Gentle Warriors: U.S. Marines and Humanitarian Action during the Vietnam War

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This thesis titled
Gentle Warriors: U.S. Marines and Humanitarian Action during the Vietnam War

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ABSTRACT

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Gentle Warriors: U.S. Marines and Humanitarian Action during the Vietnam War

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Although largely ignored in secondary literature, benevolent and humanitarian actions were an important part of the Marines’ experience during the Vietnam War. From the time the first Marines arrived in Vietnam in March of 1965, the Corp’s leadership pushed for a pacification-centered strategy aimed at securing the loyalty of the Vietnamese people. Civic action programs, therefore, were established to demonstrate the Marines good will. These programs laid the foundation for the Marines acts of humanitarianism. Many benevolent actions occurred as part of Corps’ programs, and many were initiated by individual Marines wishing to help the people of Vietnam. Their benevolence did not typify U.S. combat personnel in Vietnam, but their actions were an important part of the American experience in that war.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1966, an unlikely friendship occurred in the midst of the Vietnam War. A U.S. soldier and a Vietnamese child enjoyed a ride on a swing together, their experience captured in a photograph so different than the familiar images of the harshness and brutality of combat. Such unlikely friendships were not so unusual, even if accounts of them rarely enter the many histories of the Vietnam War. Although these instances of friendship and compassion are often forgotten and neglected, they were an important part of the experiences of U.S. soldiers and Marines in Vietnam.

Humanitarian action was an important part of the Marines war in Vietnam, both as part of their commitment to civic actions, and also as a reflection of their desire to help the people of Vietnam. From the time the first Marines arrived in Vietnam in March 1965, the Corps’ leadership pushed for a pacification-centered strategy aimed at securing the loyalty of the Vietnamese people. Civic action programs, therefore, were established to demonstrate the Marines good will. These programs laid the foundation for the Marines acts of humanitarianism. Because of the Corps’ various civic action programs, Marines lived and worked with the local population on a daily basis. While doing so, many Marines engaged in various humanitarian actions aimed at helping the people. At the heart of humanitarian actions was a sense of altruism, a desire to help those in need. Such actions, no matter how fleeting, often had lasting effects on both the U.S. Marines and the Vietnamese.

The Marines emphasized a strategy in Vietnam that put them in close contact with Vietnamese civilians and gave them opportunities and the desire to engage in benevolent
actions. The history of the Marines in small wars in the 19th and 20th century led the Corps’ leadership to recognize the importance of winning the support of the local Vietnamese population. Therefore, upon arriving in Vietnam, the Marines began a series of security and pacification operations. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace Greene, Jr. and other top leaders believed that pacification of the local population through securing the countryside was the key to defeating the insurgents in Vietnam. Consequently, pacification remained an important component of the Marines strategy throughout the war. They launched arguably one of the most successful pacification attempts, the Combined Action Platoons (CAP). These combined units, comprised of a rifle squad, a Navy corpsman and a thirty-five members of the local militia, worked to keep the villages secure from enemy attacks while gaining the loyalty of the local people. They engaged in civic action aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese. While big military units often moved from place to place in search of the enemy, the CAPs lived in the villages, surrounded by the local population. This intimate living arrangement allowed the CAPs to empathize with the plight of the local population.

The troops who worked closely with the Vietnamese were often able to move past racial stereotypes and cultural and language barriers as humanitarian actions helped to change their perception of the local population. Initially many Americans were surprised by the simple lifestyle of Vietnamese peasants. Over time, many of the members of the U.S. Armed Forces gained a deeper understanding of Vietnamese culture and traditions, which helped them to establish a respect for and understanding of the people of Vietnam.
As relationships formed, perceptions changed. The experiences of Marine Private Hop Brown demonstrate this change. He was initially appalled by the poverty and filth in which the Vietnamese lived. But as he began to forge relationships with the villagers, his opinion became very different. “My attitude changed toward these people,” he claimed. “As I got used to their way of life and started to see their customs and rituals from their point of view, I began to understand that things I took for granted as an American did not apply to this culture.” ¹

The study of actions of military personnel in Vietnam is important for several reasons. First of all, secondary literature has not significantly investigated the benevolent and humanitarian actions of U.S. soldiers and marines during the war in Vietnam. Secondary sources have analyzed pacification; however, the main focus has been on its successes and failures as a government policy, not on the experiences of U.S. troops. For example, in his book *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* Richard Hunt examines the overall development of the program and its connection to national policy and military strength. In essence, Hunt studies pacification through the eyes of the government and military advisers. Robert J. Wilensky’s *Military Medicine to Win Hearts and Minds* is a comprehensive study of the various programs that provided medical care to Vietnamese civilians during the war. His study, much like Hunt’s, focuses on the structure of the program, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, scholarship about the Marines’ strategy and their emphasis on pacification does not focus on individual experiences throughout the war, nor does it connect strategy

to individual participation in humanitarian actions. This study, therefore, will be a significant addition to the existing scholarship of Vietnam, as scholars have given little attention to the reasons for U.S. service personnel’s benevolent actions and their consequences.

This study is also important as much of the literature on the Vietnam War has focused on the eroding morality of U.S. troops. The books *Conversations with Americans* by Mark Lane and *War Without Fronts* by Bernd Greiner discuss the genocidal nature of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Positing that atrocities were typical rather than exceptional, these authors suggest that atrocities occurred frequently and consistently and often as a result of the brutal nature of the overall strategy in Vietnam. In his book, Lane even compares the behavior of U.S troops’ in Vietnam to that of the Nazis in World War II. These books are only a few of those that focus on the brutality of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The My Lai Massacre and other atrocities forces Americans to try and understand how these events could have happened. Atrocities did occur but focusing on them while ignoring the stories of those who genuinely wanted to help the people of Vietnam creates an incomplete and skewed perception of those who served in Vietnam. Positive stories that emerge from the war are just as valid, and just as significant.  

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Also common in Vietnam War literature is the idea that those who served in Vietnam were detached from the war. Unwilling to take risks or do anything beyond their requirements, U.S. troops, according to this view, simply counted down the days until their tours were complete and hoped to return home. My thesis will show, however, that many of the Marines who worked and lived among the Vietnamese volunteered to extend their tours in Vietnam. In many cases, the troops who performed such actions benefited as much as those they were helping. Edward P. Metzner, a pacification advisor, conveys this idea. “This knowledge [of helping those in need] was comforting, for when confronted with pain and fear, all soldiers need is an honest cause.” Helping those in need offered Metzner comfort and satisfaction even in the most ominous of circumstances. Many other sailors, soldiers and Marines also speak of a sense of gratification they received when helping the local population in Vietnam. This gratification offered a feeling of pride and satisfaction, even though they were aware the war might never be won.

Many sources can be used for studying humanitarian action, but the most important information comes from personal memoirs as well as interviews with U.S. Marines. Relying on such sources is crucial as the most specific accounts of humanitarianism are found in memoirs and oral histories and are not included in unit histories or command chronologies. In his book The Combined Action Platoon, Michael Peterson deems such humanitarian events as belonging to a “twilight world,” because

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there were often no follow-ups, no final reports and no further mention of such actions.\(^5\)

The impact of these events, therefore, is often unknown. What can be learned from these memoirs and interviews, however, are the motivating causes of such compassionate actions. I do not argue that their benevolence typified U.S. combat personnel in Vietnam, but my thesis does show that their actions were an important part of American experience in that war.

Other primary sources will be from the Marines Corps Archive and Historical Division in Quantico, Virginia. The personal papers of Generals Victor Krulak and Wallace Greene provide evidence of their frustration when dealing with General William Westmoreland, the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) about strategy and illuminate the Marines role in the war. Krulak and General Lewis Walt have also written memoirs about strategy in Vietnam. These primary sources will be supported by a few secondary sources about the interservice debates on strategy such as H.R. McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, Michael Hennessey’s *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972* and Robert Buzzanico’s *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era*.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter discusses Marine strategy in Vietnam. It will include a brief history of the Marine Corps, linking its heritage, experiences in past wars and self-image to their emphasis on counterinsurgency and civic action in Vietnam. This chapter will also show how the Marines were often criticized for their strategy during the war, which led to disagreements between the Commandant of the

Marine Corps and MACV. Overall, the most important goal of Chapter 1 will be to set the scene as to why the Marines were so often living and working in the villages among the Vietnamese.

Chapter 2 provides a closer look at these humanitarian actions and the relations between Marines and Vietnamese civilians. Although the Marines adopted a strategy that encouraged close interaction with the Vietnamese, the forging of relations between the two did not happen simply because of the Corps’ strategy. Marines helped the Vietnamese in many different ways. They often furnished school kits and made desks for children; they also provided medical care and many basic commodities for civilians that they were otherwise unable to obtain. One particular Marine even paid the annual tuition fee enabling an 11-year old child to attend a Catholic girls’ school in Da Nang. This chapter will concentrate on the three types of benevolent assistance the Marines provided most often: security and protection, aid to Vietnamese children, and medical assistance. The time frame spans the entirety of America’s involvement in Vietnam. The objective is to capture the troops’ experiences of Vietnam, regardless of when and where they served.

The final chapter looks at how these humanitarian actions affected both Americans and the Vietnamese. It will discuss the impact of helping the Vietnamese on some of the American involved in such humanitarian actions. This chapter will demonstrate that in many cases, the troops who performed such actions benefited as much as those they were helping. Also, this chapter will argue that while it is difficult to

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say whether these events had any lasting effects on the people in Vietnam, they did serve as catalysts in changing American perceptions the local population.

The many examples of humanitarianism among the Vietnamese tell a whole new story of the war in Vietnam. In the midst of a brutal, unsuccessful and unpopular war, some Marines were able to do good in circumstances where one often loses sight of one’s own morality. More importantly, these humanitarian actions made a lasting impression. They affected the Vietnamese who were the beneficiaries of such actions, as well as the Marines. Helping others gave Marines a reason to keep fighting—a desire to protect the people who had become important to them. In an interview, John Sallinger, a Navy corpsman serving with a Combined Action Platoon in 1970, confirms that these Marines did have a lasting impression. Sallinger went back to Vietnam in 1996. When he tried to get into the villages, it was difficult. The police chief was an ex-Viet Cong and did not like Americans coming into his villages. Then, Sallinger was able to track down a family he wanted to see in another village. The man driving Sallinger told him to wait in the car while he went to ask if it was okay if they came into the village. When he went to the family and said three Americans wanted to come see them, the mother asked if Sallinger was one of them. Back in 1970, Sallinger had made house calls to care for her sick son. She remembered him, and was hoping he would return. As Sallinger explains, “Being remembered for the help we were able to give them 25 years previously means we DID accomplish something.”

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7 John Sallinger, Email interview with author, 18 April, 2012. [hereafter Sallinger interview.]
CHAPTER 1

THE MARINE WAY OF WAR: SMALL WARS, CIVIC ACTION AND HUMANITARIANISM

Nueng Te Cong, a three-year-old Vietnamese girl was left for dead after the Viet Cong burned down her small village, killing her parents and most of the other villagers. Sick and blind, she was left lying on the ground. No one who passed by had helped her. Then a unit of Marines approached, seeing the abandoned young girl on the ground amid the ruins of her home and took her to the China Beach Orphanage near Da Nang. The Marines raised money to see that Cong received the medical treatment she needed. By rescuing the young girl, these Marines had saved Cong’s life. 8

Such actions of humanitarianism were an extension of the Marines strategy in Vietnam. In 1994, Al Hemingway published a book, Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam. This book captured the opinion of many Marines in Vietnam. The title reflected a common belief among Marines that their experiences in Vietnam were unique when compared to the other services. They fought a war that focused on both fighting the enemy, and winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. Such objectives reflected the emphasis Marines placed on counterinsurgency and civic action, which came from the Corps history of fighting in that type of war.

On 8 March, 1965, the Marines landed at Da Nang and established the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) under the command of Major General Lewis W. Walt. Almost immediately, the Marines argued that U.S. success in Vietnam required securing popular support for the South Vietnamese government. As General Victor Krulak, who

had become the Commanding General of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPac) in 1963 declared, "the Vietnamese people are the prize."\(^9\) Therefore, success in Vietnam required that pacification should be the highest priority. The Marines original role was that of airfield security. However, it was soon apparent to the Marines that the area surrounding the Da Nang airfield was controlled by the Viet Cong (VC). In the words of Secretary of the Navy Paul Nitze, “The Viet Cong controlled the countryside right up to the fence surrounding the airfield.”\(^10\) The VC controlled the population, stole their food and crops and recruited young villagers into their ranks. Because of this situation, top Marine Corps officials believed the approach to such circumstances was obvious. As declared by General Lew Walt, "the Marines were into the pacification business." \(^11\)

The Marines emphasis on counterinsurgency was at odds with the Army’s insistence of search-and-destroy tactics. As Lewis Sorley explains, search and destroy entailed “large unit sweeps, often multibattalion and sometimes even multidivisions, frequently conducted in the deep jungle regions..designed to seek out enemy forces and engage them in decisive battle.”\(^12\) This of course, would work only if the enemy was willing to cooperate. If not, as historian Krepinevich pointedly stated, “search and destroy was like Whack-a-mole.”\(^13\) The Corps’ leadership, however, believed that this Army strategy focused solely on conventional units, while the guerrillas within the

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\(^9\) Victor Krulak, “A Strategic Appraisal –Vietnam.” December, 1965, Folder 3, Box 1, Krulak Personal Papers, USMC Archives and Special Collections, Quantico, VA. [hereafter Krulak, Strategic Appraisal]


villages were left to terrorize the population and maintain control within some of Vietnam’s most densely populated areas.

Consequently, almost as soon as they arrived in Vietnam, the U.S. Marines focused on gaining the loyalty and support of the people in the 14,000 Vietnamese villages throughout I Corps, the tactical zone consisting of the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Even prior to the Marines landing in Vietnam, the senior Marine officers stressed the importance of pacification and counterinsurgency in order to achieve success in Vietnam. In fact, Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace Greene declared, “From the very first, even before the first Marine battalion had landed in Da Nang, my feeling, a very strong one which I voiced to the Joint Chiefs, was that the real target in Vietnam were not the VC and the North Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese people.”

General Victor Krulak also believed that pacification and civic action were crucial for U.S. victory in Vietnam. When he took his position in the Pacific, Krulak, with great tenacity, insisted that when his Marines were sent to Vietnam, they would understand the doctrine of counterinsurgency and would be prepared for that type of war. Thus, the day that Krulak began his new position, counterinsurgency became his main focus.

The views of the Corps’ top leadership shaped the experiences the Marines on the ground. Because of this pacification-centered strategy, many Marines ate, slept and worked with the Vietnamese on a daily basis.

Stressing the importance of counterinsurgency and pacification was nothing new for the Marines. The war in Vietnam simply awakened an institutional past

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that influenced their approach to combat operations in Vietnam. Generals Greene, Krulak and Walt were reverting back to the Corps' rich history of small wars experiences, particularly their involvement in conflicts in the Caribbean basin—the so-called Banana Wars—of the early twentieth century. Throughout these conflicts, the Marine Corps were used as instruments of Washington’s foreign policy. In countries such as Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua, where the U.S. held national interests, the Marines were sent in to act as instruments of American’s foreign policy. The U.S. wanted to use its influence to encourage stability in the region by preventing internal factions from warring with one another, while also promoting democratic governments through supervised elections. The Marines, therefore, were sent to Latin America to establish governments approved by Washington. While, they often fought local insurgents using small-unit tactics in order to root-out the rebels opposing America’s chosen leader, the Marines were also encouraged to, as historian Allan Millett explained, “alter the political behavior and even the institutions of another country.” Because of this responsibility, the Marines also experimented with civic action. They built schools and roads, promoted health care and trained the local militia. Following these small wars, older and experienced officers often swapped stories of their experiences with the younger officers. As these stories were passed down from one generation of Marines to another, the Corps experience with counterinsurgency soon became part of their self-identity, part of the tradition and the image of the U.S. Marine Corps.16

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Drawing on their service’s experiences in these earlier conflicts, the Marine command in 1965 was ready to put these lessons to use, particularly those lessons of the Marine campaign in Nicaragua. There, the Marines were involved in an insurgent war lasting from 1925 to 1933. Nicaragua was internally divided between two powerful political parties: the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, which were both run by separate families that consistently feuded over power. Because of the U.S.’s national interests in the area, Washington desired a stable political environment in Nicaragua, and after a conservative party coup overthrew the Liberal president, the U.S. decided it needed to interfere. Thus, Marines landed in Nicaragua on 23 December, 1926. While the U.S. wanted to establish supervised elections in the hopes of ending such internal disputes, Augusto Sandino, a Liberal Army General had other plans. The Marines, therefore, found themselves engaged in small-unit operations against Sandino’s rebels. During this campaign, the Marines also formed units by combining local forces with Marine officers. One of the most famous of these combined units, Company M, was led by Lewis B. Puller, who went on to become the chief instructor at the Marines’ school in Quantico Virginia. Puller’s experience in combined action is important here, because one of his first students was 2nd Lieutenant Lewis Walt, who later in his career would become an enthusiastic proponent of combined action units in Vietnam. 17

Additionally, by relaying their experiences, the many Marine officers who served in this long operation were able to contribute significantly to the Marines counterinsurgency doctrine. Many officers wrote articles which were published in the

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Marine Corps Gazette and the Naval Institute Proceedings, shedding light on the trials and tribulations of counterinsurgency operations. To consolidate and pass along these experiences of counterinsurgency, the Marines began to employ their knowledge at their School Command in Quantico, Virginia.

Furthermore, Marine authors decided to codify the Corps’ experience in counterinsurgency by publishing the Small Wars Manual explaining the lessons learned from conflicts such as the Nicaraguan campaign. Ultimately, counterinsurgency became a part of the Marine Corps doctrine. After 1940, however, the Marine Corp' was forced to redirect its focus away from small wars. During World War II the Marines mostly were involved in large-scale amphibious operations focusing on large scale amphibious operations, followed by the national fixation on nuclear warfare throughout the 1950s. The Corps never forgot its counterinsurgency heritage, however. So, when the war in Vietnam seemed imminent, the Marines shifted their training to counterinsurgency once again. Accordingly, they placed counter-insurgency and pacification at the heart of their approach to combat operations in Vietnam.  

Utilizing their knowledge of the past, and by reconnecting with their heritage in counterinsurgency, the Marines strategic concept involved bringing peace and security to an ever-growing number of people, or what the Marines called the "spreading ink blot strategy." Beginning with Commandant Greene and on down the chain of command, the Marines strategy was tri-fold. First, the Marines adamantly believed that the primary emphasis should be on pacifying the highly populated South Vietnamese coastal plains.

19 Victor Krulak, First to Fight: An Inside View of U.S. Marine Corps (Annapolis, Maryland, 1999), 197.
They wished to expand the pacified areas quickly, but only as they were declared secure. That way, the people of Vietnam would be protected from the guerrillas and would no longer be forced to provide the enemy with food or intelligence. Second, the Marines desired to diminish the North Vietnamese fighting capabilities by cutting-off their manpower and munitions before they ever left the ports of Vietnam. Thirdly, when the opportunity presented itself, the Marines would engage the V.C. and main units of the North Vietnamese, but only when the conditions were clearly in favor of the U.S. forces.\(^{20}\)

Implementing this strategy meant that the Marines needed to take the war into the villages, root out the VC, and offer protection to the people in the villages. General William Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), though, rejected diverting attention away from the big-unit war by transforming big units into smaller groups focused on pacification. Westmoreland often explained that in 1964, two VC regiments defeated various small units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) conducting pacification operations. Westmoreland described the defeat as “a lesson long to be remembered.” Krepinevich argues, however, that the “incident was more a rationalization for the big-unit operations favored by MACV than an objective lesson against the perils of maintaining insufficient quick-reaction reserves.”\(^{21}\)

Despite Westmoreland’s disapproval, the Marines continued to believe that rooting out the VC from at the village level needed to be first priority, therefore,

\(^{20}\) Krulak, *First to Fight*, 197-198.

pacification efforts began soon after the Marines arrived in-country. The Marines first experience of protecting the people began in May 1965. They learned quickly that Le My, a village about six miles from the Da Nang air strip, held nearly seven hundred people within eight hamlets, was controlled by the Viet Cong. Two guerrilla platoons, about forty men, had set-up in the village. The guerrillas moved in and out of the village using an elaborate tunnel. They came into the village to steal the peoples’ rice and crops. They would try, and often succeed, in stealing the people’s money, enticing their youth to join their forces, and assassinating the village chiefs and officials. Because of the Vietcong oppression, the people of Le My lacked many simple necessities, and often were living in fear. The Marines decided to clean the guerrillas out of Le My. Through heavy firefights, the guerrillas were eventually killed or driven out of the village.

With the Viet Cong removed from the village, the Marines were able to offer the villagers security and protection with the help of the local militia. It took some time, but the population began to trust and appreciate the Marines. Not only had the Marines offered the villagers protection, but also they helped them rebuild their village. They dug wells and helped to rebuild schools and the market while also establishing health clinics in order to treat various ailments among the population. By rooting out the VC, the Marines had helped the villagers return to a sense of normality they had not known in over a decade.22

The Marines also spent time training the local militia. By repairing their weapons and helping them build defensive positions around the village, the local militia was prepared to help the Marines protect the population. These actions were part of the

22 Shulimson and Johnson, U.S. Marines, 1965, 36-37; Krulak, First to Fight, 185-186.
“spreading ink blot” formula, which, according to Krulak, involved “this painstaking, exhausting and sometimes bloody process of bringing peace, prosperity, and health to a gradually expanding area.” In the effort to free and protect the people, it should have been at the heart of the battle for freedom in Indochina.” Le My, and the Marines’ experience in the village had become the Marines model for future pacification efforts.24

The ink-blot strategy and the Marines’ success in the village of Le My impressed many, service officials, including Army generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin. Westmoreland however, was not a supporter of the Marines approach to the war. Westmoreland did not argue that the Marines strategy was a bad idea, but that the U.S. simply did not have the time to wage the war village by village. Westmoreland believed the American people, as well as political leaders in Washington, would lose support for the war and demand that U.S. troops return home. Furthermore, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara expressed the same view as Westmoreland to Krulak in the winter of 1965. "A good idea," he said about the ink blot formula, "but too slow." 25

Such disagreements stemmed from the Marines’ and Army’s difference in philosophies. In many ways the Army and MACV strategy was the inverse of the Marines. While Westmoreland believed in pacification, he argued that it should be subordinate to the big-unit war, rather than the primary focus. Westmoreland was trained for conventional war, especially the climatic land battles in Europe that some Cold War strategists imagined.26 Westmoreland, therefore, applied what has been called the "Army

23 Krulak, First to Fight, 186.
24 Michael Hennessey, Strategy in Vietnam, 70; Krulak, First to Fight, 185-186.
25 Krulak, First to Fight, 186.
26 Coram, Brute, 285.
Concept." This concept is deeply imbedded in Army history, and evolved into part of its institutional identity. As Andrew Krepeinevich explains, “The Army Concept of war is, basically, the Army’s perception of how wars ought to be waged and is reflected in the way the Army organized and trains its troops for battle.”

The concept relies on two major characteristics: a focus on conventional war, and reliance on firepower to inflict material damage while minimizing casualties. Conventional warfare was comfortable and familiar and had proved successful in World War II and Korea. The difference in Vietnam though, was that President Lyndon B. Johnson ruled out the possibility of invading North Vietnam and engaging in a decisive war of annihilation. As a result, a war of attrition seemed to be the next closest thing. This strategy entailed search-and-destroy tactics by utilizing the U.S advantages in technology and mobility. As Krulak declared in his memoirs, Westmoreland was determined to pursue the enemy relentlessly, bring him to battle and destroy him, one unit at a time. He constantly urged General Walt to "get out of the enclaves" and go after the enemy in the hinterland.

Such tensions created heated debates over the type of military strategy to be used in Vietnam. The Marines saw the MACV idea as flawed and the Corps’s leadership became openly critical of Westmoreland and his policies. The VC infrastructure throughout the villages would remain untouched, and the enemy would be engaged in areas and circumstances which were favorable to them, rather than the U.S. forces. In

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29 Krulak, *First to Fight*, 198.
addition, a war of attrition would demand large numbers of U.S. forces, something that
both Washington and the American people wanted to avoid.\textsuperscript{30}

By December 1965, General Krulak, who had emerged as the most adamant and
outspoken critic of the MACV strategy, had grown completely frustrated with the current
state of U.S military action in Vietnam. In his opinion, the current strategy was a waste of
American lives. MACV’s strategy, Krulak believed, “promised nothing but a protracted
strength-sapping battle with a small likelihood of a successful outcome.” He expressed
his objections to Westmoreland, but the MACV Commander did not agree.

Consequently, Krulak wrote a widely circulated seventeen page report on U.S. strategy
that summed up the Corps' overall concerns. First, he defined U.S. strategy although he
declared it had never been articulated:

\begin{quote}
If it were to be described, it would have to be in about these terms. Attrit the
enemy to a degree which makes him incapable of prosecuting the war, or
unwilling to pay the cost of so doing. If this is indeed the basis for our strategy, it
has to be regarded as inadequate, even though it has generated limited progress in
recent months.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Attrition, Krulak argued, would not favor the U.S., and this type of battle was
irrelevant to who would ultimately win the war. Attrition would require large numbers of
troops and claim many American lives before it would ever produce. The current strategy
he insisted, "promises us nothing but disappointment." \textsuperscript{32}

Instead of attrition, Krulak argued that "we must neutralize the subversion and
comb the guerrillas out of the people's lives. And then we must protect the people, surely

\textsuperscript{30} Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 198; Robert Buzzanco, \textit{Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in
\textsuperscript{31} Krulak, Strategic Appraisal, 1.
\textsuperscript{32} Krulak, Strategic Appraisal, 12
and continuously, in order that they may establish a strong society. This, Krulak believed, should be the "first and greatest task." After all, if the "enemy cannot get to the people, he cannot win." Thus, Krulak concluded, until the U.S. refocused its strategy upon the people and their security, “the battle is not going to go well for us.”

General Greene, agreed with Krulak’s criticisms of the Army strategy. Greene had argued to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to the president that the concept of “find’m, fix’m and destroy’m,” would prove insufficient. To challenge the insurgency, pacification of the local population was necessary. It is important to note that the Corps’ leadership was not entirely against the Army’s ideas of search-and-destroy missions and attrition. Krulak argued that the “Army maneuver technique” was suited for Plei Me in the Central Highlands, but “you cannot shoot anything that moved in the rich area south of Da Nang, where the population runs as high as 1,000 per square mile.” Because of the situation in I Corps, Krulak explained to McNamara in a letter that “we have to root him out, and separate him from the people; which is to say, fight a guerrilla/counterinsurgency war, and clean the area up a bit at a time.”

Because of these conflicting outlooks, Army commanders and others often criticized the Marines approach to the war. General Harry Kinnard, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, was "absolutely disgusted" with the Marines and their approach to the war. The Marines "just would not play" he argued.” I did everything I could to drag them out,” he continued, “and get them to fight…They wouldn’t play. They just would not

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34 Hennessey, Strategy in Vietnam, 75.
35 Krulak, letter to Robert S. McNamra, 9 May, 1966, Krulak Personal Papers, Folder 4, Box 1, USMC Archive and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
play. They don't know how to fight on land, particularly against guerrillas." Furthermore, General William DePuy, Assistant Chief of Staff, MACV from 1964 to 1966, declared that the III MAF "just sat down and didn't do anything. Their attempts at counterinsurgency were of the deliberate, mild sort."\[^{36}\]

According to Krulak, and as demonstrated by both Kinnard’s and DePuy’s comments, in Saigon, Washington and even among the other branches, the general sentiment regarding the Marines was they were "wedded to their enclaves" and they were "absorbed in caring for the people and in training the native militia, and preferred to leave the unhappy task of going after the large enemy units to others."\[^{37}\]

Krulak’s opinion is not unwarranted, as he was often asked to explain the Marines absence in the big-unit fighting. For example, in the summer of 1966, both Defense Secretary McNamara and Navy Secretary Nitze, approached him, demanding an explanation as to why the Marines were not carrying their own weight in helping to defeat the major North Vietnamese forces. In response to McNamara Krulak wrote:

> In the past, there seems to have been some question as to the matter of the intensity [of the Marine operations against the large units] although I am hard put to perceive why...The Marines are not just bemused with handing out soap or bushwhacking guerrillas at the expense of attacking the Main Force units. They are treating the whole patient.\[^{38}\]

To Nitze, Krulak responded:

> Needless to say, I do not like to see the Marines characterized as unaggressive and bemused by the project of passing out soap to the natives. However, the allegation troubles me less than the fact that the same viewpoint which tends to condemn the Marines tends also to obscure the true nature of the Vietnam War.

\[^{37}\]& #Krulak, *First to Fight*, 203.
\[^{38}\]& Victor H. Krulak, letter to Robert S. McNamara, 9 May 1966. Krulak Personal Papers, Folder 4, Box 1 USMC Archive and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
“The fact is,” Krulak continued, “the Marines are bearing their full share.” Krulak argued that not only are the Marines participating in large unit operations, but they are also defending two major airfield complexes, conducting an intensive counterguerrilla campaign and carrying out a civic action program. Krulak pointed out that the Marines were involved in large unit operations, and had been successful. But their other three tasks are the ones which “probably have more lasting importance than the large unit efforts.”

“The real success of the counterguerrilla campaign,” Krulak reminded Nitze, “is not directly measured in enemy killed. Liberation of the population from Viet Cong domination is our goal. That is what the President has said we are bound to achieve.” For this reason, Krulak argued, the Marines had launched an extensive civic action program. And this did not just mean handing out candy to the young children of Vietnam, but helping the people of Vietnam to lead better lives, and to gain, “critical, timely, life-saving intelligence,” that the villagers often provide. After all, Krulak added, “we are in Vietnam not just to amass statistics but to bring peace and stability to the country.”

Because the Marines realized the importance of rooting out the insurgents from the villages, they were involved in four very large and important tasks. And, because they believed in the importance of counterinsurgency more so than the other branches, they were focusing on counterinsurgency largely on their own. Thus, Krulak argued that the Marines, rather than being slow or refusing to carry their share of the burden, were actually contributing significantly to many facets of the war. "In the precise area where
the Marines are sometimes alleged not to be carrying their share, they have exceeded the contribution which might have been expected of them." 39

Despite the Marine Corps attempts to make pacification the primary focus of U.S. strategy in Vietnam, they were fighting a losing battle. By 1966, the MACV strategy was set in stone. Washington as well as the leaders of MACV had endorsed the Army Concept; the U.S would be fighting a big-unit war of attrition. MACV had decided to defeat the enemy with technology and attrition, despite the warnings to the contrary. Westmoreland, despite fearing an "interservice imbroglio" decided he needed to "get the Marines out of their beachheads" and into the large unit war. He was “increasingly concerned,” he wrote to a subordinate commander, “that we are not engaging the VC with sufficient frequency...to win the war in Vietnam,” therefore reemphasizing his focus on the large unit war. Rather than start a controversy, Westmoreland later declared that he chose to “issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads.” This meant that the Marines would eventually be forced to remove forces from their pacification attempts and focus on the Army’s way of war. 40

Robert Coram, Krulak's biographer, recounts a story that captures the dichotomy between the Marines and the Army’s visions for Vietnam. Around Da Nang, the Marines found that numerous Vietnamese suffered from rashes and sores that could easily be cured by improved hygiene. The Marines ordered tons of soap to pass out to villagers, and gave them basic instructions to clean and care for such ailments. At approximately

39 Krulak to Paul H. Nitze, 17 July 1966, Krulak Personal Papers, Folder 4 Box 1, USMC Archive and Special Collections, Quantico, VA.
40 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 165-166.
the same time that the Marines were working with the villagers, Westmoreland was asked how he planned to win the war. He responded, "Fire power." 

The discussion of Marine strategy versus Army strategy is not to argue that one was better than the other, or that one had more potential to lead to success. Rather, this discussion shows that the Marines opinion that their war was different, as Hemingway declares in his book title, was often a reality and not just perception. Despite the criticism that the Marines often faced, they were steadfast in their belief that pacification was the key to victory in Vietnam. Their emphasis separated them from the other branches, as the Marines as a whole, lived and worked in the villages among the people of Vietnam more often than the other branches. The Marines took the war to the people, helping them in various ways. The belief that “our war was different” was not far-fetched. But for the Marines to protect the people of Vietnam, they needed to resist Westmoreland's efforts to have large-unit operations dominate America’s strategy in Vietnam.  

Ultimately, the Marines adopted a policy that USMC histories refer to as a multipronged, or a balanced approach to the war by following their institutional roots and heritage, but directing more units to search and destroy missions as ordered by Westmoreland. As historian John C McManus explains, “The Marines pursued pacification in I Corps, but at the expense of their own intrinsic manpower and with no reinforcement, encouragement or support from MACV.” They believed that pacification was too important to the war effort to abandon, and they succeeded in launching several pacification and civic action efforts that helped the people of Vietnam

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41 Coram, Brute, 290.
42 Hennessey, Strategy in Vietnam, 78.
43 John C. McManus, Grunts, 211.
in a variety of ways. This meant that not only was the Marines war different as envisioned by the Corps’ top leadership, but also it was different for the ground troops who executed such programs. As a result, the troops were often living, eating and fighting among the local population because of the Marines emphasis on pacification and civic action. And although many of the pacification programs the Marines employed throughout the war were conceived in the midst of battle by those on the ground rather than the top leadership, such programs represented and reflected the Marines overall strategy and mentality.

Although the Marines wanted to make pacification and civic action an important component in their approach to the war, they were aware that civic action programs would need to be handled delicately because the Vietnamese people and culture differed greatly from U.S. culture and traditions. In order to prepare each Marine for the close contact with the Vietnamese people, the Marines developed a *Unit Leader’s Personal Response Handbook*. The handbook was designed by three chaplains, John Craven, Robert Mole and Richard McGownie. Craven had suggested to Krulak that success in pacification would be almost impossible if individual Marines did not understand the Vietnamese people, their customs, and culture. The handbook, Krulak wrote, “took a practical case-example approach, explaining to Marines the simple rights and wrong of dealing with the shy and sensitive Vietnamese people. It became a standard weapon in our arsenal to deal with the complex problem.” 44

According to the Marine Corps’ philosophy, the best way to win the loyalty and support of the local population while also improving their daily lives, was to provide

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them with protection and security by permanently removing the communist guerrillas from the villages. Out of this idea, the Combined Action Platoons were born.

In a Combined Action Platoon (CAP), the Marines utilized the Vietnamese militia or Popular Forces (PF). Highly criticized, the PFs received very little respect from both the U.S. and Vietnamese military. Poorly equipped and poorly trained, the PFs motivation levels were low while their desertion rates were incredibly high. Yet, with some proper training, the PFs were often able to help the CAP Marines in their efforts to pacify the villages. Each CAP consisted of a rifle squad, a Navy corpsman, and a thirty-five-man PF platoon. While the Marines supplied the air and artillery support, the PFs provided information on the village, the terrain and the VC forces who operated in and around the area. While it is difficult to say who first conceptualized the idea of combined action, Captain Paul R. Ek, Captain John J. Mullen, Jr., and Major Cullen C. Zimmerman are usually listed as the engineers of the system. Although the program was not created by the Marines top leadership, Generals Greene, Krulak and Walt all emphatically supported the idea. \footnote{Al Hemingway, \textit{Our War was Different} (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 3-6; Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 187-190.}

The Combined Action program quickly spread to all three of the Marine enclaves. By early 1966, there were nineteen Combined Action units; by the end of 1967, there were seventy-nine. The CAPs lived, ate, worked and fought within the villages. Prior to the formation of the CAP, the Viet Cong had the opportunity to help themselves to the resources of the Vietnamese hamlets, due to the inadequacy of the Popular Forces. The Combined Action idea was an effective answer to the problem, helping to free the people
to act, speak and live without fear. While big military units often moved from place to place in search of the enemy, the CAPs lived in the villages, surrounded by the local population. This intimate living arrangement, therefore, often allowed the CAPs to sympathize with the local population. The CAP typically patrolled at night, which was the most likely time for a Viet Cong attack. During the day, therefore, the Marines often spent time in the villages, mingling with the local population. The Vietnamese were no longer a faceless entity. They had become individuals, and sometimes even friends to many CAP Marines. As a result, protecting the people of the village often became a personal endeavor, as many Marines risked their lives to protect the villagers who lived among them.  

Another program the Marines employed to work with and help the villagers was called Golden Fleece. Prior to the Marines arrival in Vietnam, the Viet Cong depended on the villagers crops for food. At harvest time, it was common practice for the VC to come to the villages within the coastal plains and steal food from the local population who put in months of planting and raising the grain. The Viet Cong extortion, called rice taxations, drove up the price of rice, and also left much of the poor population without food. Beginning with the autumn rice crop of 1965, the Marines in the Da Nang and Chu Lai areas decided it necessary to protect the population from the VC during their rich harvest. The Marines would patrol the area, protecting the people from a VC attack, and allowing the peasants to harvest their rice in safety. Using intelligence supplied by the villagers, the Marines launched attacks against Viet Cong units who moved into the Marines TAOR’s (Tactical Areas of Responsibility), at harvesting time to collect the rice  

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Hemingway, *Our War was Different*, 3-6; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 187-190.
that they claimed to be their share of the harvest. The Marines also deployed into the fields to protect the harvesters so that they could store their rice supply in their homes.  

In order to gain the support of the local population, the Marines also implemented many civic action programs to buttress village security and pacification. In the initial months of Marine involvement in Vietnam, civic action was limited to the spontaneous acts of charity by individual Marines toward the Vietnamese people. But as more Marines arrived in-country, and their command structure was solidified, more emphasis was placed on civic action. One of the first and most important projects the Marines began was offering medical treatment to the population. Marine units, accompanied by a Navy corpsman and an interpreter visited hamlets to treat the various illnesses of the people. In July, approximately 29,000 civilians were treated for minor ailments while those with more serious conditions were evacuated to medical facilities where they could receive more intensive care. Even more importantly, the Marines often trained Vietnamese officials eventually to run the centers on their own. That way, the villagers, who had learned to depend on the care could continue to benefit from medical assistance when the war was over and the Marines would no longer be there to help. Additionally, just the simple task of passing out soap to the villagers helped improve their lives. Nearly seventy percent of the diseases treated by the medical teams were skin infections caused largely by the lack of knowledge of basic hygiene among mothers and those responsible for young children. 

49 Stolfi, *Civic Action*, 27.
The Marines also had help in distributing commodities on a larger scale. The Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) was a nonprofit, joint organization of 26 American service agencies which formed in 1945 to help Americans overseas. Since then, CARE had changed its emphasis to help human beings all over the world. On 5 July, 1965, the first CARE supplies for III MAF arrived in Vietnam including two barrels of soap and two boxes of medical supplies. Soon CARE would be shipping hundreds of tons of food, clothing and other necessary commodities to Vietnam throughout the war. The Catholic Relief Services would also play a crucial role in Marine Corps civic action by donating clothing and 6,000 pounds of bulgur to III MAF in order to distribute throughout the villages.  

Project HANDCLASP was also important to the Marines distribution of commodities. Prior to 1965, HANDCLASP had been a Navy program in which individuals and organizations within the United States donated materials. In June 1965, Krulak told Walt that HANDCLASP supplies were available for the Marines. The materials available were basic yet important to the Vietnamese. Clothing, food supplements, medical supplies and books were all a part of the shipments, and General Walt requested pens, soap, vitamin and worm pills, sewing needles, thread and salt. Russel Stolfi, Marine Corps historian, declared that Walt's requests represented the entire Marine Corps effort in civic action. Pens reflected education; soap, and vitamin and worm pills reflected pressing necessities in medical aid; sewing needles and thread represented self-help for clothing; and salt was the most basic of food necessities.  

Stolfi, Civic Action ,73-74.
The Marine Corps Reserves were also eager to help the active duty Marines. Captain Rogers T. Smith, stationed at headquarters of the U.S. Marine Corps division of Reserves, realized that food, medicine, and other necessities were in short supply. So, the Marine Corps Reserve joined forces with CARE to start a fund in order to help the Corps' civic action efforts. In a USMC News Release dated 24 September, 1965, Headquarters urged all Commanding Officers and Instructors of Marine Corps Reserve units to bring the new fund to the attention of their units. "The units," the news release stated, "are encouraged to enlist the support of veterans organizations, local community groups and other individuals interested in the program." Because shipping space to Vietnam was limited, Marines in the reserve would contribute directly to CARE offices throughout the United States in envelopes marked "The Marine Corps Reserve Civic Action for Vietnam." CARE would then purchase the needed supplies and deliver them to III MAF. In a few short months the Reserves contributed over $100,000 to the fund that supplemented the Marines civic action. 52

Civic action also took place on a smaller scale. Efforts to help the Vietnamese were often more spontaneous and creative; such efforts often transcended institutional programs. Marines frequently donated and volunteered at local orphanages. One battalion even made their own desks to donate to the children of a local school. During one Christmas season, a particularly creative battalion used a Landing Vehicle Tracked, Personnel (LVTP), painted it white and mounted a Christmas tree, a reindeer and sleigh

on the top. The vehicle drove around and a Marine, dressed as Santa Claus, passed out toys and candy to over 200 small children.

The Vietnamese New Year also created the opportunity for further interaction between Marines and the villagers. In 1966, Marines went into the villages and handed out gifts and money to many young Vietnamese children. The villagers and Marines would often gather in celebration of Tet. A military band would often play, and the Marines and the population would play games, eat and enjoy the festivities together. This personal, social activity was often a success and the Vietnamese would show their appreciation to the Marines for the protection and services they offered by inviting the Marines to their homes for banquets and home-cooked meals. 53

When the Marines first landed in Vietnam, they believed pacification should play a central role in U.S. strategy. Although this idea often met fierce opposition, the Marines quickly established many programs, such as combined units, to help the Marines in their overall strategy to protect the population while also gaining support of the local population. They were able to do this while rooting out the Viet Cong infrastructure from the villages and the hamlets. The Marines were never able to focus on pacification the way they wanted because of the constant pressure to engage in search and destroy missions and engage North Vietnam's main forces. Thus, as the war progressed, the Marines slowly moved away from the pacification business. The creation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), in 1967 under the supervision of Robert Komer was one of the initial blows to Marine Corps control of pacification and civic action in I Corps. CORDS united the pacification efforts of the

53 Stolfi, Civic Action, 68-69.
State Department, civilian agencies, such as the Agency for International Development, the CIA and military services all under one command. Civilian pacification operations had always been separate from the III MAF, but because the Marines controlled most village-level civic action efforts, General Walt was able to see that the civilian programs were integrated with the Corps programs. This centralization meant that the Marines had to relinquish some of their control of these programs. Furthermore, in 1967, the Marines, per MACV and McNamara were to help in the construction of a 600-meter-wide defense barrier stretching from the South China Sea towards Khe Sanh to reduce the infiltration of the People’s Army of Republic (PAVN) into South Vietnam. The task of constructing and defending the barrier meant the Marines were spread thin on the ground, and thus, forcing them to surrender some of their pacification efforts. As a result, as the war progressed, the CAPS efforts in pacification also suffered. After the Tet Offensive, the CAPS adopted new mobile tactics for better unit security. By the middle of 1969, ninety percent of CAPS were mobile. With the teams constantly on the move, they did not have the time or opportunity to establish civic action programs the way the stationary combined units had. A year later, as units were deactivated as the manpower ceiling continued to lessen, civic action programs were eliminated almost entirely. Ultimately, The Marines were slowly pushed out of the pacification business, although they never quit believing that pacification should play an integral role in the U.S. war effort.

The emphasis on Greene, Walt, and other Marine generals on pacification separated them from the leaders of other services, especially Westmoreland and MACV.

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But more importantly, the Marines strategy created a war that was different for the Marines on the ground, those who were fighting the war. On a daily basis, thousands of Marines were in close contact with the villagers, living, eating and sleeping among them. The Marines strategy, as endorsed by Generals Greene, Krulak and Walt, opened the door for relationships to form between many Marines and the local population. Of course, this also opened the door for things to go wrong, and sometimes such relationships went awry because of cultural differences, language barriers, or uninterested and even callous Marines. Such turmoil and neglect was not universal, however. Many Marines created their own programs to help the villagers, and enjoyed doing so. In their extra time, many Marines enjoyed spending time and helping the villagers. The compassion of many Marines made the different civic action programs more effective. As Russel Stolfi wrote in his book on civic action, "individual efforts of civic action continued in what was becoming a growing Marine Corps tradition of humanitarianism." 56

56 Stolfi, U.S. Marine Corps Civic Action, 50.
CHAPTER 2

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: MARINES’ HUMANITARIANISM AND THEIR LASTING EFFECTS

“When you give people material things, you don’t give much. When you give them yourself, that’s something.” –First Lieutenant Paul R. Ek

In June 1970, journalist Cherilee Noyes published an article summing up her thoughts on her recent trip to Vietnam. In this article she wrote, “In addition to the few words of the Vietnamese language I managed to muddle through, I also learned first-hand the other Marine story in ‘Nam; the story which is seldom told. The orphanages, schools, churches and hospitals the Marines built, supported and protected.” Noyes was surprised to find how often the Marines gave of their own free time to work in the intense heat of Vietnam to build homes, wells, and roads to help the Vietnamese. She also witnessed many Marines who went to orphanages to visit children, but called it “in-country R&R.” The Marines, she remembered, were generally hesitant to speak of their projects. After all, Noyes asserted, “Marines are supposed to be rough, tough fighting men. But eventually they would recall the “three year old” who now walks around with a New York Yankee baseball cap, or how “cute that little girl at the hospital” looked in the school dress that some Marine’s younger sister had out-grown.” Noyes was sure the Marines were making a difference in the lives of the Vietnamese. They were there to fight the enemy, but there was this other “thing” they had done. They had won the hearts

of many young children, “not because it was a military obligation, but because they had wanted to do it.”

The Corps’ pacification-centered strategy often put the Marines in situations where they worked closely with the Vietnamese people. Of course, they were encouraged to treat the people kindly, and do what they could to show the population that the Marines were in their country to help and protect them. Some Marines, however, had very little interaction with the Vietnamese. Some had racial biases or were generally insensitive to the people. But there was another group of Marines; those who demonstrated true humanitarianism and compassion while serving in Vietnam.

These Marines took their mission of winning the hearts and minds of the local population to heart, and not because it was part of a military strategy, but because they truly wished to help the villagers improve their lives. After being in-country and becoming witnesses to the tragic consequences of war, many Marines sympathized with the population. Generally, the population was poor and frightened. Some Marines, therefore, engaged in humanitarian actions to help the people and ease their plight. These benevolent actions went beyond the duties of the troops. These men did not just give material things; they gave of themselves, physically and emotionally, to help those in need. Their actions suggest therefore, that at the heart of such humanitarian actions was a sense of altruism, a desire to help those in need.

The humanitarian actions and projects of U.S. troops ranged from providing a young Vietnamese child with a friendly smile and a piece of candy, to establishing a

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clinic that provided an entire village with medical care. Regardless of the magnitude of these actions, they all, in some way, were aimed at benefiting Vietnamese civilians.

The following accounts of benevolence are separated into three types of humanitarian action between members of the U.S. Marines and Vietnamese civilians which appear to have occurred most often: Providing security and protection; Aid to Vietnamese children, and Medical Assistance. The time frame spans the duration of America’s involvement in Vietnam. The objective is to capture the troops’ experiences in Vietnam, regardless of when and where they served. Furthermore, many service personnel returned to Vietnam on several different occasions, and therefore, many memoirs do not focus on one particular year or place.

Their benevolence did not typify U.S. combat personnel in Vietnam, but their actions were an important part of the American experience in that war, and their stories provide an additional depiction of those who served in Vietnam. These are just a few of the accounts of those who were able to maintain their moral being in the midst of chaos, destruction, and even failure that characterized the Vietnam War.

**Security**

"The struggle was in the rice paddies...in and among the people, not passing through, but living among them, night and day.... and joining with them in steps toward a better life long overdue."- Memoirs of General Lew Walt USMC, Retired
In a war where battles were often waged in the villages, offering security and protection was one of the most important, and generous things the American military could do for the Vietnamese. The Marine Corps was repeatedly reminded that the Vietnamese simply wanted to feel safe in their own villages, and they soon realized that civic action was nearly impossible without security in the villages.

After the Marines moved into the village of Le My, General Krulak visited the village in May 1965 along with Colonel David A. Clement whose battalion had been in charge of the Le My project. During the visit, Krulak met the district and village chief, who proudly showed the general around the resuscitated village. Then the district chief looked at Krulak and, in a very serious tone, asked, “One thing. All of this has meaning only if you are going to stay. Are you going to stay?”  Krulak said he learned a lasting lesson that day. The villagers did not want to risk giving the Marines their trust if they would leave the village and once again leave them susceptible to Viet Cong terror and control. According to Krulak, Le My was a microcosm of the entire war in 1965, and it represented the perspective of ten million rural Vietnamese. “They always feared, and sometimes hated, the Vietcong for their extortion, taxation and brutality, and designs of the local youth. They wanted and welcomed our protection but were terrified at the prospect of getting it and losing it.” 59 Consequently, it did not take long for the Marines to realize the importance of security for the Vietnamese. If they wanted to show the villagers they were there to help them, they needed to protect them.

One of the most effective programs in providing security to the villages of Vietnam was the Combined Action Platoon (CAP). The CAP was created by Marines on

59 Krulak, First to Fight, 185.
the ground, who also realized the importance of security. The CAP was not Krulak’s invention, but because of his visit to Le My that day and the words of the village chief, he was excited about the possibilities of the program. The combined units worked together to keep the villages secure from Viet Cong attacks, while gaining the loyalty of the local people.60

CAPs were the answer to the villagers’ wish for around-the-clock protection. When the CAPs went into the villages, they did not leave. Their compounds were built within a hamlet or village, and thus, they shared an intimate living arrangement with the villagers. As CAP veteran Tom Duffie explains, “a few thousand Marines were able to be a small part of everyday Vietnamese life in dozens of villages. We went beyond seeing this lifestyle from the distance of an American military base. While living in villages across the countryside from Da Nang to the Demilitarized Zone, we came as close to possible to actually becoming a part of that village.”61 Consequently, the Marines often forged meaningful and lasting relationship with the villagers. As a result, many Marines often took their work seriously, risking their lives to protect the villagers who lived among them. As Duffie explains, the villagers were never “guaranteed safety. All we really did was guarantee them that we would share the danger. Considering their belief in the inevitability of the war...for many of the villagers our commitment to their security

60 John C. McManus, Grunts, 211.
made a world of difference.” In his book, *The Village*, Bing West demonstrates the Marine-commitment to protecting their villages.

West’s memoir tells the story of a Combined Action Platoon in which he served from 1966 to 1968. This particular CAP spent over two years in the village of Binh Nghia. Since 1964 the village had been controlled by the Viet Cong, and, therefore, when the Marines moved in, the fighting was frequent and intense. No matter how dangerous their job, the Marines felt an obligation to protect the village and those who inhabited it. It was this reason that inspired these Marines to remain in the village, even when they were ordered to leave.

In March 1967, this CAP received information from their headquarters at Charlie Company of an imminent attack from at least 120 Viet Cong. While the CAP prepared for an assault in which they were completely outnumbered, they received word from both their company and battalion commanders to leave the area. Another combined unit in the area had just been wiped out by enemy forces, and the commanders did not want to take any risks. Sergeant McGowan, head of the Marines in the unit, called a meeting with his men. “I can’t order you to stay, and you have been ordered to leave,” he declared. “It’s our choice: go or stay. So let’s take a vote. Is anyone in favor of leaving?”

Angered by even the possibility of leaving the village, one Marine jumped up and shouted, “They’re [The VC] not getting this fort. They’re not getting this ville. I’m not leaving here no matter what. And you’re not getting me out of here.” Another Marine agreed, “I’m with Paul. It was all for nothing if we leave now.” “Yeh,” Gallagher

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claimed. “There’s no way I can see bugging out.” The decision was simple; the Marines remained in the village.

This decision did not go unnoticed, Bing claims. “In a sense it was the most important battle the Americans at Fort Page ever prepared to fight. They had chosen to stay; the PFs knew it and soon so would the entire village.” 64 The CAP’s decision was a brave, yet risky one. Because the combined action platoons were often so successful in gaining the loyalty of the local population, the VC desperately wanted them out of the villages. Barry Goodson, a Marine who served in CAP One in Chu Lai discovered how badly the VC wanted him and those in his unit dead. One day one of the PF’s showed the Marines a fistful of papers he found circulating in the village. As Goodson looked at the paper he remembers that “my heart joined my feet on the ground.” It was a Viet Cong propaganda pamphlet which portrayed a picture of mutilated bodies of Vietnamese women and children. Under the pictures there were captions in Vietnamese and English. The English caption read, “You Marines are rapists, murderers, and baby killers. You are destroying our country.” In Vietnamese it said, “The men you are sheltering attacked the Xuan Nhoc Hai village last week and killed all the villagers. Yet you protect them. We will pay $500 American dollars for the head of each of the Marines you are now sheltering.” 65

Of course, the Marines were accustomed to Viet Cong propaganda suggesting they were murderers, but this was the first they heard of a bounty. Goodson remembers the solemn mood of the unit. “You could have heard a tree grow,” he wrote. “The Cong

64 West, *The Village*, 232-236.  
had placed a bounty on our heads. They wanted us dead and were ready to offer hard cash, a good couple of years of their income, for the death of each one of us.” The news was shocking and troubling for the men of CAP One. But they never dreamed of leaving the village. In fact, it fueled their desire to protect the village and their friends who inhibited it.\textsuperscript{66} Placing bounties on CAP units was actually quite common. Their work was dangerous, and the survival rate for a CAP Marine was much lower than it was in other units. By mid-1967, a CAP Marine had a 75 to 80 percent chance of being wounded, a 25 percent chance of being wounded a second time, and a 16 to 18 percent chance of being killed. The mere fact that the Marines such as those of the Binh Ngia village chose to remain in the village, despite the odds, demonstrates the commitment the Marines had made to their villages.\textsuperscript{67}

Security of Vietnamese villages was certainly a prime objective of the CAP Program. This was not their sole objective, however. Barry Goodson described these other objectives in his memoir. When Goodson arrived at the Combined Action Program Orientation Session in 1968, he was shocked by what he learned. The general in charge of the orientation declared that CAP Marines had several duties. They were to serve as a type of police force in the villages, training the PFs and assisting in patrols and search-and-destroy missions to free the area of the enemy. The general continued, “In addition to being warriors of the bush, you will shoulder 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. We want to help these people in

\textsuperscript{66} Goodson, \textit{CAP Mot}, 59-60.

whatever small, direct manner that we can.” 68 Goodson could hardly believe his ears. He remembers the moment in his memoirs: “An American general standing there telling us that his main goal was to simply help the Vietnamese people, not to kill them! Boy, that blew the lid off everything.” 69 Goodson was shocked, but he welcomed this new objective. He was encouraged that he would be involved in actually helping the people of Vietnam, rather than destroying their villages and rice paddies in the hopes of killing a few VC.

Once in Chu Lai, Goodson and his CAP stayed true to the objectives established in their training, as they played an active role in helping the villagers. They worked in the field and villages, helping the population in any way possible. Doc, the Navy corpsman, treated many of the sick people, while other Marines built huts, helped cultivate their fields, and played with the children.

For Goodson, serving among the Vietnamese people was a pleasant distraction from the reports he was receiving from his hometown. Distressing reports had been filtering in from the States referring to those serving in Vietnam as rapists and baby-killers. “War was already hell on earth,” Goodson declared, “and to blatantly accuse battle-worn soldiers of rape, mayhem and child-murder was rubbing salt into our wounds.” Without infrequent bouts of encouragement from friends and relatives, Goodson would not have cared if he ever returned home. He felt Vietnam was his home now. The people here, he thought, “loved us and knew we were not rapists and baby-killers. They knew that we were foreigners, but they readily took us into their homes, fed

69 Goodson, *CAP Mot*, 17.
us and encouraged us to help protect them.” Goodson had taught the villagers to brush their teeth, rotate crops and care for the educational needs of their children. “The people were eager to learn,” he remembered, “and in return they offered us the sense of ‘home’ that America had taken away.” 70

The CAP Marines often referred to the villages which they protected as “home” or “our villages.” Living among the villagers allowed the Marines to witness the terror the Viet Cong, and sometimes even U.S. forces, had inflicted on the people and their homes. Sympathy, along with establishing relationships with the Vietnamese, often fueled a Marine’s desire to see they were protected. Sergeant Mac McGahan volunteered for a CAP because he enjoyed the idea of improving the lives of the Vietnamese. “We can see the progress being made,” he told an interviewer. In his CAP, eight out of the fourteen men voluntarily extended their tour in Vietnam. 71 This rate of reenlistment was not something that occurred only in McGahan’s unit. Members of the combined units often willingly extended their tours in Vietnam. 72 This desire to stay, coupled with the positive sentiment towards the people in Vietnam often found in the memoirs of CAP Marines, suggest that the CAP Program was more than just a policy to many Marines. Other units of the U.S. Armed Forces certainly attempted to protect the people of Vietnam, but Marines who served in combined units had lived in the villages much longer than most other U.S. combat forces. To them, the Vietnamese had become individuals, and therefore their humanitarianism was often motivated by friendship and

even a sense of kinship. Marines such as Goodson and those who lived in the village of Binh Nghia believed that protection and benevolence were the most significant ways in which they could help their new Vietnamese friends.

The benevolence and protection the CAP provided the local population did not go unnoticed. Sergeant James D. White was a temporary leader of the CAP in Binh Nghia who left Vietnam in January 1967. By the time he returned home, his mother had received two letters, both written from Vietnamese civilians who worked closely with White. Ho Yan Trao, the village chief of Binh Nghia conveyed, in broken English, his appreciation and admiration for White: “Our people thank him very much, because he is very good man,” he wrote. “My village no more V.C. Sgt White and Sq. [squad] work to hard at this duty station.” He continued, “If one of my people get sick or wounded by V.C. Sgt. White makes it to a radio and calls a helicopter for help. My people are very poor and when to see a marine they are very happy.”

The other letter was written by Ho Chi, the village school teacher. He also expressed sincere gratitude for Sergeant White and his service within the village. “He [White] is a good friend a lot of people like very much.” “About 3 months ago,” the letter continued, “my village was having trouble with Viet Cong and Sgt J. D. White and Sq. help protect my people and land. I want to thank him very much for helping have peace in my village.”

In sum, the Marines who served in the CAP Program achieved a significant amount of success when working with the Vietnamese. Sleeping, eating and working

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West, *The Village*, 194.
among the Vietnamese population allowed these particular Marines to understand and even sympathize with the local population. Some Marines remained aloof toward the villagers and the areas in which they lived, but others, through humanitarianism, formed lasting relations with the local population. As friendships were forged between the Americans and the Vietnamese, these Marines believed it was their duty to protect and care for the unfortunate people of this war-torn country.

**Aiding Vietnamese Children**

Establishing relationships with Vietnamese children was not uncommon for many members of the U.S. military. As members of the armed forces established more contact with the Vietnamese, they often felt great sympathy for the children. They saw the children as helpless victims, born into a world surrounded by devastation and war. As one Marine put it, “Ever know a Marine who could resist a kid? If you did, you knew a Marine I have never met.” Many humanitarian actions, therefore, were established to benefit the children of Vietnam—to help those who could not help themselves.

It was usually the innocence of the children that seemed to have the biggest effect on the Marines. One Marine remembers the Viet Cong using young children only three and four years old to throw grenades or carry explosives. It was not uncommon for the Viet Cong to use young and innocent children as weapons in their war. The Marines were aware that children of Vietnam were in a no-win situation, and they could do little to help themselves. These children were victims of the war and they suffered in many ways.

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because of it. Humanitarian actions, aimed at benefiting the children were therefore motivated by pure altruism.

This concern for the welfare of the Vietnamese children sent CAP Marine Anthony Baltzell on a four-month mission to help a Vietnamese mother and her baby. The mother brought her baby to the CAP compound hoping their corpsman could help her. Her daughter’s fever was dangerously high, and the corpsman said she would die if she was not taken to a hospital. It was the middle of the night in an intense battle zone, and Baltzell knew the VC surrounded them. Yet, he called for a Medevac, or helicopter ambulance, which landed to take the baby to a hospital. During the flight back, though, the Medevac received an emergency call to rescue an American unit under attack. So, for a reason no one really understood, the pilots decided to drop the baby off. Unfortunately, their changed route confused them, and they were unsure of where they had taken the baby. So, for four months, Baltzell, the corpsman and the child’s mother searched for her daughter. It seemed like an impossible mission, but Baltzell sympathized with the mother; he knew he had to help her. He would borrow a jeep from the CAP compound, and they would ride around the Da Nang area, stopping at every hospital and orphanage along the way. Baltzell could not join the mother in her search every day as his unit was often sent on patrol. But on days he was in the village, he went to the woman’s house and they renewed their search for the child. After returning from R&R one day, the mother came out of her house screaming “babyson babyson!” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him into her house. “There in the room was babyson,” he said. Finally their hard work
had paid off. “They had found her while I was gone. It was a good day in Vietnam, one of the few.”  

Jim Meyers also had grown to care about the young Vietnamese children in his village. Myers was sent to Vietnam in 1967 and joined the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines in the village of An Hoa. In a letter to his mother, Myers asked if she and the rest of his family would send basic commodities such as soap and children’s clothing to help the children of Vietnam. “People here,” he wrote,” have their first exposure to what the American is truly like…If you will meet the challenge, no matter how slight, you can join us in making a difference here.” The items that Meyers’ mother sent were eventually turned into a campaign entitled Operation Concern. In subsequent letters to his mother, Meyers would include pictures of the children dressed in clothes donated through the operation. In one particular letter he sent to his mother on 3 December, he included a picture and wrote, “These particular children were adopted by a group of us, including Tom Viti (the surgeon) and I. The children live with a Vietnamese nurse who runs a small orphanage-like place. They’re really dear. Suiting them up makes me want to cart them all home.”

In many of his letters home, Jim Meyers thanked his family for helping in such a rewarding cause. He sent pictures home because he believed the joy on the children’s faces would demonstrate how important these efforts were. Meyers showed true benevolence in helping the children of Vietnam. He believed the people wanted to

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77 Anthony Baltzell, email interview with author, 19 April 2012.
79 Meyers in Viti, 2247.
improve their lives, and he wanted to help them in their efforts. “If we bear witness to Christ, we cannot turn away from this great darkness. It is our moral obligation to help them help themselves; to stand in harm’s way. And, we can do it better and faster than anyone else.” 80

The CAP Marines of Binh Nghia also had close contact with Vietnamese children. Lance Corporal Larry Wingrove was walking through the village one day, when a Vietnamese woman ran up to him. She was visibly upset, ranting and raving in Vietnamese, only parts of which Wingrove could understand. After the woman had repeated herself for the third time, Wingrove finally understood her tirade. The woman’s neighbors had recruited a young orphan boy around the age of six to tend to their cows and buffaloes. The woman often heard the screams and sobs of the young boy, as the neighbor whipped him with a bamboo cane. Wingrove had come along just as the woman decided she could not listen to the young boy’s pain any longer. Just then, the boy walked past the Marine and the Vietnamese woman, tears in his eyes, his clothes ripped and dirty. Wingrove spoke to him and offered him a piece of gum. Roughly an hour later, Wingrove returned to the CAP fort with the boy on his shoulders. 81

When Sergeant White saw the young boy, Wingrove declared, “He followed me home Sergeant. Can I keep him?” White began to say no, but before he could, Wingrove pleaded for the boy, describing the situation in which the boy had been living. The Sergeant did not have the heart to force the boy to return to such an ugly situation The only English the boy knew was, “Hi, Joe!” and therefore the Marines thought it

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80 Meyers in Viti, 2220.
81 West, The Village, 173.
appropriate to name him Joe. Soon, the boy was a central part of the fort. The Marines provided Joe with a cot in their fort, yet Joe rarely used it. After all the other Marines had gone to sleep, Joe scurried over to Wingrove, where he cuddled up on the edge of the Marine’s cot for the night. On nights when Wingrove was out on patrol, Joe would find his bed for the night with a different Marine. Interestingly, the Marine would yell at Joe, telling him to return to his bed, yet, the Marine never seemed to realize Joe was there until the morning.  

The Marines put Joe in school and tutoring so that he could catch up with the other students his age. Soon, Joe was giving tours of the fort to his new friends from school. Eventually, the young children were arriving at the fort every morning before school to have breakfast with the Marines. They would leave their houses early in the morning, set the table for the Marines, eat, and then do the dishes for the Marines and head off to school. West, who witnessed the story first-hand, claims that the Americans were in no way attempting to win the hearts and minds of the villagers. They were simply acting as decent human beings. West claims, “Through their breakfast guests, the Americans anticipated only one benefit: escape from washing dishes.”

The Marines’ benevolence towards the young children in their village helped to save a young boy from a horrific life. These Marines became Joe’s adopted family, putting him in school, giving him an allowance, and offering him protection. As mentioned by Goodson, many serving in Vietnam felt that Americans had labeled them as baby-killers and other derogatory names. It is, therefore, important to remember

83 West, *The Village*, 173-177.
people like Wingrove, whose humanitarianism actually helped to improve or even save
the lives of those around them.

Lieutenant Colonel James Ray, of the First Tank Battalion, Marine Corps, also
formed a close relationship with many Vietnamese children. Ray served in Vietnam from
August 1966 until September 1967. Eventually he became a civic action officer in the
hamlet of Phong Bac, south of Da Nang. Ray’s job title, therefore, encouraged him to
establish programs that would benefit the local population. He went beyond his expected
duties, however, and initiated many programs he felt could greatly benefit the
Vietnamese. His greatest satisfaction, however, was in helping the children.

When asked about the Vietnamese civilians in an interview, Ray declared, “I’ll
tell you who you really become attached to, though, are the kids.” To Ray, getting to
know and working with the kids is what made his job interesting. To benefit the children,
therefore, Ray implemented several humanitarian programs. First, he built a school in the
hamlet where none had previously existed. Ray and the village chief organized the
project, which was then given to the Seabees, or the Navy’s Construction Battalion, who
supplied the materials to build the school. 84

The most satisfying thing Ray thought he did in Vietnam was to build an outdoor
movie theatre into a cliff outside the battalion headquarters. The Seabees also constructed
this project, which provided about three to four hundred seats. Ray and his battalion
showed movies —mostly cartoons— and the Vietnamese were “enthralled” he claimed in
an interview. Sometimes three to four times the number of people the theatre held would
attend these shows. Usually the attendees were mothers with their young children. In his

interview, speaking of the Vietnamese children sparked obvious emotion in Ray. “And the kids themselves, they were normal kids, but they were just cute little kids and you just really-your heart really went out to them because you know, here they were, little kids just like you’d been one day.” Furthermore Ray claimed, “It was heartbreaking to see them trying to conduct normal lives in horrible circumstances that they were surrounded by.” Ray also declared that the relationship he formed with the Vietnamese was reciprocal; “they really liked us and we really liked them.” Ray felt satisfied that the Vietnamese were so receptive to the programs he initiated.

For James Ray, the humanitarian actions in which he participated were motivated by a combination of his duty as a civic action officer, and also the sympathy he had for children living among the tragic consequences of war. Sometimes, though, humanitarian actions transcended the years of war; sometimes they led to friendships that lasted a lifetime. This was certainly the case for Timothy Duffie, a CAP Marine in the village of Phouc My in 1967. Duffie had forged relationships with many Vietnamese children. He was saddened by their circumstances. Some died because they chose sides while others died because they could not escape the “indiscriminate killing zones of high tech warfare.” All these children had ever known was war, and Duffie empathized with their unfortunate situation.  

He remembers that the children were often shy when the Marines first arrived in the village. This was the case for Co Hue, a timid sixteen-year-old girl. Duffie described her as aloof and distant. The longer the Marines were in the village, however, the more

85 James Ray interview.
86 Duffie, Heart, 3.
her demeanor changed. Co Hue first began to shed her shy exterior when Duffie brought a tape recorder into the village café owned by Co Hue’s parents. Forgetting her shyness, Hue and her friends took turns singing into the microphone and recording songs for one of Duffie’s taped letters home. Then, something happened one day that solidified Duffie and Hue’s growing friendship. He approached the café and saw Hue crying out front. Duffie asked what happened and was horrified by what he heard. “She ran her hands across her breasts and body and pointed inside the café. Somebody inside had been molesting her,” he remembered. Duffie was furious. The children of the village had become “our family.” So, Duffie stormed into the café and found six officers from the South Vietnamese Ranger unit. Hue’s parents were in the front of the room, horrified looks on their faces. They told Duffie they wanted the officers out, so he asked them to leave. They did not move. He asked again, and suddenly one of the officers lunged at him. Luckily, one of Duffie’s Marine friends was standing by and punched the officer in the face. A brawl broke out, but eventually the South Vietnamese officers left the café. Late that day though, South Vietnamese police officers and a few American MP’s came to the CAP compound to arrest Duffie and his friends. Fortunately, the district chief had heard of the incident from Hue and her family, and interjected on the Marines behalf. Those Marines risked their careers that day, but they were there to protect the villagers, and it was a job they took to heart.

At the end of his tour, Duffie went to say goodbye to the villagers, especially Hue and her family. Hue gave him a photograph of her and asked that he always remember

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87 Duffie, *Heart*, 7.
her. Duffie was honored because she never let anyone take pictures of her. After Duffie left the village, he heard news of constant fighting within the village. There was also a rumor that someone had called in artillery support during an intense firefight in Hue’s village and a stray round had landed in the heart of the village. Duffie returned to the U.S. wondering whether his friends in the village had been killed by friendly fire. Duffie and Co Hue’s friendship did not end when he left Vietnam, however. He continued to think about the children often, even twenty-eight years later. “As the years passed,” he wrote, “I would often look at the picture Co Hue had given me. That did little more than fan the fires of concern for all of my friends in the village.” Duffie felt guilty for abandoning them while their war continued.  

In 1993, the historian of Duffie’s unit informed him she was taking a trip to Vietnam with a few other veterans. Duffie did not want to go. “My reluctance was not for reasons we normally expect. I did not fear opening old wounds, nightmares, flashbacks and so forth...I did not go because I was afraid to find that my worst nightmares about the children of Lai Phouc and Phouc My were true.” Duffie did however, give the veterans the picture of Hue that she had given him, and asked if they could try to find her. When the group was in Vietnam, they visited Duffie’s village. Amazingly, one of the villagers recognized the young girl in the picture, and led the Americans to Hue. She then wrote a letter for them to give to Duffie when they returned to the U.S. In her letter, she told Duffie she was stunned that an American tourist was looking for her, and that she could not believe he would remember “a child from Vietnam.” She also asked that Duffie...

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89 Duffie, *Heart*, 12.
90 Duffie, *Heart*, 12.
come visit so that he could meet her family and sent another picture of her with the words “For Your Memories” on the back.  

In subsequent letters, Hue told Duffie, “When you left me to your home I handed you a photo at that time I felt so sad….I do not believe that you still keep those memories until now. Being separated in the war years you are still thinking about me.” Duffie was humbled by Hue’s kind and emotional words. “I will not forget,” he wrote. “I have learned the value of friendship from an exceptional Vietnamese teacher. When it comes to remembering this most charming of friends, I keep it in my heart.”

In 1996, Duffie finally returned to Vietnam. He was able to spend time with Co Hue and her family. He visited with her, her husband and her five children who referred to him as “Uncle Tim.” Villagers came from miles around just to visit with one of “our Marines.” Seeing some of his old friends, confronting both former allies and friends, Duffie was finally able to put the war behind him. Something about the trip helped him let go of the sadness and anger he had endured for nearly thirty years. Part of it was, “with everything Vietnam veterans have been told, and called, over the past thirty years, it was nice to be remembered by those we believed we were helping,” he said. Another reason was meeting the daughter of a young PF that Duffie had fought beside. Sadly, her father had not survived the war; he was killed during a VC attack in 1968. Meeting the PF’s daughter was an emotional experience for Duffie. After his visit he wrote, “It seems she just wanted to connect with this American stranger who had fought beside her father.

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91 Duffie, Heart, 13.  
92 Duffie, Heart, 14.  
93 Duffie, Heart, 25.
At times I was overwhelmed by memoirs of him...I often found myself choking back tears.” 94

For Duffie, living in the villages of Vietnam was a life changing experience. In a short time, the villagers had become his family, and his life was never the same. Duffie demonstrated that even in the midst of war, kindness and compassion could transcend language and ethnic disparities, and, as a result, a young Vietnamese child and a U.S. Marine formed the unlikeliest of friendships. As Duffie reflected on his experiences of his return trip to Vietnam, he wrote, “Those who have never experienced the love and understanding that can exist between people, often for intangible reasons, have missed one of life’s most precious treasures. This was one of those inexplicable connections during which words could have done little to enhance the emotion.” 95

Ultimately, for some members of the United States military, children played a large role in shaping their experiences in Vietnam. There was something about the children, their helplessness or their innocence, that made the Marines want to help them. The Marines could see that the children’s parents were exhausted; war had often ruined their homes, their land, their rice harvests, and in turn, their ability to care for their children. Many children were orphaned as their parents had become victims of the war. Aspiring to benefit the youngest generation in Vietnam also seemed to help the troops who were involved in such benevolent actions. Making a child happy, no matter how fleeting, seemed to offer these men a way to avoid becoming dehumanized by the brutality of war.

94 Duffie, Heart, 25.
95 Duffie, Heart, 25.
Medical Assistance for Civilians

In Vietnam and other conflicts, medical care to civilian populations in need of it nourishes the moral being of those giving the care even as it heals the bodies of those receiving it.” –Robert J. Wilensky

Throughout the war, medical assistance to Vietnamese civilians existed as one of America’s largest and most successful programs in the hopes to win hearts and minds. From 1963 to 1971, nearly 40 million encounters between American military physicians and Vietnamese civilians occurred in the Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP). In 1963, almost 700,000 civilians were treated. This number increased every year, until it reached a peak of 10 million in 1967. From June 1964 through December 1968, there were 69,590 civilians admitted as patients in US Army hospitals in South Vietnam, for total bed occupancy of 246,010 days.

Medical assistance was often the best way to show the villagers that the Marines cared for their welfare. It became one of the Marines’ first civic action efforts because it was such a basic need of the population. As Lionel Silva, a Marine working in the village near Le My explained, “Medicine is probably the first inroad because it’s the first one that shows any direct results as far as the people are concerned.” Silva claimed that most Vietnamese people had never seen a trained doctor. Most of the time, the Vietnamese would use herbal and spiritual medicines to heal the sick. One surgeon

96 Robert J. Wilensky, Military Medicine to Win Hearts and Minds, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 144.
97 Wilensky, Military Medicine, 4.
98 Silva interview.
remembers a family bringing their sick infant into a clinic wrapped with a frog, grass and rocks. The doctor could not believe it. “Vietnamese medicine,” one of the corpsman claimed. The people thought the frog was medicine and that it would cure their child’s pneumonia.  

Because medical care was so important, it became the core component of the Marines’ initial pacification efforts in Le My. As Silva explained, treating the villagers “gave them an indication that someone was actually concerned about them.” As a result, medical assistance was also used to combat the villagers’ initial wariness towards the Americans. Soon, the program took off and the doctors and corpsmen were treating about 250 to 300 people a day. Having enough medical supplies to treat the villagers quickly became a problem, and Silva explains they were forced “to go on the scrounge” to gather what they could. U.S organizations such as Catholic Relief Society or the Political Action Team played an integral role in keeping the program afloat. Additionally, Silva explains that one of the most rewarding things the Marines did in Le My was to implement a program to help children with congenital defects. Cleft pallet was common among Vietnamese children, and the Marines arranged for them to be evacuated to Saigon where they would be operated on. The Marines made sure that their family, usually the mother, was able to go with them. 

Furthermore, the Marines were aware that although they were in Le My at the time, they could not remain there forever. To ensure the villagers would have access to medical care in the future, the Marines established a nurses training program. Anyone

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99 Viti, Dr. Tom’s War, 4263.
100 Silva interview.
101 Silva interview.
interested in health or nursing would be trained by the Marines’ doctor. For a few months, the doctor and Navy corpsmen would train the Vietnamese about how to care for common ailments and problems among the population. The training program was part of the Marines’ effort to let the Vietnamese help themselves. They wanted to improve the lives of the people, thus, the Marines could not do everything themselves; they knew they could not stay in Vietnam forever. As Silva said, “We didn’t do things for them. We tried to get them so they’d do it themselves.”

MEDCAPS also became a crucial component of the Combined Action Platoons. The U.S. Navy corpsman was one of the most valuable members of a CAP. “I think our Corpsmen, pound for pound, were some of the most important men we had,” one commander asserted. Their first objective was treating their Marines and the PF’s. But the CAP corpsmen also became some of the best known Americans throughout various villages of Vietnam. Typically, a corpsman would set up a MEDCAP once a week, which meant he would set up a small aid station within a village where the Vietnamese would be treated for a variety of medical problems. Lieutenant Commander Lawrence Metcalf who served as a medical coordinator for the Combined Action Program described the scene of a Navy corpsman attached to a CAP during the war. “Invariably surrounded by children, he seeks to advise and empirically treat whatever he encounters.”

Although MEDCAPS were part of the civic action program, corpsmen usually went beyond their expected duties to help the people of Vietnam. For John Sallinger, becoming a corpsman was something he always wanted to do. In an interview he said he

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102 Silva interview.
graduated high school, “went into the US Navy and became a Corpsman, because that is how I felt I could best serve my country and my God at the same time.” Growing up, Doctor Tom Dooley, a physician in the US Navy, was Sallinger’s hero. “He really was a precursor to the combined action program,” Sallinger said, “I wanted to be able to do something to help the people in VietNam--the CAP program was the perfect thing for me.”

Not only did Salinger hold his MEDCAPSs two and three times a week, but he also made house calls. “One was an older gentleman who couldn’t get around, so I went to him daily until he passed away. The other man that I went to every day had been shot and was quadriplegic. I went to him to change his dressings.” Sallinger remembers that the villagers always seemed to appreciate him and the work the Marines were doing in the village. By offering the population standard medical care Sallinger believes that, “We showed the people in our villages, that we were also human beings, and we interacted with them as human beings, not like a bunch of soldiers marching through their town.”

Other Marines shared Sallinger’s belief that the Vietnamese greatly appreciated their newfound access to medical care. It did not take long for the MEDCAPS to become very popular with the Vietnamese civilians. Elvin Carger, a CAP Marine declares, “Whenever Doc [Navy corpsman] opened the door, the word would spread rapidly and he would have all the business he could handle.” John Sallinger also declared, “It was always interesting that no matter where I would set up, people seemed to find out where I was, and I would be there for a couple hours treating the people.”

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105 Sallinger interview.
106 Sallinger interview.
recalled, “I remember overhearing favorable comments [about his CAP corpsman] among the villagers at times when I am sure they did not realize I understood what they were saying.”

Most of the Navy corpsmen who participated in MEDCAPs felt a feeling of pride and sense of accomplishment as they helped the Vietnamese. Navy corpsman Wayne Christenson established many friendships with the local population that he treated. “There’s a great deal of satisfaction in working with these people,” he declared. “I have gotten to know them all very well. There isn’t one person in this ville I haven’t treated yet.” Sallinger experienced the same idea. “We got to learn their language, customs, and how they wanted to live their lives. Being able to help the people in our village; being able to help people anywhere and any time is what we were put on earth for. Being able to do this during wartime was very satisfying, and I think we should be proud to have been a part of this.”

At times medical assistance was part of a greater plan of civic action in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese civilians. But at other times, physicians in Vietnam acted beyond their expected duties to help people of a war-torn country. Doctor Gaetano Thomas Viti or, Dr. Tom, as he was affectionately known, for example, balanced his mandatory responsibilities with add-on duties aimed at benefiting the Vietnamese people.

The biography of Dr. Tom are different than most because they were written by his daughter, Lucia. Lucia did not know much about her father’s service in Vietnam; it

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110 Salinger interview.
was something he rarely talked about. Following his death, however, Lucia stumbled upon a box in her attic filled with her father’s Vietnam memorabilia. In the following years, Lucia traveled throughout the United States visiting and reminiscing with the Marines who served with her father, the men who knew him best. Her journey was long and difficult, but ultimately, she was proud of what she learned of her father’s tour in Vietnam.

Dr. Tom was drafted in 1966, and he applied for active commission in the U.S. and listed the Fleet Marine Force as his field of choice. He was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marines in the village of An Hoa and arrived in country in early December 1966. Lucia interviewed many Marines who knew Dr. Tom and one thing was readily apparent: her father dedicated himself to both his Marine “sons” as well as the people of Vietnam. Her research began with a visit to Richard Easu, better known as the Colonel, who served with her father in Vietnam. The Colonel informed Lucia that she should be incredibly proud of her father and his service in Vietnam-because he dedicated himself to the Marines and the Vietnamese. Although highly unusual, An Hoa’s Second Battalion, Fifth Marines, Battalion Aid States, otherwise known as 2/5’s BAS, provided medical assistance to the military and to the Vietnamese.111

Dr. Tom was a compassionate, yet stubborn Italian-Catholic, who rarely listened to anyone’s orders. Lucia often referred to this quality as her father’s “head-strong Italian compassion.” Because of his head-strong compassion, Dr. Tom saved the lives of many people, but he often did so in his own unorthodox way. The colonel remembered a time when they connected an amphibious tractor to the BAS. The AMTRAC should have been

111 Viti’s Dr. Tom’s War, 364.
sent back to Da Nang for refurbishing but Dr. Tom decided it would better suit his need as a field operating room. Mortar fragments could not penetrate AMTRACs. The colonel then added, “But hell, that didn’t keep Tom from going where he didn’t belong. He took dicey chances even from the BAS.” 112

The colonel was referring to a time Dr. Tom borrowed Brigadier General Frosty La Hue’s helicopter. The 2/5 Marines were fighting the VC and Tom was stuck in An Hoa’s BAS. He could not stand the thought of leaving his wounded men out in the field, so he hopped on the chopper, landed in the midst of an intense firefight and brought the wounded back to his station.113

As in most villages and hamlets, the loyalties of the Vietnamese in and around An Hoa were split, some belonging to the South Vietnamese government, others belonging to the VC. Those who sympathized with the VC usually did so because they feared them. Soon, though, the population began to shift their allegiance to the Marines. Some 2300 inhabitants living in a village ten miles from An Hoa approached a Marine unit as it was returning to base and pleaded for shelter. For years, the VC had taxed their rice and drafted most of their young sons to join their ranks. Those who resisted were killed. They simply did not want to live that way any longer. They came to the Marines, believing the Americans would help them. Since they arrived in An Hoa, they had been helping the local population, particularly the kind American doctor, Dr. Tom.

In the area around An Hoa, there were no Vietnamese doctors and only one German Red Cross nurse who could not handle the overwhelming amount of people who

112 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 594.
113 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 594.
needed her assistance. Once the word spread that an American doctor was willing to treat not just Americans but also the Vietnamese, the BAS became a very popular place. Some days, the American doctor would treat nearly 500 people for a variety of illnesses and ailments. The Vietnamese came from miles around to be treated by the American *basci*, or doctor. Dr. Tom had a passion for treating people, and he was passionate about his patients and their welfare.

Because Dr. Tom demonstrated such benevolence towards the people, their allegiance shifted from the VC to the Americans. This shift angered the VC, though, who hated seeing their hold on the civilian populace vanishing. They declared the doctor “Public Enemy Number 1” and put a bounty on him. They posted notices in every village nearby, and told the population to stay away from the doctor. One woman who chose to ignore the threat and seek aid for her dying baby was killed in her home, along with her husband and four other children, as a way for the VC to show what would happen if people continued to visit the American doctor. These killings did not deter Dr. Tom, though. Requests to aid those too sick to travel were steadily increasing, and he could not ignore his patients. Despite the bounty, he traveled to the surrounding villages and into enemy territory to treat those who needed him. The VC threats were not successful in deterring the Vietnamese from seeing him, either. They had never had real medical care, and they were not willing to let their sick child die knowing the doctor was willing to help them.  

He would treat many women and children, some he suspected were probably family members of the VC. He could not encounter a sick child though, and refuse

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114 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 731-732.
treatment because he or she might be the enemy. Once he encountered a young girl suffering from spinal meningitis. He brought her back to An Hoa, cured her, and returned her home. Immediately, the bounty was taken off his head; she was the daughter of the VC district chief.

Eventually, Dr. Tom would open three clinics far from the combat base in villages protected by the Marine CAPs. By using these outlying clinics as bases, he could better assist those too sick to travel. He was never afraid of taking risks for the people he believed he could save, and his devotion to saving lives was obvious to his Marines, the people in the village, and even the VC. He was loved by many people, on both sides, because he was a caring, compassionate, and a gifted surgeon and no one could question his desire to help the people of Vietnam.

During Lucia’s visit, Easu remembered a story that represented both Tom’s passion for helping others, and his stubborn nature. Lucia listened as the colonel reminisced about Dr. Tom and his many unconventional ventures. “Tom bolted through An Hoa’s protective mine field instead of running around it on a quest for a missing patient…for Christ’s sake, no one runs through a mine field, especially if you don’t know where the mines are.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Lucia replied.

The colonel continued. A young child was suffering from severe dysentery and dehydration. The medicine Dr. Tom prescribed sedated her. Her parents, not really understanding American medicine, waited twenty-four hours, and when she did not wake up, they took her home, and buried her thinking she had died. Somehow Dr. Tom
received word of this tragic misunderstanding. So Dr. Tom ran to the child’s house, and the quickest route was through the minefield. Then, he dug up her grave with his bare hands and unsuccessfully tried to resuscitative her. When the colonel asked him why he ran through the minefield rather than around it, Dr. Tom replied “I couldn’t afford the time.”

As Lucia traveled the country visiting Marines who served with her father, she heard story after story of her father’s passion for treating the people of Vietnam. Easu told Lucia of one night when a five-year-old Vietnamese boy was sprayed with shrapnel in the midst of a firefight. When the Marines brought him into the BAS, “Dr. Viti couldn’t save him. It was terrible. Tom did everything to help this little guy, and when he expired, so did a piece of Tom. It’s one thing to kill people who are trying to kill you... It’s another to witness the death of innocent children.”

Sergeant John Culbertson was another one of the Marines that Lucia visited during her journey. As he reflected on the war he told Lucia, “The good that came from the Vietnam War did so from men like Dr. Viti whose heroism is characterized by their display of love for their fellow man. He practiced medicine for the love of humanity, not the love of money.” Culbertson continued, “It’s absolutely heroic that he maintained his sanity to care, nurture, and love his patients in the chaos of war. He aspired to a higher calling, and so must we… I’m proud of your dad, Lucia.”

Jim Myers also spoke of Dr. Tom’s character in his letters home to his mom. “Dr. Tom left today,” he wrote. “His MedCAPS....have done so much in winning the hearts

115 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 650.
116 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 759.
117 Viti, *Dr. Tom’s War*, 4710.
and minds of the locals. Tom has had a great impact on the physical health of the Vietnamese, not just our Marines. Tom may have done more with his medicine and caring heart than we have done with our might.” 118

The Marines who worked with Dr. Tom were proud of his achievements. Not just those of saving the lives of their fellow Marines, but also the lives of the Vietnamese. He thought of himself as a Marine, and was proud to treat his Marine “sons,” but after spending time with the Vietnamese and witnessing the many hardships they endured, he also became passionate about treating them and he often risked his life to do so. The doctor had anticipated going to Vietnam and returning, untouched and unchanged. He could not have been more wrong. When he returned home from Vietnam, he continued to raise funds for clothing and medical supplies for the An Hoa clinic that he opened. Furthermore, he supported five Vietnamese orphans and the nurse that cared for them. In honor of his humanitarianism, Dr. Tom received many awards, including the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, the Vietnamese Medal of Honor, and two Presidential Unit Citations. As his friend and fellow veteran asserted, “No matter how Vietnam is recorded in the history books, one thing will remain clear: Dr. Tom Viti won his war for the hearts and minds of the people of An Hoa!” 119

The motivation of such humanitarian actions such as medical aid to civilians is complex, as not all members of the military acted for the same reasons. Because MEDCAP programs were a part of a larger plan to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese civilians, these actions were sometimes dictated by an officer or commander

118 Meyers in Viti, Dr. Tom’s War, 2855-2866.
and therefore were not always conducted on a voluntary basis. In the book, *Military Medicine to Win Hearts and Minds*, Robert J Wilensky, analyzes the motivations for medical civic action. Wilensky concludes that there was often a political motive behind military medicine. Policy, however, seemed to be a main concern of people in command, not the medical personnel who administered the medical attention. The doctors, nurses and corpsmen, Wilensky posits, sincerely felt they were helping the people. Their actions were altruistic in nature, as most, including Wilensky himself, were unaware they were part of a greater policy objective of winning hearts and minds. \(^{120}\)

This benevolence can be seen, Wilensky emphasizes, in how medical caregivers evaluated the programs: “In all the monthly reports, end-of-tour reports, and commentaries by physicians and nurses and oral history debriefings, no comments from health care givers refer to the use of medical services as a policy tool.”\(^{121}\) Medical caregivers were most often concerned with the quality of medical care they were providing the civilians, rather than the success of their care as a policy tool, and therefore the motivations behind such actions was simply to help those who had no other form of medical care. \(^{122}\) Furthermore, many physicians and medics indicated that helping civilians was the most gratifying experience they encountered throughout the war. Wilensky argues that many doctors even developed a “missionary spirit.” \(^{123}\)

The stories of compassion and humanitarianism include many different individuals who served in the Vietnam War. They served in different places in different

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\(^{120}\) Wilensky, *Military Medicine*, 131.
units and at different times. The war produced many diverse experiences, depending on where and when one served. But these humanitarian actions are also a part of that diverse war. These stories are not rare; the ones included here are only a few of the many accounts of humanitarian actions that are mentioned in memoirs and oral histories. These positive stories are just as real, and just as significant as the many negative stories that have emerged from the war in Vietnam. Thus, these humanitarian actions should also be remembered whenever Americans recall the Vietnam War.
CHAPTER 3

DOING GOOD IN A BAD WAR: LEGACIES OF HUMANITARIANISM

Three days after he was wounded, Corporal Barry Goodson awoke in a recovery ward in a naval hospital to find a doctor standing over him. “Just lie back and rest, corporal,” the doctor said, “You’ve come through a tough battle and it will be awhile before you’ll be able to do much. You’re a lucky marine.” Goodson was still unsure of what was going on, and he asked the doctor to explain. “By all rights you should be dead,” the doctor said. “We almost lost you during surgery but you fought to survive all the way. I’m still surprised you made it…From the report it looks like the round that hit you landed about ten feet behind you. Your men said that you were thrown about fifteen feet into the air.” The doctor showed Goodson a piece of shrapnel the size of a half dollar that had been jammed into this left side during a firefight with the VC. The healing process was long and slow, but while recovering, Goodson spent most of his time reflecting on his service in Vietnam. There were many good things to think about, such as the friends in his unit, both his fellow U.S. troops as well as the Vietnamese PF’s. Goodson thought of Taan, his Vietnamese counterpart, “who had saved my life and the lives of others countless times. A true friend.” Goodson was especially appreciative of Taan, because without him, as well as the other Vietnamese, “I would never have known the war as I did. They provided me with a reason for fighting that no one else had been able to provide. Freedom…from oppression…and happiness for their children. They had
given me a purpose...For that I was forever thankful. I could only wish that I had done more.”

As a CAP Marine, Goodson lived in the village of Chu Lai, protecting the local people. The Marines were there as part of the Corps effort to win the hearts and minds of the local people. In doing so, the people he was sent to protect had become family to him. He had nearly given his life for these people, yet he still wanted to do more. Believing that he was fighting for their cause—their freedom—provided him with a motivation to keep fighting although he was surrounded by death and destruction. Goodson witnessed the death of many soldiers in his unit, some he did not know long enough to call friends. But the belief that he was participating in an honorable endeavor—not the war overall but helping the people of Vietnam—allowed him to continue. For Goodson, the other good things he remembered were “the Vietnamese people and the help we had given them.”

As First Lieutenant Paul R. Ek explained “When you give people material things, you don’t give much. When you give them yourself, that’s something.” And that is what many Marines did in Vietnam, they gave of themselves, time and time again, to help and protect the people of Vietnam.

The compassion of people like Goodson and others who participated in benevolent actions show that many young men were able to hold on to their moral consciousness during a war in which it was so hard to do so. These humanitarian actions, however, had much larger significance. Such friendly interaction catalyzed a change in perception between the Marines and Vietnamese. Such interactions also gave the Marines

124 Goodson, CAP Mot, 226.
125 Goodson, CAP Mot, 226.
opportunities to feel they accomplished something and provided a sense of personal satisfaction that so many veterans felt robbed of upon their return to the States.

Convincing the Vietnamese population that the Marines wanted to help them was a difficult task. The Marines had to travel a long and rough road before such a task could be achieved.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

In order for the Marines’ interaction with the population to be effective, there were often many obstacles they had to overcome. Ironically, one of the main challenges these Marines had to rise above was their own training. In his book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Dave Grossman, a veteran who is now a psychologist, analyzes the system of training undergone by U.S. troops preparing to deploy to Vietnam.

Grossman argues that by the time of the Vietnam War, killing had become institutionalized within the U.S. military training system. Men had always found ways to dehumanize the enemy, to void them of any family, feelings or humanity. They did so by referring to the enemy as Japs, Krauts, gooks, slopes, dinks and Commies, and other derogatory terms. In Vietnam this process was assisted by the body count mentality, which encouraged soldiers to kill as many Vietnamese as they could. This system also discouraged troops from differentiating between combatant and civilian. The goal was high numbers, and thus Vietnamese civilians often became victims of the system. One
Vietnam vet told Grossman he thought that killing the NVA and VC was like “stepping on ants.” 127

This type of dehumanizing was common in most wars. But what was not as common in previous wars was what many psychologists have called, “boot-camp deification of killing” which encouraged desensitization and, according to Grossman, was “almost unheard of in World War I, rare in World War II, increasingly present in Korea, and thoroughly institutionalized in Vietnam.” 128 Grossman explains that unique to the Vietnam era, U.S. troops were "being indoctrinated in the most explicit fashion (as previous generations were not) with the notion that their purpose was not just to be brave or to fight well; it is to kill people.” 129 A USMC sergeant and Vietnam veteran also attested to this type of training:

The Vietnam era was, of course, then as its peak, you know, the kill thing. We’d run PT (physical training) in the morning and every time your left foot hit the deck you’d have to chant “kill, kill, kill, kill.” It was drilled into your mind so much that it seemed like when it actually came down to it, it didn’t bother you, you know? 130

Such a statement provides insight showing that our modern training programs are clearly and markedly different from those of the past. The problem then with such a training program, was that upon arriving in Vietnam Marines were not just supposed to be killers. They had to forget their training, or at the least, be sure to use such training only in combat situations. The Marines working with the people had to develop different ways of dealing with the Vietnamese in combat and noncombatant situations.

Commander Richard McGonial, a navy officer who visited many of the Marines in Vietnam, especially CAP Marines, was shocked at how well the in-country training, and working with the Vietnamese succeeded in transforming the mentality of many Marines. “When you take a group of civilians,” he declared, "and transform them into Marines and get them to kill—and kill heartily—then somehow re-transform them into people that can kill discriminately and can go through some kind of identification with people…to the point where they’re willing to risk their lives to protect them—and many times do lose their lives—that’s an amazing psychological trick.” 131

Suddenly, the Marines needed to differentiate between the enemy and civilians, and not only differentiate between who to kill and who not to; their job demanded more than that. A Navy Department article sums up this difficult task facing these Marines.

“Simply stated, Civic Action is a program aimed at winning over the people after beating the enemy. Such a program demands that the individual Marine have the cold-blooded courage to storm in battle, then the warm-hearted kindness to comfort the victims—the hungry, naked “children” caught up in the nightmare of conflict.”132 As one Marine explained, “We worked a little closer to the people and our mission was, in a sense to kill and help people. A little confusing.”133 And of course, this was no easy task. The job demanded that individual Marines express bravery and stoicism in the heat of battle, and in the next instant, exude a gentler and kinder side to the villagers around them. This difficult task put a lot of pressure on these Marines. Working closely with the population

131 Peterson, Combined Action Platoons, 44.
133 Peterson, Combined Action Platoons, 44.
meant the surrounding population was aware of everything they did. "They see everything we do--how we shave, how we dress, the way we talk to each other, the way we work," Corporal Joseph Trainer explained. "If we give them a bad impression, that's the impression they'll get of all Marines and Americans."\textsuperscript{134}

Because of this pressure, only certain Marines were capable of working so closely with the local population. One wrong turn, one wrong move, and the Marines could ruin the relationships they had been trying so hard to build. Even worse, the trust that was so crucial to these relationships could be lost forever. Thus, unworthy Marines did not last long in this type of environment. So, for those Marines who had the most intimate living arrangement relationship with the villagers, the CAP Marines, certain requirements were established before they were accepted into the combined action program.

CAP Marines were supposed to be volunteers with at least two months in country, six months left on their tours of duty, combat experience, no disciplinary record, and a mature open-minded attitude. Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, who was in charge of the program in 1967 explained that "the men I wanted to come into the Combined Action Program had to...know what it meant to take another human being's life, and how to shoot, move and communicate." In order for the program to be effective, Corson knew he needed men who were capable of killing the enemy but also saw the Vietnamese as people, not as "gooks," "slopes," or "zipperheads," to name just a few of the common racial slurs of the Vietnamese. "If they entered the job with an ethnocentric attitude, they would not succeed," Corson declared. "They had to think on their own, be proud, loyal,

\textsuperscript{134} McManus, \textit{Grunts}, 218.
and brave. And they had to have open minds to a new experience."

In a combined action unit, someone who was prone to racism, callousness or insensitivity could ruin the hard work of the entire unit in winning the trust of the Vietnamese. As a result, Corson only wanted the best of the best.

Such high standards were hard to maintain, however. Often, battalions were required to give up about twenty to thirty men per month to the CAPs. The leaders of these units did not want to sacrifice their best Marines for another program so they often found ways to give up their most incapable Marines for the program. Furthermore, many Marines volunteered for the unit as a way to avoid combat because they had mistakenly been told the CAP was safer. Private First Class Jackson Estes, for example, volunteered for the program because he thought the combined units were ways to escape combat. “I heard C.A.P. units are a lot easier,” he said in a letter to his wife. “It would be safer too.” Generally, though, men did volunteer for the program because of a genuine desire to make a meaningful contribution to the people of Vietnam.

Despite the long list of requirements for CAP Marines, some, unfortunately, were calloused and had no business living and working among the population. As McManus explains, “They dealt with people harshly, used racial slurs, broke squad rules about refraining from drinking and whoring, or just generally projected ill will.” Most of these types did not last long on a team. More commonly, however, problems arose because of the troops’ ignorance of Vietnamese customs. It was an alien culture, and it often took time to get used to such cultural differences. For example, many Marines, like

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137 McManus, *Grunts*, 220.
most Americans, would often pat the young Vietnamese children on the head until they found out that many villagers believed this gesture infested them with evil spirits.\textsuperscript{138}

Furthermore, it took longer for the Marines to learn the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese because so few could speak the language.

Most scholars who have written on the Marines and CAPs in Vietnam agree that the biggest problem for the CAPs and for those working in civic action was the language barrier. When the CAP program was expanding through 1965 and 1966, General Lewis Walt established an in-country training program that all CAPs were required to take before joining the program. This program consisted of two to three weeks of language and culture classes, but no one could really learn much of the language in an in-country crash course. Most only knew phrases and expressions that they picked up while living and working in the villages. Lance Corporal Richard Wildagel had thirty days of language training in Da Nang before joining his CAP, but communication with the people was still so limited that he was forced to rely on hand signals. Corporal Dukin Elliot who went to language school in the States for nearly a year even had problems communicating with the locals. “It’s a difficult language to learn, because you can write a word the same way and it has different meanings.” This problem would plague the Marines throughout the war.

\textbf{Changing Perceptions: From Trained Killer to Gentle Warrior}

Through these acts of good will, the U.S. troops began to change their perception of the Vietnamese. Many Americans were at first surprised by the primitive lifestyle of

\textsuperscript{138}McManus, \textit{Grunts}, 221.
the natives of Vietnam. Racism was also a problem, and many who served in Vietnam had little respect for the Vietnamese, regardless of whether they were civilians or the enemy. When Lieutenant Frederick Downs arrived in Vietnam, the soldier that drove him to his unit informed him that all Vietnamese, not just the enemy, were called “gooks.” The soldier told Downs that, “Friendly or not, they’re all called the same. Look at them. They don’t even know what good living is. They’re as ignorant as owl shit, you know?”

Another soldier told an interviewer, “Too many of us forgot that Vietnamese were people. We didn’t treat them like people after a while...I really didn’t like to mistreat people over there. I tried as hard as I could...not that I didn’t from time to time.”

Over time, however, many of the members of the U.S. Armed Forces gained a deeper grasp of Vietnamese culture and traditions, which helped them to establish a respect and understanding for the people of Vietnam. As relationships formed, perceptions changed. Private Hop Brown demonstrates this change. He was initially appalled by the poverty and filth in which the locals lived. But as he began to forge relationships with the villagers, his opinion became very different. “My attitude changed toward these people,” he claimed. “As I got used to their way of life and started to see their customs and rituals from their point of view, I began to understand that things I took for granted as an American did not apply to this culture.”

Humanitarian actions were

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also successful in allowing the benefactors of such goodwill to cling to a belief in normality or humanity that symbolized a world they used to know, a life before Vietnam.

The Marines humanitarian efforts also transformed the way the Vietnamese viewed the Americans—and often quite drastically. At first when the Marines moved into the villages, the Vietnamese often seemed afraid and usually avoided any close interaction with the Americans. "When we first got there," Sergeant John Brockway remembered, "you couldn’t get within a hundred meters of these people without some of them going in the opposite direction." 142 The initial resistance was a result of successful Viet Cong propaganda campaigns, portraying the Marines as dangerous and harmful foreigners who could not be trusted. The VC frightened the villagers by telling them that the Marines were "going to accomplish three things," explained Lionel Silva, a Civil Affairs officer working in the Le My area. "One was to shoot all military men, of military age rather, two was to molest the women and three was to burn the villages." So many of the villages near the Marines TAOR's were Viet Cong strongholds, and had been for years. Many of the villagers, therefore, had been listening to anti-American tirades by Viet Cong officers.

Over time, and through many acts of kindness, many Marines were able to transform Vietnamese perceptions of them, proving they were not evil foreigners there to terrorize families or villages. One of the initial ways that the Marines were able to reach out to the villagers was through medical care, to help break the ice and show the villagers that they were there to help them, not harm them. Sergeant Silva remembers that "initially, the people themselves were afraid, and as a result, there were very few that

actually accepted treatment." But," by virtue of our remaining there and the corpsmen...and the doctor himself actually...going into various huts and treating the villages for their ills, we finally broke down the resistance in this respect.\textsuperscript{143}

A Navy Department article told the story of Le Phuy and five other Vietnamese women who were subjected to Communist propaganda. These women listened intently as the VC issued their warnings to the people of the village. "The Americans will steal your possessions, kill, cripple and torture your people, take your children's food. Remember, of the Americans none are more cruel, violent and treacherous than the Marines . . ." The villagers were often fearful of the VC as well, but because people like Le Phuy were subjected to such propaganda for so many years, they also were terrified to hear that Marines would be moving into their village.

Because of the VC propaganda, when the Marines first entered the village, many of the people fled into the mountains to hide from Americans while those who stayed in the villages hid their most prized possessions. However, in time, the villagers began to notice that the Marines were typically friendly; they were healing the wounds and ailments of their children and the elderly, and since the Marines had come into the village, the villagers had more rice and food to eat. Prior to the Marines living in the village, the VC had terrorized the population. The village chief, school teacher and government officers had all been murdered out in the open for the whole village to see. Yet, when the Marines arrived, they did not unleash the terror the VC had promised. In fact, they had rescued the village from the terror it had known while controlled by the

\textsuperscript{143} Lionel Silva, interview by Alan Richardson, N. D, US Marine Corps History Division Oral History Collection.
VC. The Marines taught their children English and visited the orphanage of the village, providing the children there with their first—and only—toys. They also rebuilt schools and roads that had been destroyed by years of war, and most importantly, they offered the village a permanent system of security they had not known in a decade. As a result, Le Phuy and the people of her village changed their minds about the Marines. In fact, they reversed their thinking of the Marines so drastically that they were willing to risk their lives to help them. When a VC patrol demanded that Le Phuy guide them through the areas surrounding her village, she led them directly to the Marines so that the VC would be captured. Furthermore, the same five women who were, only three months earlier, listening intently to a VC monologue, portraying the Marines as horrible and dangerous, actually risked their lives to help these supposedly harmful foreigners. One day the five women were in their small boat fishing for that night's dinner when they were approached by a lost VC who requested the women's help in reuniting him with his unit. They gave him a ride in their boat, but rather than helping him find his unit, they took him into their village, now occupied by the Marines and yelled "Viet Cong!" so the Marines controlling the village knew he was the enemy. The women of the village, in just a short time, had realized that the VC propaganda was not true for many of the Marines living in their village, and the Marines had succeeded in winning the loyalty and support of the local population.
Signs of Gratitude

The Marines could be sure they were having an impact on the lives of the Vietnamese not just because their behavior was changing, but also because the villagers often did things to show the Marines their appreciation. Inviting the Marines to share meals with them was one of the most common ways the villagers showed their gratitude. Such invitations meant the Marines would have to be open-minded and audacious eaters, as the Vietnamese cuisine was quite different than what the Americans were accustomed to, but turning down the food was incredibly rude in Vietnamese culture.

In the village near Thomas Flynn's CAP, the villagers invited the Marines to an elaborate feast in honor of their service. At this meal, the Vietnamese served boiled chicken, pig brains, intestines, jellied blood, and raw fish that still had their heads and scales. Flynn was a little reluctant to partake in such a meal, but knew that passing on the invitation would hurt the feelings of the villagers. "As I picked up a piece of the pig brain," he remembered, “the people watched with anticipation. When I swallowed it and smiled, they clapped their hands and laughed. I wondered if they were happy because they thought I really liked their food or if they were laughing because they were thinking that this dumb bastard is really eating this shit!"  

Like Flynn, Sergeant Alexander Wert also remembers having dinner with the villagers. "After they eat they will sit and watch us, and laugh at the way we use their [chop] stick and eat their food. It's all good natured. We laugh at them and they laugh at us, it's always a lot of fun."  

Dinners such as these often led to invitations to luncheons,

145 McManus, Grunts, 223.
weddings and funerals. The Marines had become not just benevolent protectors of the villagers, but also they had been embraced by the village and welcomed into the lives of those who lived there.

The Vietnamese often also showed their appreciation by writing letters to the Marines in their village. One day, Anthony Baltzell received a certificate of appreciation from the district chief of “our village.” It is important to note that when Baltzell discussed this certificate, almost fifty years after his service in Vietnam, he said that the village was to thank them for protecting, not their village, but our village, as many Marines who lived among the population often did.

The translation of the certificate thanked Baltzell and his unit for giving the village “a safe life” and for the defense of the Nguyen Trai hamlet. “Besides,” the chief wrote, “you also willingly helped people with social activities at the local community. Your wonderful spirit in action and the true spirit of unity…are worthy rewarded.”

The Marines who worked in the village of Le My also received a letter of appreciation. Mr. Tac-Bac the village chief, expressed his thanks. "We the people of Northwest Hoa Vang District wish to express our feelings toward the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines who are now acting in our Northwest Zone...The Marine Corps came to our country, landed, and cleared our zone of Viet Cong. Then with its power it defended and held our zone, keeping the Viet Cong from invading us....Also we are very happy because

146 Copy of both the letter and certificate are in my possession from the personal collection of Anthony Baltzell.
you helped us rebuild our bridges in Hoa Lac....And we are very thankful towards your doctors." 147

One of the most important ways the villagers could show the Marines their appreciation was to offer them intelligence on the Viet Cong. For Barry Goodson, nothing made him happier than receiving alerts about the movements of the Viet Cong. One day the province chieftain invited Goodson to his hut. The meeting between Goodson and the chieftain was better than Goodson ever anticipated. The chieftain expressed his appreciation of Goodson and the other Marines for aid to the people of his village. The chieftain explained that he had heard from many of his people that the Marines had treated the sick and wounded of his village along with helping farmers with their crops. The chieftain then declared that he would now send runners to tell the CAP when the VC had entered the village. They would no longer be caught off-guard by a sudden VC attack. The chief’s promise symbolized the trust and admiration that the Marines had earned in the eyes of the Vietnamese. Goodson recalls, “I wanted to hug and kiss the old chief.” He knew this information could surely help to save the lives of those in the unit in the future. 148 Receiving information was not limited to this particular squad. On 10 July 1965, the peasants at Le My reported that a route, commonly used by the Marines, had been mined. Another battalion was informed of a Viet Cong guerrilla hiding out in an area very close to the district headquarters. 149 The passing of information on enemy movements and advances often occurred after U.S. service personnel had won

147 Stolfi, Civic Action, 58.
148 Goodson, CAP Mot, 169.
149 Stolfi, Civic Action, 32.
the trust and admiration of the local population, usually as a way for the locals to express gratitude for a variety of humanitarian actions.

Other less formal signs of gratitude were often expressed by the Vietnamese simply by extending an invitation to an American to join a meal, party or other event in the village. Once a local woman even requested Goodson to marry her daughter because he was “a top man of marines.” Goodson had to decline politely, but was still very flattered that the people of the village had come to care for the Marines in such a way.\textsuperscript{150}

\textbf{Win Them with Kindness}

Often, despite the adversity the Marines had to overcome, they were able to win the loyalty of the Vietnamese—through kindness. Many Marines succeeded in convincing the Vietnamese that the VC anti-American propaganda was untrue. Just because Marines were foreigners or outsiders did not mean that they were unable to connect with the population. Like one Cap leader explained, "Now you've got a ville that's got a khaki [a CAP] in it; it's got medical attention there, it's got people that care and people that show some friendliness and some interest, so the villager, like any other human begins to develop loyalties."\textsuperscript{151} And it was important for the Marines to feel appreciated by the Vietnamese and know that they were winning their support—to feel they were fighting to protect them and to improve their lives in any way they could. Many soldiers, who never worked closely with the villagers, believed that the

\textsuperscript{150} Goodson, \textit{CAP Mot}, 136.
\textsuperscript{151} McManus, \textit{Grunts}, 222.
Vietnamese, as a whole, did not appreciate them or want the Americans in their country, and this belief had grave consequences for many U.S. troops in Vietnam.

The U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam expecting that the Vietnamese people would welcome and embrace them as liberators who were saving them from the evils of communism. Yet, as soon as many U.S. soldiers arrived in Vietnam, their expectations were crushed. Private John Ketwig remembers that as he rode the bus to the replacement center upon landing in-country, the Vietnamese people gathered at the edge of the road and, “a chorus of ‘Go Home, GI’ was accompanied by a barrage of assorted garbage and trash bouncing off the wire mesh that covered the windows.” Corporal William D. Ehrhart also remembers, “I don’t even think these people like us.” The troops were devastated to get to Vietnam and discover they were hated by the Vietnamese. It was often demoralizing as soldiers wondered why they were in a country, risking their lives for people who did not even want them there. What most troops did not understand was that the people of South Vietnam had been terrorized by their own government and the Viet Cong for so long that they no longer knew who to trust. In addition, they had been listening to anti-American, as well as anti-Western propaganda for years. But when U.S. soldiers showed compassion, the Vietnamese eventually accepted them, trusted them, and even befriended them. These soldiers understood that the Vietnamese did not resent them, they simply did not know who could be trusted. Humanitarian actions were able to bridge the gap between polarized cultures and traditions, between foreigner and native, and helped those involved believe that their service in Vietnam had a purpose—the betterment of the people.  

152 Kindsvatter, American Soldiers, 143-144.
Measuring Effectiveness

Because of the compassionate and friendly ties they had established in the villages, the Marines generally believed that their work was successful and effective. Scholars and military specialists will continue to debate whether or not the CAPs and Marine Corps pacification were effective, and whether the war would have gone differently had such programs secured more support from those in leadership positions. But as John C. McManus argues in his book *Grunts*, only those who, day in and day out, were on the ground at the most basic level, living and working among the population really can attest to the differences they believed they made in the lives of the Vietnamese while serving in Vietnam. A plethora of surveys, data and charts have been compiled in order to decide if a village was secure or pacified. These surveys all used different ways to measure true pacification, however. Some were exaggerated in order to prove that civic action was a success, while the success of other villages was often overlooked. Furthermore, such studies ignore the humanitarian action taken by individual Marines and their desire to help the people of Vietnam. A study on pacification and hamlet security did not include how many times a Marine visited an orphanage, or how many took a young Vietnamese child under their wing and cared for them because the young child’s parents were either poor or dead because of the country’s long and tragic history of war. All too often these actions of person-to-person humanitarian action are overlooked. As McManus argues, “For this and for many other reasons the high level statistics are all questionable to the point of uselessness.” ¹⁵³

¹⁵³ McManus, *Grunts*, 240.
There are some things that we can be sure of, however. Take the village of Le My for example. When the Marines moved in, the population had been living in terror for the better part of a decade. They were poor, and their schools, bridges and homes had been destroyed... Even the village chief stayed most nights in Da Nang because he lived in constant fear of assassination. After the Marines moved into the village and rooted out the VC, over one hundred fifty people moved from surrounding villages—those still controlled by Viet Cong. They moved from ten or more miles away, which for the Vietnamese was very uncommon as most people lived in the same village their whole life. But they left their homes and migrated to the village which now enjoyed stability and security because of Marine protection. Le My was not always a safe-haven, it had its up and downs and periodic firefights. But the population had grown exhausted of the VC extortion and brutality in the area, and Le My was their best option. The village was never overrun by the Viet Cong once the Marines controlled it.\textsuperscript{154}

The Combined Action Platoons also experienced some success in both village security and winning the allegiance of the people. They reduced desertion rates among PFs. And like Le My, in villages with CAPS, the local chiefs and leaders usually felt safe enough to sleep in their homes. In 1999, Jim Donovan interviewed a former PAVN division commander and asked him what he thought about the effectiveness of the CAPs. “In his opinion the hamlets where the Marines lived were of little help to his troops when they needed food, men and intelligence.”\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{154} Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 185.
\textsuperscript{155} McManus, \textit{Grunts}, 240.
The Marines success goes beyond these studies, however. Many Marines developed a strong sense of loyalty to the Vietnamese people and the villages in which they served. They felt a commitment to protect the people. At the village level, the war made sense to them. Protecting the people gave them something to believe in, a reason to keep fighting. And because the Marines believed they were fighting for a cause, many were proud of their service in Vietnam, despite the outcome of the war. Humanitarianism often resulted in personal satisfaction. Hop Brown believes that “through our commitment we demonstrated to the Vietnamese people that they could trust us. I think living in the villages, amongst the people, we showed them we could face the same dangers they did. We didn’t abuse them or their women, either physically or verbally. We honored their customs and traditions.” Major Edward Palm who served in a CAP in I Corps believed that “as a gesture of dissent against a failing search-and-destroy strategy, the Combined Action Program was a noble, enlightened effort. The Marine Corps deserves high praise for at least recognizing that we couldn’t win that kind of war without winning the allegiance of the people.” And despite the way that Palm feels about the war in general, he is still proud of his service living in the villages, helping the people. “I believe that Vietnam was a tragic mistake for our country, but I’ve never regretted my own service there…and those of us who served with the Combined Action Program had a unique vantage point. My only regret is that I didn’t extend my tour.”

William Stuckey also attested to this feeling in an interview. For him, helping the Vietnamese was important to him personally, and he also believed it was the best way to win the war. “I think to win adequately in Vietnam, it will not be by military might

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156 Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 40.
alone,” he asserted. “The people themselves must be made to realize that we are not there just to fight, we are not the cruel, sadistic Westerner that the Hanoi powers have led them to believe we are.” Stuckey believed that Americans through their actions, could convince the Vietnamese “that we are there as their friend. And, two, we are not only there to help them drive their enemies out, to put them on a more sound economic platform and a way of life, but we are their friends because we are doing things for them out of the goodness of our heart because that’s the American way of life.”

These Marines often volunteered to go into the villages and help the people because they liked the idea of getting to know the people and getting a change to help them. It was gratifying for them to believe they were participating in an honorable and meaningful cause. Humanitarian actions were successful in allowing the benefactors of such goodwill to cling to a belief in normality or humanity that symbolized a world they used to know, a life before Vietnam.

**Humanitarianism: A Coping Mechanism?**

Psychologists who focus on the Vietnam War have studied the relationship between U.S. troops who believed they were participating in an honorable endeavor and their success in coping with the war. In his book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay stresses that warriors want to be accepted by their fellow citizens; to be revered as defenders and heroes representing the best of their culture—not as baby-killers and murderers. Therefore, it is important for

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them to behave in a way that will make their country proud. As historian Shannon French explains, “Warriors exercise the power to take or save lives, order others to take or save lives, and lead or send others to their deaths…If they lose sight of the moral significance of their actions—they risk losing their humanity and their ability to flourish in human society.”\textsuperscript{158} Of course, most of the Vietnam literature has reminded us that so many in Vietnam did lose sight of their own morality and the responsibility that comes with being a soldier—the ability to take or save the lives of others. Books on My Lai and other atrocities have shown that this can be a problem in war and was certainly a disconcerting component of the war in Vietnam.

For some U.S. troops, the inability to cope with the war in Vietnam can be attributed to questioning if their cause was an honorable one. As Kindsvatter posits, “A soldier who questions the legitimacy and achievability of his cause loses the will to fight.”\textsuperscript{159} This was often a problem in Vietnam, more so than other wars, as troops often wondered if they were sacrificing in vain.\textsuperscript{160} Questioning their service in the war was frequently a result of the growing anti-war sentiment at home. Even early on, troops were aware of diminishing support for the war, even if it was not yet the majority opinion. As Robert Mason wrote in his memoir, “It didn’t help that the anti-Vietnam-war demonstrators were becoming prominent in the news…the protestors’ remarks were so


\textsuperscript{159} Kindsvatter, \textit{American Soldiers}, 149.

much salt in our wounds. No one likes being the fool. Especially if he finds himself risking his life to be one.”¹⁶¹ Growing anti-war sentiment, therefore, often damaged the troops’ belief they were participating in an honorable cause. This loss of support took away one of the troops’ coping mechanisms.¹⁶² As Grossman explains, “Psychiatric casualties increase greatly when the soldier feels isolated, and psychological and social isolation from home and society was one of the results of the growing antiwar sentiment in the United States.”¹⁶³ Humanitarian actions, therefore, were important because for many Marines, working with the local population was the most gratifying thing they did in Vietnam and became, in their own opinion, their honorable mission. Regardless of what America believed about the war, many Marines were proud to be helping the people of Vietnam.

Working with the local population also helped to reduce racial tensions that can often be detrimental in troops’ postwar lives. For his book On Killing, Grossman interviewed many Vietnam veterans. Not all of those he interviewed had lingering psychological problems. Grossman found that some of the men had never truly achieved emotional distance from the enemy and, as a result, they seemed to be doing well in their postwar lives. These men expressed admiration and compassion for Vietnamese culture. Some had even married Vietnamese women. In contrast, those who persisted in viewing the Vietnamese as “less than animals” were unable to leave the war behind them.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Grossman, On Killing, 163.
Viewing the Vietnamese as subhuman was rather common among Americans in Vietnam, largely because of racism against Asian cultures. This racism and dehumanization began in training, and it escalated once the troops landed in Vietnam. As Kindsvatter explains, “the enemy, and the Vietnamese people in general, were considered something less than human…Americans did not understand the Vietnamese culture and considered the natives poor and ignorant.” 165 Such racism was a real problem for U.S soldiers and Grossman explains why. “It can be easy to unleash the genie of racial and ethnic hatred in order to facilitate killing in time of war. It can be more difficult to keep the cork in the bottle and completely restrain it. Once it is out and the war is over, the genie is not easily put back in the bottle. Such hatred lingers over the decades.” 166 Therefore, in many ways, it is more damaging to the soldier to dehumanize the enemy because it can be detrimental to the psyche of the U.S. troops during and after the war. 167 Such feelings could not just be put away when the war was over—they live within the soldier and can have horrific consequences on their postwar lives, including higher percentages of divorce, substance and alcohol abuse and post traumatic stress disorder.

Shay, therefore, argues how important it is that a soldier believes he has been a part of an honorable endeavor, rather than a mission filled with rage and hate. Perceptions transformed as U.S. soldiers and the Vietnamese people familiarized themselves with one another and their cultures. Some Marines had racist views of the Vietnamese at the onset of the war, but by working with the people, these feelings often changed, and therefore

167 Grossman, *On Killing*, 163; Also, “Dishonoring the Enemy” is the title of Chapter 6 in Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam* and discusses the psychological programs of dehumanizing the enemy in significant detail.
these soldiers did not have to suppress the genie of racial hatred. Not only did their positive feelings give them a reason to believe in the war and a reason to keep fighting, but also those feelings helped them cope after the war. Although these troops were part of a failing war effort, and often felt unappreciated by the U.S. civilians once they returned home, they were proud of their service because they believed they had participated in an honorable endeavor—making the lives of the Vietnamese a little bit better. This thinking explains the very different tone of memoirs written by those servicemen--and not just Marines but members of all branches of the armed forces—who had worked closely with the population. These memoirs and interviews usually exude a sense of empathy for the people of Vietnam. Many U.S. troops did not have an opportunity to transform their opinions of the Vietnamese. Many who served in Vietnam had little, if any, interaction with the local population, and thus, they never learned to understand and respect the Vietnamese and their culture or familiarize themselves with the population on any personal level. So, most of these troops went through the war believing their own racist training and the stories that were passed from unit to unit of the “gooks” and their backwards culture. They had no experience to change their minds the way so many Marines had. To them, all Vietnamese were the same; any Vietnamese had the potential to be a VC and, therefore, could not be trusted. And as Grossman explains, such racism and hatred often had haunting effects on those who served for years after the war.

The idea that Marines who helped the Vietnamese believed they were participating in an honorable endeavor is supported by the fact that over sixty percent CAP Marines volunteered to extend their tours. According to Michael Peterson, “a large
number of Marines transferred from their home units or extended their tours in Vietnam to remain in the CAP. This indicates an extremely high level of morale among the men which few, if any, other U.S. units could ever boast.”

In one of the very first combined action units, 40 of the 66 Marines volunteered to extend their tours, rather than be shipped back to safety with their parent battalion in Okinawa. This fact is often overlooked and it challenges one of the most common understandings of U.S. troops and their service in Vietnam. In his book *American Soldiers*, Peter Kindsvatter argues that as soon as a soldier stepped off the plane in Vietnam, “he knew exactly what day, twelve months hence for army personnel and thirteen for marines, he would leave.” Each U.S. servicemen was assigned a DEROS, or Date Eligible for Return from Overseas, and he clung tightly to this day and the promise that he would return home. The Vietnam soldier was not forced to wait for injury, death or peace to be relieved from the traumas of combat, he could count on his DEROS. As a result, Kindsvatter argues, time became an obsession for the grunt, who counted down the days and the hours until he could leave the dreadful life of a combatant in Vietnam and return to the United States. For some soldiers, this was the case, and it became more prevalent as the war dragged on and troops became increasingly aware of the strong antiwar opposition back home. But this DEROS mentality did not affect many of the Marines who felt an obligation to stay and protect the Vietnamese people and help them improve their lives.

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168 Peterson, *Combined Action Platoons*, 26, 89.
In addition to the argument that service members just counted down the days until they returned home is the assumption that “short-timers” or those who only had a few days or weeks left in-country, quit contributing to the war effort. No one wanted to get maimed or killed, so when the troops’ time was winding down, they would often refuse patrol duty, stick close to the rear or simply do everything they could to avoid taking any risks until they were finally shipped home. This assertion is in many books about those who served in Vietnam. The problem though, it that this literature makes sweeping generalizations suggesting that this is true for all, or most who fought in Vietnam. However, many troops who worked closely with the Vietnamese were likely to extend their tours in Vietnam, and many extended their tours two and three times.\(^{171}\) This fact speaks to Shay’s argument that war is different for those who believe they are involved in a honorable cause, and for many Marines, helping the Vietnamese allowed them to feel proud of their service in a war that so many of their fellow Americans were against.

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Throughout Vietnam, a brutal, unsuccessful and unpopular war, some Marines were able to do good in circumstances where one often loses sight of their own morality. More importantly, these humanitarian actions made a lasting impression. They affected the Vietnamese who were the beneficiaries of such actions, as well as the Marines. Such actions helped to change their perceptions of the local population, and often even changed their perceptions of the war itself. Helping others gave Marines a reason to keep fighting—a desire to protect the people who had become important to them. For some, they had grown so affectionate of the Vietnamese; that they continued to worry about

\(^{171}\) Peterson, *Combined Action Platoons*, 26, 89.
them after their tours were over. After the war, Barry Goodson reflected on his service. “It was obvious that I had indeed survived the war. Yet had I truly won?” he asked himself. But Goodson was not worried about whether or not the U.S. had actually won. He was worried about what would happen to his friends, especially after the U.S. troops were no longer there to help them. “From what I read and what I heard, I believed that the government was ready to pull out, leaving the Vietnamese villagers on their own…The growth of Communist oppression and terror would regain its hold as soon as our troops left. We had not won. I had not won freedom for my Vietnamese friends.” Failing his friends, being unable to protect them, was almost unbearable for Goodson. “Taan had told me so many times. ‘Someday you go home. No more fight VC. No way for me, my family to be free. We will fight and die forever.’ The words resounded in my mind.” As tears rolled down Goodson’s face, he tried to forget. “Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out the memory and the knowledge of the unending tear that they faced. “God help them,” I prayed.”

In his book War Without Front, Bernd Greiner, like so many others who have written on U.S. ground troops in Vietnam, portrays the Vietnam grunt as vicious murderers who failed to differentiate between civilian and combatant. Greiner’s book examines “war time atrocities, and war crimes committed by the ground troops. To be more precise, acts of violence which were carried out in close proximity to the victims and in the full knowledge of their identity.” According to Grenier, this type of violence cannot be brushed off as “collateral damage, nor excused as the unintentional price of operations... This is violence committed outside the theatres of war and beyond the

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172 Goodson, Cap Mot, 260.
hostilities, where the perpetrators do not fight like soldiers, but slaughter like cowardly marauders.” But what about soldiers such as Goodson, who cared for the Vietnamese, and put their lives at risk day in and day out to protect them? They, too, were part of America’s war in Vietnam. As Beth Bailey claims, because of the war’s controversy in American history, “public anger over the war too often spilled over onto those who fought it.” These Marines conducted countless selfless and compassionate deeds and spread immeasurable feelings of good will and kindness throughout hundreds of villages. They cared for the sick, rebuilt roads and schools. They taught the villagers the best way to harvest their rice. They cared for orphans and distributed commodities they would not have otherwise had. And they did this all while they were patrolling and fighting to defend the villagers from the terror of the VC. They were not perfect, but they showed true signs of compassion while enduring the stress of combat. Reminding us of the true human element of war, these Marines demonstrated true humanity in the most ominous of circumstances.

Because of their actions, many of the Marines are remembered in Vietnam, for giving their lives for the Vietnamese. As William Corson explains, "Vietnamese people in some of the [CAP] hamlets still, twenty five plus years after-the-fact, hold annual

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memorial services for the young men who died to keep them and their children free."\(^{175}\) Corson is confident in this remark, because many Marines have returned to the villages where they served in Vietnam, and have seen that they are still regarded highly.

In his book *The Village*, Bing West captures the experience of Marines returning to the villages where they served. West and Charlie Benoit, two U.S. Marines who served in Vietnam returned to the country where they had served twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon. They had belonged to a squad of Marines who lived in the village of Binh Nghia located in the Northeastern corner of Quang Ngai province. For two years, this Marine squad lived and fought among 6,000 Vietnamese civilians. In 2002, West and Benoit returned to the same Vietnamese village in which they had lived. When they arrived, they were greeted warmly by those living in the village. The Vietnamese swarmed from their houses, smiling and asking questions about specific Marines who had lived in the village. Since most of the villagers had been born after the Marines’ departure from the village, what they knew about the Marines had been passed down from a previous generation. The villagers tugged at the former Marines sleeves, inviting them into their homes. Their marker to the Marines who had died defending the village was still there. The former Marines were in awe of their unexpected reception.\(^{176}\) Tom Harvey, another Marine who lived in a village near Da Nang, had a similar experience. In 1989, he and eight fellow Marines returned to Vietnam to see what had happened, in Harvey’s words, to “our villages.” Harvey, who was bitter about the war, was not sure how he and his fellow Marines would feel as they returned to Vietnam. “But the welcome


we got from the people in Vietnam, even in the north, was much better than anything we’d experienced on our return to the States.” The Vietnamese remembered these Marines for the risks they took to help and protect them. And despite all the uncertainty and frustration that still surrounds the Vietnam War, we should remember that these stories of compassion and friendship are also a part of America’s involvement in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

When the Marines landed in Vietnam in March of 1965, U.S. strategy had yet to be solidified. The Marines Corps, however, believed that counterinsurgency and pacification were necessary to achieve success. Even before the Marines landed in Vietnam, Generals Greene, Krulak and Walt argued that defeating North Vietnam's main units would not necessarily guarantee victory; the U.S. also needed to win the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. Initially, the Corps was unsure of the best way to show the population they were there to help them. Throughout the Marines first year in-country, however, they familiarized themselves with the basic needs of the people. Two of the most glaring needs of the Vietnamese people were medical care and security. The Marines were consistently reminded, mostly by local government officials, that without security and protection, the Vietnamese lived in constant fear for their lives. The Viet Cong had been stealing their food, property, and sons, and they feared the communists and their methods of terror.

To help prevent the VC from further harming the population, the Marines set up programs such as Golden Fleece to protect the villagers and their rice harvests. The villagers, however, did not just want temporary protection. They were afraid to trust the Marines because they believed they would move into their village, temporarily drive out the VC, thereby providing a false sense of security. The villagers knew that if the Marines moved out of their village, the VC would be free to move back in, and once again assert their control over the village and its inhabitants. Therefore, the Combined Action Platoons were born out of this problem. Because the Marines were continuously
reminded that the villager wanted permanent security, they established units that lived in
the villages, on constant patrol to provide a more consistent and stable security system.
While the Marines were excited about the capabilities of the CAPs and offering
permanent protection, the Army was rather disappointed with the Marine Corps efforts.
General Westmoreland did not believe in using small units for pacification efforts. While
the Marines argued for security of the villages, Army leadership stressed search-and
destroy in order to defeat the North Vietnamese. According to the Marines, such a
strategy ignored the guerrillas who were rooted in the village, leaving them free to
control the population and free to utilize their resources. Furthermore, the Corps believed
that search-and-destroy wasted American lives by promising a long drawn-out struggle
with little chance for success. 178

The Army Concept was also questioned by troops on the ground. The war did not
make sense to them. In attrition warfare, the U.S. soldiers believed they were only
accomplishing one thing, killing Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. This body
count method replaced gaining territory as a measurement of success in Vietnam. Thus,
troops on the ground had little way of measuring progress because there was no
possession of territory which in past wars had served as an indicator of progress.
Lieutenant Frederick Down explains that the men in his unit were frustrated because they
never could tell if they were inflicting and real harm on the enemy. “The attrition on our
side was terrible on our morale,” he explained. “Although we killed and wounded many
of the NVA we never knew how much it hurt them. It seemed there was an unlimited
number to take their places. But on our side, when we lost a men we knew it and it wore

178 Krulak, *First to Fight*, 198.
heavily on their minds.”

As Kindsvatter explains, the war in Vietnam and the methods used to fight the war, “became so questionable in the minds of the grunt that he began to believe his sacrifices were in vain or, in the words of Christian G. Appy, that it was ‘a war for nothing.’” Marine Corps pacification actually helped to combat the problem of U.S. troops questioning their service in the war.

Tom Flynn, a CAP Marine in Cam Hu Village, demonstrates that helping the people of Vietnam provided Marines with a purpose during the war, that so many other troops were missing. Becoming a CAP Marine gave him, “a renewed sense of pride and meaning for our being in this country during this conflict. The average fighting man wouldn’t come to know the things we’d experience. ..We were afforded the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with these people.” This new mission of helping others was often the troops honest cause that many U.S. troops were missing from their Vietnam experience. As psychologists like Grossman and Shay have explained, soldiers and Marines need to believe they are participating in a honorable cause and for many, humanitarianism became that cause. As Sallinger stated, "the only real victory we have is how we won over the people we were responsible for." The foundation of this honorable cause was born out of the Marines way of war in Vietnam. They did more than just fight an enemy. Many of them played an active role in civic action programs, the battle to win hearts and minds of the Vietnamese. They built schools, orphanages, hospitals, wells and roads. They initiated programs to raise funds for

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179 Kindsvatter, American Soldiers, 143.
180 Appy, Working Class War, 206.
181 Flynn, A Voice of Hope, 45-46.
182 Sallinger interview.
basic commodities absent from Vietnamese culture. Of course, some did these things because civic action was part of their job. But many also devoted extra time and effort to help the people of Vietnam. Because the Marines placed such a large emphasis on pacification, Marines on the ground often found themselves working and living among the local population. Initially, the Vietnamese avoided the foreign troops walking their streets. After decades of war, it seemed the Vietnamese had lost their ability to trust anyone. Cultural and language barriers only amplified these initial problems. Over time, however, through small acts of kindness, the Marines were able to demonstrate their good intentions, which helped to reverse the populations' initial weariness. As John Sallinger stated it, "We showed the people in our villages, that we were also human beings, and we interacted with them as human beings, not like a bunch of soldiers marching through their town." The ability to gain the trust of the Vietnamese varied from village to village. In Binh Nghia, it was the Marines decision to stay in the village to confront a Viet Cong attack and protect their village despite being outnumbered. In Barry Goodson's village near Chu Lai, it was the kindness demonstrated by the individual Marines such as teaching the people more modern techniques in fishing and grain harvesting. Despite the individual action or event, many Marines were successful in showing the Vietnamese they were there to help improve their lives.

Although the Marines experiences in Vietnam were diverse, there is a commonality in those who demonstrated benevolence whether part of a civic action program or not. Working closely with the population and helping them in any way they could, was often the most gratifying thing these Marines did while in Vietnam. Whether

\[183\] Sallinger interview.
it was to befriend a young orphan, or help establish a hospital, most Marines express a sincere sense of pride in contributing to the Vietnamese lives. This is important as many service members question their service in Vietnam, even decades later. Marines involved in humanitarianism may not have understood the overall war effort, or understood how the war could ever be won, but they did understand the war at the village level, and the suffering it caused many innocent people.

With extensive amounts of literature on Vietnam, there are many things about the war we understand. The war engendered very diverse experiences for those who served. Throughout the war, every unit, in every region, experienced the war differently than the others. Some units, such as the CAPs, had significant contact with the population, while other units rarely saw any Vietnamese. We know that mistakes were often made, soldiers snapped under the pressure of combat, and violent acts of hate and atrocities were committed by both sides. Acts of humanitarianism, however, are also a significant part of these diverse experiences. As mortar rounds fell and bullets flew in one area, a Marine unit was organizing a game of volleyball with the young children of a village in another area. Although often neglected, these experiences are also a part of the U.S war in Vietnam. These actions helped U.S. troops cope with the stress of combat, and for the Vietnamese they helped to bring a glimpse of happiness—and even hope—during their seemingly endless war.

Proving such happiness to the civilian population was part of the war experience for a Marine everyone called “Tiny”. Tom Bartlett was a Marine sergeant serving in Vietnam while working with the Marine Corps magazine, *Leatherneck*. As a combat
correspondent for the magazine and later as press chief for III Marine Amphibious Force in Da Nang, Tom served four tours of duty in Vietnam. He witnessed many experiences, but he was compelled to write about Tiny and the impact he made at a small orphanage. Bartlett first met Tiny when he and Corporal Henry Casseli were doing a Christmas story on a Buddhist Orphanage in the center of the village Hoi An. Bartlett was disappointed by the orphanage though, because the kids were uncooperative. If he tried to take a picture the kids would hide. They showed little emotion and after two days, Bartlett realized he had hardly heard any laughter or seen any of the kids smile. Bartlett began to wonder, “Did these kids hate Americans that much? Did they fear Casselli and me? Or was it my camera…?”

“Then something wonderful happened,” Bartlett wrote. He knew then that the kids could in fact, smile and laugh; Tiny showed up. He came, dressed as Santa, his hat, coat and boots all stuffed with Christmas presents for the kids at the orphanage. He brought t-shirts, candy, toothbrushes, pens, coloring books and many other things to pass out to the children. When Bartlett asked where all the stuff came from, Tiny said the Marines of his combined unit wrote to their friends and family back in “the world” to send whatever they could. Tiny explained that he came to the orphanage often. It seemed to him that the Catholic orphanage in the area had sponsors and people to help them, but the Buddhist Orphanage did not. He did not know how much he could help, but he thought, “whatever I could do was something.”

Tiny’s Christmas delivery came two day early. His unit was headed out on patrol, and he did not know if he would be back to the orphanage in time for Christmas. Sadly,
Tiny never made it back to the orphanage. He died on that patrol when he set off a booby trap around midnight on Christmas Eve. Bartlett returned to the orphanage shortly after New Year’s to give them the photos he had taken. When he returned, he saw something he could never forget. Buddhists usually place a photo of deceased love ones in a small shrine and pray for the souls of those who have died. When Bartlett looked into the shrine at the orphanage, there was a picture of Tiny. Then, a young girl, approached the shine, her hands folded. As Bartlett explains, “She bowed, faced the altar for a minute. She bowed again and turned. Tears streamed down her face….” 184

There are many Marines who served in Vietnam, like Tiny, who helped to improve the lives of the Vietnamese, doing whatever they could, to bring a little comfort to the people of this war-torn country. Vietnam will always be a difficult conflict for America to grasp, but despite the outcome, not all the experiences in Vietnam were negative. U.S. service personnel initiated many humanitarian actions during the war, and studying these actions helps to provide a more complete understanding of America’s war in Vietnam.

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