

THE COMBINED ACTION MARINE: PROJECTING ANOTHER VIETNAM
SERVICE MEMBER IMAGE

by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all service members everywhere, who come from varied homes in various places; who have families of assorted ethnicities, languages, and backgrounds; who love different people and have different passions; who join and leave the military for different reasons; but who sacrifice in one way or another for others.

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ABSTRACT

THE COMBINED ACTION MARINE: PROJECTING ANOTHER VIETNAM SERVICE MEMBER IMAGE

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By focusing on Vietnam Combined Action Program (CAP) Marines and using them as examples of service members whose contributions, especially civic action, went mostly unnoticed during and after the war, this thesis will contribute to filling a specific void within a larger gap of Vietnam War pacification and civic action history. Furthermore, this study will reveal that these CAP Marines did not fit a publicly accepted image of Vietnam service members that was enabled by incomplete and sometimes inaccurate histories and war-time media coverage and both demonstrated by and further perpetuated by the 1980s popular film *Platoon*. That image is of a heartless, unintelligent, alcoholic/drug-dependent, narrow-minded “gook-”killer. In the service, he found his niche as only a combatant, yet he was beat down relentlessly by war’s daily tragedies. The CAPs were made up of all kinds of people, many of whom were nothing like the popular Vietnam service member image that penetrated and lingered in the

collective memory. In fact, in spite of endless criticisms, tongue-in-cheek references to the “hearts and minds” missions, and popular images to the contrary, many would argue that the CAPs actually did win hearts and minds in Vietnam. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted literature and archival searches at Fenwick Library at George Mason University, The Alfred M. Gray Marine Corps Research Center, and the Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections. The author also conducted interviews with multiple CAP veterans, as well as other veterans who offered information to the topic.

Introduction

In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson publically committed American ground troops to Vietnam. Although the United States had been somewhat covertly involved there for years in one way or another—military advising, frequent bombing raids, and civilian foreign aid—the decision brought tensions between various U.S. institutions and entities like the U.S. government, military, media, and public to the forefront. Many people believed that the U.S. was simply using the war as a cover to maintain its colonial supremacy, while others insisted that saving Vietnam and the South Vietnamese people was of the highest moral endeavors and essential to preventing the spread of Communism. At the heart of all the debates were the people who were actually in Vietnam implementing foreign policy and ideologies—the military. Significantly, the military had its own inner turmoil and Vietnam debate, and it revolved around the strategy implemented overseas. At the very top of the chain of command was the Commander of American troops in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland. He was a fervent believer in applying conventional warfare, including massive bombing campaigns, in an attempt to defeat the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC). Others passionately urged President Johnson to commit the majority of his forces to pacification efforts in the villages.

The term *pacification* became popular during the Vietnam War and was often referred to as the U.S.'s "other war," or "winning the hearts and minds." Notable Vietnam War historian Richard Hunt writes, "Broadly speaking, the Americans conceived pacification as a means to defeat a communist insurgency and help build a national political community in South Vietnam."¹ Vietnam veteran and historian Michael Peterson includes a slew of programs under the pacification umbrella. He explains,

There were many responses to what was known as the 'other war' in Vietnam: the counterinsurgency and pacification regimes enacted against the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The government of South Vietnam had its Strategic Hamlets and, later, the Ap Doi and Ap Doi Moi (New Life Hamlets and Really New Life Hamlets). The CIA had its highly effective and ruthless Phoenix Program (its Vietnamese counterpart named Phung Hoang). The Army had its Special Forces and MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) Advisory Teams. Even Academic America had its pacification interests in the form of the Camelot studies of the Indochinese hamlets.²

Essentially, pacification was a strategy whereby American troops theoretically fought insurgents and helped establish progressive programs in the villages alongside the villagers. One unique military program that clearly reflected this ideology was the Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP).³

In his history of the United States Marine Corps, Allan R. Millet writes, "Under the direction of General Krulak and General Walt [the two most senior Marine Corps commanders in the Pacific theater] III MAF [Marine Amphibious Force] developed its

¹ Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1995), 1.

² Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Prager, 1989), 1-2.

³ The acronym CAP will also be used in place of Combined Action Platoon. In this paper, the two titles will either be differentiated by the context, or used interchangeably.

pacification campaign with considerable ingenuity in 1965.”⁴ Based on Marine Corps pacification experiences throughout a period of repeated interventions in Central America during the early 20th century (known as the “Banana Wars”), the generals, with a staff of officers ranging in rank from Lieutenant through Colonel, devised a plan founded on the concept Millet calls “saturation patrolling.”⁵ Basically, the Marines were to be a constant force in the villages meant to prevent the Viet Cong from infiltrating in between missions and to earn the trust of the South Vietnamese. The Marines understood that the end state of their operations was to “win the hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese and secure the village forever. They combined forces with the local militias in an effort to win the trust of the villagers by proving that they were all part of the same team, and they taught the village soldiers more effective strategies and tactics. In his oral history of the CAPs, historian Al Hemingway explains, “The Combined Action Program’s basic concept was to bring peace to the Vietnamese villages by uniting the local knowledge of the Popular forces with the professional skill and superior equipment of the Marines.”⁶ Thus, the Combined Action Program established the Combined Action Platoons (also called CAP), a unit consisting of one squad of American Marines and a Navy Corpsman, and one platoon of Popular Force (PF) soldiers. Initially, the program was in an unofficial status, receiving none of the logistical benefits or general recognition of the regular infantry. In spite of this, each platoon lived secluded from the rest of the military, in its assigned typically rural village.

⁴ Allan R. Millet, *Semper Fidelis--The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 570.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), x.

Although securing the village was their priority, and despite the fact that the CAPs faced many unique challenges, the proximity of the CAP Marines to the villagers and the mantra of winning hearts and minds soon lent itself to various civic action missions. From distributing soap to delivering babies, the CAPs were committed to doing what they could to better the lives of their villagers. Throughout the war and across various regions, individual CAPs faced different enemies, overcame different obstacles, celebrated different triumphs, and mourned different losses, from every other CAP. Hemingway clarifies, “Each CAP Marine faced distinct problems in the area he was assigned to. Not all Marines were fond of PFs, for example, nor were they [all] readily accepted by the inhabitants of the village they occupied.”⁷ Depending on the assigned region, some CAPs fought local insurgents, while others combated full NVA outfits. Furthermore, CAPs that were in more isolated areas had a harder time resupplying. Because of inter-service tensions and the fact that General Westmoreland was not a CAP supporter, the CAP Marines, in general, struggled with logistical support. Still, despite their personal and military struggles, the CAP Marines continued their full-fledged support of the villagers, enjoyed a number of victories, and the program grew.

In fact, the program and its variation in missions grew quickly. By 1966, just one year after its founding, Combined Action Platoons had grown to number fifty-seven. Hemingway adds, “Because of the program’s rapid growth, III MAF created the Combined Action Groups (CAGs), each with a varied number of companies and each company with a varied number of platoons. By 1970, at the height of the program, there

⁷ Ibid., xiv.

were four CAGs.”⁸ In an article within a military publication, Captain Keith Kopets explains that although their numbers were relatively small, they had a large positive impact. He writes, “Even at its zenith of 2,220 men, CAPs represented only 2.8 percent of the 79,000 Marines in Vietnam. Yet during its 5-year lifespan, combined units secured more than 800 hamlets in the I Corps area, protecting more than 500,000 Vietnamese civilians.”⁹ CAP Marines were initially carefully selected, for their outstanding service records and demonstrated cultural sensitivity, by high-ranking officers. However, veterans claim that that changed as the war dragged on, CAP missions increased, and a greater demand for CAP Marines ensued. Regardless, as Hemingway asserts,

No other military organization had anything quite like the Marine CAP. The U.S. Army did have a group called the Mobile Advisory Team (MAT) that consisted of two officers, three enlisted men, and an ARVN interpreter. These MAT teams traveled among the villes within a designated area training PFs and RFs. By the end of 1970, nearly five hundred MATs were operational. Special Forces A Teams, composed of twelve Green Berets, were similar to the CAPs. However, the A Teams had the advantage of longer stateside training, the presence of officers or senior enlisted men, and additional reinforcements of Montagnards or Chinese Nungs at their campsites.¹⁰

Furthermore, in spite of how the CAP Marines were chosen and the variations that existed in their training and operations, their accomplishments, both in combat and in civic action, were many. Journalist Andrew C. Katen writes, the CAPs “engaged in civic action intended to win the support of the population by providing medical, agricultural,

⁸ Hemingway, 5. Hemingway adds, “In all, there were 42 Marine officers, 2,050 enlisted men, 2 naval officers, and 126 Navy hospital corpsmen in the four CAGs as well as some 3,000 PFs.”

⁹ Captain Keith F. Kopets, “The Combined Action Program: Vietnam,” (*Military Review* [July-August 2002]), *Small Wars Journal* [website online]; available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kopets.htm>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

educational, and governmental improvements.”¹¹ Moreover, they cultivated lasting friendships, and had unique cultural experiences that arguably made them more worldly individuals.

Unfortunately, because of their cursory attention to the “other war,” many stories of Vietnam, both in historical literature and the media, have enabled the continued existence of an image of Vietnam Era service members, typified by 1980s popular movies, that is far from all-inclusive. This image, in fact, does not portray significant facets, specifically the civic action contributions, of some unique individuals like those who served with the CAPs. With respect to the use of the particular 1980s films in this thesis, *Platoon*(1986)¹² is emphasized because of its designation as an authentic representation of the war and its subsequent critical acclaim. According to scholar Marita Sturken, Director Oliver Stone’s status as a Vietnam Veteran and thus “a survivor of a brutal history enhanced his credentials as a historian.”¹³ When the movie was released Vietnam correspondent and critic David Halberstam added, “The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But *Platoon* is historically and politically accurate. It understands something that the architects of the war never did: how the foliage, the thickness of the jungle, negated U.S. technological superiority...Thirty years

¹¹ Andrew C. Katen, “Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) Revisited: Vietnam Era Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan Will Require Long-Term American Commitment,” (*Global Geopolitics Net Sites*, 18 July 2009) [website on-line]; available from <http://globalgeopolitics.net/wordpress/2009/07/18/combined-action-platoons-caps-revisited-vietnam-era-counterinsurgency-strategy-for-afghanistan-will-require-long-term-american-commitment/>.

¹² *Platoon*, dir. Oliver Stone, 120 min., MGM Home Entertainment, 2000, DVD.

¹³ Marita Sturken, “Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone’s Docudramas,” *History and Theory*, vol. 36, no. 4, Dec 1997, 68.

from now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the movie was one of the top fifty highest grossing films of the 1980s and was the third highest grossing film of 1986; it won the Academy Award in 1986 for “Best Picture,” the Golden Globe the same year for ‘Best Motion Picture-Drama,” and it earned numerous other awards and nominations. While an argument could be made that it was simply a well made movie, the movie’s commendations given its provocative material and the successes of similar movies in its time period, as well as the nods Stone received for his “authentic” portrayal, serve as prime evidence that a certain image of the Vietnam service member was widely accepted into the 1980s.

This popular image undoubtedly continues to have a negative influence on the ever-changing public perception of US actions in Vietnam and Vietnam service members. Throughout all branches of the military, there was a continuum of Americans who served. Many were thrust into combat against their will. Still others believed in service, felt an obligation and answered the call by their own choosing. Some, like those who took part in the My Lai Massacre, fought savagely and immorally. Others fought with the highest sense of honor. Although in more recent years, pacification historians and media forums have worked long and hard to extricate themselves from the emotional turmoil that surrounded the war, and although heroic service members have been spotlighted, they have still failed to really delve into the intimate details of who made up units like the CAPs, what exactly they were doing in the U.S.’s “other war,” and how exactly they went about “winning hearts and minds.” The focus remains on the failed

¹⁴ Sturken, 68.

overarching strategies of the military and the government, and the subsequent sufferings and losses of the individual soldier, with only the occasional mention of civic action units and missions.

A gap exists in the world of Vietnam War pacification and civic action history. This thesis will arguably contribute to filling a specific void within that larger gap by focusing on a study of largely undiscovered CAP Marines and missions. Furthermore, this study will reveal that these Marines did not fit a popular image of Vietnam service members whose public acceptance was enabled by incomplete and sometimes inaccurate histories and war-time media coverage, and both demonstrated by and further perpetuated by the widely recognized film *Platoon*.

Chapter 1 establishes the CAP Marines as an example of service members who do not fit the combatant images of Vietnam service members enabled by the deficiencies of histories to date and the contemporary media, and characterized by *Platoon*. It examines the CAP program from its founding, to the people who executed its mission. Special attention is paid to the personal stories of some of the men who served in CAP units. Oral histories are not incorporated into history enough, but they are essential to showing the individual and personal side of the war--the human side of war. The CAPs were not the only units who fought an unconventional war and who experienced uncommon victories. Throughout histories of all branches of the military, more remain to be discovered. However, the CAPs are the focus of this paper and serve as evidence that one of the media's most commonly featured soldier was not the only Vietnam warrior.

Chapter 2 is an examination of pacification history with the conclusion that a lack of information still exists on the multi-faceted nature of the “other war,” with particular attention paid to the lack of research conducted on civic action missions performed by units like the CAPs. Varied works are analyzed, from those that covered pacification efforts during the war and completely left out units like the CAPs, to those that researched and wrote about the CAPs but in a way that simply overlooked significant subtleties of the program. The chapter reviews pacification histories by notable Vietnam historians who observed the war through a cultural, military, or political lens. Both the work of historians who lived the war as well as historians of today are analyzed, in order to achieve the greatest possible spectrum. This chapter also reviews a Vietnam Era dissertation as well as more recent dissertations to also provide a wider array of research and perspective on the topic. Finally, Chapter 2 touches on the few CAP specific histories that do exist yet only begin to tell the stories of these unique units. Strikingly, most of these histories were found only by talking with the CAP veterans themselves, rather than by an online or archival search. By examining pacification historiography, to include existing CAP histories, a continued void of information on the “other war” and the service members who fought it is exposed.

In Chapter 3 this paper progresses through a discussion on the cursory war-time media coverage of military civic action and how this enabled the acceptance of an incomplete image of service members that lasted at least through the 1980s. Most likely, this image, however, has even been carried forward in some form due to the popularity of films like *Platoon*. Sturken writes, “Stone’s status as a Vietnam veteran allowed *Platoon*

to be accorded the authenticity of survivor discourse.”¹⁵ Discussion in this chapter revolves around major American newspapers and photojournals commonly examined by Vietnam media experts like Daniel C. Hallin and William M. Hammond and declared “significant” by the creators of the Proquest Historical Newspapers database. Some of these articles, especially those found in *Life* Magazine, can be found in a public archives and/or even a simple internet search. Using the Proquest Historical database, I searched for use of the keywords “civic action,” between 1965 and 1971. While the search produced over a hundred hits within some of the major newspapers, the few articles that were relevant at all simply mentioned the phrase. No in depth discussions on specific civic action missions followed. Neither were any articles with civic action as the main topic easily found. Searching for “CAP” or “Combined Action” between 1965 and 1971 produced only a handful of hits—most of which were again mere mentions of the program in reference to another, almost unrelated topic—while “Marine Corps, Pacification” turned up little more. Simply searching the same years for the term “Pacification” yielded the greatest selection of articles, through which I sorted to find few in-depth pieces on the subject with little reference to the military’s humanitarian pacification missions. Although only a small portion of Vietnam War coverage, the media forums I investigated and which are discussed in this chapter reached a large portion of the American population during the war and shortly thereafter, and are easy to access via a general online search even today. Like the histories discussed in Chapter 2, some of these sources, the newspapers in particular, failed to cover the “hearts and

¹⁵ Sturken, 64.

minds” war in depth, allowing a facet of the military’s efforts and successes to go untold. Certainly, the CAPs made up only a tiny percentage of military civic action efforts in Vietnam. However, combined with other military civic action successes, a significant impact was made on the lives of countless Vietnamese and Americans, an impact which went almost completely unrecognized. Because of this, the idea that the Vietnam service member was only a combatant and not a humanitarian, only capable of combat and not of compassion and cultural understanding, was widely accepted for a long time after the war. Insufficient coverage of military civic action allowed images such as those shown in *Platoon* to exist within and sometimes dominate the American collective memory of the Vietnam era service member.

The Conclusion of this thesis demonstrates how such images were also readily accepted by official institutions like the government and military leaders. Moreover, this acceptance, by the nation’s leaders, only further encouraged the public to believe that the exclusive image was the only real Vietnam service member. Using Chapter 1 as a backdrop, Chapters 2, 3, and the Conclusion will show that cursory attention paid to the troops (in this case, the CAPs) and missions of the “other war” in history, popular media, and by America’s highest leaders, facilitated the acceptance of an image of Vietnam War troops that simply was not complete. Certainly contradictory evidence can/could be found by the diligent academic. However, to the ordinary American—the majority—the images of the military perpetuated by many of these accessible histories and media forums, and then subsequently accepted by prominent institutions and leaders, were truth.

Chapter 1—Who they Were

This paper will now spotlight various aspects of the Marine Corps Combined Action Program of Vietnam in the hopes of establishing images supplemental to those portrayed in Vietnam movies of the 1980s and discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. This chapter will be broken up into three sections, because from the program's leaders, to its troops, to its mission, the CAP program was unlike many of the popular portrayals of Vietnam military units and individual service members. Furthermore, intricately examining each of these specific facets of this culturally-focused military program provides a different perspective on the meaning of war, specifically with respect to the troops.

The next sections will concentrate on the Marines--from the leaders who created and implemented the program, to the executors who lived it-- and their decisions and actions during a period shrouded in negativity. The sections will not be organized chronologically or geographically, for separating the program into these parts, while essential to knowing the full story, is outside the scope of this paper. Like other histories which discuss the CAPs, this paper is only a portion of the history of the CAP program. Because the enemy, the terrain, and thus military strategy varied throughout the country of Vietnam and throughout the duration of the war, attempting to dissect each and every nuance of the CAP program would take volumes. This paper does not ignore the fact that

like in popular portrayals, CAP Marines did conduct combat patrols regularly where people, both American and Vietnamese, were killed. In fact the primary mission of the CAPs was to provide twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, combat security for their village. It also does not ignore the fact that the CAP Marines were not perfect. Like many popular images, service members--both CAP Marines and otherwise--committed wrongdoings of all types. Rather, this paper will describe the general intentions, personal stories, and actions of some of the men on the ground—the CAP Marines.

The CAP Marines were like other Marines in that they conducted armed patrols to defend themselves and the South Vietnamese, and to wipe out the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong; however, they were also unlike other service members because they typically knew the South Vietnamese intimately and so almost wholly understood and at least empathized with their plight. They knew most of the villagers felt despair in facing their seemingly hopeless options. The villagers could either support a ruthless North or corrupt South Vietnamese government. Either way they risked losing most of their individual freedoms. Otherwise, they could seek refuge in another country and lose family, friends, and all that they had worked for in life. Although CAP veteran Larry Scroggs never learned Vietnamese, and he admits he never fully trusted his villagers, his close and long term interaction with them led him to feel sympathetic to their cause, which in his mind was simply “to be left alone.” In fact, Scrogg’s compassion despite his mistrust is what stands out in his dialogue. His words nostalgically describe the sorrow he felt for the villagers, not because he felt superior, but “because it seemed they were caught between the VC and the Americans and they had no power to control either one.

They were very poor people who just wanted to be left alone to work their land as they and their ancestors had done for thousands of years. Most of them were not political and had no interest in who was in charge in Saigon.”¹⁶

The CAP Marines in fact, might also have felt a sense of desperation. Many of them knew that they were at the heart of the passionate debate over the war. They knew they were obligated to complete their year-long military tours, and unlike a common media image, because of the implications of their mission many also understood that politically their efforts were a lost cause. Tom Harvey in Hemingway’s oral history declares, “The concept of CAP...was one of the few [strategies] that wasn’t counterproductive. But I don’t think it was anywhere near enough to overcome the VC. We had no political training at all and there was no way we could compete with the VC in that area, even when we were teamed with a group of good PFs.”¹⁷ Former Corporal (now retired Major) Edward Palm, also interviewed by Hemingway, assessed the plight of the CAPs within the context of the entire U.S. military pacification effort. He explains, “As a gesture of dissent against a failing search-and-destroy strategy, the Combined Action Program was a noble, enlightened effort. The Marine Corps deserves high praise for at least recognizing that we couldn’t win that kind of war without winning the allegiance of the people.”¹⁸ Despite his somewhat obscure condemnation of the overall military strategy in Vietnam, Palm alludes to the fact that the CAP Marines generally did make the best of their time in a lost cause situation. They saw areas in the

¹⁶ Larry Scroggs, interview by author, 21 February 2010, email.

¹⁷ Hemingway, 83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

villages that needed improvement, and they improved them. Some of these improvements were economic. Some came in the form of infrastructure. Most came in the form of cultural understanding and friendship. The CAP mission, by the CAP Marines' doing, was different, and their stories should be too. Furthermore, some of the fears and questions of the media, the public, the military higher-ups, the government, and historians might have been allayed and answered by looking at and listening more intently to the CAP Marines. Many doubts about the intent and effectiveness of the "hearts and minds" mission existed. Examining the CAPs might have put a few of them to rest. Further discussion in this chapter will revolve around the people who made up the CAPs and the progresses they made, and it will begin with the program's unmatched leadership.

CAP Leadership

The CAP founders and leaders were innovative, decisive, and persistent when the troops needed it most, and their leadership set the stage for the development of this atypical program. According to historian Robert A. Klyman, the inception of the CAP program was simple. Its cultivation is what was special. The following is his matter-of-fact version of the story of the founding of the CAP program:

In 1965, Col[Colonel] William Taylor, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (3/4), stationed in Phu Bai, needed reinforcements to guard a 10 square mile area directly east and west of an airfield recently added to his tactical area of responsibility (TAOR}. The airstrip was extremely vulnerable to mortar attack from hamlets lying no more than several hundred meters away; these hamlets were known Viet Cong (VC) areas. The solution to this problem lay in the implementation of 24-hour security. When the reinforcements did not materialize, Taylor, at the suggestion of Maj. [Major] C.B. Zimmerman, Capt. [Captain] John J. Mullen, and Lt. [Lieutenant] J.W. Davis, decided to integrate South

Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) soldiers with Marines to defend the airstrip on round-the-clock basis.¹⁹

According to many accounts, including that of the first CAP commander, Colonel William Corson, Lieutenant Paul R. Ek was put in charge of the first mission. Although Klyman's thesis is an informative and well-researched CAP history, his non-chalant version of the founding of the program ignores a few important subtleties which negate his argument that the creation of the CAP program was simple and therefore not significant in and of itself. In fact, the inception of the CAP program was pretty distinct, mainly because of the leaders that worked against incredible odds to make it that way. First, General Walt--Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, and a Senior Advisor for the Marine Corps region of the Republic of Vietnam, I Corps--actually credits Captain Mullen with the idea to employ the CAP concept. That a Captain, still in the lower officer ranks of the Marine Corps, was able to assert himself, make his idea heard at the highest levels of command, and execute a test run for the program, is fairly unique, especially during a time of war.

Second, although how much of the initial platoon's creation was put in the hands of Ek is difficult to know, the level of responsibilities of a platoon commander in the Marine Corps is unheard of to anyone outside of the Marine Corps. Lieutenants are generally recent college graduates around the age of twenty two.²⁰ Suddenly, into their hands are placed the lives of between twenty and fifty seventeen to thirty-five year olds. Generally the CAPs were made up of one squad of American Marines and one squad of

¹⁹ Robert Klyman, "The Combined Action Program: An Alternative Not Taken," (Master's thesis, University of Michigan, 1986), 6.

²⁰ Some newly commissioned officers are prior enlisted Marines and are therefore slightly older.

PFs, totaling about 30-50 men.²¹ The platoon commander must mentor, discipline, and order these men into training and battle. One need not go into details about the tensions that can arise when a fresh twenty-two year old orders a thirty year old, who has been in the Marine Corps for several years, to do something he would rather not do, especially when it involves risking his life. However, although the role of a platoon commander is *exceptional* and noteworthy, it is also common to the entire Marine Corps and not just the CAPs. Other facets of leadership were exclusive to the CAPs.

To start, the uninhibited teamwork and commitment employed by high-ranking Marines helped expedite a program otherwise destined to fail, and more importantly, set the example for the younger CAP Marines. The Marine Corps commonly uses the phrase “Semper Gumby.” The phrase is a play-on the Marine Corps motto “Semper Fi” meaning “Always Faithful,” and it refers to being always flexible, no matter how much chaos is thrown in one’s way. Although the phrase is sometimes muttered sarcastically during times of frustration, it is also used with absolute seriousness, for a Marine is never going to know exactly what is coming his way in battle, and he must be ready to adjust and then readjust to overcome the most muddled of circumstances. Understanding that the military is a bureaucracy like any other, that the idea for the CAP program was able to make it up to the highest ranks and garner full support from all ends of the Marine Corps in such a short amount of time is a testament to the flexibility, adaptability, and ingenuity of its leaders. It is a glaring testament to their ability to be “Semper Gumby.” The troops had come in force to Vietnam in 1965, and the CAP leaders recognized the need for a

²¹ In many cases, the platoons fell short of the intended numbers.

different strategy and were able to devise and fully put the program into effect the same year. That that many people throughout the chain of command could come together, discuss an issue, agree upon a solution, and adapt and overcome nay-sayers, to create this arguably successful program, was an unparalleled demonstration of leadership and teamwork. But the mission these leaders agreed upon and worked together to demonstrate to their troops was what made the CAP program even more unusual.

In the minds of the CAP founders and leaders--and what they hoped to impart to their young Marines--was that protecting the people was not just about using weapons to kill the enemy. To the CAPs, protecting the people was about proving that no matter what, the Marines would be there. Numerous interpretations of what "being there" for the villagers can be made. The Marines defined the phrase with their actions. "When you give people material things, you don't give much. When you give them yourself, that's something," Ek is quoted as saying in *The Marine Corps Gazette* article "Combined Action."²² The Marine's demonstrated their commitment to the villagers by reaching out in innovative and in many cases, culturally sensitive ways.

Significantly, Marines from the lowest ranks in the chain of command to the highest ranks involved with the inception of the CAP program, understood and acted on the notion that the CAP mission was different than other military missions. CAP veteran and then Sergeant John Cooney recalls, "We had to win the trust and confidence of the villagers. We had to assure them that we were there to help them and to keep them safe. The VC had been running loose, at will for quite a while in this village and taking what

²² George Wilson and others, "Combined Action," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1966, 28.

they wanted from the people, whenever they wanted. They had assassinated the village officials and kidnapped the doctors and nurses from the hospital in the village just prior to us getting there. That is one of the main reasons for us being assigned to this village.”²³ On the other end of the rank spectrum, Colonel Corson writes, “I remember being teased because I showed the CAP Marines how to eat a meal in a Vietnamese home, how to play elephant chess, how to be accepted in a Vietnamese environment and perform a very difficult mission.”²⁴ CAP leaders led by demonstrating what it took to win the hearts and minds--they led by example, and their leadership permeated the ranks. For example, when asked in a survey if he recalled a time(s) when he shared a memorable experience with the villagers, CAP veteran Robert Ridley singled out *his* memory of Elephant, or Chinese, chess-- the same game Colonel Corson mentioned. Having learned the game at the Combined Action School, he reminisces, “I do not recall the name of the game, but it was similar to chess. The pieces were marked with Chinese caricatures. If you chose to play you would draw a crowd, and it was you, against this crowd of people. After you would make your move, your opponents would have one big loud group meeting as to what would be the best strategic move against you. I found that once the villagers knew you knew how to play the game, you would be invited to play against them, which they enjoyed.”²⁵ The CAP Marines certainly took cues from their leaders, but they eventually learned and even took the lead on cultivating positive relationships with the Vietnamese with whom they lived.

²³ John Cooney, interview by author, 15 February 2010, email.

²⁴ Hemingway, 50-51.

²⁵ Robert Ridley, interview by author, 20 February 2010, email.

An essential aspect of all leadership, mutual trust is uncommon, but was key to the effectiveness of the CAPs. CAP leaders at headquarters entrusted their young CAP leaders in the villages with overwhelming responsibility, and they were usually not disappointed. Furthermore, CAP leaders in the villages trusted that their leaders at headquarters would back their decisions within the villages. This allowed them the confidence to act immediately, whether during a combat mission or in dealing with the villagers, knowing that they would later have the full support of their senior officers. This paper already touched on the profound responsibility placed on young platoon commanders in the Marine Corps. Amazingly, most CAPs in the villages were led by Sergeants who, if they enlisted when they were eighteen, were probably only about twenty-one or twenty-two and most likely did not have a college education. Moreover, according to CAP historian Al Hemingway, “It was not unusual to find a corporal, or in some instances a lance corporal, leading a CAP.”²⁶ In such cases, a leader could potentially be as young as eighteen. These young men were responsible for the well-being of a squad²⁷ of American Marines both during daily activities and during combat assignments. They oversaw the physical, emotional and mental needs of men not much younger (if at all) than themselves. Additionally, they planned the route, strategy, and logistics of their patrols, and they were accountable for the good and bad deeds performed by members of their squads both on missions and back in the village. Finally, they were further in charge of training the Popular Forces (PF) and liaising with the village elders and chiefs.

²⁶ Hemingway, 5.

²⁷ Typically ten Marines.

Once the addition of the PFs is thrown into the equation, the dynamics and responsibilities become even more chaotic. As General Walt writes “The local Popular Force soldier was the poorest equipped, least trained, and most inadequately supported of all of the government forces in the Republic of Vietnam, yet none was more important to the security of the people. He had a signal advantage over all others: he was defending his own home, family, and neighbors.”²⁸ The spectrum of responsibility these CAP leaders had, within the context of the war and dealing with their own needs, is unmatched and seemingly overwhelming. Yet these young men many times succeeded in earning the trust of not only their chain of command, but more importantly, their villagers; moreover, they did this, not simply by patrolling and making their military presence a constant, but also by actually leading their troops in helping the South Vietnamese improve their villages and their homes.

The Troops

Certainly the Selective Service draft was politically charged during the war, and it led to brutal and heated debates over the racial and class biases involved. In spite of the image of the service member who was generally forced to go to Vietnam, however, many CAP Marines truly felt an obligation to serve. Others, despite what antiwar activists and the media may have projected, were simply enthusiastic about and instinctively drawn to being “warriors.” Being a part of something dangerous, something bigger than yourself, and being a part of that something with some of your closest friends comes with a certain adrenaline rush. Either way, some service members freely chose to risk everything by

²⁸ Colonel Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy-- A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105.

going to Vietnam, and they fully understood the implications of their decisions, or quickly learned and accepted them soon after arriving in Vietnam.

A few of the CAP Marines have confirmed these motivations for enlisting. Scroggs was eighteen years old when he joined the Corps, and he did so because of family tradition—his father and grandfather had both served. He writes, “[My] father was a career NCO in the Army and Air Force. I was raised in the military. All of my uncles had served in World War II. I felt military service was a duty I owed my country. I joined the Marine Corps because I thought it would be a great adventure to go off to war as my relatives had in World War II.”²⁹ Like most other teenagers who enlist during a time of war, Scroggs explains that he felt a definite apprehensiveness about going to war, but also a certain excitement. Others like Peterson, self-described as “well read on the Indo-Chinese war,” joined the Marine Corps because as he tells it, “I was a true believer (meaning: I was well propagandized.)”³⁰

Veterans John Cooney, Richard Thunhorst, and Mike Cone had their own specific reasons for joining. Cooney joined the Corps at eighteen in order to avoid having to stay in Japan with his family, who had received their own military orders there just before he graduated; while Thunhorst was seventeen and simply “wanted to see the world.”³¹ Cone was eighteen. He recalls, “I joined because I knew I was meant to be a warrior. The Marine Corps was my only choice. When I joined up I had no clue why we were there. If my country wanted us there, I was ready.”³² And at eighteen, McClain D. Garrett

²⁹ Scroggs interview.

³⁰ Michael Peterson, interview by author, 16 February 2010, email.

³¹ Richard Thunhorst, interview by author, 17 February 2010, email.

³² Michael Cone, interview by author, 15 February 2010, email.

knew the draft would get him and so volunteered to maintain the upper hand, yet he also firmly “believed and still [does] that we were correct in our attempt to curb communism.”³³ These veterans had various reasons for choosing to enlist in the Marine Corps during a time of war, and below is an example of the truths these young men were forced to face when they entered this strange new world. It is Cone’s story of his first day in Vietnam. He writes, “We flew from Okinawa to Da Nang and were choppered immediately to our unit. [They] were in the field on a major operation. We humped our gear plus three 81mm mortar rounds all day. When we stopped for the night, my hooch mate said to me, ‘Red Dog, thirteen months of this and we are gonna be in great shape.’ When I stopped laughing I said, ‘Church, we ain’t gonna survive thirteen months.’”³⁴ Cone’s anecdote is also an example of how some service members dealt with their reality.

Still, despite the knowledge that death was always lurking nearby, even after thirteen months in Vietnam, Cone, like other CAP Marines, was not ready to leave. In fact, contrary to popular images of service members intentionally wounding themselves to get a free ticket out of “Nam,” in addition to their already year-long tours, “over 60 percent of the Marines volunteered for at least one six month extension.”³⁵ Cone explains, “I was worried about my village, the platoon and the villagers.”³⁶ In his statement, Cone points out another aspect that made the CAP Marines unlike the Vietnam

³³ McClain D. Garrett, interview by author, 28 March 2010, email.

³⁴ Cone interview.

³⁵ Major Brooks R. Brewington, “The Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement” (Master’s thesis, Command and Staff College, 1996); available from <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/brewington.pdf>, 20.

³⁶ Ibid.

service member image in movies like *Platoon*--the relationship the Marines had with one another.

On his arrival in country, Scroggs reinforces this CAP theme of camaraderie, writing,

I was apprehensive and excited at the same time. I was beginning a new adventure as a Marine infantryman. [My unit] had recently been attacked and taken several serious casualties and I was coming in as a replacement. We worked our butts off strengthening our compound and perimeter. Reinforcing and rebuilding the weak points the VC had taken advantage of during the attack. I realized I was a “new guy” and had a lot to learn so I kept my eyes and ears open and tried to learn everything I could as quickly as I could. My squad leader took me under his wing and used “tough love” to get me up to speed. My fellow squad members also were great about teaching me the “tricks of the trade” I would need to survive and become an effective member of the squad. I strongly believe I survived my tour in CAP without serious injury because of the strengths of my squad members and our ability to work together as a team.³⁷

Significantly, Scroggs was directly taught the ways of the CAPs by the CAP leader himself, a fact disputed outright in *Platoon*. In Hemingway’s book CAP veteran Major Duncan is extremely critical of the CAP program, but he also comments on an aspect of the camaraderie of the CAPs writing, “I know of no other Marine Corps unit that lived as they did, suffered the privations they did, or had the success they did—even if the individual successes were small.”³⁸ In fact, many of the CAP veterans have noted that the conditions that they endured together were what brought them closer to one another. Whether the circumstances of the CAPs shaped the unit members, or vice versa is unclear. However, whether or not progress was made by the CAPs is not.

CAP Missions

³⁷ Scroggs interview.

³⁸ Hemingway, 156.

During the war, many Americans on the home front were vexed by the dilemma of South Vietnam, and the CAP Marines were trying to do something about it. Whether “saving” Vietnam meant preventing South Vietnam from falling to Communism so that America could retain another capitalist ally/colony; or whether it meant preventing villagers from being killed under the harsh regime of the North or South Vietnamese governments, American politicians and military leaders were concerned with saving/helping South Vietnam. For their part, the media and antiwar activists were concerned with not exploiting and/or unnecessarily killing innocent Vietnamese people, and the media many times projected this concern in the images of the war they brought back to America. At the same time, CAP Marines were attempting to resolve those very things about which Americans were fretting.

The CAPs provided security, but more importantly they provided hope for enduring stability. According to CAP veteran Mike Cone, “What had been happening was that the Americans would move into an area, chase the Viet Cong out, and then we would leave. [Then] the VC would return and punish the local people if they had cooperated with us. The poor locals were caught in the middle of the two armies.”³⁹ To remedy this, CAP Marines moved “permanently” into the villages. They provided twenty four hours a day, seven days a week security from *any* enemy, and they trained the local forces to do the same. In an article about the village of Binh Nghia, author and Marine veteran F.J. (a.k.a Bing) West explains that when the Marines got to the village in June, the morale of the Popular Forces (PF) was low. “The district chief estimated that during

³⁹ Mike Cone, “Back in Country—A CAG Marine Returns to Vietnam,” *Semper Fi*, Mar/Apr 2007, 34.

the past several years, 750 young men from that village had joined main force VC units.”⁴⁰ West adds, “In June [the PFs] had not wished to patrol or fight at all. During July, they would at least venture forth at night provided the Marines went with them...By August [they] had become much more aggressive and began to conduct night patrols alone.”⁴¹ In fact, adds West, “By 1967 Binh Nghia was no longer a battleground. From a variety of sources and reports, the district chief and his sub-sector advisors have estimated that there are less than 12 active guerillas left in the six hamlets.”⁴² Progress was being made.

In other hamlets, results were similar. In an official Marine Corps report from 1971 entitled “The Marine Corps Combined Action Program—Vietnam” had the following among a list of CAP statistics: “Near Danang, 2,800 Vietnamese have moved from other areas into Phuoc Trach hamlet since December 1966, when a CAC [Combined Action Company] was assigned there. At Chu Lai, there have been no enemy incidents on the main line of communication between Chu Lai and Tam Ky since CAC units were established along the route in 1966.”⁴³ However, although improvements in combat effectiveness were important to the security and morale of the villagers, they were not the most significant contribution the CAPs made.

⁴⁰ F.J. West, “Fast Rifles,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1967: 4. Note: Villages typically have around 5,000 people.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3. In *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam*, Peterson adds, “in an early and particularly bad period for the [South Vietnamese Army], 39,000 PFs—25 percent of the total national forces—deserted. During that same time, there were *no* recorded desertions from a CAP.”(144).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴³ Commanding General Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, *The Marine Corps Combined Action Program, Vietnam* (San Francisco: Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, 1971).

Because they lived with and learned about the Vietnamese they were helping to protect, the Marines respected the Vietnamese and therefore attempted not to exploit them, but rather to mutually respect them and earn their friendship. During their time in country, they wrote about their experiences and they passed information up the chain of command, but to no avail. As Peterson writes, “The whole panoply of America’s pacification experience in Vietnam; from CORDS/OCO; the MATS/MTTs (of the Army); the concept of brigading, the whole CAP concept, especially the 24/7 living in the villages in a limited TAOR—all were totally ignored until it was, again, too little, too late.”⁴⁴ In this case, the case of the CAPs, aside from twenty-four hour a day security, pacification/civic action came in the form of economic aid, infrastructural development, medical support, friendships, and personal growth.

In his thesis, Peterson evaluates numerous CAP attempts at economic projects in the villages. For example, he considers giveaways, or “the distribution of commodities to the Vietnamese either free of charge, or for a nominal fee,”⁴⁵ a disaster. Aside from the obvious failure to implement the fundamental “teach a man to fish” philosophy, the giveaway program was unsuccessful in several other ways. Most notably it failed to uplift or even maintain the morale of both the CAP Marines and the villagers. Peterson explains, “To the more conservative-minded Marines the policy was redolent of welfareism, a tendency which was anathema to their values.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, the CAP Marines witnessed firsthand the consequences this program had on the people they were

⁴⁴ Peterson interview.

⁴⁵ Peterson thesis, 181.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 181.

trying to help. Explains Peterson, “Families for whom soap was intended instead sold it on the black market...Commodities also ended up in the hands of the Viet Cong. Worst of all, the handouts could promote greed in some Vietnamese and resentful anger in others.”⁴⁷ Peterson understandably makes his disdain for wasted efforts and wasted lives quite clear in his work. However he also clarifies, “There were some real contributions made by the CAPs.”⁴⁸ In his work Peterson includes some more creative pacification projects, the likes of which are never seen or heard of in other stories of pacification.

Interestingly, Peterson writes about an innovative, economy-boosting experiment in which the CAP Marines, appealing to the villagers “desire to make money,” established a “community chest” from profits they earned by selling fish to the local market. Notably, once the experiment was underway, the Vietnamese were almost completely in charge. Peterson elucidates, “Both parties could hold their heads up because value was exchanged.” Incremental changes in the chest were “charted on a billboard...the billboard kept all the hamlet residents apprised of the exact amount of money saved and kept the officials honest.” Finally, a community board met to determine how to spend the money, and they settled on a pig-breeding farm, “followed by other market-oriented agricultural projects.”⁴⁹ Peterson adds, “Actual investments were not supervised by the Marines, but it is questionable if the decision making process could have been started without them.”⁵⁰ According to Colonel Corson, who came up with the idea, “As the money-making power of the pig-breeding effort increased, agricultural

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

specialization and diversification spread. The economic monopolies engendered by the rice monoculture were broken.” A year later, Corson observed, the village had “a drive-in and walk-in movie, numerous new shops, two new schools...with teachers paid for by the people, an active self-dispensary, and a hamlet self defense force.”⁵¹ That rural third world nation villagers were able to spend their money on more than simply life’s bare essentials is evidence that progress had been made. The village quality of life had clearly reached a new level.

Peterson’s overall argument in the community development/civic action portion of his thesis promotes the idea that the CAPs did provide positive and developmental assistance to the Vietnamese. Although not central to this paper, Peterson deeply considers whether or not an extension of the CAP program, in light of projects like the community chest, would have won the war or simply saved American face in Vietnam. Peterson’s candid and comprehensive analysis of the CAPs make the question worthy of brief consideration. In this case, while Peterson lauds Corson’s effective economic improvements in the hamlet of Phong Bac, he also points out the specificity of the case. Despite Corson’s lobby for a replication of the experiment in other villages and hamlets, Peterson asserts that the experiment was only successful because of some very precise factors, one of which was Corson’s leadership. He clarifies, the pig-breeding experiment was successful because “Corson, as senior officer with great experience in Vietnam and in pacification, closely monitored the Marines’ project and its progress—most CAPs—

⁵¹ Ibid., 188-190.

certainly my CAPs—never had such supervision.”⁵² Nonetheless whether or not a growth of this particular economic program or the CAP program as a whole, throughout Vietnam would have helped America win the war is, again, not the focus of this paper. What is a focus and a significant concept that Peterson begins to touch on is that despite images to the contrary, many CAP Marines took a personal interest in progressing their villages, and they were innovative and assertive in carrying out developmental programs.

The infrastructural enhancements made by the CAPs during the war were countless. Still, many histories (oral included) have paid only brief attention to the CAPs for having “buil[t] bridges, put in water distribution systems, support[ed] and buil[t] little medical facilities.”⁵³ Furthermore, several historians simply mention CAP-led construction projects. Allan R. Millet expounds upon the subject writing, “The possibilities for civic action were endless: schools built, orphanages funded, wells dug, markets opened, hospitals supplied, food distributed.”⁵⁴ In his typical cautious tone, Peterson nonetheless suggests to the reader that despite what the official logs and historical lists read, one must still consider “the simplicity or complexity of the project... Was the project in question simply one to meet basic human needs, or was it a project which could contribute to real empowerment for the hamlet?”⁵⁵ However, the bottom line is that in contrast to the destructive warrior image, progressive work was being done. Using the unit’s official Command Chronologies filed in a 1968-1971

⁵² Ibid., 191.

⁵³ James O’Kelley, interview by Stephen Maxner, “Vietnam Archive Oral History Project,” (*Vietnam Virtual Archive*, Texas Tech University, 4 August 2000) [website on-line]; available from <http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/vva/servlet.starweb>.

⁵⁴ Millet, 570.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

grouping, Peterson writes, “During the months of October and November personnel assigned to the 2nd Combined Action Group assisted the Vietnamese civilians in completing construction of the following projects: bridges 9; churches, temples, and pagodas 9; culverts 13; dispensaries 4; family dwellings 113; fences 8; market places 3; playgrounds 3; roads (in statute miles) 1.45; schools/classrooms 6/9; public showers 1; public heads [restrooms] 4; wells 95; dams/dikes 8; village offices 1.”⁵⁶

Peterson also uses the story of the building of a school to shed light on the “twilight world of civic action in Vietnam.”⁵⁷ The money for the school was donated by the family and friends of a CAP Marine killed in action. Peterson traces letters to and from the family, receipts, and balance statements. In the end, “plans were made, money was gathered and spent, Vietnamese officials were contacted, and that is all. There is no follow up; no final reports or any further accounting.”⁵⁸ Peterson points out that in analyzing what evidence he could find, one must assume the building was constructed. Ironically, with his abundance of research, he also confirms the lack of evidence or lack of complete evidence that exists in support of civic action/community development. Lack of evidence must be taken into consideration when evaluating the credibility of histories of the Combined Action Program. Regardless, constructive, rather than simply destructive, work was being done, and economic aid and infrastructure was just a portion of it.

⁵⁶ Peterson , 183.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Each of the veterans interviewed for this thesis mentioned at the very least, the implementation of MEDCAPs as a form of civic action. Most Marines will attest to the fact that their Corpsmen were invaluable, and the CAP Marines are no exception. The Navy Corpsmen who attached to the CAP units are worthy of their own historical study, but the pages it would take to fully tell their stories are beyond what can be included in this thesis. Nonetheless, this section must attempt to explain the contributions of the CAP Corpsmen, because the missions they completed during Vietnam were among the most successful in the military. When asked about the humanitarian work his CAP had accomplished, Cooney answered, “Our Corpsman conducted MEDCAPS every day at the compound and on a daily patrol at times to the outskirts of our area of operation. The Doc (corpsman) treated everything from a scratch to a gunshot wound. At night, on occasion, while on patrol he would deliver a baby when we heard a woman in labor while passing a house.”⁵⁹ Veteran Chuck Ratliff asserts, “Probably the most popular person in Alpha-1 was our Navy corpsman. He’d hold sick call for the villagers and sometimes over a hundred peasants would show up. He’d show the kids and their parents how to wash and treat minor cases, and if anyone needed more, he’s make arrangements for them to be transported.”⁶⁰ Peterson also unhesitatingly praises the CAP Corpsmen for their tireless efforts to treat the villagers and provide them with a service that would otherwise be unavailable. He adds, “Sometimes the CAP corpsman would also train a health

⁵⁹ Cooney interview.

⁶⁰ Hemingway, 28.

worker, [who] served as an aid to the corpsman;”⁶¹ and no doubt, later as an independent medical responder when the Americans left.

The MEDCAP mission statistics are substantial, but the numbers and stand-alone pictures that have gone on record naturally lack certain impactful details. According to a Marine Corps report, in one village alone “15,000 villagers are treated by CAC[Combined Action Company] corpsmen monthly.”⁶² Peterson adds, “By the time of the stand down, the Combined Action Program claimed to have conducted over 1,900,000 MEDCAPs.”⁶³ These numbers are impressive, but they simply do not tell a story the way CAP corpsman veteran Jim Beals does. He nostalgically wrote the following personal anecdote about an old woman who continually had a festering sore, “a very deep, very angry type sore. She came and hunted me down about twice a month to cut off the top of that sore and pour disinfectant into it to try to get it to heal. It took about three months to get it to stop infecting and heal, and I know it hurt like the dickens. I was the only one she would let touch her.”⁶⁴ On November 1st, 1964, *Life Magazine* printed a picture of an American/Montagnard strike force conducting a MEDCAP. In the *Life* picture, there is no interaction between the Americans and the Vietnamese. The picture again simply does not do justice to the personal and compassionate story that

⁶¹ Peterson thesis, 205.

⁶² Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, *The Marine Corps Combined Action Program, Vietnam*. Rep. San Francisco: Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, 1971.

⁶³ Peterson thesis, 206. He clarifies that “the term ‘MEDCAP’ could apply as much to a formalized program as it could to a corpsman putting a bandaid on a child’s hand.” (202)

⁶⁴ Jim Beals, “CAP Delta 1,” (*U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website*, 1996) [website on-line]; available from <http://www.capmarine.com/cap/jimbeals.htm>.

Beals tells. Ratliff emphasizes, “You won’t find too many Marines that’ll dispute the fact that Doc won more hearts and minds than all of us combined.”⁶⁵

However, perhaps an even more significant and underappreciated CAP development was the relationship many CAP Marines cultivated with the Vietnamese. John Cooney was a CAP leader, a Sergeant. During his two tours in Vietnam, which lasted a combined twenty-five months, he was assigned to two different villages. He described the second village, Gai Le, as “a hot village with contact about every night with the VC or the NVA.”⁶⁶ The village had about three to four thousand villagers. Cooney remembers that his arrival in Vietnam led to culture shock. However, he also emphasizes that he preferred being in the villages, as opposed to fighting the conventional war, because “I felt that I could do more good working in the village with the people.”⁶⁷ Cooney emphasized that the relationships built by the Marines with the villagers was “only what you make it to be,”⁶⁸ but also depended largely on the trust established between the CAP leaders and the PFs and villagers. He rightfully boasted that his CAP was in good standing with the people of both villages to which he was assigned. Again the CAP Marines made the most of their time and the best of their situations by building relationships.

West also writes of cultivated CAP relationships. In his book, *The Village*, the Marines became partial to a young Vietnamese boy who slept where the Marines slept, ate where they ate, and received education from them when time allowed. In return the

⁶⁵ Hemingway, 28.

⁶⁶ John Cooney interview by author, 15 February 2010, email.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

boy provided the Marines interpreter support as well as any intelligence information he could gather. The friendship and compassion the Marines felt toward this boy reflected the relationship the Marines had with and the sentiment they felt toward the entire village. West adds, “Each Marine has three or four close friends among the families of the villagers, and many meals are taken within the hamlets at the insistence of the villagers. On many occasions, Marines on night patrols passing by certain houses have received information about VC activities whispered through windows in broken English.”⁶⁹ West’s quote was a tribute to the trust and friendships the Marines had built with their villagers. In addition, close to the time one of West’s other CAP articles was written, “the Village Chief invited the Marines to come [to a community fair], not as guests, but as participants.”⁷⁰ Throughout his published literature on the CAPs, West’s main argument is that the CAPs “are alienating the guerillas from the people not by sole reliance on the negative means of death and destruction, but also by providing the villagers stability and the prospect of an improved economic life...the [CAP] concept touches on the potential uses for [our military] as a vehicle for the development of societies, not their destruction.”⁷¹ West is noted throughout the Marine Corps for his leadership, and still his works on the CAPs are relatively unknown, even to Marines. While, Peterson, in his thesis, is right in assessing that West’s writing must be carefully interpreted, as it is the story of only one CAP unit in one village; several stories about

⁶⁹ Bing West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 2003), 4-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

friendships formed with the South Vietnamese during the war exist and are waiting to be told and/or heard.

Peterson also reflects on some of his personal relationships with the South Vietnamese. In his thesis, Peterson's attitude about the war is negative while his feelings about the CAPs are fair. He carefully analyzes the records of CAP accomplishments, and gives them credit where he feels credit is due. He concedes that the relationship with the PFs was "generally positive." He also nostalgically shares a personal story about a time his CAP was relocating their headquarters and they came to a Buddhist shrine where a group of "traditional male elders were assembled." As the CAP commander, Peterson "was led to an elder [whom I assumed] was senior. He was at first reticent upon meeting one more American. But after I put my two hands in a prayerful manner and said "chao ong, ong manh yoi khong"⁷² he just brightened, actually grinned, as if to say, 'finally an American with manners.'"⁷³ The elders were obviously pleased with Peterson's ability to speak at least some of their language, and Peterson was not the only CAP Marine who could speak Vietnamese. While there was a range of language ability, all of the CAP Marines went through a few weeks of rushed language classes prior to joining their CAPs. Still, many took it upon themselves to really learn the language, because they saw it as essential to their mission. According to Colonel Corson, "By August 1967, [the CAPs] had in excess of 35 Marines who were *fluent* [in Vietnamese]." By comparison, "the 600 plus man CIA station in Saigon had only one Vietnamese speaker."⁷⁴ Few

⁷² Hello sir, how are you?

⁷³ Peterson interview.

⁷⁴ "Corson--First CAP C.O.," (*U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website*) [website on-line]; available from <http://www.capmarine.com/cap/colcors1.htm>, 11.

media forums project the image of the Vietnamese-speaking American service member. Nor do they portray the lasting American and Vietnamese relationships and memories.

In 2004, Mike Cone traveled back to Vietnam to visit the villagers amongst whom he had once lived. He wrote about his experience in the March/April 2007 edition of the Marine Corps' *Semper Fi* magazine. The article was called "Back in Country—A CAG Marine Returns to Vietnam." In the article, Cone describes the moment he walked back into his village. A nineteen-year-old Corporal at the time of his deployment, he carried a photograph of himself and multiple children, taken during the war. Attempting to find someone who remembered him, Cone showed it to several people until finally a man pointed to himself in the picture. Soon, more and more people surrounded Cone until as he puts it, "Half the village was there. People just kept pouring out to greet us!"⁷⁵ After the initial excitement had worn off a woman who as a little girl had sold Cokes to the troops and was known as their sister, was pointed out to Cone. He greeted her, "Chao Chi! ('Greetings, Sister!')." Then, he reminisces, "She took us to her home where we met her children and her grandchildren. Ma was there too. I heard someone ask who we were and Luan turned around and said, 'It's Micah! Micah ve dai.' ('Mike has come back.') This little old lady in a flowered pantsuit turned around, slapped me on the shoulder two or three times and said, 'Micah, con chai cua toi, o dau?' ('My son, where have you been?') After all these years, she greeted me as her son and scolded me for being gone so long."⁷⁶ Cone called his relationship with the villagers "Awesome. This

⁷⁵ Cone, 34.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

was our village too. We were not disconnected from the villagers. When they hurt, we hurt and vice versa.”⁷⁷

CAP chaplain Commander Richard McGonigal also recalled a trip he took to Vietnam in the early nineties with a group of former CAP Marines. He nostalgically remembers finding some of the former PFs in a bar in the village. He explains, “Nearly all of them had been ‘reeducated.’ But when they saw us, they came right up to us with some of their VC friends whom we’d also known, and their first words were, ‘Peace...you understand? No more war!’ A few moments later they were comparing scars and showing pictures of their children and grandchildren.”⁷⁸ Not all of the Marines took to the villagers the way Cone and McGonigal did, but most of them at least left Vietnam having had more cultural exposure and a greater cultural understanding than when they arrived.

In fact, the other major development that occurred as a result of the CAP program was a progress of self. Most of the Marines that were interviewed either for this paper or other literary works, give off a genuine sense of pride. Each is proud of his own service, and proud of the contributions he made, to both Americans and Vietnamese. Hemingway retells the story of Hop Brown who at the time of publication in 1994 was serving a prison sentence for substance abuse charges. Brown’s angry demeanor shines through statements like “My honest opinion of the PFs as a whole is that they joined the local militia units to avoid actual service in the armed forces of their country...they lacked the

⁷⁷ Cone interview.

⁷⁸ Hemingway, 20.

discipline to become an effective fighting force.”⁷⁹ Additionally, he criticizes the Marine Corps and specifically his squad leader, claiming that neither generally supported him, an accusation he blames on racism. Overall though, Brown speaks highly of his time with the CAP Marines and more importantly comments on the subsidiary benefits of the program. He speaks with evident enjoyment and amicability about several of his peers, recalling each of their names and an associated anecdote; and then shares his favorite CAP experience—“making friends with a young Vietnamese boy.” He explains, “[The boy] seemed fascinated by my dark skin, and he’d deliver beer to us on his bike. I looked forward to his visits, and I learned Vietnamese phrases from him and taught him English. The day I left, his whole family came to say goodbye to me.”⁸⁰ He further commends his CAP peers, recalling, “There was none of the racial prejudice that was common back in the world. We all judged each other on our own merits rather than the color of our skins.”⁸¹ And finally, he praises the CAP program as a whole adding, “Through our commitment we demonstrated to the Vietnamese people that they could trust us. I think living in the villages, amongst the people, we showed them that we could face the same dangers they did. We [also] honored their customs and traditions.”⁸² Most notably, this convicted felon makes one more profound remark: “I believe that the Combined Action Program was a growth of process for the men who were fortunate enough to participate in it. We developed a camaraderie that was unlike anything I felt [elsewhere in the Marine

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 26-27.

⁸¹ Ibid., 24.

⁸² Ibid., 27.

Corps.] We were more of a family than a multi-ethnic fighting unit, and we learned from each other.”⁸³

Additionally, many CAP Marines were touched enough by their experiences in Vietnam that they feel a sense of responsibility for what happened there and for what happens there in the future. Cone, an active member of Vets with a Mission (VWAM), has been back to Vietnam multiple times now. Each time, VWAM builds a new medical facility and provides medical training for the locals. “Touched” is not typically a word used to describe the Vietnam service member’s feelings about his experiences in Vietnam. But the CAPs--from its leaders, to its troops to its missions--were not typical military units. Neither are they typically thoroughly represented in histories of the Vietnam War, a fact which has caused the exclusion of an interesting and too largely ignored group of people who fought in Vietnam.

⁸³ Ibid.

Chapter 2—Pacification Historiography

Like the rest of the military, the CAPs were also made up of a spectrum of personalities, however on the whole, CAP Marines had a unique attitude about their war, and thus genuinely tried to accomplish--and many times succeeded at accomplishing--the mission of winning the hearts and minds of the villagers with whom they lived. Unfortunately, the majority of the literature about the war either lacks any intricate discussion on the humanitarian side of the military and individual service members, or it focuses only on the mistakes of General Westmoreland, and on the negative implications such mistakes had for service members. Such literature has produced a simplified image of the American service member and thus taken away the power that individuals can have on war. Consequential events can and did occur at the hands of a few. The CAPs made creative and positive events happen amidst tragedy. Specifically, the CAPs made advancements in using cultural understanding as a part of their military strategy, but they also contributed to community development and especially to medical support. This chapter will begin with a discussion on pacification historiography. Such discussion will create the context within which CAP historiography can be placed. Only in this way can the lack of thorough attention the CAP program (and other military civic action programs) has received be highlighted, so that then their distinctive role and multifarious makeup can be better understood.

In general, pacification historiography tends to align itself along one of two lines: either it argues that American hegemonic attitudes prevented decision makers from implementing a foreign policy in sync with actual Vietnamese desires, or it argues that lack of true Vietnamese desire prevented Americans from implementing a sound foreign policy. In 1966 while the war was still being fought, William Asa Nighswonger wrote his Ph.D. dissertation, “Rural Pacification in Vietnam: 1962-1965,” which supports the former thesis. He argues, “American involvement has been conceptually clouded. First the threat from the North was misdefined; then the insurgent threat was underestimated; and finally, the solution was sought in terms of an uncoordinated proliferation of government programs to aid the peasants without the essential ingredient of protection from the Viet Cong. The more fundamental question of the adequacy of the counterinsurgent government at the center was bypassed by Americans in favor of finding means of establishing its image and power at the grassroots.”⁸⁴

Nighswonger’s analysis was ahead of its time in looking at the war from both the literal and metaphorical battleground. Its focus was “what has been attempted—and could be done—1) to isolate the enemy and destroy his influence and control over the rural population, and 2) to win the peasant’s willing support through effective local administration and programs of rural development.”⁸⁵ In other words, Nighswonger, as claimed in his title, analyzes the “relevance” of pacification programs in South Vietnam, and he does so “from the perspective of the provincial administrators of pacification, and

⁸⁴William Asa Nighswonger, “Rural Pacification in Vietnam: 1962-1965,” (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1966), 95.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 19.

more particularly, the American advisors and representatives at that level. The peasant response to pacification [is] also considered.”⁸⁶ Additionally, Nighswonger insightfully provides common definitions for counterinsurgency, which he calls a “broader term than pacification” referring to “any effort by the government against the insurgent;”⁸⁷ and pacification which he defines simply as “to make peace.”⁸⁸ More recently, some Vietnam War historians have started to write as if the two terms were synonymous--that in order to defeat an insurgent in a location, one must first make peace with the inhabitants of that location. Even a quick look at what the CAPs were doing during the war might have brought this conclusion sooner.

Still in some ways, Nighswonger is ahead of his time historiographically. He elaborately provides the ethnic, cultural, and agricultural makeup of the rural regions of Vietnam, which are essential to his judgment on the relevance of the style of pacification applied to each region. Generally, historians that close to the war (and even some today) tended to evaluate the war from a military and political perspective, rather than from a sociological and cultural perspective, a fact that also lent itself to cursory attention given to units like the CAPs. Nighswonger also touches on the history of foreign and religious influence on Vietnam and alludes to how these histories could have affected efforts at pacification. He does all of this from many perspectives, including those of the villagers.

Nighswonger’s thesis, available through a University database, is essential to pacification studies, not only for its strikingly varied look at pacification efforts, but also

⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

for its analysis of a vast selection of resources. Nighswonger reviews mainstream secondary sources like David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire*, transcripts from Congressional hearings, current newspaper articles, USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) province reports from multiple villages, and interviews with members of civilian advisory groups sent to analyze progress in Southeast Asia; and he provides vast analysis of pacification programs that are scarcely mentioned in other works on the subject. Also significant is the context he creates with substantial discussion on civilian agencies like USAID and the U.S. Operations Mission, USAID's headquarters in Saigon; as well as agencies organic to Vietnam. With this backdrop, later historians are able to compare civilian "pacification" efforts⁸⁹ that had been tried and tested, to later military pacification efforts like the CAPs.

Nighswonger will always hold the unique vantage point of being a contemporary of the war and therefore close to all of the political and emotional chaos of the war, but this could also be considered his greatest flaw. Because of his proximity to the war and his reliance on primary sources like newspaper articles and interviews with people who still had a vested interest in the war (many even wished to remain anonymous), some of Nighswonger's assertions, specifically about American foreign policy, might require a second and more objective look. Some of his assertions are even overturned by evidence of CAP missions. Furthermore, certain pieces of false information by military and government leaders, which largely impacted pacification efforts, had not been exposed at

⁸⁹ Interestingly, Nighswonger notes that one particular sector of USOM, the International Voluntary Services (IVS), had workers who labored alongside South Vietnamese Farmers, and served as the "prototype on which the better known Peace Corps was patented." (114)

the time Nighswonger's dissertation was finished. For example, reports that pacification efforts were hugely successful, from both military and civilian leaders and advisors, turned out to be gross misjudgments later in the war. His other great flaw is his lack of depth with respect to the military's efforts at pacification.

He barely mentions the Army Special Forces and pays even less attention to the Marine Corps. Specifically, when he discusses "rural social and economic development fielded by the joint efforts of Vietnamese and American planners since 1962,"⁹⁰ he gives no credit to service members who implemented and advised on innovative and successful development programs in certain villages. In all fairness, Nighswonger's dissertation was published in 1966, just a year after the founding of the CAPs. Still military civic action had been in full effect for years. Like the CAPs, which he unsurprisingly⁹¹ completely leaves out of his work, the Army Special Forces also had several specialized village counterinsurgency programs and military advisers had been in Vietnam for years. Nonetheless, despite Nighswonger's lack of focus on these types of military missions, along with the other mentioned flaws, all in all in attempting to capture all of the layers of Vietnam and then analyzing the complex penetration of America into those layers, Nighswonger has cast a large and effectively telling net, but one which requires updates and supplemental information on military pacification efforts that were either already in effect, or would go into effect in the near future.

In 1995, with the added perspective of hindsight, Neil Jamieson wrote *Understanding Vietnam*, a book reminiscent of Nighswonger's work in its analysis of the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 247.

⁹¹ The CAPs were still in an unofficial status at this time.

cultural spectrum that made up 20th Century Vietnam, and in its lack of thorough discussion on military civic action programs in which service members attempted to adjust to and even assimilate into that spectrum. Like Nighswonger, Jamieson's main argument is that America failed in Vietnam because of a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture which according to Jamieson, relied on the Chinese philosophy of the innate relationship between nature's polarities: the *yin* and the *yang*. In simple terms, the *yin* and the *yang* concept is that of a balance or innate tension maintained between opposite aspects of culture, like masculine versus feminine, individual versus society, and work versus play. A constant push/pull exists between such aspects of culture and holds the structures of society together. When the *yang* aspects become too overbearing, the *yin* brings stability back, and vice versa. As Jamieson explains, "The Neo-Confucian *yang* and the Buddhist, Taoist, and animist *yin* elements coevolved to constitute a single system, best thought of as Vietnamese folk religion that pervaded all aspects of Vietnamese life. There were *yin* elements and *yang* elements in families, in villages, in religion and economics, and so on."⁹² According to Jamieson, French colonialism initially threw the balance off, and a yo-yo effect ensued with the U.S. contributing to either an excessive or insufficient *yin* or *yang*. Subsequently, young and liberal Vietnamese, no longer certain about right and wrong or of their future, turned to Communism for answers. Neither the French nor the Americans had a solid enough grasp of Vietnamese society to make the people feel safe and steady. Jamieson argues, "To understand the drama in which we became engulfed from the 1950s to the 1970s, we

⁹² Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16.

must begin to see 20th century Vietnam as a clash between the old and new, between diverse reactions to the failure of the traditional cultural system and continuing grip of this cultural heritage on the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.”⁹³

Jamieson is able to carry his discussion on through the fall of Saigon, thereby essentially testing some of Nighswonger’s presuppositions about competing cultural ideologies and their impact on the war. His rich style and complex research, which includes Vietnamese literary works, also adds a more palatable dimension to Nighswonger’s scholarly research. Still, both works should be commended for their striking look at the war through the eyes of the Vietnamese themselves, and both works are convincing in their assertion that American decision-makers’ misconception of Vietnamese culture negatively impacted its pacification policies in Vietnam. Too much of the historiography of pacification neglects to analyze the different world into which America stepped when it entered Southeast Asia. The rules--the ideologies--were different. However, both works also discuss the military units that were working parallel to the Vietnamese and did not address the units, like the CAPs, who integrated with them. While Nighswonger and Jamieson have thoroughly judged the effectiveness of the political side of pacification by American and Vietnamese logic, analysis of both the political *and* military effectiveness must be measured also by both American and Vietnamese logic. Nighswonger and Jamieson’s works are missing stories about units, like the CAPs, that were not only conscious of Vietnamese culture, but also reverently

⁹³ Ibid., 41.

knowledgeable about it, and recognized by the Vietnamese for their cultural understanding.

One such interesting and innovative military unit that, similar to the CAPs, was also left out of Nighswonger's and Jamieson's analysis, were the teams described by David Donovan in *Once a Warrior King*. In his memoir, Donovan, also known as Dr. Terry Turner, Ph.D.,⁹⁴ tells his story about life as part of an American advisory team in a rural Vietnamese village. Donovan describes both the good and the bad of life as a junior officer, commanding a team of only five American soldiers, and advising a village of 500 Vietnamese. As a brand new officer, Lieutenant Donovan was the most senior ranking soldier for hundreds of miles. Although as previously discussed, Donovan's officer status gave him a few advantages over the young enlisted leaders of the CAPs, his unit shared many similarities with the Combined Action units. Like the CAPs, he and his men lived and worked closely with Vietnamese leaders and villagers to identify problems in the village and attempt to eliminate them. In addition, though written for public consumption, Donovan also tells his story because his was an unconventional and largely unreported on mission that had political and military lessons from which to be learned. In an email he writes, "The MEDCAPs (medical civic action programs), infrastructure support (building of medical clinics, schools, village offices, village market structures, etc.), and millions of dollars that went into training of indig[indigenous] personnel of all

⁹⁴ According to his website (http://ddonovanbooks.com/david_donovan/index.html), Dr. Terry Turner chose the pen name, David Donovan, for two reasons: the first was to separate his writing career from his scientific career; and the second was, he claims, that "I could step under the umbrella of that other name and tell stories that would have been much harder for me to tell as Terry Turner. A mental trick, I guess. Call me crazy. Anyway, having adopted the name, I'm going to stick with it."

kinds was not a media focus,”⁹⁵ nor, as it is implied, has it been a focus of Vietnam histories. In an interview discussed later in this paper, Donovan suggests that an imbalance has always existed in the reports and stories of the military in Vietnam. While the public is clearly drawn to the action-packed stories of combat and destruction, lessons are to be learned from the stories of compassion, cultural understanding, and development as well. Therefore, some balance must be struck.

Despite the fact that Donovan and the CAP Marines have verified that their particular units were charged with developmental missions in addition to combat missions, with respect to pacification historiography, a specific question has stood out since the war: “Was pacification intended to be a constructive or destructive approach to winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese?”⁹⁶ In his article on the historiography of the same subject, “Nation Building and the Vietnam War: A Historiography,” Christopher T. Fisher explains that the ultimate results of the war led to tainted and confused historiography on America’s initial intentions. Because “the chasm between rhetoric and reality that followed the siege [of Saigon] betrayed the notion of ‘peace with honor,’”⁹⁷ historians have long argued over America’s motivations for intervention in Southeast Asia. Was the U.S. determined only to search for and destroy the Communist enemy, or were there sincere intentions for helping to build a stable South Vietnam? Fisher contends that recent historiography has “settled the longstanding

⁹⁵ Dr. Terry Turner, interview by author, 30 October 2009, email.

⁹⁶ Christopher T. Fisher, “Nation Building and the Vietnam War: A Historiography,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 74, no. 3 (August 2005): 451.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 441.

questions about the nature of pacification as either development or counterinsurgency,”⁹⁸ his chosen terms for construction and destruction respectively. Essentially, he argues that recent historiography confirms that the U.S. entered Southeast Asia for *all* of the reasons about which historians write, from stopping the spread of Communism to saving the Vietnamese people; and that pacification was a combined destructive and constructive force. Fisher’s article is essential for pacification studies because it offers explanations for the varied pacification arguments of numerous notable Vietnam historians like Jeffrey Race and George Herring.

In *War Comes to Long An*, Race uniquely looks at the war through the eyes of the people in a South Vietnamese village, who were involved in what he calls a revolution, when the U.S. intervened. Race believes that the war must be looked at in terms of “social revolution rather than as banditry or external invasion.”⁹⁹ He further asserts that corruption should be viewed “in socio-political terms: that corruption results from a certain distribution of political power, and if corruption concerns Americans, then they must concern themselves with political change.”¹⁰⁰ In short, according to Race, the war was never going to be won by massive bombing attacks and superior conventional forces. Instead, occupying forces must first understand the true needs and wants of the people, and whether help is needed or wanted at all. From passionate arguments like Race’s, what becomes evident is that the CAPs were accomplishing missions, in line with

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Jeffrey race, “War Comes to Long An—Back Story to the Writing of a Military Classic,” *Small Wars Journal* (January 2010); available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/340-race.pdf>, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

intellectual and seemingly logical reasoning, that were not being recognized or further evaluated for their potential effectiveness on a greater scale.

Like Race, in *America's Longest War*, Herring argues that the foreign policy implemented by America in Vietnam was “fundamentally flawed in its assumptions and major premises.”¹⁰¹ That is, because of its stance on Communism and containment and its recent end of World War II emergence as a world leader, Herring insists that American foreign policy was hegemonic and narrow-minded. The fact that many Vietnamese were not Communist, or that many more were avid Ho Chi Minh supporters was not a concern of policymakers. More importantly, that the inner-workings of Vietnam (i.e. its culture, politics, etc.) were simply different from those of America was irrelevant to American leaders who believed they had the only answer. While Race provides the Vietnamese perspective and argues that it is the perspective to be used when dealing with an insurgency, Herring's work is U.S.-centric. His book focuses on the mistakes made by U.S. decision-makers who developed Vietnam foreign policy. The Vietnamese perspective is generally not taken into account. Sadly, in both books the image of the soldier as a warrior of the state remains. In both works, the government's ideology-based decisions control the outcome of the war and the consequences faced by the “helpless” troops on the ground.

In Fisher's explanation, that the U.S. entered the war with an ideological cause means that “counterinsurgency and development were simply different expressions of the

¹⁰¹ George Herring, *America's Longest War--The United States and Vietnam: 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), ix.

same impulse for the United States and the South Vietnamese.”¹⁰² In other words, Fisher claims, “[U.S. policymakers] saw pacification as a means of preserving, and in fact extending, the principle of liberal capitalism and simultaneously showing muscle against global communism.”¹⁰³ Pacification, therefore, was the U.S.’s catch phrase for a moral mission whereby policymakers and the military would simultaneously construct a stable South Vietnam while destroying an arch enemy. Alas, this ideological context “meant treating America’s ill-fated pacification programs as an example of the possibilities and pitfalls implicit in U.S. ideology...the failure of pacification reveals the ideological elements of nation building as a source of crushing tragedy in South Vietnam that has kept the conflict fixed in the American mind.”¹⁰⁴ Where Fisher, amongst other pacification historians like Race and Herring, fails is that he too promotes pacification efforts as a general force of the government. His analysis of pacification historiography is too full of terminology and not enough about the human beings who lived the war. He neglects to give agency to the troops who implemented pacification efforts. The CAP Marines were given the broad mission of winning hearts and minds, but ultimately they shaped that mission to meet the needs of their particular villages.

Central to Fisher’s argument--that America entered the war with an ideological, or essentially a principled cause--is Michael Latham’s modernization theory. As Fisher explains, “In the Vietnam War, the confluence of modernization ideology and nation building seemed tailor-made for the challenges the United States faced.”¹⁰⁵ In Latham’s

¹⁰² Fisher., 441.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 443.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 443-444.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 446.

terms, “Modernization theory formed a conceptual framework that articulated a common collection of assumptions about the nature of American society and its ability to transform a world perceived as both materially and culturally deficient...the policy expression of modernization theory, understood as a benevolent program of accelerated development, struggled to find a place between nation building and counterinsurgency.”¹⁰⁶

Fisher believes that Latham’s theory sparked a historiographical transformation by which historians have been able to write about pacification as simultaneously a counterinsurgent strategy and an attempt at development, a destructive as well as a constructive force. The end state of the CAP pacification mission was in line with this analysis, although this transformation has not appeared to spark greater research on the CAPs. Relying on Latham’s definition, Fisher’s article claims that “modernization theory breaks down the analytical barriers that separate military historians from social and cultural historians when looking at the war.”¹⁰⁷ That is, America’s military strategy had social and cultural implications and consequences. In the end, Fisher concedes that regardless of its ideological intentions, the U.S. failed in South Vietnam because it “lacked a clear vision and relied upon fitful Cold War mantras—containment and rollback—for explanatory power.”¹⁰⁸ However, these are not the mantras by which the CAPs operated. Fisher’s ideas about historiography progressing so that pacification has political, social, cultural, and military implications may be correct, but his generalization

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 449. Furthermore, writes Fisher, “This uncertainty produced twin expressions of the same impulse: the Strategic Hamlet program and the Peace Corps.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 450.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 445-446.

about the ethics by which the military operated as well as his lack of discussion on the human side of war, does nothing to overturn (or motivate future historiography to overturn) the particular image of the service member as a man without agency or compassion.

Fisher lauds oft-cited pacification historian Richard Hunt's interpretation of pacification, contrasts it with noted Vietnam military histories like *The Army and Vietnam* (to be discussed later) and Race's *War Comes to Long An*; and associates it with the Latham historiographical transformation that has occurred more recently. In *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, Latham writes, "[Hunt] focuses on development in the pacification process and where it departs from counterinsurgency...[he] has attempted to go beyond the historical surveys of land/air strategy that have dominated pacification studies to situate the policy, particularly in the Johnson Administration, within the larger discussion of administrative goals."¹⁰⁹ Hunt's analysis contrasts earlier studies on pacification, like Nighswonger's dissertation, in which counterinsurgency was strictly a misguided effort to demonstrate American supremacy. His work truly represents a newer school of thought in that by describing pacification as "largely intangible, making a clear verdict difficult to reach,"¹¹⁰ he has shifted the blame of defeat from the decision makers, both civilian and military, to the "overarching logic of pacification."¹¹¹ In so doing, Hunt attempts to "find a middle ground between military, political, and social history."¹¹² Both Robert Komer, architect

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 453.

¹¹⁰ Hunt, 258.

¹¹¹ Fisher., 454.

¹¹² Ibid.

of the U.S. pacification program in Vietnam, and his successor, William Colby, helped guide Hunt in the writing of his book. Hunt's most significant point is that "far too many books on Vietnam have ignored pacification or merely alluded to it in passing as the 'war in the villages' or the struggle for 'hearts and minds' before returning to matters of diplomacy or conventional military operations."¹¹³ While this may be both true and a large part of this paper, and Hunt may hint that important developments were occurring in the "other war," both he and Fisher are a part of the larger historiographical void of incorporating the intricacies of the hearts and minds missions. Hunt mentions specific programs and even remarks on the lack of "other war" attention, but still absent in his discussion is the human dimension that might alter the image of the heartless service member that dominated popular media in the 1980s. He only mentions the CAPs once, and it is in reference to another pacification program that built upon CAP concepts.

Another more recent work that incorporates Hunt's analysis on pacification and further spotlights the CAPs is Pamela A. Conn's dissertation, "Losing Hearts and Minds: U.S. Pacification Efforts in Vietnam During the Johnson Years." In her 2001 work, Conn attempts to prove that "pacification was an integral component of the allied strategy, and given the time, resources and support, especially of the South Vietnamese political leaders, offered the best chance of turning back the National Liberation movement and stabilizing an independent non-communist South Vietnam."¹¹⁴ She uses Hunt to define what pacification meant to American decision makers, explaining that "its steadfast

¹¹³ Hunt, 2.

¹¹⁴ Pamela A. Conn, "Losing Hearts and Minds: U.S. Pacification Efforts in Vietnam During the Johnson Years," (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 2001), 1.

purpose was to help realize the ultimate American and South Vietnamese goal of an independent sovereign, and non-Communist South Vietnam.”¹¹⁵ On how pacification began, she writes simply, “In the midst of the war’s destruction, the pacification program was launched.”¹¹⁶ Like Hunt, Conn alleges, “The management and focus of pacification would change throughout the war, [but] the underlying philosophy and purpose remained constant: to extend the South Vietnamese government’s rule into the countryside, to gain political loyalty, and defeat the communist insurgency.”¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, her entire thesis rests on the false presumption that South Vietnamese goals were identical to American goals.

Still, Conn makes some significant arguments. For example, her assertion that the Johnson administration was sincerely engaged in and committed to pacification efforts, and that pacification incorporated the moral goal of nation building-- is perhaps the most unique aspect of her work. She refers to Hunt and to Brian Vandemark’s *Into the Quagmire* to better explain and vindicate Johnson for the no-win situation he “inherited.”¹¹⁸ She writes, “The President clearly saw his predicament presented by the war, but ‘failed to resolve it for fear that acknowledging the growing extent and cost of the war would thwart his domestic reforms, while pursuing a course of withdrawal risked political ruin.’”¹¹⁹ As evidence of Johnson’s ingenuousness, she uses countless memorandums, speeches, executive correspondence, National Security Council

¹¹⁵ Hunt, 1.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁹ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xv; Conn, 38.

documents, an interview with Johnson's National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, and vast secondary sources from credible Vietnam historians like Herring. To further exonerate the President, she blames the failure of pacification on the corrupt South Vietnamese government and the overwhelming firepower America used, which overturned any progress being made in the hearts and minds campaign. Herein lay a major problem with Conn's work: these two factors, which Conn uses to defend Johnson, were in fact direct results of decisions made by the President himself. However, Conn offers an extremely valuable asset to pacification historiography in her in depth reviews of various works. These reviews are numerous, wide-ranging, and thorough. She even covers some of the less utilized but exceptionally important literature on the Combined Action Platoons. Most notably, she reviews Michael Peterson's honest and largely overlooked assessment, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*, which will be discussed in depth at a later time.

Still, even when histories such as Conn's do discuss specific military pacification missions, most still leave out the human aspect and how they impact military conduct during humanitarian and combat missions, as well as the outcome after. In military analyses of the Vietnam War, for example, the majority of the literature focuses on high-level decision making not taking into account the fact that human reactions and emotions largely affect strategy and tactics. The two works which remain central to the discussion on military strategy in Vietnam and exhaust most of their discussion on general military theory and strategy are Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army in Vietnam* and Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr.'s *On Strategy—A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Both Summers

and Krepinevich argue that the military implemented the wrong strategy in Southeast Asia. However, while Summer's believed they applied the wrong conventional strategy, Krepinevich firmly argues that had the military trained for and executed a better counterinsurgency strategy, America might actually have won the war. In his analysis, Summer's main argument is that "a lack of appreciation of military theory and military strategy led to a faulty definition of the nature of war."¹²⁰ Both historians/strategists speak from a theoretical rather than a human level, as if the troops were simply pieces in a large game of Stratego.

According to Summers, America entered the war with a flawed frame of reference that resulted from the political objective of containing communism. He argues, "In pursuit of its policy of containment, the U.S. entered the Vietnam war on the strategic defensive."¹²¹ This prevented the military from attacking the root of the problem, which to Summers was North Vietnam and its Army. The guerilla war in the South, he argues, was but the symptom of a greater problem. Summer's blames both the military leadership, for failing to communicate its capabilities and limitations to policymakers, and the policymakers themselves for not understanding how to appreciate and properly use its military. Significantly, he also accuses President Johnson of making a "conscious decision not to mobilize the American people—to invoke national will—for the Vietnam war."¹²² Summers, a devoted adherent to the military's most renowned strategist, Carl Von Clausewitz, believed that in order for any war to be won, a balance of wills--

¹²⁰ Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., *On Strategy—A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (California: Presidio Press, 1982), xiii.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 12.

between the people, the government, and the Army-- must first be attained. A deficit within any part of the trinity leads to automatic defeat. To Summers, Johnson's failure to declare war in Vietnam placed the military into a "legal vacuum" and took the people completely out of the trinity, by revoking their right to support war. This subsequently demoralized the troops and therefore impacted their performance in battle. Furthermore, he explains, "A declaration of war makes the prosecution of the war a shared responsibility of the government and the people."¹²³ In this vein, no one felt responsible or accountable for Vietnam. Summer's argument is valuable in that it is representative of the military theory the majority of high-ranking officers (and in fact, the highest ranking military commander, General Westmoreland), especially those in the Army, supported.

Summer's other noteworthy discussion revolves around Kennedy's push in the early 1960s to improve the Special Forces and add counterinsurgency (a term under which "hearts and minds" falls) training to all of the services. In contrast to Krepinevich, Summers contends that the counterinsurgency "trend" impeded development in the Army as a whole by altering military priorities and contributing to the faulty frame of reference with which America entered the war. On the other hand, Krepinevich supported Kennedy's quest for an improved counterinsurgency capability. In fact, his central argument was that the reason "the most powerful nation on Earth, materially supported on a scale unprecedented in history, equipped with the most sophisticated technology in an age when technology assumed the role of a god of war, failed to emerge victorious against a numerically inferior force of lightly armed irregulars" was because military and

¹²³ Ibid., 22.

political decision-makers, prior to sending troops into battle, did not ask themselves the following essential questions: “What kind of Army are we sending to war? What has the Army done these past fifteen years to prepare itself for a war quite unlike those ‘traditional’ wars—World Wars I and II and the Korean War—that it had become accustomed to waging? What will the Army do to eliminate the insurgent movement that has not been done these past fifteen years?”¹²⁴ Like Summers, Krepinevich faults strategists with planning from a poor frame of reference. He explains, “World Wars I and II, along with the Korean War, solidified the service’s focus on conventional war, which has become a comfortable, familiar frame of reference in which to approach conflict.”¹²⁵ Unlike Summers, in Krepinevich’s work, the frame of reference was historical rather than theoretical.¹²⁶

Significantly and in contrast to Summers, Krepinevich praises the Combined Action Platoon as a model unit for counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam, though he only scratches the surface on the accomplishments the CAPs made and devotes almost no research/writing to their civic action contributions. Summers and Krepinevich on the whole represent the two military schools of thought that have reigned since the war. On the one hand, strategists like Summers believe[d] that the military did not apply the appropriate conventional strategy or force to defeat North Vietnam. On the other hand, strategists like Krepinevich provide[d] evidence that convincingly demonstrates that had counterinsurgency been the priority, America might have defeated the National

¹²⁴ Andrew Krepinevich, *Army in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 4.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁶ As explained, Summers believed that the faulty frame of reference was the policy of containment and the belief in the unconventional war.

Liberation Front. Regardless of their level of success at interpreting military strategy, the authors have missing links: First, both were high-ranking career Army officers who left out the perspective of the troops fighting on the ground. Feelings, motivations, and stories of the troops who were actually executing military strategy were often lost in translation or simply in transmission to the higher levels of command, and these human aspects are essential to fighting a war. Second, Summers and Krepinevich condemn and praise CAP efforts, respectively, without really analyzing all that the CAPs brought to the fight and how their experiences shaped the way they executed their missions, influenced their commitment to civic action, and hence affected the overarching military strategy.

But even the CAP-specific histories have their own CAP-related flaws. *The Betrayal*, a book highly controversial and publicized at the time of its release in 1968, was written by the CAP program's first Commanding Officer (CO), then Lieutenant Colonel Corson. Although he mostly praises the work, Peterson contends that Corson's book is "not so much a history of the CAP program as it is a general critique of the 'Other War' in Vietnam."¹²⁷ Still, Corson's book is worthy of mention and analysis as histories on the program are few and far between. Furthermore, although Corson was not a troop (the term typically refers to the young enlisted Marines who actually execute the orders of combat), per se, he helped found the program and thus had intricate knowledge of its missions. He also worked closely with the CAP Marines and was a staunch advocate of them and of the program.

¹²⁷ Peterson, 5.

Highly emotional, *The Betrayal* unfortunately expends a lot of pages “accus[ing] the [Johnson] Administration of misleading the American public about the war.”¹²⁸ Peterson writes, “*The Betrayal* is one man’s impassioned cry of protest against a hugely wasteful debacle and what he sees to be a looming defeat.”¹²⁹ In her dissertation, Conn reviews *The Betrayal* as follows: “A contemporary account of the CAPs and an overall evaluation of the ‘other war,’ the work berates the destructive American military tactics as the chief cause of America’s defeat in South Vietnam. At the same time, Corson spares no criticism of America’s southern ally, arguing that the U.S. had a responsibility to save the Vietnamese people from [their] government.”¹³⁰ While *The New York Times* concurred and called Corson’s book “a wide-ranging indictment of the conduct of war, the pacification effort, the Administration’s public information program and the South Vietnamese authorities;”¹³¹ Corson’s book also notably rallies support for the CAP program.

Responding to some of the government criticism he was receiving just prior to his book release, Corson publically and vehemently explained his motivation for writing his *The Betrayal*. He writes, “The chair-borne pacification warriors looked upon pacification as a kind of left-wing, liberal social welfare credo...By giving the Vietnamese the ‘Great Society’s War on Poverty’ equivalent to food stamps, AFDC¹³² stipends, etc., the

¹²⁸ Henry Raymond, "Colonel Says U.S. Misleads Public on Vietnam," *The New York Times*, 18 June 1968: 4-4; *Proquest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006)*, [database on-line]; available from <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/mutex.gmu.edu/pqdweb?did=77306942&sid=2&Fmt=10&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

¹²⁹ Peterson, 5.

¹³⁰ Conn, 40.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Aid to Families with Dependent Children

Vietnamese were supposed to give their hearts and minds to those who provided them with the dole.”¹³³ The CAP Marines, he claims, “actually won the hearts and minds of the folks in their hamlets, not by providing handouts, but rather by their willingness to give their lives in the protection of the Vietnamese people.”¹³⁴ Corson along with other pacification researchers like Conn, Krepinevich, and Daniel Ellsberg believed that “the CAP program [was] (circa 1967) the only pacification program in Vietnam which works.”¹³⁵ If asked, Krepinevich, Ellsberg, and Corson probably would have concurred that the U.S. military approach to Vietnam was fatally flawed and their individual works reflect this, but *unlike* most histories on pacification as well as the media, they were able to point out *specific* positive works of the military. Still, missing from all of the pacification histories thus far have been the details on who and what units like the CAPs were.

An in-depth and personal account of the CAP program was written by Captain F.J. West, Jr., a notorious Marine Corps Platoon Commander in Vietnam who spent much time with the CAPs. West has written several pieces on the CAP program, but he is most famous for *The Village*, the full story of the CAP assigned to Binh Nghia. Peterson calls West’s story “useful...the only long term analysis of any of the CAPs,”¹³⁶ but also points out its lack of variety. On one hand, *The Village* is a very intimate account, the type of history needed to see the human side of war. On the other hand, it is the story of only one CAP in only one village in a remote region of Vietnam. Peterson also cautions, “West

¹³³ “Corson--First CAP C.O.,” 7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Peterson., 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

uses a disturbing convention: although the years have come and gone, he quotes the conversations of the American and Vietnamese participants extensively and verbatim. While West insists the conversations are based upon interviews, recordings and eyewitness testimonies, I find the practice nevertheless unsettling.”¹³⁷ Lastly with regards to West’s book, *The Village* is the story of a relatively successful CAP, and while it is essential to the saga of the CAPs, some of the greatest lessons can be learned from the CAPs that were not as successful. All sides, the winning and the losing, must be told in order to reap all of a story’s lessons.

Perhaps the most comprehensive look at the Combined Action Program is Michael Peterson’s own book, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam*. What makes Peterson’s account different from other pacification histories is that his book focuses on the CAPs in the context of all pacification efforts, and it tells both the good and the bad of the program. He supports his assertions with graphs, statistical data, pictures, and interviews with key CAP members, like Chaplain Richard McGonigal and Colonel Corson. As a CAP veteran, he identifies with both the CAP Marines but also with the reader, and he explains his arguments in a fashion understandable to all. “To the amateur historian,” he writes, “the story of the pacification effort in the Vietnam War is obscured by a plethora of names and acronyms representing a constellation of organizations involved in the Other War.”¹³⁸ He goes on to discuss such organizations, first using the acronym lingo, and then humorously explaining what that other language means. Additionally, he includes the insight of his own experiences

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 173-174.

as a CAP Marine, and although this provides an automatic bias, Peterson's work is not only fair, but well-researched.

By his own admission though, Peterson fails, like other pacification and even CAP historians, to really delve into the specifics of the civic action/community development programs that were implemented by the CAPs during the war. Luckily, he maintained a copy of his original thesis, which contains such specifics. According to Peterson, these details were left out of his work when his book was published, and have therefore remained out of public view. In his thesis, Peterson is convincing in answering the following question at the heart of all pacification histories and previously touched on: "How can one engage in community development in the middle of a war, which is a profoundly destructive process?"¹³⁹ Using methodical research methods, as well as intricate and fair assessments of this question, Peterson answers with a look at some of the civic action/community development¹⁴⁰ projects completed by the CAPs. Understanding that evidence is limited because "paper trails are scattered and the survivors' contacted have not meshed with the projects recorded,"¹⁴¹ Peterson is careful in telling only the stories of the humanitarian works he could back with primary sources.

In particular, he describes and provides primary source evidence for two in-depth projects that were discussed earlier. The first is the pig-breeding experiment and the second was the school built in the name of the CAP Marine killed-in-action. However, Peterson's own experience as a CAP Marine as well as his professional and tactful

¹³⁹ Michael Peterson, "The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam" (Master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1988), 159.

¹⁴⁰ Peterson uses this term as written here, explaining that "the two concepts are not intertwined, nor are they interdependent." (160)

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

writing style prompt the insightful to read between the lines and understand that simply because the evidence has not always matched does not mean that it never will, and even if it never does match, it does not mean that civic action/community development projects never occurred. In the end, Peterson differentiates between his praise for specific works of the CAPs and praise for the American war effort overall. Furthermore, he is careful in not suggesting that an expansion of the CAP concept might have helped the U.S. win the war. To Peterson no matter how it was fought, the war, “with 58,000 dead—double that when you include suicides...was not worth the price.”¹⁴² Peterson’s current status as an active member of Veterans for peace, speaks to his feelings about Vietnam.

Yet despite his feelings about the war in general, Peterson does pay fair tribute to improvements made by the CAPs in the villages. He establishes the context for his discussion on CAP accomplishments with a look at some of the literature which has studied the military’s propensity to “develop,” and finds that in line with earlier arguments in this paper, most of these works discredit the military. In one case, Peterson cites a noteworthy government commissioned Department of Defense report entitled American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, by Chester Cooper. While he commends the contemporaneous report for its in depth look at America’s pacification efforts through 1971, he also explains, “Civic action/community development is given brief coverage, although the history exhaustively explores the structures of the Vietnamese hamlet and Vietnamese security/governmental structures. This omission

¹⁴² Peterson interview.

speaks volumes about America's tokenist commitment to 'nation building' and the Other War."¹⁴³ From this statement and specifically his use of the word "tokenist," Peterson's view on America's involvement in Vietnam is clear: America was generally not fully committed, neither militarily nor on the home front, to its pacification mission, nor was it fully aware of what was going on in the "other war." Peterson's conclusion corroborates with the historical and media omissions/biases analyzed throughout this thesis.

Two last pacification books worth mentioning are Vietnam Veteran Al Santoli's *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* and Al Hemingway's *Our War Was Different*. Santoli's book, a collection of anecdotes from service members and civilians who served in the war is an example of the variety and human side of the story history is missing. His major problem is that these extremely short yet very personal stories leave the reader asking for more. Some of the stories are so short in fact, that the reader has an incomplete picture of what the teller is describing. As it pertains to CAP historiography, Santoli only includes one anecdote by a CAP veteran. Hemingway's book, on the other hand, is an insightful oral history of many of the CAP Marines and their contributions to and perspectives on the "other war." His book spans all ranks in the program, from enlisted men in the villages to Commanding Officers and even Chaplains. Still, it lacks the methodological explanations, historical analyses, and even citations that could add credibility to his work and help those ignorant of the CAP Marines and missions. While historians tend to mistrust oral histories for their given bias and their ever-changing, memory-reliant stories, oral histories must be incorporated into the whole,

¹⁴³ Peterson thesis, 169.

because they provide the human side of history. War is not an act without agency. Rather, wars are fought by individual human beings with consciences and emotions, who make decisions that affect the outcome of battles, and who change lives for the better and for the worse.

Pacification historiography has only begun to scratch the surface of what pacification was during Vietnam. The CAP program was a specific program, designed and adapted out of sheer necessity by a group of Marines who had a shared vision, and who attempted to impart that vision unto others, both American and Vietnamese. Moreover, that unique vision, largely as a result of its civic action focus, changed the lives of both Americans and Vietnamese. Arguably, this paper not only shows that the Combined Action Program was unusual in many specific ways, but also that it was just like many other pacification programs in the lack of attention it received from the media, the government, and the home front. In order to truly define pacification, a dissection of *all* of specific programs and missions--both civilian and military, both Vietnamese and American, both at the higher and lower levels, both combat and civic action--must occur. Only in this way will the variety of creative efforts that were made by the variety of different service members be grasped.

Chapter 3—The Media

Pacification and CAP histories are not the only sources that have left out significant aspects of the “other war,” or the war to win “hearts and minds.” The war-time media also overlooked such information, specifically with respect to military civic action missions. In the case of the print press during the war, issues of coverage, or lack thereof, were typically the result of a reporter being guided in a certain direction or given false or incomplete information by military or government officials. However in many cases, even when occasions did arise for correspondents to obtain a story in the rural “hearts and minds” regions of the country, not all took advantage—a fact that only exacerbated the problem of a lack of information on the subject. Access into these rural regions was certainly not an issue. Journalists were provided with multiple methods of transportation, and a few media contributors, like certain photojournalists from *Life Magazine*, *did* take their opportunities to spend time in the villages with units like the CAPs. The results were original and rich, and they provided a new humanitarian perspective on the troops. However, these portrayals could not eliminate what had been and would be published so many more times--the image of the service member as only a combatant. Compounding the problem of the overlooked military civic action missions was the simple nature of visual imagery: the action-packed images of the war were more visually appealing and impactful than static pictures of, for example, a Marine eating

dinner with a Vietnamese family. By the 1980s, the more dynamic images had earned a permanent and arguably more dominant place in the collective memory as evidenced by popular films like *Platoon*. This chapter will examine how the news media, though not always by its own doing, contributed to the lack of information on the “other war,” specifically in the vein of civic action missions, and how that lack of information allowed an incomplete image of service members to linger at least through the 1980s.

One of the most widespread misconceptions of the Vietnam War is that the media was responsible for the loss of support on the home front and the subsequent decisions of the administration to end the war without a clear victory. In truth, according to Vietnam media historian William Hammond, “Public approval of the Vietnam War fell in step with the rise in Americans killed and wounded, dropping 15 percentage points each time U.S. casualties increased by a factor of 10.”¹⁴⁴ Noted historians like Hammond and Daniel C. Hallin agree that the media, despite its inflammatory reputation, reported stories that were generally in line with government and military policy. Hallin writes, “From 1961 to 1967, for all the tension between the media and government, and for all the mythology about the press as an adversary or watchdog of the state, the independence of the American news media—at least those parts of it we are considering here—was very limited. Even on an issue as explosive as Vietnam, an undeclared war in a distant and often hostile land, without censorship or extensive restrictions on access, the media

¹⁴⁴ William Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam—Media and Military at War* (Lawrence, KS: the University of Press of Kansas, 1998), 57.

were remarkably docile.”¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, until late in the war, the media was extremely sympathetic to the troops. Hallin explains, “The tendency was strong for reporters to identify with young Americans like themselves, whose dangers—and thrills, which are also part of war—they would often share, at least for a brief period.”¹⁴⁶ Late in the war, the loss of morale across the board paved the way for many published stories of soldiers losing their moral way and little to none of those who maintained their honor.

Overall, a certain irony existed in the story of the media of Vietnam. First as Hallin explains, Vietnam was the only war to date during which reporters could travel with and report on the troops without censorship.¹⁴⁷ They had unmatched freedoms and opportunities. On the other hand, the Commanders in Chief, in particular President Johnson, were committed to strategic and partial disclosure of the happenings of the war, so as to keep it from becoming a priority on the political agenda. In line with this, his subordinates, namely General Westmoreland and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, implemented arbitrary media access policies and, as Hallin explains, even instructed their military commanders to sugar coat events of the war.¹⁴⁸ According to Hammond and Hallin, this put severe limitations on the media that witnessed events contradictory to what was being disclosed by government and military officials loyal to the administration’s cause. For example, while reports of military progress and solid South Vietnamese military participation flowed back to the home front from leaders in country, the media sometimes saw the opposite. According to Hallin, “The truth was exposed

¹⁴⁵ Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”—The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 162.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

each time [General Westmoreland] asked for more troops and each time the reporters spoke with the South Vietnamese...His need for reinforcements is a measure of failure with the Vietnamese.”¹⁴⁹ Even with their restrictions though, opportunities did exist for correspondents to record the “real” story of the “other war.” Starting early in the war, flights left each day for multiple forward operating bases in the country with seats reserved specifically for reporters.¹⁵⁰ Hallin claims, “Journalists are in fact sincerely committed to the—somewhat ambiguous—ideal of telling ‘what happened.’”¹⁵¹ And perhaps many reporters did tell what happened where they were.

Many however, did not take advantage of their relative all-access passes to areas where military civic action was a focus. Hallin writes, “Saigon correspondents complained that official briefings and news releases were at times incomplete, uninformative, or self-serving, [but] hardly any would deny that the system in place in South Vietnam gave them ample means to do their jobs. Reporters ‘had to be willing to take dawn airplanes, spend a few nights a month with [South Vietnamese] and American troops, tour key districts with veteran U.S. advisers, dine with political specialists, and ask intelligent questions of generals, sergeants and province chiefs.’”¹⁵² However, based on the limited in-depth articles found on military civic action and the even more limited articles found on the individual service members conducting civic action missions in widely disseminated newspapers of the time, it appears that many reporters were content to report what they saw and heard from the officials in and around headquarters.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵⁰ Hammond, 72.

¹⁵¹ Hallin, 131.

¹⁵² Hammond, 291.

The many correspondents who chose to simply stick with what they learned at the regular military briefings in Saigon and Danang missed out on a unique opportunity to shed light on another aspect of the military. Those who actively ventured out to the rural villages had the chance to obtain stories, like Donovan's *Once a Warrior King*, that were fresh, insightful, and full of examples of interactions and relationships between Vietnamese civilians and US service members. Lieutenant Donovan, with his CAP-like team, was stationed in a remote village with spotty radio contact, accessible only by sampan during part of the year, writes about a day he spent with a "free-lance writer and photographer."¹⁵³ Although he does not mention the outcome article, he does talk about the questions the journalist asked about Donovan's experience in Vietnam, specifically with respect to the controversial Phoenix Program, in which the CIA established and oversaw an intelligence network of South Vietnamese military/law enforcement agencies to neutralize clandestine members of the NLF living in villages. Most significant though, is the fact that the journalist was able to break away from the mainstream bases and find his way alone to this off-the-map unit of five men. Accessibility to stories was never an inhibitor.

No, according to Donovan, the media simply typically reported "boom and bang" stories."¹⁵⁴ That the media reported on such stories may simply have been the result of the market—more people wanted to read action-packed stories of the war. However, perhaps the media fell into the trap of simply accepting what they were being briefed at the meetings in the cities and not investigating truths for themselves. Donovan manages

¹⁵³ David Donovan, *Once A Warrior King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 136.

¹⁵⁴ Turner interview.

to make his unit's civic action missions and combat lifestyle a part of a larger and still appealing story, a format he wishes more of the media had used. Naturally, the abundance and intensity of the negative soldier images brought back from the war have had a far greater impact than images of compassion and cultural understanding. In an online interview on the subject Donovan claims, "When I came back from Vietnam I felt, as did many, that the reporting was incomplete. Public support for our efforts was diminished by the public's seeing only the shocking and the angrifying. I'm not saying that should not have been reported, just that much else requiring effort, hope, and expenditure of blood and treasure went unremarked."¹⁵⁵

Again, arguments can be made that civic action missions simply did not lend themselves to appealing stories, but some writers proved otherwise. Authors like Donovan, Peterson, and Hemingway have certainly managed to weave tales of combat and civic action into interesting reads. Additionally, on the media front, *Life Magazine* produced an in depth account of CAP Echo 2 in which not only were both combat and civic action missions detailed, but so were the Marines who made up the unit. On 25 August 1967, *Life* published "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend." The article is an intricate examination of the Marines who served in the CAPs and their commitment to protecting their village through combat and civic action missions. It describes the daily operations of these particular Marines and, as the title suggests, hints at the relationships many CAP Marines formulated with their villagers. It also gives a word picture of each

¹⁵⁵ Brett Stevens, "Interview with a Warrior King: David Donovan Speaks to CORRUPT," (*CORRUPT—Conservation and Conservatism*, 23 October 2008) [website on-line]; available from http://www.corrupt.org/articles/culture/brett_stevens/interview_with_a_warrior_king-david_donovan_speaks_to_corrupt.

platoon member, creating a multi-dimensional force with a range of personalities. As a CAP tribute website proclaims in response to the article, “[*Life*’s] professionalism is a guide for today’s media.”¹⁵⁶ The all-inclusive article brought this particular CAP unit to life. Unfortunately, this type of military representation, with its attention to aspects other than combat, was the exception. Despite the fact that *Life* was one of the most influential media sources on the war, one article does not make a movement. To the contrary, just months later, the Tet Offensive occurred and media attitudes on the war turned sour, arguably putting a derived negative spin on the troops. Furthermore, as will be discussed later, the image of the CAP Echo 2 Marine was not the image behind the characters in a number of Vietnam War movies in the 1980s. This is a clear testament to the fact that articles covering civic action, even when they were printed within one of the most talked about publications of the time, were not impactful enough (either in quality and/or quantity) to add a humanitarian service member image to the collective memory after the war. The article, however, is further evidence that interesting stories could be made of troops engaged in missions other than combat, destruction, and death.

Perhaps then, the lack of disseminated information on civic action might also be attributed to the fact that military and government officials often were not always intricately familiar with what the troops were doing and so passed on to correspondents limited information. Still, published articles only extended this ignorance to the public. An example of this propagated ignorance is found in a 1965 article called “Marines in Vietnam Get 10 Instructions on Making Friends.” This short article, found in the *New*

¹⁵⁶ Jack Cunningham, *capveterans.com*, quotation [website on-line]; available from http://home.earthlink.net/~life_magazine_67/life_mag_008.htm.

York Times and the *Washington Post*, listed the cultural rules the troops were ordered to follow in order to achieve a successful deployment. Explaining and preceding the list was only this: “Following are the ’10 Commandments’ issued to a battalion of the United States Marine Corps involved in a pacification drive near the Danang base.”¹⁵⁷

Obviously, the military had shortcomings in the cultural education tools it distributed to the troops. Simple pocket guides and pamphlets on Vietnamese language and culture were mass-produced and designed to quickly school-up all levels of education. However, journalists had the opportunity--the time, the freedom, and the stories--to create something richer. By simply publishing the cultural standards the Marines were instructed to follow, the newspapers effortlessly perpetuated the notion that American troops were only intelligent enough to follow simple commands and demonstrated a lack of consideration for the complexity of the Vietnamese culture and the ability of the American service member to assimilate into it the way the CAPs did. The article neglected to offer the public any inkling that much more in-depth cultural exchanges were occurring in-country.

All of the newspapers in the University database, in fact, left out part of the story. In 1967, the *Los Angeles Times* uniquely published a Joseph Alsop article on pacification and civic action efforts called “New Look in Pacification.” The work again neglects to mention Marine Corps pacification/civic action initiatives in the villages or any programs like it. Instead Alsop, though one of the first to hint at missions other than combat,

¹⁵⁷ “Marines in Vietnam get 10 Instructions on Making Friends,” *The New York Times*, 28 November 1965: 3; *Proquest Historical Newspapers The New York Times(1851-2006)*, [database on-line]; available from <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com.mutex.gmu.edu/pqdweb?did=98547678&sid=3&Fmt=10&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

suggests that the only humanitarian deeds were being done by civilian organizations. He explains,

The [pacification] responsibility to be transferred to Westmoreland's command is instead discharged at present, in each province, by a dozen or so young American Foreign Service officers, AID officials and the like. These are the province teams of the Office of Civil Organization, whose main task is not to pacify, but to give all possible American support to the Vietnamese pacification effort. In almost all cases, the OCO province teams are exceedingly impressive. But besides individual courage and intelligence, their main resources are cement, bulgur wheat and other AID supplies.¹⁵⁸

The article goes on to hypothesize just how handing command of pacification efforts over to the military might benefit all sides, not once referencing units like the CAPs. Such reporting, on pacification and civic action but lacking any discussion on previously successful military pacification through civic action examples, is representative of the lack of knowledge on U.S. service members, a lack of knowledge that presented the troops as only combatants. While the CAPs certainly maintained their combat operational tempo, sending out patrols twice a day, a portion of the unit was always back in the village with the Vietnamese people. Their ever-presence alongside the villagers combined with their combat capability was unique to pacification attempts yet hardly explored.

As more proof of the media's freedom and creativity yet its non-commitment to reporting on America's "other war," *The Christian Science Monitor* had perhaps the broadest spectrum of article topics. Articles ranged from Vietnamese recipes and stories

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Alsop, "New Look in Pacification," *Los Angeles Times*, 09 May 1967:A5; *Proquest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881-1986)*, [database on-line].

¹⁵⁸ Peterson, 5.

of American missionaries in Vietnam, to mini-biographies of members of the Viet Cong. In 1967 the *Monitor* published an AP article called “U.S. Restudies Pacification,” in which it explicitly analyzed current pacification methods in Vietnam. The article declares, “So far the successive programs over the years for pacification in Vietnam have failed.”¹⁵⁹ The CAPs were two years old at this point and had already made great strides, yet no mention was made of the program or its civic action projects

Nevertheless, even on the rare occasions when *The Monitor* did mention the CAPs or similar pacification efforts, it failed to mention some significant and innovative humanitarian projects that were completed by American troops, and instead provided only cursory information on the various pacification units and missions. In a March 1968 article called “U.S. Weighs Shift in War Tactics,” journalist George W. Ashworth leaves out any mention of the developmental aspect of pacification and implies that the “secure and hold” style of pacification is new, despite CAP success with this style of pacification. He claims, “As strategists now view the situation, it is imperative that securing and holding receive as much of the effort as possible... Searching and destroying has been damaging, not decisive... the precise nature of the new strategy will not be known until high-level deliberations are completed.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ “U.S. Restudies Viet Pacification,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 January 1967: 7; *Proquest Historical Newspapers Christian Science Monitor (1908-1996)*, [database on-line]; available from <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/mutex.gmu.edu/pqdweb?did=219321662&sid=1&Fmt=10&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

¹⁵⁹ Peterson, 5.

¹⁶⁰ George W. Ashworth, “U.S. Weighs Shift in War Tactics,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 March 1968: 1; *Proquest Historical Newspapers Christian Science Monitor (1908-1996)*, [database on-line]; available from <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/mutex.gmu.edu/pqdweb?did=263723932&sid=1&Fmt=10&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

¹⁶⁰ Peterson, 5.

While Ashworth briefly mentions the CAPs, he neglects to mention the significant methods by which Marines were able to “secure and hold” their villages. He claims, “The success of the Marine-developed combined action platoons, which contain a squad of marines and a platoon of South Vietnamese popular forces, may be a harbinger of things to come. So far as it is known, none of the villages protected by combined action companies fell during the Tet Offensive.”¹⁶¹ His noteworthy commendation lacks any discussion on civic action. Such reporting is a testament to the fact that many journalists were most likely reporting only what they were told. Ashworth’s analysis is strictly military and filled with the strategic catchphrases of the time. He also fails to mention civic action, a likely contributor to the noted success of the CAPs.

Even the *Chicago Tribune*, with a predominantly conservative position likely to lend itself to emphatic support of the troops, never really delved into just what the pacification units were doing. Furthermore, an antiwar attitude began to seep through the cracks of the *Tribune*’s seemingly watertight conservatism, and as the antiwar stance intensified so too did disregard for the military’s civic action programs. The most impressive article discusses South Vietnamese refugee children: “There is no room for them in school, not even in jail...it is said in this land of pseudo statistics, that one of every three Vietnamese children does not live to the age of 4.”¹⁶² Journalist Karen Peterson, who wrote the article and photographed many refugee children for the story,

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Karen Peterson, "Saigon's Children of Sunshine or Shadows," the *Chicago Tribune*, 11 February 1968: H72+; *Proquest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1986)*, [database on-line]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/mux/gmu.edu/pqdweb?index=13&did=629285192&SrchMode=1&sid=4&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1276824108&clientId=31810>.

¹⁶² Peterson, 5.

blames the war for their dire circumstances. She claims, “The Communists have terrorized the families and the Americans have made them refugees by burning their huts to find the Viet Cong, often entrenched beneath them. In the process of moving to Saigon for safety, for a home, for charity, the family unit has fallen apart.”¹⁶³ While her story candidly tells the heart-wrenching tale of the victims of the war, she neglects to touch on any of the humanitarian works of the Americans, thereby submitting to the idea that the troops only brought devastation to Vietnam. But news writers were not the only ones to blame for these incomplete images. Ignorance extended into the world of photographers too.

Jackie Walker Flowers argues early on in her PhD dissertation that bias is an inherent part of photojournalism. She explains, “The degree of selectivity required of the photographer precludes an impartial, or objective result. Thus photographs of war are not detached illustrations of events as they occur; they are the result of planning, and are colored by biases, sensitivity, and creativity of each individual photographer.”¹⁶⁴ Walker Flowers calls *Life* “the predominant American picture magazine and source for photographic images of the war,”¹⁶⁵ and she traces its photojournalistic coverage of the war. She further uses the magazine as an example to argue that the media was not an adversary of government policy, and did not provoke the antiwar movement. To the contrary, she argues like Hammond and Hallin, *Life* actually typically reflected support for government policy. According to Walker Flowers, “A general scholarly consensus

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Jackie Walker Flowers, "Life in Vietnam: The Presentation of the Vietnam War in Life Magazine, 1962-1972" (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 1996), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

has been reached that both television newscasts and print journalism presented an image of the Vietnam War that was supportive of American policy until 1968 [after the Tet Offensive].”¹⁶⁶

In researching Hammond and Hallin, this rings true in that “search and destroy,” General Westmoreland’s (and therefore the military’s) overarching policy/strategy, is a term that frequently comes up with respect to media coverage on the troops, regardless of the time period. This theme is also present in Walker Flowers’ findings in *Life*. For example, on 27 November 1964, *Life* printed the story and photos of Special Forces Captain Vernon Gillespie and the twelve man unit and Montagnard strike force he commanded. Like the unit described by Donovan in *Once a Warrior King*, this unit was similar to the CAPs. In spite of this fact, the story is mostly about the unit’s search and destroy missions. According to Walker Flowers, “In the cover photo, Gillespie directs the action while the Montagnards burn down a Vietcong camp.” She adds that the accompanying story, fittingly called “Captain Gillespie Goes Out After the VietCong” suggests that “their mission was to ‘seek out and destroy any Vietcong contacted, look for refugees, destroy crops in the area.’ Gillespie and his men were flatteringly portrayed; in the photostory they are capable, determined, and aggressive in their fight.”¹⁶⁷ She emphasizes, “The Americans were depicted as performing important and urgent work, and doing so in an admirable manner.”¹⁶⁸ In the end, Walker Flowers concedes, “The images in the magazine failed to present a clear, coherent view of the war

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 65.

through photographs.” Strikingly, she also concludes that generally “*Life* editors heightened the effect of the more explicit photographs, which tended to portray negative war sentiments, by printing them in a larger format than those less visually stimulating. As a result, negative photographs occupied more page space, with greater effect, than their numbers might suggest.”¹⁶⁹ In the Gillespie article, this fact revealed itself in that while mention of a school built by the combined unit is made, none of the accompanying eight pictures portray a civic action mission. So, in analyzing the nuances of media depictions of the war, the message, and not the quantity must be evaluated.

Walker Flowers claims that in 1965, *Life* began to stress the importance of the “other war.” She writes, “*Life* stressed the political war, the war to win the hearts of Vietnamese villagers over the communist enemy, both editorially and through photographs.” She analyzes a March 1965 picture of the Marine landing at Da Nang and concludes that the distribution of leis by young Vietnamese women “documented the mixture of flowers and mortar that *Life* claimed would be necessary to win the guerilla war.”¹⁷⁰ However, this picture clearly demonstrates the type of cursory attention given to the hearts and minds mission. As understood by CAP anecdotes, cultural exchanges did not stop with welcome gifts. In sorting through *Life*’s available online images, the fact that *Life* respected American troops and sympathized with the challenges they faced is clear. Like the newspapers however, *Life* simply stopped short, in many cases, of fully examining those challenges and how units like the CAPs overcame those challenges.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

Consequently, the media missed out on opportunities to share humanitarian stories of the troops with the public.

Life was arguably the most popular print media of the time, but an even more accessible forum was visual media. Television made learning about events of the war as easy as turning on a switch in one's living room. Even if positive accounts of the troops were coming back to the home front via the media, and they were, the devastating images, as Walker Flowers argued, were far more impactful than the positive ones. So, even though mention of civic action was made, the stories were drowned out by the war's tragedies. In 1965, the same year the CAPs were beginning their missions, CBS news correspondent Morely Safer filmed and aired a Marine platoon violently leveling a South Vietnamese village, despite taking no incoming fire. In fact the only casualties in the platoon resulted from friendly fire, a fact that could only intensify the public's reaction. Safer, in an oral history, claims the Platoon Commander received an order from higher to burn down the village,¹⁷¹ a fact which emphasizes the lack of agency generally associated with troops. Safer's footage, the pictures of bodies from the My Lai massacre, and the napalm girl photograph, remain embedded in the memories of the war, while the schools and hospitals built, and the friendships cultivated and meals shared continue to go relatively unknown.

In too many cases, the media simply projected an image to the American public that the U.S. foreign policy implemented by the troops was mostly about search-and-

¹⁷¹ "Morley Safer: The Burning of Cam Ne," (*Reporting America at War: An Oral History*, compiled by Michelle Ferrari, 2003) [website on-line]; available from <http://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/safer/camne.html>.

destroy and combat operations. But what the media left out of their stories, whether intentionally or not, was that units like the CAPs made an effort to gain the trust and friendship of the people in their villages; they made an effort to be a part of society. They impacted the Vietnamese people with whom they interacted. A letter from Major Tran-Tien-Dao, the District Chief of Huong Thuy, expresses Vietnamese gratitude for the CAP Marines and helps prove that the military was doing more than just fighting.¹⁷² He writes, "During the time you served at the village, Huong Thuy District...you and all the CAP group together with the Vietnamese Self-Defense [force] have helped to give people a safe [home]; also counseling and training for the Self-Defense of Nguyen-Trai hamlet."¹⁷³ Decades later on his website, West writes, "The communists now rule Binh Nghia; yet the memorial to the Marines who fought there remains, and the villagers remember them by name, all these decades later."¹⁷⁴ The media did not provide complete coverage of the war. Yet some of the Marines did. Unfortunately, their stories, like the August 1967 CAP article in *Life*, were not heard or carried forward by the public. Other images had already been continually and intensely ingrained.

By 1980 the image of service members as dejected combatants, and anything but architects of civic action, was the premier and authentic image. The greatest example of this lingering image was Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, though Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal*

¹⁷² Although "from 1965 through 1968, CAPs succeeded to the point where [I Corps Tactical Zone Popular Forces (PF)] outperformed all other PF in terms of patrol rates, number of enemy killed, kill ratios, and low desertion rates." (Commanding General, *Future of Combined Action* [San Francisco: Headquarters Fleet Marine Force], Rep. no. 5401, Official Marine Corps Memorandum.

¹⁷³ Major Tran T. Dao, "The Army of Republic of Vietnam, Letter to LCpl Baltzell and the group of CAP 3-1-e," (*U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website*, Apr. 1970) [website on-line]; available from <http://www.capmarine.com/cap/graphics/cap31a1.jpg>.

¹⁷⁴ Bing West, "The Village By Bing West," (*Westwrite*) [website on-line]; available from <http://westwrite.com/>.

Jacket is a less publicly recognized one. In fact, “when *Platoon* was first released, it was marketed as ‘the first real Vietnam film’ precisely because of the autobiographical content of the script and its status as the first major Vietnam War film by a veteran. The film was praised for its realism and its ability to give spectators an experience of combat, the jungle, and the life of the American GI in Vietnam...Through Stone’s veteran status and his deployment of codes of cinematic realism, *Platoon* was lauded as a true experience of history.”¹⁷⁵

Unfortunately, these movies contain Vietnam War images that are easily contradicted by the stories of the CAPs, yet not easily forgotten. As previously mentioned, in 1987 in addition to being nominated for and winning a whole slew of other awards, Stone’s film won “Best Picture” and “Best Motion Picture-Drama” at the Academy Awards and the Golden Globes, respectively. Such accolades alone reflect the popularity of the film and therefore the widespread public acceptance of the service member image it projected. However, multiple scholars have also remarked on the popularity and influence of the film. Robert Brent Toplin writes, “Contributors are generally positive regarding Stone’s Vietnam War films. Randy Roberts and David Welky describe the director as the ‘most influential historian of America’s role in Vietnam.’”¹⁷⁶ In “Viet Nam Revisited,” Bert Cardullo is even critical of “all the attention lavished on *Platoon*.”¹⁷⁷ Both films have, in fact, reached almost iconic status. Moreover, Stone’s status as a veteran in addition to various media forums labeling him a

¹⁷⁵Sturken, 68.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Brent Toplin, *Oliver Stone’s USA: Film, History, and Controversy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 122.

¹⁷⁷ Bert Cardullo, “Viet Nam Revisited,” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 40, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987), 458.

“cinematic historian”¹⁷⁸ made his movie and its characters an authentic representation in the eyes of the public. Stone and Kubrick created characters that did drugs, excessively consumed alcohol, ransacked villages, and raped and beat innocent South Vietnamese families, in between combat missions. Stone created a platoon in which the members were strictly divided and could/would kill one another in defense of their personal belief. Kubrick’s main character wore a Kevlar helmet that read “born to kill.” Most of Kubrick’s characters, in fact, joined the Marine Corps to kill, and in one of the film’s most memorable scenes, a gunner shooting Viet Cong from the door of the helicopter apathetically admits that he sometimes killed innocent people too.

Certainly, variations of these platoons and service members existed, but stories from the CAP Marines challenge the notion that all platoons were like those of the movies. When Stone’s main character arrives in Vietnam, he is taken aback at the lack of attention and direction he is given and the divisions that exist within the platoon. To the contrary, in his account of his first day in Vietnam, Larry Scroggs attests to the fact that he was directly taught the ways of the CAPs by his squad leader. Multiple CAP Marines, in fact, have retold stories of the unique camaraderie they shared. Stone’s platoon members were also considered the bottom of the barrel back in their hometowns, where this does not appear to have been the case with the CAP veterans, who spoke and wrote intelligently about their experiences. CAP veterans like Peterson, Cone, Hemingway, and Palm have even been published. And in the most disturbing scene of *Platoon*, the

¹⁷⁸ Sturken, 67.

soldiers arbitrarily burn down a Vietnamese village and one member even shoots an innocent Vietnamese woman, actions starkly opposite of what the CAPs were doing. Events like Safer's documented burning of Cam Ne and My Lai did occur, but when the media portrays these events over and over again, yet only hints at cultural exchanges made by units like the CAPs, the graphic depictions will certainly win out in establishing their place in the collective American memory. As historian Kyle Longely writes, "For many younger readers Vietnam has begun to fade in historical consciousness, as a generation born after 1960 has virtually no real memories of America's longest war; instead movies and distortions through the lens of political partisanship have shaped perspectives."¹⁷⁹ The Marines who served with the CAPs, like all of the Marines, Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen who served in Vietnam or who serve in any war, were human beings with the power to choose. Most did not just kill, despite the destruction that surrounded them. Unfortunately, while pacification efforts that incorporated progress and constructive works must be actively tracked down by the diligent scholar, the public went no further than their doorstep, their living rooms, or the movie theaters to watch and "learn" what the troops had supposedly done at war.

¹⁷⁹ Kyle Longely, *Grunts--The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), xxi.

Conclusion

Certainly the media's coverage of units like the CAPs was cursory and sometimes inaccurate, but politicians and even high-ranking military officers, it seems, sometimes guided and then accepted the media's limited portrayals of the war, a fact that only further fueled the images portrayed by journalists and later by many historians. So American leaders, the media, and many historians were caught in what appears to be a cycle that mutually promoted an incomplete picture of who the troops were and what they were doing in Vietnam, specifically in the "other war." Although expanding the CAP concept may not have been the answer to winning the war, and although testimony as to the success/effectiveness of the program varies with respect to the region and time period of a particular CAP, as well as the source of the testimony, certain aspects of the program may have been worth further investigating. In general, a leader who understands or is simply aware of all of his strengths, weaknesses, assets, and shortcomings is better prepared to lead and in this case fight.

In Vietnam, the supreme commander of the U.S. military in Vietnam and arguably the period's most influential military leader, General Westmoreland, was steadfastly against the CAP concept for reasons that were sometimes unfounded. Certainly he had his own view on the military strategies needed to emerge victorious. In "Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement," author Major Brooks

R. Brewington asserts, “The Army and the Marines had differing views on what it would take to win the war. Westmoreland's major goals included attrition through search and destroy operations thus denying the NVA and VC territory regardless of population densities.”¹⁸⁰ However, Westmoreland’s strategic flaw was not that he refused to give the CAP program the manpower or funding it required to be expanded throughout Vietnam, nor was it the fact that this led to the ultimate dissolution of the CAPs. His flaw was that he did not fully evaluate his options. This flaw becomes evident as the General is frequently attached to this highly disputable quote: “[I] simply did not have enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet. That would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail.”¹⁸¹ Evidence directly contradictory to Westmoreland’s claim is found in *The Army in Vietnam*, in which historian Andrew Krepinevich calculates that even if a CAP-style unit was placed in every village and hamlet, “a 1967 DOD report found that it could be met by utilizing 167,000 U.S. troops, far fewer than the 550,000 eventually assigned to South Vietnam. Within the 550,000 ceiling there could have been a CAP force together with several Army divisions to counter any moves by major Communist forces, and casualties would have been minimized and population security enhanced.”¹⁸² Such a discrepancy was at least worth investigating further. And inconsistencies in reports of the effectiveness of the CAPs did not end there.

¹⁸⁰ Brewington, 10.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Krepinevich, 6.

Unfortunately and in many cases, the higher one goes up the chain of command, the more convoluted reports may become, and the more distanced from the troops the officers are. This prevents leaders from understanding nuances of their troops (i.e. morale, skill sets, etc.) that are directly related to how they perform in battle. In Vietnam, it prevented leaders from seeing the effectiveness of civic action both separate from and in conjunction with combat missions. According to historian John A. Nagl in his book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife—Counterinsurgency Lesson from Malaya and Vietnam*, despite numerous official and unofficial reports to the contrary, in 1965 General Westmoreland wrote, “the Marines have become so infatuated with securing real estate and in civic action that their forces have become dispersed and they have been hesitant to conduct offensive operations except along the coastline where amphibious maneuvers could be used with Naval gunfire support which is available.”¹⁸³ His use of the word “infatuated” does an injustice to the lives the Marines were living in the villages. Brewington writes, “The average CAP Marine had a 75 percent chance of being wounded once during his year-long tour and a 12 percent chance of dying.”¹⁸⁴

As for their combat effectiveness, Brewington records that “in 1968, PF platoons that had been combined with Marines, although making up only 14 percent of the PF's in I Corps, accounted for 55 percent of the enemy killed in action. The kill ratio for these CAPs was eight VC to one Marine/PF; regular PF units achieved a ratio of less than

¹⁸³ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife—Counterinsurgency Lesson from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 157.

¹⁸⁴ Brewington, 20.

3:1.”¹⁸⁵ Nagl also uses Westmoreland’s famous quote to further argue that the Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam was a powerful adversary of the CAP concept despite his lack of knowledge about the subject. While the earlier version of the disputed quote was from an interview with Colonel Corson, Nagl tracked down a similar extract from Westmoreland’s own book *A Soldier Reports*. In it, the senior Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam claims, “Although I disseminated information on the platoons and their successes to other commands, which were free to adopt them as local conditions might dictate, I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every hamlet; that would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail.”¹⁸⁶ Perhaps Westmoreland’s ignorance could be blamed on inaccurate briefings and or the fact that he had not the time to divert his attention to all of the various pacification efforts.

Regardless, he was not the only ignorant prominent official. In his book, Nagl also includes stories of those who witnessed and recorded the stubborn and unprofessional ways of some high-ranking officers and politicians. In one example international officer Brigadier General Kenneth Hunt,¹⁸⁷ who studied and was impressed with the CAP concept, went to relay his feelings about the program to MACV. According to the General, “They said that I had been fixed by the Marines, had been brain-washed! They did not agree and said that in any case it would be too expensive.”¹⁸⁸ Again, what is both evident and in fact the true failure in these anecdotes of

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁸⁶ Nagl, 157.

¹⁸⁷ General Hunt was a member of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS).

¹⁸⁸ Nagl, 157-158.

miscommunication is not the fact that the CAP concept was not expanded. Rather the failure was that the truth was distorted and sometimes never even heard. The innovative programs implemented and successful civic action missions completed by the CAPs never made it to the higher ranks for legitimate consideration.

Sadly, the Marines were telling their stories and showing this different side of the military, and in fact they have been since the days they lived in the villages. Despite countless articles in the Marine Corps' regular magazines, *Leatherneck* and *The Marine Corps Gazette*, as well as other Marine publications and stories from the veterans themselves, the military, the media, and hence the public remain(ed) aloof to the actions of the CAPs, specifically the humanitarian/civic actions. In the *Sea Tiger*, the III Marine Amphibious Force newspaper produced in Vietnam by and for the troops, spotlights were regularly done on troops serving overseas. In "Sea Tiger Spotlight on Combined Action Companies," Public Affairs reporter Gunnery Sergeant Jack Butts writes, "[The CAP Marines] have worked with blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, and fisherman. Ideas—and work—have been shared by Marines who were farmers in civilian life, with their Vietnamese counterparts. Knowledge has been gained by both."¹⁸⁹ Another *Sea Tiger* article described the "adoption" of a Vietnamese orphan by a CAP Marine. Having met in a hospital where both were being treated by U.S. military doctors, the boy and the Marine became quick friends. Throughout his deployment, the Marine mentored the ten-year-old and supported him when financial crises arose. As discussed previously, West

¹⁸⁹ Gunnery Sergeant Jack Butts, "Sea Tiger Spotlight on Combined Action Companies," *Sea Tiger*, (*U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website*) [website on-line]; available from <http://capmarine.com/cap/Shylo-Alpha-CAPs/alpha-shylo-seatiger.html>.

writes of a similar “adoption” in *The Village*. West, in fact, has written several works on the subject of Combined Action Platoons, including multiple articles in the *Marine Corps Gazette*.

Still to this day, even the Marine Corps is falling short on teaching about the benefits of military civic action and units like the CAPs. In fact, the Marine Corps officer training program, “The Basic School,” only recently started briefly teaching the Combined Action Program concept. As of 2005, the rigorous six-month school which all Marine Corps officers must complete before going on to their specialty school and then the operational forces, did not really emphasize cultural sensitivity either. Neither does the Expeditionary Warfare School, the next level of operational training for officers who attain the rank of Captain. Such disregard, just within the Marine Corps, for some of the innovative methods implemented by units like the CAPs also fails to overturn the image of the unsophisticated service member, and highlights the lack of progress made on the subject.

In 1970, General Lew Walt published his book, *Strange War, Strange Strategy—A General’s Report on Vietnam*, and in it he included an important statement on war. He writes, “[During the war] the burden was, and remains, on the young men, both enlisted and commissioned.”¹⁹⁰ In Vietnam, the CAP Marines “had ‘Wanted Dead or Alive’ prices of 10,000 piasters placed on them by the Viet Cong; they endure sniping, booby traps, mines, and ambush.”¹⁹¹ In the introduction to Walt’s book President Johnson, referring to Walt’s story of the CAPs, writes, “[This book] describes many events and

¹⁹⁰ Walt., 23.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 109.

programs that never got into our newspapers. They were not dramatic or destructive. It shows young Americans in the midst of war's horrors yet keeping their humanity, their loyalty to each other and to their country, and most important, their compassion for the men, women, and children around them."¹⁹² Both Walt and Johnson expressed just a portion of what can be learned by studying units like the CAPs further. In simple terms, the first lesson they expressed was that the burdens, both during and after, of war fall mainly on the service members who live it. Secondly and despite these overwhelming burdens of war, many service members, contrary to popular images, conducted themselves in ways that were not only beneficial to the political mission, but also with honor and integrity. In many cases, they have taken the fall for the minority who did not.

No one wants to die in vain; least of all, those who die under circumstances that are morally and unrelentingly questioned--like a war that is detested by so many. The CAP Marines wanted and still want to know that their sacrifices and the sacrifices of their comrades who were killed in or as a result of combat, were not in vain. They want their stories told because it is part of the healing process. When asked if he was ready to leave Vietnam after his second year long deployment, John Cooney responded that he was. He explained, "I had lost some troops while on R&R in June of '66 in an ambush and really never got back into the groove. I felt guilty for their loss and could never get around it. To this day I suffer from PTSD,¹⁹³ survivors' guilt syndrome. I have learned to cope with it but it will never go away."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Ibid., x-xi.

¹⁹³ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

¹⁹⁴ Cooney interview.

However, the CAP Marines also want their stories told so that the image of the service member is different—more human--and so that lessons in humanity and cultural understanding can be learned. Veterans want to pass on what they learned by living with and showing compassion to these people of another culture and way of life. As Cone puts it, they want to feel “relevant.” In an email from Cone, he explains:

When we came home from VN we felt like we didn't matter and what we did didn't matter. When someone validates us and our program we are all kind of shocked that [people] know and care. Last November, you may remember we were [in Washington DC] for a reunion and the [Marine Corps] Birthday. On Veterans Day It was cold and rainy and no one wanted to go to the Memorials so I went by myself and was just walking around sight seeing. I had stopped at the WWII Memorial and two younger guys asked me about my service,(I was wearing a Marine jacket) No, I wasn't in WWII, thanks a lot. I told them that I was in a little known unit called the Combined Action Group. One of the guys was very surprised and began telling his friend all about us. Needless to say, I was shocked. "You heard of us?" "Hell yeah," he said. "I just came back from Iraq working for the State Department. We were studying about you guys and how your program was one of the most successful of the war." Wow. I couldn't believe it. I want to thank you for making us all feel more relevant.¹⁹⁵

Reports of the war and military history should not simply be stories of who won and who lost the war. They should be intimate stories of people who consciously made choices---both strategic and otherwise—to help or hurt others, suffered the consequences, and celebrated the triumphs. They can also be lessons of the same. Historians, the media, and leaders simply failed to look deeply enough into the human side of war, and so not only further perpetuated a generalized and limited image of the American service member, but also maintained the idea that individual service members had nothing to offer. Many of the stories of the Vietnam War wrongfully portray the people who fought

¹⁹⁵ Cone interview.

the war exclusively as simple combatants who knew neither self-respect nor compassion for others. These stories enabled a massive void to exist in the 1980s American collective memory of the Vietnam service member, a void which still remains, to a lesser degree, even today. That void is not only the knowledge that the military service member can perform humanitarian missions during war, but also that these missions, as demonstrated by stories of the CAPs, can be successful in forever changing the lives of countless people.

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