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Martial Brilliance or Marine Corps Propaganda?

The Combined Action Platoon in the Vietnam War

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Historians and military thinkers alike are fascinated with the Vietnam War given its status as one of the few engagements in American military history in which the United States failed to achieve its strategic and political policy objectives. Much attention is paid to the military policies implemented during the war aimed at neutralizing the guerilla threat, propping up the government in Saigon, and pacifying South Vietnam. The prevailing strategy during the war, Search and Destroy, was championed by political and military leaders alike. The strategy is nearly self-explanatory; conventional line units would conduct operations throughout the jungles, hills, and rice paddies of South Vietnam with one goal in mind: to make contact with and destroy the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) units operating in the region. The idea being that if the enemy could be isolated from their supply bases in North Vietnam and forced to engage in pitched battle with the United States—as both sides were well aware of the tactical inferiority of NVA and VC troops when compared to their American counterparts—rather than

the guerilla tactics that the National Liberation Front (NLF) preferred, the NLF would be defeated. The United States sought to inflict casualties so heavy on the enemy and so deprive them of war materiel that losses would be greater than the feasible rate of replacement, and the enemy would wither away into nothing. Search and Destroy had the added benefit of providing a tangible and quantifiable measure of success at a time when support for the Vietnam War was low in the form of a body count. This policy is criticized by historians and strategists, mostly with the benefit of hindsight, for a number of reasons that revolve around a central point that Search and Destroy was a strategy that lacked finesse and was not particularly well suited to counterinsurgency and all of its nuances.

Instead, many contend that a recondite strategy used on a much smaller scale—the United States Marine Corps' (USMC) Combined Action Program (CAP)—was a superior alternative to Search and Destroy that would have won the war in Vietnam for the United States. The basic idea of the CAP was that a squad of nine or so marines would be embedded with a platoon of local South Vietnamese militia, known as the Popular Forces (PFs), and would live within a particular set of villages on a permanent basis with the goal of providing village security and pacification.¹ Though the CAP seems to have been a slightly more effective method at the pacification of Vietnamese villages over Search and Destroy, the widespread implementation of the CAP would have been nearly impossible, and it certainly would not have led to victory in Vietnam.

Upon analysis of the Vietnam War in general and the Combined Action Program in particular, it is evident that any effort by the Americans to peacefully encourage the Vietnamese

¹ Bruce Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience*, (McLean, Virginia, Human Sciences Research, 1969), 20-21.

people to willingly build up their own nation, secure it, fend off the VC, and eventually successfully take over all operations and functions of the government and army of South Vietnam were doomed to fail before they even began. This is not to fall into the modern trap of historical revisionism and moral relativism; this is a statement of fact of the military and political situation leading up to and during the Vietnam war. This is meant neither to decry nor laud the intervention of the United States in Vietnam and their actions during the war. The merits of attempting to contain the evils of communism and authoritarian rule aside, one must take into account the people of South Vietnam and what their culture and desires were.

The Vietnamese people had spent millennia trying to fight off foreign rule. For this reason, among those who held political ideals in South Vietnam, the majority were likely to have one burning desire at the heart of their idealism: independent Vietnamese rule. The greater western question of communism and capitalism was of little importance to the Vietnamese. If any attention was paid to the question, it would have been in the context of securing Vietnamese independence. The overtures made by Ho Chi Minh to the United States for military aid against French colonial rule serves as evidence of that fact. Furthermore, the majority of the people in the villages and hamlets scattered throughout the countryside of Vietnam had little interest in the political events outside of their immediate area. The majority just wished to live in their traditional ways in peace regardless of the governmental type and paid little mind to whether or not one type of government might benefit them over another. A significant portion of those in power in the South Vietnamese government were corrupt holdovers from the French colonial administration who were merely interested in continuing to line their own pockets through corruption. Though not a monolith, the Vietnamese people often times saw little difference between American personnel and the French colonial regime that had existed only a few years

prior. To the Vietnamese this fostered a feeling of general apathy towards the war and a tendency towards isolationism; both North and South Vietnam were foreign backed—with the communist movement seeming to have arisen more naturally—and it seemed that regardless of the outcome of the war little would change. Perhaps there was a more natural inclination to support the Viet Cong as it seemed to provide the best chance of independent Vietnamese rule, but the majority simply wanted the war to end and to be left alone. Whether or not these feelings and opinions regarding the belligerents in the war and the potential outcomes were accurate is another matter entirely.

“People get the government they deserve,” according to Alexis de Tocqueville, and Vietnam is no exception. In the face of the overall apathy of the people towards American presence and the corruption of the South Vietnamese government, the American counterinsurgency effort had nothing to work with. Such an effort needs active participation from the people and an idealism and zeal towards the cause of their government. This did not exist in South Vietnam and a foreign entity cannot create it *ex nihilo*. Without this zeal, Vietnam was destined to fall into the hands of the side that was prepared to remain in Vietnam the longest. Without the proverbial spark to fan into a flame there was no chance at the success of a counterinsurgency effort predicated on grassroots involvement. If the United States wished to stem the tide of communist aggression in South Vietnam they would have needed to take a page from the most successful colonial empires of history and implement a harsh colonial regime, inundate the country with soldiers, militarily occupy as much land as possible with their own troops, and administrate at the tip of a bayonet. This is something that the United States was certainly morally unwilling to do—indeed, at that point they would have been as reprehensible as the communists—and probably physically unable to do given their other military obligations around the globe.

It is within this context that the unsuccessful American-led effort to pacify and rebuild South Vietnam must be understood. As Allnutt relates in his report on the efficacy of the Combined Action Program (CAP): “The key to victory lay in the winning of the primarily uncommitted Vietnamese peasant, who, as yet had been relatively unaffected by the various pacification programs which had filtered inefficiently down from Saigon. As Che Guevara has pointed out, the insurgent can thrive even in an indifferent peasantry--his defeat can come only if the people regurgitate him.”² The American backed South Vietnamese government was to make any meaningful gains towards the goal of ousting the National Liberation Front from South Vietnam in this manner. The closest thing to a coherent strategy aimed at winning over the largely apathetic Vietnamese villagers the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) had implemented was the Strategic Hamlet Program, which aimed to isolate the Viet Cong from their Center of Gravity: the Vietnamese people. What made the Viet Cong so successful was their ability to blend into, draw resources from, and recruit the more neutral civilian populace; if the VC no longer had access to the people, their ability to fight would be severely reduced.³ The Strategic Hamlet Program attempted to combat this by strongly encouraging the Vietnamese peasants uproot themselves and move into protected villages guarded and aided by the South Vietnamese government. Alongside isolating the populace from the VC, this initiative was also supposed to have the added benefit of improving the average peasant’s opinion of the South Vietnamese government through exposure and government aid. By October of 1963, the Diem regime would claim that 85 percent of the South Vietnamese population was secured within strategic hamlets.⁴

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

While correctly focusing the war effort on the Vietnamese peasantry, the execution of tasks towards achieving the objective of pacification of the peasantry was lackluster. While in theory relocation to strategic hamlets was voluntary, in actuality many people were forcibly relocated to strategic hamlets resulting in the disillusionment of many. Furthermore, the security situation in the strategic hamlets was tenuous at best. Security was obviously of great concern to the people living in the strategic hamlets, as they were targets of the VC by virtue of the fact that they were living under the protection of the South Vietnamese government. The fact that many strategic hamlets were overrun by VC when the Diem regime collapsed further lowered confidence in the South Vietnamese government.⁵ As a result of this initiative the average Vietnamese peasant was left with no good option; they could either leave their ancestral homes and risk ruin or death in a strategic hamlet, risk death in the course of the war by refusing to leave their homes, or join the VC.⁶ This issue was only compounded by the fact that in 1964 the VC was rearmed with modern weapons and strengthened by communist nations such as the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC).⁷ The failure of the South Vietnamese government to achieve any lasting success in securing their own nation against communist agitators was one of the major factors leading to large scale American military intervention in Vietnam.

What shaped American military strategy after they had arrived in force in Vietnam was the conventional superiority of the American soldier over his NVA and VC adversaries. There was no question that the United States' military was able to defeat the NVA and VC in pitched

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brooks Brewington, *Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement*, (Quantico, VA, USMC Command and Staff College), 10-13.

⁷ Allnut, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 6.

combat; both the North Vietnamese and American military leadership were keenly aware of it.⁸ This is why the North Vietnamese were so reluctant to engage in a pitched battle with the United States; it surely would have been the demise of the NVA and VC. Therefore, it was altogether necessary that the Vietnamese adopt an irregular strategy to combat the Americans. VC and NVA regulars would operate in conventional battalion strength (sometimes larger) elements that could hold territory and pose a direct threat to South Vietnamese and American controlled areas.⁹ VC guerillas could live off of and among the average Vietnamese peasant, launching ambushes and laying traps, spreading communist propaganda, and terrorizing the local population in order to obtain submission.¹⁰

The terrain in South Vietnam, particularly around I Corps, with its dense vegetation, lent itself particularly well to this form of guerilla warfare.¹¹ The VC did not typically act unless there was good propaganda value in that action and the conditions for such an action were favorable.¹² As the official USMC report on the Combined Action program relates:

The VC retained its sway over the largely uncommitted population through propaganda and terrorism designed to reinforce three hard-to-dispute and fundamentally frightening myths: the VC are everywhere, the VC own the mountains, and only the VC can move at night. They made capital on the failures of the GVN to expedite land reform and on its inability to deliver any of its promises or even to provide security for the villagers.¹³

The United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) had no good answer to the problem of the VC. MACV still favored Search and Destroy as the *modus operandi* of American personnel in South Vietnam. ARVN and the Vietnamese militias, known as Popular Forces

⁸ B. W. Graham, *The Combined Action Program Revisited*, (Homeland Security Digital Library), 2-3.

⁹ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 7-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

(PFs), had proven to be rather inept at fighting pitched battles against the NVA and VC.¹⁴ Policy makers, particularly in the Army, viewed American involvement being for the express purpose of defending population centers and protecting the ostensibly democratic South Vietnamese government from annihilation at the hands of the NLF through offensive action against the Vietnamese communists. The United States military was chronically undermanned for the tasks allotted to it in Vietnam, with Gen. Westmoreland stating that he needed an additional 100,000 men in order to merely regain the initiative in conventional fighting in 1967.¹⁵ The US Army adopted an unofficial policy of “kick ‘em in the ass and hearts and minds will follow”¹⁶; even if pacification of South Vietnam had been a task the American military was capable of, they simply did not have enough personnel to effectively do so. MACV believed that they were only equipped to wage war by conventional means and provide the security the government of South Vietnam needed to pacify the nation by themselves.¹⁷

Elements of the United States Marine Corps, particularly Gen. Victor Krulak, saw the American role in Vietnam differently. They believed correctly that Search and Destroy techniques were not enough to win a war against a guerilla force given the limited number of US personnel that could be deployed to Vietnam; US combat units were not available in sufficient strength to occupy in traditional fashion the whole of South Vietnam to capitalize on the destruction of VC and NVA elements and ensure they were not reformed. Time and again the United States won pitched conventional battles—the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley being a prime example—only to withdraw and see the region reoccupied by or reopened to the Viet Cong. The destruction of main force units alone was ineffective; so long as the NLF had access to a region,

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Michael Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, (Westport, CT, Praeger, 1997), 114.

¹⁶ Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, (New York, NY, Praeger, 1989), 31-33.

¹⁷ Brewington, *Combined Action Platoons*, 9-14.

main force units could absorb the losses, rearm and refit, and redeploy within a matter of months, thereby mitigating whatever victory could be claimed by the disparity in casualties.¹⁸

Rather than Search and Destroy methods, in which soldiers would seek out the enemy, destroy them, and leave, many USMC leaders advocated for an “inkblot” or “clear and hold” strategy where the US would occupy a set of villages, search out and destroy NVA and VC main force units in the area, root out the smaller VC units with small unit operations, provide security, and pacify an area.¹⁹ After pacification was complete, the area would be turned over to the South Vietnamese (they were very fond of the phrase “work ourselves out of a job”) and the Americans would move on to pacify another region. This concept of how combat operations in Vietnam should be conducted, combined with a lack of available personnel, is how the Combined Action Program got its start.

In order to properly pacify a village, permanent security needed to be established to protect the villagers from VC retribution for cooperating with the Americans, deny use of the village to the VC guerilla, and win over the locals through good will missions and continued exposure, thereby creating loyal South Vietnamese citizens. However, such a task would have required more men than were readily available. The natural choice in order to fulfil the manpower needs of permanent village security in sufficient force to fend off the VC was to utilize PFs. The PFs were poorly trained, poorly equipped, and received little support from ARVN.²⁰ They had minimal command and control infrastructure and were not effective in any task but the support of larger ARVN operations or use as interpreters.²¹ In fact, these PFs were

¹⁸ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 7-8.

¹⁹ Brewington, *Combined Action Platoons*, 13.

²⁰ Graham, *The Combined Action Program Revisited*, 4.

²¹ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 9.

unable to stop VC propaganda meetings and taxation in their own villages despite regular patrols.²²

However, USMC planners believed that, if augmented and led by US Marines and given US support, they could become an effective fighting force. Plans for formal integration of local Marine and PF forces were set in motion. A section of four rifle squads, each with a corpsman, as well as a three man headquarters element were given an orientation and integrated with the local PFs to form the first Combined Action Company in August of 1965. The Combined Action Program was organized according to the charts below.

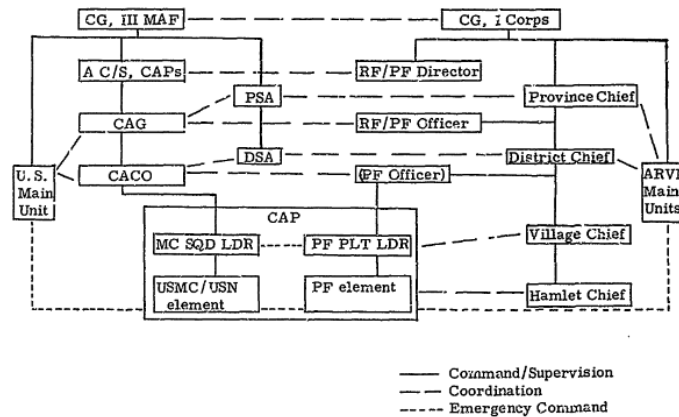


Figure 1. Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, A-5

²² Ibid.

CAPs (4)	
C. O. :	USMC Sqd Ldr
X. O. :	PF Pit Ldr
	1 USN Corpsman
	1 USMC Grenadier
	4 PF enlisted
	3 Squads each
Sqd Ldr:	USMC FT Ldr
	3 USMC enlisted
	10 PF enlisted

Figure 2. Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, A-2

The organization of the Combined Action Platoon was such that the success or failure of the CAP relied on the performance of the squad leader in charge of the local platoon. As Allnutt put it:

This man is the key to the entire operation, and on his capabilities all else hinges. He must lead in a vacuum, with no higher officers behind him to reinforce his authority, nowhere to pass the buck, and nowhere to hide (such as an NCO club) if things go wrong. He must have the strength of character to enforce his decisions against argument or complaint, and the endurance to live with his mistakes. And above all, in his isolated position, he must be an excellent tactician. Rarely is such responsibility placed in the hands of a 22 year-old (that is the average--some are 19) Sergeant in other units. If he is strong, smart, and earns the respect of his men, the CAP is a superb fighting machine; but if he weakens (because "after all, I have to live with these guys"), loses control, or makes mistakes that destroy his men's respect for him, the CAP goes slack and becomes not only ineffectual or a liability, but also quite vulnerable to the enemy.²³

The stated desired end state of the CAP program was the pacification of rural Vietnam. An individual Combined Action Platoon was to pacify the villages and hamlets within its area of operation and ensure that the inhabitants are willing and able to maintain that security.²⁴ It aimed to do this by providing village security, consolidating intelligence activities, improving the local

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 36-39.

standard of living, strengthening the local governing institutions, promoting support of the national government and its objectives, and preparing the PFs to eventually fully take over operations from American personnel.²⁵ To meet these goals, marine squads that were integrated with local PFs were expected to conduct integrated military operations, train the PFs, gather, evaluate, disseminate, and react to local intelligence, and participate in Civic Action and Psyops programs.²⁶

Command structure was, in theory, parallel with authority shared between PF and the USMC, but in practice, this varied.²⁷ At any rate, even the illusion of shared authority and autonomy of command was critically important to a people and culture that so valued and had fought millennia for independence and self-rule. In theory, the marine squad leader was to jointly plan operations three days in advance with the PF platoon leader to help improve the martial skills of the PF. In practice, this occurred less than half the time; marine squad leaders would plan events and share the plan with the PF shortly before operations began as a security precaution.²⁸ CAPs had observed that enemy responses indicated that the VC had prior knowledge of the CAP's plans.²⁹ Moreover, the PFs often could not read maps and were unable to communicate properly with the marines due to the language barrier.³⁰ PFs did have the ability to suggest an alternative course of action. Given that PFs were better attuned to conditions on the ground, the Marines would more often than not adhere to the course of action suggested by the PF.³¹ Disputes were common enough over a course of action if for no other reason than the PF

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

PL desired to display authority in front of his men. This is an important reason that the CAP ostensibly has a parallel command structure rather than a linear one; it takes into consideration the culture and attitudes of the local Vietnamese. They needed to feel independent and in control in order for pacification attempts to be effective. However, they were not properly trained to immediately take over military operations in an area and effectively secure it. Therefore, the PFs needed experienced American military personnel to train them up and make the key military decisions in the beginning stages of pacification.³²

Patrolling and ambushing the enemy remained the first priority of CAPs.³³ Typically, daytime operations in the CAP were recon and training patrols. After this, the PFs would typically go home and the Marines would borrow abandoned or occupied houses in the area they were staying. This habit did not seem to perturb the locals.³⁴ PFs typically would return around dusk for night operations. A command post was usually established on a good vantage point and static or roving ambushes were set up and manned through the night. A minimum ratio of at least two PFs for every marine was maintained so as to ensure that the PFs were getting combat experience.³⁵ CAPs were also often pulled to assist in combined operations with other US and ARVN forces as the situation required.

The continuing presence and active combat operations in the vicinity of the village in which the Marines were embedded provided a feeling of security which was solidified over time. The VC was denied supplies, taxes, and recruits from the village through these actions. Protracted interaction between American personnel and Vietnamese villagers served to humanize

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 31.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 34.

both parties to one another. This also served to further build trust between the parties, which created a much more effective counterinsurgency force and reinforced feelings of security. Association of PFs with American military members built confidence in their ability to defend their own villages. The relationship established between the Marines and the Villagers also allowed for the villagers to feel safe enough to pass on information to the Marines and allowed the Marines to be present to act on that information.³⁶

Though intelligence gathering was theoretically a part of the Combined Action Program's mission, the intelligence gathering apparatus of the CAP was fairly informal. Intelligence gathering efforts were mostly focused on tip gathering from the locals who volunteered this information as they gained confidence in the CAP.³⁷ This is the type of information that would likely never be divulged to passing US and ARVN troops that were not embedded with a village. The populace would tend to side with whoever was perceived as being stronger and in control, and the familiarity and confidence in the CAP that was established over time also went a long way towards achieving the end goal of pacification.

The CAP also allowed the course of action in terms of nation building and civic action to be more reflexive to the situation on the ground. For instance, many CAPs were strongly against giving "handouts" to the locals in order to assist the prosperity of their villages and form a better opinion of the Americans. It was often found that these handouts were building a reliance on American charity within the villages and only created discord. Village leaders would often hoard the supplies to themselves and many items would end up being sold for a profit at markets by the villagers.³⁸ By decentralizing the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam, leaders on the ground

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

would have the ability to observe occurrences such as this and quickly react to those circumstances—in this case, by discouraging handouts.³⁹ For these reasons CAP officials placed less emphasis on handouts and large projects and placed greater emphasis on “short term, high impact, low cost” smaller projects. These projects often included “efforts as village cleanups, teaching the kids to swim (and take a bath), encouraging athletics, forming “boy scouts,” and convincing the people to “raise rabbits or plant an extra vegetable crop out of the traditional season” and other efforts such as providing medical care.⁴⁰

This was all aimed at building rapport with the locals in order to establish a working relationship and enlist the help of the villagers. According to the official USMC report, the Combined Action Program was supposed to operate according to the flow chart below.

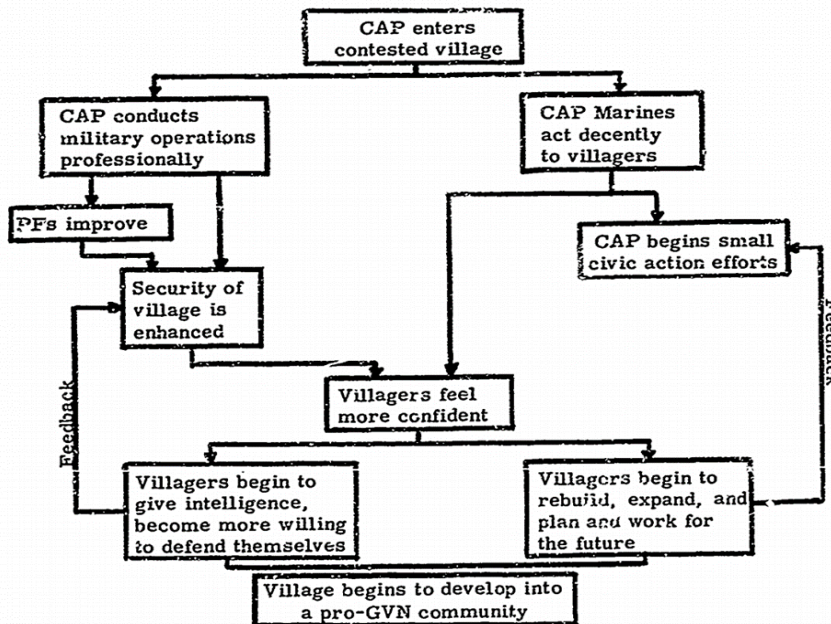


Figure 3. Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 52.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

It is not unfair to say that, for the most part, Combined Action Platoons did function as they were supposed to with occasional hiccups. In terms of nation building and pacification, it was a superior program to Search and Destroy—for what little that is worth given that the primary aim of Search and Destroy was not to build but to destroy. However, there are a number of glaring issues with the practice and implementation of the CAP that made the program impossible to effectively utilize in all of South Vietnam.

The most grievous issue with the program is one that is evident by looking at the flow chart above. The chart ends with “village begins to develop into a pro-GVN (Government of Vietnam) community.” Though the USMC gave lip service to the notion of “working themselves out of a job” by purporting to train the Vietnamese to take over security and governance, it is clear that this was not the focus of the program nor were concrete steps taken to ensure stability after the Americans left.

For instance, there is little evidence of formal marine training of their PF counterparts—with many being so poorly trained they did not even know how to disassemble their rifles for cleaning.⁴¹ Allnutt attempts to eschew this glaring issue with the CAP by dismissing the PF as part time soldiers who were unwilling or unable to learn martial skills from younger marines. He further goes on to claim that the CAP dramatically increased the fighting effectiveness of the PF as they learn through osmosis—citing a kill to death ration of 2.7:1 and 8:1 in independent PF Platoons and CAPs respectively.⁴² However, this claim is dubious at best. It is well established fact that the enemy body count in the Vietnam War was dramatically inflated due to the emphasis on body count as a measure of victory. Consider the fact that the NVA and Viet Cong

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 36-30.

⁴² *Ibid.*

were offshoots of the Viet Minh who had spent the last few decades honing their military skills against the Japanese, French, and Americans. The PFs were, as earlier described, poorly trained part time soldiers. True, the PFs were on the defensive which is the stronger form of warfare; however, the equipment, training, and tactical prowess of the VC should have been enough to mitigate that fact and inflict more losses than they sustained in operations against independent PF platoons. The level of terror the local villagers felt about the VC and the freedom with which they seemed to operate in PF platoons' areas of operation would seem to point to the fact that the VC were regularly able to best the PFs in battle. Furthermore, the supposed 8:1 kill death ratio of CAPs is easier explained by USMC presence and leadership of the PF rather than gained military experience and training. Allnutt readily admits that Marine squad leaders were the ones mainly in control of the CAP; as the old proverb goes "an army of sheep, led by a lion, is better than an army of lions, led by a sheep."

Furthermore, it is irrelevant that the PFs were simple villagers who just wanted to survive under any government. The same could be said of most people in the world. The fact of the matter is that "pacification" is something that must be cultivated from the ground up if it is to be successful and lasting. The same is true of soldiering skills. This is one of the reasons why the CAP achieved any measure of success; it fostered security and protection at the local level. The great irony of the CAP is that it went to great lengths to accomplish this but did not take action to train the PFs to maintain it.

Ultimately, pacification could only come if the villagers themselves desired it and could secure it. American soldiers could not be present forever, and it was imperative that the villagers be properly trained and equipped to sustain the peace after the Americans were gone. The CAP viewed the establishment of security in local villages as a means to the end of securing the

support of the locals. The emphasis should have been placed on the training up of PFs to secure and maintain the security of their villages with little to no American assistance. The Americans were too few in number to permanently maintain a presence in every village and hamlet in South Vietnam.

Emphasis was placed on winning over the local populace via benevolent treatment by US personnel.⁴³ This is all well and good that there was an effort to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, but how does this translate into victory? True, the VC were denied taxes, food, and recruits, but those things were simply a speedbump to a determined enemy; those resources can come from elsewhere—especially when a conventional campaign against North Vietnam was out of the question due to fear of Soviet and Chinese response. More saliently, if the USMC was serving as the lynchpin holding together security in an area, all the VC had to do was outlast the Marine presence in the area—which is one of the main reasons an insurgency is successful in the first place. At that point, the Marines haven't solved the problem anymore than the proverbial Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke; that is to say, as soon as the Marines left, a "flood" of VC would sweep back through the territory they once held.

The ability of an enemy to continue fighting is their means to fight multiplied by their will to fight; if either one drops to zero the enemy is no longer going to continue to fight. In this way, the predominant theory of Search and Destroy in Vietnam was superior insofar as they tried to reduce the means to fight of the Vietnamese Communists to zero—albeit through literal annihilation of the Vietnamese fighting force in pitched battle. Though this myopic strategy of cold, hard battle calculus was not reasonably attainable, at least the desired end state of the

⁴³ Brewington, *Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement*, 4-5.

strategy was a permanent solution. The CAP was more concerned with establishing immediate security in an area with an eye towards achieving benign neglect or token support from the local villagers.

The Army viewed the VC as a partisan force rather than an insurgent force; they believed that the VC were operating as an Auxiliary to the NVA rather than an indigenous armed extension of the Communist Party—an insurgent force—in Vietnam capable of independent operations without support.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Army concluded that the strategy that would be most effective at pacifying South Vietnam would be conventional military actions aimed at cutting off the VC from their supply lines from North Vietnam. Conversely, the USMC viewed the VC as an insurgent force and therefore purportedly advocated a “take and hold” occupation strategy that would eventually manifest itself in the form of the Combined Action Program. However, the narrative that there was some great difference of opinion between the Army and Marine brass and that if the Marines had simply been allowed to act without restriction from the Army the combat operations in Vietnam would have been far different and more successful is rather dubious. “The Combined Action Platoon's (CAP) genesis was not a deliberate plan from a higher headquarters, rather, it was a solution to one infantry battalion's problem of an expanding TAOR (Tactical Area of Operations).”⁴⁵ The fact that the CAP arose as a response to conditions in the field and not as a deliberate strategy from higher ups would suggest that the USMC had a fair degree of operational autonomy within their designated sectors of South Vietnam. The fact that there were only around 111 CAPs at the height of the program would indicate that there was little mainstream military interest in the CAP until after the war.⁴⁶ Simply put, whatever the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

⁴⁵ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., F-17.

failings of the US military during the Vietnam War were, they were shared by all branches; no one branch can be said to be less at fault than another. Inter-branch tensions aside, the notion that the Army would not allow the USMC to conduct the war in the manner they saw fit and that the Vietnam War was lost as a result seems to be an act of historical revisionism aimed at preserving the mythical reputation of the fighting prowess of the USMC rather than being grounded in historical fact.

There is a tendency among contemporary writers on the subject to create a false dichotomy between Search and Destroy operations and the CAP rather than viewing them as two parts of a counterinsurgency operation that need to be properly balanced. This dichotomy is born out of viewing the Vietnam War with the benefit of hindsight. The modern historical consensus is that the Vietnam War was lost; therefore, the strategic and operational decisions made by the United States during the war necessarily were seriously flawed—or so the thinking goes. However, the merits of the Search and Destroy initiative are seldom considered. While attempting to gain victory through pure attrition is certainly not an efficient form of warfare, one must consider the military and political situation in Vietnam. The NVA was a legitimate threat to South Vietnam that needed to be curtailed; regardless of their inferiority in terms of training and equipment compared to their American counterparts, they still possessed the ability to wrest control of territory from the Americans if they were not careful. The Tet Offensive, and the Battle of Khe Sanh in particular, serve as evidence of this fact. In many instances, American personnel were narrowly hanging on to territory through sheer force of will during the Tet Offensive. Furthermore, the Vietnamese communists were heavily reliant on military and political support from the Soviet Union and PRC. If the United States could, through continual defeat of the NVA, exhaust the supply of manpower to the NVA, destroy their morale, and

convince the Soviet Union and PRC that continued support of North Vietnam was a bad investment, it would go a long way towards winning the war. Similarly, the will of the American civilian to continue fighting was heavily based on what was being broadcast to their living rooms each night on the news. Without visual evidence of progress in Vietnam through conventional military victories, it is unlikely that support for the war would continue. Search and Destroy operations filled these roles nicely.

One of the great dangers of the CAP was that it violated a maxim of war—Concentration of Force—which an army should not do without good reason. The CAP program involved the integration of small units into local villages which diffused and diluted the combat power of the US military over a great area. While such a force was excellent at boosting local support and providing security from smaller VC infiltration and attack, one must consider the security liability of not having large combined arms forces in the field. Without large conventional units to fend off and eliminate the larger conventional NVA forces, the CAP would have been easy prey, which would render the program ineffective. Putting aside the skill of the American warrior, to be frank, if an NVA battalion or regiment sized element decided to assault a CAP, there would be very little that a company sized element—three quarters of which were poorly trained and equipped Vietnamese militia—spread over several villages and hamlets could do to stop it. The implementation of the CAP alone would have made it much easier for a conventional NVA force to achieve control over portions of South Vietnam through defeat in detail.

According to Gen. Westmoreland:

In what may be called a pacification approach to anti-insurgency warfare, the marines achieved some noteworthy results, particularly with one of the more ingenious innovations developed in South Vietnam, the Combined Action Platoon...Although I disseminated information on the platoons and their success to other commands, which were free to adopt the idea as local conditions might dictate, I simply had not enough

numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet; that would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail. I admired the élan of the marines and had come to know it at first hand. I was one of the few U. S. Army officers, if not the only one, ever to hold a senior position in a Marine command.⁴⁷

Westmoreland was a fan of the idea of the Combined Action Platoon in principle. However, it was simply not practical or prudent to try and implement it over the whole of Vietnam. The accusation that Westmoreland and other army leaders were resistant to the idea due to branch rivalry or distaste for particular marine leaders is ridiculous on its face. The buildup of NVA forces in I Corps from 1966 onwards and the subsequent trend towards larger battles in 1967 and 1968 would support Westmoreland's assessment.⁴⁸ Furthermore, from December of 1967 to February of 1968, nine out of seventy-eight CAPs, or roughly 11.5 percent, were overrun and forced to withdraw or were relocated due to large concentrations of enemy forces opposing them.⁴⁹ This seemed to have a psychological effect on the villagers; this indicated to them that when things got rough they could not count on the CAP or the Americans to defend them.⁵⁰

There is a concerted effort in the relation of the history of the USMC in Vietnam and the CAP to cast the Army as being obstinate simply to spite the USMC and that the Army was only fixated on death counts and quick results. The idea seems to be that the only problem hindering the USMC from singlehandedly securing victory in Vietnam "was that they were under operational control of Westmoreland, who was commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). The Marines were subordinate to the Army."⁵¹ To that end, Maj. Brewington, in his paper "Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement,"

⁴⁷ William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY, 1976), 166.

⁴⁸ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 31.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁰ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 36.

⁵¹ Brewington, *Combined Action Platoons*, 11.

attempts to dismiss the concerns of Army brass such as General Westmoreland who felt that the CAP fostered a dependence on American personnel and that the Americans did not possess the numbers to place a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet in Vietnam. Brewington dismisses these objections as “ridiculous,” asserting that it was not necessary to place squads in every village simultaneously and, even if it had been the requirement, it could have been accomplished with only 167,000 men of the 550,000 troops the US had in country at its peak. How Brewington arrives at that number is unclear. However, taking that number at face value, Brewington fails to consider the sheer size of the communist forces that had aligned themselves against the United States. Troop numbers varied on both sides as the war progressed; estimates place NVA and VC forces at around 690,000 men under arms in 1967 and a further 320,000 men provided by the Chinese.⁵² This was at a time when many US and ARVN troops were saddled with maintaining order in the face of unrest in South Vietnam, among many other tasks. Moreover, recruitment in the United States remained low due to the unpopularity of the war, which reduced the ability of the US to muster replacements; any significant drain on the men that could be utilized in a conventional maneuver unit would have been an unacceptable risk. A reduced US conventional force puts the South Vietnamese government and major population centers, the US military, ARVN, and every village and hamlet in South Vietnam at risk from communist forces. Consider, for a moment, if a major offensive—much like the Tet Offensive, where the US and ARVN, mustered in conventional line units, had been barely able to hold their ground—had occurred if the CAP had been implemented as the USMC has described it. The USMC failed to recognize that even one defeat of American conventional forces at the hands of the NVA in pitched battle would give a profound legitimacy to North Vietnam and be invaluable

⁵² Brantley Womack, *China and Vietnam*, (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176.

to the Vietnamese communists as a propaganda tool that would likely further reduce American support for the Vietnam War. Diffusing American combat power in this way would have made a Vietnamese advance and rout of American and ARVN forces far easier if not inevitable.

Supporters of the CAP claim that the drain on manpower would have been minimal as troops would simply hand over security responsibilities to the PFs as soon as the village had been pacified. However, by the USMC's own internal reports on the matter, "By the end of 1968, only 32 CAPs had been relocated, which is not a very impressive record for three and a half years. Significantly, the first CAPs to be deployed (those in the Phu Bai area) are still in the same village (though the TAOC bound areas have changed) after more than four years."⁵³ Considering that there was a demand from the people of the United States and officials in Washington to see more rapid and tangible progress in Vietnam, if this track record of pacification were to be extrapolated to the whole of US forces in Vietnam, it would have been seen as unacceptable. Right or wrong, there would have been immense pressure to speed up the pacification effort which, given that effective counterinsurgency takes time, would have resulted in the demand for more troops to attempt to pacify other villages yet controlled by the VC. The most likely approach to obtain those men would be to pull soldiers already in Vietnam from other duties which would result in the reduced effective manpower of conventional units that the USMC claims would not occur. Simply put, the merits of the CAP aside, there were simply not enough American men under arms available to meet the demands of both the primary security needs of South Vietnam against the NVA and VC as well as take the lead in counterinsurgency, pacification, and nation building efforts in Vietnam.

⁵³ Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 62.

Furthermore, even if manpower had been sufficient to meet the demands of the nationwide institution of the Combined Action Program in Vietnam, there was a much larger cultural issue that made success—regardless of what policy the Americans adopted—in Vietnam exceedingly unlikely. The people of South Vietnam simply did not care. They did not care about the outcome of the war. They did not care about democracy or the success of the government of South Vietnam. They did not care about being strong enough to defend themselves. To them, there was no difference in whether the VC or the Americans prevailed; they were simply not invested in the fight beyond their desire to live in peace in their traditional way. This attitude was so pervasive that they even refused to take simple steps to improve themselves and their own well-being so that they might be strong enough to defend themselves from the VC after the Americans left. For instance, the Popular Forces were the subject of great frustration to CAP marines. According to Allnut:

“A common complaint was that the PF's were lazy and could not be counted on in combat. The PF's would shoot straight up in the air to scare the VC. PF's would feign illness to avoid going on patrol. Deals would be struck between VC and PF's on patrol routes. PFs were scared of the VC and had no ambition to learn... There was the possibility that PF's were VC or VC sympathizers. PFs had access to your radios, freq's [sic], patrol routes, and rest stops. Who does one trust? Villagers were in a quandary as they often had relatives in the local VC. They did not want to see their relatives killed so cooperation on enemy intelligence was limited.”⁵⁴

Indeed, when the CAP did held classes—some of which were on basic sanitation and hygiene rather than warfighting—only around 24 percent of the assigned PF strength would attend.⁵⁵ These people were unskilled and untrained with no desires to rectify that fact or even provide basic security for their own homes—content to let Americans shed blood on their behalf. One

⁵⁴ Allnut, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, F-20.

village chief related to the Americans that the only thing he wanted from them was the provision of security and nothing more; he wanted Americans to shed blood in their stead.⁵⁶ Part of the USMC's failure to achieve their goal of 74 CAPs by 1967 was due to a lack of PFs who were willing to defend their own homes.⁵⁷ Many of the young males of the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam were fleeing their homes, being drafted into ARVN, or joining the VC.⁵⁸

Furthermore, neither the PFs nor the Vietnamese villagers on the whole could even be bothered to learn basic medical care in order to achieve some degree of independence from the Americans and improve their own quality of life—content to let the Americans do that for them too. Allnut also writes that:

In particular, the daily [Medical Civic Action Program] (performed almost everywhere) and the occasional [Medical Evacuation] (which service is used more frequently) for ill or injured Vietnamese than for Americans appreciated by the villagers more than any other function of the CAP, save the more basic provision of security, and do more to cement CAP/village relations than any other effort. In fact, the benefits are so great that it is sad that such projects cannot be turned over to the Vietnamese (after the Marines have capitalized on the initial improvement in relations with the villagers) so that the GVN can reap the rewards. As it is, CAP corpsmen have seldom been able to attract a Vietnamese trainee for any length of time, MEDEVACs are handled exclusively by Americans, and the difference between American and Vietnamese hospitals are so pronounced that even seriously ill villagers were observed to demand American treatment before consenting to a MEDEVAC.”⁵⁹

If the Vietnamese were unwilling to learn and assist in their own medical care—literally investing in saving their own lives—there is little chance that they would fully engage in the effort to drive out the VC and NVA.

⁵⁶ Ibid., G-3.

⁵⁷ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁹ Allnut, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 47-48.

The Popular Forces aside, the USMC experienced failure far greater than what their insistence on the adoption of the CAP during the Vietnam War would suggest. The lack of an integrated supply system left many CAPs to scrounge for or pilfer supplies on their own.⁶⁰ The lack of a formal intelligence communication channel up and down the chain of command, which was so touted by proponents as it apparently was more effective at gathering tips from the locals, was a major flaw. Given that there was no official or central intelligence collection agency, the CAPs were unable to report their observations to military leaders. Leaders were blind to what was going on in the villages and countryside and this fact may have even contributed to the US being taken by surprise during the Tet Offensive.⁶¹ Proponents of the CAP often cite a decline in VC activity and casualties from 1968 to 1969 as a quantifiable measure of success of the CAP, stating that the enemy was unable to penetrate areas occupied by CAPs.⁶² However, this decline is likely a result of either the VC realizing the US had turned against the war and lying low until the Americans left, a shift in CAP strategy to a more mobile form of warfare that did not result in larger pitched battles as often, a reduction in fighting ability of the VC and NVA due to heavy losses at the hands of conventional units during the Tet offensive, or a combination thereof.⁶³ Furthermore, some CAPs were “cold,” not due to lack of VC, but rather the inverse; many local village leaders often made arrangements with the NLF.⁶⁴

Language barriers also caused major trouble in CAPs and led to events that were detrimental to the good order, discipline, and morale of the CAP that could have been easily avoided by effective communication through qualified interpreters.⁶⁵ There was a lack of a

⁶⁰ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 47.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

concerted effort to obtain Defense Language School graduates who could speak Vietnamese for the CAP.⁶⁶ Recruitment for the CAP was less than ideal. Many of the soldiers who would have been good fits for the CAP were excluded from the program as it was viewed as a soft duty and many of the slots were taken up by low quality marines whose commanders had sent them to the CAP to get rid of them.⁶⁷ Many proponents of the CAP cite a high level of re-volunteering for CAP duty by CAP marines as evidence of the success of the program. In reality, that fact is not a viable metric for judging the efficacy of any military operation one way or the other. It is simply indicative of a higher morale or esprit de corps which is not predicated on the efficacy of their counter-insurgency efforts.

Perhaps the best indicator for how successful the Combined Action Program was is how the VC viewed the CAP. Though no mention was made of the Combined Action Program in *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam* (which speaks volumes in and of itself), the NVA and VC seemed to regard the CAPs as a secondary objective during the Tet Offensive. Survivors of the CAPs recollect that they were attacked when the enemy was moving to or returning from attacks on larger cities.⁶⁸ If the CAPs had been as effective as the USMC claims it was, then the VC and NVA would have made a much more concerted effort to oust the CAP marines from their villages.

The Vietnam War is one of the most complicated wars in American history. The war was complicated in how it began, how it was conducted, and how it ended. Whether the war can be classified as a victory or a defeat largely depends on how a person defines victory and defeat and what the conditions for those states are. Was the United States defeated in Vietnam? Is it fair to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 56.

characterize a force as defeated if, while they were engaged in the conflict, their policy objective, namely propping up the state of South Vietnam, was achieved and they suffered lower losses on an order of magnitude? Is it fair to characterize a force as victorious if they came to terms with the enemy and withdrew voluntarily, especially when the enemy violated that treaty and achieved their objectives two years later? Can it be characterized as a stalemate if both sides at one point achieved their stated objectives? The answers to these questions are well beyond the scope of this paper and likely beyond the ability of anyone to definitively answer or prove beyond a shadow of a doubt. At any rate, given the apathetic nature of the Vietnamese people towards Americans and the idea of a democratic self-governance, there was nothing the Americans could have done, short of indefinite occupation, to ensure the lasting security of the state of South Vietnam. Neither the Americans nor anyone else could instill a love of country, desire for self-governance, and drive to be self-reliant into the Vietnamese people. If that is defeat, then the Americans and their allies were soundly defeated.

The global perception is that the United States and her allies lost the Vietnam War. This had a profound, irrevocable effect on the American people, their government, and their military. The naivety and innocence of the American public was gone. Their government was not always right and their politicians could be corrupt. Their people could be deceived. Their will was not indomitable. Their military, which, prior to this point had never fallen short of achieving their political objectives, was not invincible.

It is out of this quagmire that the legend of the Combined Action Program and all its mythical attributes and properties are borne. The American military suffered a trauma so impactful that it found itself in a doctrinal and morale rut so great that it would not see its confidence completely restored until the overwhelming American victory in the First Gulf War.

To be blunt, the United States Marine Corps makes claims of martial superiority over every friend and foe that are not based in reality—though they are certainly preeminent in public relations efforts. It is difficult to continue to make those claims of superiority with a blemish as large as the Vietnam War on their record. The supposed effectiveness of the Combined Action Program is propagated largely by USMC officers trying to save face after the fact. It is much easier to pawn off responsibility for the failures of all branches of service during the Vietnam War on all branches—the US Army in particular—but the Marine Corps than to admit mistakes and accept fallibility. It is easier to dredge up an obscure program that saw limited implementation and moderate success and hold it up as the “silver bullet” that would have been a surefire way to defeat the NLF—if only the Army had let them—than to accept blame.

About the author

Bret Scarpaci is a junior at Marquette University and is currently pursuing a B.A. in Military History. Bret has had formal and informal education on maneuver warfare, counterinsurgency techniques, and small unit tactics. Bret aims to pursue a graduate level education in the realm of military history and either gain employment as a defense analyst or a university instructor.

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