

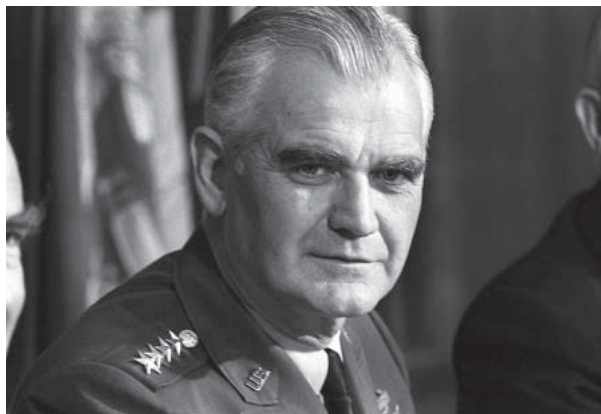
# THE USMC'S COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS: A COUNTER-INSURGENCY SUCCESS IN VIETNAM AND WHY IT FAILED TO DERAIL US MILITARY STRATEGY



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The literature on the Vietnam War, particularly as it pertains to the United States (US), is voluminous to say the least. This article therefore proceeds in the humble understanding that while it is unlikely to “go where no man has gone before,” there remains the hope that in choosing to highlight one of the success stories from the conflict, instead of the more popular pastime of spotlighting failures, some paths that have traditionally remained less traveled might be explored in greater depth.

Most analyses of US involvement in the Vietnam War are unanimous in their conclusion that the US was defeated and that this defeat was due in large part to the military strategy and overall approach that the American civilian and military leadership took in Vietnam. The US military, led in Vietnam by General William C. Westmoreland from 1965-1968, viewed the situation in Vietnam largely through the lens of the Second World War and the Korean War. Armed with these experiences, they not surprisingly pursued a conventional, big-unit strategy of attrition. This required enormous quantities of manpower and material, employed a mammoth amount of firepower, and resulted in significant casualties on both sides.<sup>1</sup>



General William C. Westmoreland

Courtesy of Author

It is easy to be critical, particularly in the glare of historical hindsight. This criticism is made easier still, and amplified, when the effort is associated with a failure, especially one that destroyed so many lives and resources for what eventually came to be seen as an ill-defined purpose. Thus, rather than centre this article on a US failure in Vietnam this paper will analyze instead the United States Marine Corps (USMC) Combined Action Platoon (CAP) Program. This is one of the few examples of US efforts to defeat the North

Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, more commonly referred to as the Viet Cong (VC), that actually bore some fruit.

While there has been wide acknowledgement of “the other war” in Vietnam, that which was fought primarily at the village and hamlet level<sup>2</sup>, attention has tended to rest on the efforts made from 1967 onward at “pacifying” the South Vietnam countryside under General Westmoreland’s Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Less known and

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discussed, however, is the CAP Program, established prior to this in August 1965. Despite drawbacks, the CAP Program showed great potential, and of the various pacification efforts in Vietnam, it has been widely considered as the concept that held the greatest promise as a strategic alternative.<sup>3</sup> Despite its potential, however, the CAP Program failed to gain prominence and critical mass in South Vietnam.

The thrust of this article will be twofold. First, it will offer an analysis of the USMC's CAP Program: how it came into being, why it was the Marines who instituted it and not the Army, the specific successes and failures of the program itself, and, ultimately, why it failed to get much past the experimental stage.

Second, analysis of the CAP Program will be used to highlight two elements of American strategic thinking, and the challenges and problems the country encountered in pursuing this strategy. The first element, the tactical acumen and strength of CAP, serves to highlight the overarching flaws of the conventional approach that defined US military strategy in Vietnam. The second element, by examining the Program's demobilization and the fact that, despite positive results, it remained a relatively small-scale initiative, provides some insight into the nature and challenges faced in the American military regarding organizational adaptability and institutional learning. Understanding how CAP was formed, evolved, expanded and eventually disbanded reveals a great deal about the doctrinal rigidity under which the US Army operates.

## Military Assistance

British historian Charles Callwell noted in 1906 that small wars are defined not by their size but, rather, by their characteristics<sup>4</sup>; this is certainly true for the conflict in Vietnam. By 1968, US forces in Vietnam numbered 536,000, Allied forces (Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines) numbered 66,000, and the South Vietnamese Army and its militias totalled approximately 670,000.<sup>5</sup> These numbers certainly imply that the war was executed in a conventional manner by firepower-based big unit armies. The fact that large-scale battles were the exception rather than the rule, however, and that the real struggle took place at the village level amongst the people, indicates that the war was in reality a "small war."

The war in Vietnam was not a conventional war. It took place at the village level, along the densely populated coastal plains where 90% of the population in South Vietnam lived on approximately 15% of the land area. While there seemed to be a "collective cognitive dissonance on the part of the US Army to recognize a war of rebellion, a people's war, even when they were fighting in it,"<sup>6</sup> the same accusation cannot be levelled at the Marines.

The USMC has a strong tradition in fighting guerillas and in conducting what would today be termed as "unconventional" operations. Since their formation in 1775, the Marines have stressed the qualities of adaptability, initiative and improvisation. They recognize that total readiness is more of an objective than a reality, and that the war one prepares for is rarely the war one gets.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the philosophical underpinnings of the Marine propensity for, and skill at, counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, events in the interwar years also played a key role in the establishment of the CAP Program in Vietnam. Specifically, American interventions in Haiti (1915-1934), Santo Domingo (1916-1922) and Nicaragua (1925-1933) all involved Marines integrating into indigenous forces to combat an insurgency.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the CAP Program instituted in Vietnam represented the fourth time Marines had joined with local forces in combined action to battle an insurgency. A strong case could also be made for the inclusion of the Philippine War, where the Marines fought at the local level with indigenous tribes to great effect. Thus this would make the CAP Program the fifth example of combined action.

The Marines distilled their experiences and observations from these interventions into the *Small Wars Manual*, published in 1940. The *Manual* has since become a bible of sorts, not only for the Marines but for other branches of the service. It was re-published

in 1990, with dated references (regarding, for example, the care of mules) being removed. The *Small Wars Manual* remains highly applicable to current operating environments and is perhaps the strongest single piece of evidence that the Marines, more than any other branch in the US military, truly understand the nature of counterinsurgency warfare. Two passages, among many others, highlight this understanding well:

The application of purely military measures may not... by itself restore peace and orderly government because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political or social.<sup>9</sup>

In small wars... the goal is to obtain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life.... (Above all, in) small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population.<sup>10</sup>



Courtesy of Author

Lieutenant General Victor Krulak

Contrary to the muscle-bound, raw force image of the Marines, the *Manual* highlights the non-military elements present in any conflict, the use of minimal force, respect for local cultures and, above all, a respect for the security, welfare and dignity of the indigenous populations whom the Marines are often charged to protect.

In addition to philosophy, and hard-earned and well-documented experience, USMC leadership also provided the foundation upon which CAP was formed. Two individuals in particular were central to the establishment of the CAP Program: Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific (FMFPac), 1964-1968, and Major General Lewis Walt, Commander, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), June 1965-1967, which throughout this period was deployed in the northernmost corps area, I Corps.

General Krulak went to Vietnam eight times between 1962-1964 as the Special Assistant for COIN Operations, part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While there, General Krulak met several times with Sir Robert Thompson, a key architect of the British success against guerillas in Malaya and a person whom Krulak evidently respected. Krulak studied the complex situation in Vietnam and admits that while the necessity of locating and destroying the VC was relatively easy to understand, the necessity and manner in which one could win the loyalty of the people was less clear.<sup>11</sup> Thompson had established a set of COIN principles based on his Malayan experiences and, drawing on these, he advised Krulak that "the people's trust is primary. It will come hard because they are fearful and suspicious. Protection is the most important thing you can bring them."<sup>12</sup> Once security was established, Thompson also stressed health, education, land, prosperity and privacy. General Krulak took this advice to heart and called for the main military activities to be shifted from the jungle to the coastal plains.<sup>13</sup> He became convinced that the most important contribution the Marines could make in South Vietnam was to deny the VC their most important resource—the people. Krulak also took his cue from North Vietnamese leader General Vo Nguyen Giap, who noted that "Without the people, we have no information. They hide us, protect us, feed us and tend our wounded."<sup>14</sup>

General Lewis Walt was of the same mind as Krulak and Thompson; all three of them recognized the village/hamlet as the centre of gravity in Vietnam. This was fortunate given that General Walt, as commander of III MAF, was ultimately the person in charge of implementing Krulak's ideas and defending Marine Corps initiatives in their tactical area of operation (TAOR). What began then was a heated debate between the USMC and General Westmoreland and senior Army leaders over military strategy in Vietnam. This debate lasted from March 1965 when the US first formally committed troops to the conflict in Vietnam up until General Westmoreland was replaced by General Creighton Abrams in June 1968.

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General Krulak in particular argued for a “spreading inkblot” or “oil spot” strategy, also known as the “clear and hold” strategy, which involved securing one village after another. Krulak’s strategy was based on two factors:

- a lack of confidence in the “search and destroy” approach that was championed by Westmoreland; and
- lessons drawn from previous small wars in which the Marines were involved.<sup>15</sup>

General Krulak was a studious man and fond of research. As the war progressed, he cited studies that indicated that contact rates for search and destroy missions were less than 2%. It was clear to him that the VC was easily evading US forces and that they had the initiative. Validating Krulak’s claims to some extent was a 1966 study of 50 operations. The study indicated that of the operations successfully making contact, the VC initiated contact 85% of the time and achieved “tactical surprise” 80% of the time. In only 5% of operations did American commanders feel that they had “reasonably accurate knowledge of enemy positions and strength.”<sup>16</sup>

In essence, the Marines were comfortable with counterinsurgency because of their long history of small wars and policing actions.<sup>17</sup> They have long-recognized that “small wars are conceived in uncertainty, are conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority and under indeterminate order lacking specific instruction”<sup>18</sup>, and that in such an environment, the social, economic and political aspects of a conflict are often equally or more important than military actions, especially when conducting operations amongst the general population. Contrary to their hard-nosed image, an overarching USMC principle is to achieve results with minimal use of force and loss of life. In other words, do not fight small wars using big war methods.<sup>19</sup> Given this historical and philosophical foundation, articulated in the timeless *Small Wars Manual*, it is hardly surprising that soon after landing in Vietnam the Marines were itching to get into the villages and commence aggressive patrolling, contrary to the wishes of General Westmoreland.

Although thousands of American military advisors had been in Vietnam for years (12,000 in 1963; 23,000 in 1964<sup>20</sup>), the official start of the American ground war in Vietnam began 8 March 1965 when 3,500 Marines landed just north of Danang, the second largest city in South Vietnam, in order to secure the Phu Bai US airbase. The Marine commanders quickly realized that the geographical scope of the mission—to secure the ten square miles around the air base—vastly exceeded the resources of their single battalion—the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines. As a solution to this problem, Captain John J. Mullen, the battalion’s adjutant and civil affairs officer, suggested combining squads of 12 Marines, usually accompanied by one Navy corpsman (or medic), with the indigenous Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) platoons that consisted of approximately 35 men.<sup>21</sup> Captain Mullen’s commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William Taylor, agreed to the plan. Taylor then gained the support of General Nguyen Van Chuan, Commanding General of the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN (Army of the Republic of South Vietnam) Division, and the Combined Action Platoons were born. The Phu Bai TAOR in which the airbase was situated had six PF platoons residing within it. In August 1965, the first four CAPs of Joint Action Company (later changed to Combined Action Company) began operations, organized and trained by First Lieutenant Ek.<sup>22</sup>

## Combined Action

The concept of combining Marines with indigenous forces, as has been noted above, was not new, having been employed in various guises by the USMC during the inter-war years in Haiti, Santo Domingo and Nicaragua, and during the Philippine War 1899-1902. Thus, to attribute the establishment of the CAP Program to one single individual would be somewhat erroneous and misleading. The Program was not the result of in-depth strategic analysis or the product of a detailed study but rather an expedient, designed in response to a difficult mission with limited resources.<sup>23</sup> It was a product of the Marine mindset and approach to warfare.

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Almost immediately, First Lieutenant Ek's four CAPs put the VC base in the Phu Bai area at risk. While the results among the general population were more difficult to discern at this early stage, "the Vietcong had to shoot their way into the hamlets, and this was not to their liking."<sup>24</sup> In taking the time to begin to understand the nature and routines of the South Vietnamese villager, Ek and his Marines found that the villagers responded well to a personal approach, whereas they tended to avoid and have disdain for large, impersonal propaganda drives. The longer the Marines kept the VC out of the hamlets, the more cooperative and pleasant the villagers became. General Krulak and General Walt recognized the potential of CAP immediately and, capitalizing on its initial success in Phu Bai, gave "combined action" official sanction.

The response from the Army and Joint General Staff in Saigon was telling: "If you want to play around with such foolishness you'll have to eat the personnel spaces out of your hide."<sup>25</sup> Throughout the life of the CAP Program, Westmoreland and MACV did not make any additional Marines available for the Program. Despite this, however, the Program was able to expand until early 1970 because most Marine commanders were willing to give up some of their men, depleting their own units, in support of the CAP Program. At its peak in 1969, no more than 2,220 Marines (and some Navy corpsmen) were part of the Program, spread out amongst a maximum of 114 villages. This represented only 2.8% of the 79,000 Marines in Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> While the overall numbers remained small, the effect, as will be demonstrated, was vastly out of proportion to the support the CAP Program received.

One of the characteristics of CAP that made it so unique was that the Marines serving in them were almost all volunteers, and there were a number of prerequisites that had to be met before they would be considered for the Program. The Marines running the Program took recruitment seriously. In order to be able to join a CAP, a Marine had to have served in Vietnam for two to four months, with at least six months left on his tour. The Marine could not have any disciplinary infractions, required a recommendation from his battalion commander, and could not demonstrate any signs of xenophobia.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps naturally, the theory was not quite as robust as the reality. Not all Marine battalion commanders viewed the Program positively and for some the CAPs were seen as a "depository for their misfits", and one result of the rapid expansion of the Program during 1966 and 1967 was that a "volunteer" came to mean that "if a man does not object, he is a volunteer for it."<sup>28</sup> There was the reality too that commanders were being asked to give up their best men and many of them were reluctant to do so. This being said, overall, the Program attracted higher than average quality Marines who displayed a relatively advanced degree of cultural sensitivity.

In addition to rigorous recruitment standards, another factor that contributed to the effectiveness of the Program was that a Marine CAP went to a village only at the request of the village or district chief, and only if the PF platoon lived in the village.<sup>29</sup> "This marriage of Americans to the indigenous village militia force illustrated a true centre of gravity for combined action."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, once invited, the Marines did not just move straight into the given hamlet. Instead, they integrated gradually into the life of the hamlet or village. They began simply by observing the local routines in order to accustom themselves to the culture and habits of the villagers. There was limited daytime patrolling and security checks to begin with, which gradually increased to full night-time patrols and ambushes on a daily basis.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in taking the time and care necessary to ensure the CAPs were well-manned with high quality personnel and by ensuring that the CAPs only went where they were invited and, once in location, integrated in the life of a village gradually and with respect, the CAP Program laid the groundwork for its future success.

For purposes of clarification, it is perhaps worthwhile to note at this stage that the CAP Program should not be confused with the "strategic hamlet program" of 1962. Established under South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem, the Strategic Hamlets involved creating a

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fortified hamlet in a known VC-dominated area. South Vietnamese were moved from their own villages and relocated into these new hamlets. This was done irrespective of their desires to remain in their own villages, and they were required to stay in these hamlets except for organized and protected trips to and from the fields in which they worked. The program, perhaps not surprisingly, was widely viewed as a failure.<sup>32</sup>

The objectives of the CAP Program were adapted from the existing missions of the PF platoons themselves. There were six key objectives:

- destroy VC infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility;
- protect public security and help maintain law and order;
- protect friendly infrastructure;
- protect bases and communication axes within the villages and hamlets;
- organize people's intelligence nets; and
- participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the VC.<sup>33</sup>

It is no coincidence that these objectives both mirrored and aimed to counter Ho Chi Minh's Six Forbiddances and Six Permissibles. Ho Chi Minh took much of his inspiration from Mao Tse Tung's rise to power via the Chinese peasant. Using China as an example, Ho Chi Minh, with the help of General Vo Nguyen Giap, developed a strategy (the Forbiddances and Permissibles) for the "liberation" of Vietnam. The PF/CAP's objectives aimed to loosen and eventually destroy the grip that the VC had established on South Vietnamese villages by first protecting the people and then improving their standard of living through a variety of civic action programs.<sup>34</sup>

The US and its Allies were up against a formidable enemy in the North Vietnam and the VC. They were a battle hardened and successful insurgent body fighting on its own soil that was armed with the confidence gained from having defeated the global powers of Japan and France. At peak strength, France had over 300,000 men in Vietnam and their defeat was a noteworthy accomplishment.<sup>35</sup> Political organization was the key to North Vietnam's success, not just military strength. A central element of the VC movement was "its ability to organize a vast political machine within the history and culture of Vietnam."<sup>36</sup> In effect, the VC represented a government within a government in South Vietnamese society. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap, the North Vietnamese Army and the VC were well-coordinated, and the focus and clarity of purpose that characterized North Vietnam's efforts to take over the South stood in sharp contrast to the American approach to the war and to President Diem's rule in South Vietnam.

Making up approximately 75% of any given CAP, the Popular Forces (PF) platoons in South Vietnam were a key component of the CAP Program. The challenges surrounding equipping, training and arming these platoons were significant and represent a major accomplishment of the Program. PF platoons were the lowest group on the totem pole in the South Vietnamese forces. They were poorly equipped, trained and led, and received half the pay of South Vietnamese Army personnel. Furthermore, a 1965 study by the South Vietnamese Army indicated that PF platoons suffered from a 25% desertion rate, four times that of the ARVN. The study also revealed a high weapons lost rate and a high number of "misbehavior incidents."<sup>37</sup> They were literally afraid of the dark, refusing to go out when they suspected VC were in the area, and tended to man the same positions every night, making it easy for VC to avoid them. Not surprisingly, they did not inspire much confidence in the villagers they were supposed to protect. General Krulak, inspecting a PF platoon in 1962 with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, described a group of "grave-faced little men.... No two in the same uniform, armed with an assortment of battered rifles, carbines and shotguns, they were monumentally unimpressive to look at."<sup>38</sup>

The PF platoons were recruited from and served in their own hamlets. Herein lay their strength as far as the Marines were concerned. They knew the local area intimately, which

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meant they could provide good intelligence, and they were protecting their own family, friends and land, which provided a high level of motivation.

The ultimate goal of the CAP Program was to create a level of security, and then bring the PF platoons up to a standard of training and effectiveness where they could assume responsibility for their own security. The Program was ideally supposed to work itself out of a job and move from village to village, leaving secure, prosperous and healthy populations in its wake.

In order to achieve this, the operations and activities of the CAP centred around co-habitation with PF platoons in their hamlets and villages, training PF platoons, aggressive patrolling, setting up ambushes, and undertaking various civic-oriented projects. The Marines trained the PF platoons in tactics and weaponry, and instilled a sense of discipline into their daily routine. The Marines had the power of the radio which could call in air support and additional resources from whatever regular units were operating in the vicinity. This comforted the PF platoons and gave them confidence. In return, from the PF platoons the Marines received language training, knowledge of local customs, and invaluable intelligence regarding the VC.<sup>39</sup>

The CAPs also made frequent visits and monitored families whose members were known to be working with the VC. This reduced the recruitment of villagers by the VC because the individuals in question now realized they would have to live a life on the run, unable to return comfortably or safely to their families.<sup>40</sup>

The strengths and successes of the CAP Program could be seen at both the village/hamlet level as well as farther up the strategic ladder. Additionally, the Program also had a generally positive effect on the morale of the Marines who served in CAPs. At the hamlet level, three aspects of the CAP worked in its favour. First, the small number of Marines involved (a squad of twelve) did not disrupt life in the hamlet or give the villagers the feeling that they were being "occupied." Second, the Marines possessed sufficient firepower, with the ability to call in a great deal more if necessary, to reassure the villagers of their relative security. Finally, the young age of the Marines and their relatively junior ranks were very similar to those of the PF platoons and this made establishing positive relationships between the two military groups that much easier.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most direct benefits of this relationship with the villagers was an increase in the volume and quality of intelligence provided by the villagers to the Marines. This increased the security and likelihood of survival of both groups. This is highlighted by the fact that, while mine and booby traps accounted for 30% of US casualties in the Vietnam War, the casualties to CAP Marines from these devices were reportedly too insignificant to record.<sup>42</sup> The population of South Vietnam was accustomed to occupation and the accompanying deprivation that was caused by invading forces, whether Chinese, Japanese, French or VC. Once they realized that the Marines were committed to staying and were not intent on simply using them for their food, shelter and recruitment drives, they saw the benefit in keeping them alive in order to ensure their security and well-being. Closer relationships between the Marines and the villagers also resulted in less collateral damage. Fewer lives were lost due to stray artillery rounds and air strikes, and property and infrastructure was not damaged to the same extent as in areas where the CAPs did not operate. Although they could call in strikes at almost any time, the CAP Marines found they were much more reluctant to do so for fear of hurting someone they had come to know personally.<sup>43</sup>

Another indication of the CAP Program's success at the village level was in the area of village security, governance and administration. A survey in 1967 showed that in hamlets where CAPs were located 80% of the village chiefs remained in their own home overnight instead of spending the night in the more secure compounds of the district chiefs, where they were less likely to be kidnapped or assassinated by the VC. Furthermore, 93% of these hamlets had functioning hamlet councils. In contrast, in those hamlets where CAPs

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were not located, less than 20% of the hamlet chiefs remained in their own homes overnight and only 29% of these hamlets had functioning councils.<sup>44</sup>

Once a modicum of security was established, the CAP could devote more time and effort to improving the infrastructure and general health of the village. The CAPs built bridges, churches, temples, roads, dispensaries, schools, marketplaces and classrooms, and through bringing their engineering and material assets to bear, the Marines could offer much more in terms of infrastructure development than the VC.<sup>45</sup>

Another successful program that contributed directly to the health and well-being of the South Vietnamese population was the Medical Civic Action Project (MEDCAP). CAP Marines were universal in their praise of Navy corpsmen, and the MEDCAP revolved around use of these navy corpsmen for the treatment of non-life-threatening medical problems. While not a practice common in the US, in South Vietnam the Marines realized that often cleaning and covering a wound using some disinfectant a simple band-aid would save lives. Cuts or scrapes that would be considered very minor by Americans had potentially life-threatening implications for the Vietnamese, many of whom worked in rice paddies all day, up to their knees in water that had been fertilized with human excrement. The CAP Program claimed to have conducted over 1.9 million MEDCAPs over the course of its existence.<sup>46</sup> It was a service that was evidently in high demand and much appreciated, especially given that in 1967 there were only 750 doctors in Vietnam, half of whom were assigned to the Army. There were 1,200 Vietnamese doctors in Paris alone at this time and another 800-1000 others working internationally.<sup>47</sup> The need for even the most basic levels of medical care was great amongst the population.

The CAP Program sought to protect the lifeblood of the villagers as well—their rice. Under an operation called Golden Fleece, beginning with the autumn rice crop in 1965, the CAPs in the Danang and Chu Lai areas utilized intelligence provided by local inhabitants to launch attacks against VC units that were preparing to commence rice collection operations. The VC required about 1.5 pounds of rice per day per person and, lacking land of their own, prepared attacks during harvest season in order to secure adequate supplies of rice. The CAPs also protected the villagers as they harvested the rice and escorted the crop back to storage sheds. In the first season of Golden Fleece, approximately 870,000 pounds of rice was secured for the villagers, much of which might have been seized by the VC.<sup>48</sup>

Success at the village level also resonated at the strategic level. Colonel William Corson, a former CAP commander, highlighted three areas where CAPs had a strategic impact: recruitment denial, subsistence denial, and combat casualties.<sup>49</sup> Although only representing 1.5% of the Marines in Vietnam, CAP units accounted for 7.6% of the enemy killed.<sup>50</sup> Also, from 1966-1968, the ratio of enemy losses to friendly losses for CAPs in the I Corps area was 7.2:1. This compared to a ratio of 7.6:1 for large units (800 or more men) in the same area. This indicates that the CAPs killed almost as many North Vietnamese Army and VC combatants as the much larger units but at less cost and with greater efficiency.<sup>51</sup> Aggressive patrolling by CAPs and accurate intelligence resulted in a large number of engagements with the VC. Furthermore, constant patrolling in small units kept the true strength of the CAP unknown to the VC and gave the impression of strength beyond their actual numbers. Reports obtained from captured and dead VC indicated that they believed the numbers of Marines in the area were much higher than they actually were.<sup>52</sup>

The increasing number of attacks being made by the VC on CAP defensive positions within the hamlets was evidence of a certain strain and perhaps frustration. This was not the preferred method of operation for the VC and the fact that they were attacking these positions is a fairly strong indication that they needed access to the hamlets for supplies and manpower. A key success factor for the CAP Program was the fact that the CAPs had well-defended positions established in the villages and refused to engage the VC unless it was on their terms. VC attacks on these positions resulted in heavy VC casualties as well as collateral damage to the village or hamlet itself. This further reinforced CAP control of the village. Amazingly, and as a testament to their combat power and fighting prowess, only one CAP was overrun during the entire six years of their existence.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to operations such as Golden Fleece, the CAPs regularly monitored markets.

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This had the immediate effect of allowing the markets to function, which in turn allowed the villagers to sell and trade their crops on the open market, an activity often not possible in areas where there were heavy concentrations of VC. It also allowed the CAPs to observe rice purchases. South Vietnamese government law limited purchases of rice to no more than five pounds per person per day. Those buying more than this amount were often VC buying for their companions, and thus they were easily spotted by the CAPs.<sup>54</sup>

There is some strong evidence that the CAP Program had positive effects at both the village/hamlet (tactical) level as well as in the larger strategic plane. More difficult to measure, but central to the success of the Program, was the sense of purpose and motivation that CAP Marines seemed to possess in larger quantities than their brothers in other Marine units and throughout the rest of the US forces serving on the ground in Vietnam. One of the strongest indications of the success of the CAP Program is that 68% of CAP Marines signed up to extend their 13 month tour by a further six months instead of returning home to the US; this compares to 15% from all other forces serving in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> This statistic is even more impressive when one considers that one out of every eight Marines in the CAP Program was killed, 80% were wounded once and 25% were wounded twice. This is indicative of a high level of morale, a strong sense of purpose, confidence in the CAP Program, and a sense of responsibility for the people with whom they were living and protecting, regardless of the heightened danger that the assignment brought with it.<sup>56</sup> Captain Moore, who did two tours in Vietnam, summed it up: "After 23 years in the Marine Corps, CAP was the most satisfying thing I'd ever done."<sup>57</sup>

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the CAP Program was without its challenges and weaknesses. The main challenges that hampered the CAP Program were differences in culture, supply and personnel shortages, lack of an overarching strategy to guide the Program, and the relationship between the Army (MACV) and the USMC. Of these, the later two were the most serious and hampered the success of the Program to the greatest degree.

The key challenge between the two cultures was language. Quite simply, the Marines lacked all but the most basic training in Vietnamese and this lack of language skills would hinder the program throughout its existence.<sup>58</sup> At the end of the day, however, the success or failure of a CAP was not dependent on language. Certainly while patrolling and conducting ambushes, there was no need for verbal communication. There were other cultural "divides" that caused confusion and consternation. One was the apparent "right" the villagers felt they had to steal from the Marines who were materially so much better off than them. The Marines for their part often preferred hot, home cooked meals over C-rations and would often invite themselves into the homes of the villagers. The Vietnamese males were also inclined to show affection for each other and were very physical, which made many Marines uncomfortable. Again, while these were often irritants and on occasion led to low-level violence, they did not hinder the overall effectiveness of the Program to any great degree.<sup>59</sup>

On a more practical level, when a CAP was assigned to a village, operational ties were almost severed with the battalion. A great deal of trust and confidence was placed in the hands of young squad leaders and being "forced to fill the shoes of a career officer and seasoned diplomat simultaneously"<sup>60</sup> sometimes led to violations in conduct, in one case a murder, but these were generally isolated incidents.

More serious was the lack of supplies and personnel, a symptom of the geographical and to some degree philosophical separation between the CAPs and their battalion headquarters. These problems were also the result of priority being given to large unit actions. The Marines were often left to scrounge for material to construct defensive fortifications and had to use their ingenuity (e.g. fake requisition orders) to procure M-14 carbines for their PF colleagues. The situation was similar where personnel were concerned. The CAP Program not only competed with the other units for Marines but it competed for the best ones available. This drew the ire of some non-CAP commanders who saw CAP as a liability that took away their best men and risked more when they provided reaction forces to aid the CAPs.<sup>61</sup>

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The two biggest brakes on the CAP Program, however, were the lack of an overall strategy for the Program and the continual jousting with Westmoreland and MACV. Despite strong champions for the program, particularly General Krulak and General Walt, the creation of the CAPs themselves was the responsibility of battalion commanders in consultation with village chiefs. This led to ad hoc implementation and resulted in many of the CAPs being isolated. Isolation, in turn, meant lack of support and greater difficulty achieving security. There was no “intermeshed defensive net” or a “saturation deployment scheme”, and this is clearly reflected in the fact that of the 114 CAPs eventually deployed, only two of them achieved a level of security in their first placement that was sufficient to allow the CAP to move into a new village.<sup>62</sup> This cuts to the heart of the issue of the sustainability of the CAP Program and whether or not it was truly following an “inkblot” strategy with any success.

Finally, perhaps the biggest roadblock that prevented the CAP Program from reaching its full potential was General Westmoreland and the prevailing attitudes at MACV. As mentioned above, the CAP Marines comprised less than 3% of the total Marine force in South Vietnam. The top USMC leadership believed they had the correct response to the challenges they faced in defeating the VC and the NVA, yet Westmoreland held on to the cherished concept of “search and destroy” and insisted that the vast majority of Marine forces in South Vietnam pursue this strategy along the DMZ.<sup>63</sup> Inter-service rivalries were also at play but Westmoreland, conscious of the politics involved, preferred an indirect approach to get his way over direct confrontation with the USMC. He admitted later that “rather than start a controversy, I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads.”<sup>64</sup>

On 17 May 1970, the last Combined Action Group of three CAPs was deactivated. The CAP Program had started in August 1965 with four CAPs. By the end of 1966, there were 58 CAPs, in 1967—79 CAPs, in 1968—102 CAPs, and in 1969—114 CAPs. The turning point in the fortunes of the CAP Program proved to be 1968. The Tet Offensive in January, the election of President Nixon, growing concern over the number of US casualties back in the United States, and the policy of “Vietnamization” all combined to ensure the scaling down and eventual demise of the Program. The decision to switch from “compound” CAPs to “mobile” CAPs was an effort to reduce the high casualty rates being suffered in the CAPs. While this increased the survivability of its members, mobility meant that the CAPs no longer lived with the people and thus lost some of the intimacy and trust that had previously allowed them to pursue not just effective military patrolling but also civic-oriented projects.<sup>65</sup>

Of key importance was the shift in attitude on the part of the electorate back in the US and with the new President. Patience for the war had run out and the process of “Vietnamization” (handing over control of South Vietnam back to the Vietnamese people) had begun. In line with this, the CAPs were scaled back, demobilized and eventually disbanded.

Did the CAP Program ever have a chance of going to scale and making a potentially history-altering change to the outcome of the conflict in Vietnam? Without delving into an exercise in counter-factual history, the answer seems to be “very unlikely.” At a fundamental level, Westmoreland and his commanders at MACV seemed “unable or unwilling to accept the conclusion implicit in the success of the CAPs, which was that their vast resources, equipment and technology were essentially irrelevant to the kind of war they faced.”<sup>66</sup> On the USMC side, throughout the life of the CAP Program, from March 1965 to May 1970, the USMC command was serving two masters in a way. The likes of General Krulak and Walt believed very strongly that the proper way to fight the war was at the village level, protecting the populace from the threat of the VC, and in the process separating the VC fish from the water in which they so freely swam. They were true soldiers, however, and at the end of the day, they followed the orders from Westmoreland who commanded the overall American military effort in Vietnam.

A number of the successful aspects of the CAP Program serve to highlight the deficiencies in American strategic thinking as it pertained to the Vietnam War. These successes are in

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the area of targeting, combat effectiveness and efficiency, intelligence gathering, and the morale and motivation of those Marines who served in the CAP Program.

The CAP Program under the USMC represents a rare example of a long-term commitment on the part of the US military to fight at the village or hamlet level. CAPs represent one of the few instances in Vietnam where American military personnel associated intimately with Vietnamese for long periods of time in a Vietnamese setting. In other words, they correctly identified and accurately targeted the centre of gravity of North Vietnam; the villagers in the South. The side who won control of this element of society would win the war, and this is exactly what transpired. The USMC was able to accurately target its efforts to achieve maximum effect because its underpinnings as an organization stress adaptability, initiative and innovation. They do not try to predict the future but rather learn from the past to the extent possible and move forward confidently, comfortable in the understanding that the next conflict in which they are involved is unlikely to be the one they trained for, but something to be expected and dealt with when the time comes.

In contrast, the US Army arrived in Vietnam with a firepower-based army that was generally inappropriate to the demands of COIN warfare.<sup>67</sup> During negotiations in Hanoi in April, 1975, Colonel H.G. Summers Jr., Chief of the Negotiations Division for the American delegation, commented to Colonel Tu, Chief of the North Vietnamese delegation, that "You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield." To this, Colonel Tu replied "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."<sup>68</sup>

This exchange is indicative of much that defined US military strategy and mindsets during the Vietnam War and was central to its defeat. The US approached the war in Vietnam as a big-unit affair, counting on overwhelming firepower and technologically superior equipment and weapons to carry the day and propel them to victory. Under the leadership of General William C. Westmoreland, a veteran and product of the Second World War and Korea, MACV believed that its conventional forces would easily handle "a bunch of rag-tag Asian guerillas."<sup>69</sup> The US Army treated doctrine as a template and attempted to apply it unquestioningly. The result is that one ends up "trying to fit the circumstances to the doctrine rather than the other way around."<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

As has been discussed, the CAPs generally punched well above their weight in terms of combat casualties caused. A combined action platoon consisted of 50 men at the maximum, only twelve of whom were US Marines. They patrolled aggressively, engaged the enemy frequently and, as a result, suffered higher than average casualties. They accepted this as a necessary price to pay in order to protect the local inhabitants and effect change at the village level. Success was measured in booby traps defused, bridges built, MEDCAPS conducted, weapons confiscated and collateral damage avoided. In contrast, MACV focused on large-scale "search and destroy" missions using massive sweeps through the jungles. This approach actually prevented security in the countryside by generating displaced persons. These people fled to areas controlled by the South Vietnamese Army but they brought with them only "poverty, dislocation and instability."<sup>71</sup> Body counts and confirmed enemy kills is how a quantitative military success would be measured and reached. Unfortunately, as Max Boot notes, "The Vietcong refused to play the Wehrmacht to Westmoreland's Patton."<sup>72</sup> In fact, the NVA and VC welcomed the "search and destroy" approach and deliberately concentrated in remote areas in order to draw US forces away from the populous coastal areas, not unlike an animal trying to lure a predator away from their own nest. The goal was to encourage the Americans to engage in inconclusive battles that would gradually reduce their willingness to fight. The North Vietnamese leaders accurately read this situation.<sup>73</sup>

The CAP Program's success in intelligence gathering highlights the transitory nature of the vast majority of the Army's experience in Vietnam. The key to gaining accurate

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intelligence is patience and perseverance. By living in the villages, CAPs demonstrated to the people that they were there for the long haul and were not just passing through. This built trust and familiarity, which in turn produced valuable and accurate intelligence on VC activities and plans. That CAP deaths due to booby traps and mines were too insignificant to record is but one indicator of the intelligence gathering success of the program.

Again, in contrast, the “search and destroy” tactics used were fleeting in nature. Once finished, the troops went back to their well-protected base camps to prepare for the next large sweep. Time was a precious commodity not to be wasted where the US public was concerned as well. The thin, time-bound patience of the electorate does not permit the investment in time that most successful counterinsurgency efforts require.<sup>74</sup> Nixon wisely noted that “when a president sends American troops to war, a hidden timer starts.”<sup>75</sup> This was certainly true for the American efforts in Vietnam.

Finally, the generally high morale and motivation of many CAP Marines stands in stark contrast to the much lower morale in the rest of the US forces in Vietnam. CAP Marines felt a sense of purpose and responsibility associated with what they were trying to achieve. This sense of purpose for many in non-CAP units quickly dissipated upon their arrival in Vietnam. It is this sense of purpose and commitment that encourages learning. If an experience is distasteful and one does not believe in what one is trying to accomplish, it is an aspect of human nature to try to forget that experience or at least to re-visit it as infrequently as possible. Thus, the mantra that quickly followed America’s exit from Vietnam of “no more Vietnams,” a mantra that is still part of the lexicon for today’s foreign policy makers, is indicative of a lack of learning on the part of the US Army and its civilian leaders. Again, in the words of Max Boot, “Their hard-won experience, their painfully accumulated battle lore, was tossed away as casually as a spent bullet casing” in Vietnam.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the shock of defeat, and the vehemence with which so many in the American leadership have vowed “no more Vietnams”, the US will nonetheless quickly have to realize that their predominance in conventional warfighting methods and their unparalleled firepower means that no enemy of theirs will willingly choose to fight the US on its terms. This means unconventional, asymmetric, guerrilla style tactics which the US absolutely has to accept and adapt to in order to survive.

The Combined Action Platoon Program in Vietnam represents a strong case study in military flexibility, adaptability and learning. It was certainly not the answer to all the challenges that the Vietnam War presented to American leaders and their militaries, but it was one of the more successful efforts at targeting and starting to defeat the insurgency in South Vietnam. By way of a study in contrasts, by shining the spotlight on one of the few successes of the war, one can perhaps gain a greater understanding of what did not work as well.

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## About the Author ...


Over the last ten years, Fraser Fowler has worked for the Canadian federal government in the fields of trade promotion, investment review, international development and national security. Entering through a management development stream, he has worked in both policy and programming capacities for a number of departments that include Canadian Heritage, Industry Canada, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Privy Council Office. Fraser holds a BA in Political Science from UBC and a MBA from McGill University. He is currently pursuing a MA in War Studies at Royal Military College, where he is focussing on the history of guerrilla warfare and how it has informed and shaped current counterinsurgency doctrine and operations. Prior to joining the federal government, Fraser worked in the pulp and paper and telecommunications industries in Vancouver, B.C.

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## End notes

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