

To Win the Hearts and Minds: The Combined Action Program During the Vietnam War

By
Abigail Jean Miller


Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Honors in History

April 2019

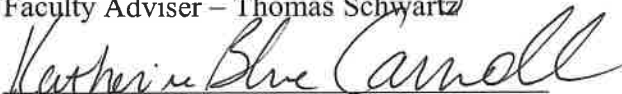
On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on April 29, 2019
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in History.



Director of Honors – Arleen Tuchman



Faculty Adviser – Thomas Schwartz



Third Reader – Katherine Blue Carroll

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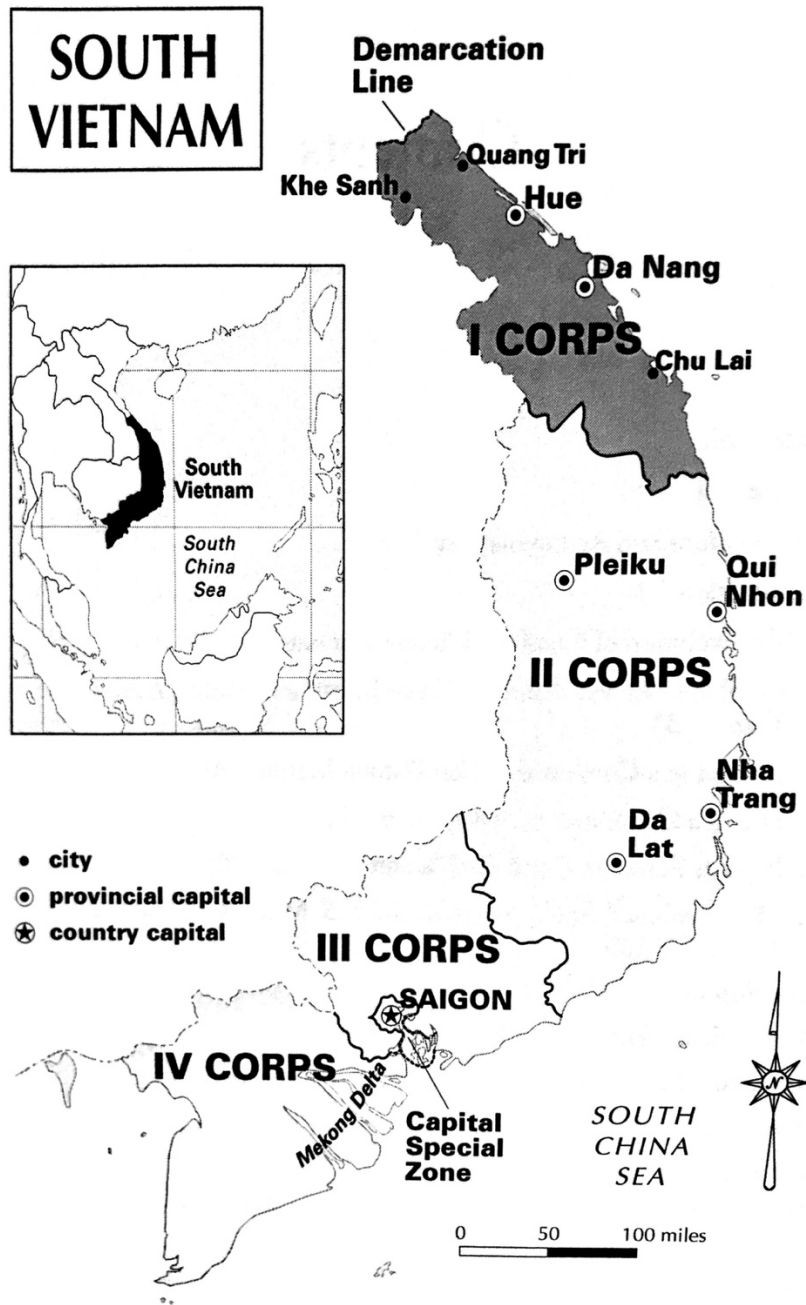
Finally, I am so grateful for my Mom, Dad, Tamara, and Amanda. Thank you for providing me with a fantastic education and for supporting me the whole way.

Maps



Map 1. Location of Quang Tri Province.¹

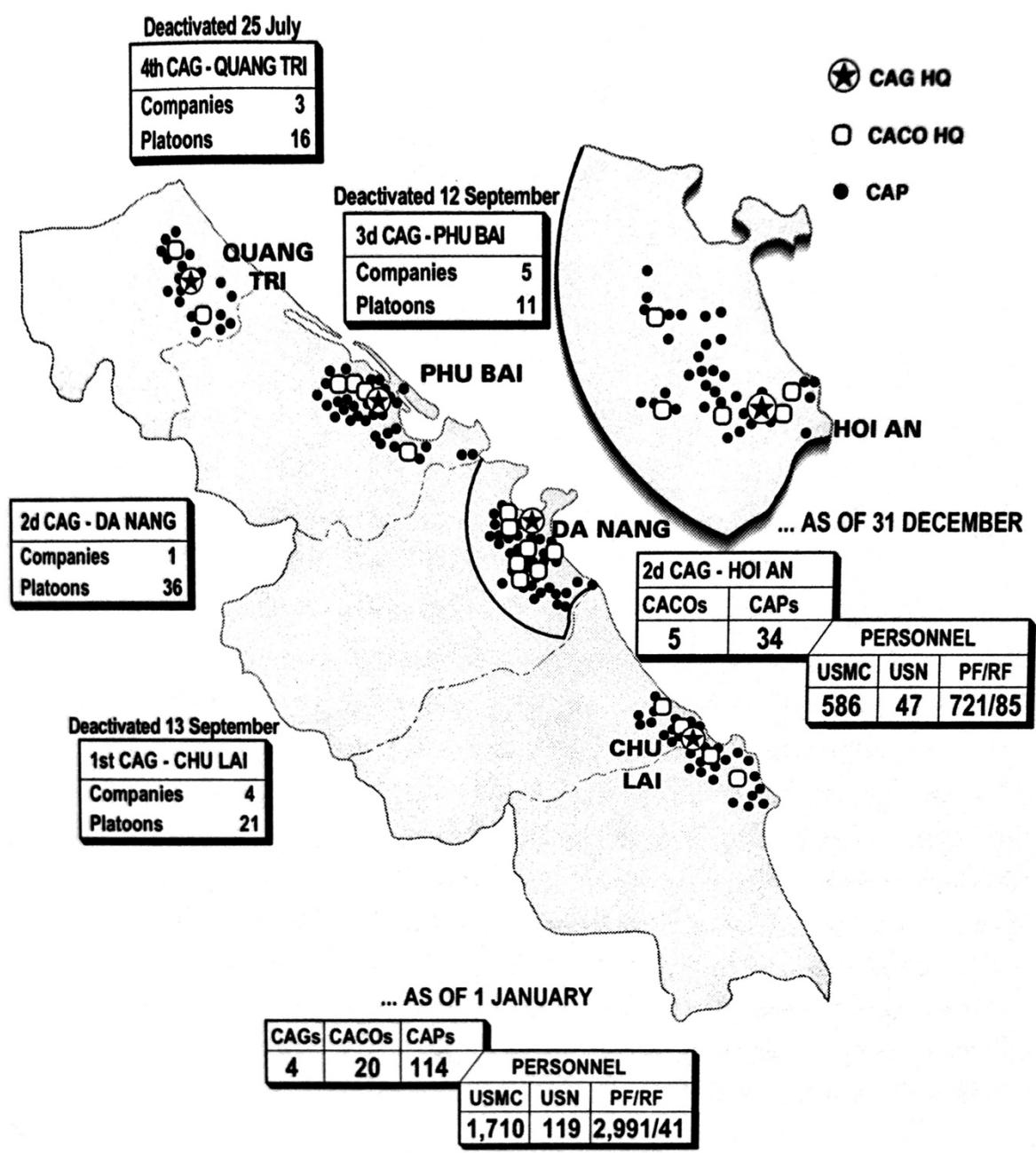
¹ Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Quang_Tri_in_Vietnam.svg (accessed March 10, 2019).



Corps military regions in South Vietnam, 1970.

Map 2. Within South Vietnam, the Marines operated in I Corps, the northernmost portion of South Vietnam.²

² John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014). Reproduced with permission from the author.



Evolution of the Combined Action Program, 1970.

Map 3. This map shows the placement of CAP units within I Corps at height of the program in 1970.³

³ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014). Reproduced with permission from the author.

Introduction

On May 4, 1965, two months after the first Marines landed in Vietnam, Lyndon B. Johnson spoke at a dinner meeting with the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc. “So we must be ready to fight in Vietnam,” he famously announced, “but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live there.”¹ Johnson, now committed to escalating the war in Vietnam, would use the phrase, “winning hearts and minds” a total of twenty-eight times between January 1964 and August 1968. In plain terms, the phrase refers to winning the loyalties of the local population through emotional or intellectual appeals to gain strategic military advantages in a war setting. This concept— “winning hearts and minds” — would become integral to discussions of Vietnam War tactics and counterinsurgency strategy.

Roughly ten years earlier, in 1954, the Geneva Convention had split the people of Vietnam at the 17th Parallel into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam, or DRV for short) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). America pledged its support to the South to help establish a pro-western democracy in Southeast Asia in opposition to the spread of communism. The North, led by Ho Chi Minh, and aided by the mass political organization in South Vietnam known as the National Liberation Front (referred to as Viet Cong by Americans, or VC in shorthand), promoted a communist government. The agreement at Geneva stipulated that the two countries hold a general election after two years to unify under one government. But the election never occurred. Instead, conflict between the two countries, and American involvement, only grew.

Johnson’s reference to “winning hearts and minds” served as an integral rhetorical device of what some American military officials at the time (and historians today) referred to as “the

¹ Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 112.

Other War.”² This concept implies a duality to the war in Vietnam. The main component of the war was the, “search and destroy” operation or strategy of attrition, which opponents often blame for America’s eventual loss.³ Both of these strategies under U.S. Army General William Westmoreland meant wearing down the enemy with the steep use of manpower and resources to defeat the DRV. The other part, the Other War, referred to ideologically winning over the population through nation building and pacification efforts. This strategy is referred to as counterinsurgency (often shortened to COIN by military strategists). The Other War to “win hearts and minds” made its way into various small programs in the American military. Perhaps the most remembered today is the Marines Corps’ Combined Action Program.

In my thesis, I evaluate the effectiveness of the Combined Action Program (CAP) in winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.⁴ Proponents of the program during the Vietnam War praised CAP as a success, but often without defining exactly what success meant. Today, military strategists still refer to CAP in Vietnam as a potentially lucrative strategy for the war. With a provincial look at CAP Program, as opposed to a whole overview, historians can gain a thick description of how these units interacted in the villages they served.⁵ This thesis provides new insight into how the American Marines and Vietnamese civilians and local militia

² This term is one used both by historical actors at the time, such as the Head of Combined Action Program from 1967-1968, William Corson, and by historians today. See William Corson. *The Betrayal* (New York: WW. Norton, 1968), 14; Michael Peterson. *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam* (New York City: Praeger, 1989), 1.

³ Search and destroy refers to the strategy of entering hostile territory (the Vietnam countryside where Viet Cong insurgents controlled or were present), searching for the enemy, destroying them, and withdrawing. The War of Attrition refers to strategy of wearing down the enemy with continuous attacks to the point of collapse. See: George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, 4th Edition* (New York City: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 179-191.

⁴ CAP is the acronym used interchangeably for Combined Action Program or Combined Action Platoon. For the sake of clarity, I will use more precise wordage when referring to the program itself or the Marines involved.

⁵ “Thick description” is a term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz that emphasizes both surface level observations and added context in order to more fully understand other cultures. By narrowing my focus to one province, I can focus more on the context surrounding the actions and decisions of Vietnamese and American actors. See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.” *The Interpretation of Culture, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

interacted within these villages, and allows historians to compare the program's legacy with its actual effectiveness.

Attempted first in 1965 and formalized two years later, the Combined Action Program (CAP) placed Marine platoons in cooperation with the previously underutilized local South Vietnamese militia, the Popular Forces (PFs). Each platoon consisted of thirteen CAP Marines and a fifteen- to thirty-person group of Vietnamese Popular Forces from the hamlets in which Marines were placed. Marines worked alongside these local forces to conduct patrols and ultimately ensure the hamlet was secure from Viet Cong military forces or insurgents. To varying degrees, the CAP Marines attempted to integrate into everyday life in the village by interacting with Vietnamese civilians to gain their trust, bettering the lives of the locals through civic action projects, and forming connections with the population. In short, as historian John Southard explains, the Marines attempted to "defend and befriend" the South Vietnamese people.⁶ The program operated solely in I Corp, the territorially bound Marine zone in South Vietnam, beginning at Quang Ngai Province and extending to the demilitarized zone (DMZ).⁷ At its peak in late 1969 and early 1970, 114 Combined Action Platoons and a total of about 2,000 Marines served in four administrative groups of the program. The Marines reduced the number of CAPs in Vietnam as American involvement declined overall, and the program officially deactivated in September 1970.⁸

Marine commanders overseeing the program quickly judged CAP as a success. William Corson, who served as the Head of the CAP Program from 1967 to 1968, almost wholly judged

⁶ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 2.

⁷ See Map 2.

⁸ FMFPAC Monthly Report, 1967. Box 2, Folder 2, Robert Klyman Collection, Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

the United States' involvement in Vietnam as a failure. However, he wrote about CAP as a rare exception to America's otherwise ill-fitting war strategy. He even referred to CAP as the best nonconventional tactic in the Vietnam War, calling the CAP Marines "the most powerful asset in the Other War."⁹ General Lewis Walt, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corp from 1968-1971, also commented on CAP. His assessment of the program was glowing, and in his words, "Of all our innovations in Vietnam, none was as successful, as lasting in effect, or as useful for the future than the Combined Action Program."¹⁰

Today, both military strategists and veterans of the program see the CAP as one of the few successful strategies in Vietnam. Given that CAP never exceeded 2,000 Marine participants at a time, many of these strategists argue that with a greater commitment to the program in number of units and manpower, the program could have made an impressive impact. In 2002, for example, Major Curtis L. Williamson conducted a study at the Marine Corps Archives about the program. He argued that a more robust dispersal of CAP units throughout South Vietnam would have preserved the country's sovereignty.¹¹ Albert Hemingway, a veteran of the program who also authored the book *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, also shares a positive perspective regarding CAP's potential. He wrote, "The CAP concept was never fully exploited. One can only speculate the kind of impact if it had been allowed to bear full fruit."¹² These overwhelmingly positive interpretations of CAP amongst those in the military make the program essential for historians to evaluate.

⁹ William Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) 198.

¹⁰ Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105.

¹¹ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 145.

¹² Albert Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994).

CAP earned much of this praise because it seemed like an innovative strategy in a war long-remembered for its failure to adapt to a new style of guerilla warfare. Historian Michael Peterson (1989), the first to write a comprehensive CAP Program history, laid out a few reasons why those in the military considered CAP unique. He noted that CAP was the only long-term commitment of U.S. troops that fought on the hamlet level. It was also one of few programs where troops interacted intimately with the Vietnamese people in a Vietnamese setting, in contrast with many soldiers who, despite fighting *in* Vietnam, experienced little of the culture.¹³ The Marines had always carried a culture and history of counterinsurgency with them, but CAP seemed even more extreme than what Marine recruits expected. In an oral history conducted by the Marine Corps, a veteran said about the program that, “the major thing is... you must be open-minded because this line of work is different than anything else... in the Marine Corps.”¹⁴ Because of the ways in which the program is unique, CAP is relevant, not just for the field of history, but both sociology and political science through studying CAP’s emphasis on cultural communication and the program’s applicability for future wars.

However, despite the many factors that make appear CAP unique, few historians who write about the Vietnam War discuss Combined Action. Some historians ignore CAP because they argue that the impact of the Other War as a whole was minimal at best. Frances Fitzgerald (1972), George C. Herring (1976) and Stanley Karnow (1983) rarely mention the Other War in their survey histories and none of them mention Combined Action at all.¹⁵ When they do discuss

¹³ Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam*, (New York City: Praeger, 1989) 2.

¹⁴ Jeannie Johnson, *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: Lessons Learned and Lost in America’s Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 151.

¹⁵ See Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1972); George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, 4th Edition* (New York City: McGraw-Hill, 2002); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1983).

pacification efforts, these historians do so critically. In *Fire in the Lake*, Fitzgerald identifies the concept of the Other War as public relations tool more so than a military strategy. By making the false distinction between the political and military aspects of the war, she argues, the military found a compact narrative to “pinpoint the blame for the slowness of progress.”¹⁶ Fitzgerald disparages actual efforts in pacification programs as “[meaning] little more than more government control and a few welfare programs.”¹⁷ Karnow and Herring too provide unenthusiastic explanations of these programs, Karnow devotes almost no space to the topic, and Herring simply states that, “pacification achieved little.”¹⁸ To them, the Other War was an inconsequential and irrelevant offshoot of the American effort in Vietnam.

Fitzgerald, Herring, and Karnow all illustrate the orthodox approach to studying the Vietnam War. The orthodox perspective of the war stemmed from the anti-war movement and the belief that America’s involvement in Vietnam was immoral, unwinnable, or a mistake.¹⁹ These histories reflect these beliefs, and ignore the Other War due to, as they argue, its minimal impact. But in contrast to these three historians, recent political and social trends have led historians to rethink the Other War. The revisionist approach to the war, which gained popularity in the decades following the war’s close, offers a much more nuanced argument regarding America’s involvement in Vietnam.

Historian Gary R. Hess breaks down revisionist histories into “‘The Noble Cause’ and the ‘If Only’ History”.²⁰ “The Noble Cause” refers to Ronald Reagan’s 1980 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, where he announced that, “It is time that we recognize that our

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 306.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 310.

¹⁸ Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 194.

¹⁹ Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

[war] was, in truth, a noble cause,” a sentiment which struck a chord with veterans who previously felt shunned by the American public and separate from veterans whose wars were seen as honorable and just.²¹ The “If Only” History refers to historians and analysts looking back at the war to try to comprehend how the United States lost, and what could have led to a more successful outcome. An integral part of the “If Only” history is the “Better War Thesis” as Colonel Gian Gentile calls it. This argument insists that General Westmoreland utilized an ill-fitting strategy in Vietnam War. When General Creighton Abrams took over Westmoreland’s position in 1968, he emphasized counterinsurgency tactics in his overall strategy. Supporters of this argument believe that Abrams began to turn the tide of the war, potentially leading to a victory for the United States and South Vietnam had the war continued. However, by that time, the war had lost popularity among politicians and the American public, and Abrams lacked the support to see his strategy through.²² Revisionist historians write about the Vietnam War with this viewpoint in mind and speculate how different strategies could have changed the war’s outcome. As revisionist histories of the war grew in popularity, the Other War concept grew in legitimacy, and historians began to focus more on these pacification and counterinsurgency tactics.

Since this change, more historians and military strategists have focused on CAP. The Combined Action Program first gained historical attention when historian and CAP veteran Michael Peterson wrote the first book on the program in 1989. Interest in the CAP Program has grown further since the U.S. Military began their operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which brought into question the best counterinsurgency tactics to use in modern wars. In 2004, the U.S.

²¹ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85202> (accessed February 9, 2019).

²² Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, (New York: The New Press, 2013), 16.

Military even implemented a CAP unit in Iraq, although it quickly disbanded.²³ Within this new era for CAP, John Southard (2014) also wrote a history of CAP in Vietnam to help draw out conclusions from Peterson's work over twenty years prior. Both Peterson and Southard provide valuable comprehensive historical overviews of the program.

Based on both Corson and Walt's glowing reviews, Peterson and Southard might have also evaluated the CAP Program in Vietnam as a success. However, both historians conclude that the program's impact varied. John Southard wrote that the top CAP officials held a different conception of the program than the men on the ground.²⁴ Michael Peterson wrote that, "there was a wide variance amongst the [individual] CAPs in qualitative and experiential ways."²⁵ Peterson and Southard explain the program as a whole and emphasize how nuanced and unique each unit was, but they both hesitate to make a definitive statement regarding whether or not CAP succeeded. With such a large data set of CAP units and so many confounding factors to keep in mind (such as location, size of villages, religion, propaganda, familial histories, local economies, etc.), they provide reasonable, although underwhelming, conclusions. The large scale of their research restrains them from making value judgments.

Other renditions of CAP history originate from veterans themselves, and these platoon specific stories often lack broader historical context on their own. Francis (Bing) West's *The Village* (1985) remains one of the most popular books on CAP. On the cover reads the proud tagline, "The true story of 17 months in the life of a Vietnamese village, where a handful of American volunteers and Vietnamese militia lived and died together to defend it."²⁶ The book recounts West's CAP experiences in Binh Nghia, where he depicts the Marines and Vietnamese

²³ Katie Ann Johnson, "Reevaluating the CAP." *Marine Corps Gazette*, June 2009. 24-27.

²⁴ Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 4.

²⁵ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*, 86.

²⁶ Francis J. West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985).

Popular Forces cooperating and demonstrating mutual respect for one another. But the book also slyly admits that evaluations of this single CAP platoons alone does little without greater context. West's CAP in Binh Nghia lay across the river from historic rivals for fishing rights. West admits that the historic rivals of Binh Nghia were known to be supportive of the North Vietnamese Army, making the population of his hamlet predisposed to suspicion of the North simply because of their long-standing rivalry.²⁷ Therefore, these villagers did not need to be won over by the CAP Marines, and rather, their presence offered them extra defense support, and did nothing to flip their loyalties. Thus, West's book provides a unique experience that, while providing a part of the CAP story, cannot be generalized.

Other accounts by veterans, often shared on their Facebook page, "CAP Marine History (Vietnam)" also dive into the everyday experiences and memories of individual hamlets.²⁸ These, like West's experience, are also difficult to generalize. But another concern with relying on these sources is their subjectivity. As one veteran who still writes about his experiences in Vietnam admits, "our experiences processed by memory are akin to fiction."²⁹ In recalling events over fifty years ago, the memories of these veterans are more susceptible to recent historical trends that shape their views of their time in Vietnam. That is not to say that these individual veterans' accounts are not helpful in understanding CAP. Instead, these narratives need contextualization and analysis that the authors cannot always provide themselves. With a historian's eye, these accounts can be reassembled to discuss the CAP Program.³⁰

²⁷ West, *The Village*, 176.

²⁸ Bill Nimmo, "CAP Marine History (Vietnam), Facebook.com, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1466572823656975>

²⁹ Edward Palm, "CAP Marine History (Vietnam), Facebook.com, Oct 23, 3018.

³⁰ For a more in depth discussion on the use of social media as a source for historians, see the Appendix.

In short, one of the problems with these CAP histories is that they provide only one story, and cannot be generalized without greater context. But meanwhile, histories like those by Peterson and Southard provide such a broad look at CAP that definitive conclusions are difficult to make. Because of this, the historiography can benefit from a new approach to analyzing the program.

In this thesis, I pursue a magnification of a localized region within I Corps. This scale provides historians with multiple individual accounts, while also still allowing one to focus more clearly on analyzing the program's effectiveness. One particular province of South Vietnam, Quang Tri Province, provides the historian with a particularly thought-provoking region to study. Quang Tri was the northernmost province of South Vietnam.³¹ The 17th parallel which divided North and South Vietnam did not do so based on the populations' political ideologies or family ties, but rather because of an arbitrary political compromise at the Geneva Conference. This decision meant that Quang Tri Province was suddenly located in the South, and associated with the Southern government, regardless of what the people living there wanted or believed. This makes Quang Tri a particularly powerful site to analyze the relationships between Americans and Vietnamese and their attempts to understand one another.

In order to fully engage with the implications of Combined Action, one must place CAP within the context of modern counterinsurgency (COIN) debate. Almost every source, either those written by veterans or historians, mentions the program in tandem with the concept of "winning hearts and minds." Just like in Vietnam, "winning hearts and minds" has been an integral part of discussions of United States military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. After the 2007 Iraq War troop surge, the military altered their counterinsurgency strategy in favor of a

³¹ See Map 1.

“winning hearts and minds” population-centric security approach.³² But some military figures, such as Gian Gentile suggest that the turn to this approach is based on a mythicized history of counterinsurgency. Others, like 2nd Lieutenant Katie Ann Johnson, see counterinsurgency tactics like CAP as a beneficial strategy in the Middle Eastern conflicts.

Gian Gentile sees the ready adoption of counterinsurgency tactics by the U.S. Military as the result of idealizing the impact of these strategies. Colonel Gian Gentile commanded a cavalry squadron in Baghdad and observed firsthand America’s counterinsurgency tactics in Iraq. Upon returning home, Gentile wrote about his belief that the presumption that “winning hearts and minds” works and can win wars, is, “a blend of myth, history, and suppositions about roads not taken,” that, “depends on a narrow and selective view of histories that are messy and complicated.”³³ Gentile writes that the turn toward counterinsurgency in Iraq was in part based on a mythicized history of its success in the past. In explaining how Vietnam contributes to this, Gentile argues that the suspicion that COIN could have worked in Vietnam is based on this flowery idea that COIN works at all. In actuality, he argues, COIN does not work.

Other military theorists, however, evaluate CAP as a potential tactic for future wars, indicating that they see COIN as a viable military strategy. Katie Ann Johnson in 2009 wrote an article for the Marine Corps Gazette which praises CAP’s potential in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even though the program had been attempted in Iraq before (a limited number of units were implemented and quickly disbanded in 2004), she claims that with greater commitment to the program in number of units and manpower, the strategy would work.³⁴ This sentiment echoes both Albert Hemingway’s and Major Curtis Williamson’s arguments about the CAP Program in

³² Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ Johnson, “Reevaluating the CAP.” 24-27.

Vietnam.³⁵ This argument also implies more generally that COIN strategies like CAP can be successful and are applicable to future wars.

This thesis argues that in the case of Quang Tri, the counterinsurgency strategy of CAP did not succeed in winning hearts and minds. Thus, the acceptance by many that CAP did succeed in doing so, or at least could have, supports Gentile's argument that counterinsurgency strategy is based on a mythicization of its capabilities. In the case of Quang Tri, the glowing sentiments surrounding CAP reveal an imagined narrative separate from the program's reality.

In contrast to what Hemingway and Williamson suggest, CAP's failure in Quang Tri did not solely stem from a lack of military commitment in numbers. Instead, CAP failed in Quang Tri because the Marines struggled to win over a population in which many people had already determined their loyalties. Over time, the touted ideals of CAP began to break down as demand for more units increased. Many Marines were not adequately prepared to demonstrate the cultural sensitivity that the program sought. And finally, if the Marines were unable to secure the safety of the population, they could not expect to win their support. Ultimately, the CAP Program in Quang Tri effectively illustrates the dissonance that Gentile points out between COIN's legacy versus its reality. And the reality of CAP falls short from its legacy.

Chapter One introduces the reader to Quang Tri Province by exploring the division between North and South that led to Quang Tri's identity as a border province. The chapter explains the geography and demography of the province and the historical events leading up to the introduction of CAP units in 1967. I emphasize the decades of propaganda employed by the Viet Cong throughout South Vietnam prior to the increase of American forces in Vietnam. I posit that because of Quang Tri's unique and arbitrarily determined position at the border, and the

³⁵ See page 10.

preexisting propaganda developed by Hanoi and revolutionaries during colonial Indochina, “winning hearts and minds” in Quang Tri would prove most difficult for the U.S. Marines.

Chapter Two explores the war leading up to the Combined Action Program through the U.S. Military’s perspective. I explain the creation of the Marines’ strategy in Vietnam, including how public relations strategies may have influenced the creation of the Combined Action Program. I share the official Marine narrative of the first CAP unit and the subsequent buildup of the program. Finally, the chapter delineates the major changes the program underwent over its seven years. This explains why historians struggle to make broad claims about the program, and demonstrates how the touted ideals of CAP faltered under wartime realities.

Chapter Three analyzes CAP units in Quang Tri Province. First, I begin with the CAPs at Khe Sanh; these CAP units were unique for their interaction with an ethnic minority group, the Bru, as opposed to the ethnic Vietnamese people. Then, I analyze interviews from Americans at the Tiger Papa units near Cam Lo to uncover strains in the CAP Marines and Vietnamese PF relationships resulting from preconceived notions, distrust, and miscommunications. Finally, I compare accounts by U.S. Marine Trust Israel and Viet Cong veteran Le Dang Phac, where Le Dang Phac lived and Israel served as a commander of the CAP unit. Their testimonies reveal a friendly relationship between the Americans and Vietnamese, although one far from leading to military or strategic advantages.

Adding a “Vietnamese perspective” to an analysis of CAP is difficult for a non-Vietnamese speaking historian. However, a close reading of my sources can help to better uncover whether CAP did “win hearts and minds”. I conduct my analysis of primary sources with an intentional focus on the Vietnamese people’s responses to the CAP Marines, but I am limited by my sources and I cannot speak for every Vietnamese person in Quang Tri. While I

include narratives from current residents of Quang Tri Province, it is important to note that many people who supported the Southern government fled the area when Quang Tri fell to the communists. Additionally, the government of Vietnam holds control of the official narrative of war, which deemphasizes South Vietnamese resistance to the North, giving more agency to the Americans than the South Vietnamese. Because of this, the Vietnamese perspectives that I share may be skewed toward loyalty to the North.

In all, CAP contributes to the debates over Other War's legitimacy and the revisionist perspective of the Vietnam War. But even greater, the continued debate about CAP's narrative illuminates the lasting wounds of the Vietnam War. Historians, veterans, and everyday people continue to grapple with the question of how the United States lost the Vietnam War. In a war many deem immoral or a mistake, CAP persists to many as the road not taken, the road that perhaps could have led to success. The Combined Action Program did win hearts and minds. But the question remains, *whose?*

Chapter One: The Tale of Quang Tri Province

Before 1956, modest Quang Tri Province had little relevance outside the community living there. In contrast to its neighboring province to the south, Thua Thien-Hue, which held both the former imperial capital, Hue, and the second largest city of South Vietnam, Da Nang, Quang Tri had little economic or political significance. To the east of Quang Tri Province, coastal plains lead to the South Bien Dong Sea (in global politics today known as the South China Sea). Hills fill the remainder of the province's landscape, growing into the Annamite Mountain Range and the country of Laos to the west. Quang Tri Province consisted of just a few large towns, like Quang Tri City and Dong Ha, which today may sound familiar to Americans who recognize the names from television coverage of the war. Route 9, one of the few major roads built by the French earlier in the century, connected Dong Ha to Laos, winding through the hilly countryside. Along this road sat the village of Cam Lo and, further westward, the valley of Khe Sanh, which also would eventually become American namesakes.

Long before the war, the people of Quang Tri Province lived a largely agrarian lifestyle. Like 90% of those who lived in Vietnam at the time, they lived in rural communities. Fishing and farming rice served as the main source of income for many families. The people lived in hamlets, a collection of which formed a village, comparable today to the operation of an American township. In these modest sized communities, people held close emotional connections with their home villages.¹

Quang Tri Province mostly consisted of ethnic Vietnamese, but an ethnic minority group called the Bru also resided there. Of the sixteen million people in South Vietnam at the onset of the division, an estimated thirteen million people identified as ethnic Vietnamese. A majority of

¹ Capt. Robert H. Whitlow, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era, 1954-1964* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1977), 8.

the remaining three million were Chinese, who remained in Vietnam following Chinese occupations. About 700,000 people in South Vietnam fell under the French classification of, “Montagnards,” meaning “Mountaineers”. When the French colonized the region, they encountered the many ethnically diverse communities living in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Ignoring the distinct cultures and societies of these individual groups, the French clumped them together under the umbrella term of Montagnard. In reality, each group spoke a unique language and had distinct traditions and cultures. In Quang Tri, the most prominent Montagnard group was the Bru. The Bru population lived in the westernmost district of Quang Tri Province called Huong Hoa, where the Annamite Mountains begin to form. Before the Americans arrived in Khe Sanh, about 10,000 people lived in Huong Hoa district, most of them members of the Bru ethnic group.² They worked on coffee plantations, a long-term and economical crop, and like the ethnic Vietnamese, lived in small but close-knit communities.

The Vietnamese and Bru people of Quang Tri soon found their humble communities elevated to those of broad international importance with the division of North and South Vietnam. In 1954, the Geneva Convention chose to divide Vietnam at the 17th parallel. But the decision regarding where to divide the country was determined neither by demography nor the political leanings held by the residents in question. Rather, political actors on a global scale, influenced by Cold War politics, determined the fate of the people of Vietnam. Pham Van Dong served as the representative of the DRV sent to the Geneva Convention, where he demanded that the delegates draw the temporary border at the 13th parallel to acknowledge the Viet Minh’s military successes. This agreement would have placed the communist government’s reach only 100 miles North of Saigon. The French immediately countered that proposal, calling for the 18th

² Minh, Interview by the author. Ta Con Airport Relics, Huong Hoa, Vietnam. May 21, 2018.

parallel as the border.³ According to Vietnam's most famous historian, Le Van Lan, Pham Van Dong was not prepared to settle, trying instead to agree on the 15th parallel as a middle ground. However, even though China and Russia "supported" Pham, they "feared a strong Vietnam... and cruelly picked the 17th parallel."⁴ In reality, China and Russia feared that by demanding too much, they would provoke further action by the United States. But nevertheless, Pham felt betrayed by his supposed allies, reportedly declaring that the Chinese leader Zhou Enlai "has double crossed us."⁵

Thus the negotiations resulted in an arbitrarily determined middle ground and the delegates set the temporary border between North and South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. The North and South governments reflected the boundary by designating the actual border at the Ben Hai River, which runs just south of the parallel in Quang Tri Province. Suddenly, the province grew to a place of vast strategic interest. For the population of Quang Tri, this held huge significance. Regardless of their personal beliefs or family ties, they now lived under the South Vietnamese government, just a riverbank away from family and friends in the North.

Their American War

"Winning hearts and minds" in Quang Tri Province would prove incredibly difficult. The Vietnamese people had experienced decades of nationalist movements amongst their people long before the Combined Action Program first instituted a platoon in Quang Tri, and even long before the Geneva Convention divided the country. When the convention did delineate Quang Tri as the northernmost province of South Vietnam, the decision depended on high level politics,

³ Robert C. Cottrell, *Vietnam: The 17th Parallel* (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 6.

⁴ Le Van Lan, Interview with author. Vietview Hotel, Hanoi, Vietnam. May 7, 2018.

⁵ Cottrell, *Vietnam: The 17th Parallel*, 9.

not the makeup or beliefs of the people who would thereafter live on the controversial new border. Finally, the government of South Vietnam, led by Ngo Dinh Diem, failed to motivate the people in rural villages, like many of those in Quang Tri, to support the South. These factors indicate that the people of Quang Tri would likely have cemented their beliefs and loyalties before the first CAP Marine arrived.

To Vietnamese nationalists, the history of Vietnam follows a pattern of foreign invasion followed by fierce resistance. Time and time again, nationalists would harken the memory of Vietnam as a nation of freedom fighters. During the French colonial era, nationalists used this theme to bolster a national narrative for independence. Vietnam first existed as an independent entity with a sovereign government in 1009, with the founding of the Ly Dynasty and creation of the Dai Viet Kingdom. Since then, the Vietnamese people often felt subject to foreign government rule, most notably, the Chinese and Mongols. When foreign powers lost their influence over Vietnam, the country attempted to unify, most notably in 1804, when the Nguyen lords established an imperial city at Hue and named the country Viet Nam for the first time.⁶

Also in the nineteenth century, France began to meddle in Southeast Asian affairs. Southeast Asia appealed to the French for two main reasons. First, the French saw the region as a viable addition to their growing trade empire for coffee and various other goods. And second, many French diplomats, including Prime Minister Jules Ferry, believed in the duty of “superior races” to “civilize the inferior races,” like those from Southeast Asia.⁷ To the French “civilizing” the Vietnamese people meant conquering them and developing their society to serve France’s interests. France succeeded in conquering the region, and officially formed French

⁶ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 16.

⁷ Jules François Camille Ferry, “Speech before the French Chamber of Deputies, March 28, 1884.” From *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1884ferry.asp>. Cited in Robert J. McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War 4th ed.* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008), 17.

Indochina in 1887. The French allowed the emperors of Vietnam to remain in power as figureheads, but true power and administrative control rested in the hands of French diplomats. France divided Southeast Asia into five territories. Tonkin, the northern portion of Vietnam on today's map, held the modern day capital Hanoi. Cochinchina, the southernmost section of Vietnam, included Saigon and the Mekong Delta. Annam (the Chinese historical term for "the pacified South") included all the central provinces, a 1300 kilometer middle section of Vietnam. The final two protectorates were Cambodia and Laos, all of which created France's Indochinese Union.⁸

French colonialism severely impacted Vietnamese society. For a handful of Vietnamese people, French rule offered new opportunity. Those who cooperated with the French enjoyed benefits such as access to French schools in Vietnam and universities in France, positions in colonial administration, and even rights to full French citizenship.⁹ But according to historian Pierre Asselin, this opportunity depended on the exploitation of other Vietnamese people, as those who worked with the French allowed the French to take advantage of the Vietnamese wage laborers. For the majority of Vietnamese, French colonialism was marked by marginalization and exploitation. Quang Tri Province sat in the middle of Annam, where the French organized the production of tea and coffee destined for European markets. The French gave wealthy French landlords access to large industrial farming tools, and granted them autonomy in organizing their farms. Asselin argues that this practice shifted the social structure of the countryside by turning indigenous farmers into marginalized sharecroppers and wage laborers.¹⁰ In Quang Tri, not only

⁸ William J. Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 30.

⁹ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

did the French disrupt Vietnamese life, but the relationship between the Bru people and Vietnamese as well.

While the relationship specifically between the Vietnamese and Bru people before French colonialism to the region has not been discussed by historians, historians do know that in other regions, Vietnamese and Montagnard groups shared strained relationships. Researcher Larry R. Jackson wrote an article in 1969 about the relationships of the Vietnamese and Montagnard populations, both in the North and South. He wrote that the Vietnamese people see Montagnards as lazy, backwards, and uncivilized.¹¹ They saw many alien qualities in the Montagnard culture, including a lack of written language and the practice of an animist religion, where animal sacrifice to appease the spirits was not uncommon.¹² In fact, many Vietnamese people referred to Montagnards as “Moi,” meaning “savages”. In turn, Montagnards saw the Vietnamese people as a “threat to their existing, taking their lands, bringing diseases, and depriving them of their culture.”¹³ Likely the Vietnamese and Bru in Quang Tri shared at least some level of animosity as well. When the French came, the relationships between the Vietnamese and Bru deteriorated further.

By favoring the Vietnamese people over the Bru population, the French cemented a social hierarchy in which the Bru suffered. French botanist, Eugene Poilane, established an experimental garden and new coffee plantation at the Khe Sanh Valley, where the Bru lived. If French colonialism was based on racist understandings of the inferiority of the Vietnamese people, the French saw the animistic religion and lifestyle of the Bru as even more “primitive”

¹¹ Larry R. Jackson, “The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards.” *Asian Survey* 9, no. 5 (May 1969): 316. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642459?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹² In the 1940s, American Evangelical Protestant missionaries helped some tribes in the Central Highlands develop a written language in order to translate and read the Bible. However, this occurred further South than Quang Tri Province. See Raleigh Bailey, “Montagnard Cultural Profile.” *Cultural Orientation Research Center*: 7. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/montagnards-cp>

¹³ Larry R. Jackson, “The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards.”

than the Vietnamese. Thereby convinced that the Bru culture made them unsuitable workers, Poilane imported Vietnamese workers from the eastern portion of the province to work on his plantation.¹⁴ This dynamic cemented a social hierarchy in Quang Tri Province, with French at the top, followed by the Vietnamese, and the Bru sealed as the lowest social class. Eugene Poilane exploited his Vietnamese workers, while also placing the Vietnamese and Bru in opposition. While there is no evidence that Bru and Vietnamese people may have been outwardly at odds in Khe Sanh or elsewhere in Quang Tri, interviews with minority groups throughout South Vietnam by Don Luce and John Sommer from 1958 to 1967 indicate frustration by many ethnic minority populations over the encroachment of Vietnamese people on the Bru way of life.¹⁵ The introduction of Vietnamese people into Khe Sanh probably interrupted the Bru traditional crop rotation system and way of life, causing increased tensions between the groups.¹⁶

While French colonialism favored the Vietnamese by marking them as superior to the Bru, the Vietnamese people suffered from subordination under French rule in the majority of the country. Rigors of life produced disenchantment and anger toward the French. Popular uprisings began to break out, notably in Northern Annam provinces, where Vietnamese nationalists organized strikes, demonstrations, and revolts against French colonialism.¹⁷ These acts of defiance exemplified the country's readiness to gain independence from their colonial rulers.

Nguyen Ai Quoc, more commonly known as Ho Chi Minh, served as the figurehead of the revolutionary movement. Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam in 1911 for France, where he identified

¹⁴ Ray Stubbe, Interview with Jim Kurtz, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center. Dec 2005-Apr 2006.

¹⁵ Don Luce and John Sommer, *Viet Nam- The Unheard Voices* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 69.

¹⁶ Of course, antagonism between indigenous populations and invaders is a common theme in history worldwide. This particular case is important because of the possible implications of whom the Bru pledged their loyalty. A predisposition of the Bru to feel animosity toward the Vietnamese people may lead one to suspect that the Bru welcomed Americans as their allies. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 35.

the dissonance between the touted French value of liberty and the country's exploitative actions abroad in Vietnam. During this time, Ho Chi Minh studied Marxism-Leninism, which particularly appealed to nationalists like him. Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonialism Questions*, for example, denounces imperialistic practices like those of France in Vietnam.¹⁸ With this important influence, Ho Chi Minh vowed to work toward granting Vietnam independence from foreign occupiers, and eventually looked to the Soviet Union and China for help in doing so. With the onset of World War II, Vietnam quickly fell into new hands, this time those of Japan, although France would quickly return after the war ended. In May 1941, amidst this imperial power struggle for the control of Vietnam, Ho announced the creation of an indigenous united front to fight against French and Japan imperialism in Vietnam, known as the Viet nam Doc lap Dong minh Hoi (Vietnam Independence League, or henceforth known as the Viet Minh).¹⁹

The struggle to grow a base of loyal followers began as early as the creation of the Viet Minh. As a part of the month-long military and political training sessions of the Viet Minh, volunteers learned how to fight, and, as historian Pierre Asselin writes, to, "engage civilians to win their hearts and minds."²⁰ In part, doing so was easy. The Vietnamese people had reason to join the Viet Minh because of their established anger at French colonial rule. An estimated 20,000 people in Annam alone enlisted with the Viet Minh at this time, many of whom did so because of this history.²¹ Propaganda campaigns these cadres conducted found success among populations who felt unfairly treated by French rule.

¹⁸ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War* 31.

¹⁹ Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition*, 377.

²⁰ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 39.

²¹ Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition*, 381.

The First Indochina War spurred even greater action and support amongst the Viet Minh. The war began shortly after Japan surrendered to the United States, marking the end of World War II. Ho Chi Minh spoke to a crowd of half a million people in Hanoi to declare independence and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under a communist government. Vietnam's supposed independence would not last. The French, insistent on keeping its important economic hold on Indochina, thus marking the beginning of the First Indochina War.²² Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and China formally recognized Vietnam as an independent country, and Ho Chi Minh as its leader. For ten years, Vietnam served as a battleground, with war taking a toll on the population. By late 1952 during the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh had amassed 150,000 troops with more than five million sympathizers.²³

The Viet Minh shocked the French, and the world, with a decisive victory at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. With this victory, it seemed that after over half a century of French colonialism, independence for Vietnam lay just around the corner. Instead, discussions at the Geneva Convention divided North and South Vietnam. What came after was the Second Indochina War, or as it is called in Vietnam, *Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc*, which roughly translates to *The Resistance War Against America for National Salvation*.²⁴ The name of the war deemphasizes the characterization of the conflict as a civil war, and instead it identifies the United States as an invader and the war as North Vietnam's struggle to unify the country. This modern name of the war stems from the desired narrative that Hanoi wanted to convey to the

²² Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition*, 385.

²³ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 62

²⁴ Le Van Lan identified the full name of the war as, "The Resistance War against American Imperialism for Saving the Country." This translation even further emphasizes America's role as a imperial power taking advantage of Vietnam, as opposed to a Civil War. The translation in text is the most widely accepted translation. Le Van Lan. Interview with the author.

Vietnamese people; North Vietnam was fighting for unification of their country against the United States.

Of the 150,000 troops and five million sympathizers of the Viet Minh, many chose to stay behind in the South and the organization developed into the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong served as both a military and political organization. Militarily, they engaged in guerilla operations against the United States, while politically, the VC worked to organize the Southern Vietnamese people to resist their new government. With the creation of the Viet Cong came the same nationalist fervor as the Viet Minh. Thus, with so many supporters of the North actively working toward unification under the Northern government, Hanoi benefitted from an advantage over South Vietnam in gaining the populations' loyalties.

Hanoi attempted to further gain more indigenous support by evoking the same narrative that led to its success against the French— a history of invasion and resistance that spurred Vietnamese nationalism. Asselin writes that Hanoi cleverly used Vietnam's history as a building block of its propaganda. American historians disagree on the legitimacy of aspects of Vietnam's narrative that their history is marked by multiple resistances against powerful, foreign rulers.²⁵ Whether or not historically true, Hanoi utilized this narrative to illustrate to the Vietnamese people that they had fought foreign powers before, and their fight against the United States would be no different.

Through official and public statements, Hanoi manipulated a history it knew would resonate with the Vietnamese people.²⁶ Not only did Hanoi emphasize this past, but they also

²⁵ Historian William Turley argues that the image of “heroic resistance to foreign rule” is a myth. But William J. Duiker argues that it is a legitimate part of Vietnamese history that the United States ignored in its dealings with South Vietnam. Regardless, the narrative that the revolutionaries developed supported this history. See Asselin, 62; William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995) in Robert J. McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 26.

²⁶ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 62.

controlled the war narrative by manipulating all propaganda. Hanoi vetted all information about the war to stave off opposition, and they punished those who opposed the established narrative.²⁷ Propaganda coming from Hanoi often emphasized the wrongdoings of the Americans, sealing their role as invaders. The My Lai Massacre demonstrates Hanoi's keen ability to turn a gross mistake by the Americans into a symbol to serve the North's purpose.

In March 1968, U.S. troops committed a mass murder of a village of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, an event cemented in history as the My Lai Massacre. The massacre fit in with the historical narrative that North Vietnam had disseminated to the population. Hanoi disseminated photographs of the My Lai incident to villages to educate civilians on the destruction that the American military caused.²⁸ One Vietnamese observer said after Cam Ne, "The ten-year-old children who witnessed their village being burned are the ones who at fifteen will take up rifles for the Viet Cong."²⁹ The same likely was true of the people who witnessed the photographs. While historians cannot be sure that these photographs reached Quang Tri, these images would have instilled great fear in those who saw them, and in turn, many Vietnamese people probably began to recognize the legitimacy of the Hanoi government and their efforts to unify the country.

Hanoi also had an advantage over South Vietnam in winning over the population because of Saigon's many unpopular policies. When the United States government backed Ngo Dinh Diem as the president of South Vietnam, Diem was already an unpopular leader. As a fervent Catholic, Diem ostracized the Buddhist population, a larger population than that of the Catholic people in Vietnam, through a series of repressive acts. This rift came to international attention

²⁷ Ibid., 130.

²⁸ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 182.

²⁹ Peter Brush, "What Really Happened at Cam Ne." *HistoryNet*, June 12, 2006, Accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.historynet.com/what-really-happened-at-cam-ne.htm>

when in 1963, Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death in the streets of Saigon to protest the treatment of Buddhists under Diem. Diem also implemented policies that lacked support most amongst the those in the countryside, which included the population in Quang Tri.³⁰ Monetary support from the United States government bolstered Diem's reputation in the capital city, where it helped support a high standard of living. But this support did nothing to improve the lives of those in the villages (where 90% of the population lived).³¹ These actions likely alienated the Vietnamese people of Quang Tri from South Vietnam even further.

Diem's policies also proved unpopular amongst Montagnard populations. In an attempt to secure Montagnard lands against the Viet Cong, Diem ordered village populations to leave their ancestral homes in the mountains and to move into more secure valleys.³² This action may have appeared more like a cruel forced relocation than an attempt to guard the populations from harm by the VC. The Southern government did not subject the Bru in Quang Tri to this relocation. However, the Bru people would soon also find their ancestral homes disrupted regardless, when the United States built an airbase next to their villages at Khe Sanh.

The Southern Vietnamese people had great reason to support Hanoi. For decades, the population listened to the nationalist narrative of the revolutionaries. Many of them resented Diem's policies. They heard about atrocities that Americans committed. And those in Quang Tri quite literally fell in the middle of this, torn between two governments. Saigon would require extra localized support to counteract the actions of Hanoi and the VC in winning over the population.

³⁰ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³² Truong Nhu Tang, *Vietcong Memoir* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1985) from Robert J. McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008), 278.

A New Force in the South

As the VC grew its influence in the countryside, the South Vietnamese government felt pressure to strengthen its forces, and developed a system of local militias to fill security roles in hamlets. In the early 1960s, the government of South Vietnam established the Dan De, the Vietnamese term for the Popular Forces and Regional Forces, in order to supplement its army. Regional Forces (RFs, or Ruff-Puffs, as the CAP Marines called them) were low ranking troops integrated into the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but operated on a regional level. The Popular Forces (PFs) operated independently from ARVN. These forces consisted of the men who would later work alongside the CAP Marines. Popular Force troops served on a voluntary, part-time basis to ensure the safety and security of the hamlets where they lived. Therefore, PFs were able to stay home near their families and continue working a secondary job to earn extra income. This allowed individuals to guard their own villages in the hopes that they would feel intrinsic motivation to ensure the safety of their homes and families. Vietnamese officers called the Trung-si led the Popular Forces and reported to the village or district chiefs.

Unfortunately, the PFs went unappreciated by the majority of South Vietnamese society. PFs received the lowest pay in the entire Vietnamese Armed forces, which caused a financial burden on their families. The PF served in their role only part-time, but this meant they had less time to dedicate to their original occupation. Balancing these two roles posed a challenge for both the men and their families. Additionally, as the lowest ranked members of the armed forces, regular ARVN troops and even civilians ridiculed the PFs. They received very few weapons, and those that they did receive were outdated, so to many people in the villages. To many, the PFs appeared useless.³³ In her famous memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly

³³ Headquarters III Marine Amphibious Force, Force Order 3121.4A, 17 July 1967. Marine Corp Archives Box 1, Folder 5, Robert Klyman Collection, Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

Hayslip corroborates these views of the PFs, and characterizes the Dan De in her home village as men with little training on how to use the few weapon they were given.³⁴

Despite these deficiencies, the PFs and RFs made up half of the Vietnamese armed forces by 1967. They suffered more casualties, and inflicted more damage on Viet Cong than the regular ARVN forces. Additionally, because there was a PF platoon in all but a single district in South Vietnam, they represented a large quantity of potential manpower. For these reasons, the American Marines saw the PFs as an untapped investment to help bolster their efforts in South Vietnam. Perhaps these forces could help maintain a military presence in the villages to counteract the Viet Cong.

In reality, however, these men may not have been too keen on fulfilling that mission. Intrigued by the PFs' potential impacts on the war effort, the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the U.S. Government contracted the Simulmatics Corporation to conduct a socio-psychological study on the Popular Forces. Their report, published in September 1967, reveals that many rural populations did not believe in the cause they fought for, but felt tired and frustrated by so many years of war. The study's first and most prominent conclusion was that "genuine commitment to ideological and national objectives in the war against the VC was highly questionable." The study confirmed that instead of joining because of their support for the South, men joined the PFs to remain close to home, avoid the ARVN draft, or simply to appease family or their community who wanted to see these positions filled.³⁵ The report further found a profound indifference toward North Vietnam. In interviews with the wives of PF soldiers, 47%

³⁴ Le Ly Hayslip. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* in Robert J. McMahon. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 278.

³⁵ Philip Worchel, Douglas C. Braithwaite, Joseph P. Jackson, Richard M. McWhirter, and Samuel L. Popkin. *A Socio-Psychological Study of Regional/Popular Forces in Vietnam* (New York: The Simulmatics Corporation, 1967), 9.

of them expressed no opinion on North Vietnam, 3% saw North Vietnam as being oppressed by the communists, and 16% said that the people of North Vietnam were poor, hungry, etc. not because of Viet Cong control, but because of U.S. bombings.³⁶

The PF's apparent overwhelming indifference to the politics and ideology of the war sometimes actually concealed a true loyalty to the North. In Le Ly Hayslip's memoir, she writes of ARVN forces temporarily leaving her village and placing their trust in the Popular Forces there. Instead of continuing their mission of fighting VC influence, some of the PF men joined Le and her family one night in hiding materials from the ARVN forces when they returned.³⁷ This action appears much more as an act by people against the South than those who feel indifferent, like the American study conveys. In all, the PFs, which were implemented in every single district of South Vietnam, were unreliable for their political ideologies or motivations for joining the forces. The Americans would have to win over the PFs first if they were to work alongside them.

These findings parallel the decades that Hanoi and the VC had prior to the introduction of CAP to influence and gain support in the rural population. With an unpopular Diem in government, the Viet Cong likely won even more clout amongst the people in Quang Tri Province. Of course, not everyone was won over by the Viet Cong. In 1953, French Army General Henri Navarre created a map to assess the areas of Indochina where the French or the Viet Minh controlled. In this map, most of Quang Tri is shaded as a "zone theoretically French controlled." The western portion of the province is shaded as "zone controlled by the Viet

³⁶ Worchel, *A Socio-Psychological Study of Regional/Popular Forces in Vietnam*, 8.

³⁷ Le Ly Hayslip. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* in Robert J. McMahon. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 278.

Minh.”³⁸ By 1953, the Viet Minh held only partial control of Quang Tri. But a January 1966 map of South Vietnam created by the New York Times provides a much different picture of Quang Tri Province loyalties. Here, the newspaper shaded most of Quang Tri as “areas under vietcong influence.” A large circle in the middle of the province, indicating Cam Lo District where the Marines would soon establish many CAP units, indicates “area controlled by the Vietcong.” The coastline is shaded as a “heavily contested area.”³⁹ If the maps are completely accurate, they reveal that the population had shifted. Now, the VC controlled Quang Tri and were perhaps supported by the people there. With this strong influence and the divided political climate, the CAP Marines would have to work extra hard to “win the hearts and minds” of the people in Quang Tri Province. Their strategy, and the war, depended on it.

³⁸ It should be noted that there is another category, “Zones entirely Vietminh.” So while Quang Tri appear to be controlled by the Viet Minh, support there did not reach the level that it did elsewhere. See Henri Navarre, *The Situation in May 1953* [map]. In: George McTurnan Kahin and Jon W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: the Dial Press, 1967), 34.

³⁹ The New York Times, *South Vietnam: Areas of Control and Influence as of 30 January 1966* [map]. In George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis. *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: The Dial Press, 1967), 238.

Chapter Two: The Tale of the Combined Action Program

For the United States, the French defeat at the battle at Dien Bien Phu was alarming. In the Cold War, America saw Vietnam as the access point for the spread of communism in all of Southeast Asia. They worried for the implications of what the United States coined, “The Domino Effect.” As President Eisenhower explained, “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”¹ The United States government, which had supported the French in the First Indochina War, feared that the fragility of the Southeast Asia region meant that the fall of Vietnam to communism would inevitably result in the collapse of a “free” Southeast Asia.

For the next ten years, the U.S. government attempted various nation-building techniques to strengthen South Vietnam against the North. The United States threw support behind Ngo Dinh Diem, a government official who had previously worked under the French, and a staunch anti-communist. Using psychological tactics, the U.S. aimed to encourage emigration from North to South and produced leaflets designed to embarrass the Northern government and encourage Southerners to support Diem instead.² In the meantime, the U.S. provided South Vietnam with monetary aid and began training a South Vietnamese Army in conventional warfare.

In the early 1960s, however, revolutionary activities in South Vietnam increased. North Vietnam hoped to overthrow Diem with what appeared to be an indigenous revolution from the South without provoking U.S. intervention. The North Vietnamese operatives in the South

¹ *Public Papers of the President: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958), found in Robert J. McMahon. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 85.

² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York City: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 54

reopened intelligence and propaganda networks, and in this time, support for the Southern government waned further.³ According to historian George Herring, the Diem government's disapproval amongst the population, and his disregard for cooperating with the United States, eventually led the U.S. government to support the coup that killed him.⁴ In late 1964, following years of limited commitments to protecting South Vietnam, with American politicians carefully balancing between the potential collapse of South Vietnam, the greater threat of communism, and fears of losing a war, the American government reiterated its pledge to defend South Vietnam.

To command the war in Vietnam, President Johnson appointed General William Westmoreland, who advocated for a drastic expansion of ground and air forces and the adoption of an offensive strategy.⁵ Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy aimed to locate and eliminate North Vietnamese units and the Viet Cong. According to Westmoreland, "[t]hey had to be pounded with artillery and bombs and eventually brought to battle on the ground if they were not forever to remain a threat."⁶ Westmoreland's strategy constituted the majority of the United States' efforts in Vietnam and involved tremendous amounts of weaponry and manpower to sustain.

In 1965, the Marines tried an alternative strategy that would evolve into the Combined Action Program. The Marine narrative states that Combined Action resulted from Lieutenant Paul Ek's experiences in defending a hamlet at Phu Bai in 1965. When Ek needed more troops, his superiors recommended he utilize the Popular Forces. In turn, Ek developed a strategy that emphasized cross-cultural communication and aimed to gain the trust and loyalty of the

³ Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 82.

⁴ Ibid. 114.

⁵ Ibid. 165.

⁶ Ibid. 179.

Vietnamese people. Parts of this story are true- Ek's platoon did kick off what would become the Combined Action Program. Yet this narrative ignores aspects of the Marine Corps' history and culture that led to Ek's strategy. A history of Marine counterinsurgency, the Corps' self-perception as the premier military branch, and a need to recreate the war narrative all contributed to Ek's strategy and the Marines' incorporation of the strategy in a new program.

The Marines and the Army have historically held different beliefs in how war should be fought, and this dissonance permeated the Vietnam War discussion. The Marines celebrated a history of counterinsurgency strategy, most notably in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, a series of American interventions known as the Banana Wars.⁷ The Marines regarded their experiences in Latin America as successes and codified their tactics in their *Small Wars Manual*, the first of a continuously updated series published in 1940.⁸ But in general, U.S. military culture (apart from the Marines) embraced the big conventional war paradigm and the U.S. Army notably viewed these small wars experiences as anomalies.⁹ So when deciding how best to approach Vietnam, Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy made sense to the Army. The Marines, on the other hand, likened the circumstances in Vietnam to what they had encountered in Latin America, where the war depended less on sheer force, and more on a localized strategy. To these Marines, such as William Corson, Westmoreland's strategy needed a shift. Corson insisted that to win the war in Vietnam, the U.S. Military needed to place a greater emphasis on the Other War and the pacification efforts and appropriate strategies that went along with it.¹⁰

⁷ Jeannie Johnson, *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: lessons Learned and Lost in America's Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Press, 2018), 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Robert M. Cassidy. "Back to the Street Without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars." In *U.S. Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007: Anthology and Selected Bibliography* by Colonel Stephen S. Evans (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps., 2008), 14.

¹⁰ William Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: WW. Norton, 1968), 14

But in addition to the Marines' expertise in this type of strategy, the Marines' unique culture may have also played into their belief that the Army's tactics were wrong for Vietnam. The Marine Corps, like other military branches, crafts a strong narrative to convince young men to volunteer for their positions. But the Marine Corps go further in creating a sense of superiority compared to other branches of the military. In some sense, this superiority is justified. The Marines require the most difficult boot camp, are most selective in choosing their recruits, and send troops to the roughest and most difficult areas of war. But this all culminates in an inflated sense of self. Victor Krulak, Special Assistant to Counter Insurgency Activities during the Vietnam War explained that, "woven through [the Marine] sense of belonging, like a steel thread, is an elitist spirit. Marines are convinced that, being few in number, they are selective, better and above all, different."¹¹ This bravado and elitist spirit that the Marines hold makes it likely that the Marine attitude culminated in the idea that their own solutions were superior to those of the Army.

Another potential reason why strategists sought out alternative methods for fighting the war was the impact of Westmoreland's strategy on the war narrative and public opinion. Much of the American public did not know what to make of the 1965 decision to increase the number of troops in Vietnam, but soon, they would feel bombarded by horrific images and stories of the war. The November 26, 1965 edition of *Life Magazine* exemplifies this. An image of a Vietnamese man, eyes and mouth taped over, stretches over the magazine's cover. The tagline identifies that the man belongs to the Viet Cong, and in the photo the Marines hold him prisoner. The name of the issue across the top of the page reads, "The Blunt Reality of War in Vietnam."

¹¹ Johnson, *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: lessons Learned and Lost in America's Wars*, 66.

Other photos in the spread include a mother holding a child, spattered with blood.¹² On one hand, the issue does share heroic stories of the American military. But on the whole, the issue demonstrates the graphic images of war that Americans soon encountered nightly on their home television, and would help lead to the growing anti-war movement.

The Marines in particular felt pressure to rework their image after the public destruction of Cam Ne. In August 1965, in response to a supposed VC force coming from the hamlet, the Marines destroyed the Cam Ne village complex. Correspondent Morley Safer and South Vietnamese cameraman, Ha Thuc Can, accompanied the Marines. CBS broadcast the report.¹³ The American public was shocked by the footage and the Marines suffered from this huge public relations disaster. The Marines needed a new narrative. Perhaps the Marines gained inspiration from Safer's report. Over images of the scene at Cam Ne, Safer narrated, "there is little doubt that American firepower can win a military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side."¹⁴

Strategists may have thought that a new war rhetoric, one that sounded more peaceful, could help counter the growing discontent with the war effort. As a rhetorical tool, "winning hearts and minds" evokes a softer version of the war. It emphasizes the war as a diplomatic struggle rather than a gruesome battle. Knowing this, American leaders explicitly used this phrase in order to garner public support. The "hearts and minds" quotation that I used to begin this thesis originates from Johnson's speech at the Texas Electric Cooperatives. Johnson's brief remarks laud the Texas Electric team working in South Vietnam in "bring[ing] the healing

¹² Michael Mok. "The Blunt Reality of War in Vietnam." *Life*. November 26, 1965.

¹³ Peter Brush, "What Really Happened at Cam Ne." *HistoryNet*, June 12, 2006, Accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.historynet.com/what-really-happened-at-cam-ne.htm>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

miracle of electricity to that poor, war-torn countryside.”¹⁵ The use of the “hearts and minds” phrase paints a new view of the war, one where humanitarian aid helps to gain the trust of the people. The turn toward military strategies that also emphasized this war narrative seems a rational step by commanders who now understood the dangers of a negative media portrayal.

With more troops pouring into South Vietnam in 1965, the Marines experimented with pacification strategies in I Corp to counter the search-and-destroy strategy of Westmoreland. They commonly advocated the implementation of civic action programs, which included the building of infrastructure or giving out of supplies such as soap or medicine. But according to Corson, civic action programs were not countering the Viet Cong’s influence like the Marines anticipated. While Corson did not explain why, part of this failure likely stemmed from resentment of being given charity, or feelings of being taken advantage. The Marine official histories, a set of volumes that outline the Marine involvement from Vietnam from before 1965 until 1971 published by the Marine Corp History and Museums Division, claim that when Marines first proposed ambitious projects (building homes, hospitals, etc.), the Vietnamese population lacked the motivation to pursue them. They instead saw these long-term projects as unnecessary and impossible to complete.¹⁶ Corson recalled that these civic action projects did not lead to the “miraculous transformation of the hearts and minds into support,” as the Marines desired.¹⁷ In some cases, the population may have realized that these gifts were simply tools to gain their loyalty. The line between enacting a project useful to the community that did not also offend the population may have been finer than the Marines thought. William Corson wrote that the failure of civic action programs catalyzed CAP, and “at that point, the Marines looked into

¹⁵ Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), p.112.

¹⁶ Jack Shulimson and Major Charles M. Johnson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978), 144.

¹⁷ Corson, *The Betrayal*, 177.

their history, adapted what they found there, and the first Combined Action Company was born.”¹⁸

The final catalyst to Combined Action was the need to make a localized change in June 1965 at Phu Bai. The 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines had just incorporated a new 10 square mile area into their command. Lieutenant Colonel William “Woody” Taylor expected extra forces to defend this new territory, but the Marines redirected the troops set to meet him, leaving Taylor to make do with his own force. Because of his troop shortage, the Marines granted Taylor operational control of the 6 Popular Forces platoons, essentially the local Vietnamese militia, in the village.¹⁹ Taylor handed over the command of the PFs to First Lt. Paul Ek for what would be the first time the U.S. military formally worked alongside the Popular Forces.

According to the Marine official histories and an interview of Marine Paul Ek in 1966, Taylor easily and successfully integrated the Popular Forces into his command at Phu Bai.²⁰ Taylor called upon First Lt. Paul Ek, at the time a young officer stationed in Da Nang, to establish an experimental unit in Phu Bai. The decision to place Paul Ek in command rested on his strong track record in the Marines thus far and knowledge of the Vietnamese language, which he learned at a FMFPAC (Fleet Marine Force, Pacific) pilot course in Okinawa. Over two months in the course, he spent six days a week, ten hours a day, studying the language.²¹ By the time he completed the program, he held an adequate mastery of the language, especially compared to his other Marine counterparts, who rarely received any language training.

¹⁸ Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup*, 144.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Paul Ek, interview by D.J. Hunter, 24 Jan 1966, U.S. Marine Corp History Division, Oral History Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Jan 13 2009.

Taylor ordered Paul Ek to take control of the Phu Bai area bounded by the Dai Dong River, controlled by the Viet Cong. Taylor and Ek recognized that if the VC increased their influence and control to the nearby villages, the enemy gained ready access to the Phu Bai Air Base, a potential disaster for the United States Military. Taylor told Ek to clear the area of VC, or at least neutralize their impact by diminishing the VC presence within the villages.²² With this goal in mind, Ek handpicked every Marine in his platoon, paying close attention to those who he believed could best interact with the Vietnamese population. He chose men who enthusiastically volunteered and subjected them to one week's training before entering the villages, which included the study of Vietnamese language and culture. With a small platoon of Marines, and the task of organizing six PF platoons of thirty to forty men each, Ek trained the Marines to make sure they understood the cultural context of their presence. He explained in his interview a few years later, "I told them when to use 'sir' or 'you'."²³ This distinction reveals Ek's particular focus on the concept of hierarchy and the Marines' place in the village. In the Vietnamese language, the pronouns one uses differ depending on the age and status of both the person speaking and to whom one is speaking. For example, one refers to someone of the same age as "you", but will use different pronouns for a man a couple years older than the speaker, a father, or a man of a grandfather's age. Ek placed considerable focus on teaching his Marines their place in the Vietnamese hierarchical society that they would encounter.

According to Ek, the Marines spent the first week in the village solely interacting with the PFs. He ignored the civilians of the village to allow them some time to acclimate to the Marine presence without threatening their sense of normalcy. Ek's focus on the Vietnamese hierarchy and cultural understanding placed the Marines in a much humbler position within the

²² Paul Ek, Interview by D.J. Hunter.

²³ Ibid.

hamlets, which, Ek concluded, contributed to the success of his mission and was appreciated by those living there. In all, Ek concluded that the people could not be won over by a large impersonal group, but rather, the people in the village could be won over on a person-to-person basis, with personal appeal rather than with official propaganda. With time and effort building relationships, the Vietnamese began telling the Marines intelligence about the Viet Cong, suggesting to Ek that they had gained their trust.²⁴

Satisfied with the results of Ek's combined strategy with the PFs in Phu Bai, the Marines created the first Joint Action Company (JAC) on August 1, 1965. The JAC Program was the preliminary stage of what would become CAP. Limited to the area near Da Nang, most of these units operated like Ek's trial run. The JAC Program, which would quickly be renamed CAC and then CAP, grew tremendously in its first few years, reaching 79 platoons in December 1967 and 110 in May 1970.²⁵ In all, the decisions made by Ek in his platoon contributed to the reality and legacy of CAP.

The decisions made by Ek to put the Marines through extensive training on Vietnamese culture and language, and to emphasize the social structure of Vietnamese society, all made their way into CAP's operations, with the platoons in theory operating like Ek's. These idealistic themes integrated into the CAP Program made it easy for those like Corson, or the rest of the Marine Corps, to latch onto CAP as a viable option for Vietnam. During this period of growth, Marine leaders saw that three out of every four CAP Marines chose to extend their stays in Vietnam. This held true even though there was an 80% probability of being wounded once, and a 25% of being wounded twice.²⁶ The high rate of Marines that chose to stay in their CAPs led

²⁴ Corson, *The Betrayal*, 177.

²⁵ FMFPAC Monthly Reports, 1967-1970. Box 2, Folder 2, Robert Klyman Collection, Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

²⁶ Corson, *The Betrayal*, 84.

Corson and other Marine leaders to conclude that the men involved truly believed they were making a difference. General Walt, seeing successes similar to Ek's back in Phu Bai, wrote in retrospect that CAP's results were, "far beyond our most optimistic hopes."²⁷

The Evolution of CAP

But regardless of the idealistic themes that CAP claimed, historians and veterans alike find it challenging to generalize the CAP Program, since it changed in many different ways over its short lifespan. Anecdotes on the CAP Veterans Facebook page reveal that individuals experienced drastically different-looking units depending on when and where they joined CAP.²⁸ The modifications made to CAP help illuminate some of its internal and external problems, and reveal a spectrum of how this program could look in action. Slowly it grows clear that many of the program's proclaimed ideals eventually could not withstand the reality of war.

One major change in the Program was in the recruitment of CAP Marines. Paul Ek, in the creation of the first CAP, handpicked his platoon. This worked on a small-scale, but the CAP Program needed a more standardized screening process to keep up with the demands of the program. At first, the Marines delineated very specific and clear requirements to join the CAP Marines. Eligibility for the program depended on four months of previous combat experience, a high recommendation from their commanding officer, no disciplinary action and no manifestation of xenophobia. Corson insisted in his book that at the program's beginnings, he even tried to personally interview each candidate.²⁹ These criteria, which focused on experience

²⁷ Lewis W. Walt. *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 105.

²⁸ Bill Nimmo. 2018. CAP Marine History: Memories, Facebook.com, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1466572823656975>

²⁹ Corson, *The Betrayal*, 183.

and personal relationships, seems logical for a program emphasizing person-to-person interactions. But even relatively early in the program, during Colonel Edward F. Danowitz's reign as Director of CAP from 1968-1969, these criteria broke down. Danowitz explained:

We did have occasions where first sergeants would submit lists of people who were not volunteers and had no idea what the program was about; they were getting rid of their deadwood. However, once these people were interviewed, this was quickly determined and we sent them back to their units immediately.³⁰

Perhaps Danowitz's account downplays the level to which entrance to CAP grew laxer.

Regardless, the idealized method of choosing CAP Marines, with personal interviews and strict qualifications, slowly succumbed to CAP's quick growth. Peterson, a veteran of the CAP program himself, can attest to this. In his case, he recognized that other military units looked upon the CAP Marines as misfits. Commanders understood that by volunteering their men for the CAPs, they could essentially rid their platoon of their least valued men, so some commanders pressured these men to volunteer themselves.³¹ The result could be a CAP filled not with the motivated men that Corson and Ek envisioned, but instead with the boys other Marine commanders wanted gone. Additionally, in dealing with a growing program, CAP leaders had less scrutiny over volunteers, and took men who may not have gained acceptance in previous years. This all played further into the development of the rumor that the CAP Marines were misfits.

CAP Marines also had a reputation of constant injury. Rocky Jay, a CAP Marine in Quang Tri in 1968, recalled passing two Army men on the way to his CAP. When they heard where he was headed, the men laughed and said, "We're always going out and picking up what's

³⁰ Albert Hemingway, "Col. Edward F. Danowitz," *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 106.

³¹ Michael Peterson. *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*, 33.

left of them.”³² Because of CAP’s reputation as a dangerous job, some commanders purposely sent men into the CAP Program as punishment. For Trust Israel, who was sent to Quat Xa in Quang Tri Province, his journey into a CAP relied on his commander’s dislike of him. The Marines required Israel’s commander to send one person to the CAP unit, and picked Israel out of spite. Circumstance and punishment, not the distinction as a qualified candidate, brought Israel to his CAP.³³ The pressures of filling the new CAP units often led to the demise of the program’s idealized way of screening Marines for the job.

Historians and veterans often discuss the uniqueness of the CAP Program by emphasizing the training and education courses required to participate in the program, but those requirements too dwindled over time. Paul Ek strongly believed that the success of CAP depended on cultural understanding, so the Marines established a CAP School near Da Nang. In ten days, the school covered the essentials, like Vietnamese phrases and culture, civic action concepts, military refreshers, and how to train the Popular Forces. A Marine Minister, Richard McGonigal, took particular interest in the idea of giving the Marines cross-cultural training. With the support of the Marines, he embarked on several studies of the Marines and Popular Forces, analyzing their perception of how much the groups “liked” the other.

After finding that the percentage of Marines who claimed to like the Vietnamese were far more than the percentage of Vietnamese who *thought* the Marines liked them, McGonigal created the Personal Response Project.³⁴ His project aimed to train and educate the CAP Marines on Vietnamese culture and customs to connect more closely with the Vietnamese in the hamlets.

³² Albert Hemingway, “Rocky Jay,” *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 113.

³³ Trust Israel. Interview with the Author.

³⁴ Assessment of Attitudes of Third Marine Amphibious Force Toward the Vietnamese, June 1967. Box 17, Folder 11, Vietnam: Personal Response Project, 1967-1968. Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

The Personal Response Project developed pamphlets sent through Marine circulations. These pages would, for example, offer valuable phrases for the Marines to use with the ethnic Vietnamese or Bru people. The pages also encouraged CAP Marines to reflect on their interactions with those living in the hamlets. One page that McGonigal made as a prototype for the program said, “Only 46% of Vietnamese Civilians feel we like them as people. But 62% of our Marines listed positive things they like about Vietnamese people. WHY? WHAT IS WRONG HERE?”³⁵ This pamphlet, and others like it, aimed to encourage the CAP Marines to reflect on their treatment of the Vietnamese, in order to find ways in which they could improve this statistic. McGonigal found internal success within the Marines, which allowed him to provide many CAP units with access to these materials. McGonigal also believed that the program was making a real difference with the Marines he encountered. Those who received cultural sensitivity training personally from McGonigal reported a greater percentage of Marines who liked the Vietnamese people.³⁶ McGonigal hoped that with a greater understanding of the Vietnamese, the Marines would treat them with more respect and they, in turn, would see that the Marines *did* “like them”. Unfortunately, McGonigal never tested if this translated in the way he anticipated. McGonigal’s papers, including his correspondences and plans for training CAPs disappear around mid-1967, suggesting that these education efforts never reached their potential.

From the administrative perspective, it appears that the Marines made efforts to curate a culturally sensitive and beneficial training program through McGonigal’s efforts. However, many Marines did not feel like they received this type of training after finishing the CAP school.

³⁵ Personal Response Project Pamphlet. N.D. Box 3, Folder 6, Vietnam: Personal Response Project, 1967-1968. Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

³⁶ Assessment of Attitudes of Third Marine Amphibious Force Toward the Vietnamese, June 1967. Folder 11, Box 17. Vietnam: Personal Response Project, 1967-1968. Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

Ed Palm, for example, attended the CAP school for two weeks before joining his platoon, and recalled later that combat training dominated his training. Fifteen years later, what stuck out to him most was when a sergeant spoke to the group about Vietnamese sexuality and potential homosexual advances from the PFs. “Most of us,” Palm wrote, “resolved not to get too close to PFs if we could help it.”³⁷ Others, like veteran Trust Israel, who served in Vietnam from 1967-1968, did not receive any formal CAP training at all, suggesting that this oft-praised aspect of the CAP Program was not widespread throughout the program’s history.

The CAP Program is also so difficult to generalize because of its many administrative changes, and one of the most notable of these changes came from a lack of oversight within the Marines to foster cultural sensitivity. Before CAP served as the acronym for the program, Marines referred it as JAC and then CAC. The Marine administration felt that the “joint” part of the Joint Action Program implied that the program set up two separate forces (the PFs and the Marines), each performing unique missions. In actuality, the Marines and PFs went on integrated missions alongside one another. Certain that “combined” gave a better impression of the program than “joint”, the Marines renamed units, “Combined Action Company”, or CAC for short. Yet in 1967, it grew clear that CAC was a horrible name for the units, and in fact, the administration had overlooked the Vietnamese perspective in drafting the program’s title. “Cac” in Vietnamese is a euphemism for penis. For a program with cultural understanding in mind, this mistake sounds hilarious in hindsight but it was embarrassing for the Marine Corp at the time. When the Vietnamese PFs or villagers encountered the Marines, they learned to identify them as a crude term. This made for an awkward conversation between the Vietnamese and Americans, and the hilarity to some of the Vietnamese people at the Marines being called “penis” could completely

³⁷ Edward Palm, “Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of the Combined Action Program,” *Marine Corp Gazette*, Jan 1988, 36.

delegitimize any authority that the Marines held.³⁸ The name change from JAC to CAC to CAP does not just represent the changing administration of this nascent program, it also illuminates CAP's attempts and struggles to manifest its goal of cross-cultural cooperation into an actual program.

Historians and political scientists may feel most frustrated with one particular inconsistency within CAP. The lack of consistently stated goals of the program makes evaluating the program's success so difficult. Every document or individual who discusses CAP's goals offers a unique list of objectives. They contain definite overlaps in concepts, but never exact similarities. The FMFPAC (Fleet Marine Force, Pacific) Monograph, for example, detailed notable Marine efforts monthly for military figures, its section on CAP includes a scorecard with weighted values for different pacification indicators. Out of a total 100 points, the heaviest weighted items were VC force units destroyed or driven out (15 points), local defense forces trained and in place (12 points) and VC infrastructure discovered and destroyed or neutralized (8 points).³⁹ The remaining 65 points spread across 20 different items, from completing a town census to ensuring public health needs were met. Other sources, like the 4th CAG Command Chronologies, also offered scorecards in a hamlet evaluation worksheet.⁴⁰ This allowed commanders to rate the level of corruption in hamlet officials, evaluate the access to drinking water, and record tax collection by either the GVN or Viet Cong.⁴¹ Again, most of the worksheet allowed commanders to evaluate their progress in reaching goals similar to those stated in the FMFPAC Monograph, although it was still a completely different schema used to determine

³⁸ Corson, *The Betrayal*, 180.

³⁹ The Marine CAP, Vietnam FMFPAC Monograph. Box 1, Folder 4, The Robert Klyman Collection. Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico, H2-H4.

⁴⁰ The Command Chronologies offer a list of all CAP activities for the month via papers written by captains of platoons.

⁴¹ 4th CAG Command Chronology, Oct 1968. U.S. Marine Corp History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Dec 1 2004.

success. Finally, William Corson too listed CAP's goals, this time defining them as the same as the Popular Forces' stated missions; they were (1) Destroy the VC infrastructure, (2) Protect Public Security, (3) Maintain law and order, (4) Organize people's intelligence nets, and (5) Participate in civic action and propaganda against the Viet Cong.⁴² Again, the same themes arise here as in the Command Chronologies and FMFPAC Monograph.

What remains troubling is that the program never standardized its mission. No two lists of goals are ever duplicated, nor do they at least use the same format or verbiage. If CAP commanders did fill out any of these forms, they no longer exist. So not only were these goals never clearly stated, but historians also lack the information that could help determine if the goals were met. Supposedly objective sources that do evaluate the CAPs lack credibility. The FMFPAC reports claim that the program found great success, but they never clarify the metrics that conclusion is based on. Many historians also refer to these reports, "Krulak's Fables", based on then-Commanding General Victor Krulak's unreliable reputation and on the political nature of these documents in their advocacy of the Marine agenda.⁴³

Because of this, assessing "success" across the 114 total hamlets in which CAP operated proves difficult. One must ask oneself a plethora of questions in order to begin to grapple with this challenge: Success according to whom? Which scorecard should one use? By what metric should one measure CAP? Meanwhile, the sources available, mostly personal experiences supplemented by the Command Chronologies, do not provide all the data points to assess the scorecards. I argue, however, that a regional magnification of the program with the sources available allows us to gain a thick description of how CAP operated. From there, we can better evaluate CAP's success, and identify the program's struggles, in winning hearts and minds. On

⁴² Corson, *The Betrayal*, 184.

⁴³ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*, 5.

the border between the two countries, the American military must have seen Quang Tri Province as an important region to secure from the Viet Cong. Here lived the “hearts and minds” that were most strategically important, but also the hardest for the CAP Marines to win.

Chapter Three: The Hearts and Minds in Quang Tri

John Balanco, a CAP Marine at Khe Sanh, said in hindsight to fellow veteran Albert Hemingway that, “the whole experience [in Vietnam] was like a painting on glass that broke. Each of us walked away with a few pieces, and it has only been in the past few years the want to reconstruct the painting.”¹ Other veterans of the Vietnam War often echo this statement. Peoples’ individual experiences were limited and each CAP Marine returned home with just a piece of the war based on his experiences of the program’s operations in the hamlet in which the Marines placed him. One must reassemble these independent fragments like a puzzle in order to understand the CAPs in Quang Tri as a whole.

Quang Tri held the smallest number of CAP units of any other province, with only 19 platoons in the province at the peak of the program in the Province in April 1969.² In each of those 19 hamlets another piece of Balanco’s glass painting took form, making up the CAP story. In this chapter, I flesh out the most comprehensive stories from CAP units, those from Khe Sanh, the Tiger Papa units near Cam Lo, and those from Quat Xa. Each of these locations brought unique struggles for the Marines, and today, each illuminates some of the complex issues involved with the CAP Program and conducting counterinsurgencies in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Determining whether or not CAP “worked” proves incredibly challenging. As mentioned before, there existed no standardized way to evaluate success, or even a standard for what success could mean for the CAPs. What remained consistent throughout CAP, however, is its association with the strategy of “winning hearts and minds”. Using the CAP units at Khe Sanh, Cam Lo, and Quat Xa, this chapter aims to discover if hearts and minds of the Vietnamese

¹ Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 64.

² FMFPAC Monthly Report, 1967. Box 2, Folder 2, Robert Klyman Collection, Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

people really were won in such a contentious province. Or, perhaps “winning hearts and minds” was an impossible feat for the American Marines.

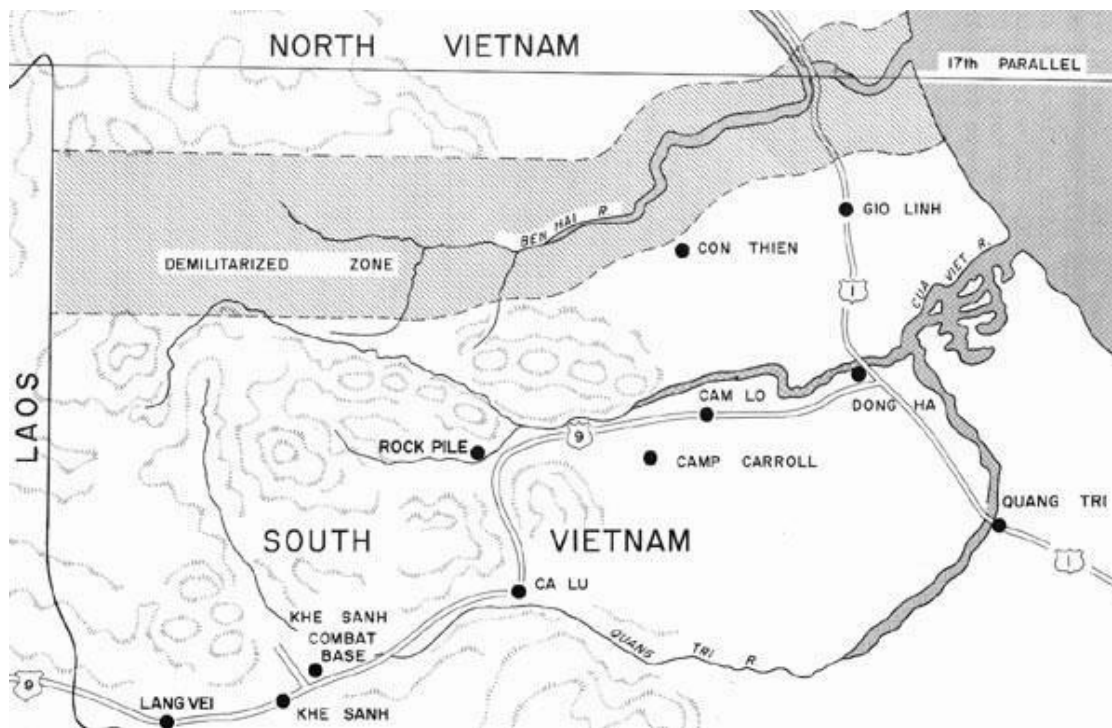
Khe Sanh- The OSCAR CACs

The Marines established their first CAP units in Quang Tri Province in February 1967 in Khe Sanh Valley.³ 1,200 Vietnamese people lived in the main village of Khe Sanh and in the surrounding villages lived just over 10,000 people who identified with the Bru ethnic minority.⁴ Long before the creation of these CAP units, the U.S. Army under General Westmoreland identified Khe Sanh as an important location to secure because of its strategically valuable location, and established an Army base there in 1962 (See Map 4). The valley sat along Route 9, allowing the U.S. forces to cut off the road from Viet Cong infiltrators while also offering the Army an easy supply route. The city of Dong Ha, where the Army had backup forces, lay only 4 kilometers northeast of Khe Sanh.⁵ In all, the base at Khe Sanh served as an American buffer in case of a large scale attack from North Vietnam.

³ At the time, they were called CAC units (the named from CAC to CAP later that year). For the sake of consistency, I will refer to them as CAPs.

⁴ Ray Stubbe. Interview with Jim Kurtz. Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center. Dec 2005-Apr 2006.

⁵ Minh, Ta Con Airport Relics Tour Guide. Ta Con Airport Relics, Huong Hoa, Vietnam. May 21, 2018.



Map 4: Ray Stubbe's map shows Khe Sanh's location (bottom left of map) in relation to the DMZ, Dong Ha, and the rest of Route 9.⁶

In February 1967, five years into an established American presence at Khe Sanh, military personnel noticed an increased level of Viet Cong activity nearby, and decided to activate three CAP units to quell the VC influence. At this time, the Marines named each CAP a lettered system, and designated these three units, CACO O-1, O-2, and O-3.⁷ Using the NATO phonetic alphabet, Marines colloquially referred to them as the Oscar CAPs. The Marines placed two Oscar platoons in Khe Sanh Village, and one more CAP just outside Khe Sanh Combat Base. The CAP units at Khe Sanh would only last a year. With the onset of the Battle of Khe Sanh in January 1968, the Marines swiftly disbanded the units due to the gravity of the battle and the

⁶ Ray Stubbe. *Quang Tri Province* [map]. In: *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1991). Reproduced with permission from the author.

⁷ Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and David A. Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*. (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums D U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1997), 622.

larger anxiety over the Tet Offensive.⁸ The CAP Marines were immediately pulled out from Khe Sanh, leaving their Popular Force counterparts to make do without them.⁹

Despite producing few sources given its short run, the CAPs at Khe Sanh present a unique and important case study. Only here did CAP Marines interact and work alongside individuals who did not belong to the Kinh ethnic group, commonly referred to as *the* Vietnamese ethnic group.¹⁰ Instead, they dealt largely with the Bru people, an entirely new population with different customs and a unique language that their training had not covered.¹¹

Today, narratives of the war often provide positive tales of Montagnard relationships with the Americans they encountered. The Army's official historical publication, *American Military History*, explains that the long-standing history of animosity between the Vietnamese and Montagnards made it less likely for the ethnic minorities to willingly cooperate with ARVN. Instead, Montagnard populations readily sided with the Americans. As the publication explains, "Treated with disdain by the lowland Vietnamese, Montagnards developed close, trusting relationships with their Army advisors."¹² This narrative parallels the history of strained relationships between the Bru and Vietnamese in Quang Tri. Based on this historic bitterness,

⁸ The Tet Offensive refers to the coordinated attack by North Vietnam against the South in hopes that the South Vietnamese people would join in and defeat the United States. While the objective of North Vietnam ultimately was not met, many historians consider it a turning point in the war as it led to great resistance against the war at home. The Battle of Khe Sanh was the first major battle leading up to the Tet Offensive. See "The Tet Offensive" in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (4th edition) for more.

⁹ John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

¹⁰ Don Luce and John Sommer, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

¹¹ The U.S. Army Special Forces were the main group that interacted with the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. John Southard in his book *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* extensively explains the differences between the Combined Action Program and the U.S. Army Special Forces in his second chapter, titled, "Combined Action Platoons, Green Berets, and Mobile Advisory Teams."

¹² Maurice Matloff, "The U.S. Army in Vietnam." *American Military History* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1973), 630, <https://history.army.mil/books/AMH/AMH-28.htm>.

one may speculate that the Bru sided with the CAP Marines when the CAPs at Khe Sanh formed. But instead, the CAPs at Khe Sanh reveal that this supposed narrative lies far from reality.¹³

Evaluating how well the Oscar CAPs adapted to working with and training the Bru people proves a difficult task. On one hand, the CAP Marines appear to have felt sympathetic toward the Bru people. Some Marines even wrote letters home asking their families to send clothing and other goods to the Bru they worked alongside.¹⁴ Whether this came from a place of mutual respect or pity it at least appears that the CAP Marines wanted to use their role to help the Bru if possible.

The CAP Marines' administration also reacted well to the challenge of training the Marines for the Bru culture. Recognizing the uniqueness of the Bru population, and attempting to move Marines away from viewing the Bru as primitive people, the Marines gave influential chaplain, Richard McGonigal, the authority to develop the Personal Response Project. The project aimed to foster cultural sensitivity amongst the CAP Marines so that they gained empathy for the Vietnamese people, but McGonigal also recognized that CAP training had not prepared the men to interact with the Bru. McGonigal developed and distributed documents to teach CAP Marines the Bru language and cultural norms. These pamphlets include drawings of the Bru people in their traditional homes of bamboo huts on stilts. Some pamphlets also list useful

¹³ The idea that the Montagnards cooperated with the South persists as a common narrative of the Montagnard experience in the Vietnam War. However, while the U.S. Army, and other established sources, make this argument, other studies counter this fact. Researcher Larry R. Jackson in a 1969 article wrote that many Montagnard populations heard about North Vietnam granting autonomous zones to ethnic minority groups in the North. Many Montagnards, Jackson argues, interpreted this political development as a sign that Montagnards enjoyed greater rights under the North's government. In contrast, South Vietnam developed a strategy of assimilation to handle the Montagnard people. This policy devalued Montagnard groups' individual attributes, and many Montagnard people turned away from the South. See Larry R. Jackson, "The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards." *Asian Survey* 9, no. 5 (May 1969), 320, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642459?seq=15#metadata_info_tab_contents. This dissonance between a historical narrative and reality parallels my argument regarding the narrative of CAP and its reality. In both cases, the U.S. Military propagates a desired story, while in actuality, the intricacies of the story are much more nuanced. As to why this happens, one must look into what the military gains from pushing a particular narrative. For CAP, this will be discussed in the conclusion.

¹⁴ Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*, 162.

phrases, a short history of the Bru people, and tips for getting along.¹⁵ Chaplains disseminated these pamphlets to platoon commanders, in the hopes that as many CAP boys as possible would gain insight into the local population.

But while both the letters home asking for donations for the Bru and the Personal Response Project indicate a desire on the part of the CAP Marines to reach out to the Bru, it is ultimately unclear what type of feelings the Marines had toward the villagers, or vice versa. No materials exist to evaluate the effectiveness of the Personal Response Project, and eventually the effort fizzled out. Additionally, while some testimonies of CAP veterans discuss their relationships with the Bru, they are potentially unreliable. These testimonies were gathered after the war had ended, and thus, are impacted by hindsight. For example, John Balanco does not discuss the Bru people before the battle, but he does recall the traumatic scene of physically pushing the local people off a Marine chopper so that they could successfully take off and flee Khe Sanh. He then expresses anger and sadness toward the abandonment of the Bru.¹⁶ Colored by horrific images and experiences similar to Balanco's, perhaps accounts like this unintentionally paint a more favorable narrative of the relationship between the two groups.

If the Bru were likely to support the Americans, as implied by the Army's official narratives and a history of animosity between the Vietnamese and Montagnards, then one could assume that the Marines easily won over the Bru peoples' loyalties. However, it appears that for much of the Bru population, choosing loyalties was much more of a complex process, and one that divided the community. Ho Noong, a member of the Bru ethnic minority group who still lives in Huong Hoa today, recalls his family supporting efforts against the French and Americans

¹⁵ Personal Response Project Flyer "In Vietnam's Highlands", June 1 1967, Box 17, Folder 3: Vietnam, Personal Response Project, 1967-1968. Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections. Marine Corps Base Quantico.

¹⁶ Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 64

by carrying supplies.¹⁷ Born in 1960, Ho Noong spent much of his early childhood attempting to find safety from the war. He recalls how his community attempted to leave their homes in Quang Tri, and escape to the north side of the DMZ. But the North refused their entry. The officials there insisted that they needed to keep the Bru population who supported the North within Quang Tri. That way, the North could rely on the physical presence of North Vietnam's supporters in such a contentious area. That left Ho Noong's community no choice but to live nomadically, moving from cave to cave in the mountainous wilderness. According to him, his community lived off the jungle, which often suffered from Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant chemical, sprayed by the United States. Despite this, he remembers no one who pledged loyalty or supported the American army or South Vietnam.¹⁸ Of course, Ho Noong's story is only one of the shattered glass pieces that makes up the Vietnam War experience. Additionally, similar to Balanco's story, Ho Noong's rendition of his family's history is subject to the decade of political shifts since, as well as unintended changes in the oral history. But we understand from Ho Noong that not all the Bru supported the Americans, and that perhaps loyalties formed long before the Marine chaplains implemented the Personal Response Project and the CAP Marines worked alongside the Bru.

The CAP unit's introduction at Khe Sanh also unveils another challenge CAP faced outside of "winning hearts and minds." It illuminates just how controversial CAP tactics were among different branches of the military. The Combined Action Program originated from the Marines' view that the military needed a different strategy from Westmoreland's search-and-destroy theory of conducting warfare. But in Khe Sanh, this disparity between the Army and Marine Corps manifested in a clear dissonance between the CAP Program and other military

¹⁷ Ho Noong. Interview by the author. Huong Hoa, Vietnam. May 21, 2018.

¹⁸ Ho Noong. Interview by the author.

efforts. At CAC OSCAR, the dissonance went so far that communication faltered between the CAP Marines and the other forces at Khe Sanh. John Roberts, a CAP Marine there, remembered that there was “an almost total lack of knowledge among other Marines and Army units about who we were and what we did. Some thought us some type of Special Forces (we weren’t!), while others thought we were some sort of CIA (which we also weren’t).”¹⁹ Ray Stubbe was also cognizant of the friction between the CAPs and other forces. In a 2005 interview he recalls that there was “terrible friction” and that “the Special Forces would not let the Marines know they were doing anything because it was classified.”²⁰ The impact of this rift— lack of knowledge sharing between the units, terrible friction, and lack of communication— likely made it difficult for the CAPs to proceed. Thus, this too would have weakened the CAP’s ability to “win the hearts and minds” of the Bru.

Ultimately, whether or not the CAPs “won the hearts and minds” of the Bru cannot be answered. Written letters home asking for donations for the Bru PFs they worked alongside establishes a possible case for CAP’s success. Still, other groups of the Bru population exhibited unwavering support for the North, even when they suffered because of it. Ultimately, a few letters home cannot stand up against the Bru’s attempts to flee North and the image of the Americans pushing the Bru off their choppers. But in these letters home we learn that if the Bru were not changed, at the very least the Americans were. The CAP Marines who served at Khe Sanh learned to respect a new culture and felt their pain.

The CAPs in “Leatherneck Square”

¹⁹ John Roberts. “CAC Oscar History.” USMC CAC Oscar. <https://sites.google.com/site/usmccaposcar/cap-oscar>

²⁰ Stubbe, Interview with Jim Kurtz, 27.

Just one month after the initiation of the OSCAR CAPs in Khe Sanh, the program established six CAP platoons in Quang Tri near Dong Ha. This decision was a controversial one. The military remained divided on CAP's efficacy and some, even those in the Marines, fought against the addition of CAPs in the province. 3rd Marine Division Colonel Alexander L. Michaux, asserted that Quang Tri had no need for CAPs, and that the existing Marines already had the area under control. However, General Davis, the 3rd Marine Commander, insisted that CAP could provide some aid in their pacification efforts in Quang Tri.²¹ The continued divisiveness surrounding CAP echoes the disputes in Khe Sanh, but instead of different military branches disagreeing on CAP's potential, members within the Marine Corps itself also did not always see eye to eye on CAP.

While the onset of the Tet Offensive saw the end of CAP units at Khe Sanh, the Marines bolstered their presence elsewhere in Quang Tri. They created the Combined Action Group #4 (or 4th CAG) to organize all administrative duties in the province. By the end of 1967, the CAP Program as a whole had seventy-nine platoons, nine of which were in Quang Tri, and the 4th CAG would reach its height in 1970 with nineteen CAPs.²² Most of these units were concentrated near Dong Ha, Cua Viet, Gio Linh, and Cam Lo.²³ The Marines, as veterans of these CAP units remember today, nicknamed the area "Leatherneck Square" because of the huge Marine presence there.²⁴

Given that 4th CAG was the smallest and shortest running administrative unit of the CAP program, it generated the fewest written accounts. However, a few important testimonies provide

²¹ Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blaisiol, Charles R. Smith, and David A. Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*, (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997).

²² FMFPAC Monthly Report, 1967. Box 2, Folder 2, Robert Klyman Collection, Marine Corps Archive and Special Collections, Marine Corps Base Quantico.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bill Nimmo, 2018. CAP Marine History: Memories, Facebook.com, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1466572823656975>

insight into the relationships between the American Marines and Vietnamese. Edward Palm, situated in a CAP unit outside Cam Lo called by the CAPs “Tiger Papa 3,” wrote multiple articles on his time in the unit. Other accounts from Quang Tri CAPs appear in books containing interviews with veterans, such as Albert Hemingway’s *Our War Was Different* in 1992. Two chapters, on Rocky Jay and Warren Smith, provide insight into their experiences at another Tiger Papa unit. Together, Edward Palm, Rocky Jay, and Warren Smith outline the relationships with Popular Forces along with how the Americans perceived the Vietnamese people in Quang Tri. Together, these accounts piece together the nuances of the interactions CAP Marines had with the Vietnamese in Quang Tri.

According to these accounts, American preconceived notions of the Vietnamese, distrust by the Popular Forces, and miscommunication between the Americans and Vietnamese people often strained the relationships between the CAP Marines and PFs. First, some CAP Marines brought into the villages the notion that PFs were inferior to ARVN forces. Rocky Jay served in Vietnam for six months before the Marines assigned him to a CAP unit in Quang Tri. In describing the thirty Popular Forces with which his platoon worked, Jay referred to them as “like a National Guard unit- a bunch of draft dodgers.”²⁵ In actuality, membership in the Popular Forces did not exempt anyone from the ARVN draft.²⁶ However, Jay’s description of the Popular Forces indicates contempt toward the perceived “easy way out” he believed the Popular Forces took in choosing to guard their home hamlets. It is unclear whether false assumptions led Jay to believe the PFs were similar to the American draft dodgers, or if he believed this because of a rumor he had heard. Regardless, this presumption led Jay to blatantly disregard the PFs he worked alongside. Hemingway recorded Jay’s annoyance at the fact that the PFs “were always

²⁵ Hemingway, “Rocky Jay,” *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 116.

²⁶ Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War in Vietnam*, 23.

busting ambushes,” which a few times led Jay and a fellow Marine to “take [the PFs] out to the sand dunes and leave them out there all night just to get away from them.”²⁷

Warren Smith, too, still harbored ill feelings toward his PFs at the time that Hemingway interviewed him for his book in the early 1990’s. But while Smith’s words explicitly reveals what the Marines thought of the PFs, it also illuminates how the PFs might have reacted to the Marine’s presence. Hemingway records that Smith believed that “the PFs were terrible. They thought it was their job to keep everybody away from the women [of the village] and steal from us.”²⁸ Smith’s assessment of the Popular Forces definitely indicates that he, and other Marines, discredited the PFs’ effectiveness, but it also quietly reveals how the PFs felt toward the Marines. Their actions in “keep[ing] everybody away from the women” indicates that the PFs saw the CAP Marines as community outsiders from whom they had to protect the people of their village. While the Marines interpreted the PF actions as an act of jealousy of the CAP Marines, the PFs may have felt the Marines disrespected their established societal norms and might take advantage of their community members.

While some PFs may have immediately received the Americans with disapproval and resentment, other interviews from Marines who served in Leatherneck Square indicate that some of the Popular Forces felt ambivalent toward American control. Edward Palm’s record of his experience at Tiger Papa Three, in a village called Thon Vinh Dai, exemplifies his PF’s reluctance to trust the American forces. At the beginning of Palm’s time in Thon Vinh Dai in 1967, he quickly recognized that the PFs were not as cooperative as he had anticipated. Palm’s unit struggled to consistently gather PFs for patrols. At one point, the PFs blatantly rejected Marine orders by sitting down at the riverbank, refusing to go on with a patrol of the northern

²⁷ Hemingway, “Rocky Jay,” *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 116.

²⁸ Hemingway, “Warren Smith,” *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 136.

side of the village.²⁹ The PFs did all in their power to avoid the Marine compound, only reporting and interacting with the Marines when absolutely necessary, and Palm theorized perhaps some of the PFs had agreements with the Viet Cong.³⁰

Palm's theory of the PFs allying themselves with the Viet Cong is possible. In casual conversation between the two parties, the PFs were "amazed and skeptical" to hear that many of the Marines were not happy to be in Vietnam. The PFs, according to Palm, could not understand why else the recruits would interfere with a war that the PFs had wanted to end for so long. They saw the American action in their hamlets as "not capable of toppling the existing order, only of bringing a part of it down on their heads."³¹ Therefore, alliances or agreements made between the Viet Cong and the PFs to keep themselves safe, seems justified.

While preconceived notions may have been the main reason why Tiger Papa PFs and Marines had unproductive and adversarial relationships, cultural and language miscommunications definitely worsened the relationship. The language barrier presented an obvious obstacle. One example involved Warren Smith, who acted as an interpreter for the CAP Marines, one of few individuals who held such a position. The Trung-si (Popular Force officer) that Smith worked with had a name that Americans found difficult to pronounce. Marines referred to their trung si as the title, followed by their name (for example, Trung-Si X). Vietnamese is a tonal language, so saying the same sounds with a different tone can completely change the meaning of a word. According to Smith, when the CAP Marines tried referring to the PF's trung-si, they unintentionally mispronounced his name, and referred to him as what is

²⁹ Edward Palm, "Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of the Combined Action Program." *Marine Corp Gazette*, Jan 1988.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Edward Palm, "Part Two: Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time." *Marine Corp Gazette*, Feb 1988.

translated to, “Trung-si Anus.”³² The result was an angry and upset trung-si, who felt disrespected and belittled by the American Marines.

Communication between the Vietnamese and Americans was not just impacted by the language itself, but was also a result of the incredibly different cultures interacting for the first time. One aspect that shocked American Marines was the rumored homosexual relationships between men in Vietnamese culture. According to Palm, it was not uncommon for Marines to encounter acts of mutual masturbation between the PFs or other Vietnamese men. The men involved, when “caught” by the Marines, would not be the least bit embarrassed.³³ It would take decades, and arguably even longer, for American culture to even begin to outwardly accept homosexuality, so Palm explained that many of the Marines felt disgust or at least agitation if they encountered their Vietnamese counterparts engaging in a homosexual act. Whether these acts actually occurred, or these activities were just rumor, the supposed cultural difference between the Marines and PFs worked to fortify the rift between the two parties, thus limiting cooperation between them. Communication faltered, and the PFs and CAP Marines were far from combined. In reflecting on his time in his CAP unit, Palm wrote, “I am struck by the irony that I never knew a Vietnamese- not really. I knew five or six PFs by name and they me.”³⁴

If communication between the American Marines and Vietnamese PFs was strained, the relationship between the Americans and the Vietnamese civilians in the hamlet must have been worse. In some sense, this may have been a result of the Marines lack of attention to the Vietnamese context. In many cases, the Marines did not pay attention to the Vietnamese names of hamlets or important sites. For example, the CAP Marines referred to Palm’s hamlet of Vinh

³² Hemingway, “Warren Smith,” *Our War Was Different: The Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 136.

³³ Edward Palm. “Part Two: Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time.”

³⁴ Ibid.

Dai as “the ville”.³⁵ Today, in order to identify their units to other veterans, CAP Marine veterans refer to them as their three digit CAP number as opposed to the village name.³⁶ This trend indicates the enduring nature of the Marine memory of the locations, as opposed to their actual names. Even in a program so determined to connect the American and Vietnamese forces, the Marines proved unable to establish a connection with the Vietnamese people insofar as remembering the true Vietnamese names of locations. Instead, the CAP Marines in Quang Tri operated on a plane above the hamlets, not within them. Of those Marines who wrote about their time in CAPs, Vietnamese villagers often reacted with indifference or aloofness toward the American presence. Rocky Jay put the matter succinctly, explaining his perspective that, “The villagers were so tired of war, they really didn’t care who controlled things. They just wanted to be left alone.”³⁷

Perhaps instead of wanting to be “left alone,” the Vietnamese villagers simply wanted to ensure their personal safety and sustain family ties. Particularly diligent CAP Marines, those like Smith who was an interpreter, or Palm who continuously questioned his experiences and even today continues writing about his time in the CAP unit, recognized that there were often complex and personal relationships that Vietnamese villagers held with the Viet Cong. One of the families that Warren Smith’s platoon stayed with witnessed one of these familial entanglements. Even though the father of the family aided the American Marines, he had a son in the Viet Cong. Privy to this information, the CAP Marines attempted to set up an ambush in the house to snare the son. On the night of the ambush, the father left his bed often to light a candle in an attempt to warn his son not to come home. Each time, the Marines blew out the candle and told him to

³⁵ Palm, “Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of the Combined Action Program.”

³⁶ This causes an even greater problem since many of the CAPs were renumbered often when they were moved or reassigned.

³⁷ Hemingway, “Rocky Jay.” *Our War Was Different: The Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 117.

return to bed.³⁸ These complex relationships put Vietnamese families in limbo as they had to decide who to support and how. And sometimes, this balance made acts of cooperation with the Americans even more dangerous.

Tim Duffie served as a CAP Marine in another Tiger Papa unit near Cam Lo. In 1968, during his time in the hamlet, the Viet Cong assassinated two PFs he worked alongside. Duffie still distinctly remembers Ha Si Phu, who the Viet Cong assassinated as he slept in his home, and was, as Duffie recalls, “one hell of a good trooper,” Le Van Thu.³⁹ This phenomenon was not limited to Duffie’s particular hamlet. In fact, the Viet Cong used assassination as a widespread tactic to invoke fear in the Vietnamese people and to dissuade them from cooperating with the Americans. On June 29, 1968, the Viet Cong overran the village of Son Tra, just south of Quang Tri Province near the coastal city of Da Nang, killing eighty-eight South Vietnamese civilians and destroying most of the village with fire and explosives. A CAP Platoon had been defending the village until that point. According to reports by a Marine Captain, the Viet Cong visited the village earlier aiming to recruit people, but the villagers refused to cooperate. Upon burning down the village, the Viet Cong put up a sign in Vietnamese saying, “Do not cooperate with the Americans.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the villagers of Son Tra did not have a choice in allowing the CAP Marines to enter their village or not. They lived in the South under the South Vietnamese rule and were subject to the United States’ military strategies. Regardless, the Viet Cong used Son Tra as an example to rile up resistance against the United States. If they could not get the South Vietnamese people to support the Viet Cong willingly, perhaps acts of terror would work.

³⁸ Hemingway, “Warren Smith.” *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, 140.

³⁹ Tim Duffie, Papa 2/4 Photos. “U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website.” <http://capmarine.com/cap/duffie-1.htm>

⁴⁰ “88 Refugees Die in Raid on Village by Vietcong.” *The Washington Post*. June 30 1968. A1, A16.

The Viet Cong conducted a similar terror tactic in squad leader Trust Israel's hamlet of Quat Xa, known to many of the CAP Marines as Tiger Papa 1. In Quat Xa, the village chief had a girlfriend whom he often visited with the protection of the PFs. One night, according to Israel, the chief said he wanted to visit her, but insisted he did not need protection. Soon after, Israel and two other corporals found the chief, hanging upside down, dead, with a weapon through his stomach. A sign from the Viet Cong perpetrators hanging from the chief's body warned the Vietnamese people of Quat Xa, "This is what happens if you help me."⁴¹ With these types of activities happening in one's village, reluctance of the Vietnamese people to support the American Marines is understandable. The hearts and minds of the Vietnamese could not be won over by a group who could not even protect their village chief from murder.

Civic action projects, however helpful for the community, could not undo the damage of strained relationships. Command Chronologies of the CAPs indicate progress insofar as the creation of physical symbols of community advancement. In the month of November 1968, the CAPs in Quang Tri built footbridges, a chicken coop, and helped repair homes. The CAP Marines passed out to villagers throughout the province 867 pounds of soap, and 1,130 school kits.⁴² These numbers alone suggest a positive contribution to Vietnamese society, but the Vietnamese people did not usually appreciate these gifts. What could soap and school kits do to better the villages while a war raged in their backyards? These Command Chronologies also indicate the difficulties of conducting such civic action. These civic action projects were meant to be collaborative efforts between the Marines and the villagers, but the Vietnamese civilians often did not see the value in these projects. The next month, the chronologies pointed out that,

⁴¹ Trust Israel, Interview by the author. Sep 4 2018.

⁴² 4th CAG Command Chronology, Nov 1968. U.S. Marine Corp History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Dec 1 2004.

“the most significant problem encountered is the reluctance of people in [a village in Quang Tri] to participate in civic action without pay.”⁴³ At Ed Palm’s hamlet, the CAP platoon struggled to get the villagers interested in any of their projects. As he wrote in his 1988 article:

At the insistence of our headquarters, we repeatedly asked the village chief what the village needed or wanted in the way of civic improvements. He would promise to think about it and get back to us, but never did. The only thing we ever did in the name of civic action was to present the village school with new textbooks. But no one asked the schoolmistress whether or not she needed new textbooks. We simply showed up one day and delivered the books. The schoolmistress seemed reluctant to accept them at first. She did in the end, but she was less than profuse in her thanks. In general, most of the people who lived in the vicinity of Papa Three didn’t want anything we had to offer.⁴⁴

Civic action looked great on paper, but residents of Quang Tri did not respond positively to these attempts by the Marines to “better” their lives. Just as the Corson found before, civic action did not impact the loyalties of the population. And again, it still did not do so when paired with combined action. Perhaps these efforts did not worsen the relationships between the Vietnamese and Americans, but it did not make them better as strategists hoped.

These case studies of the Cam Lo units reveal important weaknesses of the CAP Program. First, they demonstrate that preconceived notions about the local inhabitants, and the power dynamics that existed between the Vietnamese villagers and the incoming Marines, negatively affected the program’s ability to win over the Vietnamese people’s loyalties. They also weakened the combined military efforts of the CAP Marines and PFs. Accounts from veterans reveal the frustrating communication barriers, due to language and cultural differences, that exacerbated the already complex relationships between the Vietnamese people and the American Marines. Ultimately, in Cam Lo, creating the ideal CAP that the program’s creators

⁴³ 4th CAG Command Chronology, Dec 1968.

⁴⁴ Edward Palm, “Part Two: Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time.” *Marine Corps Gazette*, Feb 1988.

sought for, may have been rendered impossible by the complex relationships that formed between the Americans and Vietnamese. In the end, the Vietnamese had to choose the side that ensured their safety, and the Americans could not always guarantee that.

Quat Xa: “An Unofficial Prison”

The previous accounts lack a direct Vietnamese perspective on the CAP Program, but that is different for Quat Xa. Le Dang Phac, a Viet Cong veteran and current resident of Cam Lo, lived in Quat Xa as a child. There, Trust Israel served as squad leader of a CAP unit.⁴⁵ The stories told by Le and Israel corroborate the impressions and challenges that the previous accounts suggested. The two interviews provide an image of how CAP looked in Quat Xa through providing details regarding how the villagers understood the CAP Program, the loyalties of the villagers, and the conceptions of the American Marines.

Just west of Dong Ha, along Route 9, sits the humble hamlet of Quat Xa, where Le Dang Phac grew up. In 1954, Le’s father left his pregnant wife to fight for North Vietnam. His father died in the war in 1969, but even though Le’s father was absent from his life, the family forever remained associated with his father’s fight.⁴⁶ When Le was a young child, his mother had an affair with an important Southern official, Binh, who lived only 15 meters away from their house. According to Le, his mother engaged in the affair to improve her and her child’s lives. Perhaps she thought that a relationship with this man could improve the family’s social standing and allow them to regain trust in the community. Another potential motive for the affair may have been Southern President Ngo Dinh Diem’s encouragement for officials to form

⁴⁵ Trust Israel is not his original name. Rather, he adopted this new name and a hippie lifestyle later in life.

⁴⁶ Hai T. Nguyen. “Disputed Land, Disputed Souls.” *The New York Times*. Jan 25 2018.

relationships with the wives of rebels, thus “converting” them.⁴⁷ Regardless, Le insists that his mom and Binh loved each other, and his mother bore another son. While his mother’s affair and second son may have indicated the family’s allegiance to the Southern government that controlled the area, the rest of his mother’s actions showed unwavering support for her The Viet Cong. She offered her house up to VC members in need of shelter as they planned their future tactics. The men gathered in Le’s home to acquire food and medicine from supporters in the village. During the daytime, the VC stayed in small tunnels they built nearby or in the attics of other homes.

Regardless of his mother’s affair with a Southern official, the town’s leaders remained suspicious of the family’s rebellious history. When Le was twelve, hamlet leaders arrested his mother. Le’s extended family feared backlash from the village government if they helped Le, so without the aid of any relatives, Le cared for himself and his little brother, alone. After school, he brought food to his mother in jail, and witnessed the police water board her in an effort to extract information she knew about the Northern army. Vietnamese officials also jailed Le a few times as a child. According to Le, village leaders commonly used jail as a punishment for people, even children, whom they did not completely trust. Each time, he stayed in jail a couple of weeks. Unlike with his mother, Le’s jailors did not use physical punishments on him because he was a child. But they spent hours a day interrogating Le, trying to convince him that the Southern government was made up of ‘good guys,’ and that he and his family would benefit greatly from the South if they cooperated.

None of this broke Le’s loyalty to the North. In addition to sneaking extra food for the soldiers hiding in his home, Le told the Viet Cong secrets he heard about military movements,

⁴⁷ Nguyen. “Disputed Land, Disputed Souls.”

and he even drew up for them a map of hidden mines the South planted in the ground.⁴⁸ Finally, when Le turned seventeen, he decided to secretly move North and join the army there. Before leaving, he prepared documents to make it look like he joined ARVN, before moving to a nearby commune to hide the truth. He took part in battles in the Cam Lo district and at one point, he covertly returned to Quat Xa to move his family to safety in the North.

Le, now a grandfather, feels great pride in his role in the war and his family. In the spring of 2018, I had an opportunity to meet with Le. As soon as I sat down to speak with him, he swiftly placed a printed copy of the *New York Times* article about his story in front of me, even though he himself cannot read the English text. Generations of influence and careful reevaluation of memories came before my discussion with Le, and while Le may not have had any intention of depicting events falsely, memories are dynamic and constantly responding to the present.

Even so, Le's details alone provide valuable materials for an analysis of the operations of the CAP Marines. His explanation of the power dynamics in Quat Xa shows that perhaps the Marine influence was not as large and obvious as other sources suggest. Le's testimony, and the *New York Times* article about him, both leave out any mention of the CAP unit that operated there. In fact, unearthing that Le encountered CAP Marines at all required cross-referencing the labyrinthine Command Chronologies and finally speaking with an American veteran (Trust Israel) stationed at Quat Xa. The difficulty in making this connection indicates that the Vietnamese people did not recognize the distinction between the CAP Program and other military units. Without any explicit discussion or explanation of the CAP Marines' agenda or focus, it may have been impossible for the villagers to differentiate the different groups of the American military that they encountered. So if they had negative experiences with the U.S.

⁴⁸ Le Dang Phac. Interview by the author. Dong Ha, Vietnam. May 21, 2018.

Military before, the people of Quat Xa may not have been aware or receptive to the fact that the CAP Marines shared an agenda independent from the rest of the military.

Another aspect of Le's testimony that complicates the role of the CAP Marines is his claim that in Quat Xa he and his family lived as "unofficial prisoners." While "unofficial prisoners" may not be Le's exact terms, it still stands that Le felt captive by the Southern government and American military.⁴⁹ But Le also emphasized the role the Southern officials held over that of the American military. Le's stories of how the South Vietnamese officials tortured his mom and put him in jail indicates the lasting image of the South Vietnamese as the main policing force in the village, as opposed to the CAP Marines. This description contrasts with other accounts, such as Rocky Jay's, where he insists that, "[the Marines] had total control of the villages."⁵⁰ Perhaps Rocky Jay's analysis lacks credibility, or Le's identity as a supporter of the Viet Cong led the South Vietnamese officials to target him (as opposed to the CAP Marines themselves). Likely, each unit operated differently, and these two cases represents a wide spectrum of the level of involvement each CAP held in a hamlet's political structure.

Trust Israel, who provides the CAP Marine perspective of Quat Xa, corroborates many of Le's claims. Both Le and Israel verify the complex loyalties held by the people of the village. The story of Le's mother and brother perfectly illustrates the intricacies of loyalty. In Le's explanation, those who supported the South did so because of the personal and economic advantages. It benefitted families to support the South because they acquired higher salaries, extra food, or association with a higher social class.⁵¹ Families who actually support the North could gain these advantages by pretending to pledge support to the South. According to Israel,

⁴⁹ A Vietnamese translator who had previously met Le Dang Phac translated the phrase to me using these terms.

⁵⁰ Albert Hemingway, "Rocky Jay." *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*.

⁵¹ Le Dang Phac. Interview with the author.

the Marines were sometimes aware of and even accommodated fractured Vietnamese families. Israel recalls one day when his interpreter told him that one of the mothers in Quat Xa asked to visit her Viet Cong son that night at the border of the village, and wanted to know if they could meet safely. Israel, worried that the Viet Cong planned to ambush him, agreed to give them the space to meet while he stood on guard nearby. No ambush occurred. Instead, Israel's decision gave the mother and son the chance to see each other again in peace.⁵²

Israel and Le also support the narrative that the American Marines in Quat Xa fostered positive relationships with the villagers. During the interview with Israel, he recalled many positive stories of him joking and laughing with the villagers. In his own words, Israel said, "I fell in love with [the Vietnamese people]. I saw how [the Americans] were rude and sick-minded."⁵³ One memory that especially stands out to Israel was when he helped the women of Quat Xa carry water up from the riverbank. He explained that he "had a rhythm to it" and "the Ba" told him not to dance while he carried the water, but he did it anyway, making all the women, including the Ba, laugh and "have so much fun together."⁵⁴ What is really interesting about Israel's recollection is his memory, and continued use, of the word Ba. Ba is the pronoun used in Vietnamese to refer to a woman much older than you (a grandmother's age, for instance). As explained before, the hierarchical emphasis in Vietnamese society makes these pronoun distinctions important, and Israel's memory and continued use of the word indicates a strong acknowledgement of Vietnamese cultural norms. Thus at the very least, it appears that Israel himself held Vietnamese customs in high regard, which led to mutual respect between the Vietnamese and Americans. Le also remembers the Americans in a positive light, as friendly and

⁵² Trust Israel. Interview with the author.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

amicable. He noted that the American soldiers would give him and his friends extra cans of food if they could, and Le would bring it right back home and give it to the Viet Cong forces hiding away in his home.⁵⁵

Israel may be unique in his appreciation of the Vietnamese people. Even though Israel served as the squad leader, it appears he resented or feared his militaristic role. In one instance, Israel ran into members of the U.S. Army near the river bothering the women doing their laundry. Israel approached the men and asked to see their orders, and after engaging in a spat with his fellow soldiers, told them that he was there to “protect these girls from people like you.” Other times, like when going on night patrols, Israel admitted that “if you saw something that looked like a big uniformed man, you laid there and let them go by. If we had started shooting...”⁵⁶ Israel did not finish his sentence, but he was referring to seeing a Viet Cong on night patrol. In these instances, Israel believed that the personal safety of his men, and the safety of his villagers, was paramount over militaristic or political gains. Additionally, Israel developed a new identity after the war, taking on the name of Trust Israel and a hippie lifestyle. Thus, his memory of the war is influenced by the life outlook he adopted.

In some ways, Le and Israel’s explanations of Quat Xa seem very different from the testimonies of Smith, Jay, or Palm. The amicable and friendly relationships between Americans and Vietnamese in Quat Xa contrast the frequent miscommunications and animosity that the latter group of veterans reported. However, like Smith, Jay, and Palm, Le and Israel corroborate the idea that the familial and personal ties motivated the Vietnamese people in determining their loyalties, regardless of the relationships they had with Americans.

⁵⁵ Le Dang Phac. Interview with the author.

⁵⁶ Trust Israel. Interview with the author.

These accounts force military strategists to ask if “winning the hearts and minds” was really efficacious at all. Likely, some Marines, like Israel, were *so* open-minded that they did not act strategically. But meanwhile, in CAPs like Tiger Papa 3, where Americans and Vietnamese clashed, rifts impossible to bridge formed between the two groups, and CAP could not work like its founders intended. Ultimately, just as the letters home from Khe Sahn indicate that CAP changed the outlook of the Marines involved, Trust’s love of the Vietnamese people today indicates the same happened at Quat Xa. The CAP at Quat Xa did not “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. Instead, the Vietnamese won the hearts and minds of Trust Israel and others like him.

But Did CAP Work?

The stories of the CAPs in Quang Tri reveal that the program failed to “win the hearts and minds” of the population. In some instances, friendships developed, but they did not change patterns of loyalties enough to develop strategic advantages for the Marines. Instead, more often the Vietnamese and Americans felt reluctant to trust each other. Even where positive relationships between the Marines and Vietnamese developed, like what Le Dang Phac and Trust Israel insist existed at Quat Xa, the friendly American presence could not influence Le’s loyalty to the Viet Cong. There is a difference between friendliness and loyalty, after all.

This is not to say that the CAPs completely failed to win over *anyone’s* loyalty in Quang Tri Province or that the entire population sided with the North. During the Spring 1975 Communist Offensive in South Vietnam (the “final push” so to speak, before the war ended), Vietnamese and American researchers interviewed refugees at relocation centers. They found

that most of the refugees fleeing South began their trek from Quang Tri Province.⁵⁷ Perhaps this population consisted of those who wanted to collaborate with the CAP Marines but felt silenced by their neighbors in fear of reprisal. Unfortunately, historians cannot know without these peoples' accounts.

What I can say with confidence is that CAP was too little, too late. They arrived after the Vietnamese people's loyalties had been established, and with only nineteen platoons in the province. The military filled the platoons with boys trained as Marines, not diplomats, so this widespread shift could not, and did not, happen. That is not to say that arguments for CAP hold no merit. Instead, perhaps the strategy of combined action should divorce from the rhetoric of "winning hearts and minds". Perhaps as a strategy of holding, strategists can better evaluate CAP as a success. But Combined Action and this counterinsurgency rhetoric remain entangled, and historians lack the materials possible to determine CAP's success based on other metrics. Thus, as far as CAP exists within the framework of "winning hearts and minds," it failed to do so in Quang Tri.

Still some strategists argue that regardless of how well CAP actually did, the program could have seen greater success if the Marines implemented the program on a larger scale. For Curtis Williamson and Albert Hemingway, success would have come if the Marines increased the quantity of platoons and Marines in the program.⁵⁸ Katie Ann Johnson similarly argues that in Iraq and Afghanistan, the short trial run of CAP required both more time to notice changes in the villages and longer tours of duty for those placed in these units.⁵⁹ If Williamson, Hemingway, and Johnson are right to argue that CAP could succeed, they qualitative reasons that they offer

⁵⁷ Le-Thi-Que, A. Terry Rambo, and Gary D. Murfin. "Why They Fled: Refugee Movements during the Spring 1975 Communist Offensive in South Vietnam." *Asian Survey* 16, no.9 (September 1976).

⁵⁸ See page 10.

⁵⁹ Katie Ann Johnson, "Reevaluating the CAP." *Marine Corps Gazette*, June 2009, 24-27.

for CAP's failure cannot be the sole factors. Instead, the problems of CAP that Quang Tri Province helps to illuminate also contribute to its overall failure to sway the local population.

Instead, the failure of CAP has more to do with the implementation of the program and the already determined loyalties of the local population. So many of the admired elements of the CAP Program crumbled under the bureaucracy of a growing program. The recruitment of Marines grew less stringent. The CAP school did not adequately train many Marines in their cultural setting. The stated goals of CAP constantly changed. All these problems channeled into a program up against an enemy that had operated for decades to win over the population.

The CAPs in Quang Tri reveal that in the future, the military must place extra measures to ensure that Combined Action strategies and idealized attributes, reach fruition. Perhaps if the Marines implemented the strategy like Paul Ek imagined, historians and military strategists could better assess whether counterinsurgency tactics like this, work. Until then, with the same implementation of CAP as in Vietnam, the hearts and minds of the population will remain in the same hands as they rested before.

Conclusion

At the beginning of 1970, the Combined Action Program reached its peak, with about 2,050 enlisted men. But the same year would see the quick decline in the number of CAP units in Vietnam. Caught between a seemingly unending war and dwindling public support, President Nixon advocated for Vietnamization at the end of 1969. This plan allowed the American military to slowly pull out of South Vietnam while shifting the responsibility of security to the South Vietnamese government.¹ The Marine Corps soon began to discuss the planned Marine withdrawal and decided to reduce the CAP force at a proportional pace to the withdrawal of all other Marine units.² In January 1970, at the height of the program, the Marines halted the flow of replacements for CAP men. In July, reduction accelerated. From July 7-30, the Marines disbanded the remaining group headquarters and all sixteen platoons in 4th CAG, marking an end to the Combined Action Program in Quang Tri. Most of the men in these units, and those in the 1st and 3rd CAGs, moved from their original placement to Quang Nam Province, 2nd CAG. The Combined Action force continued to decrease until total withdrawal in June 1971.³ In 1972, North Vietnam launched the Battle of Quang Tri, which resulted in the fall of the province to the North. After this battle, those who supported the South, largely the Catholic population in the province, fled further South.⁴

The Official Marine histories paint the end of the CAP units as a bitter farewell between the Marines and the Vietnamese people. This history includes the tidbit that General Ngo Quang Truong, the commander of the 1st ARVN division in Quang Tri Province “accepted the

¹ Nixon Speech, November 3, 1969. U.S Department of State *Bulletin*, 61 found in Robert J. McMahon. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 369.

² Graham A. Cosmas and Lt. Col. Terrence P. Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment: 1970-1971* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1986), 148.

³ *Ibid.* 150.

⁴ Le-Thi-Que, A. Terry Rambo, and Gary D. Murfin. “Why They Fled: Refugee Movements during the Spring 1975 Communist Offensive in South Vietnam.” *Asian Survey* 16, no.9 (September 1976).

redeployment of Marine units but pleaded with... [the Marines], 'I don't care what else you do, but please don't take the CAPs,'."⁵ This plea rested more on CAP's effectiveness at securing villages from outside influence than on its ability to win over the people's loyalties. In Quang Tri, each CAP conducted a farewell parade attended by the district chief, village chief, and villagers. Both Vietnamese and American local leaders made speeches at the parade. The Vietnamese leaders thanked the Marines for the aid, while the Americans expressed their confidence in the Popular Forces now that they had finished training.⁶ These formal ceremonies helped propagate the desired narrative that the Marines were not leaving because they had to—but that instead they succeeded in their mission to prepare the village to defend themselves independently. In reality, the CAP Marines abandoned the villages they served.

This image suggests a somber scene, and leaves the reader to imagine the drones of Vietnamese bidding farewell to their beloved American heroes. But the Marine history includes a small detail suggesting otherwise in writing that the parade viewers included, "as many villagers who could be persuaded to appear." Depending on the CAP unit, the Marines would find varying success with this. Likely, in the studied CAPs in Quang Tri, few people willingly attended.

The narrative painted in the Marine histories, save the quick statement about how many villagers attended the goodbye ceremonies, suggests a recurring theme in the retelling of the Combined Action Program. The most prominent discussions about CAP display it as a success in "winning hearts and minds" and as a beacon of hope in future wars. Francis West's book, *The Village*, tells a heroic tale of West's unit where the Vietnamese and American soldiers depended on each other. Upon returning in 1967, West found a monument erected in honor of the Marines'

⁵ Graham A. Cosmas and Lt. Col. Terrence P. Murray, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment: 1970-1971*, 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*

memory.⁷ As anthropologist of war, Doyle Quiggle writes in a *Small Wars Journal* review, “*The Village* will always stand as a firm and truthful reminder of a *road not taken far enough* in a war that America could and should have won.”⁸ The book also wins praise amongst those who serve in the Middle East today. *The Village* once appeared on Marine Commandant General James Conway’s annual reading list. Some commanders recommend the book to their troops before deploying. One can find copies of the book in Marine outposts, and a company in Afghanistan even named outposts after the Marines who died in West’s book.⁹ While this example does provide a success story of CAP, success was likely do to its geographic location.¹⁰ Regardless, the story stands out as a commonly retold narrative of Combined Action.

Albert Hemingway’s book *Our War Was Different* (1992) even better exemplifies the discrepancy between the created narrative of CAP and its reality. Hemingway’s book as a whole is undeniably pro-CAP, from the title suggesting the superiority of the CAP program over other war tactics, to an overview of CAP using mostly its idealized aspects. The book begins with an introduction authored by Hemingway about the background of the CAP Marines. Hemingway’s overview paints the CAPs as heroic and successful, one that “was never fully exploited”.¹¹ The overview leaves out mention the failings of the CAP Marines that scholarly works or other personal accounts acknowledge, such as the insufficient program to educate the men about Vietnamese culture, or Vietnamese Popular Forces that remained closely tied or allied with Viet Cong. After a CAP overview, Hemingway’s book devotes every chapter to retelling an

⁷ Francis J. West, *The Village* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985).

⁸ Doyle Quiggle, “A Review of Bing West’s *The Village: An Irregular Warfare Classic.*” *Small Wars Journal*, March 10, 2018. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/review-bing-wests-village-irregular-warfare-iw-classic>

⁹ Tony Perry, “Marines in Afghanistan take some lessons from Vietnam to heart.” *Los Angeles Times*. Jan 8 2010. A20.

¹⁰ See page 14.

¹¹ Albert Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 15.

individual veterans' story of the war. The interviews range from Corson, who feels incredibly passionate about the Combined Action Program, to those who felt disillusioned after their time in the program. Thus, the wide range of opinions about the program's success appears at odds with Hemingway's overview and insistence in CAP's potential. In this way, Hemingway contributes to the mythmaking of CAP.

The dissonance between the selective narrative of the CAP Marines and the reality of the program, supports Gian Gentile's argument that the modern counterinsurgency debate is based not on tangible results, but on a dreamy attraction to the ideals of COIN. He writes, "Above all, the cult of COIN lulls people into thinking that war is about soft power, that American soldiers sent overseas to tame a civil war or stop an insurgency will do so in a less harmful way."¹² The rhetoric of "winning hearts and minds" and the belief in CAP's potential echo this. The feel-good themes of CAP- the cross cultural communication, civic action, and "winning hearts and minds" by casual interaction as opposed to military force- lead people to believe in the efficacy of the program, regardless of the outcome.

That same narrative, however, is also what has brought healing for many veterans. The CAP Marine veterans reconnected for the first time in 1986, organizing their first reunion. This resurgence of interest in their time in Vietnam, and the program's narrative by its leaders that painted it as different from the typical U.S. war strategy likely intensified CAP's legacy as a success. Today, the CAP Marines proudly post old photos and stories on their Facebook group. They write messages looking for long lost friends from the war. They update each other when a member of the group passes away. They also are the most active actors in preserving their

¹² Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, 7.

history, together creating and updating multiple websites that collect this information for future researchers, but mostly for each other.

Regardless of whether the program “worked” as evidenced by its impact in Quang Tri Province, it is clear that CAP Marines today hold onto the program because it provides a different narrative of war than the typical Vietnam War story. More so than other veterans, these men have the endorsement from those who like Corson, who claim that CAP was the one thing that could have worked in Vietnam. This pride serves as a source of both healing and camaraderie. John Southard argues that perhaps the most meaningful impact of the Combined Action Program was the one it had on the American men, who, because of their experiences, saw the Vietnamese people as individuals, “they were no longer as ‘gooks.’ They had become Vietnamese.”¹³

The CAP Marines still hold an annual reunion to meet and reconnect. In 2013, political scientist Jeannie Johnson spoke at the reunion, in the midst of her research for her 2018 book *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture*. Her positive rendition of CAP struck a chord with the attendees. Tim Duffie, CAP veteran and creator of a popular web page on the CAP Program, wrote about her speech:

For those of you who missed the 2013 reunion, you missed a powerful presentation by Dr. Jeannie L. Johnson. With irrefutable facts, as well as a clear understanding of the impact of ignoring the cultures of the countries in which we are conducting military activities, Dr. Johnson assured all present that our CAP Program worked... not in every aspect... but the program overall was a success. Quoting no less than General Mattis, she had many of the CAP Marines present in tears. For most of us in attendance it was a cathartic moment... a moment when years of frustration, doubt and uncertainty, were put to rest once and for all.¹⁴

¹³ Southard, *Defend and Befriend*, 152.

¹⁴ Tim Duffie, “U.S. Marines Combined Action Platoons Website.” Accessed December 5, 2018, <http://capmarine.com/cap/duffie-1.htm>

The CAP Program had a greater impact on the Marines than changing their views of the Vietnamese people, as Southard claims. The Combined Action Program gave young men a positive narrative to hold onto, and one of which they can still feel proud. CAP truly won the hearts and minds of the men who served.

Appendix: Social Media as a Source

In my thesis, I often discuss the CAP Marines' Facebook group, "CAP Marine History (Vietnam)" and personal websites created by CAP veterans. This analysis is unusual for a historian's work, mostly because for many historians, social media is so recent that it falls outside their focus. But social media will play an increasing role in historical research, and it is necessary to discuss the uses and implications of social media sources.

I use social media sources like Facebook groups and personal websites as dual primary and secondary sources. As primary sources, these Facebook groups and blogs provided images and firsthand accounts of the past. In many ways, as information scientist Dr. Katrin Weller explains, Facebook statuses act as the postcards and letters of the Internet Age. While online posts reach a much wider audience than letters, historians can still analyze these modern texts similarly.¹ These pages also act as secondary sources. Veterans on these forums take part in recording their histories by piecing together the names of the men in each unit, writing about their current understandings of the past, and discussing new literature on the war. As with any other primary and secondary sources, the historian needs to take into account the author's perspective, especially when they write from outside the academic realm.

But historians also find new challenges when using these sources. First, comes the issue of privacy. Today, debates regarding social media centers around the ownership, legality, and privacy of what people share online. Because of this, historians may feel wary to directly quoting individuals. Even if a post is public, to what extent do individuals have the freedom to choose whether or not their words are included in the historical narrative? I grappled with this question

¹ Jason Steinhauer. "Preserving Social Media for Future Historians." *Library of Congress Blog*, July 24, 2015, Accessed April 3, 2019, <https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2015/07/preserving-social-media-for-future-historians/>.

while I conducted my own research. “CAP Marine History (Vietnam)” is set as a private group run by CAP veteran Bill Nimmo. Facebook users can request to join the group granted they submit a reason they want to join. From there, Nimmo accepts CAP Marine veterans, their family members, and those with an interest in studying the CAP Program. In my thesis, I chose not to directly cite individual posts given the group’s private setting. Instead, I mention more general trends I found on the site, which helps retain the privacy of the group’s members.

Another problem with social media is its tendency to become an echochamber. On almost all social media platforms, users can cater their feeds toward content they like to see. Usually, these are the posts which align with one’s worldview. Additionally, those who choose to comment on posts may not be representative of an entire group. For example, in a post recommending documentaries on the Vietnam War for a high school class, a thread began which denounced the recent Ken Burns documentary series on the war. Many CAP veterans responded with their criticisms of the documentary’s portrayal of the war. A historian must critically analyze this thread. Just because a subset of veterans feel this way does not mean the entire group does, and perhaps the lack of responses in favor of the documentary reflects a desire to avoid controversial topics more than agreement with these commenters.

Finally, the use of social media as a primary source for historians spurs an archival discussion as well. In order for future historians to use information from today’s social media, someone must archive all these posts. But with five million new posts per day on Twitter alone, the sheer volume of social media content provides a huge problem for archivists.² Perhaps then, the difficulties of archiving data make it imperative for historians to take a look at social media

² See Andrew McGill, “Can Twitter Fit Inside the Library of Congress?” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2016. Accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/08/can-twitter-fit-inside-the-library-of-congress/494339/>.

today. By including discussions of how the modern world conceives of their historical topic, historians can both help preserve social media's interactions with history for future generations, while also understanding a new facet of historiography-- how the everyday person understands and interacts with history.

Instead of ignoring social media as too biased, historians must acknowledge the disadvantages of this source and approach this material with a critical eye. After all, social media is incredibly useful to the historian. As a larger set of the population gains the means to share their lives and viewpoints, the field of history benefits as it gains more primary sources to conduct a history from below. For military history, this addition is especially exciting. As historians like Southard unearthed, understandings of CAP differed between the military leaders who oversaw the program and the Marines on the ground.³ Before social media, historians would have to rely on published materials in books and articles, and archived letters to unearth how just a few men experienced CAP. With social media, however, historians can better test Southard's claim. The field gains a greater volume of sources to help make judgments on CAP and learn more about how veterans today understand their own experiences.

Today, social media offers a new space for discussion. This mode of communication is so widely used and influential in modern life that the Department of Justice has deemed President Donald Trump's tweets official statements of the President, and these tweets, now modern texts, will be included in the Public Papers of the President.⁴ Historians can not overlook this channel in which the world communicates. Ultimately, the freedom for anyone to publish their

³ See page 13.

⁴ Andrew Blake, "DOJ: Trump's Tweets are 'official statements of the President,'" *The Washington Times*, Nov 14, 2017, Accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/nov/14/doj-donald-trump-tweets-are-official-statements-of/>.

perspectives will completely alter our historical understanding of the recent past. As more people gain the means to share their lives and viewpoints, they become a part of the historical narrative. Historians will need to look upon these sources with intense scrutiny, perhaps more than they ever had before. But as historians of new media, Cayce Myers and James F. Hamilton argue, “the history of the twenty-first century cannot be written by social media, but it cannot be written without them.”⁵

⁵ James F. Hamilton and Cayce Myers, “Social Media as Primary Source,” *Media History* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 2014), 431-444, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=89ef323b-6493-4bda-a002-00a7d2d053ef%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=98530183&db=ufh>

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