

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.



Does history repeat itself or do we repeat history?
The CAP program, relic of the past or tool of the future?

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature:

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16 June 1995

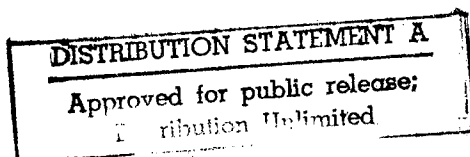
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13 Feb 95
Date

19950417 097



THIS QUALITY ENHANCED

1. Report Security Classification: Unclassified			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: Joint Military Operations Department			
6. Office Symbol: 1C		7. Address: Naval War College, 686 Cushing Rd., Newport, RI 02841-5010	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Does history repeat itself or do we repeat history? The CAP program, relic of the past or tool of the future? (U)			
9. Personal Authors: Raymond C. Damm, Jr. Major, United States Marine Corps			
10. Type of Report: Final		11. Date of Report: 13 Feb 95	
12. Page Count: 22			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Pacification, Operational Commander, End State, Insurgency, Ethnic Nationalism, Civil Action, Strategy, History, Operations Other Than War, Vietnam			
15. Abstract: This report reviews a number of elements of the Combined Action Platoons as implemented by the United States Marine Corps in Vietnam. Many consider this program one of the few successful operations of the Vietnam conflict. Lessons are learned from the history of the program as applied to Vietnam and in contrasting the strategy of clear and hold (the foundation of the CAP) and that of search and destroy (the strategy generally employed throughout the conflict). The applicability of the CAP concept in future Operations Other Than War is explored and a case is made to maintain the concept and its elements as a tool for the Operational Commander. Much of the text is relegated to the telling of the story of the program, for it is in the re-telling where many lessons are learned.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified	Same As Rpt XXXXX	DTIC Users
18. Abstract Security Classification: Unclassified			
19. Name of Responsible Individual: Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department			
20. Telephone: (401) 841-3414/4120		21. Office Symbol: 1C	

The Doctrine for Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0) identifies two categories of the United States "Range of Military Operations;" War and Operations Other Than War (OOTW). The latter category is defined as having a "focus on deferring war and promoting peace."¹ An older definition, from the Marine Corps Small Wars Manual, further defines small wars (OOTW) as a spectrum ranging from "demonstrative operations to military intervention in the fullest sense, short of war."² These overlapping categories form the basis of planning for future conflicts short of war. In Operations Other Than War, as in War, the Operational Commander must define goals and then choose the best method available to accomplish the assigned mission. As the title of this paper implies, revisiting historical cases and applying pertinent principles to future operations can aid in mission accomplishment. The historic case applied in this paper is Vietnam; the aid to mission accomplishment is the Combined Action Platoon (CAP).

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Unannounced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Justification _____	
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A-1	

¹ Joint Pub 3-0, p. I-3.

² Small Wars Manual, p. 5.

THESIS

The Combined Action Program implemented in Vietnam by the United States Marine Corps was one of the "most successful efforts of the war."³ Operational Commanders can use elements of the CAP concept as a tool to combat insurgency in future Operations Other Than War.

BACKGROUND

The major underlying problem of the Vietnam conflict was the lack of a defined strategy. The National Command Authority made the decision to assist the Government of Vietnam (GVN), but to paraphrase Clausewitz, the last step was never considered by the United States. The method which General Westmoreland used to implement the goal of helping the GVN was based on a strategy of search and destroy. The search for and destruction of Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) local and hard core (Main Force) guerrillas, and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regulars was the way through which General Westmoreland would achieve the means (support of the GVN). Unfortunately this concept did not account for all the components of the insurgency. Search and destroy neglected the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in the villages. The VCI was the heart and soul of the enemy forces in South Vietnam. This infrastructure provided for the supply and reconstitution of VC local and hard core troops from the

³ Klyman, p. 50.

villages. Without the VCI, the political and psychological foundation of enemy operations, the VC would have lost their influence over the villagers.

The Small Wars Manual establishes that in a small war "no defined battle front exists. Uncertainty of the situation may require the establishment of detached posts within a small area."⁴ The first portion of this statement applies to the Vietnam conflict. It was the second half of the statement on which the Marines focused. The idea of detached outposts was combined with other concepts from the Small Wars Manual to define the Corps' view of the mission in Vietnam, clear and hold. This was based on the perception that if the GVN was to succeed it must "regain the allegiance of a population alienated by the [government's] failure to address basic grievances."⁵ The most basic grievance was the security of the hamlet twenty-four hours a day. The concept of clear and hold ran counter to that of the search and destroy and never received the priority it deserved. The following statement effectively sums up the differences in execution of the conflicting strategies; the "CAP Marines waged war in the hamlets; the main force Army/Marine units waged war on the hamlets."⁶

The main goal of clear and hold was pacification. For the purposes of this paper, pacification is defined as the

⁴ Small Wars Manual, p. 14.

⁵ NWC 2228, p. 8.

⁶ Peterson, p. 35.

acceptance of the people of the Government and their cooperation with Government forces. The following quotations provide the requirements leading to pacification:

Successful pacification must be cautious, comprehensive, and coordinated. If troop support is not given over a long enough time, and without interruption, all the economic, social, and political efforts [will be] wasted.⁷

The indispensable first stage of pacification is providing continuous local security.⁸

Only 24 hour security would have won the support of the people. If the government could have won their hearts; their minds, and their assistance would have been denied to the Viet Cong.

According to Joint PUB 3-07 an insurgency "must form a support base through coercion or by voluntary sympathetic agreement with the cause."⁹ In removing the factor of coercion from the lives of the villagers, the VCI and VC would lose their ability to exert influence over them. General Giap stated "without the people we have no information . . . they hide us, feed us, and tend to our wounded."¹⁰ If support, manpower, and safe havens were denied to the VC, they would have ceased to exist.

A road block to the pacification process was the strategy of search and destroy. In 1965, General Westmoreland, Commander

⁷ Tanham, p. 119.

⁸ Trainor, p. 72.

⁹ Joint Pub 3-0, p. II-2.

¹⁰ Hemingway, p. 17.

of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) related the three choices the villagers had during the implementation of search and destroy in a press conference:

- (1) Stay close to his land (risk living in a free fire zone).
- (2) Join VC (become a target in a free fire zone).
- (3) Move to an area under GVN control (become a refugee).¹¹

On that day "we declared war on the peasant, and that is the day we lost the war."¹²

The United States forces should have attempted to keep the hamlet intact. The village elders administered the government at the hamlet level. For many rural Vietnamese, "the village was the only government they knew."¹³ The catch phrase used during the conflict was winning of the hearts and minds of the people. It was the "people, not the materials, [that held] the key to success in Vietnam."¹⁴

Earlier attempts to enhance security in the villages had failed dismally. The first of these attempts implemented by President Diem (GVN) was the Strategic Hamlet Program. There were two specific reasons for the failure of this program. The first was the forced removal of peasants from their ancestral lands and family graves. The second was the rapidity of the Strategic Hamlet Programs implementation in an attempt to prove

¹¹ Peterson, p. 19.

¹² Ibid, p. 19.

¹³ Tanham, p. 98.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 130.

to the Americans the viability of the program. Proof was required for continued flow of United States dollars and support.

After Diem was assassinated the program became the New Life Hamlet Program. The major difference from the previous program was that the villagers remained in their ancestral villages with a trained cadre of Popular Forces (PFs) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Forces (ARVN) as their protection. Since the PFs were neither sufficiently armed nor adequately trained, and the ARVN forces were in constant movement, the people were deprived of local security. The only way to increase security would be to clear and hold. Clear the vicinity of VC, and hold the area so the VCI could not rebuild a viable support apparatus.

Versions of the CAP concept were first used successfully by Marines in the Banana Wars (Haiti 1915-1934, Nicaragua 1926-1933, and Santo Domingo 1916-1923). The lessons learned during these wars provided the foundation of the publication the Small Wars Manual. The actual reason the CAPs came into existence was to give round the clock security to the air base at Chu Lai. Possible applications for pacification became apparent and the program was expanded to cover the Da Nang area. This area was the most densely populated area in South Vietnam at two-thousand persons per square mile. In this zone, search and destroy was difficult and costly in terms of peasant lives due to an enemy

who used the people to conceal and shield him.¹⁵

Although the initial program was sanctioned by General Walt,¹⁶ it was opposed by proponents of search and destroy. This difference in opinion kept the CAP program from receiving the official recognition of a Table of Organization (manpower allotment) until 1969. The idea was to take a rifle squad (14 Marines) and a corpsman and combine them with a PF company (30-35 Vietnamese minutemen) to operate in a specific village. This combined force would provide security because "without security, social, economic and political measures [could not] be taken except in a very limited and sporadic matter."¹⁷

The Marines brought many things to the combined unit. They were considered experts on small unit tactics. They also brought firepower and access to fire support that the PFs had never had before. The Marines were tasked to train the PFs so they could eventually regain control of their hamlet.

The PF contribution to the CAP complimented the capabilities of the Marines in many ways. They brought knowledge of the area and the people to the combined unit. They lived and worked with the populace and could identify infiltrators. His motivation was the protection of his home. He was initially poorly trained and poorly armed; the Vietnamese forgotten soldier.

¹⁵ USMC 1969, p. 346.

¹⁶ Commanding General, Third Marine Amphibious Force.

¹⁷ Tanham, p. 31.

In concept the strengths of the Marines would combine with the strengths of the PFs to form a well-rounded security force. As the PFs became better trained, their motivation level would increase. The enhanced security the unit brought would allow civic action programs to create an environment that nurtured support for the Government of Vietnam.

On 1 August 1965, the first Combined Action Company (CAC)¹⁸ became operational with the stated goal to "pacify rural Vietnam by creating an atmosphere of security." The objectives were to:

- (1) Provide village security.
- (2) Consolidate intelligence at the village level.
- (3) Improve the standard of living of the villagers.
- (4) Strengthen local institutions.
- (5) Promote support for the national government and its programs.
- (6) "Work ourselves out of a job."¹⁹

Note that the final objective infers making the unit unnecessary. The goal was to clear the VCI from the Hamlet and allow the PFs alone to satisfy the security requirement for the villages.

The definition of the concept was loose enough to allow it the flexibility to accommodate different situations. For example, the CAP had two separate chains of command but gave the Marines virtual operational control (OPCON) of the PF companies. This parallel but separate Chain of Command caused a number of

¹⁸ CAC was changed to CAP with the realization CAC had a derogatory meaning in the Vietnamese language.

¹⁹ Alnutt, p. 20.

problems due to a lack of similarity between the PF and Marine Corps command structure. Some of the difficulties were overcome by giving the PF platoon leader equal status to the Marine squad leader.²⁰

There were some uncomfortable military risks to these small unit outposts. The CAPs were **not** meant to withstand NVA regular forces or large Main Force units and would not last long if assaulted by either. It was a risk General Walt was willing to accept. Another psychological aspect dealt with the fact that the VC could triumph only if the threat of attack or an actual attack cowed the small unit into leaving.²¹ If this occurred, the villagers would realize that the CAP was not a dependable security force. The result would be a greater loss of faith in the government.

Initially, Marines were selected for CAP duty only from volunteers. The selection process used a psychological profile to choose Marines untainted by a hatred of the Vietnamese people. A two week school provided rudimentary language classes, weapons training, and cultural lessons to selectees before entry into the field. These lessons were very important since a cultural slight could have tremendous operational significance. For instance, an apparently insignificant insult could lead to

²⁰ The senior Marine, in theory, was to be a Sergeant, but in practice could be a Corporal or Lance Corporal. The decentralized command structure delegated responsibility down to the CAP leader, no matter how junior.

²¹ West, p. 256.

intelligence being passed to the VC concerning unit patrol routes. The language training was never sufficient. Numerous problems came about due to communication difficulties between the PFs, the people, and the Marines; an ever present deficiency of the program.

Some early lessons from the CAP were to remain with many of the units throughout their existence. One was the use of fire support, considered by many as our greatest asset in Vietnam. In one instance a call for artillery support resulted in the destruction of a home and the death of a villager by an errant round. After that incident, "the rifle - not the cannon or jet - was to be the primary weapon of the Americans."²²

A positive lesson learned was to co-locate CAPs within the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of larger units. The smaller units could add to their security by using the larger units as a reaction force and incorporating their listening posts and command posts into the CAP perimeter. The larger units could gain from the intelligence the CAPs were able to gather.

There were some problems with the functioning of the CAPs because of their ad hoc nature. Commanding Officers would volunteer substandard men because they did not want to give up their best Marines. Another factor affecting CAPs was that since it was not a sanctioned program, the giving battalion would end up short the number of men it gave up -- never to be replaced. Both of these manpower issues kept some qualified men

²² West, p. 36.

out of the program.

General Westmoreland was against the program from the beginning. He felt the CAPs would be easily overrun. He also believed the cost in manpower and materiel precluded putting a CAP in every hamlet. If the program had expanded, the VC would not have had the personnel to assault all the CAPs in large unit operations. The second issue was not valid because complete coverage was never an intention of the CAP program. The methodology was the oil spot approach used by the British in the Malayan crisis. The area of security would expand from the original oil spot to eventually overlap another area. The Marines felt "there would always [be] a need for conventional forces to buck heads with the NVA and break them down into manageable size elements . . . that a CAP could handle."²³ The CAP was designed to engage small guerrilla forces, not NVA regiments.

Another argument against the CAPs was that in the first three-and-one-half years of the program only about 28 CAPs worked their way out of a job. In comparison the British took twelve years to pacify Malaya on a national level. In the Banana Wars, the shortest duration of any of the counter-insurgency efforts for the United States was seven years. This type of operation requires a commitment of time to allow it to bear fruit.

The best measurement of success of the program was before

²³ Klyman, p. 71.

and during the TET Offensive. Intelligence from the CAPs pointed to something big, but their warnings were ignored. It is postulated this occurred because of the lack of an officer in the unit and a feeling the young Marines tended to exaggerate. Though the intelligence was disregarded, the defense of the city of Da Nang was successful due to the efforts of the CAPs in the area.

Before TET, the concentration of enemy resources against the CAPs validated the discomfort of the VC concerning this project. General Giap conceded he had to build up his Main Force units to disrupt the Marines' pacification campaign.²⁴

The tragedy of the CAP program was that it reached its culmination of implementation as America began to exit Vietnam. In 1970, the CAPs achieved their starting point of one hundred and fourteen units just in time to begin shutting them down for troop retrograde back to the United States. The apex of the program was achieved after the American resolve had plummeted to its nadir.

The Marines, as well as American and Vietnamese civilians involved in the CAP Program, have given testimony to the validity of the concept. As villagers became secure they reclaimed formerly contested lands and, more importantly, cooperated with the Marines and government forces in passing intelligence on VC activities. The responsibility the CAPs felt for the people they protected and the motivation they instilled

²⁴ Peterson, p. 31.

in the PFs was the keystone on which pacification balanced.

Some numbers may better verify success:

- (1) Less than one percent of American forces in Vietnam were involved in the program;
- (2) In a main force unit one out of 400 patrols made contact;
- (3) In a CAP one out of two patrols made contact.²⁵

The CAPs achieved results well out of proportion to the number of personnel employed. The most important statistic was that no CAP-cleared area ever returned to control of the Viet Cong.

APPLICABILITY

Many proponents of the CAP program argue that it is not applicable in any situation except the Vietnam conflict. This argument against using any elements of the program in future OOTW neglects the origins of the CAP program. Elements were taken from the Banana Wars and the Malayan Crisis and applied specifically to Vietnam. Cultural similarities and differences were factors in choosing the correct way to implement the program.

The Strategic Hamlet Program was an example of a program that worked in another scenario but was not applicable in Vietnam. In Malaya, mobile guerrilla support structures of Chinese Nationals were moved into fortified safe havens. This action cut off support to the irregulars and forced them to capitulate. The idea of centralized safe villages was indiscriminately applied in Vietnam through the Strategic Hamlet

²⁵ West, p. ix.

Program where peasants had been tied to their land for generations. Moving them denied them their ancestry and was a cultural affront. Past success of a method in one situation does not mean it can be utilized without modification in another.

Where the program has applicability is in an area where a fledgling or weak government is in conflict with an internal enemy. An often repeated theme in this paper is that of security. Security provided by the recognized government would reduce the coercion of the populace by an internal subversive group. The United States units would participate in enhancing security through presence and training, but the government forces would eventually take over the operation. American forces would eventually work themselves out of a job.

Another factor that must be used to define the applicability of the CAP program in a different scenario is whether the threat is internal or external. An internal threat with active external support (i.e. Korea supported by China in the Korean War) would require large unit operations for the clear portion of clear and hold. This was a post-TET transition undertaken by the CAPs that was diluted by the draw down of United States forces.

Repressive measures cannot be used in the application of security or the hearts and minds of the people will revert to enemy control. Compassion for the plight of the populace is very important. If you can address their grievances, you will have taken the first step towards pacification.

Where CAPs would fail is in a conflict defined by ethnic nationalism. A CAP style program would not afford the protection required to diffuse an ethnic cleansing scenario. Implementation under the wrong circumstances will only result in failure.

CONCLUSIONS

The CAP program may not have won the war in Vietnam but with wider implementation it could have changed the tenor of U.S. involvement and strengthened the government we were trying to defend. It is not Vietnam specific and could be applied in many Operations Other Than War to assist countries in turmoil under the auspices of Foreign Internal Defense (FID). Possibilities for implementation of the CAP program exist in South America, especially in Peru and the case of the Sendero Luminoso. This particular case pits an irregular force, which relies on coercion of the populace for support, against weak government forces; a familiar scenario!

In Operations Other Than War, two quotations epitomize factors that the operational commander must remember:

American forces may well be involved in other relatively undeveloped areas. [The CAPs], with their critical tasks of winning the support of the people [give us] credible examples of right and wrong. Without [the people's] support, as Vietnam taught us, victory is out of reach.²⁶

And from the Small Wars Manual (1940) concerning the Banana Wars:

²⁶ Hemingway, p. xi.

With all the practical advantages we (U.S.) enjoyed in those wars, that experience must not lead us to underestimate the modern irregular, supplied with modern arms and equipment. Natural advantages . . . will weigh heavily in the balance if careless audacity is permitted to warp good judgement.²⁷

The first quote relates to future conflicts other than war. Though it concerns the Vietnam conflict, the protection of the people is the key to success. Since the U.S. did not achieve the support of the people, victory was out of reach.

The second quote is hauntingly appropriate as applied to Vietnam and any conflict short of war. "Careless audacity" was definitely a factor in supposing the awesome fire power and might of the American military machine was unstoppable. This sense of invincibility warped good judgement and allowed the Viet Cong modern irregular to win by allowing him to wage war on his terms.

The operational commander must realize every situation is different. Any view of the mission must include an idea of the desired end state. A methodology must be crafted to execute a sequence of events to achieve conditions that allow the accomplishment of the assigned National Strategic Objective. This objective must first be defined and then deemed achievable. If the strategic goal in Vietnam was to strengthen the government of South Vietnam then search and destroy, as implemented by main force Marine and Army units, would not bring about the conditions necessary to achieve that goal.

²⁷ Small Wars Manual, p. 8.

Pacification of the people, most notably, assuring their security without repression, would have fomented conditions to strengthen the South.

The application of a form of the CAP program in future Operations Other Than War is an option. If we disregard history and the tools of the past we destine ourselves to repeat past errors. Regarding the case of the Vietnam conflict, repetition of the end state is not an option!

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