



# CETO QUICK LOOK:

## Personal Experiences with the Combined Action Program in Vietnam

March 17, 2004

**Introduction.** The Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) conducted a professional military education discussion on March 5, 2004 concerning the Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The guest speaker was Mr. Ed Matricardi, currently an attorney in Northern Virginia, who was a U.S. Marine corporal and served as a CAP squad leader in Vietnam during 1967. Mr. Al Paddock, Ph.D., an historian and retired U.S. Army Special Forces colonel who served three tours in Vietnam also participated in the session, as did the CETO staff.

For over two hours, Mr. Matricardi led a riveting, frank discussion that covered much of his experiences and the lessons he learned during the eight months he served in the CAP. Although much of what was discussed was peculiar to Mr. Matricardi's personal experiences in Vietnam, some of it certainly will have direct application to current and future operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, and elsewhere.

Highlights of the Combined Action Program addressed in this paper are provided for general information purposes and are based on both the written notes and oral comments by Mr. Matricardi.

One consideration that should be taken into account when reading this report is that for the most part it is based on Mr. Matricardi's personal experiences,

perspectives, and recollection of events that occurred while he served as part of the Combined Action Program in Vietnam. Others who served in the same program, whether or not at the same time or location, most likely will have had different experiences and perspectives and have different recollections today.

Any comments, questions, or recommendations concerning this paper are welcome and should be submitted to CETO.<sup>2</sup>

**History of CAP.** In Vietnam, the Marine Corps instituted the CAP as a tactic for defense in-depth. Platoons and squads were assigned to villages and hamlets where Marines and local militia forces were involved in counterinsurgency and pacification efforts. The CAP was established in 1965 and ended in 1971. At its height, it had 114 units, each consisting of approximately 14 Marines, one Navy corpsman and 20 Popular Force (PF) militia members. Its two-fold purpose was to establish an armed, aggressive military presence to provide physical security in villages, many of which were in densely populated areas around the U.S. bases, and win the trust and cooperation of the people through civic action projects.

**Types of CAPs.** There were two types of CAPs in Vietnam, stationary and roving. Stationary CAPs were permanently assigned to a specific village. Roving CAPs rotated every night into a different hamlet or

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<sup>1</sup> CETO is a think tank dedicated to developing new ideas for the U.S. Marine Corps. CETO operates as a division of the Expeditionary Force Development Center, Marine Corps Combat Development Command.

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remained in a rice paddy, always staying on the move.

### ***Stationary CAPs***

Each stationary CAP established a permanent location for its command post. It patrolled and performed all of its missions from a central, unmoving location. Because of their fixed nature, the command post and patrols attached to stationary CAP sites were more vulnerable to planned, coordinated attacks by various means.

Location of a stationary CAP site was dependant on the level of local support, needs, and makeup of the area. To be successful, the CAP teams needed to be widely dispersed and intertwined among local inhabitants and structures. Fire teams were spread widely throughout villages and hamlets.

Defensive wire and munitions encompassed the entire hamlet, not only the U.S. Marines. Segregation of CAP Marines in a separate compound or location, away from locals, was avoided as it made the Marines an easy target for mortars and rockets. CAP Marines occupied local dwellings and buildings, paying rent, rather than constructing their own living quarters.

Based on the surrounding area and local populace, stationary CAPs presented an easier target to the enemy than roving CAPs. This liability was offset by the unit's ability to fortify and establish permanent defensive perimeters and check-points more substantial than those established by roving CAPs. Stationary CAPs were also better able to build relationships that provided them with intelligence on enemy actions and intentions.

Because of the permanent location of stationary CAPs and the continuous day-to-day interaction Marines had with the locals, personal friendships developed between them. The nature of the stationary CAP enhanced the ability of Marines to assimilate with the local community and individuals, to create dual missions, and to share responsibility to complete the needed tasks and missions.

In stationary caps, big bunkers were built for CAP personnel protection. However, they were not used because the Marines saw them as lighting rods, highly visible symbols that frequently were the target of enemy attacks. When their villages or hamlets were attacked, CAP Marines used slit trenches as fighting positions in lieu of big bunkers.

In Mr. Matricardi's village there usually were 12 people assigned to a CAP squad, with two squads in the CAP unit.

Vietnamese Popular Forces (PFs) were the CAP Marines' counterparts. The PFs were villagers who acted as a militia to protect their homes and families. They were equipped with World War II vintage weapons. Marines often exchanged their weapons with them and dressed like them, taking off their U.S. uniforms, helmets, sunglasses, etc. in order to be less obtrusive

### ***Roving CAPs***

Roving CAPs rotated every night into a different hamlet or remained in a rice paddy. Constant relocation reduced the probability of attack and infiltration, provided a broader physical area of influence on the people and enhanced intelligence gathering.

Roving CAPs were best suited for deployment in urban areas with high

population densities as well as in less densely populated rural areas that posed problems.

Roving CAP teams were not as capable of establishing the same level of rapport and closeness with the local population as were stationary CAPs. However, teaming-up with Vietnamese Popular Forces allowed roving CAPs to afford protection to outlying areas with much greater effect than stationary CAPs.

Daytime reconnaissance patrols would generally establish a new command post each day or would remain in the field as a nighttime ambush. Nighttime defensive measures were installed and removed as needed.

Daytime checkpoints and patrols were planned to be random and without pattern so as to reduce the possibility of enemy anticipation of the CAP's location.  
***CAP Reaction Squads***

CAP reaction squads would leave the village or hamlet to help the squad that had been ambushed. They would conduct reconnaissance by fire as they rushed to the ambush site. By the time they arrived, the ambush usually was over, and they helped carry bodies and wounded back to the camp.

### ***Mutual / Dual Missions***

Coordination between local military, police, and civil authorities was essential. Additionally, every effort was made to identify needs of the people prior to insertion; this impacted missions, team composition, and logistical support.

Fire teams were selected by matching the specialties of the men with the initial objectives to be accomplished, as

identified by pre-insertion intelligence. Consideration was also made to include people in a CAP squad with a variety of skills such as carpentry, plumbing, electrical, etc. However, the primary need was that each member have the killer instinct.

CAPs learned how to communicate with the villagers as part of their shared learning experience. Linguists were not needed or used.

The Marine CAP force continuously gathered and refined intelligence and identified additional needs and objectives to be met. When a clear picture was achieved, a civic action team was assigned and brought in to fulfill the specific programs or objectives identified under the security umbrella afforded by the Marines and their PF counterparts. An understanding of the needs of the people was continually refined as intelligence was gathered on the ground after insertion.

Civic action teams were mobile for easy deployment and reassignment, oftentimes conducting multiple assignments in different locations at the same time.

Marine fire teams likewise were readily reassigned as needed. It was critically important that once a close relationship with a local group was established, it be maintained for as long as possible.

All day-to-day missions and activities, such as combat patrols, defensive perimeter watch, civic action programs, medical treatment, educational programs, and the like, were planned with the advice and consent of the local authorities and conducted in a joint operational capacity.

Patrols, ambushes, and reconnaissance were conducted on a joint basis with local forces, with Marines on point, radio, and drag. Standing watch normally was a dual responsibility, with Marines in vital roles. There was no way to be sure of the loyalty or the courage of the PFs.

### ***Operational Control and Personnel Issues***

CAP teams needed to have a high degree of autonomy. They especially did not need officials from higher headquarters to visit them periodically and assign unrealistic missions and requirements.

Additionally, an autonomous-appearing organization allowed the operational control of operations and the administration of civil needs to be presented as a local endeavor rather than American manipulation.

CAPs were not treated like regular line units in terms of uniform, appearance, or adherence to standard operating procedures. In the area of logistics, however, despite their low consumption rates and limited need for support they needed to have their logistics requirements given priority in order for them to be effective. This often did not happen and led to innovation in supply procurement methods on the part of CAP members and cooperating Special Forces and supply personnel.

CAP members went through three psychological stages during their time in the village. It would have been advantageous to both the individuals and the program if they had received training prior to assignment that would allow them to anticipate and understand the changes they and their team would go through.

- After they first arrived, CAP members were afraid they might be killed because they did not know what was going on, what rules to follow, or which tactics, techniques, and procedures to implement.

- After they had been there for a while, CAP members were not as concerned with danger. They felt they had a job to do and just wanted to accomplish it.

- Short-timer shakes affected everyone. Keeping short-time calendars was bad because it reinforced the focus on leaving versus performing the mission.

It would have been preferable to rotate small two to three-man teams in and out of the CAP, on an unscheduled basis, as opposed to using individual replacements or conducting full unit rotations on set schedules. It was important to build team homogeneity while maintaining experience and familiarity with the village.

Living in a hostile environment for an extended period of time created its own psychological problems. With the passage of time, under constant stress, and the expectation of returning stateside, perceptions and attitudes of individuals changed for the worst. This change was obvious to fellow Marines, and more importantly, it was obvious to the locals.

To maintain a stable, positive impact on the local civilians, it was important that they remain unaffected by the varying attitudes of the Marines. This was especially important when the civilians affected were the PF members that worked hand-in-hand with the Marines.

**Bonds of Friendship and Trust.** To be effective in achieving unit goals, the CAP unit needed to be able to identify the needs of the people, regardless of how they felt personally about these needs.

The means, tools, and equipment to effect the desired change needed to be available for use in short order. Medicine, educational materials, environmental needs, candy and business assistance were commonly used.

Understanding the needs and fears of the people was paramount to understanding how to motivate them toward acceptance of a CAP unit.

To be successful, CAP Marines had to be considered locals by the locals. The local populace had to believe that the sole mission of a CAP unit was to improve their security and quality of life.

Local villagers loved, feared, and hated the CAPs. CAP Marines would do simple things to obtain the local people's trust and cooperation, such as protecting homes, calling for a medical evacuation helicopter to evacuate seriously injured children, or throwing hand grenades or other explosives into rivers to kill fish for the locals to eat.

After the M-16, a smile and a handshake were the CAP members' most important weapons. CAP members attended and participated in events such as weddings, funerals (even of people killed by the CAP), birth celebrations, and other events that were important to the villagers. It was important to demonstrate an interest in their way of life. When CAP members attended these events, they carried only concealed weapons in order to fit in better.

Buying local foodstuffs and eating with the locals helped establish strong trusting relationships. Conveying the understanding that the Marines were just normal young Americans who were sent there to live with and help them was easier to accomplish over a bowl of soup and rice.

It was imperative to get to know the people. By keeping ears and eyes open, CAP team members became cognizant of such things as:

- Strange people moving around the village
- A local school needing chalk and blackboards
- Wells running dry
- Families needing help in the rice paddy because they were shorthanded

Knowing what the villagers needed without being told was important. Waiting to be asked for help only served to reduce their self esteem and to sow resentment towards the CAP. Marines strove to identify the people's needs and satiate them, even without the people's knowledge that it was being done.

While in the village, CAP members did not have much contact with the outside world. They didn't know what was going on either in America or in Vietnam. The only thing they were aware of was the village and what was going on in and around it. News was obtained on the local level, and intelligence, both true and misleading, came in buckets.

The feeling of safety felt by the locals because of the security afforded by the CAPs cannot be overstated. The CAP teams worked to make sure the village people never felt the need to contemplate the

possibility of being abandoned and left alone to face retribution.

A soft-handed approach in dealing with the locals was essential. However, when force was used as a response to violence, it was quick, aggressive and overwhelming.

The administration of medical treatment, entertainment, education, and environmental needs was made on the basis of their system and beliefs, not ours.

Assimilation of locals with the Marines and Marines with the local populace was considered a priority. No activity, attitude, or wearing of apparel that could be interpreted as an “in your face” statement was allowed to occur.

### ***Interactions with Children***

By winning over the kids, CAP teams were able to win over their brothers and sisters, and eventually to get into the homes and win over their parents. Children are by nature more accepting of strangers and open to new ideas and suggestions.

A Marine unit is extremely imposing and intimidating. However, once the children understood that the Marines were honest and would protect them, they began to invite Marines into their homes, where influence and exposure to the family greatly expanded.

Although intimate contact with the local females was considered taboo, it should not be overlooked that once a Marine earned the respect of a woman, as with a child, the seeds were sown for acceptance by

others. Efforts to win over children by fulfilling their educational and medical needs led to acceptance by the women, (their mothers and sisters), which in turn made it easier to obtain the confidence of the men and the people in general, hence affording greater intelligence and cooperation.

Many villagers, especially children, were injured by unexploded ordnance while doing simple things like working in their rice paddies or playing. Some of the explosives were placed there by the enemy with the intent to blame the Marines. CAP members must be mentally prepared for extremes in human behavior.

### ***Positive Interactions with Adults***

Understanding cultural differences is essential. In Vietnam, physical contact between men was a major issue.

Holding hands or placing one’s arms across the shoulders of another man was a natural thing for the average Vietnamese male. It meant friendship and trust. Civilians and Popular Forces would walk the trails holding hands, or stand around arm-in-arm.

Since the average Marine would rather be pinned down under hostile fire than hold hands with another man, physical contact between U.S. Marines and Vietnamese men initially was extremely uncomfortable. In time, the Marines realized the contact was not sexual but rather a sign of respect, trust, and an expression of admiration.

Having sexual contact with local women was, of course, the best way to lose respect and enrage the local people. If a Marine inappropriately fraternized with a local woman, he was reassigned from the

CAP and gone the next day. The transfer was intended to reduce conflict with the people whom the CAP was serving and depending on for support and intelligence.

Furnishing security to families, schools, and local open-air markets brought the CAP closer to the people. However, such large-scale support did not remove the villager's desire for individual gain from the CAPs actions. Care was taken to ensure that all the people benefited from the CAP's presence.

One of the most important things to come out of the CAP was that it created opportunities for the Vietnamese villagers to teach the Marines. The program provided opportunities for both sides to trade ideas and build relationships.

Helping the locals to build adobe bricks out of mud and straw, working in the rice paddies on a water wheel, or simply watching local children while their parents worked the paddies, all brought the human factor into play.

CAP team members were careful not to look down on local lifestyles or compare them to American lifestyles. Eating bugs when living with people who do so, earned respect and helped span the cultural gap. Different societies have their own quirks. For example, when administering medication or providing medical care to the locals, the Marines found that it was best to make it hurt. Pills such as penicillin, although offering identical relief, were not deemed by the villagers as powerful as a painful inoculation, because taking a pill didn't hurt. CAP teams recognized that in order to make the people feel better they needed to do whatever it took, including giving them a shot and making it hurt.

Operating as an enabler to the people to help them achieve their goals by bringing U.S. resources to the local level opened many lines of communication and cooperation. The program kept a lot of Vietnamese non-combatants alive and obtained intelligence critical to fighting the war.

**Tactics, Techniques and Procedures.** Mr. Matricardi was assigned to a stationary CAP which was responsible for a village and several small hamlets. There were only four trails leading to his village. Initially, CAP patrols would go out after sunset and return between 0300 and dawn. These patrols often were ambushed while returning to their base camps. In response, they varied their schedules and returned after dawn.

If a member of the CAP had a bad feeling or premonition about something, the squad tried to follow that instinct, whether it meant adjusting a mission or doing something differently.

CAP members would go into a village, gather intelligence, and report on the needs of the village. It was important to demonstrate to the local people that the CAP could bring in the necessary resources to improve security, get things fixed, and help improve the standard of living.

Fire discipline was very important to the CAPs. They did not want to kill locals who might have been caught in the middle of a firefight. They also did not want to waste ammunition so as to ensure they had enough when they really needed it.

CAPs did not like associating with regular line units. Regular line units acted and dressed much differently than the CAPs. These units were much more conventional in their approach, used different tactics,

techniques and procedures, and were not as effective as the CAPs in dealing with the local people. CAPs interacted with Army Special Forces who passed through their areas and with whom they shared many traits.

The soft-handed approach was the name of the game with the CAP. However, team members had to be able to react quickly and swiftly, to be ready to receive fire and shoot back.

The CAP was like a neighborhood watch. Every night there would be incidents. Some nights no one got hurt. Other nights a few people got hurt, and on others, some were killed.

CAPs would always take a corpsman on nighttime patrols and ambushes. There were two corpsmen assigned to Mr. Matricardi's CAP, who happened to be twin brothers. This caused morale problems toward the end of their assignment as they began to worry more about each other's safety than that of the team.

Stray dogs and water buffalo caused problems for CAP patrols, as they would bark and make noises, alerting local civilians and the enemy to their presence. While the water buffalos were "hands off," the teams would kill any dogs they came across on patrol.

Village chiefs and PFs did all of the interrogations of captured personnel, a task the Marines normally did not perform.

Marines would frisk search women suspected of carrying weapons or explosives when required.

**Conclusion.** There is much value to the study of the Vietnam era CAP, especially in

light of current operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, and the global war on terrorism. Marines returning to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom II or deploying elsewhere, would be well served to learn from the general lessons of their predecessors in Vietnam.

Iraq in 2004 will pose a much different environment than the one the Marines experienced in the 2003 war and the first months after Saddam's regime was removed from power. An emboldened enemy has adapted to the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the coalition, is exploiting fear by embarking on a campaign of taking foreign hostages, and continues to attack coalition military forces whenever it can, as well as Iraqi governmental and police officials, religious assemblies, civilians, non-governmental organization and humanitarian relief workers, and the infrastructure. According to recent polls, many Iraqis have mixed feelings about the coalition. While they see it negatively as an occupying power, they still want it to remain and provide for their security. Further complicating this environment is the limited Shia's uprising led by firebrand Islamic cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the projected turn-over of sovereignty to the interim Iraqi governing council by July 1, 2004.

The Marine Corps Combined Action Program in Vietnam is a good example of the kind of innovative thinking and action that has guided the Corps throughout its history of involvement in small wars. The Marines of today are writing their own chapter in that history. As in Vietnam, it will be written with the cooperation of the local people and the blood and sacrifices of Marines and locals on the ground.