

# KIT CARSON SCOUTS

By Capt William V. Cowan

*Former North Vietnamese army regulars and Viet Cong are a potent asset to Marines in Vietnam.*

**I**MMEDIATELY west of the main Citadel in Quang Tri City, capital of South Vietnam's northernmost province, lies a small but strongly fortified compound. Built with Marine Corps money and materials, it is defended only by former North Vietnamese regulars and former Viet Cong. Though few Marines know of its whereabouts or purpose, the products of that compound represent a potent asset to the small unit leader operating against Communist forces in the Republic of Vietnam.

It is the 3rd Marine Division's Kit Carson Scout School, staffed by Marines and dedicated to the task of training former enemy to work with units of the 3rd Marine Division.

The Kit Carson Scout program was originated and implemented by Marines. It started when the 1st Marine Division decided to use defectors to locate enemy weapons caches and booby traps. Though they were mostly untrained, their exceptional performance with Marine units was noted in Saigon, and Gen Westmoreland issued a message in September, 1967, directing all infantry divisions in Vietnam, both Marine and Army, to begin using Kit Carson Scouts in conjunction with friendly operations. In addition, Gen Westmoreland directed that a minimum of 100 scouts per division was necessary to insure effectiveness. The 3rd Marine Division was the first unit in Vietnam to reach that level when the fourth Kit Carson Scout class graduated from the school in Quang Tri City in December, 1967.

The Scouts are known as Hoi Chanh (generally translated in Vietnamese as "one who has



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returned”), and their reasons for defection from the VC or NVA differ. Although many are disillusioned with communism or unfulfilled Communist promises of land, money or battlefield glory, most of them return to the Government of South Viet Nam (GVN) control because they are tired of the constant pressure of allied operations and honestly believe they are on the losing side.

After their initial return to GVN control they are interrogated by Allied intelligence personnel. Their rank or assignment determines the amount of interrogation which they must undergo, with officers and more important political cadre being sent to Saigon for exhaustive interrogation. Others are generally interrogated at the provincial level. They then receive food, clothing, money and temporary housing in a Chieu Hoi center. They live and eat at the center, attending daily political classes aimed at outlining the programs and accomplishments of the GVN and assailing the goals and principles of communism.

Upon completion of their reindoctrination they are free to obtain employment, buy land and become farmers, marry, join the South Vietnamese forces, or, if they desire, request to become Kit Carson Scouts.

In the 3rd Marine Division, bordering the DMZ, the Scouts' top man is SgtMaj Tran Van Tranh, whose honorary rank was bestowed by the late MajGen Bruno A. Hochmuth when he was the division commander.

Tranh was a North Vietnamese captain when he rallied to South Vietnamese forces after infiltrating in 1959. He had fought as a Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu and had spent two years in Communist China being thoroughly educated in guerrilla warfare. Then he was sent south to help organize more Viet Cong units. When he arrived in the south, he realized for the first time that the South Vietnamese were better off than the North Vietnamese. Recognizing the difference between Communist oppression and the freedom of democracy, he vowed to help fight communism.

Now he is the chief instructor at the Kit Carson Scout School in Quang Tri City. His daily lectures to prospective Scouts cover mines, booby traps, sniper techniques and ambushes—all things with

which the students, as former NVA and VC, are extremely familiar. But Tranh's emphasis is on methods of detection, and this determines the usefulness of the Scout to a Marine unit in the field.

As with anything else, there is always “that 10 percent,” and the strict and demanding training schedule and screening program of the school don't always locate a Scout who may later pilfer, go UA or, as in one case, attempt to sell marijuana to Marines. Fortunately these are the most serious of the offenses, and when a unit returns a Scout to the school for disciplinary reasons, punishment is usually harsh when Tranh is involved.

Their achievements greatly overshadow the shortcomings of a few.

When Hue was attacked during the Communist Tet offensive of 1968, SgtMaj Tranh was sent to Phu Bai in the hopes of rounding up other Scouts who had been successful in eluding infiltrating enemy forces. Rounding up six Scouts who had been separated from their units, he made liaison with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, in the MACV compound at Hue and obtained permission to conduct a patrol into an enemy-held area of Hue with which he was familiar. The patrol accounted for five NVA killed, two captured and seven weapons, in addition to intelligence data which was of importance to the 1st Marine Division's operations into the city.

During the same period, another experienced Scout, Doan Thi Me, organized a defensive unit for the Chieu Hoi Village between Hue and Phu Bai.

When employed with Marine units, the principal mission of the Scouts is to detect and disarm enemy mines and booby traps, and assist in the immediate detection of enemy ambushes. Some claim the Scouts have an uncanny “sixth sense,” but their proven abilities of detection come from their past experience and their excellent training. One young Scout on his first patrol with Marines discovered and disarmed four booby-traps and forced the premature triggering of an enemy ambush in which he killed two NVA before being wounded himself.

The citation in another Scout's record book tells how, when his recon patrol was ambushed, he savagely returned the enemy fire, forcing the NVA to break contact and pull back. He then crawled up a steep hill to locate an LZ for an immediate extraction, and returned to the patrol to carry two seriously wounded Marines to the LZ. Next he helped establish a hasty defensive posture, cut small brush to clear the LZ, and finally fell from exhaustion. The patrol leader then discovered that the Scout had been shot twice in the stomach and once in the leg, but had covered his wounds to help his Marine companions.

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The performance of Scouts is not related solely to their past experience or training, however, but more specifically to the attitude toward the Scouts of the unit for which they are working. It takes a Scout only a few days to learn whether a new unit accepts him as just another Vietnamese security risk, or greets him as a well-trained, eager Scout who is voluntarily joining the Marines to fight his former comrades.

In the spring of 1968, the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, while working along the Cua Viet River in almost constant contact, used several Scouts with excellent success. The battalion had a fine reputation among the Scouts because they felt they were well accepted, so they worked harder.

The 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion's system was to incorporate a Scout into a specific recon team. In this manner the team members and the Scout got to know each other. Cross training was possible, with the Scout improving his English and patrolling procedures from the Marines, and the Marines learning the techniques of the enemy from the Scouts. More important than the cross training, however, was the trust and confidence instilled between the team members and the Scout. When each felt at ease with the other, the Scout was likely to work extremely hard to prove himself in the field, and the Marines placed more confidence in any recommendations the Scout would give while on patrol.

The methods of effective Scout employment are restricted only by the imagination of the unit for which the Scouts work. Each battalion's success varies proportionally with the unit's attitude and methods of employment.

From October, 1967 to May, 1968, the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines enjoyed continued success with Kit Carson Scout Nguyen Thuong. Accepted well by the battalion when he joined, Thuong was inspired to always work his hardest.

A citation submitted on Thuong by 2/9 relates: "He was responsible for the discovery of several well-hidden booby traps which otherwise would have been detonated and undoubtedly caused Marine casualties." Although some units would have considered Thuong's work completed at this point, the citation continues: "On finding these explosives, Thuong informed the USMC unit leader of his suspicion that the NVA occupied an OP in the area. This hidden OP was uncovered and destroyed after a thorough sweep of the area."

On another occasion, while 2/9 was operating north of "the Trace," Thuong was acting as guide for a patrol working along the southern boundary of the DMZ. Coming under intense mortar fire, another unit would have probably disregarded any reaction from a Kit Carson Scout. However,

the citation reads, "instead of seeking cover from the rounds, Thuong as usual moved to a position of vantage where he could determine the enemy grid, which he shouted to a nearby Marine in English. The resulting fire mission, typified by a fire for effect with no previous adjustments, not only silenced the enemy mortar but achieved a small secondary explosion."

In addition, 2/9 used Thuong in psychological warfare broadcasts. His timely understanding of the enemy's habits, fears, and emotional state proved a more efficient application of this operation than Marine interpreters or tapes could attain.

Continuing, Thuong volunteered to act as a clandestine agent in the refugee villages around the Cam Lo artillery base. The battalion reported that "the intelligence information he accumulated proved to be accurate and timely, covering everything from the leanings of the civilians in the area to collection of tactical information about the enemy. At times he actually conversed with disguised enemy elements at the risk of his own life."

For his outstanding work, only a portion of which has been narrated, 2/9 recommended Thuong for the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star, the equivalent of our Navy Cross.

With 100 Scouts in the division, each battalion desiring them can generally get 4 or 5 Scouts depending upon operational commitments at any one time. A desired level would be one Scout per company, though this is not always possible.

Disciplinary problems with the Scouts were best handled by the unit's returning the Scout to the school in Quang Tri City, escorted by someone from the unit who was familiar with the facts of the offense. In this manner proper disciplinary action was possible. Since the UCMJ was not applicable to the Scouts, SgtMaj Tranh became the sole legal authority at the school.

A unit which develops rapport with its Kit Carson Scouts usually will realize another asset in its arsenal of arms. Besides the obvious tasks of locating mines and booby traps, detecting enemy ambushes or in pointing sniper positions, the Scouts can work for the S-2 in obtaining information from the local populace. The Scouts' knowledge of the terrain can prove valuable in planning patrol routes or determining targets for H&I fires. They can pinpoint trails and harbor sites they used while working with the enemy. They can be used for psy-op broadcasts, or perform basic interpreter work. On "County Fair" operations they can assist in locating enemy elements or sympathizers among the population, or they can train Marines in the techniques of the enemy, increasing unit proficiency. Their operational application is restricted only by the imagination of the unit for which they are working. USMC