean nothing if the guerrillas could return and kill them for cooperating with the Americans.

One of the biggest problems the people of Vietnam had at this time was a lack of good medical care. Soon after they arrived, the Marines began setting up medical dispensaries for the Vietnamese, and this program of medical care spread quickly throughout the three Marine enclaves of Chu Lai, Danang, and Phu Bai. Initially there was suspicion of the program on the part of some of the Vietnamese, but eventually the services of the dispensaries became popular, and dental care was also provided for the

\textsuperscript{56} Shulimson and Johnson, 39.

\textsuperscript{57} Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 185.
people. In the more remote and less safe areas, Marine patrols would accompany a Navy corpsman (medic) to villages where the patrol would guard the area while the corpsman helped the Vietnamese with minor medical problems. Medical care for the Vietnamese people became one of the most popular pacification services the Americans provided during the Vietnam War.

A key part of the enclave plan was the denial of rice to the guerrillas, and the Marines started doing this in the Danang area as they expanded their Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) into a densely populated region south of Danang. The Marine commander asked a number of Vietnamese village chiefs in the new area to give their support to the Marines. Initially the village chiefs were uncertain, but after the Marines defeated the local NLF forces in a fight, the chiefs became more confident the Marines could protect them. One of them approached the battalion commander of the Marines and told him the NLF forces were coming into the area, as they did each year, to take what they considered to be their portion of the rice that was soon to be harvested. The village chiefs wanted to know if the Marines would protect the villagers so they could keep all of the rice they harvested. The Marine commander agreed to this, and the Marines set up a protective screen of troops around the rice harvest. The NLF staged an attack on the Marines protecting the rice harvest, but it was defeated, and the operation was successful. Other Marine units in the Danang region and in the Chu Lai region protected rice harvests during this period, and the NLF was kept from taking a large amount of rice vital for feeding its soldiers. This protection of the rice harvests, called Golden Fleece, was so

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58 Shulimson and Johnson, 47.
successful, and it was so popular with the Vietnamese farmers, that a similar operation was scheduled to protect the next rice harvest\textsuperscript{59}

The Marines continued to increase the size of the enclaves they occupied, but one of their most crucial jobs was to clear the NLF from the villages within the enclaves. If hidden NLF members remained in the villages, the villagers would not feel safe in cooperating with the Marines because of the threat of reprisal. In order to root out the NLF agents in the villages, the Marines used the classic counterinsurgency tactic of “cordon and search” in which a force of Marines surrounded a village, and ARVN troops entered the village and gathered all of the people together to check their government identification cards. As this was being done the village was searched for hidden weapons and for people who were trying to hide. As all of this was being done the Marines made medical assistance available for the people, and the people of the village were usually fed. These operations became known as County Fairs, and their use in getting rid of the NLF presence in Vietnamese villages was considered to be successful. Because of this the Marines continued to use them with varying degrees of success.\textsuperscript{60}

Many of the pacification projects of the Marines showed promise, but the fundamental counterinsurgency necessity of protecting the people from the enemy was a recurring problem when South Vietnamese militia forces were used to defend the villages. When the Marines expanded the Danang enclave area, they encouraged the ARVN to develop a pacification plan for a number of villages close to Danang. The area

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 138- 141.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 141- 142.
where the villages were located was behind the protective screen of the Marines’ expansion from Danang, but civic action activities and a military presence in the villages were thought to be needed to keep the NLF from influencing or intimidating the people. According to the plan, RF and PF troops were stationed in the villages and Marines were close enough to some of the villages to help protect them from NLF attack. The control of the people was important for the NLF also, and they fought back when the RF and PF forces were stationed in the villages. The NLF forces targeted the villages defended by the RF and PF units, and they stayed away from the areas where there was Marine protection. One after another, many of the RF and PF defended villages were attacked by the NLF, and the defending forces were defeated. Eventually, the plan to expand the pacified area through the use of South Vietnamese militia forces had to be halted for a period of time. The glaring problem was that the South Vietnamese militia units were neither trained well enough nor equipped well enough to fight and defeat the NLF.61

The Marines also had problems in performing civic action and defense duties in the villages they attempted to pacify. The Marine infantry units were unable to spend very much time helping with more time-consuming civic action projects, because the infantry units were needed for combat missions. In some instances the pacified villages were close to the Marine camps, but they were not close enough to keep the villages from being vulnerable to NLF infiltration. On various occasions, village officials in the supposedly pacified villages were assassinated by the NLF, and in Le My, where one of the first rice harvest operations took place, a village official was buried alive after he was

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61 Ibid., 144-146
tortured by the NLF. These hard lessons showed that protection of the people was the most important part of counterinsurgency and without protection of the people there could be no pacification.

On one of his trips to Vietnam General Krulak observed the County Fair cordon and search operations, and he saw some significant problems with them. The idea was a good counterinsurgency technique, in his opinion, but it was being executed poorly in some respects. While the Marines guarded a perimeter around the village, ARVN troops searched the village and checked the identification cards of the villagers. Krulak thought the ARVN did a poor job of this, and he thought the ARVN did not like working with the Vietnamese people. Another problem he saw was the lack of a permanent security presence in the village after the Marines and the ARVN left. The Marines surrounded the village, the ARVN searched the village for NLF members, and they checked the identification cards of the people, but after the Marines and the ARVN left, NLF forces could easily return because there was no security force to protect the village. Krulak’s observations pointed to the conclusion that the Marines could not depend on the ARVN to do some of the pacification duties, at least without improvements in the ARVN, and until the ARVN did improve their performance the Marines would have to perform the pacification duties themselves. Also, Krulak’s observations and the experience of the pacification program were underscoring the fact that a lack of security in the villages to be pacified was a central problem for the pacification program at this time.

62 Ibid.
63 Krulak. First to Fight, 187.
The United States Marine Corps established three enclaves in the northern coastal region of South Vietnam, and the northern-most of these was Phu Bai. The Third Battalion of the Fourth Marine Regiment (3-4) was responsible for the security of the enclave at Phu Bai and for the security of the airbase located there. The Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) continued to be increased for 3-4, and this was straining the abilities of the regiment to adequately defend the base. The aircraft at the airbase were high-priority targets for the NLF, and the regimental staff became concerned about attacks from Vietnamese hamlets located close to the camp.\(^6^4\) Captain John Mullen was the Civil Affairs officer for the regiment, and he proposed a possible solution for the problem to Lieutenant Colonel William Taylor, the regimental commander. Mullen knew the South Vietnamese military had militia units at the regional and the local levels. The regional militias were the Regional Forces (RF’s), and the local militias were the Popular Forces (PF’s). Technically these troops were under the control of the South Vietnamese Army, but in fact the province chiefs controlled the Regional Forces, and the village or district chiefs controlled the Popular Forces. Mullen suggested to the regimental commander that the Popular Forces in the villages around the base could be organized to help in the defense of Phu Bai.\(^6^5\)

The decision to request the use of the South Vietnamese Popular Forces in the defense of the camp may have indicated how concerned the Marine commander was with respect to the security of Phu Bai. The military effectiveness of South Vietnamese troops

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was generally held in low regard by the Americans, and the Popular Forces were among
the least respected of all the South Vietnamese military units. Generally they were poorly
trained, poorly equipped, poorly led, and poorly paid. One of the few benefits for a
member of the Popular Forces was that he could serve close to his home. Regardless, Col.
Taylor requested the use of some Popular Forces, who were controlled by the district and
the village chiefs and was given a limited degree of control over six Popular Forces
platoons. Shortly after this, Cullen C. Zimmerman, the executive officer of 3-4, drew up
plans to create a unit made up of Marines and PF militia.66

The choice of the man to lead the new unit was fortunate. In June of 1965
Lieutenant Paul R. Ek was serving on the staff of the Third Marine Regiment at Danang
as a liaison officer to the South Vietnamese. When he was asked to take a special
assignment that involved working with the Popular Forces in the Phu Bai area, he
accepted it and reported to Lt. Colonel Taylor at Phu Bai in July. Ek’s credentials for the
job were impressive. On Okinawa he attended an intensive Vietnamese language course,
and as a result of this he spoke Vietnamese well. Also, prior to his serving on the staff of
the Third Marine Regiment he served as an advisor to the Vietnamese Special Forces.67
His language ability and his experience with the Vietnamese Special Forces made Ek a
good choice to form the new unit of Popular Forces and Marines.

When Ek reported to Phu Bai, Taylor told him the TAOR at Phu Bai had been
expanded, and Taylor was concerned that he did not have enough men available to

66 Shulimson and Johnson, 133, 135.
67 Paul R. Ek, interview by Jack Shulimson, November 2, 1972, Klyman collection, file 4, Box 1, US
Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
provide adequate defense for the expanded area. Taylor instructed Ek to formulate a plan to use Marines and Popular Forces in a combined unit for defense of the Phu Bai area.\textsuperscript{68}

The operational concept Ek conceived for the use of the Popular Forces with the Marines drew generally on his knowledge of counterinsurgency warfare, and particularly on his understanding of the infrastructure organization (the political and economic framework) of the NLF. In the villages Ek intended to have the PF’s and the Marines build their own infrastructure to win the loyalty of the people, and he wanted them to do this by giving assistance to the people. In this respect he said his method differed from the NLF use of terror to gain a sort of loyalty from the people based on fear. As the Marines and the PF’s created their own infrastructure in the villages, they would be destroying the village infrastructure of the NLF. There were several fundamental duties Ek set for the unit as it worked in the villages. They had to provide protection for the people and for the village, and they had to gather intelligence information. They also had to do psychological warfare work and gain the good will of the people in the villages. These duties were the spokes of the plan Ek developed, and the hub of the wheel in his plan was the training of the Marines and the Popular Forces militiamen.\textsuperscript{69}

Ek was told to combine four Marine rifle squads with four Popular Forces platoons to create a Joint Action Company (JAC). Each of the Marine squads was made up of three fire teams of four men each with a corporal as the fire team leader. There was a sergeant as the squad leader, and an assistant squad leader who was armed with an M-

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
79 grenade launcher. Because of the specialized work for the Marine squads combined with the Popular Forces platoons, a US. Navy corpsman (medic) was assigned to each of the Marine squads. Each of the fifteen-man Marine squads was combined with a Popular Forces platoon of between thirty and forty men. The PF platoon was commanded by a sergeant, and the other men in the platoon were all privates. The headquarters for the JAC was made up of Ek as the company commander, an ARVN lieutenant as the liaison officer, and three PF’s for Vietnamese radio communication. 70

Altogether the plan looked impressive in these initial phases. A combined force of Popular Forces and Marines working at the village level to provide civic action and protection for the people of a village could be a valuable part of a counterinsurgency war in South Vietnam. Regardless of how good the plan looked, though, the success or the failure of the plan would depend on how well the Marines interacted with the Popular Forces and the people of the villages as they worked and lived together. Because of this, how the Marines were chosen and prepared for the new assignment was critical.

The Marines for the JAC company were carefully chosen, and Ek trained them himself before they joined the PF’s to form the new unit. Volunteers from the infantry units were requested, and after Ek interviewed them he chose the volunteers he thought were motivated to live and work with the PF’s to defend the Vietnamese villages. In addition he wanted Marines who had already been in combat, and who could think and act quickly in unusual situations. After Ek chose the Marines for the new unit, he trained them for a week to prepare them for their new job. In the training Ek taught the Marines

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70 Ibid.
Vietnamese customs, and he also taught them how the new unit would interact with the Vietnamese political and military organizations in the rural area where they would operate. An important part of the training was teaching the men how to perform intelligence activities in the villages. Also, Ek taught the men the tactics of the NLF. Ek’s purpose with all of the selection and the training of the Marines was to make them capable of being accepted by the villagers as a part of the community while the Marines accomplished their military duties.  

The Joint Action Company combined the Popular Forces militia and the Marines in one unit, and because of this the command structure was unique. Partly because it could look similar to a colonial relationship, during the Vietnam War the South Vietnamese were adamantly opposed to the encadrement of US troops with South Vietnamese troops. The Joint Action Companies were the only units in the war that combined South Vietnamese and US troops in a unit in which the leader of the US troops was usually in command. The sensitivity to the question was reflected in the command structure of the newly established unit.

The administrative authority and the military operational authority were divided at both the district and the village level. The Vietnamese district chief had administrative responsibility for the Popular Forces in his district, and the Marine battalion commander had military operational control in the district. At the village level where the combined

71 Paul R. Ek interview, Camp Pendleton, CA, February 10 1966, No. 46, Oral History Collection, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.

platoons worked, the Vietnamese village chief controlled the civil administration of the village while the combined platoons were responsible for the military security of the villages. In the platoons the Marine squad leader commanded the platoon, and the sergeant commanding the Popular Forces in the platoon became his assistant; each squad in the platoon had a Marine fire team of four men and a squad of approximately ten PF’s. The Marines in the squads were the designated leaders, but they also had counterparts who were Vietnamese, and for military operations the Marines led the squads and the platoons, Ek said.73 This was a maze of authority and personalities, and whether or not the platoons could work successfully in the villages depended to a great extent on the way the Marines interacted with the South Vietnamese.

After the Marine and PF personnel were assigned to their platoons, classes were given to share the strengths of each group with the other group. The Marines taught their tactics and their discipline to the PF’s, and they taught them methods of civilian population control. For their part, the PF’s taught the Marines Vietnamese customs, Vietnamese language, the terrain of the village area, and information about the NLF in the area. The training did not end with the classes, though. The Marines and the PF’s continued to learn from each other and to teach each other as they lived and worked together in the Vietnamese villages.74

The Marines may have taught the Popular Forces some important skills, but this may have been overemphasized. A Marine who served with a CAP platoon later in the

73 Ek, interview, February 10, 1966.
74 Ibid.
war said many of the members of the Popular Forces were experienced veterans who had learned combat skills fighting a guerrilla war for years, and this was especially true of some of the older PF’s who fought either the French or the Viet Minh during the French Indochinese War. This Marine said the Marines taught the PF’s some of the technical features of the newer weaponry the Marines had, but often,” they showed us stuff that we didn’t know.” For instance, he said, the PF’s taught the Marines different techniques of using booby traps and other explosives.75 It is likely that this was true in many of the combined platoons, and considering that most of the Marines in the combined platoons were relatively inexperienced young men, the wise Marines probably learned more from the PF’s than they tried to teach them.

On August 1, 1965 the Joint Action Company was formally established, and within a few days the platoons began to make daytime patrols through their assigned villages. The Marines had little contact with the villagers during this time because the primary purpose of the patrols was to have the Marines become familiar with the villages and the surrounding areas where they would be working. The daytime patrols through the villages were also fairly safe, and they gave the Marines and the PF’s a chance to practice their patrolling techniques as a joint unit in safe situations. After the first week, the combined platoons began to stay in the villages at night, and they began to conduct over twenty night patrols and ambushes each week. These night operations were calculated to make the Marines as familiar with the area as the enemy was. These patrols were also an important step the combined platoons made in keeping the NLF away from the villages.

75 Igor Bobrowsky interview, Klyman Collection, folder 7, Box #1. US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
Before the combined platoons were established in the villages the NLF could operate confidently in the area at night because there were few if any PF patrols. At night the NLF often entered the villages to give propaganda lectures, take food, collect taxes, and get recruits for its army. After the combined platoons started to saturate the area with patrols and ambushes at night, the guerrillas had to be more cautious because they were now being hunted. 76

As the combined platoons took their first steps to protect the Vietnamese people from the NLF, they also started to learn about the NLF operations in the area and how the NLF controlled the people. Ek said he eventually learned the NLF organization in the area was made up of approximately thirty confirmed NLF members with an experienced leader, but there were also NLF sympathizers in the villages. There may have been some women fighters with the local NLF, but Ek said most of the women associated with the enemy were NLF sympathizers. The NLF wanted to control the villages with its guerrillas so their forces could collect rice from this rich farming area to send to NLF forces farther to the north. The NLF controlled the people primarily with terror, Ek thought, and if the combined platoons could not protect the people from the NLF, the people would give their allegiance to the guerrillas. NLF retribution could be especially brutal, Ek said, and on occasions the NLF fighters disemboweled people and cut the bodies of others into pieces to make an example of those who cooperated with South Vietnamese government authorities. What the Marines learned about the NLF organization in the area and its methods to control the population of the villages

76 Shulimson and Johnson, 135-136.
reinforced what they already knew about the NLF. If the combined platoons were going to gain the loyalty of the people and protect them and their rice from the NLF, they were going to have to keep the NLF from getting into the villages. In addition, they were going to have to root out the NLF members and sympathizers in the villages.  

Soon after the combined platoons began living in the villages, they began intelligence and population control measures to find and eliminate NLF activities in the area. The Marines were told to talk with the civilians and to watch them as the civilians went about their daily routines. If the behavior of any of the people seemed unusual, or if the daily routines were altered, the Marines were told to find out the reason. Each of the Marines kept a small notebook in which they noted these behaviors and routines, and any changes in them. The notebooks were given to the Marine squad leader on a regular basis, and he compiled the findings in a report he sent on to his commander. Eventually these reports were studied at the headquarters of 3-4 for intelligence purposes. This gave the combined platoons some intelligence information, but the PF’s were also able to get good information about the NLF. The people of the villages usually felt more comfortable talking with the PF’s, and many of them were relatives or friends of the PF’s. At times the PF’s would talk with someone and get information about the NLF that could be used for intelligence purposes. The National Police in the region were also a good source of information about the NLF, Ek said, and the National Police also helped in the identification checks the combined platoons conducted for population control in the villages. For these identification checks a part of a village was blocked off early in the morning, and the people were called out of their homes. The Marines and the PF’s would

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Ek interview, February 10, 1966.
apologize to the people for the inconvenience, but the people were told it was necessary to do this to protect them from the NLF. The National Police then spoke with the people and made sure they all had their government identification cards. The National Police were used for this because they had a good understanding of how to detect NLF agents who might be in the village.78

Along with security, intelligence, and population control, psychological operations and civic action were important parts of Ek’s plans for the combined action platoons in the villages. The PF’s did much of the work for the psychological operations the combined platoons conducted. To do this the PF’s told the people about the successes of the combined platoons in the area, and the information was more believable for the people when it came from the PF’s. They told the people the NLF fighters could no longer come to the villages as freely as they had, and the protection of the combined platoons prevented the NLF from taking tax money, rice, and young men for their army from the villages. Also, the PF’s told the people about any fights the combined platoons had recently won with the NLF forces. The civic action projects the combined platoons worked on were intended to help the economy of the villages and the people generally. Ek said it was important to work on civic action projects the people themselves wanted, and not projects the Marines thought they should want. Among the early civic action projects were getting a source of clean water for the people and building bridges.79

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
After being in existence for a few months, the combined platoons started to show progress in reaching the goals Ek set for them as a unit. There were no major disagreements between the Marines and the Popular Forces as they lived and worked together. Also, the Marines and the PF’s seemed to have created a synthesis of the knowledge of the two groups as they gradually adopted the best of the PF methods and the best of the Marine methods. The constant presence of the combined platoons in the villages improved security, and the large number of day and night patrols the combined platoons conducted kept NLF fighters away from the area. A document found on the body of a dead NLF fighter said, “There were at least 4,000 Marines in the area. You could not move anywhere because Marines were always in the way.” 80 Most of the Marines in the area were those in the combined platoons, and there were approximately forty of them. However, the reaction of the NLF expressed in this document showed that the aggressive patrolling was inhibiting NLF activity and improving security in the area. As security improved, more intelligence information about NLF activities was given to the combined platoons by the people. Partly because of this, and partly because of good population control actions, the combined platoons were able to keep many NLF agents out of the villages. In one instance NLF fighters tried to capture a village official at his home. Marines and PF’s knew in advance of the attempt, and they prevented it. Ek said as security kept the NLF away from the villages and as civic action projects brought fresh water, bridges, and other improvements to the lives of the people, the psychological

80 Shulimson and Johnson, 137.
operation efforts to convince the people of the benefits of supporting the combined platoon also became easier because conditions in the villages became better.  

In October 1965 the name of the Joint Action Company was officially changed to Combined Action Company (CAC). The name was changed because it was determined troops of the same country worked together in joint actions, but troops of different countries worked together in combined actions. The concern over the name and the changing of the name showed how sensitive the South Vietnamese were to maintaining their independence and to not giving the appearance they were under the control of the United States. The company became the Combined Action Company, and the platoons became Combined Action Platoons (CAP’s).

To get a truer picture of how well the Combined Action Platoons (CAP’s) were performing in the first few months of their existence, it is valuable to find out not only what the Marine officers were thinking about the unit, but it is also valuable to find out what the Marine enlisted men were thinking. Hop Brown was an African-American from Harlem who was serving in 3- 4 as a Marine rifleman when he was assigned as a member of one of the first combined platoons at Phu Bai. Brown thought the training the Marines received before they lived with the Vietnamese was good because the Marines learned Vietnamese customs, language, and rituals that helped them understand and respect the people. This implies the training succeeded in its purpose of creating respect for the people in the Marines. Initially Brown was shocked by the poor living standards of the

81 Ek interview, February 10, 1966.
82 Shulimson and Johnson, 136.
villagers, but as he lived among the people and came to know them, he said he sympathized with them and respected their culture. His experience with the PF’s was similar; at first he thought they were in the Popular Forces to avoid going into the ARVN where they would probably be in heavy combat. Eventually Brown came to think they joined the Popular Forces to protect their families from the NLF who took food and young men and women for their army from the villages.  

The support his CAP received from the Marine Corps, the ARVN, and from the South Vietnamese government officials was very good, in Brown’s opinion. He said the Marine units in the area responded quickly with reaction forces when the CAP asked for help during an NLF attack. Also, he said the Marine Corps gave the unit all the help support it needed to do its work in the villages. Importantly, the Marine Corps let the platoon use its own judgement to act on any intelligence the platoon had, and the platoon was also allowed to do what it thought was necessary to improve security and win the confidence of the people in the village. Brown also said the platoon received good intelligence information and artillery support from the ARVN, and the National Police helped them with any problems they had in the village.  

As time passed Brown said the Vietnamese villagers began to like and trust the Marines in the CAP. He thought this because the people made the Marines feel welcome in the village, and they started to give the Marines intelligence information about NFL activities around the village. It is interesting that Brown said his best experience in the

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84 Ibid., 24- 26.
platoon was making friends with a young Vietnamese boy in the village. He grew close to the boy, and when Brown left the platoon to go home the boy and his family all came to say goodbye to him. This is touching, and it shows the strong friendships that could develop between the Marines and the Vietnamese when they lived and worked together in the villages to fight against a common enemy.

Brown was critical of the platoon in some ways, though. He said he did not volunteer for the duty, and neither did any of the other men who went to the combined platoon in which he served. He was not sure why the others were chosen, but in his case he thought he was chosen because he was perceived as a discipline problem. Brown may have been an exception, but this contradicts the idea that only the best volunteers were chosen for duty in the combined platoons. Also, Brown did not get along well with his squad leader, whom he said was a racist. These could be important problems for someone serving in one of the combined platoons, because living and working in such close proximity with other people in a stressful situation could magnify any problems.

It is significant that even though Brown did not volunteer for the platoon and disliked his squad leader, he still valued the experience of serving in the combined platoon. In his opinion there was a strong bond in the platoon that made it almost like a family and he said he had not felt that close to the men with whom he served in other units. Also, he thought the combined platoons were a success because they showed the Vietnamese people the Marines would live in the villages to protect the people and share

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85 Ibid.

86 Ibid. 26- 27.
their dangers. Altogether, it seems as if Brown’s service in the combined platoon gave him compassion for the Vietnamese people, and he was proud he protected them.\footnote{Ibid.}

From the perspective of Ek as the commander of the Combined Action Company, and the perspective of Brown as an enlisted man in one of the Combined Action Platoons, it looked as if the company was making progress in its counterinsurgency job of separating the people from the NLF. However, at a higher level there was a conflict that would affect the CAP program more in the future. Some influential officers in the US Marine Corps and the US Army continued to differ over what they thought were the appropriate strategy and tactics for the war. General Westmoreland of the US Army wanted the Marines to follow the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy operations he chose for the war. For their part, Generals Krulak and Walt were US Marine Corps generals who strongly supported an enclave strategy and counterinsurgency tactics such as the CAP platoons as best suited for the war. This conflict of approaches was becoming more pronounced.

Two military actions in South Vietnam in November 1965 brought the tactics of the US Army approach to the war and the US Marine Corps approach into sharp contrast. In the southern area of South Vietnam during one day of a search and destroy operation involving almost 25,000 men from five brigades, twenty NLF fighters were killed.\footnote{Lewis Sorley, \textit{Westmoreland}, 98.} Further to the north, in the Phu Bai area, elements of a CAP platoon ambushed an NLF platoon close to the village where the CAP platoon lived. Four NLF fighters were killed,
and one was captured. The massive effort of the search and destroy operation succeeded in killing a few of the guerrillas and adding to the total body count for the strategy of attrition. For its part, the CAP ambush helped to keep the NLF separated from the village, and the guerrilla forces were kept away from the food, the intelligence and the young men for their army they needed from the village if they were to survive.

By the end of November 1965 the CAP program was in existence for approximately four months, and it looked as if it could develop into a successful counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. The most important reason for this was that the CAPs kept the NLF out of the villages, and because the CAPs gave the people security, NLF troops could not easily enter the villages to take food for their troops, to get intelligence information, and to get recruits for their army. One reason the security in the villages was strong was that the Marines and the PFs combined their respective strengths to create a strong platoon capable of finding and defeating NLF forces. As the Marines lived and worked with the PF’s in the villages they gained the trust of some of the people, because the Marines showed their commitment to defend the villages. When the people began to trust the Marines, they began to give the Marines intelligence information about NLF activities in the area. Civic action projects brought improvements such as fresh water, schools, and improved medical care to the people. Many of the Vietnamese villagers seemed to be starting to believe they could be safe and they could live better lives if they supported the CAP’s against the NLF, and the support of the people was the most important factor in winning the counterinsurgency war.

Even though the CAPS were showing promise as a counterinsurgency tactic, there were early warning signs of problems that would harm them later. The controversy between the US Army and the Marine Corps over strategy and tactics for the war threatened to negatively affect the CAPS if the US Army would not agree to support them. The CAP concept also depended on support from the GVN and the ARVN, and both of these organizations were increasingly seen as corrupt and unreliable.
CHAPTER III

COUNTERINSURGENCY ROLE OF

THE COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS

From the time US troops started fighting in South Vietnam in 1965, the Marine Corps looked for ways to take control of the Vietnamese villages from the National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrillas, and the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program showed promise of being an important part of the answer. The goal in this counterinsurgency war was the loyalty of the people, and after operating for a short period of time, the CAP program appeared to be developing as an effective counterinsurgency tactic to achieve this goal.

By the end of 1965 the CAP program had only been in existence for approximately five months, but it looked as if it might have the potential to accomplish a number of the goals of counterinsurgency warfare. The vital goal of keeping the guerrillas out of the villages was being pursued with some positive results. The numerous patrols and ambushes the CAPs conducted made them appear to be everywhere and nowhere, throwing the guerrillas off balance in their attempts to enter the villages. There was less tax money being taken from the people by the guerrillas, and there was less oral
and written guerrilla propaganda in the villages.¹ This implies the guerrillas had less access to the people of the villages because of CAP security efforts. The goal of gaining the loyalty of the people was being accomplished, to some extent, and an indication of this was that some of the villagers were giving the CAP members intelligence about the guerrillas. Because of this, the CAPs had a better idea of the size of the local guerrilla units, and they knew who some of the local guerrillas were. With this intelligence the CAPs were able to discover some of the members of the guerrilla infrastructure in the villages, but they were not able to find many of them. In the area of civic action and economic improvement there were some activities, but most of the CAPs were busy with security activities. Psychological operations were conducted to discredit the guerrillas, and these helped to gain the loyalty and the goodwill of some of the villagers for the CAPs.

As the CAPs continued to work in the villages, they needed to improve in some important areas of counterinsurgency if they were to succeed. As Robert Thompson told Victor H. Krulak, the primary need in a counterinsurgency situation was security for the people of the village. If the people of a village expressed loyalty to the CAPs, and if they were subject to only a few acts of guerrilla retribution over a period of time, they might be hesitant to side with the CAPs. This could be the case because if only one person were killed by the guerrillas in retaliation for siding with the CAPs, the people might question whether or not the CAPs could protect them. As a result of this, the security of the villages had to be as complete as possible. Another priority for the CAPs needed to be the

destruction of the guerrilla infrastructure in the villages, because these hidden members of the guerrilla organization in the villages ensured the survival of the guerrilla fighters. The infrastructure members made sure a steady supply of food, recruits, and intelligence went from the villages to the guerrilla units hidden in the country surrounding the villages, and without this support the guerrillas could not exist. Also, the members of the guerrilla infrastructure could target villagers who cooperated with the CAPs for intimidation or assassination, and they could perform acts of propaganda and sabotage.²

Another area of counterinsurgency the CAPs needed to stress was civic action and economic development in the villages. This was of less importance than the security of the villages and the destruction of the guerrilla infrastructure, but it was an important point in winning the loyalty of the villagers for the CAPs. The Vietnamese people had to see their lives were materially better under the control of the CAPs than they would be under the control of the guerrillas. The appeal of guerrillas is usually based on the promise of a better future under their rule, and if current physical circumstances are good and show promise of becoming even better, then the attraction of the guerrillas’ propaganda is lessened considerably.

A factor that helped the CAP program was a belief on the part of many of the Marines who served in the first CAP units that their service in the CAPs was making a worthwhile difference in Vietnam, and this belief was in sharp contrast to the beliefs of some of the Marines who were serving in regular infantry units during this period. A Marine who served in one of the first CAPs thought the program was beneficial because

the Marines lived in the villages and showed the people the Marines would face the same dangers the villagers faced. This, he said, gained the trust of the Vietnamese villagers, and he considered this part of the reason he thought the CAPs were a success. On a larger scale, the Marines who served in the first CAP units showed their commitment to the objectives of the CAP program when many of them chose to stay with their CAPs rather than leave Vietnam. In December 1965 forty of the sixty-six Marines assigned to the CAPs in the Phu Bai area volunteered to extend their service in Vietnam after their initial tour of duty ended. This sense of purpose was not matched in the regular infantry units where some of the Marines were becoming disillusioned with the war. As a Marine infantry officer in 1965, Phillip Caputo said, "By autumn, what had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhausting, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival." A large number of the Marines in the CAPs at this time appeared to have high morale and a strong sense of purpose because they believed the CAPs were helping the Vietnamese people in particular and the war effort generally.

Many of the CAPs appeared to be doing well in the area of counterinsurgency at this point in the war, and it should be emphasized that the Popular Forces (PFs) in the CAPs were a vital reason for this. Many Americans said the PFs fought poorly, but the Marines helped the PFs in this respect. In addition to improving the military training of

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the PFs, the presence of the Marines also helped the morale of the PF soldiers. One PF veteran said” The Americans were so brave that we became brave, too.”6 For their part, the PFs made it possible for the Marines to work in the villages. If the PFs were not in the CAPs, it is doubtful the Marines would have been seen as anything other than an occupying force. Also, many of the PFs had lived in the villages for their entire lives, and some of them had been fighting a guerrilla war throughout the area for years. They taught the Marines the tactics of the guerrillas, and they showed them the trails and the likely ambush sites. Often the PFs served as point men on the CAP patrols because of their knowledge of the area and the enemy. Few, if any, of the Marines knew Vietnamese, and because of this they depended on the PFs for much of their communication with the people of the villages. The people of the villages gave intelligence information to the PFs, and the PFs would then pass the information to the Marines. The connection between the PFs and the villagers was close, and one CAP Marine said the PFs in his platoon were related to one hundred and sixty of the two-hundred families in the village where the CAP operated.7 The PFs were truly of the people, and their close connection with the people of the villages, their knowledge of the area, and their knowledge of the guerrillas made the PFs invaluable for the counterinsurgency war the CAPs were fighting against the NLF.

This was not the first time Marines served in counterinsurgency units that combined Marines with indigenous troops; it was also done in the insurgency wars the Marine Corps fought in the Caribbean between 1912 and 1933. Officially, Marines were


sent to various Caribbean countries during this period to put down insurrections that threatened friendly governments and private American and European investments. In the counterinsurgency actions the Marine Corps fought in Haiti, Nicaragua, and Santo Domingo during this period, units made up of Marines and local fighters fought well against guerrilla forces, and this was particularly the case in Santo Domingo where units similar to the CAPs were formed. In these units a few enlisted Marines and a Marine officer joined with approximately fifteen people from a village to form a village defense force. In addition to helping defend the villages, the Marines trained, organized, and equipped the indigenous people in these units. A distinction between these units and the CAPs in Vietnam was that there was not a joint command of the units. Instead, in the mixed units the Marines formed in Haiti, Nicaragua, and Santo Domingo, the Marines were in command. These village defense forces in Santo Domingo did well at keeping the guerrillas out of the villages, and this was an important counterinsurgency lesson the Marine Corps learned in Santo Domingo. Generally, another counterinsurgency lesson the Marine Corps learned in the wars in the Caribbean was that one way Marines could best be utilized was by having them provide leadership and training for the local forces.

The Marine Corps learned a great deal about counterinsurgency warfare in the Caribbean wars, and it started to teach Marines these lessons in a formal setting. In 1920 at the Marine Corps Schools in Quantico, Virginia, the Marine Corps began conducting a

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9 Krulak, 190.

series of lectures based on the information learned from its experiences in the wars in the Caribbean. These practical lectures based on experience were continued over a period of time, and eventually they were published as the book, *Small Wars Manual*, in 1940.\(^{11}\) Until shortly before the publication of this manual, the Marine Corps saw fighting counterinsurgency wars as its primary mission, and with the exception of US involvement in World War I, fighting counterinsurgency wars in the Caribbean was the mission of the Marine Corps for more than three decades at the start of the twentieth century. In fact, during World War I Marines were also involved in counterinsurgency fighting in both Haiti and in Santo Domingo. \(^{12}\)

Even before the manual was published, though, the primary mission of the Marine Corps was changing. The possibility of war with Japan became a probability, and the Marine Corps was needed as an amphibious assault force to capture island bases for the US in the Pacific Ocean. During World War II the mission of the Marine Corps was to conduct amphibious assaults, and, for the most part, this continued to be the primary mission for the Marine Corps in the period after World War II. Partly because of this, the counterinsurgency techniques distilled in *Small Wars Manual* were largely neglected for a period of time. However, when the Vietnam War began a number of the highest-ranking generals in the Marine Corps were men who were young officers before World War II, and some of them remembered the counterinsurgency lessons of the Caribbean wars and looked for ways to apply them in Vietnam.


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 261-262.
Krulak was one of these Marine Corps generals who contributed to the development of the strategy and the tactics used by the Marine Corps in the initial stages of the Vietnam War, and it looks as if he used counterinsurgency lessons from the *Small Wars Manual* and the Caribbean wars to form strategy and tactics for the Vietnam War. The US needed to use a counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam, in Krulak’s opinion, and in the first few months of the Vietnam War he proposed an enclave strategy to gradually take control of the coastal region on the northeastern coast of South Vietnam. Within the enclaves, Krulak wanted to use CAP units living in the villages as a tactic to defend the villages from NLF guerrillas who might filter into the enclaves. It is striking to see how similar Krulak’s plan is to a plan of action detailed in the *Small Wars Manual*. In the manual it says a commander may need to secure” A certain area, the economic resources of which are such that its possessor controls the lifeblood of the country.”13 This is in keeping with Krulak’s idea of controlling the northeastern coastal region of South Vietnam to deprive the NLF guerrillas of the vast amounts of rice grown in that area. The parallels between Krulak’s plan and a possible course of action suggested in the manual become even closer, though. The commander is advised that ” The entire scheme of maneuver will frequently result in the occupation of the coastal area initially with a gradual coordinated movement inland, thus increasing the territory over which control and protection may be established.”14 Together, these passages from the *Small Wars Manual* can be seen as a summary of Krulak’s strategy to create an enclave along the


14 Ibid.
northeastern coast of South Vietnam to keep the NLF away from this heavily-populated, rice growing area.

As far as tactics were concerned, it looks as if Krulak found one of his principal tactics for his plan among the tactics used in the Caribbean wars. Within the enclave the manual says “The area commander … will seek to control his area by use of small detachments to protect the towns and to conduct active operations against irregular groups until the area becomes completely pacified.”\textsuperscript{15} These detachments could have been made up entirely of Marines, but the manual also says it is beneficial to combine Marines with indigenous troops to improve the leadership and the training of the indigenous forces.\textsuperscript{16} In Vietnam the Marines were combined with the PFs to create the CAPs, and the CAPs were used to protect the villages, to train the PFs, and to fight the guerrillas.

In considering Krulak’s plan, it looks as if he adopted some of the counterinsurgency techniques the Marine Corps developed in the Caribbean wars when he developed a strategy and tactics for the Vietnam War. These were proven counterinsurgency practices the Marine Corps learned from experience, and it appears Krulak chose the proven techniques he thought were appropriate for the Vietnam War.

Another of these generals was Lewis Walt, who was given command of the Third Marine Amphibious Force in Vietnam in June of 1965. Walt began his career in 1936 when he started his initial training to become an officer in the Marine Corps, and Lewis

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 419.
B. Puller was the captain who commanded Walt’s Basic School Company. Puller was a Marine officer who distinguished himself in the fighting in both Haiti and in Nicaragua, and this was especially true of his actions in Nicaragua. The value of Puller’s instructions and example for Walt can be appreciated in looking at Puller’s achievements during the remainder of his career in the Marine Corps. Puller went on to become a lieutenant general, and he acquired legendary status as one of the finest Marines to ever wear the uniform. During Walt’s training he said Puller often used examples from his experiences in the Caribbean wars in the lectures he gave the officer candidates, and it is probable that some of those lectures were later used in the _Small Manual Wars_. Later in his career Walt expressed great respect for Puller and the lessons he taught him during this initial phase of his training as an officer.17

When Walt commanded the Third Amphibious Force in Vietnam his actions show how great an influence Puller’s teaching and the counterinsurgency experiences of the Marine Corps in the Caribbean had on his thinking. Walt thought a counterinsurgency approach to the war would work best, and he saw the allegiance of the Vietnamese people as one of the keys to winning the war. He was a supporter of Krulak’s idea of using an enclave strategy, and Walt was the commander who put the enclave strategy into practice. When the idea of forming the first Joint Action Company was being considered, Walt gave it his authorization, and later after the CAP program was having some success, he promoted the expansion of the CAP program. His thinking and his actions show Walt

drew on the practical experience of the Marine Corps in the Caribbean to find strategic and tactical answers for the war in Vietnam.

Another Marine general who looked at the Marine Corps experiences in the Caribbean for lessons that could be applied to the war in Vietnam was Commandant of the Marine Corps Wallace Greene. He received his commission before World War II, and he was certainly familiar with the information in Small Wars Manual. Greene saw the war as a counterinsurgency challenge for the US, and he supported both Krulak’s proposal for the use of an enclave strategy and the use of CAP units in Vietnam. Also, in 1963 Greene was considering ways the Marine Corps could use its experience in the Caribbean to its benefit in Vietnam. At that time Greene was the Chief of Staff at Headquarters, Marine Corps, and he met with a retired Marine Corps general who had served in the Caribbean wars to ask his advice regarding the question. The retired officer was Edward H. Forney, who served in Haiti for two years in the 1930’s. The advice Forney gave Greene was more pertinent because in 1963 Forney was the Public Safety Advisor with the US Operations Mission in South Vietnam.18

In response to Greene’s request for advice Forney said he thought the Marine Corps could use its experience in the Caribbean to make a significant contribution in South Vietnam. Forney said the effort “should be a real grass roots level operation…linked with the Civil Guard, the Self Defense Corps, and the local Militia in the village and the boondock level… similar to the Guardia effort in Nicaragua or the Gendarmerie operation in Haiti and Santo Domingo.” Forney said he thought these units

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in the South Vietnamese villages were being neglected at the time, and he thought the
people in the villages would welcome a program such as this. Greene’s knowledge of
Marine Corps counterinsurgency operations in the Caribbean and the advice he received
from Forney look as if they were a direct influence on Greene’s strong support for the
enclave strategy, and his support for the CAP program.

The Marine Corps was able to draw on a wealth of practical information from the
Caribbean wars when it became involved in the Vietnam War, and the influential
generals Krulak, Walt, and Greene used this information to formulate a strategy and
tactics for the war. Both the enclave strategy and the concept of the CAPs looked as if
they would be appropriate for the situation in Vietnam. It certainly seems wise to use
proven methods from the past for current problems. Because some in the Marine Corps
thought units similar to the CAPs did well in certain counterinsurgency situations in the
Caribbean, the idea was used for the counterinsurgency war in Vietnam. The question
was whether or not the CAP idea could be successful in the Vietnam War.

The initial successes of the CAP platoons in the Phu Bai area convinced Marine
generals Walt and Krulak that the program should be expanded. Five CAP units were
operating around Phu Bai, and in November of 1965 Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi,
the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) I Corps Commander, agreed to allow
eight PF platoons to be place under Marine control in the Danang region. When he agreed
to this transfer, Thi stated the spirit and the fighting abilities of the PFs were improved by

19 Ibid., 134-135.
20 Krulak, 190.
the presence of the Marines in the CAPs. Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor, who commanded the Third Battalion of the Fourth Marine Regiment at Phu Bai when the first CAPs were formed, was now the commander of the Third Battalion of the Ninth Marine Regiment at Danang. He used Marines and the PF platoons to form a new Combined Action Company (CAC) to operate in the Danang area. 21

According to one study, though, few if any of the Vietnamese in one of the first villages where a CAP was located were favorably impressed with the CAPs. James Trullinger wrote, Village at War, which is a study of the village of My Thuy Phuong, where a CAP unit was stationed in the Phu Bai area. In his book Trullinger said the majority of the people in the village were either actively working with the NLF, or they were sympathetic to the NLF cause. Few of the people remembered much about the CAP except for the fear of being killed by one of the CAP patrols or ambushes. None of the people Trullinger interviewed spoke of any positive relations with CAP members, and none mentioned any civic action projects initiated by the CAP. Rather than seeing the CAP as a military force that protected them from the NLF, the people saw the CAP as another form of US power that opposed the NLF forces the people supported.22 The CAP was simply another expression of US military power, and it did nothing to convince the people to help the CAP, and for many of them, the CAP did not convince them to oppose the NLF. Trullinger wrote of the people of the village as enduring and opposing the CAP

21 Ibid., 138.

22 Trullinger, 118.
as another manifestation of the war against the NLF, and the villagers said the CAP was not successful in turning the people against the NLF.

Some of the information in Trullinger’s book implies the CAP may have been successful in its counterinsurgency war in the My Thuy Phuong region than Trullinger acknowledges. In a captured NLF document he quotes an NLF commander who said the psychological warfare information directed at the NLF “created dissention among our forces and various religious sects… [and] aroused nostalgia among our soldiers and cadres….“23 This suggests the CAP psychological warfare was working well to divide support for the NLF, and to capitalize on CAP successes to weaken the morale of NLF guerrillas. The NLF commander went on to explain,” the reason why shortcomings rose to a high degree was because of the enemy’s stepped-up activities in various fields and…Because of the above shortcomings our cadres were incapable of controlling the people and restoring security in the liberated area…”24 This can possibly be seen as meaning the CAP units were doing well in their fights with the NLF guerrillas. Also, it could mean the CAPs were keeping the guerrillas out of the villages, and that they were gaining the loyalty of some of the villagers. Another NLF document stated the guerrillas” have not satisfactorily performed fighting, protection of the villages, people and agricultural production. They have not carried out the role of being a backbone of the people’s political struggle and of the resupply of concentrated units.” 25 This could mean the CAPs were keeping the guerrillas out of the villages and away from the people. It

23 Ibid., 119.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 120.
could also mean the CAPs were gaining the loyalty of some of the people, and they were preventing the villages from supplying the guerrillas with the food and the recruits the guerrillas needed to survive. The information in these documents is not conclusive, but it shows the NLF was having setbacks during this time, and a contributing factor for this may have been the presence and the counterinsurgency activities of the CAPs.

Even as the CAPs were starting to show promise as a counterinsurgency tactic, the conflict between the US Army and the Marine Corps over the most effective strategy and tactics for the war was growing. William Westmoreland previously gave the Marines commanded by Walt in I Corps some freedom of interpretation for the orders Westmoreland gave the Marines, but he was becoming more impatient with the Marines by November of 1965. Westmoreland was concerned that in I Corps the Marine strategy left the” enemy free to come and go as he pleased throughout the bulk of the region.”26 To add to Westmoreland’s concern, US Army Brigadier General William DePuy, the MACV operations officer, went to I Corps in November and was displeased with the situation he found there. DePuy reported to Westmoreland that he was” disturbed by the fact that all but a tiny part of the I Corps area is under the control of the VC [Viet Cong] who have freedom of movement east and west- north and south- outside the Marine enclaves.”27 He also thought the NLF guerrillas in the area were growing stronger and the ARVN troops were not able to contain this threat. DePuy went on to say” the Vietnamese cannot adequately fill in behind the Marines in their expanding enclaves and

27 Ibid.
for this reason, the Marines are stalled a short distance south of Danang.” As a result of this, in DePuy’s opinion,” If they move out farther, they will have insecure areas behind them for which there are no Regional or Popular forces or pacification cadre to provide long term hamlet- by hamlet security.” 28 This report reinforced Westmoreland’s opinion that the Marines should be more aggressive, and he pushed them to conduct more search and destroy operations beyond the established enclaves.

Some of Westmoreland’s concerns had merit, but others were a matter of different strategic approaches to the war. The Marines did not want to engage in random search and destroy operations beyond the limits of the enclaves. Instead, they sent numerous small patrols into the areas outside the enclave in an effort to find the main force units of the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). When good intelligence was developed as to the location of the main force NLF units, the Marines could then strike an identified target with sufficient force to give the Marines the advantage in the fight. The Marines thought this method was better than having their battalions move through the jungle in a search for hidden NLF and NVA units. DePuy’s conclusions regarding the inability of the ARVN, the Regional Forces (RFs), and the PFs to provide security in the enclaves was in keeping with the conclusions the Marines drew themselves. By this time the Marines attempted a number of ways to use the ARVN, the RFs, and the PFs in hamlet security within the enclaves, and none of them worked well. One promising way the Marines were using to provide security in the villages and the hamlets was the CAP program that combined Marines with PFs, and it is unfortunate DePuy’s inspection of the Danang area was conducted in the same month the CAP program was authorized to expand to the

28 Ibid.
region around Danang. If DePuy saw the CAPs after they were operating in the villages around Danang for a period of time, it is possible he would have been more favorably impressed with the security within the enclaves.

Westmoreland did not like the idea of using the CAP concept extensively, and this was partly because he saw an ARVN program similar to the CAPs fail badly. In Binh Dinh province in 1964 Westmoreland suggested that small units of ARVN troops be assigned to the districts in the province for security and for patrolling throughout the area to detect NLF movement. After the plan was put into practice, it worked well for a period of time. Eventually, though, two NLF regiments conducted an offensive in the area and defeated each of the small ARVN forces. The NLF units were able to do this because the ARVN did not have battalion and regimental units of their own in reserve to reinforce the small units in an emergency. The conclusion Westmoreland drew from these events was that the large NLF units had to be destroyed before small ARVN or US units could be safely used for security and pacification duties. Otherwise, in Westmoreland’s thinking, the small units would be too vulnerable to defeat by the NLF main force battalions and regiments. 29

The Marine Corps did not agree with Westmoreland’s idea that the CAP concept should be abandoned because of the vulnerability of the small CAP units to large enemy attacks, but instead the Marines resolved to correct the weakness. The Marines thought the counterinsurgency work the CAPs were doing was critical for keeping the guerrillas out of the villages, and rather than eliminating the program because of its exposure to

29 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 99-100.
attacks by large NLF units, they resolved the problem by having infantry forces ready to reinforce the CAPs. In many situations this worked well. In one instance when a large force of NLF guerrillas attacked one of the first CAPs, a Marine said an infantry unit quickly came to reinforce the CAP in the fight.\textsuperscript{30}

In his book, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, Westmoreland gave some praise for the CAPs, but he also showed he did not fully understand how the CAP concept was used by the Marines. The CAP program was an innovative pacification program, Westmoreland said, and he sent information about their successes to units under his command. Those units were told they could use their own judgement in using the CAP idea where they thought it would be appropriate. As far as using CAPs more widely in South Vietnam was concerned, though, Westmoreland was against the idea. He said” I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet; that would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail.”\textsuperscript{31} However, the Marine Corps intended to solve the weakness of CAPs as isolated units by having reaction forces close to the CAP villages. Also, the Marines only wanted the CAPs to be located in enclaves in the heavily populated, rice growing regions of the northeastern coastal area of I Corps and the Mekong Delta. A large number of troops would have been needed to create a network of CAPs in I Corps and in the Mekong Delta, but it would not have required as many troops as Westmoreland suggested.

\textsuperscript{30} Hemingway, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{31} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 166.
When the Marine Corps expanded the CAPs in November 1965 the attitude of the US Army toward the program turned from disapproval to active resistance. The Marine Corps was told that no additional assigned quotas of Marines would be provided for the support of the CAP program, and "If you want to play around with such foolishness you’ll have to eat the personnel spaces out of your own hide."32 This was a serious problem for the Marine Corps because it meant any men assigned to the CAPs would have to be taken from Marine infantry units, and those units needed every man they had. Regardless, some infantry commanders were willing to assign their men to the CAPs because they believed the CAPs were serving a worthwhile purpose.33

The US Army’s decision to not provide additional Marines for the CAP program had a negative effect on the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency role. The CAPs were intended to have a squad of fourteen Marines with a Navy Corpsman, and a PF platoon of approximately thirty-five men. In fact, though, there were usually fewer than thirty-five PFs available for the CAPs. This force of approximately forty-nine men was responsible for keeping the guerrillas out of Vietnamese villages with populations that could be as large as five thousand people, and often the populations of the villages were greater than this. As they searched for the NLF guerrillas, the CAP members patrolled through and around the villages which often covered areas of ten square miles or more. In addition to keeping the guerrillas away from the villages, the CAPs were also responsible for other counterinsurgency duties such as accomplishing


33 Ibid.
civic action projects, gathering intelligence, and psychological warfare operations.
Performing these missions with a squad of fourteen men, a corpsman, and a force of PFs would be difficult, but the reality was that the CAPs often had ten or fewer Marines and a corpsman. The lack of support for the CAP program from the US Army meant there were fewer Marines available for the CAPs, and this meant the CAPs could not perform their counterinsurgency missions as well as they would have been able to with more Marines. The Marine infantry units provided some of their men for the CAPs, but the infantry units needed every man they had, and this was especially the case when the Marines began fighting pitched battles with the NVA in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) region in 1966.

After the United States had been fighting the war in Vietnam for over eight months, Krulak submitted a second strategic appraisal of the war in December, 1965 in which he expressed dissatisfaction with the way the war was being fought. Krulak said the strategy for the war was never clearly stated, but he saw the strategy as one of attrition that intended to” attrit the enemy to a degree which makes him incapable of prosecuting the war, or unwilling to pay the cost of so doing.” He went on to say” If this is indeed the basis for our strategy, it has to be regarded as inadequate.” Krulak thought the strategy of attrition attacked the strength in manpower of the NVA and the NLF, and neglected their material weaknesses. The North Vietnamese and the NLF had thousands of soldiers to send into the fight in South Vietnam. If the United States fought a war of attrition against these forces it would result in unacceptable levels of casualties for the United States, regardless of the number of NVA and NLF soldiers killed. In this report Krulak underscored the questionable worth of the strategy of attrition by pointing out that at the ratio of NVA and NLF casualties to US casualties at this point in the war, ten
A thousand Americans would be killed in order to kill twenty percent of the NVA and NLF soldiers. 34

The strength of the NVA and the NLF was in the number of soldiers they could put into the fight, and Krulak made a radical proposal to attack the material weakness of their forces. He saw the NVA and the NLF as vulnerable in a material sense because the military supplies and the fuel they needed to conduct the war came into North Vietnam through its harbors and over its railways from China. In Krulak’s opinion, the NVA and NLF war effort in South Vietnam could be severely hurt if the North Vietnamese harbor facilities were bombed, the harbors mined, and the railways from China bombed. Cutting off the supplies the NVA and the NLF needed to fight the war in South Vietnam had the power to cripple their ability to fight, and Krulak saw this as a key element of the strategy he thought was needed to win the war. 35

Instead of fighting the war with a strategy of attrition, Krulak said the United States should use a strategy based on counterinsurgency that separated the people of South Vietnam from the NLF guerrillas, and gave the people security to protect them from the NLF. In the strategic proposal he wrote in June 1965 Krulak said pacification operations should be a primary consideration, and he continued to think pacification should be emphasized. He thought the military of the US should be used for pacification, because the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN had shortcomings that could not be overcome very soon. In I Corps the Marine Corps created Joint Coordinating...

34 Victor H. Krulak, “A Strategic Appraisal, Vietnam December 1965”, Klyman Collection, Box #1. US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.

35 Ibid.
Councils that formed one authority over all of the South Vietnamese and US civilian and military pacification efforts in their regions. One benefit of these councils was that they made it possible to create one clear plan for all of the pacification actions in their areas. Krulak thought councils such as these should be put into place in South Vietnam from Saigon down to the level of the various corps regions. Krulak restated his belief in the enclave strategy when he said US military forces should pacify areas adjacent to their enclaves to form larger pacified areas in South Vietnam. To make pacification more effective, he said all US units that were in contact with Vietnamese civilians should be given specific standards for civic action programs they were to conduct.  

The ideas in Krulak’s paper show he was frustrated with what he saw as a failing strategy of attrition he thought should be replaced with an enclave strategy emphasizing pacification. He said the loyalty and the support of the Vietnamese people was vital for winning the war, and there was too little being done in the area of pacification to gain the loyalty and the support of these people. Many of the victories in battles against the NVA and the NLF main force units were meaningless, in his opinion, and he thought it was more important to keep the NVA and the NLF away from the Vietnamese villages. Regarding the war of attrition he said” A key point is this: the conflict between the North Vietnamese/ hard core Vietcong, on the one hand, and the U.S, on the other, could move to another planet today and we would not have won the war.” He then gave a primary reason for focusing on pacification to keep the NVA and the NLF away from the populated areas of South Vietnam” On the other hand, if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse, as the enemy would be denied

36 Ibid.
food, sanctuary and intelligence.” A large number of US troops would be needed for the work among the Vietnamese people in a war based on pacification, in Krulak’s opinion, but he thought fewer troops would be needed for a war based on pacification than were being used for the search and destroy operations in support of the attrition strategy. Also, he thought the number of US casualties would be fewer. Krulak’s comments reveal his conviction that a spreading enclave strategy with a focus on pacification might bring the war to a successful conclusion for the US, and his belief that a strategy based on attrition could only result in the war’s being lost.37

The conclusion of the paper had a number of recommendations Krulak thought were needed to win the Vietnam War. The focus of the war needed to be on defeating the NLF guerrillas and on providing security to keep the guerrillas away from the Vietnamese people. As this was being done, the main force NLF and NVA units would be attacked when firm intelligence located them, and when the situation was in favor of US forces. Also, the North Vietnamese port facilities, industrial sites, fuel depots, power plants, and rail lines should be destroyed, and the ports mined. In keeping with his emphasis on pacification, Krulak said all appropriate US and Vietnamese resources needed to be used for pacification. To make the pacification program more effective he said the PFs needed more training, and US should be used for this training. US military units that had contact with the Vietnamese civilians needed to concentrate on developing civic action programs to be conducted among the people. In his last recommendation

37 Ibid.
Krulak said the Vietnamese government should be pressured to initiate an extensive program of land reform.\textsuperscript{38}

The conclusion of the paper ended with two points that illustrated Krulak’s belief that a change in strategy was imperative to prevent a catastrophic end to the US war effort. First, he stressed the US needed a military strategy that took into consideration the political, the social, and the economic conditions in South Vietnam. In other words, he was promoting a strategy that emphasized counterinsurgency and pacification, and not attrition. Second, he said the strength of the NLF and the NVA was in the number of soldiers they had to fight the war, and the strategy of attrition was attacking their strength, and not their weaknesses. He ended by bluntly saying these two factors had to be the basis for a change in strategy for the war, and if the current strategy of attrition were continued, the war would end in a defeat for the United States.\textsuperscript{39}

This paper was Krulak’s analysis of the strategy of the war, and he did not mention the CAP program specifically. However, he expressed how important he thought it was to protect the people from the NLF guerrillas, and to keep the guerrillas from getting the rice, the intelligence, and the recruits they could get in the villages. Also, he made the point that he thought US forces should be used to train the PFs who defended the villages.\textsuperscript{40} The CAP concept was considered successful enough to expand the program at approximately the time Krulak wrote his paper, and these two ideas were

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
among the primary missions of the CAPs. As the CAP program was expanded the CAPs eventually became an integral part of the pacification plan the Marine Corps used in its enclaves.

Because he was deeply concerned about the way the war was being fought, Krulak made a determined attempt to have his strategic plan adopted. Initially, Krulak took his plan to Admiral Ulysses S.G. Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, who said he liked it, and who then gave Krulak permission to show the plan to Marine Commandant Greene. After Greene said he thought the plan was good, he told Krulak he should present the plan to Robert S. McNamara. The relationship between Krulak and McNamara was good because they worked well together during the period of 1962-1964 when Krulak served on the Joint Staff as the special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities, and McNamara agreed to see Krulak. After listening to Krulak’s plan, McNamara’s primary concern seems to have been with the bombing and the mining of the North Vietnamese ports and the bombing of the railways to China. Eventually, Krulak was able to present his plan to President Lyndon Johnson, and Johnson listened as Krulak explained it to him. When Krulak said the US needed to bomb the North Vietnamese port facilities and mine the ports, Johnson rose to his feet and showed Krulak to the door. Johnson and others in the US government thought bombing and mining in North Vietnam on the scale Krulak’s plan proposed would risk bringing Russia, China, or...

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41 Krulak, First to Fight, 199-200.
both, into the war.\textsuperscript{42} Partly because this one aspect of Krulak’s plan was seen as too extreme, it looks as if the entire plan was rejected.

The US was clearly not willing to start a war with either the Soviet Union or The People’s Republic of China over Vietnam. Whether the Soviet Union and China were willing to go to war with the US over Vietnam is more obscure, though. Both the Soviet Union and China provided North Vietnam with extensive material and technical assistance during the course of the war For its part, China sent a tremendous amount of military and economic aid to North Vietnam during the war. China also sent approximately five hundred thousand troops, and technical and military advisors to North Vietnam to help the war effort. The threat of China’s entering the war if the North were invaded was a major reason the US did not invade North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{43} However, the former NVA officer Bui Tin thought neither the Soviet Union nor China were willing to fight the US if North Vietnam was invaded, and he said both countries let the North know this was the case. The North Vietnamese continued to say both countries would help them if the US invaded. The North Vietnamese thought the US might invade if they knew this though, and they continued to say the Soviet Union and China would help them if the US invaded.\textsuperscript{44}

Krulak understood the inherent risks in his plan to bomb and mine North Vietnamese ports and to bomb railways to China, but this plan needs to be considered

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 202.


\textsuperscript{44} Bui Tin, 40-41.
within the context of the situation. The US was engaged in a war, and it was Krulak’s
duty as a military officer to contribute to victory in the war. He saw the US strategy of
attrition as a mistaken strategy that attacked the NLF and NVA strengths, and he thought
continuing to pursue this strategy would result in a bloody defeat for the US. Instead,
Krulak proposed to attack the NLF and NVA weaknesses by using the expanding enclave
strategy to block the NLF and the NVA from the food and the recruits they needed in the
heavily-populated, rice-growing areas of South Vietnam. To fight the war, the NLF and
the NVA also needed rockets, artillery, antiaircraft guns, and other weaponry and
supplies transported to South Vietnam from North Vietnam. These weapons and other
supplies for the war first entered North Vietnam through its ports and over the rail lines
from China. If this flow of supplies into North Vietnam could be stopped the ability of
the NLF and the NVA to fight would be severely constrained. Instead of using a strategy
of attrition to attack their strength in manpower, Krulak proposed to attack these two
weaknesses of the NLF and the NVA. He saw this as a calculated risk, but he said, “I
was sure the Russians were not about to start a war with the United States over Indochina
and that, if put to the test, the North Vietnamese would probably prefer having Americans
in their country to Chinese, whom they hate.” The risks in Krulak’s plan were
considerable, but his plan was promising because it focused on attacking the weaknesses
of the NLF and the NVA. There was the element of a desperate gamble in Krulak’s plan,
but the war was a bloody stalemate at the time he conceived his idea, and the only
alternative he could see for his plan’s adoption was a painful defeat for the US. 45

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45 Krulak, First to Fight, 199-200, 201.
As a consequence of Krulak’s strategic plan not being either wholly or partially adopted the strategy of attrition with its search and destroy operations continued to dominate the Vietnam War. Later studies done during the war proposed changes similar to those in Krulak’s strategic proposal. As for the CAP program, the continuation of the strategy of attrition meant the US Army would continue to deny the Marine Corps support that could have improved the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency duties more effectively.

As the CAP program expanded, adjusting to the culture in the villages was a challenge the Marines faced as they tried to accomplish their counterinsurgency work among the Vietnamese people. Hop Brown was a black Marine from Harlem who said, “I didn’t think I’d ever see people living in more squalid and degrading conditions than what I’d left behind.” 46 The poverty and the living standards of the Vietnamese were initially shocking for many Marines, and some Marines were repelled by the living conditions they encountered in the villages. The Marines also found it difficult to accept that the Vietnamese habitually defecated in front of their homes and in other public areas, and at other times the Vietnamese defecated in the rice paddies to fertilize the rice crop. This was disconcerting for the Marines, and the sexual habits in these rural villages could also be upsetting. The Vietnamese strictly prohibited premarital sex between men and women, but masturbation between men was commonly accepted. 47 It was hard for some

46 Hemingway, p. 22.

Marines to have respect and sympathy for the people when cultural habits such as these were so different from those in the United States.

To work in the villages, and to be accepted in the villages, the Marines had to understand how important the elderly were in Vietnamese culture. It was easy for the Marines to play and joke with the children who were open and friendly, but they learned it was more important to be respectful toward the elderly in the village, and to spend time talking with them. The Marine squad leader especially had to cultivate a good relationship with the village chief and the district chief, if possible. To gain the goodwill of these men, the squad leader might have tea with them and ask their opinions on various matters. Gaining the favor of these men could give the CAP status among the villagers, and the cooperation of the village chief and the district chief were important for the CAPs as they worked in the villages. The reverse was true also, if the village chief and the district chief were opposed to the CAPs, then the CAPs would have a difficult time accomplishing much in the villages.

To be successful, the Marines in the CAPs needed to be accepted in the foreign culture of the villages, and they needed to fight a counterinsurgency war against the determined and experienced NLF guerrillas. In some instances the Vietnamese were offended by actions of the Marines that were a result of Marine ignorance of Vietnamese cultural values. When the Marines spoke with the Vietnamese children they would often pat the children affectionately on the head, but the Marines learned the Vietnamese thought this brought bad luck to the children. Also, according to the beliefs of some

48 Ibid., 220.
Vietnamese, if a person crossed his legs and the heel of his crossed leg pointed at someone, that person would soon die. Mistakes such as these that resulted from cultural ignorance seem trivial, but they could alienate the villagers and frustrate the CAP efforts to gain the loyalty of the people in the villages. As the Marines attempted to acquire sensitivity to the culture of the villages, they also worked to sharpen the skills necessary to fight the NLF in a counterinsurgency war. To do this, the Marines and the PFs had to train to work together as a military unit in this fight. The Marines also had additional challenges such as giving the PFs additional training, finding a way to acquire intelligence, performing civic action, and conducting psychological warfare actions. For these and other reasons, finding a way to make the CAP concept work well was a tremendous challenge, and much of the success or failure of the program depended on how the Marines chosen for the CAPs were selected and trained.

When the CAP program began the Marines chosen for the program were carefully-picked volunteers, but these high standards were difficult to maintain as the program expanded. A study of the CAP program done in 1969 looked at the history of the program during the war, and the study found in the first CAP platoons Lieutenant Paul Ek formed in the Phu Bai area he was able to personally choose the men he thought were appropriate for the job. He understood the difficult counterinsurgency mission he wanted the CAPs to accomplish, and he looked for men with qualities he thought were important for accomplishing the mission. Ek said he chose” Men who were mature, intelligent, who possessed leadership capabilities and tact.” He emphasized, though, that” tact was the

49 Ibid., 220-221.
most important qualification.” Also, Ek stressed the men he chose for the CAPs had to be motivated to work with the Vietnamese people, and to respond to the needs of the people.50 When the CAP program was expanded, though, the additional CAP Marines had to be taken from the existing strength of the Marine infantry units because no specific quotas were created for CAP units. The infantry commanders were told to select men for transfer to the CAPs who were “mature and highly motivated”, but this caused a conflict of interest for the infantry commanders. In effect, they were asked to send some of their best enlisted men and non-commissioned officers (NCO’s) to the CAP program, and this would weaken the combat effectiveness of their units. This was particularly true because some of the infantry units were told to send as many as thirty of their men to the CAP program each month. Because sending their best men to the CAPs would lessen the combat strength of their units, and because the description of men needed for the program was open to interpretation, the infantry commanders sometimes sent the men they did not want in their units to the CAPs. 51

The quality of the Marines in the program was important for performing the CAP counterinsurgency mission in the villages, and it is revealing to look at how some Marines became assigned to the CAPs during this period. For the reasons mentioned, many of the Marines sent to the CAPs during the expansion of the program were “volunteered” by their units. One Marine said he was not asked if he wanted to go to CAPs, and he did not volunteer. He said he was seen as a loner in his company, and when


51 McManus, 215-216.
he got into a fight with another Marine he was quickly transferred to the CAPs. Private First Class (PFC) David Sherman was in a platoon ordered to provide a number of men to go to CAPs. After approximately half the needed men volunteered, Sherman and a number of others were told they would go to the CAPs. Sherman did not want to go to the CAPs, and he did not volunteer. He went, as he said, with” No school, no indoctrination, no nothing. Gather a bunch of Marines, stick us outside a hamlet, and we were a CAP.”

In another instance PFC Thomas Flynn was a member of a battalion scheduled to rotate from Vietnam in 1966. Flynn and some other Marines who had not been in Vietnam for very long were told they would stay in Vietnam and be assigned to the CAP program. Flynn said he never heard of the program before he was told he would become a part of it.52 These experiences show some of the more questionable ways men went to the CAP program, but they were probably the exceptions.

Most of the men who went to the CAP program did volunteer and many volunteered because they wanted to help the Vietnamese people, and they thought the CAP program would help win the war. Jim Donovan went to a CAP when his battalion commander requested,” volunteers, and good ones” from the companies under his command. Donovan said he was personally chosen by the battalion commander, and he helped to choose the other men for the CAPs from among those who volunteered. He said,” They were all good, and not a ‘bird’ in the bunch.” After serving in an infantry company Sergeant Mac McGahan volunteered for duty in a CAP unit because he wanted to help the Vietnamese people. In the CAPs” We can see the progress being made,” he

52 Ibid., 216- 217.
said. In his CAP” Eight out of the fourteen men here have extended for another six months. In McGahan’s opinion serving in the CAPs had more purpose than serving in an infantry unit because” In a line company you’re in a lot of combat and you’re always tired. You don’t really care about the people. You just want to put in your time and get out.” In the CAPs the war was different, though, because,” Here with the CAP you’re not just killing the VC, you’re helping people and you can see the progress you’re making”\(^53\)

Even those Marines who did volunteer for the CAPs were sometimes not well-suited for the intricate counterinsurgency processes in the villages, though. Some of the Marines who volunteered knew little about the CAPs, but they thought living in the villages was preferable to the grinding violence and danger of serving in an infantry unit. \(^54\) While their intentions may have been good, many of these men were simply too scarred from their previous experiences of fighting the NVA and the NLF main units. They served in areas where they saw very few Vietnamese civilians, and most of the Vietnamese they saw were NVA and NLF fighters. It was difficult to shift from seeing all Vietnamese as enemies, and to now see the villagers as people they were trying to help. One Marine said,” We’ve been up in the mountains where it’s been kill, kill, kill; now we come down here and are told we’re supposed to love them all. It’s too much to ask.” \(^55\) Also, other men who volunteered for the CAPs because they saw living in the villages as better than serving in an infantry unit had a racial hatred for the Vietnamese people.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 217.

\(^{54}\) Allnutt, 12.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., C- 3.
When men such as these were placed in CAPs their intentional or unintentional actions could ruin a bond of cooperation and trust developed over a period of months.56

The difficulty of obtaining volunteers who were able to conduct the counterinsurgency work the CAPs needed to do in the villages created fundamental problems for the CAP program. The primary reason for this was that the CAPs needed good Marines, and good Marines were needed everywhere. The infantry units were usually understrength as it was, and they were asked to have their best men volunteer for duty with the CAPs. Doing this could only lessen the combat- effectiveness of any infantry unit, and it is unrealistic to think many infantry commanders would do this. As a result of this many of the Marines sent to the CAPs were cast- offs from the infantry, and they did a mediocre job in the villages. The Marines sent to the CAPs who either could not or would not serve well in the program could usually be transferred out of a CAP, but this often meant the CAP would be short of the men needed to accomplish its mission. The selection process at this time for CAP Marines worked as a detriment for the counterinsurgency work the CAPs were doing in the villages.

The junior enlisted men chosen for the CAPs were important, but much of the success or failure of the CAPs depended on the Marine squad leader. The study of the CAP program conducted in 1969 determined throughout the existence of the program, ” The major variable affecting the performance of military operations is the leadership ability of the Marine squad leader. This man is the key to the entire operation and on his capabilities all else hinges.” The study said if the squad leader had the respect of his men

56 Shulimson, 1966, 245.
the CAP did its work well, but if the squad leader lost the respect of his men the CAP” goes slack and becomes not only ineffectual or a liability, but also quite vulnerable to the enemy.”\(^{57}\) The principal reason the squad leader was so important in the CAPs was the sheer physical isolation of the CAP units. The morale of the Marines could become low if they focused on the fact that they were alone in a hostile area. On the other hand, discipline might become a problem when there was little guerrilla activity and the men saw little reason for the constant boredom of patrolling and setting ambushes. In situations such as these the squad leader had to stay motivated and disciplined, and he had to keep his men motivated and disciplined, also.\(^{58}\) Because the squad leaders were such a vital part of the CAPs, it is important to look at who they were, and how they were chosen.

The success of the CAPs depended so much on the quality of the squad leaders that the study of the CAPs cited earlier made a point of looking at the characteristics of these squad leaders. The study was done later in the war, but it gives a description of the men who led the Marine squads. There were one hundred- eleven CAP platoons at the time of the study, and over fifty percent of the CAP squad leaders were twenty- one years old or younger, and three of those under twenty- one were eighteen years old. Over sixty percent of them were sergeants, and the others were either corporals or lance corporals. Even though the lance corporals were below NCO rank they were given command of the squads. More than twenty- five percent of these squad leaders had served in the Marine

\(^{57}\) Allnutt, 35.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., C- 5- C-6.
Corps for less than two years, and the average length of service in the Marine Corps for them was less than four years. Approximately half of the men were promoted to their squad leader positions from within the CAP program, and over forty percent of the squad leaders extended their tour of duty at least one time.\textsuperscript{59} One of the most striking impressions taken from these characteristics is that some very young men were given great responsibility to accomplish the complicated counterinsurgency missions of the CAPs.

The importance of the squad leaders was further confirmed when the CAP study said experience showed an excellent squad leader could improve a mediocre squad to the point that the squad could do a good job of performing its CAP mission. In some instances the best squad leaders were sent to CAP units where there were problems. As a result of these findings, the study determined ever effort needed to be made to find the best possible NCOs for the CAP program.\textsuperscript{60}

The CAP program was not provided with a steady supply of qualified and highly-motivated volunteers and it is reasonable to imagine the program would have been more successful if it had been given those volunteers. The important job of establishing a bond with the Vietnamese could be ruined by the actions of one man who was less than willing to work closely with the people. Also, the CAPs were small units, and every man was needed to work on the counterinsurgency tasks of intelligence, civic action, psychological operations, and security in the large areas of the Vietnamese villages. The central

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., C- 6.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
problem, though, was that the same qualified and highly-motivated men needed in the CAPs were also needed in the infantry, and the infantry was the source of Marines for the CAPs. This was especially true for the quality NCOs needed to command the CAP units, because good NCOs were always at a premium, and few infantry units were willing to release these men if they had a choice. MACV’s refusal to give the Marine Corps additional manpower quotas for the CAP units was part of the reason for a lack of qualified Marines for the CAP program. The end result was that the CAP program had too few qualified men, and the CAPs usually had too few men, altogether.

As the CAP program expanded in 1966, a general pattern was established for the counterinsurgency operations of the CAPs in the villages. One of the responsibilities of the CAPs was to provide security for the villages, and to keep the guerrillas from getting food, recruits, supplies, and intelligence from the Vietnamese villagers. Gaining intelligence on local and general NLF and NVA activities was another basic responsibility of the CAPs, and performing civic actions and psychological operations were other responsibilities. An additional task was developing local government and strengthening the loyalty of the people to the central government. These were among the tasks the CAPs were expected to accomplish, and a study done during the war looked at how the CAPs actually operated in attempting to accomplish these tasks.

The primary responsibility of the CAPs was to provide security to keep the guerrillas out of the villages, and most of the time and the energy of the CAPs were taken up with planning, conducting, and reporting on the ambushes and patrols the CAPs
performed to provide that security. \(^{61}\) With good security all of the other counterinsurgency goals can be accomplished, but without good security no counterinsurgency goals can be achieved. The patrol is the “lifeblood of security” for all infantry, and this was particularly true for the CAPs. As an infantryman patrols, he “gathers intelligence, projects power, assesses terrain, calms friends, intimidates enemies, outwits the enemy soldier or insurgent who would like to kill him, and, if necessary, gets into a life-and-death fight with that enemy combatant.” \(^{62}\) This definition is a good summary of the purposes of the patrols for the CAPs, and the patrols and the ambushes were the essence of the security function for the CAPs in the villages. The ambushes were small groups of PFs and Marines who hid in the night at points where they thought the guerrillas might pass by them. By conducting a constant series of patrols and ambushes the CAPs worked to take the initiative away from the guerrillas whose strength was that they might attack at any time, and at any place. If the CAPs began to execute fewer patrols and ambushes during a period of guerrilla inactivity, they could pay in blood for their lack of attention. Because of this, there was a requirement for each CAP to conduct at least one patrol or ambush each day, and at least two each night. Each of these activities needed to be planned at least three days in advance because they were coordinated with units in the area that provided reaction forces and artillery and mortar fire support for the CAPs. This coordination also prevented the possibility of accidentally firing on friendly units operating in the same area. \(^{63}\)

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 31

\(^{62}\) McManus, 226-227.

\(^{63}\) Allnutt, 31.
The ambushes and the patrols were usually assumed to be planned each day by the Marine squad leader and the platoon sergeant of the PFs. It was thought this joint planning of military activities would help to improve the leadership ability of the PF platoon sergeant. In the majority of the CAPs this was not done, though. Instead, the Marines planned the activities and then submitted the plans to their headquarters. Shortly before the ambushes and the patrols were sent out in the evening, the PFs were told where they would be going, and what they would be doing. A primary reason for doing this was to prevent anyone’s telling the guerrillas the CAP plans. On some occasions the guerrilla responses to the military activities indicated they knew where the patrols and the ambushes were located, and the most immediate way to deal with the potential problem of a breach in security was to keep the plans a secret until the last minute. All of the CAPs in the study reported security leaks such as this. Another reason the Marines planned in this way was to avoid disputes with the PFs over the plans for the military activities. Disputes of this sort took place frequently, and often they seemed to occur because the leader of the PFs wanted to show his authority. When disputes such as these arose the Marine squad leader either agreed to changes proposed by the PF leader, or he negotiated a compromise plan with the PF leader. In this way the critical idea of the sharing of power between the Marine squad leader and the PF leader was maintained, and there was no loss of face for the PF leader. The reality of having the two leaders in the CAP share power created problems, but it was important for the morale of the unit, and it was especially important for the morale of the PFs.  

64 Ibid., 32.
The danger of NLF members infiltrating the PF ranks was a constant problem, and the CAP members needed to be aware of this. After one fight the body of a PF was found among the bodies of the enemy dead. On another occasion a number of PFs led a guerrilla unit through the defenses of a CAP for an attack on the CAP unit. In some villages the PFs helped to keep this problem in check, though. If it became known a PF was disloyal, and if the PF fled the area, there could be retribution against the family of the PF. Measures such as these, and constant vigilance helped to lessen the problem, but the danger of NLF infiltrators among the PFs was never eliminated.

Differences of opinion between the Marines and the PFs over plans for military operations caused problems, but they were probably worthwhile, also. If the differences became too great they could alienate the Marines and the PFs from each other, and their operations could reach a state of near paralysis. If the differences were discussed, and if compromises were achieved, it could work for the benefit of the CAP unit as a whole. The Marines knew good patrolling and ambush techniques, and they practiced them well. However, the PFs were more experienced in fighting the guerrillas, and they knew the area better than the Marines did. In one instance a PF platoon sergeant took command of the Marines and the PFs in a CAP and led them in defeating a night attack by the guerrillas. The platoon sergeant’s bravery and his knowledge of the guerrillas’ tactics were instrumental in his ability to do this. The joint command of the CAP was an

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65 Ibid., E- 9.
66 Hemingway, 106.
awkward arrangement, but the unit was probably more effective when the Marine squad leader and the PF platoon sergeant listened to each and compromised on their plans.

The military activity during the day for the CAPs was almost always a patrol, and these patrols served a number of purposes. A primary purpose of these patrols was to reassure the people with the presence of the CAPs, and to show the villagers the CAPs were vigilant and in control. The patrols in the day were conducted more as general surveillance of the areas, and they were frequently used to train the PFs and Marines who were new to the CAPs. The patrols moved through their area to look for any unusual activity, and to look for any strangers among the people of the villages. Also, the patrols looked for possible locations for future ambushes, and possible routes for future patrols. An important purpose of these patrols was to mingle with the people, and to establish good relations with them. As they talked with the people the CAP members were sometimes told of a problem someone had, or they were given intelligence information. The day patrols were only for two hours or less, and after they ended the PFs went to their homes to rest or to work, and most of the Marines returned to their compound to work there and to rest. 69

At dusk the PFs returned to the CAPs compounds, and the Marines and the PFs began to prepare for the night ambushes and patrols. Men were then assigned to the various missions, the plans were discussed and finalized, and the men cleaned their weapons and prepared their equipment. As night began to fall the patrols left the

68 Ibid., 138-139.
69 Allnutt, 33.
compound on their missions, and the remainder of the men stayed in defensive positions in the CAP compound. The numbers could vary depending on the mission, but each patrol was usually comprised of two to four Marines and four to eight PFs. Two patrols were often sent out to set ambushes at previously determined locations where it was thought guerrilla activity might be detected during the night. Later in the night the first patrols usually returned to the compound, and other patrols were sent out to set ambushes. At other times patrols set ambushes and then moved to another ambush position a few hours later. In this way a larger area was covered, and the guerrillas were less sure of where the ambush might be located. Even though conducting patrols and ambushes at night was difficult and dangerous, the CAPs needed to master their ability to perform these military activities if they were to defeat the guerrillas in the villages.70

In a guerrilla war the guerrillas often operate at night when there is less chance of their movement being detected, and they can attack and retreat with less chance of being pursued. This was the method of the NLF in the Vietnamese villages, and because of this the CAPs needed to be excellent at the skills of night patrols and ambushes if they were to defeat the NLF in the villages. Learning these skills took courage and determination. His first experience on a night patrol in one of the villages was unnerving for a Marine squad leader who said,” You had the idea the VC were fussing with your mind, that they knew exactly where you were, that they could read the label on a suit in a dark closet.”71 Before he transferred to a CAP the squad leader served in an infantry unit that fought

70 Ibid., 35.
71 F.J. West, 19.
NVA and NLF main force troops, but his experiences on the patrol gave him great respect for the guerrillas.” They’re good, man, they’re very good. It’s their turf.”72 Small, vicious fights in the night were where the war in the villages was fought, and the side that did it best would win. In 1966 the improved security in a number of the CAP villages indicated some of the CAPs were doing this well.

The CAPs were frequently required to participate in joint operations with ARVN or US forces, and this took away from the time they had to accomplish their primary counterinsurgency missions in the villages. The rationale for having the CAPs participate in large operations may have been that the CAPs knew the areas of their villages well, or that they were familiar with the people in the area. On occasions, though, the CAPs were required to participate in operations in areas away from their villages. In effect, the CAPs were simply used as an additional infantry force when they were used on operations away from the areas where their villages were located. As a result of having to take part in large operations all day, the CAP members were tired when they needed to conduct their patrols and ambushes at night. Also, they had little time to plan their activities and to prepare their equipment. A more subtle negative effect of having the CAPs leave the villages to take part in large operations was that the villagers saw the CAPs leave the villages undefended. There may or may not have been a risk involved with having the CAPs leave for one day, but it was important for the Vietnamese people to see the CAPs

72 Ibid.
as a permanent security element in the villages. If the people were expected to give their loyalty to the CAPs, they needed to know the CAPs would not abandon them.73

Using the CAPs on operations in areas where the CAP members knew the area and the people had some merit, but generally it was a misuse of a specialized resource. The CAPs were carefully developed units intended for the intricate counterinsurgency jobs in the Vietnamese villages. Using them as an additional infantry force on an operation was similar to using a scalpel for a job more appropriate for a hammer. An additional risk in doing this was that the CAPs might have men killed or wounded on these operations, and the casualties among the CAP members could not be easily replaced with qualified men. Because the CAPs were made to participate in these operations frequently, it implies the Marine Corps either did not place a high priority on the mission of the CAPs, or the Marine Corps was not able to control how the CAPs were used by infantry units. Regardless of why this was the case, the effect was that it hindered the ability of the CAPs to conduct their counterinsurgency work in the villages, and it probably caused the Vietnamese people to wonder whether they could count on the CAPs to defend them.

One of the primary jobs of the Marines in the CAPs was to train the PFs, and the study concluded that this was being accomplished. Officially, formal classes for the PFs were supposed to be conducted by the Marines, but little formal training was actually done in the CAPs. The PFs were part-time soldiers, and when they were not involved in the military activities of the CAPs many of them had to work to support their families.

73 Allnutt, 36.
After they were on patrols and ambushes most of the night, few of the PFs wanted to sit in classes conducted by Marines who were often younger and less experienced in combat than they were. The real improvement in the military capabilities of the PFs took place on a more informal basis when the Marines and the PFs worked together in the CAPs.  

Adding a squad of Marines to the PF platoons in the villages generally increased the morale and the self-confidence of the PFs to a considerable degree. The Marines were motivated, well-armed, and confident they could defeat the guerrillas, and the Marines were also able to use US artillery, air, and reaction forces to support the CAPs when they were in a battle. After the CAPs defeated the guerrillas in a few fights, the PFs began to believe the combined force could defeat the guerrillas. Because the CAPs performed as stronger and more proficient fighting units than the PF platoons had performed by themselves, the study stated, the morale and the self-confidence of the PFs was improved. As they conducted military operations with the Marines the PFs began to adopt the discipline and the military techniques of the Marines. This was partly because the Marines insisted on it, but the PFs also did this because their survival depended on it, and their pride made many of them want to do as well as the Marines. The Marines did train the PFs to clean their weapons regularly, and they trained them in marksmanship, but this was not done in a classroom setting. The Marines were training the PFs to be better fighters, the study concluded, but it was being accomplished more through example than through teaching in a formal classroom setting. 

74 Ibid., 36-37.

75 Ibid., 38-39.
Even though the Marines trained the PFs, the performance of the PFs was uneven, but it was necessary to have the PFs in the CAPs. This was true because the Marines could train the PFs and improve their morale, but in the end it was up to the Vietnamese to either win or lose the war. In his book, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*, John Nagl made the point that, “On their own, foreign forces cannot defeat an insurgency; the best they can hope for is to create the conditions that will enable local forces to win it for them.”

In a variation of this, the CAPs were able to create the conditions needed for the PFs to win the counterinsurgency war by bringing together the strength of the Marines’ fighting ability with the PFs’ strengths of their local knowledge and cultural connections with the people. With the PFs in these hybrid units the possibility of the CAPs defeating the NLF guerrillas was improved.

After securing the village against the guerrillas, the most important job of the CAPs was to gather intelligence, and the study concluded many of the CAPs were doing this well. Blocking the NLF from intimidating and interacting with the villagers was the essential first counterinsurgency step of providing security in the villages, and after this was accomplished to a reasonable degree, the lives of the people began to improve. With increased security the villagers had more money because the NLF tax collectors were no longer able to come to the villages, and the Marines were spending some of their own money in the local economy. The lives of the people also improved because the guerrillas could no longer come into the villages to get recruits for their army and food for their soldiers. Partly for these reasons, the study said, the people were living a better life in the

villages because of the presence of the CAPs, and many of them were willing to provide the CAPs with intelligence related to the NLF to help protect the better life the people were living. The people usually gave the intelligence to the PFs who gave the information to the Marines, and the Marines then passed the intelligence to their headquarters. The role the CAPs played in gathering this intelligence was crucial because it is unlikely the Vietnamese villagers would have directly given this intelligence information to ARVN forces or US infantry units. 77

The worth of the intelligence collected by the CAPs was confirmed by reports from various intelligence agencies that gathered intelligence in the areas where the CAPs were located. The majority of the agencies reported specific instances when the intelligence provided by the CAPs was useful for their operations. A number of commanders thought so highly of the intelligence-gathering operation of the CAPs that they said it was the greatest contribution the CAPs made to the war. 78

The civic action the Marines did in the villages was intended to help improve the lives of the people so that they would prefer the lives they were actually living in the villages to the promised changes the NLF offered. The Marines were doing some civic action work in the villages, but they were limited in how much of this they could do. Doing large civic action projects was difficult for the Marines because so much of their time was spent in planning and conducting their military operations. Smaller civic action projects took less time to complete, and many of the people appreciated the real benefits

77 Allnut, 41-42.
78 Ibid., 42.
these projects provided for the village. Examples of these small projects were teaching children to swim, teaching athletics, and encouraging village cleanups. Among these projects were some that helped the people economically, such as convincing people to plant an additional vegetable crop out of the traditional season. 79

These small civic action projects often helped improve life for the people, but the most popular civic action project among the villagers was the medical assistance they received from the Navy corpsmen in the CAPs. A Marine who served in a CAP said when the corpsman had sick call,” Sometimes over a hundred peasants showed up”. He thought the corpsman’s work was so valuable that” You won’t find too many Marines that’ll dispute the fact that Doc won more hearts and minds than all of us combined.”80 The corpsmen were available to treat the Vietnamese almost every day, and the study said this medical care did more to create good relations between the CAPs and the people than almost any other CAP activity. 81

The psychological operations the CAPs conducted were not extensive, but a number of CAPs were able to do some of this work in the villages. Just as with civic action, the CAP members had limited time and limited expertise to conduct involved psychological operations. In the first CAPs formed in the Phu Bai area the Marines and the PFs spread information among the villagers about CAP victories in fights with the guerrillas, and they told the people these victories showed the CAPs were winning the

79 Ibid., 47.
80 Hemingway, 28.
81 Allnutt, 47.
war in the villages. The CAP members also made sure all of the people knew about the CAP civic action projects that made life in the villages better. These were basic psychological operations the first CAPs performed to convince the people the guerrillas could not win, and that life in the villages was better than it would be with the guerrillas in control. As the CAP program expanded, many of the new CAPs continued to use simple but effective psychological operations such as these in an attempt to gain the loyalty of the Vietnamese people for the CAPs.

Both the civic action projects and the psychological operations some of the CAPs initiated were simple and effective, and the CAPs had neither the ability nor the time to do any more on their own. The small civic action projects were effective because they created meaningful benefits for the people, and they often helped to forge a closer relationship between the CAP members and the villagers. The psychological operations of the CAPs were effective because they were based on real victories over the guerrillas, and real improvements in the lives of the people. The villagers could learn quickly on their own whether or not the CAPs defeated the guerrillas in a fight, and they could see any improvements in the village. These limited civic action and psychological operations worked well as counterinsurgency measures for the CAPs because they were based on facts the people knew were true.

Even though many of the CAPs did well in the areas of civic action and psychological operations, they probably could have done better if they were given more support. There were specialized units that could have helped the CAPs plan and execute civic action projects, but this was rarely done, and the CAPs were left to their own
devices. Also, the study of the CAPs stated little if any effort was made to have specialized psychological operations units work with the CAPs in the villages.\textsuperscript{82} Rather than using specialized units to help the CAPs with the vital counterinsurgency functions of civic action and psychological operations, the job in each village was left to a squad of Marines and a platoon of PFs. If a coordinated plan to use specialized civic action and psychological operations units in all the villages where the CAPs were located had been put into practice, it is likely the CAPs would have been a more effective counterinsurgency program in the Vietnam War.

To some extent the Marines in the CAPs worked to strengthen local government and local institutions in the villages, but the wisest course of action was usually to allow these institutions to work as they had in the past. In the village the council of elders and the family controlled the traditional form of local government, and the Marines learned to work with the local government, and not to attempt to change it. In any event, advice given the council of elders by young Marines probably would not have been well-received. In most respects this was true for the local institutions in the Vietnamese villages, as well. The PF platoon was a local institution that was an exception to this, and the Marines helped make the PFs a respected fighting force that fulfilled its function of defending the villages.\textsuperscript{83}

One mission the CAPs were given was to help the central GVN government improve its control over the villages, and events beyond their control inhibited the CAPs

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 61.
from helping much with this. The men in the CAPs gained the loyalty of some of the Vietnamese people because they provided security for the village, they accomplished civic action projects, and they generally treated the people well. The people could easily see, though, that the benefits they derived from the presence of the CAPs came almost exclusively from the United States, and not from the GVN. The people saw security in the villages improve when the Marines helped the local PF platoons defend the villages, but any outside supplies used in civic action projects came from US resources. Also, the popular medical programs were performed by US Navy corpsmen and not GVN medics. If GVN control of the villages were to be extended over the villages in a beneficial manner, GVN personnel and resources needed to be used to help secure and defend the people. Attempts were made to encourage more GVN involvement in the CAP program, but the GVN was either unable or unwilling to do this.84 Because the GVN did not capitalize on the successes of the CAPs, it missed an opportunity to increase its popularity among the Vietnamese people, and to increase its control over the villages.

In 1966 the CAP program was beginning to demonstrate the CAPs were capable of accomplishing some of the most necessary counterinsurgency tasks in the guerrilla war in the Vietnamese villages. The fundamental counterinsurgency goal of security for the villages was being achieved as the CAPs defeated the guerrillas and kept them away from the people. The people were the true prize in this counterinsurgency war, and by keeping the NLF away from the people the CAPs kept the guerrillas away from the source of the food, the recruits, and the intelligence the guerrilla insurgency needed to exist. To help in

84 Ibid., 62.
doing this, the Marines were training the PFs to be better soldiers, and the Marines and the PFs in most CAPs were finding ways to cooperate in these mixed units. As far as the vital task of gathering intelligence was concerned, the intelligence operations of the CAPs were praised by US intelligence agencies to the extent that they said the CAPs were some of their best sources of intelligence information. This was the case even though the CAPs had limited means of gathering intelligence at their disposal. With their limited resources some CAPs were also conducting simple but adequate civic action and psychological operations in many of the villages. In regard to strengthening local government, most of the Marines in the CAPs wisely allowed the local governments to operate as they operated in the past, and this was true for most of the local institutions, also. However, the Marines did improve the local institution of the PF militia in most villages. With the training and the help of the Marines the PFs became better soldiers, and the CAPs were able to defeat the NLF guerrillas in most of their fights. Because of this the PF militia members were respected among the people as fighters who could protect the villages. Despite these counterinsurgency successes, there were some problems that kept the CAPs from operating at their full potential.

The CAPs experienced some difficulties in performing their counterinsurgency work in the villages, but most of their problems were beyond their control. The best possible volunteers were needed by the CAPs for their complicated and dangerous missions in the villages, but it was hard to get these volunteers from the infantry units. The infantry units needed every man they had for the savage fights they were having with the battalions and the regiments of the NVA and the NLF. The infantry was not only being asked to send men it needed to the CAPs, it was being asked to send its best men.
Because of this some infantry units sent the men they did want in their units to the CAPs. To compound this problem the Marine Corps was not allocated additional manpower quotas to compensate for the men sent to the CAPs. The intelligence gathering of the CAPs worked well, but this critical job was left in the hands of the Marines and the PFs, and if trained intelligence operatives worked in a planned manner with the CAPs the intelligence operation would likely have been improved. The situation with civic action and psychological operations for the CAPs was similar. The CAPs did not have either the time or the ability to perform anything other than rudimentary civic action and psychological operations, and even though the CAP units did well in most cases, more support would have been useful. Specialized units could have worked in coordination with the CAPs to create better civic action programs and psychological operations in the villages. Standardized training for their counterinsurgency mission would have helped the CAP Marines perform their pacification in the villages more effectively. Help with the civic action projects and the psychological operations could have also come from GVN sources, and this might have helped the GVN to create and strengthen a favorable image of itself in the villages. For whatever reasons, though, the GVN did not do this.

A fundamental problem for the entire war effort for the US and its allies during the war was the alienation of the Saigon government from most of the Vietnamese people. A Vietnamese village elder expressed much of the reason for this alienation well when he contrasted the GVN leaders with Ho Chi Minh. He said, "We are not Communists, even though we do not know exactly what a Communist is." For the village elder the problem was simpler than ideology, and he said, “But we admire and respect Ho Chi Minh. He led the struggle which threw out the foreign French. And he lives the life
of a peasant.” Unlike Ho Chi Minh, he said,” Our South Vietnamese generals in Saigon wear silk clothes and ride in big cars and send their wives to France and Japan for eye fixings so they can look like foreigners.” In contrast to the GVN leaders he said, “Not Ho Chi Minh. He owns only two suits of clothes, wears sneakers, and rides to work on a bicycle.” The village elder’s conclusion was powerful and difficult to dispute when he said,” He may be a Communist. But we would like to have a leader like him around here.”85 It is difficult to imagine anything the US and its allies could have done to counter the truth in this village elder’s statement.

There were specific instances when some of the Vietnamese people demonstrated they preferred to live in regions controlled by the CAPs. After a CAP was formed in the village of Ky Bich near Chu Lai, the people of the village began to sleep in their homes again. Before the CAP was located in the village the people moved each evening to an area three miles away to avoid the NLF guerrillas. In another situation approximately twenty- eight hundred Vietnamese moved into a hamlet near Da Nang after CAPs were established in the area. These people said they did this because they thought the CAP- controlled region was the safest place to live in the area.86 At a minimum, these actions on the part of the Vietnamese people showed the CAP- controlled villages were acquiring a reputation as villages where the people could live away from most of the violence of the war.

85 William J. Lederer, Our Own Worst Enemy (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968), 156

86 Klyman, 18- 19.
It is unusual that a concept with as much apparent potential as the CAP program received so little support during this period of the Vietnam War. The strategy and the tactics of the NLF and the NVA were confusing for US commanders, though, and there were many different ideas with apparent potential as to how the war should be fought. Many of the people who had these ideas were insisting their ideas be made a priority, and they were competing to have resources assigned to their programs. The CAP program was only one among these ideas, and Westmoreland was among those who did not think the CAP concept was that promising. Regardless, it is hard to imagine some additional resources and specialized personnel could not have been found to help the CAPs with the sophisticated aspects of counterinsurgency war in the villages. As it was, the responsibility was given almost exclusively to squads of Marines and platoons of PFs.

An event in 1966 that negatively affected all of the pacification efforts of the Marine Corps in I Corps was the conflict between the Saigon government and Buddhist elements in Hue, Da Nang, and some of the other cities in I Corps. Confrontations began in March, and they continued through June. The GVN forces of Nguyen Cao Ky eventually resolved the situation in their favor, but on a number of occasions Walt used threats and negotiations to keep the two sides from openly fighting each other. Some Vietnamese were upset because the Marines supported the GVN in the conflict, and they resented the Marines as a result of this. Also, in the confusion created by the political crisis NLF guerrillas were able to infiltrate areas considered pacified before the start of the disturbances. After the political crisis was concluded the CAPs were faced with a
situation in which they had to work harder to get the goodwill of some of the Vietnamese people, and they also faced the possibility of more guerrilla activity in the villages.

In the summer of 1966 a new front was opened in the war when NVA forces infiltrated across the DMZ into the northern-most provinces of I Corps. Westmoreland though the NVA intended to create an area where a liberation government could be established. For their part, Walt and Krulak thought the NVA was attempting to draw the Marines away from the coastal plains, and into battles in the thick jungle of the interior. Westmoreland and Walt agreed, though, that the threat needed to be met, and Marines were sent to find the NVA forces. After a series of hard fights the NVA withdrew, but the threat that they might return remained. Because of this the Marines stationed more troops closer to the DMZ to deal with any future incursions by the NVA.88

The NVA incursions below the DMZ were calculated to draw Marine forces away from their successful pacification work among the people in the coastal region of I Corps. Many of the Marine units sent to the DMZ region were taken from the populated coastal area where they were conducting and supporting pacification programs. Walt and Krulak’s suspicions that the NVA incursions were an attempt to draw the Marines away from the populated coastal areas and into battles in the interior were later substantiated by DRV leaders. A prominent member of the DRV government said we sought to,” Entice the Americans close to the North Vietnamese border and will bled them without mercy.


88 Shulimson, 1966, 312.
In South Vietnam, the pacification program will be destroyed.” 89 In 1967 Giap wrote an article for the DRV armed forces newspaper, Quang Doi Nhan Dan, in which he stated the NVA lured the Marines into battles at the DMZ to take the Marines away from their pacification work with the Vietnamese people in the coastal areas. 90 The implications in these statements are that the populated coastal areas of I Corps were important for the NVA and the NLF, and that the pacification programs needed to be disrupted because they were too successful.

Toward the end of 1966 the CAP program was having success as a counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War, but greater success was frustrated by matters beyond the control of the CAPs. The CAPs were accomplishing the primary counterinsurgency job of security for the villages, and they were generally working well with the PFs. There was always the problem of having too few Marines for the CAPs, and this problem was only increased when the Marine infantry units were sent to the DMZ to fight the NVA. For those battles the infantry needed every man they had, and they were understandably reluctant to send men to the CAPs. In the field of intelligence some of the CAPs did well, but they could have done much better if their efforts were coordinated with and supported by specialized intelligence groups. This was true for the CAP civic action and psychological operations work, also. Although many of the CAPs did well with their own resources, the help of specialized units could have improved the civic action projects and the psychological operations the CAPs initiated. As far as

89 Ibid.

strengthening the loyalty of the village to the central government was concerned, the GVN could have taken over the operation of civic action programs the CAPs started, but this was not done. The CAP program was generally doing well as a counterinsurgency tactic at this time in the war, but it would have performed better with more support.

There were other fundamental problems related to the war generally that adversely affected the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency pacification missions in the Vietnamese villages. An ARVN officer who was responsible for inspecting pacification programs in I Corps condemned the entire pacification program when he said, ”The idea of pacification- winning the hearts and minds of the people- turned out to be merely a French cliché, polished up and given an American look.” He thought the pacification programs were ineffective, and, “The insensitivity and ill-conceived policies of the men at the top, Saigon generals and American officials alike, were turning many of the people in the cities, and even some in the Vietnamese Army, against them.” As a result of the war the officer said, ”Our entire country was being devastated by fire, iron, and chemicals. People and soldiers continued to die for causes (freedom, justice, social and economic equity) that they heard a lot about, but never enjoyed. Many of those who weren’t killed or wounded lived in suffering and misery.”

This officer described the war the GVN and the Americans were fighting as hypocritical and brutal, and he implies the pacification programs were a cynical ploy to control the people.

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CHAPTER IV

COMBINED ACTION PLATOON PACIFICATION

AND THE PHONG BAC EXPERIMENT

During 1966 the CAP program was showing promise of being an effective tactic. Generally, the Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) were accomplishing the basic counterinsurgency tasks of securing the villages, gathering intelligence, performing civic action, and performing psychological operations. This study also examines why the CAP program was or was not an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the war. Many of the problems the CAPs were having in accomplishing their counterinsurgency tasks during 1966 were a result of a lack of support for the CAP program. The CAPs were deficient in the number of Marines and the quality of the Marines made available for the CAPs, and they also received little support for their civic action and psychological operations in the villages. The CAPs were not able to assist in strengthening the loyalty of the local people for the government of South Vietnam (GVN) because the GVN exhibited little if any interest in doing this. Despite this lack of support, the CAPs were doing fairly well as a counterinsurgency tactic at this point in the war.
In 1966 some officials in the US government were criticizing the Marine Corps for not being more aggressive in the war. Understandably, these officials wanted to win the war as soon as possible, and Westmoreland’s attrition strategy and search and destroy tactics were promoted as a fast way to defeat the enemy and win the war. In I Corps the Marine Corps was using the classic counterinsurgency strategy of slowly expanding enclaves and the tactics of pacifying the areas within the enclaves. In contrast to the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy, this approach was seen as lacking fast results. Robert McNamara was one of these officials, and when Victor Krulak met with him in May 1966 Krulak thought McNamara questioned the progress the Marine Corps was making in the war. Krulak was frustrated by McNamara’s comments, and he responded with a letter explaining what the Marine Corps had accomplished in the war, and why he thought the strategy and the tactics of the Marine Corps were appropriate.

Krulak began by saying the Marines were fighting the war as they were partly because “The enemy, the terrain and the mission all unite to dictate the tactics.” He said the National Liberation Front (NLF) main force units in the mountainous areas beyond the populated coastal region were of little immediate importance because they did not present much of a threat. However, he said if these units could be definitely located and attacked in situations advantageous to the Marines, then this should be done. Doing this destroyed the strength of the main force units, and it kept them from massing for attacks on Marine positions, but he did not think the Marines should be pursuing these NLF units.

simply to enlarge body counts of NLF dead. This was in keeping with his criticism of the strategy of attrition favored by Westmoreland and some others. Krulak made the central point that the Marines were primarily engaged in pacification in their areas of responsibility, and this, he stated, was the principle mission of the war. Krulak stressed, “The battle itself has to be fought in terms of weeding the guerrillas out of the villagers’ lives, and this breaking the nexus between Hanoi and its target—the people of South Vietnam.” He said the Marines were eliminating the guerrillas in the villages, and then securing these villages so that the guerrillas could not return. Part of this pacification process was the training of local militias to help in the defense of the secured villages. The slow, methodical pacification of and defense of an increasingly larger enclave was the most important mission for winning the war, in Krulak’s opinion. He underscored his thinking by saying intelligence sources confirmed North Vietnamese leaders recently stated the survival of the guerrilla movement in South Vietnam was one of their most critical concerns.

In the conclusion of his letter to McNamara Krulak said the Marines were fighting in a way to address all the problems of the war, and not part of those problems. If pacification of the populated areas were not made the primary mission of the war the guerrillas would continue to control the people of the country, and the guerrillas depended on the people to give them the food, the recruits, and the intelligence they needed to exist as a guerrilla movement. He continued to see the control of the population as the key to winning the counterinsurgency war in South Vietnam. The progress in
pacification activities in I Corps was difficult to measure, he thought, but he saw pacification as the most important mission in winning the war.\(^2\)

The pressure on the Marine Corps must have been intense during this period, because in July 1966 Krulak wrote another letter in response to Secretary of the Navy, Paul H. Nitze’s criticism of the performance of the Marine Corps in South Vietnam. Nitze told Krulak the Marines were not moving at a fast enough offensive pace, they were not pursuing large operations enough, and they were not carrying an adequate share of the burden in the war. In his response Krulak stated the Marines were, in fact, contributing more than their share to the war, and he said “To criticize the fundamental structure of the Marine operations is to place an incorrect interpretation on what really constitutes progress in the conflict.” In the letter Krulak suggested the Marine Corps was fighting the war in a more effective way than the US Army was fighting the war.\(^3\)

Krulak used facts to show the Marine Corps was conducting more than its share of large operations in the war. He said the Marines had twenty-eight percent of the maneuver battalions in the Free World forces in Vietnam, and they conducted thirty-nine percent of the operations conducted by battalion size or greater forces since the beginning of 1966. Also, he said that the Marines’ twenty-eight percent of the maneuver battalions accounted for twenty-eight percent of the NLF and NVA soldiers killed on those operations. This showed, he said, the Marines were exceeding the contribution that might be expected of them. Krulak then went on to say that while the Marines were doing more

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Victor H. Krulak to Paul H. Nitze, letter, July 17, 1966, Klyman collection, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.
than their share with the large operations, the large unit operations were not as important as the other Marine efforts.

In his letter Krulak responded to Nitze’s criticism with a strong argument for the enclave strategy the Marines were employing in I Corps. He discussed the counter-guerrilla operations the Marines were conducting, and why they were so important. He said these operations were important because I Corps covered approximately 27,000 kilometers, and the coastal plain in I Corps was approximately 7,000 kilometers. The coastal plain produced all of the salt and all of the fish in I Corps, and almost all of the 470,000 tons of rice produced in this region were produced in the coastal region. He said the other four-fifths of I Corps were sparsely inhabited, generally inaccessible, and barely able to produce enough food to support the few tribal people who lived in the area. The 20,000 NLF and NVA troops in I Corps were located outside the coastal plains, and they needed over 1,200,000 pounds of rice each month to feed themselves. Because there was little food where they were located, most of the rice these troops needed would have to come from the rice fields of the coastal plains, and the guerrillas made this possible.

Krulak stressed the point that the guerrillas were the vital connection between the population and the NLF and NVA main force units. He said the guerrillas got rice from people, collected taxes, got intelligence, got recruits, and spread propaganda among the people. Because the guerrillas knew the area and had local connection with the people, their efforts were a necessary link in the operations of the NLF and the NVA. Krulak stated the simple but important fact that regardless of how well-equipped or well-armed the NLF and the NVA were, they could not fight without rice. He said, “Mr. McNamara
rightly has said that the war will end when the enemy in South Vietnam loses his morale and his will to fight. One way to bring this about is to starve him."4

In his letter Krulak said the Marines were making extensive efforts to destroy the guerrillas, and because of its critical importance, they were trying to prevent rice from getting to the NLF and the NVA main force units. He said the counter-guerrilla campaign was of massive proportions, and it was intended to systematically eliminate the guerrillas in the area. Eliminating the guerrillas was important because they knew the people, their resources, their habits, and the area, and in his opinion the guerrillas could not be easily replaced.

Although he did not mention the CAPs specifically, Krulak said the Vietnamese authorities showed increasing confidence in the Marines because they were giving them more control of the local forces. He said the number of PFs working with the Marines increased to the equivalent of thirty-seven platoons, and the Marines were training them to be better able to defend their villages.5

The detailed responses Krulak wrote to the criticism of both McNamara and Nitze show Krulak was adamantly trying to defend the performance of the Marine Corps, and to gain support for a strategy he thought would win the war. The complaints expressed regarding Marine Corps activities indicate these highly-placed officials were convinced Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition would bring a fast conclusion to the war. They did not want to discuss a slow enclave strategy and methodical pacification tactics. The US

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
was impatient to win the war, and Krulak’s protest was lost in the clamor for a quick victory.

The CAP program remained caught up in dispute over strategy because of the attitudes of officials such as McNamara and Nitze. The US Army disliked the Marine Corps enclave strategy, and the US Army specifically said it would not give the Marine Corps additional personnel quotas for the CAP program. With the secretary of defense and the secretary of the navy pressuring the Marine Corps to perform in a manner more in keeping with the strategy of attrition, there was little chance of gaining support from them for one of the primary tactics of the enclave strategy. Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition and his tactics of search and destroy were favored at this time. Regardless of how well the CAPs did as a counterinsurgency tactic, they were generally not seen by many high officials as a promising way to help win the war.

In 1966 a study was completed that vindicated much of what the Marine Corps was doing with the enclave strategy and pacification, though. US Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson was an officer who disagreed with Westmoreland’s approach to the war, and he commissioned a study conducted by US Army officers to examine other approaches to the war that might be more successful in accomplishing US objectives. The Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) study rejected the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy, and said the focus of the war should be placed on pacification. The current strategy was not working, the study stated, and it could not work because it was having no effect on the NLF guerrilla organization. A necessary change in tactics for pacification meant” Security
forces must be associated and intermingled with the people on a long-term basis. Their capacity to establish and maintain public order and stability must be physically and continuously credible.” The study stressed “The key to achieving such security lies in the conduct of effective area saturation tactics, in and around populated areas, which deny VC encroachment opportunities.” The loyalty of the people was the true prize in the war, and” the critical actions are those that occur at the village, district, and provincial levels. This is where the war must be fought; this is where that war and the object which lies beyond it must be won.” The study emphasized a change in strategy that focused on pacification was not simply a good idea for consideration. Instead, it said a focus on pacification was vitally necessary because” The situation in South Vietnam has seriously deteriorated. 1966 may well be the last chance to ensure eventual success.”6 The US Army officers who conducted the study could hardly have been more forceful in urging the adoption of the changes they proposed in the PROVN study.

Ironically, at the time the study was completed many of the recommendations in the PROVN study were already an integral part of the enclave strategy and the CAP program operated by the Marine Corps in I Corps. Much of the thinking in the PROVN study was reflected in Krulak’s two previously submitted strategic proposals, his letter to McNamara, and his letter to Nitze. Krulak had repeatedly said the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy were futile, and they could not be successful in defeating the NLF and the NVA. The enclave strategy Krulak advocated saw the loyalty of the people as the primary goal in the war, and the guerrillas of the NLF as the primary threat

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to be defeated. The slowly expanding enclaves were intended to pacify the highly populated coastal areas. That is, the purpose of the enclave strategy was” The conduct of effective area saturation tactics, in and around populated areas, which deny VC encroachment opportunities.” Part of the protection of the populated areas proposed in PROVN for the populated areas was accomplished by the CAPs in the enclaves. The CAPs lived in the villages and protected them from NLF infiltration, and they were the security forces that” Must be associated and intermingled with the people on a long-term basis.” Part of the mission and the actions of the CAPs could be described by saying,” Their capacity to establish and maintain public order and stability must be physically and continuously credible.” The manifestation of many of the conclusions of the PROVN study in the strategy and the tactics the Marine Corps was employing in I Corps was striking. The similarity in the PROVN study’s conclusion to Krulak’s thinking was striking, also. In keeping with the final conclusion of PROVN, Krulak stated on various occasions that the primary use of the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy in the war would result in a loss for the United States.

Eventually PROVN was sent to Westmoreland who was understandably critical of the study. The conclusions in PROVN were a direct challenge to Westmoreland’s authority, and to the strategy and the tactics he chose to fight the war. He saw problems with PROVN because” It must be realized that there are substantial difficulties and dangers inherent in implementing this or any similar program…. Any major reorganization such as envisioned by PROVN must be phased and deliberate to avoid confusion and slow-down in ongoing programs.” To lessen any impact the study might have Westmoreland determined the study should be a “conceptual document” for further
study. In this way, Westmoreland blocked the possibility that the changes proposed by PROVN could result in a more effective US strategy and more effective tactics for the Vietnam War.

Looking at the history of one particular CAP can demonstrate how a CAP unit worked to accomplish its counterinsurgency goals in a Vietnamese village. In June 1966 a CAP was established south of Chu Lai at the village of Binh Nghia. Later in the summer a Marine officer named F.J. West was ordered to the village to find out why there was such a high level of fighting in the area. West observed the activities of the CAP, and he participated in some of their patrol actions during his stay in the village. Eventually West left military service, but he returned to the village a number of times over the next few years to watch the progress of the CAP. As a result of his experiences, West wrote The Village, which is a history of the CAP in Binh Nghia. West related the military struggle for the village, but he also showed the human dimension of the war the CAP fought for Binh Nghia.

There were a number of reasons why pacifying the village of Binh Nghia was a difficult job for a CAP unit. The village consisted of seven hamlets covering an area of approximately four square miles, and the total population of the village was over 5,000 people. A number of the hamlets of the village were under complete NLF control by 1964, and by 1965 the GVN conceded control of Binh Nghia to the NLF. Intelligence reports determined that by the summer of 1965 there were one main force NLF battalion and at least two independent NLF companies operating in the vicinity of the village.

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7 Ibid., 160.
loyalty of the people to the NLF could be gauged by the district chief’s estimate that over seven hundred and fifty men from the village left to become NLF fighters. In spite of these problems, or because of them, a CAP unit was formed in Binh Nghia.\footnote{Jack Shulimson, \textit{US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966} (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1982), 241.}

In June 1966 a squad of Marines went to Binh Nghia where they joined with the PFs of the village and began operating as a CAP unit. On the outskirts of one of the hamlets the CAP fortified an abandoned home to use as a headquarters, and the CAP began to patrol the area as a combined unit on the first night the Marines were in the village. The fight to secure the village from the NLF was an intense series of small, vicious battles fought almost exclusively in the night as the CAP fighters and the guerrillas stalked and fought each other. The Marines and the PFs learned to work together, and they were winning most of their fights with the NLF guerrillas. In July and August there were as many as eleven of these fights each week, and there were more than seventy of these clashes during those two months. By the end of August there was little contact with the guerrillas, and the CAP thought it had taken control of the village from the NLF.\footnote{Ibid., 242.}

The vital, initial counterinsurgency task of securing the village population from the guerrillas was not over, though, it was only approaching a more violent stage of the fight. Intelligence sources determined the NLF singled out the CAP at Binh Nghia as a special target for guerrilla attacks. The members of the NLF district committee were angry because the ambushes and the patrols of the CAP were disrupting the guerrilla river
traffic on the Tra Bong River that bordered Binh Nghia, and the river was important for transporting rice and other needed supplies to various NLF units. The district committee was also angry because the local guerrillas in Binh Nghia were barely outnumbered by the members of the CAP, and there was an entire NLF main force battalion positioned across the river from Binh Nghia. The CAP was greatly outnumbered, and it was intolerable for the committee to allow a unit as small as the CAP to drive the NLF out of a village the size of Binh Nghia and to claim it as pacified. If the CAP were to remain, it could establish a dangerous precedent, and other CAPs might be initiated. The district committee saw clearly that the CAP needed to be eliminated.11

Near the middle of September a mixed force of approximately one hundred and fifty NVA regulars and NLF fighters conducted a night attack on the fortified house where the CAP was headquartered, and the CAP was overrun. At the time of the attack there were only six Marines, a Navy corpsman, and twelve PFs in the fort because the other Marines and PFs went out on patrols earlier in the evening. A reaction force of Marine infantrymen eventually arrived, and they and the other CAP members forced the NVA and NLF forces to break off the attack, but the attack was fast and overwhelming. Five of the Marines and the corpsman were killed in the attack, and one of the Marines was wounded. Seven of the PFs managed to hold off the attackers to some degree during the fight, and the other five PFs were wounded.12 The results of the fight demonstrated how vulnerable unassisted CAPs were to an attack by a large enemy force.

11 West, 41-42.

In the aftermath of the battle the surviving Marines demonstrated their determination to remain in the village. The morning after the assault General Lowell English, commander of the First Marine Division came to the fort and spoke with the six CAP Marines who survived because they were on patrols when the attack began. The general told the men the mission the CAP was given may have been too much for such a small force, and it might be better to have a platoon of regular Marine infantry patrol the area. In effect, English was telling the men they could leave if they wanted. All of the Marines said they wanted to stay. Later one of the Marines said” What would we have said to the PFs after the way we pushed them to fight the Cong? We had to stay. There wasn’t one of us who wanted to leave.” English accepted the men’s decision and told them he would make sure they were sent six excellent volunteers as replacements for the men killed and wounded in the fight.13

That afternoon funeral services were conducted at a small Buddhist pagoda close to the marketplace for the five Americans and the six Vietnamese CAP members killed in the battle. Before the funeral the Buddhist monks went to the fort and asked the Marines to join them, and the Marines did. The large funeral procession wound through the village, and the monks mentioned the names of both the Vietnamese and the Americans when they prayed for the dead. After the funeral the Marines thanked the people for their prayers and for their expressions of sorrow, and they then returned to the fort.14

13 West, 131.
14 Ibid., 132- 133.
On the night after the fort was overrun the NLF returned to reclaim the village of Binh Nghia. The PFs heard from the people that the NLF said the CAP was defeated, the Marines were leaving, and the NLF guerrillas were returning to the village that night. CAP patrols were sent out, and one soon ran into a large force of guerrillas near the marketplace. In the ensuing fight the patrol was quickly reinforced by Marines and PFs from the fort, and by a Marine infantry reaction force. In the hard fight the guerrillas were defeated and they suffered significant casualties. The CAP demonstrated it lost a battle when the fort was overrun, but it was not defeated, and the CAP would stay in Binh Nghia.\textsuperscript{15}

A number of conclusions regarding the successes of the counterinsurgency security operations of the Binh Nghia CAP can be drawn from this portion of its history. During a period of approximately three months the Marines and the PFs learned to work well enough together as a combat unit that they took almost total control of the village from the NLF. This was done despite the presence in the village area of local NLF guerrilla forces roughly equal in strength to that of the CAP, and despite the presence of a main force NLF battalion across the Tra Bong River from Binh Nghia village. Prior to the formation of the CAP the GVN relinquished control of the village to the NLF, and the PFs from the village were reluctant to go into the village during the day, let alone at night. The ambushes of NLF river traffic conducted as part of the CAP security operations were so successful that they were hampering the ability of the NLF to supply NLF and NVA forces with rice and other supplies from the village area. The NLF district

\textsuperscript{15} Shulimson, 1966, 243.
committee became concerned enough with this problem and the inability of the guerrillas to retain control of the village that the CAP was targeted for a large scale attack. The attack on the fort by a large force of NVA and NLF fighters overran the fort and inflicted heavy casualties on the CAP, but regardless of their losses the surviving Marines and PFs of the CAP and an infantry reaction force were able to defeat a large force of NLF fighters who came to the village two nights later. The Marines and the PFs were able to work well together as a unit, and they were successful at the counterinsurgency task of keeping the guerrillas out of the village. After the fort was overrun the CAP also showed resilience and determination that made the defeat temporary in nature.

Despite the success the CAP at Binh Nghia had in accomplishing the counterinsurgency task of security, its early history illustrated an important weakness of the CAPs. One of Westmoreland’s primary reasons for not supporting the use of units such as the CAPs was that they were too vulnerable, and they could be individually attacked and overrun by large NLF and NVA forces. In its plan for the CAPs the Marine Corps planned for infantry reaction forces to be available to quickly reinforce CAPs when they were attacked by large forces, and when the reaction forces came quickly this plan worked well. On the night the fort was attacked the reaction force was late in coming, and because of this the CAP was overrun with heavy casualties. Two nights later when the CAP members fought a large guerrilla force in the village an infantry reaction force arrived quickly to reinforce the CAP, and the fight resulted in a defeat for the guerrillas. The CAPs performed the security mission of fighting the guerrillas in the vicinity of the villages well, but when they were threatened by large NLF and NVA...
forces it was imperative for them to have the fast support of reaction units if they were to survive.

As far as the intelligence gathering mission of the CAP was concerned, in Binh Nghia the CAP Marines thought they were fortunate because there were GVN national police in the village who worked to develop intelligence sources among the people and to find hidden members of the guerrilla infrastructure. The police were interested in finding the people who linked the villagers with the NLF and who helped supply the guerrillas with food, intelligence, and recruits. Without the police the CAP would have had a difficult time trying to do this on its own. The national police were well-trained professionals, and they were often able to obtain good intelligence information from a network of paid informants. Finding the secret guerrilla cadres was more difficult, though, because often very few if any of the people in the village knew who they were.\footnote{West, 20-21.}

The national police were a great help to the Binh Nghia CAP in gathering intelligence and finding hidden guerrilla cadres, but the CAP members also had their own ways of acquiring intelligence information. The PFs had contacts among the people who would tell the PFs about guerrilla activity, and the Marines learned to do this themselves. As the Marines went on their night patrols they often hid close to the homes of friendly villagers to quietly ask them if they knew of any guerrilla movement that night. At other times some villagers gave the CAP members intelligence, but these methods of gathering intelligence were not as sophisticated as those of the national police\footnote{Ibid., 67.}. The problem for
many CAPs was that they did not have national police in their villages to help them gather intelligence and find the hidden guerrilla cadres.

However, the national police and the ARVN often treated the people badly as they attempted to find the hidden NLF cadre members, and at times the process of finding the NLF cadre members was corrupted. A South Vietnamese worker in a pacification program said, “The police and the military continue with heavy hands. Village officials sometimes use their positions to point suspicion at their personal enemies, regardless of whether they are Viet Cong or communist sympathizers. Many innocent people have suffered as a result.” The pacification worker showed his frustration when he said, “That makes it harder for us to convince others that our efforts are worthwhile.” Circumstances such as these alienated the people from the GVN and increased the loyalty of the people to the NLF.18

The CAP in Binh Nghia did little if any economic development and civic action work in the village, and this was partly because so much of their time was taken up with planning and conducting security operations. The economy of the village did improve, though, because the Marines spent money on food and drinks in the village, and the Marines paid villagers to do their laundry and sew their uniforms. The people also had more food and more money because they did not have to give rice or tax money to the guerrillas. After the CAP established control over the village the quality of life and the

The Marines in the CAP were able to gain the loyalty of some of the people in Binh Nghia, but not all of them. The best actions related to psychological operations they performed to win the loyalty of the people were the fights they won to take control of the village from the guerrillas. Some of the people had relatives who fought the guerrillas, and because of this they liked the Marines and the PFs. Other people supported the NLF and were related to guerrillas who were killed by the CAP, and because of this they hated the Marines and the PFs. Still others simply wanted to live in peace and were willing to be relatively friendly with the side in control of the village.

Generally, the CAP at Binh Nghia did a good job of accomplishing its counterinsurgency missions of establishing security, eliminating the hidden guerrilla infrastructure, and gathering intelligence in the village. Taking control of the village from the guerrillas was the most important mission for the CAP, and it did this well by fighting the guerrillas and keeping them away from the village. Establishing security in the village was the essential counterinsurgency mission because this meant the guerrillas could no longer have access to the food, the intelligence, the supplies, and the recruits they needed to exist as a guerrilla movement. The mission of eliminating the hidden NLF infrastructure was difficult, and some of the secret cadre members remained in the village. However, the ability of these cadre members to act as a conduit for food,

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19 West, 66.
20 Ibid., 247.
intelligence, supplies, and recruits for the guerrillas was inhibited by the security activities of the CAP. The constant patrolling of the CAP members made it difficult for anyone in the village to make frequent contact with the guerrillas without being discovered. In Binh Nghia the actions of the hidden cadre members were also restricted by the constant surveillance of the national police unit and its network of informers. Even though its methods were basic the CAP did well in accomplishing its mission of gathering intelligence, and the national police helped with this because they had more sophisticated intelligence gathering techniques.

Even though the CAP did not do much specific work to perform its other counterinsurgency tasks in the village, it was still able to accomplish most of these to some degree. Civic action projects were intended to improve the quality of life, and the quality of life did improve although the CAP initiated few if any formal civic action projects. The quality of life improved because after the CAP took control of the village from the guerrillas the people could live and work without the constant threat of violence. The economy of the village also improved even though the CAP did not start any economic projects. The Marines helped the economy by spending money among the people, and the people were more prosperous because the security the CAP provided the village kept the NLF from taking tax money and food from the villagers. The purpose of psychological operations was to gain the loyalty of the people for the CAP, and the CAP did this well without conducting formal psychological operations programs. The Marines and the PFs treated the people well, and they risked their lives to protect the village from the guerrillas. Because of this many of the people were loyal to the members of the CAP. The CAP had no success with respect to gaining the loyalty of the villagers for the GVN.
government, but this was beyond control of the CAP. The GVN made no effort to use the successes of the CAP to help the GVN gain the loyalty of the people, and the CAP could not do this by itself.

One of the most fascinating people in the history of the CAPs was US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson who was placed in charge of the CAP program in February 1967. Corson was both capable and brilliant, but he was also irascible and outspoken to a fault. In 1942 Corson left the University of Chicago where he was studying math and physics on a scholarship to join the Marine Corps. After fighting in the Pacific as an enlisted man during the World War II, Corson returned to the University of Chicago and earned a degree in math. When he completed his degree Corson reenlisted in the Marine Corps and received a commission as an officer. Later Corson earned a doctorate in economics from American University. Soon after he reenlisted in the Marine Corps Corson began working with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on projects that were primarily in Asia, and he eventually learned to speak fluent Chinese. During this period of his career he became an expert in insurgency warfare which he said he learned about and practiced in” Viet Nam, in Indonesia, Thailand, China and a few other unmentionable places. That’s been my profession.” In 1966 Corson was teaching Chinese communist military tactics at the US Naval Academy when he was asked to return to South Vietnam.21

When Corson arrived in South Vietnam in September 1966 he was given command of the Third Tank Battalion of the Third Marine Division located

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approximately nine miles southwest of Danang. Considering Corson’s experience in Asia and his expertise in counterinsurgency warfare, it does not seem realistic to think he was brought to South Vietnam to command a tank battalion. It was Lewis Walt who asked Corson to come to South Vietnam, and this was the period during which Walt and Krulak decided to expand the CAP program. Because of his experience and his ability Corson was a natural fit to command the expansion, and it is likely Walt had this in mind when he requested Corson. The possibility this was the case became more of a probability when Corson began an experimental pacification program in the hamlet of Phong Bac soon after he arrived at his new command.

The pacification program experiment Corson initiated at Phong Bac was important for the CAP program because he later said the experiment was a test case for the CAPs. Corson probably knew he would be taking command of the CAP program, and he probably knew the CAPs were intended to work as small units to pacify the Vietnamese villages. Because of this Corson used his knowledge of counterinsurgency and pacification to conduct an experimental pacification program in one Vietnamese hamlet. Later he said he took the successful techniques developed in the experimental program at Phong Bac and taught them to the Marines in the CAP program.22

The Third Tank Battalion was stationed in the area of Phong Bac and performed some of the standard US civic action activities before Corson took command of the battalion. Among these activities were passing out candy and toys to the children, distributing soap, and giving the people food supplies. In Corson’s opinion, these

22 Ibid.
activities were done out of a sense of compassion for the poverty of the people, but it was also assumed gratitude for these actions would somehow turn the people against the NLF.

The attitude of the Marines’ quickly changed when a Marine position was attacked by the NLF and the Marines suffered a number of casualties. The Vietnamese civilians gave no warning of the attack, although it was suspected they must have had some knowledge of it. Additionally, a Regional Forces camp located close to the attacked Marine position did not attempt to help the Marines during the attack. The Marines thought the Vietnamese civilians and the Regional Forces were ungrateful after the Marines were generous with the Vietnamese civilians, and they felt betrayed. Because of the hostility the Marines felt toward the Vietnamese, they withdrew into their camp as if it was a fortress, and they had little contact with either the civilians or the Regional Forces. In a pattern that was common among US military units in the war after similar incidents, the Marines concentrated on conventional military actions against the NLF, and ignored civic action.²³

The most difficult problem the US military faced in South Vietnam, in Corson’s opinion, was pacification, and this was critical because successful pacification was necessary if the war were to be won. He said, “Of all the tasks the military has been confronted with in Vietnam pacification has been the most troublesome and complex.” He looked at previous pacification programs the US used in South Vietnam, and he tried to see why they failed. One reason he saw was that the GVN officials in charge of many of the pacification programs had little interest in seeing the programs succeed. The

American-initiated programs such as plans for popular elections, land reform, and the elimination of corruption would destroy cultural practices established over centuries, and these practices were the basis for the wealth and the position of the officials. The responsibility of these officials was to the people who put them in their positions, and not to the Americans. They felt safe to do as they wished because US military power would protect them, regardless of what they did. Also, pacification programs failed because the ARVN either would not or could not keep the guerrillas away from areas the ARVN was trying to pacify. Part of the reason for these ARVN failures, Corson thought, was that the ARVN lacked good leadership, was poorly motivated, and had generally poor morale. Corson also thought Americans assumed they knew what the Vietnamese people wanted instead of finding out what they wanted. After the US built schools and bridges for the people because it was assumed this is what they wanted, the error was compounded by thinking the people would support the GVN and oppose the NLF in gratitude for the new projects. Two of the conclusions Corson drew regarding pacification were that the US was at the mercy of the GVN in past pacification programs, and the culture and the conditions in South Vietnam that caused the failure of pacification were not changed.

Corson thought the base of the pacification question was how to counter the ideological appeal of the NLF. The NLF received support from the people, he thought, because they were Vietnamese from their hamlets, or from hamlets like theirs. Also, the NLF fought the traditional enemies of the people who were the wealthy people of the cities, the absentee landlords, the corrupt landlords, and foreign invaders, such as the Americans. While many Vietnamese disliked the NLF practices of taking their young men to be guerrillas, and charging high taxes, they clung to the hope an NLF victory
would bring a better life for the people. However, even though the people felt a strong emotional appeal for the NLF, they feared hunger more.

A unique method Corson used to establish a rapport between the Marines and the Vietnamese was the game of *co tuong* which is similar to chess and is played throughout much of Asia. Corson knew how to play *co tuong*, and he also knew the game was played by virtually everyone in Vietnamese society. After he taught some of his Marines to play the game, Corson organized a *co tuong* tournament in the village with a transistor radio as the prize for the winner of the tournament. The tournament was well-attended, and the eventual winner was a hamlet chief. After the tournament ended Corson challenged the hamlet chief to a game of *co tuong*, and the game ended in a draw. In the days following the tournament the Marines who knew how to play *co tuong* went into the village and played a number of games with the villagers. Playing this popular game together helped the Marines and the Vietnamese to get to know each other, and a number of friendships resulted from this. 24

After the tournament Corson began to go into the village to play *co tuong* with one of the village elders. The village elder knew Chinese, and he and Corson spoke in Chinese while they played the game. As they played, Corson eventually began to tactfully ask the village elder about the beliefs, the desires, and the fears of the people in the village. The man was open with Corson, and as a result of their conversations Corson came to the conclusion that showing the people how to end their fear of hunger by

helping them become economically independent was the best way to approach pacification in Phong Bac. 25

The pacification program Corson put into practice did not rely on the GVN or the ARVN for its success, but instead it relied on the Marines, and went directly to the Vietnamese people as the objective of pacification. For the pacification program Corson said,” I believed that my program should not depend upon the Vietnamese military for its successful implementation.” Instead, Corson concluded “The decision, therefore, was to go it alone, relying on the Marines, and to deal directly with the end object of pacification--- the peasant.” The emotional support for the NLF was ignored, and Corson chose to emphasize the desire of the people to make money. The people could still think they were loyal to the nationalism of the NLF, but they also wanted to make money to avoid poverty and starvation. To do this the Marines suggested projects to make money for the people, and they let the people and a village business council decide which projects should be adopted. The Marines helped the people by providing their labor and their technical help with projects such as pig farms and rabbit farms, but the people of the village decided which projects they wanted. After a period of time the people began to make money, and this economic success gave them a sense of security and hope. In this way the Marines used the natural resources of the area to show the people how to acquire money for themselves, and no US economic help was used or needed.26

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25 Ibid., 164.
26 Corson, “Phong Bac Hamlet”.
As the people started to make money with the new projects, the NLF used propaganda to attack the American-initiated economic programs. Their propaganda did not have any appeal that could overcome the fact that the people were achieving some degree of economic independence, though. The will to avoid hunger and starvation was too strong among the villagers, and the propaganda of the Marines countered by saying the NLF were bandits who stole from the people. When the guerrillas offered bounties for the killing of the Marines, the people were shrewd enough to realize any bounty money paid would have to initially be taken from the people by the NLF. The hope of financial security countered the ideological appeal of the NLF, and Corson said in any choice between ideology and gain the people would always choose gain.

One aspect of this propaganda war between the NLF and the Marines showed the particular flair Corson acquired in his Asian experiences for accomplishing this mission. When the NLF criticized the economic programs the Marines helped to start in the village, Corson challenged the guerrillas to a debate in the village during the Christmas truce declared during the war. The topic of the debate was to be what sort of material advantages the NLF could bring to the village, and Corson said he would come to the debate by himself if anyone from the NLF would debate him. On the day of the debate there were NLF members in the audience, but none of them chose to debate Corson. Because of this, Corson took the opportunity to discuss other business projects with which the Marines could help the village. The NLF thought they lost face when they did not debate Corson, and that evening they used loudspeakers to criticize the Marines and the business projects the Marines helped to start. Corson was aware that Asians
appreciated the use of colorful and earthy insults, and he responded to the NLF propaganda by calling them “suckers of rotten turtle eggs.” Some of the villagers found this amusing because this was a degrading insult made in a particularly Asian manner, and few people openly insulted the NLF.\(^{28}\)

After his experiment in pacification in Phong Bac Corson concluded that even though the GVN could not be counted on to give up its power to accomplish the pacification aims of the US, pacification could be accomplished by the Marines using their own resources to help the people. He thought pacification in Phong Bac was successful because of three basic points that could be duplicated in other geographical areas. First, the Marines needed to prove they were credible by fighting and defeating the NLF. Next, they needed to have technical skills to help the people with the economic projects in the villages. Lastly, the first two elements needed to be brought together to show the people the Marines could defend the people and help them build the economic projects to improve the life in the villages.

A Vietnamese perspective on Corson’s pacification project in Phong Bac was obtained by the author William J. Lederer while he was doing research in South Vietnam during 1967. Lederer did not know about the Phong Bac project at the time, and he did not know Corson. He became curious, though, when a Pan American Airways official he knew told him two Vietnamese men from a hamlet called Phong Bac were in Saigon to take delivery of a number of hogs of a special breed that were flown to South Vietnam from the US. The official told Lederer the hogs and their transportation costs were paid

for by the people of Phong Bac in a private business transaction, and there was no US or GVN government involvement in the venture. Lederer was intrigued by the situation, and he decided to talk with the two Vietnamese men.29

The two men were reluctant to speak with Lederer at first, but when they found out he was not affiliated with either the US government or the GVN they spoke openly with him. They said Phong Bac bought the hogs because a Marine sergeant named Smith told them hogs of this breed would be the best breed to raise in the Phong Bac environment. When Lederer asked the men about Sergeant Smith, they said he was the Marine Colonel Corson brought to them to help them with their hog-raising efforts. Lederer then asked them who Corson was, and they said he was the Marine officer who came to Phong Bac in September 1966, and who left Phong Bac a few months prior to their trip to Saigon to get the hogs. The two Vietnamese then spoke with Lederer about their experiences with Corson in Phong Bac.30

Phong Bac was a small hamlet close to Danang where the people made a living by farming rice. Doing this was difficult because most of the land in the area was owned by absentee landlords who charged the farmers fifty percent of their crop to use the land. This was twice the legal limit that was supposed to be charged for the use of the farm land, but the people were able to make a modest living. The war caused additional hardships for the hamlet because some villages were destroyed in the violence and many refugees from the destroyed villages came to Phong Bac. The Vietnamese told Lederer

30 Ibid., 177.
approximately fifteen hundred refugees came to Phong Bac in the previous year, and this placed a severe strain on the resources of the hamlet.\textsuperscript{31}

When the Marines came to Phong Bac to pacify the hamlet the people did not like them, the men told Lederer. This was partly because they saw the Americans in general as responsible for destroying villages and making refugees of many Vietnamese. Also, though, when American and ARVN troops came to pacify the villages the landlords came with them, and the landlords used the troops to collect rent from the people and to mistreat them. The Marines who came to Phong Bac made the people feel as if they were beggars because” They would go through the streets giving everyone chewing gum, cigarettes, candy, things to eat, and toys to the children.” The men said it is a terrible insult in Vietnamese society to be called a beggar, and when the Marines passed out free food and cigarettes to the people these actions made the people resent them.\textsuperscript{32}

After the Marines’ camp was attacked by the guerrillas the Marines were angry with the people because none of them warned the Marines of the impending attack. As the Marines suspected, many of the people knew the guerrillas would attack, but they felt they had no reason to warn the Marines. The people disliked the Americans generally because they blamed them for much of the destruction of the war, and they disliked the Marines particularly for treating them as if they were beggars. The men told Lederer the villagers also did not warn the Marines because the people helped the NLF. The men said, “It seemed to us that if the NLF would win, then at least the frightful conditions of

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 179.
this war would come to an end.” It seemed right to them to support the NLF because “The NLF mostly are farmers like ourselves and come from the same district.” The only land reform the men knew of was a generation prior to this time when the Vietminh gave land to the people.³³

After the attack on their camp the Marines did not interact with the people, and they were only involved in performing their military missions in the area. After a period of time, though, some of the Marines began to come into the village to play co tuong with the Vietnamese. The people saw the Marines enjoyed the game, and the people appreciated that the Marines were no longer giving the Vietnamese food, candy, and cigarettes. Eventually, Corson organized a co tuong tournament and, in fact, the older of the two men who spoke with Lederer was the hamlet chief who won the tournament. After the man won the tournament Corson approached him and asked if he would play a game of co tuong with Corson. The man was impressed that Corson knew some Vietnamese, and he played co tuong with him. Later Corson went to the most respected elder in the village and began playing co tuong with him. As the two men played they spoke with each other in Chinese, and the villagers were impressed that Corson knew Asian languages. The man told Lederer,” His knowledge did us honor. He was the first foreigner who was familiar with our ways.”³⁴

Eventually the Marines began to hire boats from the villagers to fish in the Song Cau Do River that was close to the village. To get the fish the Marines threw dynamite

³³ Ibid., 179- 180.
³⁴ Ibid., 179- 180.
into the river, and they caught a large number of fish that they then sold to the people at a very fair price. After the Marines did this on a few occasions, Corson spoke with the village elders at a public meeting and told them the river belonged to Phong Bac, and the people of the village should share in the profits from the sale of the fish. Corson gave the hamlet chief a total of approximately one hundred and fifty dollars, and he suggested the village form a business council to decide how the money could best be spent for the benefit of the entire community. The people were not sure how they should use the money, and they asked Corson for his advice.35

To help the villagers Corson had some of his Marines who were fishermen and farmers talk with the Vietnamese and suggest ways the people could improve the economy of the village. The Marines told the Vietnamese about farming cooperatives in the US, and they discussed possibilities such as bee keeping, better ways of fishing, raising hogs, and raising rabbits. The Vietnamese decided to raise hogs as their first project, and the men said, “The young Marines worked with us when we requested it. They were not like the government men who talk big but do nothing but talk. These young Marines worked with their hand and knew how to.” After working at raising hogs and other projects for a few months the average worth of each family in the village increased almost ten times. 36

The NLF became upset because the Marines were successful in helping the villagers, and the men said, “They sent messages saying that the Marines were trying to

36 Ibid., 183.
trick us.” When the hamlet chief told Corson about the messages, Corson challenged the NLF to a public debate on whether or not the economic projects were good for Phong Bac or not, and whether or not the Marines were lying to the people. When Corson said he would even go alone if this would get the NLF to debate him, the hamlet chief told Corson the NLF would kill him if he went by himself. Corson replied that if the NLF came to the debate then the better argument would win, and if the NLF did not come to the debate the people would know they were liars, and if Corson were killed the people would know the NLF were liars. On the day of the debate the men said, the NLF did not come to debate Corson. After this Corson called the NLF filthy names in Vietnamese, the men said, and he was very good at this. They went on to say calling enemies filthy names is traditional in Vietnamese culture and Corson" Is the first foreigner who knows how to use filthy names with skill."37

In the village of Phong Bac there were a number of positive changes because of the new businesses begun while Corson was there. The new businesses the hamlet business council started employed people from approximately sixty families, and some families quit farming rice because working in the new businesses was so profitable. As a result of this the landowners needed to encourage more people to grow rice, and they reduced the rent for the land they owned by fifty percent. The men said,” Our new businesses give the village a sense of independence. What we did, we did alone, without the help of the government.” Their sense of accomplishment was greater because “We do

37 Ibid., 183- 184.
not have to pay off a district chief for licenses or for help. We feel like an independent hamlet, which is traditional in our history.” 38

The village was independent and prosperous, and because of this the village did not want trouble with the NLF, the GVN, or the Marines; the village only wanted to be neutral in the war. On one occasion the people heard the NLF was planning an attack on the air base at Danang, and the guerrillas were going to stay overnight in an area of the village close to the hog farms. Because they did not want the hog farms to be harmed by any fighting, some of the people told Corson about the NLF plans. The men justified this when they said, “We were not betraying the NLF or acting as informers. What we did was to make sure that the hamlet property was not harmed.” Even though the Marines were still in the village and the guerrillas were still in the area, neither group bothered the villagers. The Marines were able to keep the guerrillas away from the village, and “Nobody makes speech about democracy or Ho Chi Minh or General Ky. The Marines mind their business and we mind ours. We understand each other.” The Marines let the people conduct their business and remain neutral.39

The men from Phong Bac ended their conversation with Lederer by saying some NLF fighters came back to the village since it became prosperous. Many of the guerrillas were farmers, and they said, “That’s all we farmers want- a good and peaceful life.” The men joked and said if Corson were given enough time the people would be making so

38 Ibid., 184.
39 Ibid., 185.
much money in the new businesses that the guerrillas would all come home and the fighting would end.  

Later, after Lederer spoke with the two men from Phong Bac, he met and interviewed Corson. In this interview Corson gave some additional information about the pacification experiment at Phong Bac. He said he developed his pacification program at Phong Bac by studying the pacification programs the French, the Vietnamese, and the Americans attempted in Vietnam. All of these were failures and Corson decided to rely exclusively on the Marines in his command to conduct the pacification program in Phong Bac. Corson’s study brought him to the conclusion that pacification needed to focus on the Vietnamese people, and to look at the process of pacification from the perspective of the people. All the pacification activities needed to take into consideration the economic and the social life of the Vietnamese people, and the people needed to decide for themselves that the course of action the Marines wanted from them was best for the villagers.  

It is revealing to look at the description of the pacification process at Phong Bac from the perspective of both Corson and that of the two Vietnamese men from the hamlet. By looking at Corson’s description we see what he intended to do, and what he thought he accomplished. The description of Corson’s actions given by the men from the hamlet shows how the villagers responded to Corson’s actions, and what they thought the

40 Ibid., 185-186.
41 Ibid., 179-180.
results of the pacification process were. Comparing the two descriptions helps to see how well Corson accomplished his objectives.

Corson’s knowledge of Asian culture and his study of earlier pacification efforts helped him to develop the pacification program in Phong Bac. He saw the previous pacification attempts by the French, the Vietnamese, and the Americans did not work, and he did not think the civic action programs of the Marines would help to pacify the Vietnamese villages. This was confirmed by the men with whom Lederer spoke who said it made the people of the village feel as if they were beggars when the Marines gave them things such as food and cigarettes. Rather than making them like the Marines, these actions caused the Vietnamese to resent them. Corson knew this was true of Vietnamese culture, and he knew simply giving the people material goods would not gain their loyalty. After the villagers did not warn the Marines about the coming attack on their camp Corson realized the villagers did not like the Marines, and he looked for a way to establish a rapport with the Vietnamese.

The use of the game of co tuong, his Asian language skills, and his general knowledge of Asian culture to acquire a rapport with the Vietnamese people also worked well for Corson. He knew from his Asian experience that knowing and playing co tuong would gain the respect of many of the Vietnamese. When the Marines played co tuong with the people, Corson thought some of the hostility between the two groups might be lessened, and he thought the co tuong tournament would be popular among the Vietnamese. Later, Corson showed his respect for and understanding of Vietnamese culture when he played co toun with the most respected elder in the village and spoke
with him in Chinese. In Lederer’s interview the Vietnamese men said some of the villagers were impressed when they saw a number of the Marines could play *co tuong*, and the villagers liked the *co tuong* tournament. Also, the villagers thought well of Corson because he went to the most respected elder in the village and spoke Chinese with him as they played *co tuong*. Because of this they saw Corson as someone who knew and respected their culture. The comments of these men show Corson’s knowledge of Asian culture helped him to affect some rapport between the Marines and the Vietnamese people in the village.

With the Marines and the villagers at least not hostile toward each other, Corson approached the problem of how to separate the people from the NLF, and in this instance his knowledge of counterinsurgency and economics worked well for him. Corson saw the family, the community, and the cultural bonds between the people and the NLF were too strong to be broken, and his study of earlier, failed pacification programs in Vietnam probably helped him come to this conclusion. A central strength of guerrilla movements is that the guerrillas only have to promise the people a better life in the future when they succeed, and they can attack existing economic and social circumstances that helped create the revolution. In *Isolating the Guerrilla*, Michael F. Trevett wrote” Every insurgency situation is the result… of popular grievances, which have led to revolt.” The challenge for the counterinsurgency forces was finding a way” To offer a viable and more attractive alternative to what the guerrilla promises, and by contrast to remove some of his support.”42 Because he knew there was little chance of breaking the strong connections between the people and the NLF, Corson chose to create a better life in the

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present to counter the guerrilla promise of a better life in the future. The economic program Corson conceived dealt with the primary fear of hunger among the Vietnamese villagers.

The comments the two Vietnamese men made in their discussion with Lederer showed Corson chose a useful method to bring the villagers to act in a way that was beneficial for the Marines. The connections between the people and the NLF were too strong, and there was hope an NLF victory would end the war and bring the better life the NLF promised, the men said. Still, the fear of hunger and starvation was stronger for the people because they were barely growing enough food to feed themselves. The destruction of the war made this fear greater as many other villages were destroyed, and many of the people of those villages became refugees without any means of subsistence. They welcomed and appreciated Corson’s approach to them because he did not offer them charity. Instead, he offered them suggestions as to how they could better themselves economically, and he and the other Marines gave the people technical help to accomplish this. The Vietnamese men said the villagers were proud they achieved a degree of prosperity through their own resources, and they wanted to protect this new prosperity. They could still give the NLF their moral support, but they did not want the guerrillas to ruin the prosperity the people of the village created. Corson’s plan worked because he helped the people realize the Vietnamese cultural ideal of the independent hamlet.

After looking at the reactions of the Vietnamese villagers to the pacification plan of Corson, it seems Corson’s pacification plan brought the villagers to act in a way that was beneficial for the Marines. Corson’s intention was to use the successful elements of
his pacification plan throughout the CAP program after he assumed command. Because of this it is important to look at how well Corson’s plan could work within the existing CAP units to accomplish the basic counterinsurgency functions this study stated the CAPs needed to perform to work well as a counterinsurgency tactic.

The basic counterinsurgency task is security, and the security the Marines provided for Phong Bac was good, but this was not a primary consideration for Corson’s pacification experiment. Since the inception of the CAPs their greatest strength was arguably their ability to defeat the guerrillas, and to keep them out of the villages. Finding and eliminating the NLF cadres in the villages was a vital counterinsurgency task that was more difficult to complete. In Phong Bac the people knew the hidden guerrilla cadre members might endanger the relative neutrality the people wanted to maintain in the war by attempting to send food and intelligence to the guerrillas. If this were done the people knew the Marines could react with force, and the village businesses would be at risk of being destroyed. Because of this the people of the villages were likely to attempt to avoid Marine violence and protect their businesses by either convincing the cadre members not to do this, or by betraying the cadre members to protect the economic interests of the village. In any event it is not likely the villagers would have allowed the actions of the cadre to jeopardize their economic success. If Corson’s pacification plan brought about similar attitudes and actions in other villages where the plan was put into practice, this would help a great deal in eliminating or neutralizing the hidden NLF cadres in the villages to be pacified.
The Marines in Phong Bac received intelligence information on related to NLF activities because the people did not want their businesses destroyed by fighting. With Corson’s plan for economic development in the villages it is likely this would continue to be the case in other villages where the CAPs operated. As it was, the CAPs operating at the time were getting good intelligence through their patrolling and their informants in the villages. The economic prosperity of the villages could convince people who would otherwise be neutral to provide intelligence for their own economic self-interest. In this way intelligence gathering could be increased if Corson’s plan were incorporated in the CAPs.

Corson’s plan for economic assistance appeared to do a good job of accomplishing the counterinsurgency tasks of civic action, economic projects, and psychological operations in Phong Bac. Prosperity and economic independence were at the heart of Corson’s pacification plan and as the economic projects succeeded and the standard of living improved in the village, the other counterinsurgency tasks became easier to complete for the CAPs. Also, in the circumstances realized from the improved living standards in the village, there was no need for psychological operations to discredit the guerrillas and to attempt to gain the loyalty of the people. The villagers were living a good life in the present, and they were no longer willing to risk their lives for the NLF’s promise of a better life in the future. It is reasonable to think all of these successes in civic action, economic projects, and psychological operations could be achieved if programs similar to Corson’s pacification plan were started in CAP villages.
The counterinsurgency task of strengthening and developing the local government was performed with Corson’s plan because the local government oversaw the economic projects in the village. The business council and the cooperatives formed by the villagers helped to create the village prosperity, and they served as strong forces to counter corruption on the part of the elected hamlet and village chiefs. The business council and the cooperatives were also village institutions that helped to develop and strengthen the village government. Situations such as these would probably have occurred in the CAP villages when Corson’s plan was implemented.

Corson’s pacification plan made no effort to accomplish the counterinsurgency task of improving the control of the GVN over the village. In his opinion the GVN was corrupt and predatory, and he seemed to think the GVN was at least as great a threat to the villagers as the NLF, if not greater. Also, he determined the GVN either would not or could not help in pacification programs. Because of this he chose to leave the GVN completely out of his pacification plan and he wanted to conduct his pacification plan solely with the Marines and the resources of the village. The GVN was the government of the country, though, and whether or not Corson would have been able to do this throughout the CAP program is questionable.

The success of Corson’s pacification experiment in Phong Bac was impressive, but replicating it in the CAP villages presented at least one significant problem. The key to the success of the pacification program in Phong Bac was the development of economic projects that made the people prosperous, and the key to the development of the economic projects was the technical expertise of the Marines in Corson’s command.
who assisted with the projects. Assuming many of the Marine infantrymen in the CAPs had any knowledge of skills such as hog farming, bee keeping, and raising rabbits was not realistic. There may have been a few, but if Corson’s plan were to succeed in the CAP program generally, men with skills such as these would be needed in all the CAPs. The CAPs were having difficulty finding enough men for the program as it was, and making these skills an additional requirement for the Marines in the CAPs would have made finding qualified men impossible. How well Corson would do as the commander of the CAP program now remained to be seen.
In February 1967 Major General Herman J. Nickerson told Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson that General Victor H. Krulak, General Lewis Walt, and he wanted Corson to take command of the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program and initiate an expansion. The three generals were impressed with how well Corson’s pacification experiment worked in Phong Bac, and they wanted to use the CAPs as the primary pacification method to duplicate the experiment and to create self-sufficiency in the Vietnamese villages. The civic action programs the Marines were using as a means of pacification produced poor results, and they often created more harm than good. One of the main activities of the civic action programs was giving free food and clothing to the people in the belief this would somehow gain the loyalty of the people for the Marines. This did not work well, though, because it made many of the Vietnamese feel as if they were receiving charity, and they resented the Marines for making them feel as if they were beggars. Officially the government of South Vietnam (GVN) and the army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were responsible for accomplishing pacification, but the Marine generals saw the previous performance of both the GVN and ARVN as indicating
they were either unable or unwilling to do the pacification work. In addition, both the GVN and the ARVN were riddled with corruption. The generals decided if pacification were to be accomplished in I Corps, the Marines would have to find a way to do it themselves. Corson’s success with the Phong Bac experiment made it look as if Phong Bac was a good template for the pacification of the villages, and many of the CAP units were proving they worked well at counterinsurgency tasks among the Vietnamese people. For these reasons the generals chose The CAPs as the central means for their plan to pacify the villages in I Corps, and they chose Corson to command the CAPs in the execution of the pacification plan. ¹

Prior to the decision of Krulak, Walt, and Nickerson to give the CAPs the main responsibility for pacification in I Corps the official mission of the CAPs was security and not pacification. Corson said the CAPs were initially intended as a defense force in the rear areas to keep the guerrillas out of the villages and away from the people. Without some way to protect them, the rear areas in the Marine enclaves were vulnerable to guerrilla attack, and the Marines “Knew the security conditions behind our lines would become intolerable if combined action went down the chute.” Before they could perform this counterinsurgency security mission the Marines and the PFs in the CAPs needed to demonstrate they could work successfully together as a military unit. The performance of the CAPs was followed closely because of the critical importance of their rear security mission. Eventually the Marines and the PFs showed they worked well together in the joint military units of the CAPs, and they also showed they were usually able to do well

with their own resources while defending villages from larger guerrilla forces. Because of this the CAPs were considered to be a dependable force for the protection of the rear areas of the enclaves, but they were not given the official mission of pacification in the villages of the enclaves until February 1967.2

An important distinction is that many of the CAPs were doing a great deal of counterinsurgency pacification work in the villages before this, but their primary counterinsurgency task was to provide security in the areas of their villages. The operational plan Ek developed for the first CAP units in the Phu Bai area included pacification objectives, but the purpose of these CAPs was to prevent the guerrillas from getting into the areas within mortar range of the Marine base at Phu Bai. In 1966 Walt expanded the CAP program, and a number of the new CAPs in the Danang area were located in the villages close to the airbase at Danang.3 The primary function of these CAPs was to keep the guerrillas away from the airbase, but Walt also made some pacification duties part of their mission. Among these duties were collecting intelligence, civic action, and psychological operations.4 As the Marines watched the CAPs succeed as a defense force for their rear areas, the potential to use the CAPs for pacification must have been seen as the Marines came to the decision to perform pacification in I Corps on their own. The CAPs and Corson’s successful Phong Bac plan were then brought together to perform the pacification program.

2 Ibid., 179.


As Corson prepared to assume command of the CAP program he said the results of the Phong Bac pacification program showed three factors Marines could duplicate in other areas to accomplish pacification. First, the Marines needed to demonstrate their credibility by fighting and defeating the guerrillas. The Marines then needed to show they had some relevant technical expertise to help the Vietnamese people become economically self-sufficient. The most important factor was the third factor that brought the first two together. With this third factor the Vietnamese saw the Marines were able to keep the guerrillas away from the village, and they saw these same Marines were able to help them with projects to help make them economically self-sufficient. As a result of this the Vietnamese determined the Marines could help them develop an economic self-sufficiency the Marines would protect. In Corson’s opinion no other pacification program ever showed it successfully combined the factors of security and technical relevance, and this was why those pacification programs were failures.  

An additional factor that contributed to the success of the Phong Bac pacification experiment also needed to be duplicated for successful pacification, in Corson’s opinion. He said the Marines were ready to actively oppose not only the NLF, but also the GVN if either tried to destroy or corrupt their program. Because of this, he said, the people of Phong Bac were economically independent and they were in charge of their own destinies, and these results could be duplicated in other villages.  

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5 Corson, 171- 172.
6 Ibid., 172- 173.
When Corson assumed command of the CAP program in 1967 the CAPs arguably became the most important element of the Marine Corps pacification program in the Marine Corps enclaves in I Corps. Because of the importance of the mission the CAPs were given when Corson took command of the program, whether or not they were an effective counterinsurgency tactic during the war may have been easier to determine after Corson took command because the CAPs were put to a greater test of their capabilities. Also, why the CAPs were or were not an effective counterinsurgency tactic during the war may have become more obvious for the same reason. The CAP program was now given an opportunity to prove itself in a vital mission for the Marine Corps in the Vietnam War.

Since the start of the CAPs there were administrative problems that were not resolved until the CAPs were officially brought together as a separate command. The CAP was technically a part of the infantry battalion usually stationed closest to the CAP, and this caused some problems with administration because the Marines’ pay, supplies, and mail came through their battalion. As was often the case, the battalion to which the Marines were assigned might move to another location, but the CAP of which the Marines were members remained where it was. In these circumstances the Marines could leave the CAP and return to their battalion for the battalion’s move. This was not likely, though, and usually the Marines stayed with their CAP while they were officially transferred to another battalion close to the CAP’s location. When the Marines were officially transferred to a different battalion their service records were sent to the new battalion and sets of orders for the transfer were required. Many of the infantry battalions were frequently moved to new locations in the war, and it is easy to see the
administrative chaos that could result from these procedures. A Marine who served in a CAP near Phu Bai in 1966 said “Whoever moved into Phu Bai, that’s who we became attached to. My mailing address changed every sixty days or so. I was attached to 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines; 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines; 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; and 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, without ever leaving the compound.” These problems could be confusing, but other problems were dangerous for the CAPs.

Before the CAPs were brought together as a separate command there were also problems because the infantry battalions to which the Marines in the CAP were assigned were responsible for providing supplies and equipment for the CAPs. The infantry battalions usually had too few supplies and too little equipment for themselves, and this meant the CAPs were never given much by the battalions. Because of this the CAPs were frequently forced to obtain adequate levels of supplies and equipment for their units through barter, purchase, or theft. Another problem resulting from the dependency of the CAPs on the infantry battalions to which the Marines were assigned for equipment was that some of the battalion’s equipment could be taken from the CAP when the battalion moved to another location. In some instances equipment needed by the CAPs for combat operations was taken from the CAPs when the battalions moved their locations. In fairness, the battalion also needed the equipment, but in one situation a battalion moved and”The first the CAP knew about it was when the battalion in that area come to get its PRC- 25 radio and .50- caliber machine gun.” Because these were taken” The CAP had

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8 Hemingway, 29.
9 Peterson, 36.
its firepower greatly diminished and was out of touch with everyone else for about a
week.”10

Because the Marines in the CAPs were formally part of the infantry battalions to
which the Marines were assigned, the infantry battalions often had difficulties
coordinating their operations with those of the CAPs. The infantry battalions were
responsible for coordinating the patrolling of the CAPs and the troops in their own
battalions, and this could be confusing at times. However, it was important to ensure
patrols from the two units did not come into contact with each other and fire on each
other by mistake because they thought the other force was a guerrilla unit. Also, the
infantry battalions were responsible for providing infantry reaction forces and artillery
support for the CAPs. When the infantry battalion remained in one location this
arrangement usually worked well, but problems could arise if the battalion was moving
for some reason.11 In regard to situations such as these Colonel Noble L. Beck, the Third
Marine Division Operations Officer said,

“Most often the infantry battalions were on the move from one area to another
while the combined action units normally remained in the same location. It was not
infrequent that the infantry command was called upon to come to the aid of a combined
action unit with its ‘tail in a crack’ in a situation unknown to the infantry commander in
advance, and often this found him in an awkward tactical posture for response.”12

10 Hemingway, 19-20.
11 Peterson, 36.
The confusion and the danger that arose from these command arrangements were lessened when the CAPs were made a separate command.

The command and supply structure within which the CAPs operated before the CAPs became a separate command had a negative effect on the ability of the CAPs to conduct their counterinsurgency operations well. The administrative problems resulting from Marines being transferred from one battalion to another when a battalion left an area probably meant the pay, the mail, and the supplies for the Marines could at least be delayed in some instances. This might appear to be a minor irritant for the Marines, but it could be a detriment to their morale, and they were already in a stressful situation in the CAPs. Not being able to depend on being given adequate supplies and equipment from the infantry battalions for the CAPs’ military operations was a more serious problem, though. The small number of men in the CAPs and their isolated positions made them vulnerable to attacks as it was, and if they did not have sufficient supplies and equipment with which to defend themselves, they became even more vulnerable. Even though in some instances CAPs were able to acquire the supplies, the equipment, and the weapons they needed through barter, purchase, and theft, they would have been better prepared to defend themselves and to perform their counterinsurgency missions if they were given a guaranteed source for the supplies and the equipment they required. At times, needing to rely on the infantry battalions for infantry reaction forces and artillery support also created dangerous situations for the CAPs. Often the infantry units were away from their usual battalion area on missions they were assigned. In situations such as these the CAPs might not have an infantry reaction force readily available to help them fight a large

12 Shulimson, 1966, 240n.
NVA or NLF unit. This was a significant problem because the CAP concept could only succeed if reaction forces were prepared to quickly help the CAPs when the CAPs were threatened with overwhelming forces. If this were not the case the CAPs could be easily defeated, and the CAP concept was not feasible. Artillery support for the CAPs was not as significant a problem for the CAPs because the artillery did not usually move with the infantry units when they went on their missions. However, artillery support for the CAPs was important for the same reason the infantry reaction forces were important, and if the CAPs were attacked by a large force, artillery fire was critical in helping them fight off the attack. There also could be occasions when the artillery was firing missions in support of battalion operations, and this might mean those artillery support missions were given priority over artillery fire support missions for the CAPs. These problems created because the Marines in the CAPs were formally a part of the infantry battalions adversely affected the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency mission, and a number of these problems had the potential to allow for the annihilation of some of the CAPs.

These problems were not so much the fault of the infantry battalions as they were the fault of the organizational arrangement that assigned the Marines in the CAPs to the infantry battalions, and assigned some responsibilities for the CAPs to the battalions. The infantry battalions and the CAPs were given very different missions, and it would not be realistic to expect the infantry battalions to sacrifice their performance on their assigned missions to support the CAP units. The CAPs suffered because at times they may have lacked supplies, equipment, infantry reaction forces, and artillery support, but the infantry battalions also suffered because their responsibility for giving the CAPs supplies, equipment, infantry reaction forces, and artillery support took their own material
resources and had the potential to distract them from focusing on the other missions assigned to the battalions. Assigning the CAPs to the infantry battalions was a poor organizational arrangement that probably arose out of necessity rather than design when the CAP program was started. When the CAPs were formed into a separate command it looked as if many of these problems could be eliminated.

When Corson took command of the CAPs in February 1967 he brought together a staff of people to develop his idea of how the CAP program should be formed as an independent unit. Officially the infantry battalions were still responsible for the administrative, supply, equipment, combat support, and operational control requirements of the CAPs. Now, though, Corson and his staff began to plan the necessary organizational structure, or Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) as it was designated, so it would be ready when the CAPs were formally made a separate command. One of the people who was a member of Corson’s staff at this time described Corson and the staff members as being enthusiastic and committed as they worked to create a structure for the new unit.  

13 He said” We were just forming up and working the plans out, and the organization charts; and how this thing was going to mesh, and where we were going to put these units, and how were we going to train those outfits; how were we going to resupply them….“  

14 By June the TO&E was completed, but the CAP program was still not officially an independent command.

In June 1967 General Robert Cushman replaced Walt as commander of IIMAF, and his deputy commander for IIMAF was Nickerson, who along with Krulak and Walt

13 Peterson, 46.
14 Ibid.
had asked Corson to take command of the CAP program. Cushman made Nickerson responsible for the program, and, in turn, Nickerson gave Corson most of the responsibility for the new CAP command. Corson soon developed the required standard operating procedure (SOP) that detailed the goals, the missions, and the chain of command for the CAP program. During June Corson strengthened the organizational structure of the new CAP program by forming a Combined Action Group (CAG) headquarters at Danang, and four CAGs were eventually operating by the summer of 1968. The CAGs worked at the province level in I Corps, and each CAG supervised a number of Combined Action Companies (CACOs) operating at the district level. In turn, the CACOs controlled the various CAPs working in the villages in their respective districts. These actions gave the CAP program a clear organizational structure for the command of the CAPs down to the village level.

In practice the organizational structure worked to send orders from the CAG to the CACO and then to the individual CAP. The Popular Forces (PFs) in the CAPs were officially supposed to take their orders from the village chief. Normally, though, they received their orders from the district chief who had more power. The CAGs were placed close to a province headquarters and they gave administrative support to the CACOs under their supervision. In addition the CAGs worked with the unit commanders and the province chiefs to determine the tactical areas of coordination (TAOCs) in which the CACOs would operate. In turn, the CACO headquarters were placed at district headquarters where they were responsible for organizing medical evacuation, air and

artillery support, and infantry reaction forces for the CAPs the CACOs supervised. Each CAP had its own TAOC which it controlled, and any other unit wanting to conduct operations within the CAP’s area needed to request permission from the district commander and the CACO commanding the CAP in the area. This practice was intended to prevent friendly forces from firing on each other in the mistaken belief they were confronting a guerrilla force. The plan for the new CAP program was impressive, but at this time the CAPs were still officially dependent on the infantry battalions for administrative, supply, equipment, combat support, and operational control purposes.16

In July 1967 the Third Marine Amphibious Force (IIIMAF) changed the support and control arrangement for the CAPs so that they were no longer under the control of the infantry battalions, and the CAP program became a separate command reporting directly to IIIMAF. In the revised chain of command the CAPs were responsible to the CACOs, the CACOs were responsible to the CAGs, and the CAGs were directly responsible to the IIIMAF. As commander of the new CAP program Corson supervised the various elements of the CAP organization, and he reported directly to Nickerson who was the deputy commander of IIIMAF.17 The CAP program was now a separate unit, but there were problems associated with this new independence.

The staff of the new CAP program was now free to plan the tactics, the training, and the other matters necessary for the CAPs, but they had inadequate access to supplies to accomplish their plans. In their zeal they resorted to scrounging and ingenuity to

16 Hemingway, p. 6.

acquire the supplies they wanted. One of the CAP staff members at this time said when the first Combined Action Group headquarters was started they only had one jeep he thought they had stolen, and they used it to go to Danang where” There was this junkyard. And we used to go in there and get tires, axles, pieces and parts of jeeps and rebuild. We had… a couple of good mechanics. We got a couple of good frames and we actually started building our own vehicles….” The efforts used to get their own vehicles was matched by the creativity this same CAP staff member said was used to get other supplies. He said” I’d get a guy from the Chicago Sun- Times in, and I’d say, ‘Hey, look: We need this kind of supply. And we [can] get it from Sears Roebuck. And can you help us?’ And goddamn if Sears didn’t come through and give us some supplies.” The creativity the staff members used to get the supplies they needed is commendable, but their need to do this is also disturbing.

The CAPs were chosen to perform the important mission of pacification in the rear areas of the Marine enclaves, and they needed adequate support to do this. Making the CAPs a separate command made it possible for Corson to tailor an organization suited for helping the individual CAPs do their pacification work in the villages. Also, making the CAPs a separate command allowed the new CAP command to focus all its efforts solely on finding ways to help the CAPs with their counterinsurgency tasks. These were positive developments for Corson’s new unit, but it is disturbing that they were not given adequate supplies and equipment to accomplish their mission. Marine Corps generals as

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18 Peterson, p. 47.
19 Ibid.
prominent as Krulak, Walt, and Nickerson chose the CAP program for the purpose of pacifying the enclaves, and they should have ensured the program was sufficiently supplied to do the job. When the staff of the new CAP program was forced to find outside sources for supplies and equipment it distracted them from accomplishing their primary mission.

When the CAG was formed at Danang in June 1967 a permanent CAP school was established to ensure Marines going to the CAPs were trained for their mission before they went to the CAPs. Prior to this some of the Marines who went to the CAPs were given training, but often Marines did not receive any formal training before they were assigned to a CAP. In the first JAC units at Phu Bai Ek conducted a course of training for the Marines before they went into the Vietnamese villages, but this was not always the case. Some Marines were not given any special training before they were assigned to CAP units, and one reason for this was the increased demand for more Marines in the CAPs when the program was greatly expanded between June and December of 1966.20 One Marine said he and others in his unit were asked if any of them wanted to volunteer to live in a Vietnamese village. He said he and a few others went but” The words CAC and CAP were never spoken, but that’s what it was, a CAP outfit….We had to meet one of the Marines at a break in the wire on the perimeter….He took us into the ville.” After this the Marine squad leader in the CAP gave the new Marines the only training they

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20 Hemingway, 18.
received to prepare them for duty in the CAP. The CAP school was started to prepare the Marines for their counterinsurgency mission in the CAPs.

The CAP school Corson established at Danang was intended to give a concentrated, intensive training course to all the Marines going to the CAPs for their unique counterinsurgency mission in the villages. The training period for each Marine at the school was usually two weeks, and Corson knew this was not sufficient time to accomplish much training. In regard to this he said he” Realized that it was not possible to transform these Marines into linguists or cultural anthropologists overnight.” However, he thought” It was possible to teach them some of the customs, some of the history, some of the culture of Vietnam, Maybe then they would approach the Vietnamese in the hamlets as human beings.” The syllabus for the school reflected Corson’s thinking with classes in Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese history, co tuong, and Vietnamese language; civic action; Vietnamese politics, and the organization and the history of the PFs. The students were also given classes on the weapons, the tactics, and the organization of the NLF. Combat and tactically oriented classes were refresher classes for most of the Marines in small- unit tactics, patrolling, first aid, basic map reading and compass reading, basic infantry weapons, requesting artillery fire and air strikes, medical evacuation, and other military subjects. As part of their training for the CAPs the students and local PFs conducted patrols around the perimeter of the school area at night.

21 Ibid.,44.
22 Ibid., 50.
23 Ibid., 5.
The syllabus for the CAP school in 1967 shows much of the military subject training was practical and appropriate to prepare the Marines for the CAPs, and the students were taught classes on military subjects for over thirty-nine hours during the two weeks. The Marines were coming from infantry units, and this has been criticized as too much time to devote to teaching Marine infantrymen basic military skills in such an accelerated course. Most of the men in the CAP school were enlisted men below the rank of NCOs, though, and in the infantry units map reading was usually done by either officers or NCOs, and this was true for planning and leading patrols, and for conducting small-unit tactics. Specially trained Marines from artillery units were with the infantry to call in artillery support when it was needed, and specially trained Marines who were often pilots were with the infantry units to call in air support. In addition, if an enlisted Marine in an infantry unit did not know how to operate a radio, for instance, he was usually not far from an NCO who would show him how to do it, or who would do it himself. In the CAPs some of the enlisted men would probably be leading patrols comprised of other Marines and PFs. In the dangerous environment of the villages, the men leading the patrols needed excellent patrolling skills to keep their men alive and to accomplish their missions. This was true for the other military skills taught in the CAP school, also. Any Marine in a CAP needed to be able to call for artillery support or an infantry reaction force if a patrol was under heavy attack. If a CAP compound were overrun any Marines not wounded or killed also needed to be able to operate all of the weapons in the compound, and to operate a radio to call for a reaction force if it was needed. Quite a bit of time in the school was devoted to teaching military skills, but it

24 Peterson, 48.
was especially important for every Marine in the CAPs to know these skills in the counterinsurgency war in the villages. Security in the villages was the initial, most important task in the villages, and poor security could be catastrophic for the CAPs.

In two weeks of school there was not enough time to teach the Marines very much of what they would need to know in the CAPs, but there was probably a poor distribution of instruction time given to the non-military subjects in the syllabus. Corson emphasized the importance of economic development as a key component in his pacification project in Phong Bac, but there was nothing specifically about economic development in the syllabus. Civic action was a subject in the syllabus, and that subject might have dealt with economic development, but there were only a few hours of instruction in the syllabus for civic action. Altogether, in fact, there were fewer than eight hours of total instruction in the school program for Vietnamese culture and civic action. The game of *co tuong* Corson saw as a way to establish good relations with the Vietnamese people was taught for eight hours in the school program. 25 The use of this game worked well in Phong Bac, but eight hours of instruction in the CAP school may have been excessive. One Marine who went to the school later said” They said it’s a traditional game and everybody plays it… and we learned it. I’ve been here a little over three months now and I have not yet sat down and played a game…. In fact, I’d venture to say I haven’t even seen a game… since I’ve been here.”26 While there were eight hours of instruction for *co tuong*, there were

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25 Ibid.

only six hours of Vietnamese language instruction for the Marines in the two week program. 27

One Marine who thought the training was good was Barry Goodson who served in an infantry unit for a number of months before he volunteered for the CAPs. Goodson said his experience in the CAP school changed the way he felt about the war and the Vietnamese people. While he was in the infantry Goodson said he participated in burning huts and destroying villages, but he was not proud of having done this. An officer who gave the new students an orientation speech told them one of their responsibilities would be to train the PFs in the CAP, and he also told them they would have” The responsibility of living with your Vietnamese counterparts and helping them improve their lives and the lives of all the villagers in whatever small way you can think of.” After the wholesale destruction he had seen during his service in the infantry Goodson was enthusiastic about the idea of helping the Vietnamese people. He thought” It’s about time. Up until now we only thought of the people as simple idiots, or animals we could slaughter without a second thought.” As he learned about Vietnamese culture and language during the first week of the school his thinking continued to change and he said” I was beginning to feel a strong devotion towards helping these people….” This marked change in Goodson’s thinking of how the war could be fought in a better way and his changed attitude toward the Vietnamese people show the worth of the school for Goodson. He also thought highly of the combat- oriented training he received. 28

27 Peterson, p. 48.
Much of the second week of Goodson’s training in CAP school was devoted to combat related training he considered rigorous and intense. He and the members of his class studied guerrilla strategy, explosives, and survival methods, and they also practiced hand- to- hand combat and learned to use a wide variety of weapons. In addition, this second week of training for the Marines included information about the insects and the snakes they might encounter in their duty in the CAPs. Goodson’s description of his CAP school training implies he thought it was a concentrated, practical preparation for his CAP duty.  

It is easy in retrospect to fault the CAP school for what it did not teach the Marines going to the CAPs, but given the circumstances at the time the school gave the Marines good training. Some of the most important generals in the Marine Corps determined pacification in the villages in the rear areas of the enclaves was vital for the success of the Marine Corps enclave strategy, and Corson was given the mission of forming a new unit to accomplish that mission. The pressure Corson felt must have been immense as he tried as quickly as he could to make the CAP program a functioning expression of his knowledge and his experience. Corson’s thinking regarding this initial training for the Marines entering the CAP program was expressed to some degree when he said” I’m giving a little light direction, because what I’m trying to establish in that period of time is given the ingenuity, the initiative of these young men, give them a little guidance… ‘You’re going to be all alone, sergeant or corporal. And I’ve taught you

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29 Ibid., 19.
enough to be able to do it on your own.’ It’s a risk.”

The military subjects were stressed in the CAP school, and this was appropriate because the counterinsurgency mission of security was the primary mission of the CAPs, and without good security in the villages none of the other counterinsurgency tasks could be accomplished. The non-military training was less extensive, but there was enough of it to make the men aware of some of the cultural challenges they faced. Corson’s Phong Bac experiment succeeded largely because it encouraged and helped with economic development in the village, though, and it is puzzling that Corson included little if any class instruction in the school related to how the Marines could help to accomplish this. However, it looks as if time was of the essence in this situation, and priority was put on giving the Marines some good training in a short period of time, and then getting them to the CAPs in the villages where they were needed.

In the summer of 1967 the CAP program was in an excellent situation to show whether or not it was a good counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. The CAPs were now part of a separate CAP unit focused on the counterinsurgency mission of pacification in Vietnamese villages in the rear areas of the Marine enclaves, and they were no longer hampered by their previous organizational ties to the infantry battalions. Three of the most prominent generals in the Marine Corps encouraged and authorized the creation of the new CAP unit because they thought the pacification mission in the villages was so critical, and they were giving the program their support. Probably because of the importance of this mission, the man the generals chose to command the new unit

was an officer who was considered to be one of the most experienced experts on counterinsurgency warfare in the Marine Corps. In his capacity as the director of the new CAP program, Corson’s knowledge of counterinsurgency warfare promised to help the CAPs develop their counterinsurgency abilities. A formal school was established to give the Marines going to the CAPs a course of training for the specialized counterinsurgency work they would be doing in the villages. For the most part the training the Marines were given in the school was practical and adequate for the counterinsurgency work they were expected to do, and it was probably assumed they would learn more of what they needed to know from the other men in the CAPs to which they were assigned. With the CAPs a separate unit focused on counterinsurgency, and a school to train the CAP Marines operating, Corson began a more careful process to select Marines for duty in the CAPs.

Corson knew the individual Marines serving in the CAPs together comprised what was possibly the most important component of the CAP program, and because of this he created a list of requirements for the selection of prospective CAP recruits. Previously when the infantry units were told to send men to the CAPs they were given guidelines to follow in selecting those men. Essentially, the infantry commanders were told to send Marines to the CAPs who performed well in combat, and who did not have behavior problems. Often this did not work well because it was in the interest of the infantry units to keep their best men, and because of this the infantry units often sent their unwanted men to the CAPs. The infantry units were now required to send a specific number of men to the CAPs, and to ensure the CAPs had the sort of recruits he wanted for the program Corson developed a set of criteria for the selection of the Marines entering the CAP program. Among these were that a CAP recruit needed to be a
volunteer for the program, he needed to have served in a combat unit in Vietnam for at least four months, he needed a good recommendation from his commanding officer, he could not have any recorded disciplinary infractions, and he could not be xenophobic. Corson’s standards for the CAP Marine recruits were high, and he worked to make sure they were met.

Corson used his specified criteria to initially find recruits for the CAP program, but he used other methods to make his final selections. One of his most important qualifications was that the men not be xenophobic. If a Marine in a CAP exhibited hatred or even dislike for the Vietnamese people this could cause an entire village to be alienated from the Marines in the CAP, and because of this any good relations the CAP developed with the people could be ruined. To prevent problems such as these and other problems, Corson used a questionnaire he developed. He said” there were certain questions. And I looked the kid in the eye and I’d ask him a couple of questions and I’d say ‘Get out of here,’ or,’ Come here, young man.’” Corson was serious about getting the sort of men he thought were appropriate for the program and he personally interviewed as many of the men as he could. As he interviewed the men Corson said he was looking for particular qualities he thought made people empathetic human beings. He wanted to eliminate men who would feel superior to or disdainful toward the Vietnamese. In describing the negative characteristics he was looking for, he said” They do it with kinetic movements, with their hands, they do it with their voice, they do it with their face’ I know better than you.’ And they show it. Part of it is swagger some of it is body

32 Ibid.
movements, body chemistry.” Corson thought his experience gave him the ability to do this” And you see, I survived the environment and I knew what offended. If a kid is naturally offensive I don’t have time.” If a Marine did not meet Corson’s standards he was sent back to his unit. Even after the Marines entered training Corson continued to observe them, and if he thought a man did not have the qualities Corson wanted for the CAP Marines he would have him dismissed from the program.³³

Corson’s obsession for finding the right men for the CAPs was matched by his obsession to make the CAP idea work as a counterinsurgency concept. His driving motivation, he said, was to overcome the challenge of finding an effective means of pacification in Vietnam. Corson gave careful attention to choosing the commanders for the CAGs because he said the prospective commanders needed to accept the idea that the squad leaders in the CAPs knew the situation better than the officers did. For this reason the CAG commanders needed to know their jobs well before they could tell the squad leaders what their mission responsibilities were and the officers could not simply say they knew better because of their rank. This was difficult for many officers to accept, but each village was a unique situation, and the officers needed to understand the situations in the villages before they could advise the CAP squad leaders as to how to deal with them. In keeping with this idea, one of the fundamental principles Corson used for the CAP program was to give the CAPs what they needed, and not have them bring their problems to higher authorities until the problems became critical. Corson said he used his ideas and experience to train the CAP Marines, and then gave them a chance to fail on their own.

³³ Corson, Shippen and Greenman interview.
When the Marines made a mistake the situation was reconstructed and a way to correct it was discussed. With this flexible trial and error method Corson said he and the CAP Marines tried to find answers for the problems the Marines encountered in each CAP. Because of his desire to improve the performance of the CAPs Corson often went on patrols with the CAPs to understand their problems and evaluate their performance. 34

As Corson shaped the CAP program he gave the CAPs a list of six specific counterinsurgency missions to accomplish. These missions were the same missions the PF units were previously given during the war, for the most part, but by themselves the PFs had difficulties completing the counterinsurgency missions. Corson was confident the Marines and the PFs together in the CAPs created a powerful, effective counterinsurgency tactic capable of successfully performing these missions” And for the first time since we have confronted a war of national liberation, we know how to defeat the Communists in an insurgency environment.”35

The missions Corson gave the CAPs dealt with most of the counterinsurgency missions this study determined the CAPs needed to accomplish to work well as a counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. In the opinion of this study the most basic responsibility of the CAPs was to provide security for the Vietnamese people by keeping the guerrillas away from the villages. This security effort of the CAPs also needed to prevent the guerrillas from having access to the villages to obtain the food, the recruits, the supplies, and the intelligence they needed to exist as a guerrilla movement. The CAPs

34William R. Corson, interview by Russ Martin, July, 1976, transcript, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections.

35 Corson, The Betrayal, 184.
also needed to find and eliminate the NLF agents or members of the guerrilla infrastructure among the people in the village. The CAP members had to gain the loyalty of the people, and develop intelligence sources among the people of the villages. To work well as a counterinsurgency tactic the CAPs also needed to perform civic action and economic development projects to improve the living standards and the economic conditions of the villages. Psychological operations needed to be conducted to discredit the NLF and to promote the loyalty of the villagers to the central government. Finally, the local government had to be developed and strengthened to help improve the control of the central government over the villages.

The six missions Corson gave the CAPs were:

1) Destroy the NLF within the village hamlet area of responsibility.
2) Protect public security and help maintain law and order.
3) Protect the friendly infrastructure.
4) Protect bases and lines of communication within the villages and hamlets.
5) Organize people’s intelligence nets.
6) Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the NLF.  

Later as Corson recounted how he thought the CAPs accomplished these counterinsurgency missions during the time he commanded the CAP program he said the CAPs worked to destroy the NLF in the village hamlet area of responsibility in three ways that complemented each other. The military security in the CAP villages was

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36 Ibid.
excellent, and this prevented guerrillas from entering the villages to achieve their goal of recruiting fighters for the NLF. As proof of this, extensive CAP census taking operations found that few people left the areas the CAPs controlled, and Corson said this indicated not many people left the areas to join the NLF. In a similar way, the NLF could not take rice from the villagers because the CAPs guarded the village rice harvests. The local markets were also watched to ensure people were not purchasing large amounts of rice or other supplies that might be smuggled to the NLF. Corson said these methods were effective because some NLF defectors and prisoners stated the guerrillas thought it was dangerous to attempt to get rice and supplies from villages where there were CAPs, and because of this they chose to get rice and supplies from villages where there were no CAPs. In this way these first two measures denied the guerrillas the recruits, the rice, and the supplies they needed to exist as a guerrilla movement. The third way the CAPs destroyed the NLF was through the combat operation the CAPs conducted in the areas of the villages. Here the CAPs fought the guerrillas and showed the ability and the willingness of the CAPs to defend the villages from the NLF forces. So, Corson said the CAP security operations accomplished the mission of destroying the NLF by killing its fighters, and by preventing the NLF from getting the recruits, the food, the supplies, and the intelligence needed to sustain the NLF insurgency.  

The security to eliminate guerrilla activity in and around the villages also helped the CAPs accomplish the second, the third, and the fourth missions Corson gave the CAPs. The continual series of patrols and ambushes the CAPs conducted prevented the NLF from interfering with the business and social activities in the villages. The NLF tax

37 Ibid., 184-185.
collectors, recruiters, and propaganda teams were kept out of the villages by the CAPs so the people could live, farm, and do business in an atmosphere of relative peace and stability. Often the CAPs served as both the security force and the police force for the villages, and in some situations they helped to resolve differences between people in the villages. As proof the CAPs were able to protect the leadership and the infrastructures of the villages, Corson said his research showed in villages without CAPs only twenty percent of the hamlet chiefs felt safe enough to stay in their homes during the night. In contrast, in villages where there were CAPs over eighty percent of the hamlet chiefs felt safe enough to stay in the villages throughout the day and the night. Also, there were operating hamlet councils in ninety-three percent of the villages where CAPs were located, while only twenty-nine of the hamlets in villages without CAPs had operating hamlet councils.38

Good security operations and the establishment of good relations with the Vietnamese people helped the CAPs accomplish their fifth mission of creating effective intelligence operations in the villages, Corson said. He stressed the importance good intelligence plays in defeating an insurgency, and he said the first requirement for getting intelligence from the people is the existence of good security measures in the villages. Rather than staying in the villages for a period of time and then leaving, as other Marine and ARVN units had, the CAPs lived among the people and protected them from the NLF. Some of the people came to trust the CAPs because they stayed in the villages, and they also saw the CAPs were able to fight and defeat the guerrillas. The Marines simply treated the people in a humane manner, and they did not attempt an ideological crusade

38 Ibid., 186-187.
against the communists. Interestingly, Corson said the affection the young Marines showed for the children frequently led to friendships between the Marines and the children that resulted in the children being the first villagers to bring intelligence information to the CAPs. After a period of time some of the other villagers saw that the Marines and the PFs in the CAPs protected the people and treated them well, and they began to provide more intelligence about guerrilla activities. Corson thought this process of treating the people humanely and proving they could defend the people from the NLF was an excellent way for the CAPs to gain intelligence. In fact, the intelligence program began to work so well that after six months in operation many CAPs were receiving more intelligence information than they were able to act upon with their own resources.

The civic action portion of the sixth CAP mission was initiated after some progress toward achieving the first five missions was accomplished. This was partly because civic action worked best when the CAPs attained the confidence and the goodwill of at least some of the people, and performing the first five CAP missions helped them to do this. Establishing military security was the paramount mission for the CAPs in the villages, and all of the CAP resources were focused on accomplishing this before any appreciable amount of time and resources could be used for civic action or any of their other missions. Also, the Marines wanted to find out what civic action projects the people themselves wanted in the village instead of trying to tell them what they needed. As the Marines lived in the villages and worked to perform their first five

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39 Ibid., 187-188.
missions, they developed a rapport with the people and the people eventually felt confident in telling the Marines what civic action projects they wanted for the villages.  

After the Marines gained the confidence of the villagers there were few limitations to the civic action projects the Marines could help complete in the villages, Corson thought. The Marines used their initiative and imagination to think of potential civic action projects they could suggest to the people, and among the successful projects were road and bridge repairs, new farming techniques, field irrigation, credit unions, and school construction. The Marines learned the projects would fail if they became impatient and did all of the work themselves. The villagers needed to maintain their self-respect by knowing the projects were primarily the result of their own work, and the Marines could help but they needed to allow the people to work at their own pace to complete the work.  

Corson thought the Marines accomplished their final mission of propaganda through their actions. By simply acting in a humane manner toward the Vietnamese people the Marines disproved many of the negative NLF accusations regarding the Americans. The Marines and the PFs also caused a number of defections from the NLF with the propaganda technique of personally encouraging villagers with relatives among the guerrillas to tell those relatives to quit the NLF. The CAP members did this patiently and without using pressure, but they explained the relatives among the guerrillas would eventually be found and possibly killed if they stayed with the NLF. By staying in the villages the CAPs countered one of the strongest NLF propaganda messages. The NLF

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40 Ibid., 188.
41 Ibid., 188-189.
guerrillas always said they would fight their way back into the villages, but the NLF was not able to reoccupy any village where a CAP was established.\textsuperscript{42}

The missions the CAPs conducted in the villages were important, but there were three reasons for the success of the CAPs, in Corson’s thinking. First, the squad of Marines and the Navy corpsman in the CAP were never more than fifteen men, and a force this small did not threaten to upset the traditional social network within the village. This small group of Marines and a corpsman also generally tried to be respectful and friendly toward the people, and they worked to adjust to the social norms of the villages. The second reason for the success of the Marines in the CAPs was the ability of the Marines to prove they and the PFs in the CAPs comprised a strong enough military force to protect the villages. The third reason was that the youth and the rank of the enlisted Marines in the CAPs made it easier for the PFs and people in the villages to identify with the Marines as people similar to themselves.\textsuperscript{43}

The most significant reason for the success of the CAPs, in Corson’s opinion, was the idealism the Marines exhibited for their mission in the CAPs. The people knew most of the Marines in the CAPs volunteered for the dangerous duty in the villages to help the Vietnamese people, and the Marines demonstrated their commitment to their stated mission to help the people through their actions. The people frequently heard empty promises from Americans and GVN representatives who came to the villages and left after a short period of time. In contrast, the CAP Marines lived and sometimes died among the people as they helped the PFs fight the guerrillas. As they shared the dangers

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 189- 190.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. , 190.
with the people the young Marines also tried to help the Vietnamese improve the economic conditions in their villages, and they made a sincere effort to respect the culture of Vietnam.44

Because of Corson’s counterinsurgency expertise his later evaluation of the performance of the CAPs is valuable in determining whether or not the CAPs program was an effective counterinsurgency tactic during the Vietnam War. The greatest strength of the CAPs was arguably their ability to secure the villages from the NLF. As Corson said, the NLF never regained control of a village where a CAP was stationed. Even in those instances when a CAP unit was overrun, other Marines were quickly brought to the villages and the CAPs continued to operate. CAP security measures made it difficult for the NLF to recruit soldiers in the villages where there were CAPs, and census operations conducted by the CAPs showed few people left the villages in which CAPs were located. Because of the effectiveness of CAP security, NLF prisoners and defectors said the guerrillas were forced to attempt to obtain rice and other supplies from villages where there were no CAPs. Corson did not directly address how the CAP security attempted to keep villagers from giving intelligence information to the NLF, but it can be assumed sending intelligence to the NLF was more difficult because of the constant watchfulness of the CAP members and their sympathizers. Corson’s evidence supports the conclusion that the CAPs were performing almost all of their counterinsurgency security tasks well.

In his evaluation of the CAPs performance Corson did not discuss specifically how any hidden members of the NLF infrastructure were eliminated. Again, though, an assumption can be made that the activities of the hidden agents were inhibited or ended.

44 Ibid., 190-191.
by the security activities of the CAPs, and some of the individual agents were detected through the intelligence activities of the CAPs. One of the most important functions of the hidden NLF agents in the villages was to supply the guerrillas with recruits, rice, other supplies, and intelligence from the villages so the guerrilla forces could continue to survive. Because of the extensive security measures of the CAPs, if the agents attempted to send food, recruits, or supplies to the guerrillas the agents would probably have been caught. The threat of being caught also might have kept some agents from contacting and supplying the guerrillas. As the intelligence network of the CAPs became more extensive the hidden NLF agents faced a greater chance of being discovered by the CAPs, and this could cause the agents to be less active. It is likely that both the security measures and the intelligence networks of the CAPs either discovered the agents or caused them to be largely inactive.

Assuming the security and the intelligence actions of the CAPs eliminated the hidden agents or hindered their activities is not adequate, though. Considering Corson’s background in intelligence and the threat posed by the hidden NLF infrastructure in the villages, it is surprising he did not specifically address how this threat could be eliminated. Even though the actions of the hidden agents may have been hampered by the operations of the CAPs, the agents were still capable of harming the CAPs and intimidating the villagers. It is probable the agents could find some way to send messages to the guerrillas, and they could give the guerrillas information regarding the strength, the defenses, and the daily routines of the CAP members. These agents could also tell the guerrillas which villagers were helping the CAPs, and the agents could also carry out assassinations on their own. These were some of the reasons the hidden agents were a
formidable problem for the counterinsurgency efforts in the villages, and the CAPs needed to find a way to eliminate the hidden NLF infrastructure in the villages to be considered a good counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

The CAPs were doing a good job of developing intelligence sources in the villages, according to Corson, and his endorsement in this respect is impressive because of his previous experience in intelligence operations. He said the primary counterinsurgency necessity of good security for the villages was also the first step for getting good intelligence contacts among the people. When the people knew the Marines would stay with the CAPs in the villages and protect them, and the Marines treated the people well, they began to give the CAPs intelligence information. With this humane and gradual approach, Corson said, in a few months the Marines were receiving significant intelligence information from the villagers. This shows the CAPs developed effective methods to accomplish the counterinsurgency task of gaining intelligence information.

The CAPs were successful in their civic action and economic projects because of the training Corson gave them. Corson instructed the Marines to initiate civic action and economic projects slowly, and only after the CAPs secured the village and gained the trust and confidence of some of the villagers. After this the Marines asked the people what projects they wanted for the village, and they were careful to only make suggestions for possible projects. When civic action and economic projects were begun, the Marines helped the people with the work, but they allowed the people to do most of the work on the projects. This process gave the people a sense of pride because they were improving the village, but many of the people were also grateful to the Marines for the physical and the technical help the Marines gave the villagers to complete the projects. Corson’s
method of performing civic action and economic projects was the cornerstone of his Phong Bac experiment, and the CAPs used it fairly well to accomplish the counterinsurgency task of civic action and economic projects in the Vietnamese villages.

Even though Corson said the CAPs performed their assigned civic action missions in the villages well, it is difficult to understand why he did not place more emphasis on civic action and economic development in the CAP program. In his evaluation of the Phong Bac pacification experiment Corson specifically stated the primary reasons he thought the pacification program at Phong Bac succeeded there while other pacification attempts in Vietnam failed. The experiment in Phong Bac was successful, he said, because the Marines demonstrated they could both protect the people and provide the technical expertise to help the people become economically self-sufficient. Corson did not state why the CAP school and the CAP mission statement did not place an emphasis on helping the people achieve economic self-sufficiency, but this is a significant omission considering the conclusions he drew from the Phong Bac experiment.

Rather than using words, the CAPs used deeds to perform psychological operations in the villages. As the Marines helped defend the villages, lived among the people, and treated the people well, they disproved the NLF propaganda message that said the Marines would rape the women and abuse the Vietnamese people. Also, instead of pressuring them, the CAP members encouraged people with relatives among the guerrillas to persuade their relatives to surrender to the CAPs so they would not be killed. The simple humanity and idealism demonstrated by the Marines did more to gain the loyalty of the villagers for the CAPs then any number of speeches on the benefits of capitalism and democracy, in Corson’s opinion. In this practical and humane manner the
CAPs accomplished the counterinsurgency task of conducting psychological operations to discredit the guerrillas and to promote the loyalty of the people to the CAPs well.

The local government of the CAP villages was strengthened, but Corson did not say this was done to help improve the control of the GVN over the villages. Part of the reason Krulak, Walt, and Nickerson chose to bring the CAPs together as a separate command to conduct pacification was their belief the GVN and the ARVN could not adequately perform the pacification themselves. The generals thought this because previous pacification efforts showed the GVN and the ARVN were inept, unwilling, and corrupt. Because of this the separate CAP program under Corson’s command was intended to perform the pacification mission as an exclusively Marine Corps operation. A lesson for future pacification projects Corson drew from the Phong Bac pacification experiment was that the Marines performing pacification missions needed to actively confront anyone from either the NLF or the GVN who tried to corrupt or destroy their program. In his evaluation of the performance of the CAPs Corson said good security in the CAP villages made it possible for the majority of the hamlet chiefs to remain in their villages without the threat of being killed by the guerrillas. Because good security kept the NLF from interfering with them, the majority of villages where there were CAPs also had functioning hamlet councils. Corson’s evaluation of the CAP program gives evidence the counterinsurgency task of developing and strengthening the local government was accomplished by the CAPs, but there was little if any effort to improve the control of the GVN over the villages.

Corson’s evaluation showed he thought the CAPs were doing well in accomplishing their assigned missions in the villages, but there were exceptions among
the CAPs. It must have been difficult to attempt to maintain the high standards set for the large number of CAPs scattered across a large geographical area. Major Max McQuown commanded a Marine infantry battalion with two CAPs located in two villages within the battalion’s TAOR, and he was not impressed with the CAPs. He said” Few of the Marines assigned to these two CAP units had prior ground combat experience…. The leaders and the Marines under them… lacked skills in scouting and patrolling, mines and booby traps, map reading, observed fire procedures, basic infantry tactics, and VC tactics and techniques.” In addition to criticizing the military knowledge of the CAP Marines, McQuown also said they had little knowledge of Vietnamese culture” They had scant knowledge of the Vietnamese language and were unfamiliar with the social and religious customs of the people they were living with.” His criticism included the relations the Marines and the PFs had with the villagers, and he said the Marine and the PF” Members of the CAP platoon kept themselves aloof from the villagers they were supposed to be helping…. ” The village chiefs thought the two CAPs were so ineffective that” Neither chief had faith that the CAP would accomplish anything.” Edward Palm served as an enlisted man in a CAP, and later he earned a commission and eventually taught English at the US Naval Academy. During his service in the CAP he said” The village seemed aloof, intent on ignoring our presence.” He did not mention anything the Marines did to change this situation, and he said” The attitude seemed to be mostly cold indifference verging on hostility.” Even the relationship the Marines in Palm’s CAP had with the PFs was poor, and he said” Our PFs were standoffish, mostly, and they associated with us

45 Peterson, 36-37.
only when they had to.\textsuperscript{46} The CAPs may have appeared to be doing well in some respects in 1967, but these comments indicate there were still problems.

The idea Corson’s analysis of the CAPs performance in 1967 was more hopeful than accurate is further supported by the observations of a Vietnamese teacher in Danang. The teacher disliked the NLF, but he was angry with the effect US pacification efforts had on the Vietnamese people. In a conversation with his cousin, who was a high-ranking ARVN officer, the teacher spoke bitterly about the situation in the pacified areas where a number of CAPs were located. He said Danang was being flooded with people made refugees by the war and,” Some of them came from hamlets that were supposedly ‘pacified’ and protected by US Marines.” Regarding conditions in the CAP villages he said,” They seek better security than they could obtain even in such pacified areas- where Viet Cong, and sometimes even our local officials and ‘friendly’ troops often make life difficult for them.” The teacher concluded,” It seems that the claims of ‘pacification and protection’ are better sounding than in actual performance.”\textsuperscript{47} This was harsh criticism from a Vietnamese man who supported the war against the NLF and the NVA. The important job for the CAP program was to make its performance as good as its promise.

As Corson worked to make the CAPs an instrument of pacification in the Vietnamese villages he relied on the help of a US Navy chaplain named Richard McGonigal. Earlier in the war both Walt and Krulak decided the Marines in Vietnam needed to understand an important part of their mission was the protection of the

\textsuperscript{46} Hemingway, 38.

Vietnamese people. In an effort to find ways to help eliminate any negative feelings the Marines had for the Vietnamese people, Krulak authorized a program called the Personal Response Project. The person chosen to lead the new program was McGonigal, who was a trained sociologist as well as a chaplain, and McGonigal began to conduct a series of attitudinal surveys among in the various Marine units.\textsuperscript{48} After a period of time Corson and McGonigal met, and soon McGonigal was helping Corson with the CAP program.\textsuperscript{49}

McGonigal appears to have thought the CAP program Corson was planning could perform its pacification mission well, and he began to work closely with Corson on the program. He helped Corson write the questionnaire Corson used to interview prospective CAP Marines, and in some instances he helped with the interviews. When the CAP school was begun, McGonigal also played a significant role in forming its curriculum. Among the classes he developed for the new school, were classes in Vietnamese language, customs, and history. As McGonigal worked with the program he conducted attitudinal surveys among the CAP Marines.\textsuperscript{50}

A Personal Response Project survey report on the attitudes of Marines in I Corps toward South Vietnamese military and civilians was completed in 1967, and it revealed some disturbing information about those attitudes. Twenty-two percent of the Marines in the CAPs said they disliked the Vietnamese military, and seventeen percent said they had mixed feelings toward the Vietnamese military. As far as Vietnamese civilians were

\textsuperscript{48} Shulimson, 1966, 244.

\textsuperscript{49} Peterson, 42.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
concerned, ten percent of the CAP Marines said they disliked the civilians, and twenty percent said they had mixed feelings toward the civilians.\textsuperscript{51}

These figures must have caused some concern among the officers in charge of the CAP program. The survey was initiated in October 1966, and this was well before Corson took command of the CAP program in February 1967, but the survey continued through June 1967. The results of the survey showed thirty-nine percent of the Marines in the CAPs either did not like the Vietnamese PFs with whom they served, or they disliked them to some degree. Also, thirty percent of the CAP Marines either disliked the villagers or they disliked them to some extent. Because the Marines in the CAPs worked so closely with the PFs and the Vietnamese civilians, these attitudes would be difficult to hide. This means that roughly one-third of the Marines in the CAPs did not like the PFs and the civilians, or they did not like them very much.

Corson’s analysis showed the CAP program was performing well by the end of 1967, but the comments of some of the CAP Marines and the results of the survey indicate there were still important problems to be addressed. The CAP program became a separate unit under Corson’s command in February 1967, though, and it is difficult to imagine Corson could have made it into the instrument of pacification he wanted it to be in a few short months. Also, many of the Marines serving in the CAPs were in the program before Corson began his careful selection screening process, and the CAP school that gave a uniformity of training to the Marines was not established until June 1967. In discussing his relationships with the Marines and the PFs in his CAP platoon,

\textsuperscript{51}Robert A. Klyman, “Personal Response Project”, box 7, Klyman collection, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.
one Marine made an important point in relation to the results of the survey of the Marines’ attitudes. He said his relations with the members of the CAP platoon were the same as they were in any other group of people; he had some close friends, he liked others, and he did not like some of the people.\footnote{Igor Bobrowsky, interview, September 11, 1984, Klyman Collection, Folder 7, Box 1, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.} These might simply have been problems associated with the initial growth of a new organization, and if it were given time, the program Corson had in place showed the promise of being able to eliminate many of these problems.

A major change occurred in the new CAP program when Corson completed his tour of duty in South Vietnam in August 1967 and returned to the United States. Corson must have thought he left the program in good hands when he chose a specialist in counterinsurgency named Lieutenant Colonel Russ Hittenger, as his successor. However, Hittenger was killed before he assumed command, and Lieutenant Colonel Brunnenmeyr took command of the program. Brunnenmeyr only commanded the CAP program for three months before he was replaced by a Marine infantry officer named Lieutenant Colonel Byron F. Brady.\footnote{Peterson, 50.}

By the end of 1967 the CAPs looked as if they might be able to accomplish the counterinsurgency tasks this study determined necessary for the CAPs to be considered a good counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. As a separate command, the CAP program mission statement focused on the performance of many of those tasks, and the training for the Marines was calculated to help them accomplish those counterinsurgency
tasks in the villages. There were problems, but they did not look as if they were problems that could not be solved with good organization and good leadership.

However, the pacification program in which the CAPs played a central role was no longer a primary concern of the Marine Corps by the end of 1967. During the year the Marine Corps had to send more of its troops to the area of South Vietnam below the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to counter an increasing number of NVA units operating there. The threat of an invasion of South Vietnam by the NVA appeared greater toward the end of the year as they laid siege to the Marine base at Khe Sanh, and there was concern they might try to overrun the base. Marine infantry units combed through the jungles and the hills below the DMZ, and they fought fierce battles with NVA forces supported by artillery fired from dug-in positions in North Vietnam and the DMZ. In addition to the base at Khe Sanh, Marines were also needed to defend other static positions such as Con Thien and Camp Carroll.\footnote{Tefler, 1967, 256.} Almost all of the resources and the attention of the Marine Corps were devoted to this semi-conventional war being fought along the DMZ, and this could only mean fewer resources and less attention could be given to the pacification program of which the CAPs were a central part.
CHAPTER VI

A CHANGING ROLE AND THE END OF THE COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

During 1967 some developments promised to help the Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) realize any potential they had as a counterinsurgency tactic. There were events beyond the control of the program during 1967, though, that hampered the ability of the CAPs to work as well as they might have as a counterinsurgency tactic.

An important positive occurrence for the CAPs in 1967 was their selection to play the primary role in the pacification program for the Marine Corps in I Corps. Pacification was one of the most important concerns for the Marine Corps at this time, and the choice of the CAPs for this mission was made by Victor Krulak, Lewis Walt, and Herman Nickerson, who were all influential generals. These generals backed the CAPs in the pacification mission, and they showed the importance they placed on pacification when they chose William Corson to head an independent CAP command to conduct pacification in the Vietnamese villages. Corson was considered to be one of the most knowledgeable counterinsurgency experts in the Marine Corps, and he used his knowledge to form an organizational structure to maximize the counterinsurgency
effectiveness of the CAPs. During the period Corson commanded the program he used a careful selection process to choose the CAP Marines, and he also established a unique school to teach the Marines many of the fundamental skills they needed for their counterinsurgency work in the Vietnamese villages. With an important counterinsurgency mission, a separate CAP command, an experienced leader, and a practical training program, the CAPs were in a position in 1967 to show their worth as a counterinsurgency tactic.

The increased level of fighting in the area of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) during 1967 was one of the central reasons the CAP program was hindered in developing as well as it might have, though. Fighting along the DMZ intensified as the Marines fought hard battles with an increasing number of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regular units infiltrating into South Vietnam. The Marine infantry battalions needed every man they had for these fights, and their casualties were also high during this time. As a result of this they were not in a position to send many, if any, men to the CAPs. A great deal of Marine Corps air and artillery support was also needed for the fighting in the area of the DMZ, and this meant there was a decrease in the amount of air and artillery support available for the CAPs. At the start of 1967 there were fifty-seven CAPs operating and the intention was to have one hundred and fourteen by the end of the year. Partly because of the manpower needs of the infantry units only seventy-nine CAPs were operating by the end of 1967.¹

Because of the problems the program had in finding an adequate number of Marines, the program changed its requirements for prospective CAP Marines during 1967. Corson initially said all of the CAP recruits needed to have served a minimum of four months in a combat unit before they came to the CAPs, but this stipulation was dropped. Also, Corson’s requirement that none of the CAP recruits have any recorded disciplinary actions was no longer in effect. Dropping the need for CAP recruits to have prior service in a combat unit may have harmed the program, but the standards for new recruits were still high. These were the formalized standards for CAP recruits in 1967:

1. Have been in-country for at least two months if on first tour or have served a previous tour.
2. Have a minimum of six months remaining on current tour or agree to extend to meet this requirement.
3. Be a volunteer and motivated to live and work with the Vietnamese people.
4. Be a mature, motivated Marine and recommended by his commanding officer.
5. Had no nonjudicial punishment within the past three months, not more than one nonjudicial punishment and no courts- martial within the past year.
6. Have an average 4.0 marks in conduct and proficiency with last marks at least 4.0.
7. Have not received more than one Purple Heart award on current tour.
8. Preferably a high school graduate.²

These standards were high enough to ensure the CAPs had good recruits for the program, but the fact that the standards were lowered in some respects shows the Marine

Corps did not or could not give the CAP program a priority for finding the sort of men the CAPs wanted for the program. The need for men in the Marine units fighting in the DMZ area at the time was probably a major reason for this. However, this was a problem that continued, and it was arguably a problem that lessened the ability of the CAPs to work well as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war.

When Corson left Vietnam and command of the CAP program in August 1967 it almost certainly had a negative effect on the ability of the CAPs to show how well they could work as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war. When he organized the CAP program Corson used his general counterinsurgency expertise and his experience from the Phong Bac experiment to form the program’s structure in the way he thought was most appropriate to accomplish the pacification mission. He also personally chose the officers he wanted as his subordinates in the program, and in many instances he personally chose the individual Marines for the CAP program. The new CAP program was Corson’s creation, and as its leader Corson was an integral part of it. In addition to his expertise, Corson also brought his own charisma to the program, and this translated into a sense of spirit and vision for the program that appears to have given a sense of purpose and confidence to the CAP Marines. One CAP veteran said Corson “Saw the Program’s potential and expanded it into a formalized and integrated instrument of true pacification.” He continued to say Corson also “Gave the Program a unique style….”3 When another CAP veteran discussed Corson he said “Nobody except a few really understood what our job was.” He said, though “Col. Bill Corson, the first director, was

3 Peterson, 40.
very instrumental in the program and always supported us— he knew what we were about.”4 After he organized the CAP program and commanded it for approximately six months, Corson left Vietnam to return to the United States.

It is difficult to understand why Corson left the CAP program when he did. Corson was chosen for the high-priority mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages, and he was given the CAPs to form as an independent command to accomplish the job. This was a unique assignment that capitalized on Corson’s talents and experience, but after approximately six months Corson left his command to return to the United States. Corson began writing his book, The Betrayal, soon after he left Vietnam, and the book was published in 1968 after Corson retired from the Marine Corps. In his book, Corson detailed his disgust with the way the war was being fought, but he said the war could still be won if it were fought in a different manner. Corson believed strongly in the CAP concept as a counterinsurgency tactic in the war, and he saw them as a key part in a changed military strategy he proposed for the war. A point in the strategy he proposed in his book was” Merging and placing the Regional and Popular Forces under direct US command to form a massive Combined Action Program” , Included in this program would be” A US contribution of approximately 60,000 troops. This force would be used to provide relevant and credible military security in 3,500 to 3,750…hamlets.” 5 While Corson thought highly of the CAP program, it is likely he thought he could do more to


change what he saw as a misdirected war by having his book published than by leading the CAP program.

Toward the end of 1967 intelligence information began to indicate the NVA and the National Liberation Front (NLF) were preparing for a major offensive in South Vietnam. In the I Corps area, captured NVA prisoners said they were told to prepare for a conclusive battle, and intelligence determined NVA units in the DMZ area were being reinforced. Intelligence sources also confirmed additional NVA divisions were moving into positions close to the Marine base at Khe Sanh. As a result of this information, William Westmoreland considered what his response should be.⁶

Westmoreland reviewed this intelligence and intelligence from various other sources and came to the conclusion the NLF and the NVA were probably going to conduct a major offensive somewhere in South Vietnam, and he began to consider where the offensive might occur. In December 1967 he sent a message to Washington saying he thought the NLF and the NVA would try to achieve a significant victory to give them a position of strength before they agreed to negotiations. In his opinion, Westmoreland thought the NVA would attack and attempt to overwhelm the Marine base at Khe Sanh. As a result of this, Westmoreland ordered the Marine Corps to send additional forces to the camp at Khe Sanh, and to increase the number of Marine units operating in the area around the base.⁷

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⁷ Ibid.
Krulak’s thinking regarding the matter differed from Westmoreland’s. Krulak was opposed to the plan when Westmoreland decided to establish a Marine base at Khe Sanh in 1966, and he thought Westmoreland only intended to use the camp to lure the NVA into a siege in which their forces could be destroyed by US air power. Krulak looked at the NVA activity in the DMZ area and around Khe Sanh and told Walt he thought the NVA was attempting to draw the Marines away from the successful pacification work the Marines were performing in I Corps. From the perspective of the NVA, Krulak thought the pacification the Marine Corps was accomplishing was seen by the NVA “As the greatest threat to my aspirations on the Indochina Peninsula.” In order to remove the threat the NVA was “Applying Mao’s tactical doctrine, ‘Uproar in the East, Strike in the West.’” Krulak saw the increased NVA willingness to send its forces into the DMZ area to fight the Marines as a diversion. Regarding the sending of more Marines to the DMZ area, he said “Our current actions in Quang Tri are probably agreeable to the NVN.” He thought the NVA was glad to have its forces fight the Marines in the DMZ area because the Marines “Might otherwise be engaged in Revolutionary Development Support [the official term for pacification]…” Krulak concluded his prescient cable to Walt by saying “We may expect him [the enemy] to hang on to our forces in Quang Tri as long as he can.”

On the night of January 30 and the morning of January 31, 1968 the Tet offensive struck across South Vietnam with surprise and fury. Taking advantage of a cease fire declared to celebrate Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, the NLF and the NVA assaults included attacks on five of the six principal cities and thirty-six of South

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Vietnam’s forty-four provincial capitals. The effect of the attacks on Saigon were negated to some extent because US Army Lieutenant General Fred Weyand earlier evaluated intelligence reports as indicating there were large NLF and NVA forces moving into the area close to Saigon. Because of these reports some forces were put on alert, and Weyand had US forces in position to defend Saigon when the Tet attacks began. Ironically, the ineffectiveness of the search and destroy tactics was demonstrated when one of the most significant attacks on Saigon came from the historically NLF-dominated region called the Iron Triangle. The attack came from this area even though in 1967 various large-scale search and destroy operations including the massive Operation Cedar Falls were conducted throughout the Iron Triangle. At Khe Sanh the attack was not as intense as Westmoreland expected.

A new series of attacks by the NVA on the base at Khe Sanh began on January 20, 1968, but these attacks appeared to be an effort to divert attention and resources from the general attacks initiated at the end of the month. A former NVA colonel said, “A few weeks before Tet, a diversion was created with the attack launched against Khe Sanh. The Khe Sanh maneuver was intended to lull the cities and municipalities into a false sense of security.” The NVA commanders in the DMZ area were given instructions to draw in and engage as many US and ARVN forces as they could. At Khe Sanh the NVA staged two infantry attacks within three days, but neither attack was comprised of a force

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10 Ibid., 179.


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larger than a regiment. Unfortunately for the Marines, a well-placed NVA artillery bombardment exploded Khe Sanh’s central ammunition dump, and this created severe problems for the camp’s defenders. In response to these events Westmoreland ordered a massive bombing campaign around Khe Sanh, and two additional battalions were sent to help in the defense of the camp. Westmoreland prepared Khe Sanh for the main attack he expected, but instead the main attack exploded as a series of coordinated attacks throughout South Vietnam.\footnote{John Prados, \textit{Vietnam: the History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 229-230.}

One of the most important counterinsurgency tasks for the CAPs was to gather intelligence and prior to the Tet offensive they gathered intelligence that might have indicated the attacks were coming. Byron Brady was the program director during this period, and he credited the CAPs with providing the first and the best intelligence reports that caused the Third Marine Amphibious Force (IIIMAF) to cancel the Tet cease fire agreement with the NLF before the attacks started.\footnote{Peterson, 56.} Before the Tet attacks began a number of CAPs were reporting an increase in NLF and NVA activity in the areas of their villages, and they also reported other indications an attack might take place. One CAP Marine said, ”For a week or more our village had suddenly been filled with strange young men in civilian clothes.” In another village a Marine said” Early in December 1967 some of the villagers started asking me to give them sandbags…. I changed the [patrol] routine by going into some of the houses…. The villagers were actually digging in.” While they were on a daytime patrol, members of this same CAP were ambushed on
January 12, 1968, by a force they later discovered was part of an NVA regiment that had only recently arrived in the area.14 Because they lived and worked in and around the Vietnamese villages the CAP members were uniquely able to discover and submit intelligence information such as this to show attacks might occur in the near future.

Although Brady said he was grateful for the intelligence he received from the CAPs, some Marines thought intelligence they submitted prior to the Tet offensive was disregarded. On one occasion a patrol found a map made in the ground that was marked with all of the CAP village locations in the area. The information was passed on through intelligence channels, but no action was taken, and the people to whom the Marines sent the information said” They got that stuff all the time.” A member of the CAP that discovered the map later said” That was one of the problems with the CAPs- we didn’t have any officers with us. They thought we exaggerated.” Some Marines became frustrated when CAP intelligence on NLF and NVA troop movements was disregarded because” We were not listened to by higher command…. We watched heavy weapons squads come in, platoons come in, and we called these. And nobody believed us….” Less credence may have been given to the intelligence reports of the CAPs because there were no officers with them and in this instance the Marines said they” Were told by higher ups that, quote, we didn’t know what the hell we were talking about…. Nobody would bother to check it out.”15 In one situation before the Tet offensive a Marine noticed the villagers were making a large number of coffins, and he remembered thinking” What the hell are these people making coffins for? Who died? Was there, you know, a plague?” He said

14 Hemingway, 59.

15 Peterson, 56.
this information about the unusual number of coffins being built was sent to intelligence, but he did not think intelligence thought the information was significant. Even though some of the information they provided was not given much serious attention, the CAPs showed they were capable of gathering intelligence prior to the Tet attacks.

Many of the CAPs were attacked during the Tet offensive, and the attacks usually came when the NLF and the NVA forces were either on their way to assault one of the cities or when they were returning from conducting one of those attacks. Some CAP Marines thought the program was considered such a threat that one of the objectives of the NLF and the NVA units was to destroy the CAPs. The number of attacks on the CAPs conducted during the Tet offensive gives some support to this possibility. From January through October, 1967, approximately fourteen percent of the NLF and NVA attacks in the I Corps area were made on CAPs. From November preceding the Tet offensive through the middle of January 1968, forty-seven percent of the attacks in the I Corps area were directed at CAPs. Also, the number of contacts with NLF and NVA forces from December 1967 through most of January 1968 averaged approximately five per week for each CAP. These numbers increased dramatically to an average of approximately fifteen contacts each week from January twenty-ninth through February ninth. During the period of the Tet offensive, sixty-nine of the CAPS stayed in their villages, and nine were either temporarily moved to another location to provide security, or they were temporarily moved after they were overrun by NLF and NVA forces.  

16 Igor Bobrowsky, interview, September 11, 1984, Klyman Collection, Folder 7, Box 1, US Marine corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.

17 Peterson, 56-57.
In one instance during the Tet offensive two CAP platoons were especially important in the defense of the city of Danang. The two CAPs were positioned directly in the path NVA troops were using in their approach to attack Danang, and the NVA assaulted them with overwhelming force. When Corson later described the actions of the two CAPs during the NVA attack, he compared it to the suicidal Spartan defense at Thermopylae during the Persian Wars. Although they were massively outnumbered when they came under attack by two NVA divisions, the CAPs stood and fought to protect their villages. There was no possibility the Marines and the PFs could survive an assault by a force that large, but they fought as long as they could. In the end approximately twenty-seven Marines and an undetermined number of PFs were killed; one Marine survived the battle when he was left for dead by the attacking NVA. The defense provided by the CAPs slowed the advance of the NVA, though, and the time gained by their defense efforts allowed Marine infantry units to be brought into the fight to attack and defeat the NVA divisions. One result of this battle was that the city of Danang was the only city in South Vietnam the NLF and the NVA never held during the Tet offensive.\footnote{William R. Corson, interview, Michelle Shippen and Ron Greenman, 1984, transcript, US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.}

In the drastic circumstances of the Tet offensive, the CAPs generally did well in accomplishing their primary counterinsurgency task of protecting their villages. The attacks of the NLF and the NVA were almost exclusively directed at the cities of South Vietnam, but when the NLF and the NVA forces passed by CAP villages they often attacked them. In a few instances the CAPs were ordered to leave their villages for purposes such as providing security at strategic bridge locations and along important highways. When this happened the CAP members did it reluctantly, and they were
adamant that they wanted to stay and protect their villages. A number of CAPs were attacked and virtually annihilated during the Tet offensive, as they sometimes were on other occasions, but the Marines killed were always quickly replaced. In the NVA assault on the two CAPs defending the route to Danang only one of the Marines survived, but the next day Marines were sent to those villages to serve in the CAPs. This was done to show the people the Marines might be killed, but the CAPs would not be abandoned.19

The extent, the surprise, and the coordination of the Tet offensive shocked Westmoreland and some members of the US government in Washington. On the morning of January 31, 1968 Westmoreland went to the US embassy in Saigon where a group of NLF commandos fought their way onto the embassy grounds during the previous night. In a hard fight the last of the commandos were finally either killed or captured, and Westmoreland now stood in the ruins of the embassy and gave an informal press conference. His comments to the press could be construed as indicating he was completely bewildered by the situation he faced as a result of the NLF and the NVA attacks occurring throughout South Vietnam. He said the attacks were ‘very deceitfully’ conceived to create concern in South Vietnam, and he stated the primary NVA attack would still come at Khe Sanh. 20 The MACV commander’s lack of comprehension of the situation was possibly exceeded by how stunned Johnson and some others in Washington appeared to be when they received news of the Tet offensive. Lyndon Johnson’s White House secretary at the time was George Christian, and he said” The Tet offensive came as a brutal surprise to President Johnson and all of his advisors.” He said the reason for

19 Ibid.

20 Sorley, Westmoreland, 177.
“this was that” We had been led to believe that the Viet Cong were pretty well defanged by that period, that the pacification program had worked very well, that most of the villages in South Vietnam were secure, and that it was virtually impossible for the Viet Cong to rise to the heights that they did in 1968.”21 At a minimum, the strategy and the tactics used to fight the war were now called into question.

The historian Lewis Sorley later summarized the results of almost three years of the US war in South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. He said Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition killed large numbers of NLF and NVA fighters, but these were losses the NLF and the NVA were willing to take, and they were able to replace their losses without much difficulty. As US troops conducted the search and destroy operations in the remote jungles and mountains of the country, the NLF was able to maintain and extend its control over the Vietnamese people in the rural areas without significant interference. Even though the NLF and the NVA were suffering many casualties in their battles with US forces, they appeared willing to accept their losses because these losses were peripheral to their ability to accomplish their primary objective in the war. The NLF and the NVA understood gaining the allegiance of the people would win this insurgency war for them, and they were focused on that objective.22

The fighting during Tet was brutal and obscene, and during this time many Vietnamese civilians either became more confirmed in their beliefs, or the uncommitted finally gave their allegiance to one side or the other. In his book, *A Vietcong Memoir*, Truong Nhu Tang said some South Vietnamese intellectuals committed themselves to the

21 Ibid., 182.
22 Ibid., 183.
NLF even though they disliked the communists, and were suspicious of how much control the communists had over the NLF. These intellectuals thought the Tet offensive was an indication of a more violent and more widespread war in the future, and they thought the only way to save the nation was to support the NLF. They thought this because the NLF showed that regardless of the circumstances it would not be defeated, and the Tet offensive showed the US forces were not invulnerable.\(^{23}\) Among many of the common people who supported the GVN the death and the destruction created by the Tet offensive intensified their hatred of the NLF, but the supporters of the NLF gained new pride in the NLF because of the audacity and the bravery of the guerrillas during the offensive.\(^{24}\) A Marine in a CAP said he saw the mood of the villagers as bitter and vengeful toward the NLF after the vicious killings and the destruction of property committed by the NLF during the Tet offensive. The villagers who were friendly toward the CAP were more open in their friendship after the offensive, and more of the people seemed friendly toward the CAP. In this Marine’s opinion the Vietnamese villagers thought” Things happened that could not be forgotten.”\(^{25}\) In a counterinsurgency war the people may be the prize, but they suffer greatly, and this was especially true in the Vietnam War.

After the Tet offensive a major change was made in the way the CAPs operated. Since the start of the program in 1965, they always established a fortified headquarters


\(^{25}\) Bobrowsky, interview.
compound from which they conducted their ambush and patrol operations in the areas around the villages. The compounds were usually old buildings or abandoned fortifications located close to the villages, and the CAP members stayed in the compounds when they were not in the villages or on military operations. These small, isolated, and stationary positions were often the target of massive attacks that overran the compounds, though, and this weakness was especially evident when a number of CAPs were overrun during the Tet offensive. The NLF and the NVA forces were able to watch the fixed positions to find any flaws in the compound defenses, or any patterns in the habits and the schedules of the CAP members. With this information the NLF and the NVA could carefully plan their attacks and then mass their forces to attack the CAP compounds when they thought the CAPs were at their weakest. This vulnerability of the compounds to large attacks caused the Marine Corps to adopt a mobile concept for the CAPs.26

Instead of having a compound as a headquarters, the idea of the mobile concept was to have the CAP members moving from one place to another throughout the area around the village. The Marines and the PFs carried all of their equipment with them, and each night a different location was chosen for the CAP headquarters. During the night the CAP patrols and ambushes were conducted from this location. The next day all of the members would begin patrolling in and around the village, and that night a different position would be chosen for the CAP headquarters. Because they were not in a fixed position, such as a compound, it was more difficult for the guerrillas to find and attack

26 Peterson, 60.
the CAPs. Colonel Theodore E. Metzger commanded the CAP program during this period, and he said the NLF and the NVA “Don’t like to come after you unless they’ve had a chance to get set and do some planning.” He thought the mobile CAP concept disrupted the NLF and the NVA, though, because “Mobility throws this off…. The CAP can be found anywhere outside a village or hamlet, and they don’t like this when they’re trying to come in for rice, or money, or recruits, or just plain coordination.” The mobile CAPs worked without a fixed location for their missions, and, in effect, they became guerrillas operating in and around their villages.

In comments he made later, Corson said he disagreed with the mobile concept because he thought the compound concept was necessary for the CAPs to accomplish the counterinsurgency missions assigned to them. He said he preferred the compound concept, and he thought the vulnerability of the compounds would not be a problem if the CAPs performed their missions correctly. Constant patrolling in and around the villages would make it more difficult for the NLF and the NVA to mass for attacks on the compounds. Also, if the CAPs worked to gain the loyalty of the people then the people would give them intelligence about guerrilla activities that would prevent them from being surprised by large NLF and NVA attacks. In addition, Corson favored the compound concept because he thought the compounds were a physical expression of security in the villages, and they showed the commitment of the CAPs to the defense of the villages. The supplies for civic action projects were often kept in the compounds, and Corson thought the compounds needed to be the centers for the pacification work the

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27 Ibid.

28 Hemingway, 60.
CAPs conducted in the villages. When the villagers had any problems, they knew they could go to the CAP members in the compounds for help and protection. In fundamental ways this made the CAPs the social, the economic, and the military alternative to the NLF and in Corson’s thinking they needed to be this alternative to the NLF.  

Corson’s later observations support the position that the implementation of the mobile concept made it difficult for the CAPs to adequately perform some of the counterinsurgency tasks necessary for them to accomplish the pacification mission they were assigned in 1967. When the CAPs were made a separate command in 1967 and given responsibility for conducting the important mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages in the Marine enclaves, a list of counterinsurgency objectives was developed to achieve pacification in the villages. The mobile CAPs were able to do well at accomplishing the objective of providing security for the village, but they did not do as well with other objectives. Because they were constantly moving, the CAP members were not able to spend time talking with the villagers to gain their trust and their loyalty. In order to accomplish their mission of developing intelligence contacts among the people, it was important for the CAPs to gain the loyalty and the trust of at least some of the villagers. Also, there was little, if any, time for the mobile CAPs to work on civic action of any sort. The corpsmen did not have as much time to treat sick and injured villagers, and the CAP members did not have the time to help the villagers with civic action projects, such as repairing bridges and digging wells. A Marine who served in a mobile CAP said” Civic action duty just fell by the wayside…. I just don’t think it [the

mobile concept] was as effective.” 30 The adoption of the mobile concept may have made the CAPs less vulnerable to NVA and NLF attacks, but the mobile CAPs were not able to accomplish as many of their assigned counterinsurgency tasks as the compound CAPs were able to accomplish.

Another reason for the adoption of the mobile CAP concept was related to the actions of the Civil Operations and Rural Support (CORDS) agency. In 1967, Johnson’s insistence on more emphasis on pacification led him to send Robert W. Komer to take command of an organization to manage all of the US pacification activities to ensure a coordinated pacification program for the Vietnam War. The new organization was CORDS, and it took control of all US pacification operations including economic development, US district and village advisers to land reform, US advisory responsibility for RF and PF forces, and the elimination of the NLF infrastructure. 31 Komer was dynamic and aggressive in his efforts to bring all US pacification programs under the control of CORDS, and he upset many in the Marine Corps when he attempted to take control of the CAP program. Marine Corps Major General E.E. Anderson said” When Komer was there, he tried his darndest to get the CAP program absorbed into the RF/PF program…. So what Komer’s latest ploy was, to absorb the CAPs into the RF/PF structure and that would be controlled by DepCORDs….” Anderson said to prevent this from happening Marine Corps General Cushman” Felt that by coming up with some new idea, like the mobile CAP, he would get more mileage out of the CAP program and

30 Peterson, 61.

31 Prados, 321.
forestall any attempt on the part of Komer…to destroy the program." So, the CAPs may have lost some of their effectiveness as a counterinsurgency tactic, but the change to the mobile concept may have helped the program to continue to exist as a separate command.

The compound CAPs were better able to accomplish the majority of the counterinsurgency tasks assigned to them, but one of the main reasons for the change to the mobile concept was that the compound CAPs were being overrun too often. The primary military reason the CAPs were changed to the mobile concept was that the compounds were seen as too vulnerable to being overrun by large NLF and NVA forces. However, as Corson said, if the compound CAP members conducted a continual series of patrols throughout their areas, and if they acquired good intelligence from the villagers, then this problem could at least be alleviated. Also, one of the most important elements in the initial plans for the program was to have reaction forces prepared to help the CAPs if they were in a difficult battle with a large force of guerrillas. The Tet offensive was an extraordinary situation, and some of the CAPs may have been overrun during the offensive because their designated reaction forces were engaged in other fighting. In circumstances less drastic than those of the Tet offensive, though, the possibility of the CAPs being overrun could have been lessened if adequate reaction forces were prepared to quickly help them. The program was designed to have reaction forces for the CAPs because the compound CAPs were small, isolated units that could not survive on their own without the support of reaction forces. Instead of adopting the mobile concept, the organization and the response of the reaction forces in support of the compound CAPs could have been improved. If this were done there would have been less chance of their

32 Klyman, “CAP”, 34.
being overrun, and it is likely the compound CAPs would have been able to perform their important counterinsurgency pacification missions in the villages.

Captain Paul Ek returned to South Vietnam in April, 1968 as part of a Marine Corps inspection team. Ek was the officer who commanded the first Combined Action Company (CAC) or Joint Action Company (JAC) as it was called in 1965. When Ek first formulated his concept of operations for the new unit, he based his ideas on proven counterinsurgency principles. His intention was to have his combined platoons destroy the organizational structure of the NLF in the villages and replace it with their own organizational structure. To do this the JAC platoons conducted security operations to protect the villages from the guerrillas, but they also attempted to gain the loyalty of the people by helping them with civic action projects in the villages and by treating them well. As the JAC platoons gained the good will of the villagers, they began to receive intelligence regarding the guerrillas from the people. Ek said his plan for the platoons was successful, and “The Marines were gradually changing the people’s impressions that the VC were all about them to the perception that the Marines were all about them.”

After his successful initial experiences in forming the JAC Ek returned to South Vietnam in 1968.

One of Ek’s duties as part of the inspection team in 1968 was to observe the CAPs to determine what effect the Tet offensive had on the CAP program. Ek was particularly well-suited to do this evaluation because although the CAP program was modified in some respects since its inception, the CAP concept was essentially his creation. This was the period during which the CAPs were converting from the compound concept to the

33 Paul Ek, interview by Jack Shulimson, 1972, Klyman collection, Folder 7, Box 1. US Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, Va.
mobile concept, and Ek was able to observe and evaluate twelve CAPs. Ek concluded the CAPs were concentrating on the security and the military aspects of their missions, and they were doing well in these areas. He also concluded, though, that they were not working on the other counterinsurgency tasks necessary to pacify the villages and to replace the NLF organizations in the villages with the CAP organizations.\textsuperscript{34}

In March 1968 the information was made public that Westmoreland would leave his command to become the Army Chief of Staff in June, and in June General Creighton W. Abrams replaced Westmoreland as the commander of US forces in South Vietnam. Before assuming his new command Abrams served as Westmoreland’s deputy commander, but he disagreed with Westmoreland’s use of the strategy of attrition and the tactics of search and destroy. Abrams agreed with the conclusions of the earlier PROVN study that stated the most important objective in the war was security for the Vietnamese people, and the strategy of attrition was contributing little if anything to accomplish that security. After he took command Abrams began to put some of the PROVN ideas into practice with his “one war” strategy. Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. was the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) at this time, and during a trip to South Vietnam Abrams explained to McCain that, “The one war concept puts equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] and pacification - all of which are interrelated so that the better we do in one, the more our chance of progress in the others.”\textsuperscript{35} This balanced approach of Abrams was more similar

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

to a counterinsurgency strategy than Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition, and regarding NLF and NVA losses Abrams said, ”I don’t think it makes any difference how many losses he [the enemy] takes. I don’t think that makes any difference.” Abrams’ ideas in 1968 sounded different from Westmoreland’s ideas, and they sounded similar to the ideas Krulak expressed in 1965.

When Abrams was looking for someone to serve as his deputy commander, his comments revealed the intense level of inter-service rivalry between the US Army and the Marine Corps during the war. Abrams’ dislike of the Marine Corps in general and Krulak in particular became evident when he was asked if he would accept Krulak as his deputy commander. Abrams replied, ”I am confident that I can work effectively with most associates I may have.” In response to the possibility of Krulak being his deputy commander, though, he said, ”In my judgement, no Marine has the full professional military qualifications to satisfactorily discharge the military responsibilities of the office.” The level of Abrams’ displeasure with this possibility became evident when he said if Krulak were forced upon him as his deputy, Abrams would publicly state his opposition. This inter-service rivalry between the US Army and the Marine Corps negatively affected many aspects of the US war effort in the Vietnam War.

Throughout the existence of the program there were problems common to most of the CAPs that kept the Marines from more effectively accomplishing some of their counterinsurgency missions in the villages, and one important problem was the inability

36 Ibid., 23.
of most CAP Marines to speak the Vietnamese language well. In the CAP school the Marines received minimal Vietnamese language training, at best, and it was assumed they would learn more of the language as they worked with their platoons in the villages. In fact, though, most of the Marines in the CAPs only learned a few Vietnamese words, local slang, and a few phrases of Vietnamese as they interacted with the PFs and the villagers. Even some of the CAP Marines who had more extensive Vietnamese language training found it difficult to communicate with the people. In one situation a Marine assigned to a remote CAP village realized his Vietnamese language training was almost useless because his instructor spoke Saigonese, and he said” Vietnamese as spoken in Saigon is much different from what is spoken in the countryside. Out there dialects can change considerably in 10 miles.”38 In many instances any language training the CAP Marines received was useless because the villagers frequently spoke a local dialect that might also include some French, some slang terms, and possibly even some Japanese. 39

Because so few of the CAP Marines spoke any Vietnamese, the Marines needed to find other ways to communicate with the PFs and the villagers. Often a number of the PFs and the villagers spoke some English, and this was helpful in communicating. For the most part, though, the Marines communicated with the people and the PFs through the use of hand gestures, the use of some common Vietnamese phrases, and the use of a form of pidgin English that evolved in many areas of Vietnam during the course of the war.40

38 McManus, 223.


40 McManus, 224.
These forms of communication were adequate in some respects, but there were still important communication problems.

It was difficult for the CAP Marines to be effective in performing their counterinsurgency missions in the villages because of their inability to communicate well with the Vietnamese. The planning for the security missions, such as the patrols and the ambushes, needed to be kept at a basic level because the PFs and the Marines were not able to communicate very well with each other as they made their plans. This problem could become more pronounced in a combat situation when members of the two groups became excited and could not understand each other because they began talking to each other in their native languages. The security mission of the CAPs suffered to some extent because of the Marines’ inability to speak Vietnamese, and the intelligence mission suffered, also. Because the Marines were not able to communicate directly with the Vietnamese, they were forced to rely on the PFs to acquire intelligence from the local people related to NLF activity and the identity of any hidden members of the NLF infrastructure in the village. For the counterinsurgency missions of psychological operations, civic action, and economic development the situation was similar. For these activities the Marines needed to depend on the PFs to communicate the Marines’ thinking to the villagers because they could not communicate directly with the people in Vietnamese. The basis for all of the counterinsurgency work in the villages was gaining the loyalty and the trust of the people, and this was difficult for the CAP Marines to do because they could not communicate with the people in Vietnamese. This inability of the Marines to speak the local dialects was a problem that kept the CAPs from performing their counterinsurgency missions more effectively.
It is probable the CAPs would have performed their counterinsurgency duties in the villages in a better manner if officers worked more closely with the units in the villages. The Marines in the CAPs were commanded by an NCO, and Corson said there were no Marine officers in the villages with them because the people disliked the ARVN officers and” The people associate them with corruption. But our young corporals and sergeants look like they have succeeded in the same way that the best of the village boys, who can only aspire to becoming corporals and sergeants, might hope to succeed.”

While this may have been true, there were advantages in having officers operating in the CAPs. Officers were more highly- trained than NCOs, and in, *The Village*, West discussed a situation in which an officer helped improve the performance of the CAP at Binh Nghia. An experienced infantry lieutenant was sent to the CAP to advise the Marines as to how they could improve their working relationship with the PFs, and to help them improve their tactical proficiency. As a result of this officer’s help the CAP was improved in both these respects. Also, during the Tet offensive there were instances when CAP Marines thought intelligence information they submitted was given little consideration because it was not submitted by officers. If officers were serving with those CAPs the intelligence reports might have been taken more seriously, and that could have lessened the severity of the attacks during the Tet offensive. The NCOs commanding the CAPs generally did well, but it is likely that using proficient officers in at least an advisory capacity for them would have improved the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency missions in the villages.

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41 Southard, 5.

The Marine Corps generally and the CAPs in particular were hindered in accomplishing their counterinsurgency objectives because they received little if any support from either the government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) or the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN). One of the basic tenets of the counterinsurgency approach of the Marine Corps in Vietnam was that the GVN would counter the appeal of the NLF by improving the lives of the people of Vietnam. In its early attempts at pacification the Marine Corps cleared the NLF fighters from the Vietnamese villages and then gave the responsibility for pacifying the villages to the GVN and the ARVN. Neither the GVN nor the ARVN did well in these pacification efforts, and the Marine Corps came to the conclusion both these organizations were either unwilling or unable to conduct effective pacification in the villages. In his Phong Bac pacification experiment Corson reflected this same thinking when he used the men in his command to do the pacification work in the village. Because the Marine Corps could not depend on the GVN and the ARVN to perform the pacification work to improve the lives of the Vietnamese people, the Marine Corps decided to use the CAPs to pacify the Vietnamese villages.

The inability and the willingness of many in the GVN and the ARVN to conduct pacification created problems for the Marine Corps, but these pacification problems were compounded by the widespread corruption in the GVN. The corruption of the GVN alienated many Vietnamese, and in the rural areas it made pacification efforts more difficult. An example of this was an economic program initiated in a village with the official objective of improving the rice production of the villagers. Some of the people became disillusioned with the corruption in the program, though, and one man said” Many people here did not care much about politics. But when we saw the cadre and
the businessmen getting rich on that program we became angry at the Government. We saw clearly how corrupt the Government was, and we began to support the Liberation.”

Those Vietnamese officials who were honest had difficulty avoiding corrupt practices and one village chief said” None of us liked to have anything to do with bad money practices, but we had to.” As an example of one of these practices he said” A soldier who worked for the district chief came to every village chief to tell us that we had to instruct all our clerks and policemen that a certain amount of money was expected from our village ever month. This was to go first to the district chief, and then, above him, to the province chief.”

These examples of corruption were the rule rather than the exception, and this corruption put the Marine Corps in the difficult position of trying to gain the loyalty of the people for a government that did not deserve that loyalty.

If anything, the corruption and the brutality with which the ARVN treated the people were worse because the ARVN soldiers were supposedly protecting the villagers from the NLF. The ARVN troops were usually unwilling conscripts, but they often acted toward the people more as if they were part of an invading army punishing a subjected population. The people in one village said when the ARVN troops came through their village on operations the soldiers were always rude, they used excessive force, and they stole from the people. The people said even when the soldiers were not on duty they would often stand by the road and extort money from farmers and tradesmen who passed by them.

One villager summed up the feelings of the people when he said” Every time

43 Trullinger, 151.
44 Ibid., 161.
45 Ibid., 169
the Army came they made more friends for the V.C.” Another villager implied the degree of hatred the people had for the ARVN when he described the ARVN soldiers as” Cruel like the French.” The predatory nature of much of the ARVN soldiers’ behavior when they dealt with the people meant the people often saw the ARVN as enemies rather than protectors.

The anger and the distrust of the Vietnamese people for many in the GVN and the ARVN meant the CAPs needed to adjust how they conducted some of their counterinsurgency tasks in the villages. At the conclusion of his Phong Bac pacification experiment Corson said the CAPs needed to be prepared to protect their pacification work in the villages from any members of the NLF, the GVN, or the ARVN who might try to destroy or corrupt their successes with pacification. Corson also wanted to make the pacified villages economically independent so the people would not need to depend on either the GVN or the ARVN for economic help. When the CAPs performed psychological operations in the villages they did not try to criticize the guerrillas and promote the loyalty of the people to the central government. Instead, they attempted to circumvent the anger of the people toward the GVN and the ARVN by criticizing the guerrillas and promoting the loyalty of the people to the CAPs. In working to accomplish the counterinsurgency task of developing and strengthening the local government the CAPs usually allowed the local governments to work on their own, but they often protected the local governments from the NLF and corrupt influences of both the GVN and the ARVN. As they worked to protect the local governments in the villages the CAPs did it with the intention of allowing the local governments to be strong and independent,

46 Ibid., 85.
and not with the intention of improving the control of the central government over the villages.

The counterinsurgency program of the Marine Corps and the CAPs was fundamentally flawed because of the corruption and the incompetence of the GVN and the ARVN. In the counterinsurgency approach the Marine Corps pursued in South Vietnam it was necessary for the GVN to offer the people a life that was preferable to life under the control of the NLF. In order to do this it was important for the GVN to address the problems of the people, and to implement changes to help the people economically and politically. The CAPs were able to create a security shield to keep the NLF and the NVA away from the people while the pacification programs were conducted to improve the economic and the political lives of the people. In creating this security shield the CAP could not ask for help from the ARVN because most of the ARVN soldiers treated the people so badly. With their limited resources the CAPs were able to perform some civic action and some economic projects, but the GVN and the ARVN usually refused to help with these projects. If the GVN and the ARVN helped, it could have improved the relationship between the villagers and the GVN and the ARVN. Instead, the GVN and the ARVN were usually kept away from the civic action and the economic projects because they would attempt to extort money from the people or corrupt the programs. The psychological operations of the CAPs worked well, but they could not promote the benefits of life under the GVN because the people often hated the GVN for its abuses of the people. The CAPs were able to protect the local governments so they could operate in a safe environment, but they could not help the GVN to have greater control over the
villages. This was the case because most of the villagers thought the GVN was predatory
and corrupt, and they did not want a closer association with the central government.

This created paradoxes in the villages because this meant some of the people liked
the CAPs, and they frequently made friends with the Marines, but they did not like the
GVN. Many of the people were in a difficult situation because they feared and hated the
NLF and the NVA, but they also saw the ARVN as their enemies rather than their
protectors. As a result of this the CAPs frequently gained the loyalty of the villagers, but
the GVN and the ARVN did not. The central problem in this was that the Marines would
have to leave eventually.

A problem for the entire CAP program was that the CAPs were not positioned
adjacent to each other to create one unified and constantly expanding pacified area. In
counterinsurgency theory the enclave concept is meant to be used to pacify an area, and
then to gradually expand the size of the pacified enclave. The, Small Wars Manual, stated
the location of the enclave is chosen because the region has resources the insurgents
need, and the expanding enclave drives the insurgents out of the area and blocks them
from the resources in the enclave. Within the enclave military forces continue to operate
to eliminate any remaining insurgents in the enclave.47 Thompson gave more detail to
explain the purpose of the counterinsurgency enclave strategy in, Defeating Communist
Insurgency. He said the enclaves needed to be expanded to drive the insurgents out of the
populated areas where they could obtain the food, the recruits, the supplies, and the
intelligence they needed to exist as an insurgent movement. To make this process
effective it was necessary to station troops in the villages within the enclave to keep the

insurgents away from the people, and to destroy any insurgents remaining in the enclave. To keep the insurgents out of the enclave and away from the people the occupied villages needed to be adjacent to each other to form an overlapping pattern of pacified territory within the enclave. If the occupied villages were not made part of an unbroken pacified area, then the villages would be little more than isolated outposts. If this were the case the insurgents could operate in the areas between the occupied villages, and they would still have access to the people, and to the resources the insurgents needed to support their movement.48

The Marine Corps did not position the CAPs to create an unbroken area of mutually supporting villages, and this was a shortcoming of the program. This detracted from the ability of the CAP program to realize its full potential as a counterinsurgency tactic. Douglas S. Blaufarb supported this conclusion in his book, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, when he said a significant problem for the CAP program was,” The failure of the command to link the various CAPs together into an interlocking and mutually supporting network. They were too scattered and isolated to have maximum impact.”49 Much of the effectiveness of the CAP program was lessened because the CAPs were not positioned to make them part of one expanding, pacified area.

After the Tet offensive the CAP program continued to expand throughout 1968, and in 1969 the program reached its peak expansion of the Vietnam War. In 1967 the goal was to have a total of one hundred and fourteen CAPs operating by the end of that


year. For various reasons, such as the demands made on the Marine Corps by the fighting in the DMZ area, this goal was not realized, but during 1968 twenty-three new CAPs were formed for a total of one hundred-two platoons operating by the end of the year. In 1969 the program expansion continued until the 1967 goal of one hundred and fourteen operational CAPs was finally met in August 1969.  

In 1969 the US Office of Naval Research (ONR) commissioned an independent study of the CAP program by Human Sciences Research, Inc. to evaluate the performance of the program, and to suggest ways in which the program might be improved. Under the direction of Bruce C. Allnutt the researchers looked at the history of the program and they analyzed the current operations of the CAPs. The research for the study was conducted in Vietnam from May to August of 1969, and in Vietnam the research included participating in patrols and interviewing PF and Marine members of the CAPs. The study was a thorough examination of the CAP program, and it made a number of suggestions as to how the program could be improved. Looking at the findings of this research can help evaluate how well the CAPs performed the counterinsurgency functions this study considers important for them to be considered an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

During this period the ONR study concluded the CAPs were doing an excellent job in providing security for the villages, but it also found the mobile concept created a new security problem. Through a constant series of ambushes and patrols, the mobile

\[\text{\textsuperscript{50}}\text{Peterson, 64, 67.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{51}}\text{Bruce C. Allnutt, Marine \textit{Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience} (McLean, VA. Human Sciences research, Inc., 1969) iii, 13.}\]
CAPs were able to do well at accomplishing the primary counterinsurgency task of keeping the guerrillas away from the villages, and in the evening each mobile CAP would establish its command post (CP) in a different area to prevent the guerrillas from knowing where the CP was located. The CP for the CAP was often placed close to the edge of one of the hamlets in the village, and the Marine squad leader would usually stay in the CP with a few of the Marines, some PFs, and the Navy corpsman. Frequently, though, the villagers would learn where the CP was, and a number of them would come to stay in the CP area for protection from the guerrillas. In one instance over fifty people stayed in the CP during the night, and it was difficult to keep the civilians from talking and smoking for the entire night. In these circumstances it was virtually impossible to keep the position of the CP hidden from the guerrillas because of the noise and because of the light from the cigarettes. The CPs for the mobile CAPs were not fortified as extensively as the CPs for the compound CAPs were because they were only intended to be temporary positions, and this meant they were especially vulnerable to guerrilla attacks. Because the locations of the mobile CAPs could be easily detected by the guerrillas, and because the CPs were lightly defended, the study determined the mobile CAP CPs often had some of the weaknesses of the CPs of the compound CAPs without the defensive strengths of the compound CPs. 52

While the CAPs were generally performing their security missions well, in 1969 they were still having difficulty in their attempts to eliminate the hidden members of the NLF infrastructure in the Vietnamese villages. In his book, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, Thompson emphasized the importance of the counterinsurgency task of

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52 Ibid., 34- 35.
eliminating the hidden NLF agents when he stated “The most vital aspect of protection, however, is the elimination within the hamlet of the insurgent underground organization.” Thompson said this was necessary because“Until this is done, no hamlet will be secure against re-penetration and treachery, nor can the people themselves be expected to take positive action… until insurgent agents and supporters within the hamlet have been removed.”\textsuperscript{53} The Marines and the PFs in the CAPs were given this important mission of finding the NLF agents, but they did not have the expertise to perform this necessary counterinsurgency work. On occasions their intelligence activities revealed hidden agents in the villages, but this happened infrequently. The CAP study recommended additional training for the Marines to increase their ability to detect the hidden agents, but this was unrealistic. The Marines were, for the most part, relatively uneducated, young men, and the better course of action would probably have been to coordinate their efforts to find the agents with trained intelligence specialists.\textsuperscript{54}

The ONR study concluded one of the primary counterinsurgency strengths of the CAPs was their ability to gather intelligence. As in most insurgencies, the NLF had an advantage in acquiring intelligence because its supporters among the Vietnamese people could watch almost every move the Marine and the ARVN forces made, and then report this information to the guerrillas. For various reasons including their fear of retribution from the NLF and their hatred of the soldiers, the Vietnamese civilians were frequently reluctant to give the Marine and the ARVN infantry units intelligence information about the guerrillas. Michael F. Trevett pointed out an additional problem for the Marines and

\textsuperscript{53} Thompson, \textit{Defeating Communist Insurgency}, 124.

\textsuperscript{54} Allnutt, 56.
the ARVN in their efforts to gather intelligence in his book, *Isolating the Guerrilla*. He said “The predicament of the counterguerrilla forces is compounded by the fact that conventional intelligence sections of military units, trained to gather and process combat intelligence, are normally neither prepared nor manned to gather and process information on hundreds of individuals.” 55 Because they lived and operated among the people in the villages the Marines and the PFs in the CAPs were usually aware of the general attitudes of the people, and they were uniquely capable of obtaining information related to all NLF activities in their areas. Also, the CAP members learned a great deal about many of the villagers among whom they lived, and they were able to provide the military intelligence units with all of this important information. Their familiarity with the people and their knowledge of the areas in which they operated made the CAPs a valuable asset for the intelligence-gathering functions of the military intelligence units.

While the CAPs were performing their counterinsurgency missions of security and intelligence well, the ONR study found they were not doing an adequate job of civic action. The CAPs had problems in attempting to accomplish their larger civic action projects. In their training the CAP Marines were told they could make suggestions for civic action projects, but they should let the people and the village officials make the final decision for the civic action projects. The Marines had little sustained contact with the people to discuss possible civic action, though, and this was probably because the mobile CAPs were constantly moving their locations in and around the areas of the villages. Most of the larger civic action projects were completed by the compound CAPs before
they converted to the mobile concept.\textsuperscript{56} Even when a project was selected, it was required that a request for the materials needed for the project be submitted through GVN channels. In most instances these requests would go unfilled for weeks or even months, and the Marines would finally be forced to find an unofficial way to acquire the necessary building materials. One of the most frequently chosen large civic action projects for the CAPs was a school building, and a number of CAPs built schools for their villages. Many of these buildings could not be used as schools, though, because there were very few teachers available to teach in them. A Vietnamese village official stated one problem with the civic action program well when he said” The Americans have many fine projects and programs, but none of them ever amount to much.”\textsuperscript{57} The record of accomplishment in the area of large civic action projects was poor for the CAPs, and it was similar in the area of small civic action projects.

It was easier for the CAPs to provide the small civic action projects in the villages, but they still had difficulty completing these projects. The mobile CAPs were constantly moving, and because of this they were not in one place long enough to work on either the large or the small civic action projects. On some occasions the CAPs were able to help with small projects, such as limited road and bridge repair, but they did not have time to do much more than this. An exception to this was the medical care the corpsmen were able to give the people in the villages.\textsuperscript{58} Very few civic action projects

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 46- 47.

\textsuperscript{58} Allnutt, 59.
were being conducted by the CAPs in 1969, and in visits to thirty-three platoons the researchers only found one civic action project being implemented. Just as with the civic action projects, the CAPs were doing little to accomplish the counterinsurgency mission of developing economic projects to improve the living standards and the economic conditions in the villages. The ONR study found few ways the Marines in the CAPs were improving the local economies other than through the money the Marines spent in the villages. The Marines paid villagers money to do their laundry, and they bought soft drinks and beer from the local people. In some instances people were also paid for unexploded artillery rounds they brought to the Marines, and money was paid for some intelligence information. This, then, was largely the extent of the economic development being accomplished by the CAPs in 1969.

The CAPs had always seemed to do well in their psychological operations counterinsurgency task, and the study concluded this was still true. The goal of the psychological operations was to discredit the guerrillas and to promote the loyalty of the people to the CAPs, and they did this well. The CAPs made a point of treating the people with respect and kindness, and they provided excellent security for the villagers, and these were the two most important elements of the psychological operations to gain the loyalty of the people. Many of the people appreciated the CAP members for treating them well, and because of this some of them gave the Marines and the PFs their friendship. The CAPs were also able to fight and defeat the guerrillas to keep them away from the villages, and this meant the guerrillas were no longer able to take taxes, recruits, and rice

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59 Ibid., 48.
60 Ibid., 57-58.
from the people. Because of this many people were loyal to the CAPs and respected the platoon members. To gain the loyalty of the people the CAPs continued to treat the people well, and they made sure the people knew they were defeating the guerrillas.

The ONR study found the CAPs were doing an adequate job of accomplishing the counterinsurgency task of developing and strengthening the local government. The local governments in the Vietnamese villages were controlled by the village families and the councils of elders, and the Marines were usually prudent enough to allow the local governments to function without their interference. The CAPs respected the authority of the local governments, and they helped them when their help was needed. The security provided for the villages also played an important part in strengthening the local governments because the CAPs protected the local governments from both the NLF and corrupt elements of the GVN.

While the CAPs were working to develop and strengthen the local governments, the ONR study determined they were doing little to accomplish the counterinsurgency task of improving the control of the GVN over the villages. In an attempt to increase respect for the GVN among the people the CAPs made numerous requests for GVN help with pacification work in the villages, but in almost every instance the GVN was either unable or unwilling to provide this help. In addition to this, many of the GVN officials were corrupt and inattentive to the needs of the people. For these reasons many of the Vietnamese hated and feared the GVN, and they wanted to have as little as possible to do with the government. Many of the Marines in the CAPs knew the people hated the GVN

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61 Ibid., 62.
because of its corruption, and they would often protect the people from the GVN officials as well as the NLF.

The hatred of many of the Vietnamese people toward the GVN looked as if it was an insurmountable problem that made the war unwinnable for the GVN for various reasons. After the war a former NVA officer said,” The South Vietnamese government was originally a French creation set up in the context of a colonial war of reconquest.” As a result of this many Vietnamese saw GVN leaders as” Figures from the colonial past.” The former officer saw this lack of credibility as a crucial for the GVN and he said,” This fundamental weakness was beyond the ability of the United States to correct.” This problem was increased because” The nepotism and feudal bureaucracy of the Diem administration, and the many coups d’ etat that followed Diem’s overthrow, led by generals all trained and raised to leadership positions by the French, made this weakness even more glaring.”62 Problems such as these suggest the entire US war effort was an impossible task in support of an illegitimate government.

The ONR study found other problems hindering the ability of the CAPs to perform their counterinsurgency tasks, and one problem which made the CAPs less effective in this respect was the failure to establish and maintain one mission statement for the CAP program. Corson was the first commander of the CAP program when it was made a separate command in 1967, and he gave the CAPs a mission statement with six specified missions:

1) Destroy the NLF within the village hamlet area of responsibility.

2) Protect public security and help maintain law and order.

3) Protect the friendly infrastructure.

4) Protect bases and lines of communication within the villages and hamlets.

5) Organize people’s intelligence nets.

6) Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the NLF.  

Instead of using this single mission statement to guide the actions of the CAPs, the mission of the CAPs was altered at various times in the history of the CAP program. Later in 1967 the CAP mission statement in one CAC specifically stated the CAPs were required to “Participate in combined operations with the ARVN and/or the FWMAF [Free World Military Assistance Forces] within assigned areas as requested.” In this same mission statement another primary mission for the CAPs was specifically to provide security for GVN pacification projects. In July 1968 the total CAP mission statement was changed to the single mission “To provide hamlet and village security in cleared and semi-cleared areas.” These are only a few examples of the changes made in the CAP mission statement throughout the history of the program, and they may seem slight, but they kept the CAP program from having one mission statement on which to focus their efforts. Allnutt said this problem was further aggravated because in 1969 “All mission statements, even despite subsequent cancellation, remain in circulation, and no one formal statement has taken precedence over the others.” Not having one mission

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63 Corson, The Betrayal, 184.
64 Allnutt, B- 5.
65 Ibid., B- 6.
66 Ibid.
statement meant neither the CAP program nor the individual CAPs could perform their missions well because they did not really know what they were supposed to do.

The confusion created by not having one clear mission statement for the CAPs became more evident when Allnutt asked a number of Marines in the CAP program to state the basic mission of the CAPs. Among the different answers he received were that the basic mission of the CAPs was” ‘To protect the people,’ ‘To train the PFs,’ ‘To gather intelligence,’ ‘To help the people,’ and less frequently, ‘To build schools and houses,’ ‘To look for rockets,’ or ‘To block a VC infiltration route.’” 67 When the researchers interviewed CAP veterans who ended their service in Vietnam in the early part of 1969 they discovered important differences in the way the officers and the enlisted men perceived the basic CAP mission. Approximately forty percent of the officers said the basic mission was ‘to train the PFs,’ and thirty percent of the officers said the basic mission was ‘To provide security.’ The researchers found that eighty percent of the enlisted men said the basic mission of the CAPs was ‘To help, get to know, or protect the villagers.’ The ONR study also determined these same perceptions of the basic mission were held in similar percentages by the officers and the enlisted men serving in the CAPs in Vietnam at the time of the study in 1969.68

The fact that the CAP program did not have one specific mission statement meant the CAPs could not achieve their objectives because they did not have a clear idea of what they were supposed to accomplish. From the time it became a separate command, the purpose of the CAP program was always intended to be the counterinsurgency

67 Ibid., B- 7.

68 Ibid.
pacification of the villages of Vietnam, but this purpose was blurred by the development of different mission statements at various times during the history of the program. Considering the changes in the various mission statements, it looks as if the CAPs were used for different purposes because they did not have one clear mission statement. Because of this confusion Allnutt’s study developed a suggested mission statement for the CAP program that concentrated on counterinsurgency pacification. It is important to remember, though, that Allnutt was proposing this clarification of the CAP mission statement over two years after the CAP program was made a formal command to perform the counterinsurgency task of pacifying the Vietnamese villages. There were a number of conflicting and competing mission statements in circulation during this intervening period, and without a clear perception of their mission it is probable the CAPs were not effectively performing counterinsurgency pacification during this time period.

Another problem the ONR study found with the CAP program was the loss of useful information when Marines rotated back to the US, or when they left the platoons for various other reasons. The records kept by the CAP program were usually only a compilation of statistics, and the Allnutt study recommended the use of brief narratives to detail actions the CAPs had taken, why they were taken, and the results of the actions. At the time of the ONR study the researchers found many of the Marines in the CAPs knew little about events that occurred in their villages more than a few months before they were interviewed, and this was true even though their platoons were often in the villages for a period of years prior to the interviews. This lack of continuity bothered the Vietnamese involved with the CAPs, and Allnutt concluded this problem resulted in a loss of valuable

69 Ibid., B- 7.
contacts among the people and a failure to retain valuable lessons learned through experience.\textsuperscript{70}

The ONR study saw this as a serious problem, but it was hard for the researchers to determine how detrimental the lack of continuity was for the CAP program. As they traced the evolution of the program from its beginning, though, they said” Developments over the years indicate that the waste, duplication of effort, and repetition of mistakes is significant."\textsuperscript{71} This was probably an understatement on the part of the researchers, and this lack of continuity was a failure at the core of the program that adversely affected all aspects of the CAP program.

In 1969 President Richard M. Nixon changed the Vietnam War dramatically with the introduction of the policy of Vietnamization. The war seemed as if it was a never-ending nightmare for the United States, and Nixon later wrote” It was no longer a question of whether the next President would withdraw our troops but of how they would leave and what they would leave behind.”\textsuperscript{72} The intention of this new policy was to give the South Vietnamese the responsibility of fighting the war while the United States continued to provide monetary and material support. Nixon told General Abrams the principal mission of US troops was now to help the military forces of the GVN become capable of fighting the war without the assistance of US ground forces. The US was withdrawing its troops from South Vietnam, and a central part of the new mission was to

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

train the GVN military forces to be able to fight the war on their own when the US troops were gone.\textsuperscript{73}

The policy of Vietnamization meant a primary responsibility of the CAP program would now be the training of GVN military forces to be capable of fighting on their own after US forces withdrew from South Vietnam. In 1967 Krulak, Walt, and Nickerson gave the CAP program the mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages because they thought the GVN forces were not willing or able to do the work. As a consequence of this change in US policy to Vietnamization, a major portion of the CAP program’s effort was now to train the PFs to defend their villages when the Marines left. The individual CAPs trained their PFs, and PF and RFs platoons were often brought to CAG locations for an accelerated training course before they returned to their villages and their regions.\textsuperscript{74}

As the Marine Corps began its withdrawal from Vietnam in July 1969, this increased emphasis on training led to the creation of units similar to the CAPs but used almost exclusively for training the PFs and the RFs. In October 1969 the Infantry Company Intensive Pacification Program (ICIPP) was initiated to use US Army and Marine Corps infantry companies to train the PFs and the RFs. Altogether, two US Army infantry companies and three US Marine Corps infantry companies participated in this program that was later designated as the Combined Unit Pacification Program (CUPP). The men in these infantry units received little if any special training for their mission, but they lived in the villages and provided security for the villages while they trained the PFs


\textsuperscript{74} Peterson, 81.
and the RFs. Unlike the CAPs, the CUPPs were formed to give the PFs and the RFs as much training as possible before the US completely withdrew its forces.75

The Allnutt study was submitted in December of 1969, and its results showed the CAPs were not doing well in accomplishing some of the counterinsurgency tasks this study considers necessary for them to be considered an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. The research indicated the security provided in the villages was adequate, but the conversion to the mobile concept arguably weakened the CAPs in various ways. Allnutt’s study also showed the CAPs were not able to find the hidden NLF agents in the Vietnamese villages because they did not have the expertise to do this task. For reasons including time constraints and a lack of technical knowledge the CAPs were not doing well at accomplishing the civic action and the economic projects tasks. The counterinsurgency function of acquiring intelligence information was determined by the study to be one of the strengths of the CAPs, and the performance of psychological operations was considered adequate. The CAPs did well at the task of developing and strengthening local government by protecting the village and simply allowing the local government to operate in the traditional manner. For the most part the CAPs did not attempt to increase the control of the GVN over the villages because the GVN officials were often either unwilling to help in the villages, or they were corrupt.

There were other problems Allnutt’s study revealed that adversely affected the ability of the CAPs to accomplish the counterinsurgency tasks this study considers important for them to be an effective counterinsurgency tactic. Among these was the failure to establish and maintain a clear mission statement for the CAP program. This

75 Ibid., 78.
significant failure on the part of the CAP command meant the individual, isolated platoons could not accomplish their missions well because they simply did not have a clear understanding of their missions. Another important problem was the failure to maintain informational records at the level of both the individual platoons, and at the level of the CAP command. Keeping written records detailing information and experience acquired by Marines who previously served in the CAPs could have benefited new men coming to the units. These and other problems the study found with the CAP program would not be extensively addressed, though.

At the beginning of 1970 there was no longer a reason to improve the counterinsurgency pacification performance of the CAPs. The use of the CAP concept as a method of counterinsurgency pacification in the Vietnamese villages was ending, and the CAPs were being disbanded as US forces withdrew from Vietnam. Until they were disbanded the focus of the CAP Marines was on providing security in their villages and training the PFs and the RFs to fight the NLF and the NVA after the Marines were gone.

In July 1969 the Third Marine Division left Vietnam and returned to Okinawa.76 CAP units continued to be deactivated in Vietnam as the Marine Corps withdrew more of its forces. This end of the CAP program was on May 17, 1971 when the last CAPs were deactivated. 77This marked the end of the United States Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War.

76 Ibid., 74.
77 Ibid., 82.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study examines whether or not the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) concept developed by the United States Marine Corps it was an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. The CAP program was evaluated according to its ability to perform a number of fundamental counterinsurgency tasks, and the performance of the CAPs was considered within the context of the Vietnam War. The CAPs performed some of these tasks well, but they did not do well with other tasks. The CAP program appeared to have some potential as a counterinsurgency tactic for the Vietnam War, but for various reasons most of this potential was unrealized. Among the most important of these reasons were the conflict between the US Army over the most effective strategy for the war, and the corruption and illegitimacy of the government of the Republic of South Vietnam (GVN). For these reasons this study concludes the CAP program was not generally an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

At times in history the actions of one person can contribute to success in difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, the reverse of this is also true, and the actions of one person can help ruin a promising situation. At other times even the best ideas of people can be frustrated so that the result is failure. In the history of the CAP concept as a
counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. Generals Victor Krulak and William Westmoreland, and Lt. Colonel William Corson were three men who significantly influenced the CAP program.

In 1965 Krulak disagreed with Westmoreland’s choice of a strategy of attrition for the Vietnam War and he proposed the use of an enclave strategy for the Vietnam War. The enclave strategy was a variation of the “oil-spot” method of counterinsurgency pacification, and among those who thought favorably of the enclave strategy as a counterinsurgency concept were David Gallula and Robert Thompson, who were both well-known counterinsurgency theorists. Krulak thought an enclave strategy could be used in Vietnam to move slowly from the seacoast across the heavily-populated, rice-growing area of the northeastern coastal area of South Vietnam. As a part of this enclave strategy Krulak also thought an enclave should be developed in the Mekong Delta region which was also densely populated, and where a great deal of the rice produced in South Vietnam was grown. Because most of the rice produced in South Vietnam was grown in these two highly-populated regions, Krulak thought blocking the National Liberation Front (NLF) access to these areas through the use of an enclave strategy would deny the guerrillas the rice, the recruits, and the intelligence the NLF needed to survive as an insurgency.

Krulak was partly frustrated in his attempts to have an enclave strategy used in the Vietnam War because he did not have command authority in Vietnam. However, he and other Marine generals who supported the enclave concept were able to influence the adoption of an enclave strategy in I Corps where the Marine Corps controlled the
northeastern coastal area of South Vietnam. Initially, the government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) military forces performed the mission of pacification among the Vietnamese people within the expanding enclave, but the Marine Corps later concluded the GVN military was not doing this in a satisfactory manner, and because of this the Marine Corps decided it would need to use its own resources for the pacification work.

When the first CAPs were formed in August 1965 their official mission was to provide security in the Vietnamese villages in the areas close to the Marine bases, but in February 1967 their official mission was changed. As the Marines and the Popular Forces (PFs) worked together in the newly-formed platoons to keep the guerrillas away from the villages, the CAPs soon demonstrated unique abilities that indicated they might work well in a counterinsurgency pacification role. The Marines brought their strengths as well-disciplined, well-equipped, and capable fighters to the CAPs. For their part, the PFs in the CAPs were operating in villages where they lived all their lives, and they knew the people and the area well. Many of the PFs had also been fighting for years, and they were familiar with the tactics and the habits of the NLF guerrillas. Together the Marines and the PFs synthesized their strengths to form strong fighting forces with knowledge of the village areas, a connection to the people, and a good understanding of the guerrilla forces they were fighting. The potential of the CAPs for pacification among the people was evident when the Marine Corps decided to use Marines for pacification, and the CAPs were made a separate command with the mission of conducting counterinsurgency pacification in the Vietnamese villages.
Although a number of Marine Corps generals supported the use of an enclave strategy in the Vietnam War, Westmoreland was the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander, and it was his responsibility to select the military strategy and the tactics for the war. Westmoreland chose a strategy of attrition that was intended to use the strength of US military forces to kill so many of the soldiers in the NLF and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) main force units that the NLF and North Vietnam would eventually be incapable of replacing them. Part of Westmoreland’s reason for choosing the strategy of attrition was intense pressure from Lyndon Johnson and others in Washington to win the war quickly, and he thought the war could be won in the shortest period of time by using this strategy. The central tactic Westmoreland chose to accomplish his strategy was the search and destroy mission which sent large numbers of US troops into the jungles of Vietnam in an attempt to find and defeat the main force units of the NLF and the NVA. In Westmoreland’s thinking the destruction of the NLF and the NVA main force units was the primary consideration for US forces, and any pacification among the Vietnamese people could either be conducted by the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN), or could be postponed until the main force units were eliminated.

The enclave strategy and the strategy of attrition were almost diametrically opposed in their objectives, and this worked to the detriment of the Marine Corps and the CAP program. The Marine Corps controlled I Corps in Vietnam, and they were given a degree of freedom to operate as they wished in I Corps. Because of this the Marine Corps was able to practice an enclave strategy with an emphasis of pacification in I Corps. However, Westmoreland was the US commander in Vietnam, and he wanted the Marine
Corps to use search and destroy tactics to accomplish a strategy of attrition.

Westmoreland did not want to cause controversy by directly ordering the Marines to conduct search and destroy operations, but he was able to put increasing pressure on the Marines to perform those operations. The Marines were eventually forced to relent to this pressure, and they began to conduct more of the search and destroy operations Westmoreland wanted. This meant, though, the Marines had less time and fewer troops with which to pursue the enclave strategy. The CAPs were an important tactic for the enclave strategy, but they were specifically considered by Westmoreland and others at MACV as an unnecessary use of infantrymen who should be serving in the infantry battalions. Westmoreland also thought the CAPs were too isolated, and too vulnerable to overwhelming attacks by large forces of the NLF and the NVA. In Westmoreland’s thinking the pacification work among the Vietnamese should not be performed by US forces. Instead, pacification among the Vietnamese people should be conducted by the ARVN while US troops pursued and defeated the NLF and the NVA main force units.

Westmoreland and MACV would not support the CAPs, and they actively harmed them when they would not officially allow the Marine Corps to specifically allocate men to them. As a result of this the Marine Corps was forced to take Marines for the CAPs from the existing manpower they already had in Vietnam, and this meant they took men from the infantry units. The CAPs wanted experienced, mature infantrymen, and this created a severe conflict of interests between the CAPs and the infantry units. The infantry commanders were reluctant to send their best men to the CAPs because they needed those men in the infantry units, and as a result of this they often sent the men they
did not want. Because of this conflict of interests there was usually a shortage of good men for the CAPs, and as a consequence of this the performance of the program suffered.

In addition to having too few qualified men, the CAPs were at a disadvantage until 1967 because they were under the operational control of the infantry battalions. For the CAPs this meant they depended on the infantry battalions located closest to them for their supplies and their equipment. This arrangement caused problems for the infantry battalions because any material they gave the CAPs came from the supplies and equipment they had for themselves. Frequently the infantry units were ordered on missions away from the areas where the CAPs were located. When this happened, the infantry battalions often took items such as machine guns and radios from the CAPs because they needed this equipment for their missions. Situations such as these could leave the CAPs in danger because they might be left with no radio contact with outside units, and they might have an inadequate number of weapons for an effective defense of their compounds. This dependency on the infantry battalions could also be dangerous for the CAPs because they relied on the infantry battalions for the reaction forces they needed if they were in a fight with a large NLF or NVA force. When an infantry battalion was on a mission away from the location of the CAP it was frequently difficult for it to quickly send a reaction force to help a platoon under pressure from an attack. For the most part, these problems existed because of a poor organizational arrangement and not because of any fault on the part of the infantry battalions. The first priority of the infantry battalions was to accomplish the missions they were assigned, and they needed all of their equipment and supplies for those missions. Having the infantry battalions responsible for equipping the CAPs and providing reaction forces for them harmed the
ability of both the infantry battalions and the CAPs to perform the duties assigned to
them.

In February 1967 the CAPs were given an opportunity to prove their ability as a
counterinsurgency tactic when the Marine Corps made them a separate, unified
command, and the new unit was given the mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages
in the Marine enclaves. Marine generals Krulak, Lewis Walt, and Herman Nickerson
thought the Marines needed to do the pacification work themselves, and they thought the
CAPs showed the potential to do this work well. The CAPs were formed into a separate
command, and this was to their advantage because it eventually took them away from the
operational control of the infantry battalions. For the command of the new, independent
CAP program the generals chose Lt. Colonel Corson, who was one of the foremost
authorities on counterinsurgency warfare in the Marine Corps. Corson used his recently-
completed, successful pacification experiment in the hamlet of Phong Bac as an example
for the counterinsurgency pacification work of his new command, and he began to
prepare the program to perform this mission. The program was given an organizational
structure with the specific purpose of supporting the CAPs in their mission, and a school
was established to give new recruits for the program standardized, specialized training for
their counterinsurgency pacification work in the villages. As the program began operating
as a separate command, the CAPs appeared to be performing well.

As the CAPs began to practice pacification in the Vietnamese villages there was a
fundamental weakness in the program. The Phong Bac pacification experiment was
intended to be the blueprint for CAP pacification, and in that experiment Corson
determined the greatest fear of the people was the fear of hunger. To alleviate the fear of hunger and to gain the loyalty of the people Corson used the technical expertise of the Marines in his command to help the people create economic projects that made the villagers economically independent. When the people saw the Marines would protect them from the guerrillas and help them become economically independent, they lost much of their desire to support the NLF guerrillas who promised them a better life at some undetermined time in the future. The problem was that the pacification cornerstone of economic development in the Phong Bac experiment was not made a priority of the CAP program. In, *The Betrayal*, and in his later writing and interviews Corson did not mention why economic development was not stressed in the program, but economic development on the scale of the Phong Bac experiment was not replicated in any of the CAP villages.¹ The omission of a strong economic development component in the CAP program almost certainly made the platoons less effective as a counterinsurgency pacification tactic.

It was probably difficult to find Marines with the technical ability to help with the CAP economic development projects, but this could have been done. In the Phong Bac experiment Corson was able to draw on the resources of an entire Marine battalion to find men with the technical expertise to help with economic development projects in Phong Bac. Finding men who met the high standards set for the CAP program Marines was difficult enough as it was, and adding a requirement for some sort of technical ability would have made it almost impossible to find qualified men. Assuming there might be

one or two men in a squad of Marine infantrymen in a CAP with knowledge and experience to help villagers initiate projects such as hog-breeding or bee-keeping was not realistic, though. There may have been instances where this was true, but it could not have been the rule. Also, extensive economic development projects were time-consuming, and the CAP Marines spent a great deal of their time conducting the patrols and the ambushes that were part of their primary security mission. It might have been possible to bring Marine units with technical knowledge to the CAP villages for the specific purpose of helping with the economic projects. This was not done, and no way was found to make economic development as important a part of the CAP program as it was in the Phong Bac experiment. Because of this it can be assumed economic development was not considered to be an important part of CAP pacification efforts.

Economic development is one of the most important factors in counterinsurgency pacification, and it is one of the counterinsurgency functions this study stated the CAPs needed to accomplish to be considered an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War. In the Phong Bac pacification experiment Corson discovered the greatest fear of the people was the fear of hunger, and he used economic development projects to eliminate that fear by giving the people some prosperity. Corson thought if the CAPs could provide security from the NLF for the people, and if the CAPs could help the people gain economic prosperity, then the pacification of the villages would be largely accomplished. Security and prosperity in the villages would gain the loyalty and the goodwill of many of the people, and as a result of this some of the people would be willing to give the CAPs intelligence information. Psychological operations to discredit the guerrillas could be based on the real economic successes of the economic
development projects. Loyalty to the local government would be relatively easy to promote because the local government was involved in implementing the economic projects, and a stable local government ensured a good environment for the local economy. Corson’s conclusions regarding the important role of economic development in pacification were supported by Robert Thompson who said economic development” Gives the people a stake in stability and hope for the future.” Thompson argued “economic prosperity for the people” Encourages them to take the necessary positive action to prevent insurgent reinfiltiration and to provide the intelligence necessary to eradicate any insurgent cells which remain”2 The Phong Bac experiment demonstrated the only pacification task more important than economic development was establishing security to keep the guerrillas away from the villages. Because of this the CAP program should have made a greater effort to establish strong economic development programs in all the CAP villages.

The CAP program suffered a loss when Corson left Vietnam to return to the US in August 1967. Corson took command of the Third Tank Battalion in September 1967, and his tour of duty in Vietnam probably ended in August 1967. The CAPs were formed as a separate command with the mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages in February 1967, though, and Corson was leaving the CAP program while it was still in its initial, formative stages. In many ways the CAP program was Corson’s creation because he helped develop the organizational structure for the new program, and he chose many of the men for command positions within the new program. On numerous occasions Corson

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even helped choose the individual Marines who served in the CAPs. The CAP program was the embodiment of the counterinsurgency knowledge and the counterinsurgency experience Corson accumulated during his career. No evidence of why Corson left the CAP program at this time was found in his book, *The Betrayal*, or in his interviews, but the program was almost certainly harmed by the loss of his leadership. This problem was compounded when the counterinsurgency expert Corson chose as his successor was killed in action before he could take command.

As the CAP program began performing its pacification mission in 1967, an increasing number of Marine units were being sent to the area of South Vietnam along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to meet incursions by large NVA forces. In 1966 the NVA began sending its troops into the area below the DMZ to challenge Marine and ARVN units, and by 1967 Marine resources were heavily engaged in fighting the NVA in this region. Below the DMZ the base at Khe Sanh was garrisoned by a defending force comprised primarily of Marines, and Marine strong points were positioned at various locations along the length of the DMZ. Marine infantry battalions also operated in and along the DMZ searching for the NVA, and frequently some of the most brutal fighting of the war occurred when the Marines and the NVA engaged in pitched battles. As more Marine units were sent to the DMZ, the center of Marine Corps efforts shifted to this fighting, and the pacification of which the CAPs were an integral part received less attention and fewer resources. The Marine infantry battalions needed every man they had for the hard fights along the DMZ, and they were even more reluctant than they were before to send their best men to the CAPs. More Marine air and artillery support was needed for the DMZ fighting, and this meant there was less air and artillery support for
the CAPs. North Vietnamese sources later said part of their intention in creating a threat along the DMZ was to draw the Marines away from the pacification work they were doing in I Corps. As the fighting in the DMZ region intensified, the Marine Corps focused its attention and its resources on this fighting, and pacification became a secondary consideration. This meant the pacification the CAPs were performing in the villages was no longer as important for the Marine Corps as it was previously, and the program lost some of its ability to perform its counterinsurgency pacification mission because it received fewer resources and less support.

The Tet offensive that began in January 1968 was as great a shock for the CAPs as it was for the other US and allied forces in Vietnam, but one significant consequence of the offensive for the program was the decision to change from the compound concept to the mobile CAP concept. Prior to the Tet offensive each of the CAPs established a fortified headquarters compound for the platoon in an abandoned home or an abandoned fortification located close to the village. The CAPs maintained radio contact with other units from the compound, and the Marines and the PFs usually met at the compound in the evening to plan their patrols and ambushes for the night. During the night a number of Marines and PFs stayed in the compound to defend it, and in the event of an attack by a large guerrilla force the CAP members could withdraw to the fortified compound and defend it until a reaction force arrived to help them fight off the attack. At times the reaction forces did not arrive quickly enough and the CAP compounds were overrun by guerrilla attacks. There were some instances of this prior to the Tet offensive, but during the heavy fighting of the offensive a number of CAP compounds were overrun. As a result of this the program changed to the mobile CAP concept after the Tet offensive
because the compound CAPs were considered too vulnerable to large guerrilla attacks. Instead of working from a fixed compound the mobile CAPs carried all of their equipment with them as they constantly changed their headquarters position throughout the area of their village. In the evening the mobile CAP would establish a headquarters location and then send out patrols and ambushes. In the morning the members of the patrols and the ambushes returned to the headquarters location, and the CAP resumed its movement. The mobile CAPs were considered to be an improvement over the compound CAPs because they always changed their positions and this made it difficult for the guerrillas to mass their forces and carefully plan an attack on them because they were never sure where the platoons were located. The mobile CAP concept appeared to have advantages over the compound CAP concept, but there were important shortcomings.

The adoption of the mobile concept seriously impaired the ability of the CAPs to conduct counterinsurgency pacification in the Vietnamese villages. Because the mobile CAPs were constantly moving their locations, they were not able to do much civic action or economic development work in the villages. As was previously discussed, civic action and economic development are vital to pacification, and the CAPs were not performing these tasks well before the conversion to the mobile concept. The Marine Corps historian Jack Shulimson said there was a considerable decline in the civic action the CAPs performed after they changed to the mobile CAP concept.\(^3\) Corson disagreed with the change to the mobile concept because he thought the compounds of the compound CAPs were the centers of pacification in the villages where the people could come for medical attention or for protection in the event of guerrilla attacks. The compounds were also

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\(^3\) Peterson, 62.
storage areas for material for civic action and economic development projects. For Corson the compounds were a physical expression of the determination of the CAPs to protect the villages from the guerrillas. When the CAP program adopted the mobile concept it gave up most of its ability to perform the essential civic action and economic development functions necessary for counterinsurgency pacification. As a result of this the CAP program cannot be considered a good counterinsurgency tactic according to the standards set by this study.

In counterinsurgency warfare the primary objective is not to destroy the opposing army or capture the enemy’s capital; the objective in counterinsurgency warfare is to gain the loyalty of the people. The counterinsurgency theorist John Nagl stated the importance of gaining the loyalty of the population well when he wrote” An insurgency is a competition between insurgent and government for the support of the civilian population, which provides the sea in which the insurgents swim.”4 The counterinsurgency functions used by this study to evaluate how well the CAP units worked as a counterinsurgency tactic during the Vietnam War were chosen from counterinsurgency theory for their ability to gain the loyalty of the people and defeat the insurgents. The most important task was to provide security for people by fighting the guerrillas to keep them out of the villages and away from the people. While they worked to keep the guerrillas away from the villages it was important for the CAPs to prevent the guerrillas from obtaining food, supplies, recruits, and intelligence information from the villagers. The CAP members needed to gain the goodwill and the loyalty of the people and develop intelligence

sources among the villagers. As part of their intelligence work the CAPs had to find and eliminate any guerrilla agents or members of the guerrilla infrastructure among the people of the villages. A critical task for the CAPs was the performance of civic action and economic development projects to improve the living standards and the economic conditions of the villages. This would give the people better living standards in the present in contrast to the guerrillas’ promises of a better life in the future. Psychological operations needed to be conducted to discredit the guerrillas and to promote the loyalty of the people to the central government. Local government also needed to be developed and strengthened with the intention of improving the control of the central government over the villages.

The study conducted by the Office of Naval Research is useful for judging the performance of the CAP program through the summer of 1969. It is important keep in mind the study was done approximately two and one-half years after the CAP program was made a separate command with the formal mission of pacifying the Vietnamese villages. From May through August 1969 the study used extensive field research to evaluate the performance of the CAPs in Vietnam, and it made suggestions as to how the program could be improved. The ONR study showed mixed results for the CAP program in accomplishing the counterinsurgency functions this study considers important for the CAPs to be considered an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

The ONR study concluded two of the greatest counterinsurgency strengths of the CAP program were its ability to provide security in the villages and to gather intelligence. Together the Marines and the PFs comprised strong forces to fight the NLF
and to keep the guerrillas out of the villages. This was the vital counterinsurgency task that needed to be done well before any other counterinsurgency pacification could be done successfully, and the CAPs did this well. Another strength of the CAPs was their ability to gather intelligence. Because the CAP members lived and operated in the villages, in many cases they knew the people well, and they were able to develop good intelligence sources among the people. The CAPs gained a reputation for acquiring excellent information on the NLF and the NVA.

The CAPs did not do well in accomplishing the intelligence-related task of finding and eliminating the hidden members of the NLF infrastructure among the villagers, though. Finding these hidden agents was important because if they continued to operate in the villages they could send intelligence to the guerrillas, and they could target any villagers who cooperated with the CAPs for guerrilla reprisal. Neither the Marines nor the PFs had the necessary training to do an adequate job of detecting these agents among the people, and the existence of the hidden agents in the villages continued to be a problem for the CAPs.

In the areas of civic action and economic development the ONR study found the CAPs were doing a poor job of accomplishing these counterinsurgency tasks. Civic action and economic development were key components of counterinsurgency pacification because they could create a better standard of living for the people, and the guerrillas’ promises of a better life at some vague point in the future meant less to the people if they were living a good life now. However, the Marines and the PFs spent a great deal of their time on security duties, and they did not have much time left to
perform extensive civic action and economic development projects. The projects the CAPs completed were usually fairly basic because few Marines had the technical expertise to help with civic action and economic projects such as those completed in the Phong Bac pacification experiment. The ONR study found there was less time for the CAPs to perform civic action and economic development after the change to the mobile concept because the mobile CAPs moved so frequently. The failure of the CAPs to establish and maintain a strong civic action and economic development component for counterinsurgency pacification in the villages was a serious shortcoming of the program.

The ONR study found the CAPs were performing the counterinsurgency task of psychological operations well. The objective of the psychological operations was to discredit the guerrillas and to gain the loyalty of the villagers for the CAPs. The CAPs made sure the people knew they were usually defeating the guerrillas in combat, and this raised their prestige in the eyes of the people. The CAP members also generally treated the people well, and many of the people were grateful for this. Good security for the villages and good treatment of the people were two of the most important elements of the effective psychological operations for the CAPs.

The CAPs helped develop and strengthen the local governments, but they did little to improve the control of the central government over the villages. Most of the CAPs wisely let the local governments operate in their traditional manner, and the security the CAPs gave the villages made it possible for the local governments to function in a stable atmosphere without NLF interference. Helping the GVN improve its control over the villages was often a problem, though, because the GVN was almost
always unwilling or unable to help with the CAP pacification work among the people. This situation was further complicated because many of the villagers hated and distrusted the GVN because they saw the government as illegitimate, some of its officials were corrupt, and the officials frequently exploited the people in various ways.

The research in the ONR study and other information show the CAPs were doing an inadequate job in achieving two of the most important counterinsurgency functions in the villages. For the most part this was not the fault of the members of the CAPs, though, because they were not given sufficient support to perform these functions. It was almost impossible for the CAPs to find and eliminate the members of the hidden NLF infrastructure in the villages because the Marines and the PFs did not have the expertise to accomplish this work. If specialized intelligence units worked with the CAPs this problem might have been alleviated, but this was not done. In a similar way, most of the CAP members did not have the technical expertise to help the Vietnamese villagers with civic action and economic development projects. Also, the security operations were time-consuming, and because of this the CAPs did not have much time to work on civic action and economic development. Specialized units could have been brought into the villages to help with these projects, but this was not done. Completing these vital counterinsurgency functions was beyond the capacity of the CAPs without outside assistance, but they did not accomplish the tasks, and this was part of the reason they were not successful as a counterinsurgency tactic.

When the CAPs shifted from the compound concept to the mobile concept they lost an important part of their ability to perform counterinsurgency pacification. The
compound CAPs were not able to do effective civic action and economic development in the villages, but the mobile CAPs were even less capable of doing this. The mobile CAPs were constantly moving from one location to another, and because of this they had little if any time to devote to civic action and economic development. The primary missions of the mobile CAPs were fighting the guerrillas and gathering intelligence, and the other pacification work was largely ignored. Because of this, the change to the mobile concept marked the end of the ability of the program to accomplish the counterinsurgency functions this study considers necessary for the CAPs to be considered an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War.

The ONR study found other problems in the program that affected the ability of the CAPs to perform their work as a counterinsurgency pacification tactic. Among the problems was the fact there was no single mission statement for the CAP program. There were a number of mission statements in circulation at time of the study, and their objectives frequently conflicted. For the CAPs this lack of one established mission statement could only mean they did not have a clear idea of what they were supposed to do. Also, few of the CAP Marines were able to speak Vietnamese, and this hindered the Marines in all aspects of their counterinsurgency work in the villages.

A number of recommendations were made by the ONR study as to how the CAP program could be improved. Among these were the suggestions the CAP program adopt one clear mission statement, and more language training be conducted for the Marines. It needs to be kept in mind, though, the ONR study was published in December 1969, and at this point in the war the US was in the process of leaving Vietnam and turning the war
over to the Vietnamese. The platoons were now given the responsibility of training the PFs and the Regional Forces (RFs) to fight the war on their own, and counterinsurgency pacification was no longer an important mission for the CAPs. The ONR study’s recommendations might have made a difference in 1967, but they were of little use in 1969.

According to the standards set by this study the CAP program did not work well as a counterinsurgency tactic during the Vietnam War, and the leadership of the program appears primarily responsible for this failure. This would not be a fair evaluation, though. The CAPs were not provided help from specialized units to assist them with intelligence work, civic action and economic development, psychological operations, and other matters, but it is difficult to know why this was the case. The war placed conflicting demands and immense pressure on the leaders of the program, and in many ways the war was as confusing for the commanders as it was for the junior officers and the enlisted men. To evaluate the problem fairly more research might show why the CAP program was not given more specialized support.

There are other areas this study found where additional historical research would be rewarding. The CAPs brought together people from at least two different cultures in the turbulent and stressful setting of a war, and a cultural study of the CAPs might lead to a more nuanced understanding of the program. Another area for further study might be Lt. Colonel William Corson. At times in this study Corson appeared as if he was a Renaissance man in a tragedy. After a career comprised mostly of clandestine service, Corson was given the mission of using his accumulated knowledge of counterinsurgency
to form the CAP program. Corson abruptly left his new command after a few months, and why he left is puzzling. A study of Corson’s life would be a valuable addition to the study of the CAPs, and a valuable addition to the study of US military history.

Still, the idea of the CAPs is intriguing, and some have said if the concept was used more widely in the Vietnam War, an outcome more favorable to the US could have been achieved. The CAPs were the essence of counterinsurgency pacification as the small groups of Marines lived with the PFs and defended the Vietnamese villages. The CAPs fought the guerrillas during the night and helped the villagers during the day. Much of this was true, of course, and after observing the CAPs William Lederer wrote the CAP program was” Our one successful effort. It should be spread to every corner of rural Vietnam.”5 In considering the results of using units such as the CAPs in a widespread manner, Robert B. Asprey wrote” Had the pacification process developed in a qualitative, orderly, and intelligent manner, the enemy probably would have attacked in force and been flattened by unquestionably superior firepower.”6 Some of this thinking may have been true, but there are some important questions related to it.

Any consideration of how well an extensive use of the CAP program might have worked needs to evaluate the possible responses of both the NVA and the GVN. When the NVA wanted to disrupt the pacification activities of the Marines in I Corps they did not attack the pacified areas directly. Instead, the NVA sent its troops into the area below the DMZ to draw the attention and the resources of the Marine Corps away from


pacification efforts. This response worked well, and it is not realistic to imagine a wider use of the CAP concept throughout Vietnam would have resulted in the NVA simply staging massive attacks in which their troops would have been slaughtered. Also, if the CAPs were used throughout the heavily-populated, rice-growing regions of the Vietnamese coastal areas and the Mekong Delta regions, it might have created an unfavorable response from the GVN. The CAPs tried to protect the Vietnamese people from landowners demanding exorbitant rents and corrupt GVN officials. If a widespread CAP program resulted in farmers making large profits from rice farming and villagers growing prosperous from economic development projects, it could be too much temptation for corrupt GVN officials. It is probable they would either have found a way to corrupt the program, or they would have sabotaged the program to end it. The CAP program showed promise, but there are too many unknown variables to say it would have been a success on a larger scale.

A good deal of this study has looked at the conflicting strategies and tactics of the US military in the Vietnam to determine whether or not the CAPs were an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War, and why they were or were not an effective tactic in the war. The conclusion is that the CAPs were not an effective tactic, but many of the problems of the CAPs were similar to the problems experienced by the entire US military in the war. Douglas Porch summarized the essential problem well when he said” The real problem was the political and strategic context in which the war was fought.” He said no combination of strategy and tactics could overcome the problem of” A corrupt and illegitimate South Vietnamese military.” This problem was compounded because the US and its allies confronted” An enemy who enjoyed an inviolate sanctuary, nationalist
legitimacy, solid political and military leadership, a motivated and adaptable military force, a command economy, and two powerful communist allies who supplied… virtually unlimited materiel.”7 The problem was not a question of the correct strategy and tactics for the US because the Vietnam War was unwinnable.

The importance of the failure of the US to understand the history and the culture of Vietnam was indicated in the comments of a Vietnamese professor. In a discussion of the war Professor Vo Van Kim said,” If you Americans had known even a little bit about my nation, you could have solved the Vietnamese problem in 1945. Just a little history. Just a little culture.”8 The problems created for the CAP program by a failure to understand Vietnam’s culture were reflected in a comment of a Marine who said, “Because of the cultural and language barriers, I suspect many CAPS only appeared successful.”9 This may be one of the greatest lessons to come out the Vietnam War.

The CAP concept was a carefully chosen and well-intentioned tactic, and it was one of the most promising tactics for the US in the Vietnam War. Counterinsurgency warfare is especially challenging though, and the battlefields need to be chosen carefully. For the reasons mentioned here, Vietnam was a poor choice.

The CAPs were not an effective counterinsurgency tactic in the Vietnam War, but most of the Marines who served in the CAPs did so superbly. Almost all of them were young men who volunteered for a dangerous assignment with the CAPs in the belief they

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8 Lederer, 44.
9 Hemingway, 39.
were protecting the Vietnamese people from the depredations of the NLF and the NVA. They committed themselves to the defense of the people in the villages, and many of them died in defense of their commitment. Whether or not the cause for which they fought was just, their personal commitment was honorable. The history of the CAPs is a distinguished chapter in history of the United States Marine Corps.
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