

COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN THE VIETNAM
WAR: A UNIQUE COUNTERINSURGENCY
CAPABILITY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY
OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

A Monograph

by

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ABSTRACT

COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR: A UNIQUE COUNTERINSURGENCY CAPABILITY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY OPERATING ENVIRONMENT, by Major Ian J. Townsend, 65 pages.

In Vietnam, the III Marine Amphibious Force used Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) as one part of its operational level counterinsurgency campaign. These platoons provided security assistance to the South Vietnamese Popular Forces and civic action to the village based population. To measure the operational effectiveness and the current relevancy of this specific type of combined action their activities are evaluated against current Army counterinsurgency doctrine. This monograph demonstrates the value of the CAPs as one element in the context of a counterinsurgency campaign, and how this form of combined action may serve as a tool for Army commanders conducting operational art in future. Independent operations are not the future of American warfare in the 21st Century. Contemporary thought about the future of American warfare is that the “conventional forces of the United States Army will have an enduring requirement to build the security forces and security ministries of other countries.” Some form of combined action will be a required in American military operations for the foreseeable future. Given this truth, CAPs provide a practical historical example of a combined action technique that can serve as a tool for the future.

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ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CACO	Combined Action Company
CAP	Combined Action Platoon
CAP program	Combined Action Platoon Program
CINCPAC	Commander In Chief, Pacific Command
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North)
FMFPac	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade
MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
NVA	North Vietnam Army
OPLAN	Operation Plan
PACOM	United States Pacific Command
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (DRV)
PF	Popular Forces
RF	Regional Forces
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South)
SDC	Self-Defense Corps
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
USMC	United States Marine Corps
VC	Viet Cong

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INTRODUCTION

We're using a theory
We've used it before
If you ain't got no people,
You ain't got no war.

—Lyrics sung by disheartened Marines in Vietnam

Though such talents may be useful, the CAP Marine does not need to be the linguist, sociologist, psychologist, expert on economic development, and saint that many observers have thought was required. The prime benefits of the operation are derived simply from the villagers' observation of the Marines working with the Popular Force in his defense. What is needed, rather than a genius jack-of-all-trades is a good Marine as evaluated by the same standards that have been applied throughout the Marine Corps history – that is, a superior fighting man and a gentleman.

—Bruce Allnutt

Conducting unified land operations is complex work for any military force. Operations become more complex when enemy combatants take the form of an insurgent force, not strictly a conventional one. An accepted and proven approach to counter an insurgent enemy is combined action.¹ Combined action is a technique that involves joining U.S. and host-nation troops in a single organization, usually a platoon or company, to conduct counterinsurgency operations.² Although combined action is a doctrinally approved counterinsurgency technique, conventional forces often approach combined action with caution. This is because combined action requires more patience, discipline, and training to execute than other approaches to counterinsurgency.³

¹U.S. Army, *Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2006), 5-18.

²*Ibid.*, 5-23. Counterinsurgency is those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency.

³Minimal additional training required to conduct effective combined action includes items such as supplementary language and culture training as well as training to increase knowledge on the capabilities of the host nation military.

These reasons alone are not sufficient to cast aside this technique. American military units are currently and will continue to be involved in some form of counterinsurgency warfare for the near future. Every counterinsurgency operation is unique and combined action techniques must be tailored to the specific situation. The U.S. Army does not have a monopoly on counterinsurgency operations and America's most recent campaigns offer only limited examples of the use of combined action.⁴ This leaves room for evaluation of historical combined action techniques to determine if they might provide alternatives for future operational approaches to counterinsurgency. This monograph demonstrates that the Army can draw valuable lessons for future campaigns from the United States Marine Corps' (USMC) approach to counterinsurgency and use of combined action in Vietnam.

On March 8, 1965, the Marine Corps officially entered South Vietnam with an order to "land the landing force" on the beach near Da Nang.⁵ This action introduced America's first ground combat troop units into the war.⁶ The first USMC battalion in Vietnam, Lt. Col. Charles E. McPartlin's Third Battalion, Ninth Marines (3/9), landed with orders from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) Commander, General William Westmoreland, to conduct an airfield security mission at Da Nang. Colonel McPartin and his Marines were directed to "not, repeat not, engage in day-to-day actions against the Viet Cong" and that "overall

⁴Combined action in the Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan campaigns is conducted specifically by partnering with host nation conventional military forces, built and equipped by the U.S. military or NATO coalition.

⁵Bruce C. Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience* (McLean, VA: Human Sciences Research, 1969), 6; Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1997), 1; Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978), 12.

⁶Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 402. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 538.

responsibility for the defense of Da Nang area remains a Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces responsibility.”⁷ On May 5, 1965, less than two months after the arrival of 3/9 and its higher headquarters, 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), President Lyndon B. Johnson approved the deployment of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing into Vietnam. To command and control these large elements the Marines established the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF).⁸ The man entrusted by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace Greene, to lead III MAF in Vietnam was Major General Lewis W. Walt, who assumed command at an official ceremony in Da Nang on June 4, 1965.

In 1965, Marine Corps commanders exercised authority and direction much like Army (and Marine) leaders do today. Although not titled as such, they drove the operations process through the execution of mission command. In this process the commander had the same requirements to understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead, and assess operations. General Walt’s first priority was to understand his operational environment. He stated, “When I first arrived in I Corps, I didn’t really understand how complicated this war was. I didn’t mean I lacked information. I had more facts, figures, statistics and plans than I could handle. But I did lack understanding.”⁹ In his quest for understanding, he conducted battlefield circulation to see the defensive positions his troops were occupying and he directed a survey to help him understand the characteristics of the civilian population immediately surrounding Da Nang, Chu

⁷Shulimson and Johnson, 16.

⁸Cosmas, 214; Shulimson and Johnson, 36; William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 125. III Marine Expeditionary Force became the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) on May 7, 1965. This change came by request from General William Westmoreland because the term “expeditionary” had unpleasant connotations for the Vietnamese, stemming from the days of the French Expeditionary Corps. Commandant, General Wallace Greene chose the name Marine Amphibious Force after being directed to rename the MEF by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

⁹Don H. Blanchard, “Pacification: Marine Corps Style” (Master’s thesis, U.S. Naval War College, 1968), 41.

Lai, and Phu Bai.¹⁰ The survey of the civilian population revealed that over 150,000 civilians lived in hamlets within 81mm mortar range of the airfields.¹¹ It was clear to General Walt that the bases his Marines had to defend were in danger due to their geographical situation. He understood that this situation required III MAF troops to expand their security perimeter out to include the villages. With the requirement to expand his defenses his decision to move troops away from the airfield perimeter led to his belief that the “Marines were into the pacification business.”¹² With General Walt’s, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi’s (ARVN I Corps Commander), and General Westmoreland’s approval, the Marines took a more offensive approach to airfield defense. Within General Walt’s intent, one Marine battalion developed an innovative concept that complemented the III MAF pacification operation and increased the security of the airfields. This concept was the Combined Action Platoon (CAP).

This monograph evaluates the CAP program as part of the III MAF operational campaign in Vietnam to demonstrate that it is still a doctrinally valid counterinsurgency concept that is relevant to the U.S. Army in the contemporary operational environment.¹³ This historical

¹⁰In addition to the defense of Da Nang the Marines had expanded to the additional base areas of Chu Lai and Phu Bai inside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) I Corps Tactical Zone. Illustrated by Figure 1 on page 24.

¹¹Shulimson and Johnson, 46. The civic structure in Vietnam is important to understand for clarity of the terminology used in this paper. The smallest level of governing structure is a hamlet. Groups of hamlets formed a village. Villages formed the lowest governmental structure. Several villages formed a district. A district is comparable to a “township” or small county in the United States. The largest municipal structure in Vietnam was a province, made up of multiple districts. There were five total provinces in the III MAF area of operations and forty-four total in Vietnam.

¹²Ibid.; U.S. Marine Corps, *Fleet Marine Force Manual 8-2 Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1962), 3. Pacification was the doctrinal term in 1965 for the process of stabilizing a weak government by military, political, economic, and social means. Pacification is not used in current military doctrine. The current term is nation building.

¹³Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Press, 1989), 2. For simplicity, this monograph is consistent with

evaluation of the CAP program provides practitioners in the art of warfare a better understanding of the importance, difficulties, and risk involved in combined action as part of an operational campaign. Every campaign in every war is different. The modern operational artist must use the facts at hand and all means available to determine the way his operations will achieve the desired ends. If a concept such as the CAP program is suitable, feasible, and acceptable then the operational level commander should consider its implementation in some form as part of his operational approach. This monograph also acquaints tactical level commanders to aspects of combined action from the Vietnam-era Marine Corps perspective and provides them a foundation from which they can begin to visualize how and why they should incorporate some level of training for their leaders and soldiers on this specific counterinsurgency technique.

This monograph provides a clear picture of the CAP program and the importance of combined action in counterinsurgency operations. The current relevancy of this specific type of combined action and the actions taken by the units in the program are evaluated against current Army counterinsurgency doctrine. The scope of this monograph is limited to the CAP program's relationship to the operational level of war. This monograph is not a critique of U.S strategy in Vietnam or decisions made by strategic leaders, although strategic decisions affected the operations conducted by III MAF.¹⁴ Strategic context encompasses all military operational level campaigns. Some strategic historical facts from official Vietnam histories are presented in this

the definitions used by Michael Peterson's text as a primary source on Combined Action Platoons. A Combined Action Platoon is "CAP" and the entire USMC Combined Action Program is "CAP program."

¹⁴There are many of critiques of the policy, strategy, operations, and tactics of the Vietnam War. Two books that offer critiques of the national and military strategies in Vietnam to help the military professional gain a better understanding of the Vietnam War are Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* and Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Major Curtis L. Williamson's thesis, "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War" (Air War College-Air University, 2002) also makes an argument that a different, primarily CAP program based, counterinsurgency strategy may have resulted in a different outcome to the war.

monograph accordingly to provide this context. This monograph is also limited in its scope evaluating combined action against the Viet Cong (VC) insurgency to the historical and temporal context of the CAP program in the Vietnam War from 1965-1971. The Viet Cong insurgency that the III MAF Marines conducted combat operations against meets the definition found in current doctrine of “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict” for the purposes of this paper.¹⁵ In addition to these operational and historical boundaries, the reader should be aware that this monograph is not the first evaluation of the CAP program. The Vietnam War is one of the most analyzed conflicts in American history. The Marines in Vietnam, and the CAP program as part of Marine operations, is no exception. The CAP program has been analyzed from many angles, ranging from its limited tactical successes and the important role it took in civic and humanitarian action, to the failure to implement it across Vietnam as an overall counterinsurgency strategy.¹⁶ The purpose of this monograph is to demonstrate the value of the CAP program as one element in the context of a counterinsurgency campaign, and how it may serve as a tool for Army commanders conducting operational art in the future. Through its achievement of this, it will contribute to the body of knowledge of both the operational level of war and the history of the USMC CAP program.

Before the American involvement in the Vietnam War ended, research on the successes and limitations of CAPs was being conducted. During the war, Bruce Allnutt published *Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience*, and Joseph Story with Herbert Vreeland

¹⁵U.S. Army, Glossary-5.

¹⁶For more on the value of the CAP program and these Marines’ contributions to civic and humanitarian action see Rebecca H. Bishop’s, “The Combined Action Marine: Projecting Another Service Member Image” (Master’s thesis, George Mason University, 2010) and Lindsay Kittle’s, “Gentle Warriors: U.S. Marines and Humanitarian Action During the Vietnam War” (Master’s thesis, Ohio University, 2012).

published *Implementation of the Marine Combined Action Concept in Future Contingencies*.¹⁷

These two research studies serve as valuable resources to understand what the CAP program was and as evaluations of CAP as a technique in counterinsurgency operations. There is value in these studies as tools for this monograph because the authors personally interviewed CAP Marines in Vietnam to gather data for their analysis. In addition to research and studies on the CAP program during the war, the Marine Corps conducted dialogue about the program in the Vietnam era through forums such as the *Marine Corps Gazette* journal. From 1966 onward there were articles published by Marines to explain what CAPs were and to express their opinions, based primarily on participation, about the pros and cons of the CAP program.

A second area of sources that provided valuable information and analysis for this monograph were the official military histories of the Vietnam War. The five-volume official U.S. Marine Corps History in Vietnam Series provided a context for the CAP program. The books that focused on the earlier years of the Marines' entry into Vietnam and formation of the III MAF operational approach to counterinsurgency from 1965-1967 were particularly beneficial. Jack Shulimson worked in the History and Museum's Division, Headquarters USMC for over twenty years starting in 1964. While holding the position as the senior Vietnam historian in the mid-1980s, he published two volumes that were key resources for this monograph: *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*; and *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*.¹⁸ In addition to the Marine histories of Vietnam, the U.S. Army's Center for Military History's publication by Dr. Graham Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of*

¹⁷Allnutt; Joseph C. Story and Herbert H. Vreeland, *Implementation of the Marine Combined Action Concept in Future Contingencies* (McLean, VA: Human Sciences Research, 1971).

¹⁸Jack Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1982); Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*.

Escalation, 1962-1967 provided a clear understanding of the Vietnam War in its entirety with respect to all the strategic and operational level participants. Allan Millett's *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* served as a great reference to understand the culture of the Marine Corps and the history that shaped it as an organization leading into Vietnam.¹⁹ These works collectively help us understand the strategic context of the Marines war in Vietnam.

In addition to these research studies and contemporary analyses, some memoirs by participants in the Vietnam War and more specifically inside the CAP program served as valuable resources. Before Vietnam ended Francis J. "Bing" West published *The Village* about one squad of CAP Marines in the Bin Nghia village to tell their story from the eyes of men on the ground.²⁰ A decade after the war Michael E. Peterson's *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* is a study of the CAP program that he wrote both as a personal quest (the author was a CAP Marine) and as a scholarly analysis of the validity of the program. Through his research, he assesses that due to strategy employed in Vietnam and the limited employment of CAP the efficacy of the program is debatable. Albert Hemingway's *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* uses oral histories of former members of the CAP program as a technique to record the perspective of men who served in these unique units. Hemingway's intent was not to write an official history but to give an intimate look at life in the villages, as experienced by CAP members.²¹ The operational and strategic levels of war were

¹⁹Cosmas; Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980). Millett's chapter "The Longest War: The Marines in Vietnam 1965-1975" provides a very clear description of the entire III MAF pacification campaign alongside the large-unit operations. Through this, the reader can achieve a better understanding of the context and design of the entire III MAF campaign and how the CAP program contributed.

²⁰Francis J. West, *The Village* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

²¹Albert Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), xiii.

explained in memoirs and reflections published during and immediately following the war such as Colonel William R. Corson's *The Betrayal*, General Lewis W. Walt's *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*, General William C. Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports*, and General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak's *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*.²² Each of these provided different perspectives of the war and the Marine Corps participation in the conflict, as well as their observations of the CAP program from their strategic or operational perspective. Individually they limit the reader to that individual perspective, but taken as a kalideoscope of the war they provide insight into how the Marines and MACV approached their campaigns and the value that the CAP program added.

U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE VIETNAM WAR

The conclusion of World War II renewed previous anti-colonial conflicts in Indochina. One side, represented by a Vietnamese nationalist leader, Ho Chi Minh, declared Vietnam independent in 1945 and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho was a Vietnamese nationalist who was ideologically Communist. He intended the Viet Minh party to rule a unified independent Vietnam under Marxist-Leninist principles.²³ Ironically, the United States had supported this nationalist movement from its inception in 1941 during Ho's campaign against the Japanese.²⁴ Competing against his Viet Minh party for control of Vietnam was the French government, which had occupied much of Indochina as colonial possession since the latter nineteenth century. In 1946, French attempts to reestablish their control over Vietnam led to the

²²William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968); Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984); Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970); Westmoreland.

²³Cosmas, 5.

²⁴Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 4.

eight-year long First Indochina War. In 1954 the Viet Minh, led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, defeated the French in a climactic battle at Dien Bien Phu. Both sides, under the auspice of concerned outside powers—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the People’s Republic of China—agreed to a division of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel under the Geneva Accords.²⁵ The method of warfare the Viet Minh used was protracted guerilla warfare based on Mao Tse Tung’s model.²⁶ This approach not only worked against the French, it continued to demonstrate its irritation against the American military for the next twenty years.

America’s involvement in Vietnam begins with this French loss. The United States had funded the French fight against the Viet Minh as part of its global containment policy directed at halting Communism’s advances. After the 1954 partition of Vietnam, the United States increasingly underwrote/supported the regime of Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem in the south. American President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his successor John F. Kennedy, who assumed office in 1961, made supporting Diem’s government part of their policies against Communism. In addition to diplomatic and economic support, the United States supported Diem’s government in Saigon through military means as it attempted to control its agrarian population across a dense, tropical, rural landscape. Republican President Eisenhower directed anti-Communist advisors to South Vietnam under the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to help resist a conventional invasion from North Vietnam.

President Kennedy made the decision during his first year in office to dramatically increase the number of military advisors in Vietnam within the theory of using a “flexible

²⁵Cosmas, 8.

²⁶Blanchard, 2; Mao Tse-Tung and Samuel B. Griffith, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). The model was to “first organize revolts among the peasant masses, then develop guerrilla warfare from revolutionary bases in the countryside, and finally launch attacks on the towns.”

response” to contain Communism.²⁷ This increase raised the numbers within the MAAG above the amount authorized in the Geneva Accords, from near 700 to almost 3000 advisors operating at the provincial and battalion levels.²⁸ In 1962, he made the decision to increase American involvement in Vietnam by approving the formation of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). However, President Kennedy’s clear guidance that he would not approve the commitment of combat troops, resulted in a limited American military effort in Vietnam during his second year in office.

In late 1963, the situation changed. Both President Kennedy and President Diem fell to assassins’ bullets, thereby changing the strategic decision maker in both countries. Lyndon B. Johnson became the President of the United States and Major General Duong Van Minh became the President of the Republic of Vietnam. President Minh’s position was short lived though. Less than three months later in late January 1964, Major General Nguyen Khanh replaced him in a coup. This turmoil at the highest levels of South Vietnamese leadership would become a factor affecting upon the ability for military forces to operate inside clear strategic guidance from either country.

Alongside these changes, MACV also underwent a change of leadership and strategy. In June 1964, General William C. Westmoreland succeeded General Paul D. Harken as the commander of MACV.²⁹ General Westmoreland, as an infantry officer and Airborne Corps Commander, should have been quite aware of the strategic, operational, and tactical requirements required to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign. In his autobiography, published after the war,

²⁷H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 10. Cosmas, 20.

²⁸Cosmas, 42. McMaster, 37.

²⁹Cosmas, 76-77.

he states that he had observed and studied the growing insurgency in Vietnam since the Geneva Accords and that he introduced counterinsurgency instruction into the curriculum at the United States Military Academy while serving as the Superintendent.³⁰ He is also credited for working directly with the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center to review and understand the most current counterinsurgency doctrine while serving as XVIII Airborne Corps commander immediately preceding his arrival in Vietnam.³¹ The announcement of General Westmoreland as MACV commander led one State Department official in Vietnam to rejoice that “we can shift from trying to kill every Viet Cong to protecting the Vietnamese population.”³² This official’s joyful exclamation proved to be wishful thinking. Tom Ricks states that, “Westmoreland’s shortcomings were well known in the Army.”³³ When his name surfaced as a possible replacement for General Harken, counter to the State Department official’s belief, one Army General stated, “He [Westmoreland] is spit and polish, two up and one back. This is a counterinsurgency war, and he has no idea how to deal with it.”³⁴ This theme of General Westmoreland as an attrition warfare focused general also runs throughout David Halberstam’s history of American leaders in the Vietnam War, *The Best and the Brightest*. He cuts straight to the point when he presents General Westmoreland’s military character as, “Westy: a supremely conventional man in a supremely unconventional war.”³⁵ Although he claimed to understand counterinsurgency, and could have designed a campaign based on these tactics and techniques, General Westmoreland’s “search-

³⁰Ibid., 123; Westmoreland, 45.

³¹Cosmas, 124; Westmoreland, 39.

³²Cosmas, 140.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 232.

³⁵Halberstam, 552.

and-destroy” conventional war operational approach that operated under the theory that the enemy is visible and can be found, fixed and fought, demonstrated his lack of understanding the nature of the war he was fighting.³⁶ A rather alarming demonstration of this comes from a story about reporter Neil Sheehan traveling with General Westmoreland in 1966. Sheehan reportedly asked Westmoreland if he was concerned about the large amount of civilian casualties due to bombings and the general responded with, “Yes, but it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn’t it?”³⁷

During the closing six months of 1964, under the direction of President Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and General Westmoreland, the American strategy in Vietnam shifted. These leaders determined that the strategy to assist the Government of Vietnam (GVN) using only military advisement was ineffective. They decided on a strategy that put direct military pressure on North Vietnam to end its support of the Viet Cong insurgency operating in South Vietnam.³⁸ General Westmoreland expressed his position as, “an enclave strategy is no answer...if South Vietnam is to survive the U.S. has to have a substantial and hard-hitting offensive capability on the ground to convince the VC that they cannot win.”³⁹ To conduct this new “more troops” strategy President Johnson made decisions in February 1965 that would change the conflict in Vietnam into an American War.⁴⁰ One of these decisions was to order American Marine and Army combat forces to arrive Vietnam by mid-1965.

³⁶Ernest B. Furgurson, *Westmoreland: The Inevitable General* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1968), 324.

³⁷Halberstam, 550.

³⁸Cosmas, 147; McMaster, 230-233.

³⁹Westmoreland, 140.

⁴⁰Cosmas, 157-158; Furgurson, 325.

THE UNITED STATES MARINES AND THE VIETNAM WAR

The history of United States Marine Corps provides a record of success for which it is duly proud. The Corps' mantra of America's first response to its land warfare requirements established its reputation. It is by nature an expeditionary force. It is by culture an innovative organization. In 1922, Marine Corps Commandant, General John A. Lejeune, stated that the mission of the Corps is "to accompany the Fleet for operations ashore, in support of the Fleet."⁴¹ To conduct this mission, as demonstrated in World War II, the Marines became masters of amphibious landing operations. The Marines' occupation of key terrain offered ports and airfields for the Fleet and Air Force, which the Marines then secured. This reputation, mission, and capability is why America's political and military leadership both in Washington D.C. and the Vietnam theater were in complete agreement that President Johnson's approval of ground forces in Vietnam, would begin with the Marines landing to secure the Da Nang airfield.⁴²

The escalation of force demonstrated by landing the Marines to secure airfields mission provided an asset that satisfied both the Marine Corps and the military leadership in Vietnam. It involved the Marines in America's latest war and it brought troops with an offensive capability, if needed, for the search-and-destroy centric campaign led by General Westmoreland. In contrast to the idea held by General Westmoreland that the Marines were the first of many resources for search-and-destroy operations, the Marine leadership brought with them a factor he did not account for: their standard for adaptive operational art and a systems thinking approach to counterinsurgency warfare. This adaptability ties back into the Marine Corps history and culture

⁴¹Millett, 325.

⁴²The Marines were part of MACVs troop increase plan written and expressed in 1964. MACV Commander General Westmoreland, American Ambassador in Saigon Maxwell D. Taylor, CINCPAC Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, CG FMFPac Lieutenant General Victor H. "Brute" Krulak, and the Marine Corps Commandant at the time, General Wallace Greene all agreed with the use of Marines and this course of action.

referenced above. Any organization that is the first to arrive and undertake any challenge must prove adaptable or it will fail to exist. The Marines have proven to be extremely adaptable throughout their history, and the Vietnam War was no exception. Both operational and tactical Marine units, as well as individual Marines, are designed to operate with limited guidance and direction. Marines rely on ingenuity, initiative, and creative thinking to complete their amphibious force missions. Lieutenant General Victor Krulak expresses this clearly when he stated; “improvisation has been a way of life for the Marines.”⁴³ The ability to adapt to a new environment quickly and to execute missions with minimal guidance from a higher commander to achieve his intent, are factors that made the Marine Corps in Vietnam unique.⁴⁴ The ability of the Marines to understand the environment of the counterinsurgency war they entered and to adapt their operational approach accordingly is a testament to their professionalism.

Operational Level Marine Leadership

Major General Lewis W. Walt

Marine professionalism started at the top of the chain of command. The commanding general of III MAF was Major General Lewis W. Walt. He was an innovative and experienced leader. General Walt began his career as a Marine officer after resigning his Army Reserve commission to accept an appointment as a Marine infantry second lieutenant in 1936. Walt graduated from Colorado State University, where he was an athlete (all-conference guard and captain of the football, track, and wrestling teams) and ROTC honor graduate. He served with distinction in two wars before Vietnam, earning medals for valor and bravery as well as a

⁴³Krulak, 111.

⁴⁴The results of operations and the record individual actions throughout the past decade of counterinsurgency warfare as expressed in countless recent historical accounts, published by historians, journalists, and members of the military, demonstrate that the United States Army in 2013 is an adaptive, mission command oriented organization like the Marine Corps was when they arrived in Vietnam.

battlefield commission to lieutenant colonel in the Pacific during WWII. He then demonstrated his leadership ability and expertise in operational art as the commander of the Fifth Marine Regiment and the Chief of Operations, G-3, for the 1st Marine Division in the Korean War. This demonstrated leadership quality and ability to visualize operations explains why he was selected above his peers for command of the only Marine Corps operational level unit in Vietnam.⁴⁵

Lieutenant General Victor H. “Brute” Krulak

General Walt’s operational directions came from MACV. His administration and logistics support came from Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, based in Hawaii, and commanded in 1965 by General Krulak.⁴⁶ Prior to this command, General Krulak had worked directly for the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1962 to 1964 as the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, making him arguably the most well versed senior Marine officer in counterinsurgency operations. Although he was not serving directly in Vietnam, General Krulak’s understanding of counterinsurgency warfare and straightforward demeanor greatly influenced operations in the III MAF area of operation.⁴⁷ His influence came from three areas where he held advantage: his

⁴⁵Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*, 6. When General Walt assumed command of III MAF, a lieutenant general’s position, he was the junior ranking major general in the Marine Corps.

⁴⁶Millett, 567. Millett states that, “Nowhere was the command system more complex than for III MAF in I Corps. General Walt commanded III MAF and his own 3d Marine Division. He also served as the naval component commander, which gave him responsibility for Navy shore-based activities, and as senior U.S. military advisor for I Corps, which gave Walt control of the largely Army advisory group with the ARVN.” He also points out that General Krulak “showed no reluctance to provide tactical guidance as well.”

⁴⁷General Krulak influenced the III MAF pacification campaign more than any other military leader. General Walt directed and led the campaign but General Krulak’s candor towards counterinsurgency influenced his operational approach. General Krulak visited Vietnam 54 times between 1962 and 1968 and was very outspoken about the MACV’s strategy across Vietnam. He did not believe that General Westmoreland was directing a coherent counterinsurgency campaign. Many sources confirm this such as Albert Hemingway’s *Our War Was Different*, Michael Hennessy’s *Strategy in Vietnam*, William Corson’s *The Betrayal* and General Krulak’s own retrospective account, *First to Fight*.

position as the Marine officer immediately senior to General Walt; his understanding and appreciation for the difficulties of and commitment required in a counterinsurgency war; and his proximity to and ability to visit to Vietnam at his leisure.⁴⁸ General Krulak summarized his primary argument for how III MAF should conduct its campaign when he stated, “It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people we will automatically deny the larger units the support they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among these mountains.”⁴⁹

The Marine Corps Approach to Warfare

General Krulak was a vocal advocate of the operational approach of pacification undertaken by General Walt in Vietnam and dismissive of the “search-and-destroy” approach advocated by General Westmoreland. Regardless of his personal arguments for the conduct of a more population focused counterinsurgency campaign in Vietnam, he did not offer a revolutionary approach to the Marine Corps’ standard conduct of warfare. As Allan Millett explained in *Semper Fidelis*, the Marine Corps took a balanced approach to counterinsurgency.⁵⁰ The attitude within the entire Marine Corps towards counterinsurgency was correct. It ensured that any Marine elements arriving in Vietnam were prepared to conduct some unconventional as well as conventional operations. An example of what the Marine Corps did in their holistic approach to warfare was to increase formal instruction in counterinsurgency at all levels of its

⁴⁸Millett, 567; Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, 44; Westmoreland, 166.

⁴⁹Hennessy, 74-77; Krulak, 194; Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*, 11-12.

⁵⁰Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*, 13.

schooling before they entered the war.⁵¹ This adaptation as an organization was important, but it did not cause a complete paradigm shift in counterinsurgency thought throughout the Marine Corps. The Marines did not intend to become a Special Forces organization.⁵² In 1964, the Commandant, General David M. Shoup, clearly presented the official Marine Corps position on the Marines as a conventional force conducting unconventional warfare tactics when he stated, “Counterinsurgency is an attention-getting word these days and you may properly ask what the Marine Corps is doing in the field. We do not claim to be experts in the entire scope of actions required in counterinsurgency operations...The Marine Corps has long recognized that fighting guerrillas is an inherent part of landing force operations. Counterinsurgency warfare is essentially one of small units and we have traditionally emphasized individual leadership and small unit operations.”⁵³ The focus from the top of the Marine Corps was that all Marines have the ability to conduct both conventional and unconventional operations as required upon landing, which is in keeping with the history of the Corps. General Krulak’s emphasis on counterinsurgency did influence the focus of preparing the force for the type of warfare it encountered in Vietnam but his convictions did not require a shift in the culture of the organization. The Corps was an adaptive organization, and its leaders understood that they had to prepare for the war they believed their Marines would be called to participate in eventually. This outlook prepared the Marines to build an adaptive campaign plan upon their arrival in Vietnam.

⁵¹Millett, 548. From General Shoup’s testimony to the House Armed Services Committee Hearings on Defense Appropriations for FY 1964.

⁵²Palmer, 11; Peter Paret and John W. Shy, *Guerrillas in the 1960's* (New York: Praeger Press, 1962), 3-4. In the early 1960s Special Forces had recently undergone an increase in popularity in the military, much of which is due to President Kennedy’s interest in counterinsurgency. In the spring of 1961, the Secretary of Defense asked for a “150 per cent increase in the size of antiguerrilla forces” and President Kennedy announced that American “Special Forces and unconventional forces will be increased and reoriented.”

⁵³Millett, 548. The comments are extracted from General Shoup’s testimony to the House Armed Services Committee’s hearing on defense appropriations for FY 1964.

The Commandants' words reflect on the Marine Corps concept that they must always train to be prepared for any contingency from conventional to unconventional warfare, but it also demonstrates that there were other military units more focused on unconventional warfare than they were. The units to which he was referring as experts in counterinsurgency were the U.S. Army Special Forces. Outside of the Special Forces entering Vietnam, the Marine Corps had the most expertise in counterinsurgency in the U.S. military. This organizational knowledge on counterinsurgency began in their history with operations in Central America and the Caribbean during the later years of the nineteenth century into the first two decades of 1900s in what later became known as the "Banana Wars." During these interventions and occupations, the Marine Corps learned to conduct counterinsurgency operations to pacify nations such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, then built this knowledge into its collective culture. After these operations, the Marine Corps formally collected their valuable lessons learned on how to operate and win in wars requiring counterinsurgency by publishing the *Small Wars Manual* in 1940.⁵⁴ This manual did not change the nature of the culture of the Marine Corps into a counterinsurgency only focused unit, however it did provide a basis for counterinsurgency doctrine within the organization. Two decades after its publication it was issued as official doctrine for the Marine Corps as Fleet Marine Force Manual 21 "Operations Against Guerrilla Forces" in 1962 with the specific purpose of presenting "the tactics and techniques utilized by Marine Corps landing forces against guerrilla forces".⁵⁵ The Corps changed the nomenclature almost immediately to FMFM 8-2 in 1962 and it updated it four times over the next three years to ensure it was current as units prepared for operations in Vietnam. The Marine Corps would

⁵⁴Keith B. Bickel's book *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps' Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940* and Allen S. Ford's thesis, "The *Small War Manual* and Marine Corps Military Operations Other Than War Doctrine" provide two insightful studies on the *Small Wars Manual*.

⁵⁵U.S. Marine Corps, Forward.

publish FMFM 8-2 with a new title “Counterinsurgency Operations” again in December 1967 after two additional years of counterinsurgency lessons in Vietnam.

Counterinsurgency is part of Marine Corps Professional Discourse

The Marine Corps not only kept its counterinsurgency doctrine up to date during the early 1960s, its professional forums also provided avenues for dialogue about this method of warfare. Andrew Birtle calls this “informal doctrine” which comes from, “customs, tradition, and accumulated experience that was transmitted from one generation of soldiers to the next through a combination of official and unofficial writings, circular materials, conversation, and individual materials.”⁵⁶ A review of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, the professional journal of the Corps since 1916, shows that the January issue in both 1962 and 1963 were devoted entirely to counterinsurgency, or guerrilla warfare as it was called then. Being the 1960s and the height of the Cold War the majority of articles were devoted to the Soviets. These ‘big war’ articles were printed beside articles focused on the Marine Corps core tenet of amphibious operations and its historical articles on traditions and heroes. Some guerrilla warfare articles from editions throughout 1962 include titles such as: “Guerrilla War and the U.S. Military Policy,” “Guerrillas, Small Wars, and Marines,” “The Company Fights Guerrillas” and a five part series entitled “Inside the Viet Minh: Vo Nguyen Giap Guerilla Warfare” which was an after action report of the French loss in Vietnam. This was three years before the Marines were called to send units to Vietnam! In the May 1962 *Gazette* the Marine Corps published a favorable review of Franklin M. Osanka’s book *Modern Guerilla Warfare* and stated that it was “recommended reading for any Marine seriously interested in guerrilla warfare.” The combination of both doctrine and professional discussion on counterinsurgency during the early 1960s prepared the Marine Corps

⁵⁶Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1998), 5-6.

minds for operations in Vietnam and the approach taken towards pacification in the use of both combined action as well as large unit operations.

Counterinsurgency Training / Exercise Silver Lance

In addition to professional discussion on counterinsurgency, the Marine Corps also conducted training to increase understanding about this complex form of warfare and prepare Marines for the application of their techniques. They conducted a few counterinsurgency-focused exercises to increase the ability of Marine officers, NCOs, and junior enlisted to understand and operate in a counterinsurgency environment. The only large-scale counterinsurgency exercise conducted by the Marine Corps was Exercise Silver Lance.⁵⁷ It was conducted for almost a month from February to March 1965 at Camp Pendleton, California. General Krulak's Fleet Marine Force, Pacific designed and controlled it. The three primary training objectives were: to combat insurgency in a short-of-war setting, to conduct short notice, unrehearsed raids, reconnaissance, and ancillary landings, and to plan and execute a full scale amphibious landing attack against a defended area.⁵⁸ The exercise was massive in scale. Sixty ships, including three aircraft carriers, and 25,000 Marines were involved. The script for the exercise had over 2000 problems or incidents for the forces to solve. These problems ranged from a government request for textbooks, to requirements to provide medical aid, to village chiefs that refused to deal with anyone below a commander, all of which demonstrated the complexity of counterinsurgency warfare. Exercise Silver Lance opened with a Marine brigade landing with a task to restore law and order and climaxed with the 25,000 Marines conducting counterinsurgency operations. Fleet Marine Force, Pacific staff officer, Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, stated, "in terms of counterinsurgency training, Silver Lance, provided comprehensive experience in coordination

⁵⁷Millett, 548.

⁵⁸Clifford J. Robichaud Jr., "Silver Lance," *Marine Corps Gazette* 49, no. 7 (1965).

with and support of indigenous forces in matters of law and order; relationships with civilians; the protection and evacuation of U.S. nationals and, of course operations against guerrillas. Marines involved were required to learn the essentials of living with and handling a partially friendly native population. This was made possible by a realistic counterinsurgency environment quite similar to situations which we face around the world today.”⁵⁹ In the years before mission rehearsal exercises this event was a useful prelude for operations that the 9th MEB / III MAF would conduct in directed operations just three months later in June 1965.

“Welcome Gallant Marines”⁶⁰

When the Marines arrived in Vietnam the III MAF headquarters fell under a command and control system that created some challenges. The Republic of Vietnam was in the United States Pacific Command (PACOM) area of operation. Although this headquarters was responsible for all U.S. operations in Southeast Asia, operational level command relationships below PACOM during the Vietnam War, including MACV and III MAF, frequently violated the principle of unity of command. Within his responsibilities the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral Ulysses S. Sharp, was required to provide the overall plan for the defense of the Republic of Vietnam to the Secretary of Defense and President. The plan to counter a Communist threat was entitled Operation Plan (OPLAN) 32. It had four phases:

1. Phase I (Alert)
2. Phase II (Counterinsurgency)
3. Phase III (direct North Vietnamese attack)
4. Phase IV (direct Chinese attack)

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Millett, 565; Westmoreland, 124. When the Marines landed on March 8, 1965, they plunged through the surf on Da Nang’s elegant beach and met the heavy resistance of lei-bearing schoolgirls, ARVN officers, sightseers, and four American soldiers bearing a sign stating “Welcome Gallant Marines.”

Phases II, III, and IV directed a portion, or all, of a Marine Expeditionary Force to the Da Nang area of Vietnam. The principal Marine Corps mission was to defend vital areas for the South Vietnamese thereby freeing Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units for offensive operations.⁶¹

In February 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson directed Admiral Sharp to deploy a battalion of Marines from Okinawa to Da Nang, Vietnam. Third Battalion, Ninth Marines' landing on March 8, 1965 was executed under OPLAN 32 phase II. The Marine force expanded to over 5,000 men during the next few months as 9th MEB under the command of Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch.⁶² General Karch's brigade served under operational command of General Westmoreland who reported directly to Admiral Sharp.⁶³ Within two months, the Marines' Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR) had expanded to the entire I Corps tactical zone which comprised the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam: Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai displayed below in Figure 1. To conduct command and control in this area, III MAF arrived to replace 9th MEB as the operational headquarters for American forces. Initially commanded by Major General William R. Collins, Major General Lewis W. Walt assumed command of III MAF during a ceremony on June 4, 1965.⁶⁴

⁶¹Cosmas, 188.

⁶²Allnutt, 7; Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, 16.

⁶³Eventually as the Marine headquarters expanded to III MAF the commander, Major General Lewis W. Walt, would wear four hats at once: Commanding General of III MAF, Commanding General of Third Marine Division, Commander of the Naval Component, MACV, and the Senior American Advisor to the Vietnamese Forces in I Corps. Blanchard, 43.

⁶⁴Allnutt, 7; Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, 42.

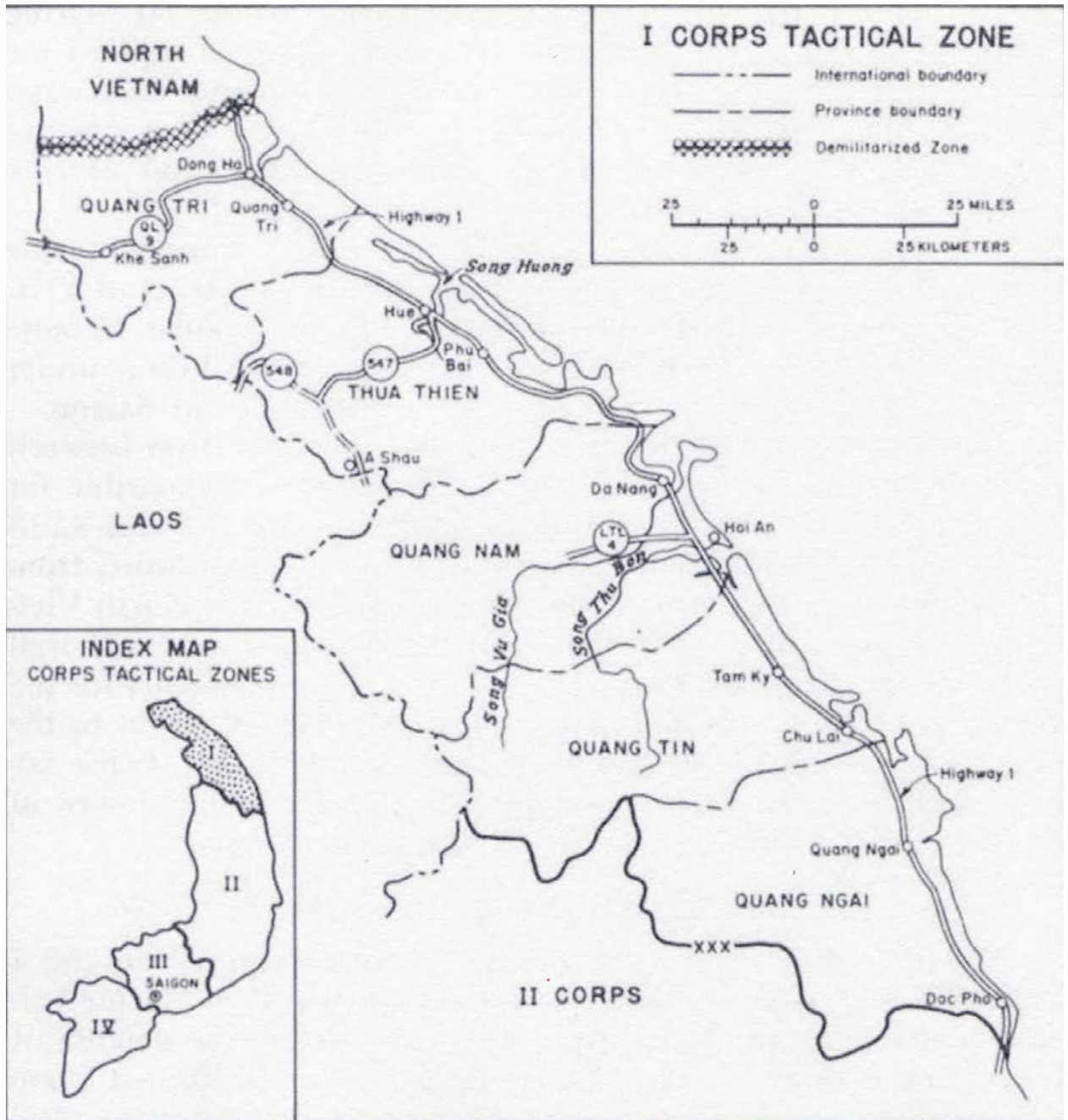


Figure 1. I Corps Tactical Zone.

Source: Center for Military History Publication 90-24, *The War in the Northern Provinces 1966-1968*.

Inside these provinces were key villages and airstrips. OPLAN 32 directed the Marine's defense of the airstrip at Da Nang in the centermost province of Quang Nam. By June 1965, the Marines' security requirement had expanded north to include the airfield at Phu Bai, south of Hue in the Thua Thien province. To add details to the broad descriptions in OPLAN 32 the CINCPAC concept of operations was published in March 1965. It outlined the four phases American forces arriving in Vietnam would use to move into offensive operations. The four phases were:

1. Protect vital U.S. installations and establish secure coastal enclaves from which they could support South Vietnamese operations (June-December 1965)
2. Conduct offensive operations from those enclaves (January –June 1966)
3. Move inland and establish bases
4. Conduct offensive operations from those bases⁶⁵

This CINCPAC concept of operations provided the framework for the campaign that General Westmoreland designed for MACV. The strategy for the MACV campaign directed all American forces to search for and destroy the main forces of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and large Viet Cong units and above all rested on General Westmoreland's confidence in the superiority of American tactical firepower.⁶⁶

III MAF Operational Approach

General Walt, in coordination with General Krulak and General Greene, outside the MACV operational chain of command, designed his operational approach and campaign under a different concept. It was not his intent to only expand out from airfield defense into offensive operations that simply conducted independent large unit search-and-destroy missions against North Vietnamese main forces. The Marine approach did not correspond with the belief that enemy main force units should be the prime objective of the American operations or that tactical

⁶⁵Cosmas, 216-217.

⁶⁶Edward Doyle, *The Vietnam Experience: America Takes Over* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1982), 58.

firepower was the primary method of warfare against them. The Marines realized that they were facing three enemies: the Viet Cong “hard core” operating in battalion strength, the Viet Cong guerrilla who was living *off* the people, and the Viet Cong who was living *with* the people.⁶⁷ III MAF operated on the belief that they should only engage NVA main forces when superior intelligence virtually guaranteed success and where the enemy force posed an immediate threat to populated areas.⁶⁸ General Walt stated that his visualization of the campaign was that he had two missions in Vietnam, “the destructive mission and the constructive mission, and we’ve got to do both jobs at the same time.” (see Appendix 1)⁶⁹ Within the III MAF campaign, General Walt provided his tactical commanders the freedom to use their ingenuity to develop alternative techniques to large scale destructive search-and-destroy missions to increase security in their area of operations. One of these constructive techniques was the Combined Action Platoon program.⁷⁰ The CAP program demonstrated what can happen when operational art allows subordinate commanders to develop methods of combat that are not constrained by prescribed one-dimensional strategy.

The Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program

The CAP program originally began as a tactical idea as part of the Marines decision to take a more active approach to the primary mission of airfield defense. The Marines knew that to defend airfields that are vulnerable to 81mm mortars required more than a static defense.⁷¹ The

⁶⁷Blanchard, 41.

⁶⁸Doyle, 65.

⁶⁹Blanchard, 42.

⁷⁰Millett, 571; Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, 133-142. Two additional techniques that are outside the scope of this paper but were determined to be a success were Operation Golden Fleece and Operation County Fair.

⁷¹Blanchard, 46. It only takes a few minutes to set up a 81mm mortar and it can hit a

problem the Marines needed to solve was one common to all tactical leaders, not enough troops were available for the tasks assigned. Third Battalion, Fourth Marines (3/4) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor had the mission to secure both the Phu Bai airfield and a nearby RVN radio station.⁷² Phu Bai is located along Route 1, just south of Hue, in the Thua Thien province. Phu Bai was tactically more difficult for the Marines to defend than Da Nang and Chu Lai because it is land locked which allowed the enemy to attack from all sides. The terrain around Phu Bai is forested and mostly hilly. Lt. Col. Taylor's active defense security plan included the conduct of patrols around the airbase. During these patrols, the Marines in 3/4 operated in four villages around the Phu Bai airstrip. These four villages in Phu Bai consisted of sixteen hamlets, with a combined population of 14,000 Vietnamese citizens. Third Battalion recognized that despite their patrols and presence the Viet Cong effectively controlled the area around Phu Bai. Lt. Col. Taylor directed his civil affairs officer, Captain John J. Mullen, along with his executive officer, Major Cullen B. Zimmerman, and a Lieutenant J. W. Davis, to formulate a plan for around-the-clock operations that would integrate elements of the battalion into the ARVN Popular Force (PF) platoons that were responsible for the security of the villages surrounding Phu Bai.⁷³ Staying within the spirit of finding practical creative solutions to deny the Viet Cong control of the area around the airbase, negotiations between Lt. Col. Taylor and General Thi, provided approval for Marine operational control of the Popular Forces in the

target at 4,000 meters.

⁷²Halberstam, 565. General Westmoreland had requested a Marine battalion to secure the Phu Bai airbase, which would be built up to serve as a helicopter field to take the burden of helicopters from the Da Nang airbase, which was already overcrowded.

⁷³Millett, 571; Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, 138-142. Popular Forces were a home guard made up of thirty-five soldiers directly responsible to the district chief for the defense of their particular village. They were generally regarded as the poorest of all the South Vietnamese forces.

vicinity of Phu Bai.⁷⁴ The battalion staff officers charged with constructing the active defense security plan requested assistance from III MAF for a Marine officer that had previously served with the U.S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam to help them organize a concept for combined action. The officer that arrived to build the first Combined Action Company (CACO) was First Lieutenant Paul R. Eck.⁷⁵ Lt. Eck and Capt. Mullen together conceived and organized what would become Combined Action Platoon program.⁷⁶ These company grade officers displayed the initiative American warfare requires, but the operational context surrounding the originality of CAP is General Walt's organizational leadership. His trust-based, decentralized approach provided his tactical commanders the freedom to develop their innovative counterinsurgency techniques. Once approved as a concept to be tested, Lt. Eck led all the Marines assigned to the new CAP program in a two-week orientation course on combined action, Vietnamese customs,

⁷⁴These negotiations took place within the atmosphere of mission command that General Walt established in III MAF. He approved and assisted Lt. Col. Taylor gain this command relationship with the Popular Forces.

⁷⁵Allnutt, 9; Robert A. Klyman, "The Combined Action Program: An Alternative Not Taken" (Master's thesis, University of Michigan, 1986), 7; Peterson, 23; Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966*, 133-135, 240. Throughout the research for this paper it was observed that First Lieutenant Paul R. Eck's last name is spelled either Eck or Ek depending on the author. Despite historian Jack Shulimson using the spelling Ek in the U.S. Marines in Vietnam official history series there are two sources that lead the author of this monograph to believe the correct spelling is Eck. These are William R. Corson's use of Eck in his book *The Betrayal* and a book review published in the April 1968 USMC Gazette written by (then) Lt Col Cullen B. Zimmerman, the 3/4 XO where he refers to Lieutenant Eck. These two first person accounts that spell the officer's name as Eck provide the standard for this monograph.

⁷⁶Allnutt, 10; Lawrence A. Yates, "A Feather in Their Cap? The Marines' Combined Action Program in Vietnam," in *U.S. Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007: Anthology and Selected Bibliography*, ed. Stephen S. Evans(Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2008), 154. Originally called "joint action," or a Joint Action Company, the name was formally designated as a Combined Action Company (CAC). CAC was later changed to CACO when it was discovered that "CAC," if pronounced with a broad "a," has a rather unfortunate meaning in Vietnamese, that same incidentally, as it has in English. Eventually Combined Action Platoon (CAP) was formally adopted to reflect the size of the elements directly embedded with the Popular Forces.

and basic language skills. On August 3, 1965, Third Battalion, Fourth Marines deployed the first CACO in the Phu Bai village alongside the Popular Forces.

CAP selection process

Selection for membership in the III MAF CAP program was different from other forms of combined action used in more recent conflicts. CAP Marines were volunteers and required to pass a selection process. This is different from the involuntary method used in recent campaigns to assign Army personnel to military transition team slots. It is important to understand the reason for the CAP selection process. The Marines in Vietnam determined correctly that not every Marine should be considered qualified to conduct an immersion form of combined action that is conducted in an extremely decentralized manner. When Lt. Eck personally selected the first combined action company, he established the standard for selection. His intent was to select the best men available. Those men selected to be a CAP advisors/commanders were platoon sergeants and squad leaders with combat experience that Lt. Eck determined were psychologically strong enough to conduct operations within hamlets in close contact with Vietnamese citizens.⁷⁷ To be fair the selection process was not perfect. There are documented accounts of men that served in the CAP program that were not psychologically fit to be members of CAPs, but generally these cases are accepted as anomalies, not the standard. Eventually under General Walt's directives, the CAP program built momentum. Marines desiring to serve in the CAP program had to meet the following criteria:

1. At least four months combat experience in a line Marine organization
2. A high recommendation by their commanding officer for duty with a CAP
3. No recorded disciplinary action

⁷⁷Blanchard, 59, 113; Cullen B. Zimmerman, "Book Review of *The Betrayal*," *Marine Corps Gazette* 52, no. 9 (1968): 14. Don Blanchard explained that the CAPs would live with the Popular Force platoons in the assigned village area, in native-style dwellings constructed by the Marines with Vietnamese assistance. The Marines eat native food and forego such luxuries as movies and beer.

4. No manifestation of xenophobia⁷⁸

The lesson to understand from the decision to use a voluntary selection process over an involuntary assignment process is that any form of immersion combined action deserves, possibly even requires, members who understand the importance of their role in a counterinsurgency campaign and have a desire to serve alongside and live with the host-nation forces. As Peter Paret and John Shy explain, “In these circumstances, self-denial, tact, and the ability to accept other people’s ways and attitudes are essential for U.S. instructors.”⁷⁹ CAP success depended upon establishing rapport with the host-nation citizens and forces.⁸⁰ In Vietnam, those host-nation forces were the Popular Forces.

South Vietnamese Popular Forces

The Popular Forces existed before the Marines landed in Vietnam. In 1955, soon after American advisors began arriving in Vietnam, the RVN Ministry of the Interior created and controlled a paramilitary Civil Guard under the command of ARVN to combat the Viet Cong. One year later in 1956, to augment this Civil Guard, the RVN Ministry of Interior created a village defense Self-Defense Corps. This Corps’ specific mission was to: provide local security from terrorism and subversion by the Viet Cong for their village or hamlet, to assist the local populace, to conduct anti-subversive activities, to defend key installations, and to aid in population and resources control at the village or hamlet. They were essentially a static force, composed of locally recruited or conscripted personnel who remained in their home villages and

⁷⁸Corson, 183; Peterson, 72-73. III MAF officially codified these standards for acceptance into the CAP program by 1968 in *Force Order 3121.4b*.

⁷⁹Paret and Shy, 60.

⁸⁰R. E. Williamson, "A Briefing for Combined Action," *Marine Corps Gazette* 52, no. 3 (1968): 43.

hamlets.⁸¹ These local village men received dilapidated small arms and little to no training by ARVN. In 1961, both the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were realigned within the RVN to the Ministry of Defense, but maintained as distinct elements from the ARVN. The Ministry of Defense did establish a Self-Defense Corps Command to monitor the administration, training, and logistical support from the national level. Within this command, it built four Self-Defense Corps Tactical Zone headquarters to oversee and direct local activities and to coordinate the Corps' participation in joint operations. In 1964, the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were renamed. The Civil Guard was renamed the Regional Forces and by 1965 it had grown to a strength of 94,000 across Vietnam. At the same time, the village defense Self-Defense Corps was renamed the Popular Forces and it stood at 172,000 strong.⁸² These Popular Forces were the resource that III MAF saw as an opportunity to capitalize on to maximize its economy of forces and increase its defenses of the Phu Bai airbase.

Purpose of the CAP program

General Walt stated "The [CAP] system was basically simple: Help the local defense forces at the hamlet level with training, equipment, support, and the actual presence of American fighting men."⁸³ Placing Marines directly in villages and working continuously throughout the day and night alongside the Popular Forces provided active defense in two ways. First, it moved Marines out of the forward operating base airfield enclaves and into the countryside where they were able to receive information from the population, analyze this information to produce intelligence, and act on the intelligence offensively against the Viet Cong. Second, the combined

⁸¹William E. Crouch Jr., "The Roles of Paramilitary Forces in the Vietnamese Insurgency 1960-1965" (Master's thesis, U.S. Army War College, 1971), 26.

⁸²Ibid., 24.

⁸³Walt, 105.

Marine/Popular Forces platoon structure improved the skills and capabilities of the Popular Forces as the Marines became a continuous reminder and demonstration of what “right looks like.”

Organization and mission of the CAPs

Beginning in the Phu Bai village, the Marines took operational control of PF to establish and test the CAP concept as an active defense tactic designed around the British Army’s concept of “brigading,” which was designed to “integrate these two forces into a single operational entity.”⁸⁴ A CAP was composed of fourteen Marines and one Navy corpsman within a thirty-five soldier Popular Force platoon (see Figure 2 on page 34). This entire fifty-man CAP was led by the co-efforts of the Popular Force platoon leader and the USMC advisor/platoon commander, usually the rank of sergeant or staff sergeant. This mentorship model of shared responsibility helped to improve the Popular Forces leaders.⁸⁵ The CAP concept operated successfully under a unity of effort at the expense of a unity of command.⁸⁶ III MAF Force Order 3121.4B officially defined the command relationship within CAPs as being on a “coordination and cooperation

⁸⁴Chester L. Cooper and others, *Elements of Pacification* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 1972); U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters III Marine Amphibious Force, *Force Order 3121.4b, Standing Operating Procedure for the Combined Action Program* (Da Nang, 1968), 2; Zimmerman. Brigading is combined action based on the concept of a “buddy system” where counterinsurgency forces embed with host nation units to maximize limited resources, increase available manpower, and intend to make training techniques as effective as possible. Zimmerman, who as the executive officer assisted in leading the establishment of CAP in 3/4, stated in his book review of *The Village* that “the concept of operations for the hamlet Marines was not rooted in the “banana war” past of the Marine Corps, but rather in the British concept of brigading one of her units with several native units.”

⁸⁵Blanchard, 94; T.B. Savage, "The Combined Action Platoon and Its Applicability in Future Conflict," (Quantico, VA: School of Advanced Warfighting, Marine Corps University, 2005), 4.

⁸⁶Allnutt, 17.

basis” and that “neither had the authority to discipline members of the other component.”⁸⁷

Through mentorship, the CAP Marine advisor/commander NCO intended to make the platoon leader proficient so he could lead without an advisor. In addition to these two leaders, the platoon headquarters had a Marine radio operator/grenadier and Navy corpsman and four Popular Force soldiers: the assistant platoon leader, interpreter, and radio operators. The Popular Force platoon consisted of three ten-man rifle squads. Embedding a four-man Marine fire team into each of these three rifle squads provided Marine lance corporals to mentor and display what “right looks like” to their Vietnamese partners.⁸⁸ This immersion of U.S. forces into a host nation unit formation is one of the truly distinctive characteristics of this form of combined action. Over time, these small forces of fifty men, combined from two militaries in partnership, demonstrated their superiority to Viet Cong forces whose numbers often ranged into the hundreds of fighters.⁸⁹

⁸⁷U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters III Marine Amphibious Force, 2.

⁸⁸Allnutt, 19.

⁸⁹David Wagner, "A Handful of Marines," *Marine Corps Gazette* 52, no. 3 (1968).

CHART 1—U.S. MARINE AND POPULAR FORCES COMBINED ACTION
PLATOON ORGANIZATION

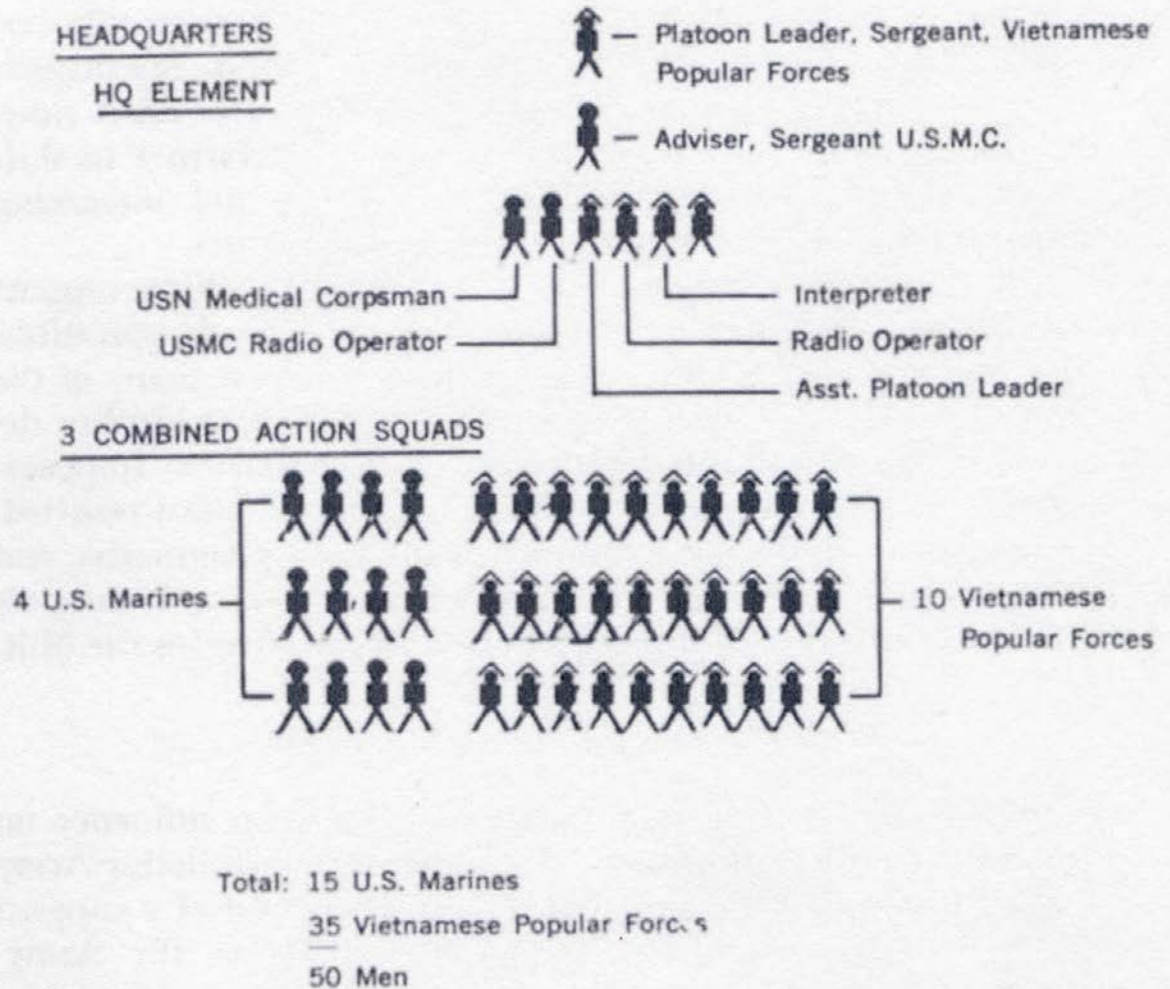


Figure 2. U.S. Marine and Popular Force Combined Action Platoon Organization Headquarters.

Source: Center for Military History Publication 90-24, *The War in the Northern Provinces 1966-1968*.

Although the original intent of the CAP program was active defense, once the program expanded in January 1966 and officially became part of the III MAF campaign plan, both American and Vietnamese military leaders viewed it as a force to augment the ARVN forces counterinsurgency campaign, not purely as force for airbase defense.⁹⁰ The CAP program grew from seven platoons in January 1966 to fifty-seven by January 1967 to its peak number of 114 platoons throughout the III MAF/I Corps area of operations by late 1968.⁹¹ The original mission for the Popular Forces was to provide local security from terrorism and subversion by the Viet Cong for their village or hamlet and to assist the local populace. The mission of CAPs stayed the same as the original mission given to these village security units because the CAP was only an enhanced Popular Force platoon. Within the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign the official mission of the entire CAP program was:

1. To enhance village and hamlet-level security
2. To increase the ability of the villagers to sustain and defend themselves by encouraging and participating in projects contributing to the well-being of the people and their identification with the national government.⁹²

III MAF also articulated the platoon specific mission. The official mission of the CAPs was:

1. Destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility
2. Protect public security and help maintain law and order
3. Protect the friendly political infrastructure
4. Organize people's intelligence nets

⁹⁰Peterson, 27-28. In January 1966, General Walt and General Thi published bilateral memorandums to detail the value of the CAP program and the plan to expand it across the III MAF/I Corps TAOR. General Walt in particular expressed that the program provided mutual benefits to both forces and that the relationship would "provide a basis for better understanding and building of mutual respect between our forces." Marine forces were also directed to use the term "cooperation or coordination" in lieu of "operational control." General Walt also viewed the program as a way to provide security to the "rear areas," which would allow conventional Marine and ARVN combat forces move forward.

⁹¹Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1988), 288.

⁹²Allnutt, 20.

5. Protect bases and line of communication axis within the villages and hamlets [by conducting day and night patrols and ambushes in assigned areas]
6. Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the Viet Cong⁹³

The CAPs were also given tactical tasks directly linked to the mission of the program:

1. Conduct integrated military operations with the Popular Forces
2. Train the Popular Forces
3. Gather, evaluate, disseminate, and react to local intelligence⁹⁴

Many of these missions, tasks, and the purpose as presented in the mission statement of the CAP program once it became a formalized part of the III MAF campaign plan may be viewed as generic to formalized counterinsurgency doctrine.⁹⁵

EVALUATION: IS CAP A VALID COUNTERINSURGENCY CONCEPT TODAY?

The historical analysis presented thus far explains how the CAP program became a pillar of the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign and provides understanding about why the CAP program is hailed by many historians as one of the most successful programs conducted during the Vietnam War. However, this does not demonstrate a complete evaluation to determine whether the CAP program is still a doctrinally valid and relevant counterinsurgency concept. The current U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* allocates three pages to the CAP program. While three pages may not seem like much if the program is hailed by many as a great success, considering that counterinsurgency operations such as CAP were considered “the other war” any mention of these tactics in our current doctrine demonstrates that there is at least some validity to the concept and some lessons for operational planners to consider. Conversely, the

⁹³Corson, 184; U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters III Marine Amphibious Force, 3.

⁹⁴Allnutt, 21.

⁹⁵The missions and tasks of the CAP program and CAPs are provided here for two reasons: to help the reader understand what General Walt intended to do with his counterinsurgency line of effort and to provide a field-tested template for future counterinsurgency campaign planners who choose to integrate this form of combined action into their plan.

reference to CAP in current doctrine does not provide a true measurement that CAP is still a doctrinally valid counterinsurgency tactic relevant to the Army today because it has not been replicated in form by conventional forces in any American conflict since Vietnam. To determine whether any portion of the CAP program in Vietnam, as explained here, can serve as a standard form of Army combined action within the contemporary operating environment, this monograph provides an evaluation of the program against standards presented in current doctrine.

Counterinsurgency Lines of Effort

The 2009 U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24.2 *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* proposed seven counterinsurgency lines of effort (LOEs), displayed below in Figure 3.⁹⁶ Lines of effort link multiple tasks and missions using the logic of purpose – cause and effect – to focus the efforts of the commander and staff to synchronize activities and assess the effectiveness of actions toward establishing their desired operational and strategic conditions.⁹⁷ Although the seven doctrinal counterinsurgency lines of effort in *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* serve only as a guide for units conducting counterinsurgency and each line must be situational, four of the seven provide a fair evaluation tool to determine if the CAP program is a valid counterinsurgency concept today. The other three lines of effort will not be used to measure the CAP program because the platoons did not exist for the purpose of achieving an end state to those lines. The four lines of effort that work as evaluation tools are: support host-nation security forces, support to governance, restore essential services, and conduct information engagement.

⁹⁶U.S. Army, *Field Manual 3-24.2, Tactics in Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2009), 4-6. A line of effort is a line that links multiple tasks using the logic of purpose rather than geographical reference to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 is the U.S. Army's current proponent document for this definition.

⁹⁷The Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

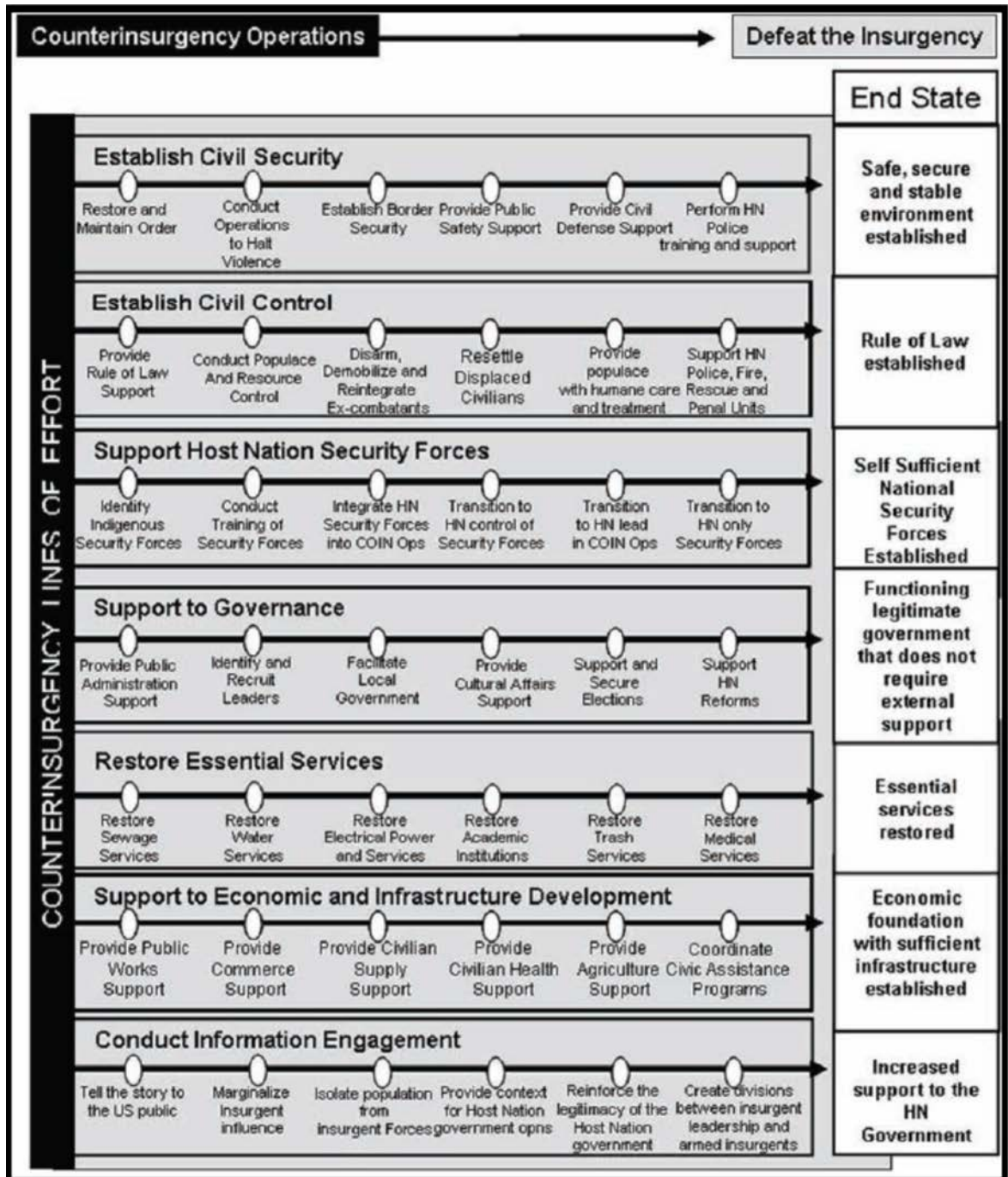


Figure 3. Counterinsurgency Lines of Effort.

Source: Department of the Army Field Manual 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency.

Support Host Nation Security Forces

General Walt's campaign plan combined both a counterinsurgency operation against Viet Cong in the III MAF area of operation and an offensive operation against North Vietnamese main force units. Against the wishes of General Westmoreland, the decisive operation within his campaign plan was the counterinsurgency operation.⁹⁸ Within the four lines of effort of the counterinsurgency operation, the formalized CAP program became the primary tactic to achieve the support of the host-nation security forces line.

The first decisive point along this line of effort in *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* is to identify the indigenous security forces. At Phu Bai the Marines did this and benefited from the existence of the Popular Forces. The existence of the Popular Force organization before the Marine's arrival in Vietnam is significant. Although the Popular Forces were pitiful by all reasonable standards, the fact that the Marine's did not have to build a village security force created the conditions for the CAP program to take effect and to formally expand as a key tactic within the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign.⁹⁹ William Corson observed that the Popular Forces were the "make or break" part of this campaign.¹⁰⁰ The III MAF counterinsurgency campaign would have been different or less successful without the formally established Popular Forces organization. This point is important for any counterinsurgency campaign planner to

⁹⁸Hemingway, 54-55; Westmoreland, 140,166. General Westmoreland states "we had to forget about the enclaves and take the war to the enemy" and "I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads." He believed the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign was an example of unprofessional tactics.

⁹⁹Krulak, 187-188. General Krulak observed that the PF "as soldiers, they were pitiable. No two in the same uniform, armed with an assortment of battered rifles, carbines, and shotguns, they were monumentally unimpressive to look at." During a visit to Vietnam with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, General Krulak listened to the SECDEF state, "We are going to have to do something about this. These may well be the most important military people in Vietnam. They have something real to fight for-their own hamlet, their own family." General Krulak agreed.

¹⁰⁰Corson, 84.

confirm and consider in their planning process – does an organized force within the local villages exist to conduct combined action with? Vietnam CAPs did not conduct combined action with regular ARVN forces. If a security force like the Popular Forces does not exist and U.S. Army forces are required to build a village/neighborhood force then a program such as CAP is not an option, or at least not as an option like III MAF Commander had in Vietnam.

In addition to the pre-existence of the Popular Force organization, a second uniqueness that the CAP program had in Vietnam as they identified the indigenous security forces was territorial. Where they operated mattered as much as which security forces the Marines combined with. The CAP program supported host-nation security forces in the hamlet and village, not the larger cities within the provinces. Providing American military resources to a force of men to defend two of their most valuable possessions, home and family, provides an economy of effort both mentally (the will of the host-nation defender is stronger when he fights for what he loves) and physically (a CAP program uses less American than host-nation forces). Any planner or commander considering replicating CAP in some form, if security force conditions make it feasible, needs to account for the significant value that combined action focused directly on defending people's homes and livelihood has. Lieutenant Colonel Wagner states, "The big thing about the popular force soldier is that he is recruited as a volunteer from the hamlet in which he will serve. This is the primary source of his motivation. When he fights the Viet Cong, he is fighting for HIS [*sic*] family, HIS home, HIS plot of ground, and HIS neighbors."¹⁰¹ If the operational commander identifies an existing village/neighborhood defense force, it is to his advantage to consider how a program such as CAP might fit into his operational approach.

The second decisive point along the support host-nation security forces line of effort requires the commander conducting counterinsurgency to conduct training of the security force.

¹⁰¹Wagner, 45.

This is the purpose of his combined action force. Train the Popular Forces was a directed tactical task for the CAPs specifically for this reason. The embedding of American forces within host-nation force platoons was a uniqueness of the CAP program that less integrated forms of combined action cannot replicate. There are two other forms of combined action that were used in Vietnam and in more recent American counterinsurgency campaigns: advisors/training teams and partnering, meaning forces of equal size and specialty are partnered together to provide the training to the host-nation force. CAP is a stronger form of combined action than advisor/training team or partnering concepts. The advisor/training team concept, while a proven tactic, which is valuable when American forces are limited, cannot provide as much individual instruction as a fully immersed squad of CAP Marines can. An advisor's ability to increase the skills of a host-nation foot soldier is limited to the time and personal interaction they can provide to train them. Host-nation soldiers will not receive the same individual attention in the advising form of combined action that an immersion CAP type combined action can provide. Acknowledging that while both advisors and CAPs constantly display "what right looks like," the CAP concept does this with more than one or two individuals for an entire platoon which are primarily role-models for, and in constant contact with, the host-nation platoon leadership. The CAP provided junior non-commissioned officer leadership directly into the Popular Forces platoon for the lowest ranking soldier to emulate.

Partnering combined action is used here to describe combined actions that place a U.S. force of approximately equal size side-by-side to train and mentor host nation forces. It should be clear that a full platoon of Marines and a full platoon of Popular Forces operating side-by-side would not have the same effect as embedding a squad of Marines into the Popular Forces platoon. Corson put it this way, "Marines, by taking some pains to understand the practical nature of the

peasant found that he can be won over on a person-to-person basis, but not by a large impersonal group.”¹⁰²

There are a few reasons why a CAP concept is a stronger form of combined action. The first is CAP by design required the Marines to be at the same location, feeling the same effects of the war as the Popular Forces. Partnering does not provide this unless there is the ability to ensure that the partnered American forces are with the host-nation unit twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If this were feasible then this form of combined action would not be conforming to an economy of force like the CAP program did. If partnering did place an American force of equal size beside the host-nation force all day, everyday the purpose would be to reduce risk to the Americans. Naturally, in non-immersion combined action, the Marine platoon would only integrate with the host-nation platoon when required for training or patrols. Partnering then allows for one of two things, the American force to withdraw to a safer enclave during part of the day and not feel the same effects of the war that their partners do, or to allow both forces to withdraw to a safer enclave. If the partnered host-nation force was a regular Army force with a base to return to, not simply a small combat outpost in a village, then this form of combined action will most likely not achieve the same effects that the CAP program did. Partnering will not glean the same amount of intelligence nor will it control the village/neighborhood as the CAP program did. A CAP form of combined action also seems to build the morale of the American on the ground. The morale for CAP Marines in Vietnam seemed to be generally high because they felt they were conducting their jobs for a purpose and making a difference, which on many occasions they could see.¹⁰³ Another benefit to a CAP form of combined action is that it can reduce civilian casualties. Michael Weltsch found that CAP Marines were much more reluctant to

¹⁰²Corson, 178.

¹⁰³Katie A. Johnson, “A Reevaluation of the Combined Action Program as a Counterinsurgency Tool” (Master’s thesis, Georgetown, 2008), 25.

call in air strikes, which they could do at any time, for fear of hurting someone they had come to know personally.¹⁰⁴ Finally, a partnering form of combined action does not provide the American force the same depth of culture that a CAP concept does. Most Marines below the leadership level in a partnered tactic would pay minimal attention to learning the culture and language of the host nation forces because these items would not be essential for survival. The trade-off for CAP Marines' depth of culture is that they required more proficiency in the Vietnamese language. Proficiency in the foreign languages, was not nor is it now, something that the American military can claim it does well. Recently, the commander of the U.S. European Command observed that fewer than ten percent of Department of Defense members speak a second language. Admiral James Stavridis stated, "As opposed to many of our European partners, who effortlessly speak four or five languages and have a deep knowledge of each other's background and culture, we in the U.S. are failing to fully train and prepare for this kind of international work, this is an area in which we have much work to do."¹⁰⁵ One study about the use of the CAP concept in Iraq recommended that Marines designated as CAP platoon commanders should receive a six month immersion in language at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA.¹⁰⁶ There are of course benefits to be gained from this but conversely it requires the availability of slots to attend this high-demand school and prior planning to ensure the right officers and non-commissioned officers attend.

None of these evaluations presented here are intended to state that these two additional forms of combined action, advisor/training team and partnering, are not worthwhile. There are

¹⁰⁴Michael D. Weltsch, "The Future Role of the Combined Action Program" (Master's thesis, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1991), 88-90.

¹⁰⁵Donna Miles, "Commander Laments Lack of Language Skills," *The Fort Leavenworth Lamp*, February 7 2013, A3.

¹⁰⁶Savage, 16.

probably more instances in counterinsurgency warfare where these forms of combined action are the only feasible forms, and CAP is not an option. In Vietnam, the CAP program was an option. It was most likely the only feasible form of combined action for two reasons. First, advisors had been used previously and the Marines were called upon as a regular force, not just to be more advisors. Second, the Marines did not have enough personnel to conduct partnering. The CAP program was an economy of force combined action tactic. The primary reasons presented here that make the CAP concept the stronger form of combined action are: economy of force, maximum individual attention for every host-nation soldier, an increased understanding of the battlefield, increased cultural awareness and understanding of why the host-nation is fighting the insurgency, increased intelligence, increased morale in American forces, possible reduced civilian casualties, and increased territorial control. These reasons demonstrate that the CAP concept is a valid form of combined action and should be considered as a counterinsurgency tactic to train the host-nation force when feasible.

The support of host-nation security forces requires the American operational commander to integrate the host-nation security forces into counterinsurgency operations after training them. The CAP program conducted this decisive point almost immediately. One additional benefit of a CAP program if having indigenous security forces already available is that the time to move from one decisive point to the next is compressed. Training is not a step to integrating the security forces into counterinsurgency operations, they happen sequentially. Every counterinsurgency operation is integrated immediately and thereby becomes training for the host-nation. The trade-off for using a program like CAP is that there is a much greater risk to the American forces. Frasier Fowler states that, "one out of every eight Marines in the CAP program was killed, eighty percent were wounded once, and twenty-five percent were wounded twice."¹⁰⁷ This increased

¹⁰⁷Fraser Fowler, "The USMC's Combined Action Platoons: A Counterinsurgency Success in Vietnam and Why It Failed to Derail U.S. Military Strategy," *Canadian Army Journal*

probability of wounding led III MAF to direct that each Marine joining a CAP could not have received more than one Purple Heart on their current tour.¹⁰⁸ Lt. Col. Taylor and then General Walt calculated that the overall payoff within the security force building and security to the airfields would be greater than the risk of embedding Marines directly into village security forces. Assuming the conditions exist to make the CAP concept a feasible tactic for consideration by the operational commander, risk is the greatest detractor to this form of combined action. There is a lower tolerance for risk today than 1965, demonstrated by the fact that the commander of forces in Afghanistan directed a halt to combined action after multiple insider threat incidents.¹⁰⁹ In this instance, the American forces are not even conducting an immersion style CAP concept, but more of a partnering form of combined action. If there is a central reason that the CAP concept will not be replicated in future counterinsurgency conflicts aside from initial conditions not being set it will be because the risk is too great.

The final decisive points in the support to host-nation security force line of effort require the commander to transition from having American forces in the lead to ensuring that the host-nation forces are in the lead. The CAP program overcame this by having a parallel command structure. The CAP Marines did not have authority over the Popular Forces and vice versa. They were integrated as one force, therefore by design the Popular Forces were in the lead as much as possible. The CAP was a Popular Forces platoon force first, not a Marine platoon with Popular Forces waiting to take over. Marines only made up for the Popular Forces platoon deficiencies until they achieved the skills required from the Marines. Transition of the CAP program to the

12, no. 1 (2009): 97.

¹⁰⁸U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters III Marine Amphibious Force, 12.

¹⁰⁹James Blitz and Richard Leiby., "NATO Scales Back Afghanistan Operations," *Financial Times* (18 September 2012). <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a6837728-014c-11e2-83bb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2EaAWodob> (accessed January 29, 2013).

host-nation Popular Forces was driven more by strategic directives than by assessments and validations by III MAF. Arguments were made for a transition from CAP Marines to ARVN regular forces performing their duties. However, the program did not transition in this fashion, but was scaled down and transitioned first to a mobile CAP program then eventually towards the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program almost as fast as it blossomed from one platoon to a part of the III MAF campaign.¹¹⁰ For this reason it is difficult to evaluate the final decisive points along the line of effort. It is reasonable to assume that the Popular Forces did not achieve self-sufficiency at a level required to ensure that the Viet Cong were unable to eventually reassert themselves into some of the villages in the III MAF area of operations. These strategic decisions do not invalidate the CAP concept. Strategic decisions will always require the operational commander to adjust his campaign plan and change what is or is not feasible. The conditions in Vietnam in late 1970 and MACVs adoption of the CORDS program reduced the CAP program, but these operational changes do not make the CAP program a historical tactical artifact that is unfeasible in future counterinsurgency campaigns.

Support to Governance

The support to governance line of effort requires the command to focus on the civil side of counterinsurgency. Since insurgencies cannot be defeated without host-nation political structures in place that are strong enough to stand alone without U.S. presence this line is equally, if not more, important than the support to host-nation security forces line of effort. The first decisive point on this line of effort requires the commander to provide public administration support. III MAF did not have to build a government. This decisive point links more towards a military force involved in government creation. III MAF was able to position itself to invest more

¹¹⁰Francis J. West, *An Area-Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1969).

in a different decisive point, the facilitation of local government, because of the existing governmental structure. Facilitation of local government within III MAF started with General Walt. As the III MAF commander, he directly engaged the provincial government leadership. This engagement added creditability to the CAP program as a force helping to enable the South Vietnam government's structure. The CAPs initially, and later the Combined Action Companies and Groups, engaged with the hamlet, village and district chiefs. The district chiefs increased their legitimacy when the villages and hamlets in their district became more secure. The CAP program was the tactic used by the Marines to separate the people from the insurgent Viet Cong, which then provided space for strengthened/improved governance in the provinces. CAP also provided support to governance as a mechanism to defeat the Viet Cong's ability to operate a shadow governmental system within the III MAF area of operations. This led to an eventual reduction of Viet Cong operations in some of the areas where CAPs operated.

The second decisive point along the support to governance line of effort is to identify and recruit leaders. Although hamlet, village, and district leadership existed, an advantage to having a force embedded in villages conversing daily with the local nationals is that the strengths and weaknesses of the local leadership is under continual evaluation. This constant interaction with the citizens helps with the support of host-nation reforms decisive point. The CAP Marine platoon advisor's knew the village and district leadership as the direct reporting official for his Popular Force platoon leader. CAP Marines immersed in the village, speaking Vietnamese improved communication with the local leaders. CAP Marines were able to help III MAF identify and assist in keeping in power those local nationals that were identified as the best leaders and equally provide information to the command about those that were corrupt beyond a reasonable standard.

Increasing the strength of the legitimate government, reducing the ability of the insurgency to operate a shadow government, and leader identification and support are ways that a

program built in the form of CAP can help facilitate local government. The end state of the support to governance line of effort is to have a functioning legitimate government that does not require external support. The CAP program assisted in moving the government in the III MAF area of operations towards this end state.

Restoration of Essential Services

To build on the strength of the host-nation government the counterinsurgency force must assist in the restoration of essential services. This third line of effort allows the command to measure and improve the status of services that are required for a basic standard of living. The decisive points presented in this line of effort in *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* measure services primarily found in urban areas such as sewage, water and trash services, electrical power, and academic institutions. Most of these services were not conducted in villages in Vietnam. This makes the villages in Vietnam and the evaluation of the CAP program as a form of combined action within this line of effort difficult, but not impossible. Although difficult, evaluating the rural village based CAP program within this line of effort is valuable for two reasons. First, while urban areas hold large portions of the populations where American forces will operate in future conflicts, not all combined action in future counterinsurgency campaigns will be conducted in urban areas. This is currently being demonstrated by operations in rural Afghanistan. Second, CAP Marines were in constant contact with the hamlet, village, and district leadership. This contact facilitated their ability to determine what assistance they could provide to increase services. There were two essential services that the CAP program leadership determined they could feasibly contribute to within the villages in Vietnam. These services were medical services and rice harvest security. Future counterinsurgency campaign planners may find value in understanding how a program such as CAP helped improve these essential services in rural villages.

The first essential service that the CAP program contributed to was the delivery of basic medical services. III MAF understood that within the civic action operations of their counterinsurgency campaign improving medical services would be one of the quickest ways of winning the hearts-and-minds of villagers. The program that III MAF used for this was the Medical Civic Action Program. This medical program placed Navy Corpsmen directly in the villages as part of the CAPs.¹¹¹ This immediate response to first aid and the ability of Corpsmen to provide medication to defeat or prevent disease immediately increased the people's trust in CAPs. Everyday corpsmen demonstrated that individual actions can have strategic consequences. Any low-cost, high return investment such as this medical program that can be made inside a counterinsurgency campaign should be measured favorably. CAP Corpsmen did not have to coordinate for travel to or cycle through hamlets and villages because they were embedded in the platoons. They only had to coordinate to receive medical supplies from their higher headquarters. As part of the CAP platoon, they were also able to conduct training that improved the popular force and villagers ability to provide immediate basic medical care and their understanding of the value of sanitation. The returns on their contributions were exponential. Medical care is a necessity in every operational environment that the military enters. Finding ways such as the medical program to project this valuable resource as far forward as possible to interact and support the people should be considered as part of all counterinsurgency campaigns.

A second, and probably more important, essential service that the CAP contributed to was the denial of Viet Cong intrusion in the rice harvest and its economic returns to the village.

¹¹¹U.S. Navy, "Navy Jobs" <http://www.navycs.com/navy-jobs/hospital-corpsman.html> (accessed 26 February 2013); Wagner, 45. Hospital Corpsmen perform duties as assistants to medical professionals in the prevention and treatment of disease and injury. They also serve as battlefield corpsmen with the Marine Corps, rendering emergency medical treatment to include initial treatment in a combat environment. Lieutenant Colonel Wagoner explained the value of corpsmen in CAP platoons with his statement, "Many corpsmen estimate that they care for around 300 people each week. At one of the CAPs in the Da Nang area the nineteen year-old corpsman delivered his first twins and the ninth delivery of his young career."

The Viet Cong required the rice to survive and operate in the III MAF area of operation. CAPs provided protection of harvests from the Viet Cong. Between imbedded CAPs in the villages and Operation Golden Fleece, III MAF was able to deny the Viet Cong the ability to seize rice. The denial of a required resource from the enemy, increased economics, and better health among the citizens demonstrate that a program such as CAP can provide value to a counterinsurgency campaign along the essential services line of effort. Don Blanchard reinforced the value of the CAP program along this line of effort when he stated, “The net result of the combined action program is a kind of spontaneous civic action which evolves from the satisfaction of the peasant generated needs and the development of spirit of communal togetherness within which are identified the mutual interests of the protected and the protector.”¹¹²

Conduct Information Engagement

Counterinsurgency campaign success relies on the population’s perception of the legitimacy of the host-nation government. Messaging to the host-nation population is vitally important in counterinsurgency. This final line of effort, conduct of information engagement, evaluates the CAP program against how well it contributed to messages that increased the legitimacy of the host-nation government. CAPs contributed greatly to the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign and the legitimacy of the RVN’s ability to reestablish its authority through this line of effort.¹¹³ Actions of CAPs contributed more to this counterinsurgency line of effort than any other except for the support of host nation security forces line. The CAP program was a key reason many of the decisive points along this line of effort were achieved within the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign. The Viet Cong insurgency’s influence was marginalized

¹¹²Blanchard, 86.

¹¹³Graham A. Cosmas and Terrence P. Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971*, Marine Corps Vietnam Series (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1986), 139.

within villages where CAPs operated more than anywhere else within the III MAF area of operation. This was because the permanent presence of a CAP in a village successfully isolated the population from Viet Cong influence. CAPs constantly engaged and demonstrated their support for the citizens of the village and the government by standing directly beside them in the face of danger. The legitimacy of the district and provincial leadership increased as the villagers relied on their popular force platoon for security and this force improved because of its daily interaction with CAP Marines. This demonstrates that the CAP program contributed to the reinforcement of the RVN as legitimate in the opinions of the people, an additional decisive point along this line of effort. In addition to directly contributing to these decisive points along the information engagement line a CAP directly embedded in a village in constant communication with its Marine headquarters provides an additional benefit. The CAP provided an avenue for the direct transmission of information operations themes and messages from III MAF and the provincial governments to the people. Messaging presented by a force that is viewed by the citizens as separate or an invading force results in ineffective communication. Since the CAPs were immersed in the villages they had the ability to express themes and messages to their Vietnamese Popular Forces in the same unit who could reinforce to the villagers how they were all siding together against the Viet Cong. Combined action conducted through CAPs contributed greatly to the information engagement line of effort within the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign.

CONCLUSION

CAPs were a valuable element of the III MAF counterinsurgency campaign in Vietnam. This technique may serve as a tool for U.S. Army commanders conducting operational art in the future. The conclusions arrived at in the evaluation of the CAPs against current doctrine demonstrate that the CAP concept is still a doctrinally valid counterinsurgency concept that is

relevant to the U.S. Army in the contemporary operational environment. If the conditions are appropriate, CAPs provide a strategic, operational, and tactical asset for the operational planner.

Since the CAP program is relevant and this portion of Army doctrine needs be kept, it should also be better understood and institutionalized as the Army moves forward in 2013 following more than a decade of war. The question now becomes, how does the Army institutionalize combined action? One position is that the Army should build “a permanent Army force structure to perform the advisor mission more efficiently and effectively,” such as an Advisor Corps that focuses exclusively on advising host-nation forces.¹¹⁴ While this complete force restructuring is one method, the evaluation of CAP in this monograph does not demonstrate that this is or should be the way forward for the Army. However, the advising mission of the U.S. Army is part of our future.¹¹⁵ It is important for U.S. Army brigade combat teams that are being designated as focused regional partner units to understand the value of the CAP program and conduct some combined action training to improve these partnerships. The relationships that these units build with the military forces of the countries in their region will be the stepping-stone towards better combined action in the future. As the CAP program ended in Vietnam Joseph Story conducted a study to determine what, if anything, from the CAP concept could be extracted for use in future counterinsurgency conflicts. Story concluded that concept was effective and “since the USMC will probably have a use for this capability in the future, the Corps should proceed immediately to institutionalize combined action, both in doctrine and in training, to the

¹¹⁴John A. Nagl, "In Era of Small Wars, U.S. Must Embrace Training Mission," *World Politics Review* Economy of Force: Training U.S. Partner Militaries, (2013).

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 7; U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC, 2012). John Nagl observed that retired Army LTG James Dubik stated, “The conventional forces of the United States Army will have an enduring requirement to build the security forces of other countries. Planning, training, doctrine and acquisition must take account of this mission and support it.” Echoing this Secretary Panetta stated, “Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, presence, and advisory capabilities.”

extent it can afford to do so.”¹¹⁶ Institutionalizing combined action is just as important today as it was to the Marines in Vietnam.

Although it is beyond the scope of this monograph to present a combined action training program to augment standard common core training, it is worthwhile to inform the reader that the unit training package explained in the Story study provides an excellent primer from which to build a training package. The highlights of the training are three fold. The training must include a general orientation for every member of the unit covering the concept of combined action, instruction on relations with military force counterparts, knowledge passed on about the experience of combined action operations, and a description of what a mission, organization, and the operations of a combined action unit should be. Following this general instruction, a level of detailed instruction that focuses on more specialized training for soldiers preparing to conduct the combined action tactical task should be included. Lastly, for those noncommissioned officers that will be leaders of combined action forces additional instruction must be provided to ensure they are prepared for this difficult and delicate role that embeds them alongside an indigenous force platoon leader. Selection of the primary instructors for combined action is a key element to ensuring that units are prepared to conduct this difficult tactic successfully, but with the amount of veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom currently serving in the noncommissioned officer ranks with high levels of proficiency in combined action, finding instructors should not be difficult. Tactical and operational units can, and should apply combined action training into their training plans. Regionally aligned conventional units have a unique opportunity to execute this training with foreign forces. This will begin to institutionalize combined action into the Army and assist in not losing one of the more difficult lessons learned over the past decade as well as the lessons learned by the Marines in Vietnam.

¹¹⁶Story and Vreeland, 153.

Combined action is one of the most difficult tactics to employ in counterinsurgency operations. The paradox here is that, although difficult, it is necessary to strengthen the host-nation security forces so the United States can extract itself from a counterinsurgency war with any semblance of success. Combined action will be part of all future counterinsurgency operations in some form, so the Army, more specifically its operational planners and tactical trainers, can only do themselves a favor by studying history, learning lessons from sister services, reflecting on its recent history, and then institutionalizing concepts through training now that will help achieve success when called in the future.

APPENDIX A: III MAF CAMPAIGN PLAN FEBRUARY 1966¹¹⁷

<u>MAJOR FUNCTIONAL AREAS</u>	<u>SUPPORTING PROGRAMS</u>	<u>SUBPROGRAMS</u>		
Counter guerrilla: Aim – Destroy Guerrilla Forces	1. Kill VC Guerrillas and 2. Destroy VC Infrastructure	Ambush		
		Snipe		
		Patrol		
		Search and Destroy		
		Collect Intell (sic) from Civilians		
	Phase-in Vietnamese Local Security Forces	Conduct County Fairs		
		Demonstrate Proper Security		
		Train Local Security Forces		
		Large Unit Operations: Aim – Destroy VC and NVA Main Forces	Watch	Man Deep Recon Posts
				Reconnoiter By Air
Execute Stay Behind Recon				
Strike	Conduct Large Unit Search and Destroy Operations			
	Pacification: Aim – Assist in Nation Building		Establish Village Security	Train Village Local Defense Forces
				Complete Village Defense Plans
				Establish Village Intel Networks
				Establish Village Psychological Warfare Information Program
			Establish Village Governments	Encourage Village Census
				Assist in Installing Government Officials
Restore Security for Village Officials				
Maintain Close Contact with Village Officials				
Improve Local Economy		Assist in Establishing Local Markets		
		Protect Rice Harves		
	Improve Communications			
	Assist in Local Construction Projects			
Improve Public Health	Give Medical Treatment			
	Evaluate Critically Ill			
	Give Medical Training			
	Feed Hungry Vietnamese			
Improve Public Education	Support Students			
	Teach English Language			
	Help Build Schools			
	Give Vocational Training			

¹¹⁷David Strachan-Morris, “Swords and Ploughshares: An Analysis of the Origins and Implementation of the United States Marine Corps' Counterinsurgency Strategy in Vietnam between March 1965 and November 1968” (Honor's thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2010), 66. This chart was originally published in the FMFPac, *Operations of US Marine Forces Vietnam*, July 1966, p. 6.

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