"To Take Some of That Fear Away"[1]

TASK COHESION AND COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS AMONG COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN VIETNAM, 1965–71

by Cavender S. Sutton

Abstract: Marine Combined Action Platoons (CAP) during the Vietnam War offer a unique lens through which to explore what makes a body of disparate individuals unify into an effective fighting force. How did small units with virtually no supervision coalesce into cohesive and lethal military organizations, and how did they maintain focus on helping villagers while repeatedly battling irregular enemy forces, most of whom were indistinguishable from the local populace? This article posits that living among the South Vietnamese and fighting at the village level fostered a personal attachment to the war that did not exist among American servicemembers elsewhere. CAP Marines maintained higher levels of task cohesion than their non-CAP counterparts, ensuring that they often remained effective fighting forces until the program's termination in 1971.
Keywords: Combined Action Platoons, CAPs, Combined Action Companies, CACs, South Vietnam, Vietnam War, task cohesion, counterinsurgency

Introduction

What makes soldiers fight? This and similar questions of how bodies of people coalesce into effective fighting forces have long captivated researchers in various spheres. The U.S. Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program offers a unique lens through which to explore this subject. CAPs were a counterinsurgency initiative that, between 1965 and 1971, placed small groups of 14 specially trained Marines and a Navy medical corpsman in South Vietnamese villages throughout the country's five northernmost provinces, also known as I Corps Tactical Zone. Their purpose was to train, advise, and fight alongside Popular Forces (PFs)—locally raised South Vietnamese militias that were minimally trained, poorly equipped, underpaid, and often low on morale—and to disrupt National Liberation Front (NLF—a.k.a. the Viet Cong) activity there.

Marines who served in the program's ranks were entrusted not only with protecting their villages while advising and supporting their PF counterparts, but also building positive relationships with them and local civilians. Yet, CAP service entailed far more than simply winning the locals' hearts and minds—it was also dangerous work. CAPs were small and geographically isolated units. Many frequently clashed with NLF and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. When that happened, reinforcements were often far away. It was essential for CAPs to function as effective fighting forces to protect their villages and themselves from being overrun. Moreover, CAPs were all-enlisted

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[1] Bill Grunder, telephone interview with author, 23 March 2021, hereafter Grunder interview.

units, often led by a young noncommissioned officer with little or no previous command experience. "What made a CAP unique was not just the opportunity to get up close and personal with the Vietnamese and their culture," recalls one veteran, "but also the extraordinary degree of trust and confidence the program reposed in young enlisted Marines."[2] Young, isolated, and often inexperienced CAP leaders were entrusted with maintaining order and discipline among their Marines while cultivating professional relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts.

From the program's genesis, it was clear that forming effective CAP units would be a difficult process. Each platoon had to function as an aggressive fighting force willing to patrol its village every day and night to interdict enemy activities while forging relationships with the local Vietnamese, whose language and culture most Marines misunderstood. What is more perplexing is how many battle-hardened Marines maintained their focus on helping villagers even while repeatedly engaging enemy forces. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges these Marines faced was overcoming their own prejudice toward the Vietnamese. That was no small feat for many, particularly infantrymen with significant combat experience. Many entered the program with a universal distrust of the Vietnamese that had to be alleviated for them to function effectively in the villages.

With these complexities in mind, the program's leaders sought to recruit a very specific type of Marine for CAP service: volunteer infantrymen with at least two months of experience in Vietnam, no recorded disciplinary issues, and no manifestations of culture shock—a polite term for a general hatred of the Vietnamese populace.[3] Yet, these requirements, especially those pertaining to motivated volunteers and experienced infantrymen, were often circumvented or ignored. Nevertheless, various cross sections of volunteers and the voluntold, battle-hardened grunts and adventurous yet naïve rear-echelon personnel, managed to form cohesive and often highly effective fighting organizations while those same characteristics sometimes ebbed among many of their mainline Marine and Army counterparts.[4]

What explains this phenomenon? How did small, all-enlisted units with virtually no supervision manage to coalesce into cohesive and oftentimes lethal military organizations, even though their strict recruiting standards were often loosened or ignored? Moreover, how did they maintain focus on helping villagers while repeatedly battling irregular enemy forces, most of whom were indistinguishable from the local populace? This article posits that the answer lies in the mission itself. Living among the South Vietnamese and fighting at the village level fostered a personal attachment to the war among CAP Marines that did not exist among American servicemembers elsewhere. In short, CAPs maintained higher levels of task cohesion than their non-CAP counterparts, thus ensuring they often remained effective fighting forces until the program's termination in 1971.

Theoretical Frameworks: Cohesion, Motivation, and Combat Effectiveness

Scholars generally define and divide the concept of cohesion into two categories: social and task cohesion. The former involves "the nature and quality of the emotional bonds of friendship, liking, caring, and

[2] Edward F. Palm, *Tiger Papa Three: Memoir of a Combined Action Marine in Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020), 50.

[3] LtCol Robert W. R. Corson, USMC, "Combined Action Program in Vietnam," July 1968, Vietnam War Documents Collection (Vietnam War Docs), Marine Corps History Division (MCHD), Quantico, VA, courtesy of Annette Amerman, 7–8; Bruce C. Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience* (McLean, VA: Human Sciences Research, 1969), appendix C, C-2; and "Official Document, Tactical Lessons: The Combined Action Company," July 1968, Vietnam War Docs, MCHD, Quantico, VA, courtesy of Annette Amerman, 4.

[4] As the war dragged on, morale deteriorated in many units, especially after the Tet Offensive and the subsequent beginning of U.S. forces' withdrawal from Vietnam. Numerous historians have noted that unit cohesion and, by extension, performance, diminished along with morale in the war's final years. For some examples, see Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), particularly chap. 7; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2002), 345–49; Michael A. Hunt, ed., *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 146–48; Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 97, 149–52; and Alan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1991), 596–600.

closeness among group members."[5] *Social cohesion*, also known as primary group cohesion within military historiography, guided numerous historians' explorations of small-unit cohesion in the decades immediately after the Second World War.[6] S. L. A. Marshall famously promulgated such an analytical approach when studying American forces in the war's Pacific and European theaters. Years of meticulous research, most of it conducted at the front, convinced him that soldiers were no less a social animal in war than in civilian life. Marshall reasoned it was that sociality that made soldiers perform their duties in battle. "During combat the soldier may become so gripped by fear that most of his thought is directed toward escape," Marshall wrote. "But if he is serving among men whom he has known for a long period or whose judgement of him counts for any reason, he still will strive to hide his terror from them." This suggests it is not only the soldier's dedication to their comrades but also how they wish them to perceive them—as courageous and dependable rather than cowardly and unreliable—that binds soldiers together in war. Marshall argues this conclusion is "simple proof" that "the ego is the most important of the motor forces driving the soldier . . . if it were not for the ego, it would be impossible to make men face the risks of battle."[7]

The primary group thesis is an alluring explanation for small-unit cohesion. It certainly presents a redeeming quality for what is an otherwise horrific experience. Yet, scholars increasingly argue that explanations hinging on social factors are problematic for two main reasons, both of which are particularly relevant to military service. First, social cohesion does not address the fact that attraction is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for group formation within a military context. Most servicemembers—especially in the draft era—have no say in what groups they serve. Moreover, there is no guarantee that all group members will get along, especially in a wartime environment where chronic stress, fear, lack of sleep, and an overall sense of helplessness do far more to amplify than mollify irritability toward one's comrades. Second, combat is generally a negative experience. Analyses focusing on social cohesion fail to explain small-unit effectiveness in bad situations, the most prominent example of which is defeat.[8] Indeed, history is replete with examples of armies losing wars yet continuing to fight effectively and offering stubborn resistance until the end.[9]

The second, more recent definition is task-oriented. *Task cohesion* refers to a "shared commitment among [group] members to achieving a goal" requiring their collective efforts.

A group whose members are motivated to achieve a common goal through coordinated efforts exemplifies high task cohesion.[10] Proponents of task-oriented cohesion examine tangible criteria to quantify success, such as the ability to set and meet attainable goals and curtailing deviance or indiscipline. This real-world approach allowed researchers to reconceptualize cohesion in terms of the primary group and maintenance of group integrity rather than simply gauging the group's attractiveness to its members. Moreover, a task-oriented conceptualization placed a far greater emphasis on strong leadership. Leaders give direction, enhance motivation, and support the group's purpose, culture, and values. Group members respond by increasing their skills and teamwork, which develops

[5] Robert J. MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat?: An Old Question with an Old Answer," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 1 (2005): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X05279181.
[6] See Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, Studies in Social Psychology in World War II, 4 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), particularly vol. 2; S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000); Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*; and J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), particularly chap. 3.
[7] Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 148–49.
[8] A. V. Carron, "Cohesiveness in Sport Groups: Interpretation and Considerations," *Journal of Sport Psychology* 4 (1982): 128, as cited in Guy L. Siebold, "The Evolution of the Measurement of Cohesion," *Military Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1999): 14, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327876mp1101_2.
[9] Two of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon are the German armies of WWI and WWII. For the former, see Dennis Showalter, *Instrument of War: The German Army 1914–18* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2016), particularly chaps. 1 and 6. In the latter case, it is ironic that the first widely promulgated study of small-unit cohesion concerned the *Wehrmacht* in the final stages of WWII. See Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1948): 280–315, https://doi.org/10.1086/265951.
[10] MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat?," 2.

pride and trust in themselves and their leaders. These new conceptions came to define cohesion as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives."[11]

Cohesion is difficult to measure, but military historians have made numerous efforts to do so by attempting to gauge soldiers' motivations in war. John Lynn's influential work on combat motivation among French revolutionary soldiers argues, "Shared labor, shared discomfort, and shared danger unite men when it is clear they can achieve their goals better through association."[12] Lynn's assertion here supports the role of task-oriented cohesion in forming an effective military organization. The adverse conditions that accompany life at war make task cohesion natural in a limited sense, as soldiers quickly learn that their plight becomes more bearable and their chances of survival greater through teamwork. However, the term *natural* in this context should not be considered axiomatic or misunderstood as an unbreakable bond. The exhausting nature of life at the front and the violent shock of combat can quickly negate the forces of necessity that first drove soldiers together.

The question then turns to how task-oriented cohesion is maintained as a war drags on. Lynn's work is a logical foundation for exploring this problem. He describes troop motivation as "the set of reasons, both rational and emotional, which leads a person to decide to act or to do nothing."[13] Lynn then proposed his now-classic three-tiered model for assessing soldiers' motivation. The first is *initial motivation*, which examines one's decision to become a soldier, either by voluntary enlistment or choosing to comply with conscription. The second is *sustaining motivation*, which applies to all subsequent military life outside of combat, such as training, exercise, marching, or camp life. Sustaining motivation is the most complex part of Lynn's model, as it requires a delicate synthesis of compliance and individual self-interest within an atmosphere predicated on rigid discipline. Finally, *combat motivation* concerns a soldier's decision to enter and remain in battle and to act therein. Combat motivation is a simple concept on the surface, but it is inseparable from sustaining motivation, for a unit's performance in combat is often reflective of its duties before battle.[14]

In sum, assessing motivation does not explain small-unit effectiveness on its own, but it can help explain how task-oriented cohesion is formed and maintained. Deficiencies or declines in sustaining motivation can similarly explain how once-effective units lose cohesion and effectiveness. For example, it became difficult for American combat forces in Vietnam to maintain task-oriented cohesion largely because the war's ambiguous objectives and frustrating character made it impossible to conceptualize what victory meant. From the average infantryman's perspective, the war lacked tangible strategic ends, outside of vague posturing about maintaining an independent and noncommunist South Vietnamese state. The lack of a clear pathway to victory and an individual rotation system that ensured each soldier would return home after a predetermined amount of time greatly affected how many viewed their role and purpose in the war. In short, for many soldiers and Marines, the primary goal in Vietnam was not to win the war but to survive their tours.[15]

Of course, survival in war is a task in and of itself, but if survival becomes the sole foundation of a group's task cohesion, they are not motivated to do anything more than the bare minimum required to minimize their exposure to danger and stay alive. A singular focus on survival degrades a group's effectiveness as a cog in a broader military system and undermines that system's task cohesion by seeking a personal objective. To paraphrase Peter Kindsvatter, cohesion among

[11] Siebold, "The Evolution of the Measurement of Cohesion," 13–14, 21.
[12] John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 32.
[13] Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, 35.
[14] Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, 35–36.
[15] Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 149–50; Charles C. Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), 141–43, 156; and John Helmer, *Bringing the War Home: The American Soldier in Vietnam and After* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 153–208. Latter two studies cited in Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic*, 31–32.

small groups of Marines and soldiers in Vietnam did not disintegrate, but hierarchical cohesion did. Small-unit group norms, which prioritized survival, became disconnected from those of the higher military organization, which prioritized accomplishing the mission and winning the war, no matter how vague those aims may have been.[16]

Explaining CAP Cohesion

Most CAPs did not witness a similar erosion in task cohesion. Indeed, living and fighting in the villages often cultivated a stronger sense of task-oriented cohesion than their line-unit counterparts, even as American forces began to withdraw later in the war. The program's supervisors attempted to build and maintain strong cohesion in part by imposing strict criteria on anyone who wished to join its ranks. But these standards were not always enforced. While many CAP Marines possessed the experience, character, and genuine motivation to live and work with the Vietnamese that the recruiting standards demanded, a large number did not. More striking, a significant number of participants did not volunteer for the program at all but were instead "voluntold"—sent involuntarily—by their commanding officers. Yet, CAP Marines still fostered and maintained cohesion in no small part because CAP duty required personnel to live alongside the Vietnamese, thus enabling them to familiarize themselves with the people they were there to protect. The CAP experience was not monolithic; some platoons performed better than others, just as some Marines look back on their time in the villages more fondly than their comrades. There are clear similarities among CAP veterans, even those who do not look back on service there fondly, that reveals a collective agreement that living among and attempting to protect the Vietnamese people was a more worthwhile endeavor than the regular infantry's impersonal methods of fighting the war. Indeed, analyzing CAP veterans' experiences using Lynn's three-tiered model reveals clear signs of task-oriented cohesion among their platoons.

[16] Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 149.

Initial CAP Motivation

From its earliest days, the officers who supervised the program realized that its success would rely on the careful selection of properly qualified Marines. "The rather unusual and delicate nature of the Combined Action Program has made it clear from the beginning that the selection of CAP personnel is of central importance," noted a report published in December 1969, "in particular, the personalities of the men involved would be a major factor in the success or failure of the CAP mission."[17] Each platoon's success, and its very survival, depended on maintaining task cohesion in an atmosphere free of any direct supervision. Neither end could be achieved without maintaining discipline within the group—standing guard at night rather than sleeping, performing regular weapons maintenance, aggressively patrolling, and setting ambushes every day and night—while building and maintaining positive relationships both with their PF counterparts and the local populace.

With these difficulties in mind, Marine leaders established specific criteria that each applicant had to meet. First Lieutenant Paul R. Ek, who supervised the first four CAPs between August and December 1965, made an admirable attempt to set a high standard for selecting Marines for service in the villages. The Marines who went to the first CAPs "were handpicked out of the battalion by myself and the company commanders," he stated in January 1966. "They were the best men that we could get available. They were volunteers and highly motivated."[18] Ek took such a direct role in the first teams' formation because he understood the complexities of both the Vietnamese sociopolitical climate and the irregular nature of their mission—one that was wholly different from anything those Marines had trained for prior to their arrival in Vietnam. Ek deployed to Vietnam as an advisor with a special forces unit in January 1965, where he gained brief but valuable experience about navigating the dynamics of village life and understanding NLF tactics

[17] Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities*, C-1.
[18] D. J. Hunter, "Interview with Paul Ek," 24 January 1966, USMCHD Oral History Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, hereafter Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 6.

for extorting and maintaining political influence over the village. Moreover, prior to his initial deployment, Ek formally studied the Vietnamese language and culture.[19] He used that experience to personally train the Marines he selected before deploying to villages. In a mere week of training, Ek instructed his Marines on village social structure and the political-military relationship between the villagers and the NLF, so that the Marines would understand the importance of denying the NLF access to the people. Further, he taught introductory classes on Vietnamese language and culture. The goal was to "get the people to accept us as members of the community," he explained. "The Marines' training was geared to teach them as much as we could about Vietnam and the Vietnamese people so that they could actually live with them in a close relationship, not as an occupational force, but as members of that village."[20]

Recruiting standards fluctuated as the program expanded between early 1966 and mid-1969. Specific details and stipulations within the criteria varied from year to year, but a consistent perception emerged about what the ideal CAP recruit would be. Junior Marines (lance corporals and below) were required to have been in Vietnam for at least two months if they were on their first tour or to be serving their second tour. They had to have at least six months remaining on their current tour or agree to extend their time in Vietnam by an additional six months. Applicants were expected to be trained infantrymen without a history of disciplinary issues and less than two purple hearts from their current tour. Above all, the applicant had to volunteer for CAP service, be highly recommended by their commanding officer, and be motivated to live and work with the Vietnamese people. Noncommissioned officers who applied to the program were subjected to the same standards but were also expected to have significant combat experience and a record of demonstrating high quality of leadership and to be considered highly qualified for promotion.[21]

There is overwhelming evidence that a large proportion of CAP Marines were indeed volunteers, although their reasons for doing so were mixed.[22] Some joined out of a genuine desire to live among the Vietnamese to better understand the war in which they were fighting and the people they were there to protect. Sergeant Robert Holm presents a fascinating example. He arrived in Vietnam on 21 September 1966. Assigned to Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, Holm soon found himself immersed in heavy combat in northern I Corps. He recalls that after seven months, a change had come over him. He did not like large-unit tactics—seemingly meaningless sweeps through the northern mountains and jungles, far away from the populace. Holm felt something was missing in his experience. "I had become consumed by the whole of Vietnam," he wrote. "The people, the beauty, and the thrill of the hunt." He chose to extend his tour and wanted to continue to fight, but not in a regular line company. Offered a choice of transferring to reconnaissance or CAP, Holm chose the latter specifically because "it offered one additional benefit—the ability to interact closely with the villagers, which was what I wanted."[23] Holm was so enamored with CAP service that he extended his tour twice more. He agreed to return to the United States after 31 months in Vietnam only because his promotion to staff sergeant took him out of the village he had learned to call home.[24]

Similarly, Jack Estes sought CAP service to better understand the war by learning to understand the Vietnamese people. Estes arrived in Vietnam in June 1968 and was assigned to Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, then operating along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam. After several violent months in the field, Estes's bat-

[19] Hunter, "Interview with Paul Ek," 1–3.
[20] Hunter, "Interview with Paul Ek," 6–7.

[21] Corson, "Combined Action Program in Vietnam," 7–8; Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities*, C-2; and "Official Document, Tactical Lessons: The Combined Action Company," July 1968, Vietnam War Docs, MCHD, Quantico, VA, courtesy of Annette Amerman, 4.
[22] Note: 32 of the 44 CAP veterans consulted for this study volunteered for the program.
[23] Robert C. Holm, *In Another Time and Place: My 31 Months in Vietnam* (Columbia, SC: self-published, 2015), 52–53.
[24] Holm, *In Another Time and Place*, 181–82.

talion went on a particularly brutal clearing operation into the infamous A Shau Valley. His platoon suffered two fatalities shortly after entering the area. Estes and another Marine spent more than a day carrying one of their fallen comrades, having to alternate between carrying the man's lifeless body across harsh terrain and dropping it to take cover and return fire.[25] That experience changed Estes's attitude toward the war. He began to feel like it had no point, vaguely summing up his experiences in the weeks after the A Shau operation as "an assortment of meaningless firefights."[26]

Estes was also painfully aware that he was stuck in Vietnam for another eight months. Determined to make the most out of his remaining time in Vietnam, he wrote to his wife shortly after the A Shau operation and told her of his request to join CAP. Life there would be easier and safer than in a line company, he wrote (erroneously), and it offered "a chance to live with the Vietnamese and get a clearer idea of what this war is all about."[27] While describing the disillusionment that overtook him in his final weeks with 3d Battalion, Estes elaborated at length on his desire to escape the meaningless existence of life in a line company. He is very clear about his desire to better understand the war by getting to know the people he was supposedly there to protect.

> I was in Vietnam, and knew virtually nothing about the people. I saw very few Vietnamese and the NVA I saw were either shooting at me, or were dead, and I had not yet discovered a reason, if any existed, for being there. In the Nam we had a motto: War is Hell, but a Firefight's a Motherfucker. That's what Vietnam was all about. It wasn't war. It wasn't hell. It was worse. It was indescribable. It was a motherfucker, for no apparent reason. I had to find a reason. I had to find some sort of justification for fighting. I needed to escape the mindless nature of the bush. There must be a purpose, a direction, I thought. I felt I would have to live with the people to really understand.[28]

Estes's words sum up the root of his and many other infantrymen's disillusionment with the war. Trudging through jungles and mountains in search of an elusive enemy offered them no opportunity to interact with the people they were supposed to protect. Estes reasoned that living among the Vietnamese afforded an opportunity to understand them and the war that consumed them all. CAP service, he thought, offered the opportunity to do something decent and worthwhile.

Not all Marines joined CAP as a way to find meaning. In other cases, volunteers simply wanted an escape from the misery and terror of life in the regular infantry. Pete Nardie arrived in Vietnam in August 1966.[29] He was assigned to 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, who were ordered to take part in a large clearing operation near the DMZ just days after his arrival. The operation did not go smoothly. All units involved met fierce resistance as they pushed through the jungles in a seemingly desultory matter. Nardie's shocking and violent welcome to Vietnam convinced him that he did not want to be in a line unit any longer than necessary. After two weeks in the field, 1st Battalion went to rest at Phu Bai airfield. A request went out for CAP volunteers soon after their arrival. "To be honest, I didn't know much about what CACs [Combined Action Company—the name used for CAPs in 1966 and 1967] were," he later admitted, "but I did like the idea of living in a village." More significantly, Nardie saw it as an opportunity to escape more clearing operations. He immediately volunteered and was accepted. Nardie had spent just shy of one month in the infantry—half of the minimum time required to join CAP at that time.[30]

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[25] Jack Estes, *A Field of Innocence* (Portland, OR: Breitenbush Books, 1987), 100–14.
[26] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 135.
[27] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 117.
[28] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 136.
[29] Several former CAP Marines' ranks were not recorded in the sources the author consulted and so are not able to be given here, although it is reasonable to assume that most of the enlisteds were corporals at the time.
[30] Pete Nardie, interview with author, 2 April 2021.

Another Marine, Harvey Baker, served in Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines during the horrendous fighting in the hills around Khe Sanh in the spring of 1967. In the final stages of the operation, Baker's company was ordered to seize Hill 861, a terrain feature with a commanding view of the surrounding area that would be a key fixture in much of the fighting around Khe Sanh for more than a year. The company captured the hill, but only 18 of its Marines, including Baker, survived the attack unscathed. Like Nardie, Baker saw CAP duty as a chance to escape life in the infantry. He volunteered as soon as the remnants of the company descended from the hills above Khe Sanh.[31]

Conversely, there is much evidence that noninfantry Marines volunteered for quite different reasons. In many cases, they saw CAP duty as a chance to escape a boring rear-echelon assignment or to experience combat before they rotated home. While the initial regulations for CAP recruitment stipulated that applicants be trained infantrymen, the program's rapid expansion between mid-1966 and mid-1969 required those regulations be relaxed somewhat. Under the revised guidelines, noninfantry applicants had to meet all the same criteria, be personally approved by the commanding general of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, and agree to extend their tour for six months, regardless of how much time they had left in country.[32] There is no evidence that any of these regulations were enforced.

Corporal Edward F. Palm's experiences provide one of many examples of a noninfantry Marine joining CAP and skirting some of the stringent recruiting regulations. He enlisted shortly after graduating high school in 1965 and was assigned to a supply warehouse in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. After two years of stateside service, Palm received orders to Vietnam, where he was assigned as a supply clerk in Da Nang. He found duty on a large base boring and searched for ways to escape it and see what the war was like, admitting that "the macho attitude of not wanting to return home without hearing a shot" played a significant role in his decision.[33] At the time, CAP seemed like the perfect opportunity to do just that. The idea of living in a remote unit embedded within a Vietnamese village appealed to his sense of adventure: "It sounded dangerous and exciting. . . . In a cavalier mood, I raised my hand [to volunteer]."[34]

Similarly, Sergeant William M. Grunder arrived in Vietnam as an artilleryman in mid-1966. He spent much of his tour on a hilltop fire support base near Phu Bai airfield. Regularly taking part in fire missions offered some excitement, but Grunder felt he was missing out on what the war was really about. He learned about CAP nine months into his tour. He was standing radio watch one night and heard a firefight break out nearby. He radioed back to Phu Bai to inquire about the situation and was informed that a CAC unit was in contact. Grunder had no idea what the acronym meant until he went to Phu Bai for rest a short time later. At the post exchange there, he noticed a flyer requesting volunteers for the program. He had long felt like he should do more in the war than sit on a hilltop and periodically fire a cannon at distant targets. Moreover, he was intrigued by the idea of living in the villages and helping the people there. "Many people thought I was crazy," he recalls. "They didn't like the idea of living in a small group out in the boonies and thought orders to CAC was a death sentence." Grunder was undeterred. He volunteered right away and spent more than a year in the program before finally rotating home.[35]

Not all CAP personnel served voluntarily. From the program's earliest stages, some commanding officers viewed CAP as a way to get rid of incompetent or trouble-making Marines. They realized that the need was so great for personnel to form new teams

[31] "Harvey Baker," in Albert Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 61. For a corroborating report on 3d Battalion, 3d Marines' activities in this operation, see 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Command Chronology (ComdC), May 1967, item no. 1201040011, folder 040, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, enclosure 10.
[32] Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities*, C-6.

[33] Palm, *Tiger Papa Three*, 52–56; "Major Edward Palm, USMC (Ret.)," in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 34–35; latter quote occurred in Edward F. Palm, telephone interview with author, 30 October 2020.
[34] Palm, *Tiger Papa Three*, 58.
[35] Bill Grunder, telephone interview with author, 23 March 2021.

and replace casualties in existing ones that they could disregard most of the recruiting guidelines without repercussion.[36] It became common for Marines to be voluntold for CAP duty, regardless of their disciplinary record, level of experience, or feelings toward the Vietnamese. This practice could be very detrimental to the CAP's overall effectiveness for, as one midwar report points out, "a CAP is precisely where such a man can cause the maximum amount of trouble" due to its physical isolation and sensitive mission. For much of the program's lifespan, however, manpower shortages remained endemic, so much so that, by mid-1969, an estimated one-third of CAP personnel admitted to being voluntold for the program by their commanding officers.[37]

Hop Brown, an African American rifleman with 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, was voluntold for service in one of the original CAPs in August 1965. This admission directly contradicts Ek's earlier assertion that the first CAP Marines were highly motivated volunteers hand selected by him and 3d Battalion's company commander, leading one to ponder whether those officers had misled Ek to pass some of their misfits along to him. Brown's recollections support this assumption. He suspected his company and platoon commanders wanted to get rid of him. "I was not what you would call a gung-ho Marine," he later admitted. "I had a hard time taking orders and putting up with the racial slurs and innuendos that were prevalent in the Marine Corps at that time."[38] Brown also credits his time in the program with changing his attitude toward the Marine Corps. He recalls his platoon as a "very homogeneous group of guys" who mostly worked well with each other and the villagers. "We all judged each other on our own merits rather than the color of our skins."[39]

In other cases, Marines were involuntarily placed in the program for more benign reasons. Thomas Flynn, for example, was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. He arrived in Vietnam as a combat replacement to 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, in late 1966. After less than two months in the field, the battalion, which had been in Vietnam since the summer of 1965, was ordered to return to its base on Okinawa to rest and refit. But Flynn did not join it; rather, all personnel in his company with less than 90 days in country were transferred to a CAC instead. Flynn had no idea what that meant, and his commander knew little more than the fact that it stood for Combined Action Company.[40] Despite having less than two months in Vietnam, having no idea what CACs were or did, and not volunteering for the transfer, Flynn was admitted into the program right away.

In sum, the CAP program's architects realized the platoons would operate in complex and often volatile environments. They reasoned that CAPs required carefully selected, highly motivated, skilled, and experienced Marines to function effectively. They established specific criteria to ensure that only highly qualified Marines could serve in the platoons. Marines entered the CAP program for a variety of reasons, but they rarely fit the criteria espoused by Marine leadership. Some Marines like Estes and Holm fit the criteria well, but many more did not. Many volunteers simply wanted to escape life in the regular infantry. Some thought it was a soft duty that would allow them to wait out the rest of their tours in a safer and less demanding environment. Some had no field experience at all but volunteered more out of fear they would return home without experiencing combat than a genuine desire to live among the Vietnamese. Others were placed in the program involuntarily. Yet, despite frequent practices of skirting or disregarding the strict recruiting criteria, CAPs largely managed to function as effective and cohesive military organizations. Indeed, individual and collective immersion within a village's society proved a powerful source of sustaining motivation that bolstered platoons' task cohesion.

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[36] Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York City: Praeger, 1989), 24.
[37] Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities*, C-3.
[38] "Hop Brown," in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 25–26. For a brief discussion of racial strife within the Corps' ranks during Vietnam, see Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 598–600.
[39] "Hop Brown," 24.
[40] Thomas Flynn, *A Voice of Hope* (Baltimore, MD: American Literary Press, 1994), 32–33.

CAP Sustaining and Combat Motivation

Regardless of how or why a Marine wound up in a CAP, in most cases he had to adapt to their new situation quickly. Life in a CAP was often very dangerous. Combat and casualties were frequent, oftentimes more so than in a regular infantry unit. The CAP's very location in I Corps, bordering the DMZ, all but ensured the program's members would come under fire and suffer casualties more frequently than units in other areas. Michael Clodfelter's statistical analysis of the war finds that 10 South Vietnamese provinces accounted for 51 percent of all allied combat deaths. Three of the four deadliest were in I Corps; all five I Corps provinces were in the top eight. Clodfelter also found that a mere 1.5 percent of all Marines who served in the war were in a CAP, but CAP Marines accounted for 3.2 percent of all Marine casualties and 8 percent of enemy casualties inflicted by Marines.[41] Administrative records written and promulgated by officers overseeing CAPs reveal similar numbers. A 1970 report on CAP activities reveals that, in 1969 alone, platoons in all four Combined Action Groups (CAGs, the largest organizational unit for CAPs) killed 1,952 enemy combatants and captured 391. During the same period, CAP personnel suffered 117 killed and 851 wounded while PF casualties amounted to 185 and 692 dead and wounded, respectively.[42] Clearly, many CAPs were effective at locating and combating enemy forces, despite the lax nature in which Marines were often admitted to the program. Evidence indicates that, regardless of how or why they wound up in a CAP, Marines were often held together by a strong sense of task cohesion that manifested after they arrived in the villages.

This phenomenon is demonstrated among many CAP Marines who were voluntold for the program. Indeed, many developed a positive attitude about their new assignment. Brown, a cynical and unmotivated Marine who was, at best, ambivalent about his new assignment is an interesting case. "In my time [in the village] my attitude changed toward these people," he recalled. "As I got used to their way of life and started to see their customs and rituals from their point of view, I began to understand that the things I took for granted as an American did not apply to this culture."[43] Like many CAP Marines, he did not think highly of the PFs' professional skill, but he did come to understand their plight. More significantly, Brown forged friendships with some of the villagers, who accepted him and many of his comrades as part of the community. In particular, he befriended a boy whose father owned a store in the village marketplace. The boy often delivered beer and other goods from his father's store to Brown and his comrades. When Brown rotated home, the boy and his entire family came to the compound to tell him goodbye. Brown does not look back on the war with fondness, but he firmly believes CAP service was "a growth process for the men who were fortunate enough to participate in it."[44] Flynn describes a similar transformation in his outlook toward the villagers around his CAP. He recalls "a renewed sense of pride and meaning for our being in this country. . . . The average soldier would never have the opportunity to be invited into a villager's home for dinner or to play with their children."[45]

What caused this transformation? Initial CAP training did little to start the process. Administrative records indicate a somewhat rigorous curriculum, but recollections from the Marines suggest the training was not eminently helpful. Few veterans have anything positive to say about CAP school except that it took them out of the field for a few weeks. The school did attempt to teach students a wide array of subjects—Vietnamese language and culture; various weapons used by NLF, NVA, and PF soldiers; small-unit patrolling and ambush tactics; and, perhaps most importantly, classes on radio maintenance and use, namely

[41] Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 107, 252.

[42] It is worth noting that enemy wounded in action are not included in this report because they were rarely left behind during or after a firefight. Marines could generally only count bodies they physically recovered or watched fall during an engagement toward the enemy casualty figure. See "2 CAG Facts Sheet," enclosure 8, folder 22, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive.

[43] "Hop Brown," 22.

[44] "Hop Brown," 26–27.

[45] Flynn, *Voice of Hope*, 46.

calling for artillery and air support.[46] The school's biggest weakness was its brevity; all lessons were crammed into a two-week period. In some dire cases, like the program's rapid expansion in the summer of 1967 or the opening phase of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, Marines received little or no training at all.[47]

In practice, the acclimation process occurred in the villages. It had to happen quickly for a CAP Marine to function effectively. One of the biggest challenges the Marines faced was overcoming their own prejudice toward the Vietnamese. This was no small feat for many, particularly infantrymen with significant combat experience. Many entered the program with a universal distrust of the Vietnamese that had to be managed for them to function effectively in the villages. For example, operating as a CAP Marine often required a greater degree of restraint on the Marines' part. Unlike the regular infantry, CAP Marines were immersed in village life and were constantly surrounded by Vietnamese people, some of whom were not friendly. Differentiating friend from foe was thus a difficult task—perhaps even more difficult (and pressing) because of the simple fact that a CAP's isolated position could make even the most experienced new arrivals nervous. "Up at the DMZ, if something moved you shot it. You didn't think about it, you just did it," recalls one veteran. "When I got to [CAP] Hotel-7, life changed totally. . . . I was sleeping on a cot with a roof over my head, but I felt like we had no security. We were out in the middle of nowhere alone."[48]

A combination of necessity and proximity led the Marines, often subconsciously, to see the Vietnamese more positively. Many CAP Marines and villagers realized that working together could be mutually beneficial. The latter were often harassed by NLF and NVA forces, who would come into their villages at night to exploit them for taxes, supplies, and recruits. Those who refused were coerced into doing so or were kidnapped, beaten, tortured, or killed as an example to the rest.[49] Just as the villagers could depend on the Marines to limit NLF and NVA incursions into their villages, the Marines relied on the villagers' knowledge of local politics and family dynamics to provide intelligence. The villagers and PFs knew better than anyone who in their village sympathized with Communist forces. They also intimately knew the terrain and were far more likely to spot irregularities—telltale signs of booby traps or other manmade hazards—before the Marines.[50]

As the Marines became more acclimated to life in the villages, they often felt like they were a part of the community. An integral part of this process involved the Marines taking part in the local economy and various social functions. Even in cases where relations with the PF were unreliable or strained, many CAP Marines describe relationships they formed with the villagers through these channels. They often paid a local woman to wash and sew their clothes or befriended a shop owner who supplied them with food, soda, and beer. Some platoons adopted a local orphan who ran errands for the Marines during the day and

[46] CAP training curricula fluctuated throughout the war, but the classes listed here were present throughout. A good synopsis of the training regimen can be found in Allnutt, *Combined Action Capabilities*, appendix D. It is also remarkable, and a bit damning, how little CAP Marines have to say about their time at the school. They mostly comment on enjoying a break from the field and getting three hot meals and a shower each day. One Marine remarked that the only thing he remembers about CAP school was that he learned to play Chinese checkers. See "Tony Vieira," in Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different*, 41.
[47] Ed Nest revealed in our interview that he went straight from Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, to his CAC in August 1967. Ed Nest, telephone interview with author, 24 March 2021, hereafter Nest interview. Another Marine, Tom Harvey, reported to CAP school on 20 January 1968. The Tet Offensive began when his class was only half finished. Their training was abruptly stopped and Harvey and his classmates were shipped out to various CAPs as combat replacements a few days later. See "Tom Harvey," in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 73–74.
[48] Nest interview.
[49] Jack Estes mentions a particularly jarring episode where an entire family was butchered except the mother, whose children were shot and disemboweled in front of her, for the crime of possessing a case of Corps-issued rations in their home. See Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 193.
[50] Brown briefly discusses the locals providing his CAP with intelligence after they had gained their trust. See "Hop Brown," 25. Harvey, who served in CAPs across two tours in Vietnam, describes the PF's ability to walk through a hamlet and point out booby traps or tell him that a family had two sons with the NLF, or that another had a son with the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN, or South Vietnam) and were reliable. Sometimes families had sons on both sides. See "Tom Harvey," 81.

stayed in their compound at night.[51] In other instances, Marines taught English classes at the local school when not on patrol during the day.[52] It was also common for Marines to attend meals at a local family's home or to be invited to a village social event like a wedding or festival, or for the villagers to throw a feast for the Marines in appreciation for their hard work.[53]

The most interesting examples involve Marines worshiping alongside the Vietnamese. A significant number of South Vietnamese were Catholic, and some CAP Marines attended mass at local churches. For example, several of Ek's Marines were Catholic and attended mass at the church outside of Phu Bai.[54] Flynn, also Catholic, recalls a similar experience. After several months in his CAP, Flynn decided to attend mass at the village's church. That Sunday, he put on his cleanest utilities and, along with his CAP leader, walked to the village church. "I was amazed to find that the inside . . . looked like any other catholic church," he recalled. "I had a warm safe feeling about being here [*sic*]. . . . The priest talked in Vietnamese, but I was still very aware of what was going on. The mass was the same all over the world!" To Flynn's surprise, many in the congregation seemed happy to have him there. He writes that many of the local men came to him and his commander after mass and shook their hands. "They made us feel welcome, and it was a warm feeling. After seeing the way they dressed to attend church, I realized they weren't quite as uncivilized as we wanted to make them out to be. It's funny how your opinion of things can change even in the middle of a war."[55]

Robert Holm never mentions religion in the earlier chapters of his memoir, yet it seems he found it in an unconventional way in Vietnam. After several months in CAP, he became very close with a family in his village, Phu Le. He initially befriended the family's youngest son, a boy of around 10 named Van. Van had a beautiful older sister named Hu'o'ng. After frequent visits and pleading with Hu'o'ng's grandmother for her blessing, Holm began a romantic relationship with her.[56] Frequent patrols, ambushes, and operations kept Holm busy, but he stopped by Hu'o'ng's family home whenever he could. As their relationship grew closer, Holm took an interest in Buddhism and learned to pray alongside his hosts at the family altar. Hu'o'ng eventually helped Holm design and build his own small altar so he could pray for protection before going out on patrol.[57] Unfortunately, Hu'o'ng was kidnapped one night in November 1968 and never seen again. Holm left Vietnam two months later, having no idea what happened to her. Forty-three years later, he returned to Phu Le. He went to Hu'o'ng's family home, where he found Van still living there with a family of his own. Holm learned that Hu'o'ng had indeed been taken and executed by a group of NLF. Distraught, Holm knelt at the same family altar alongside Van and prayed for her spirit. The family then took him to her grave, discovered only five years before Holm's return to the village. As the family looked on, Holm knelt before the grave, lit joss sticks, and prayed.[58]

[51] Several Marines in Hemingway's oral history collection describe such interactions. See Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 26–27, 28, 63, 168, 173. Flynn describes his village's mayor organizing a feast for his CAP shortly after their arrival. He notes many of the villagers, often dressed in their finest clothes, came to the compound with their favorite foods. See Flynn, *Voice of Hope*, 53–54. Estes describes building a footbridge and other infrastructure-related projects for the locals, going fishing with locals and PFs (sometimes with hand grenades!), and even helping his corpsman deliver a baby, which another Marine in his CAP also did shortly before Estes's arrival. See Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 163, 169, 180, 236–37, 268.

[52] Bill Grunder and Cpl Cottrell Fox both mention in their respective interviews a Marine in their CAP named Charlie Brown who regularly taught English classes to the children at their village's school. Robert Holm also taught classes at the school near his first CAP. Tom Pierce, who served in CAP during both his tours in Vietnam, taught classes as well. Grunder interview; Cottrell Fox, telephone interview with author, 22 March 2021, hereafter Fox interview; Holm, *Another Time*, 76; and Tom Pierce, telephone interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[53] Chuck Ratliff describes having "quite a bit of time to mingle with the people," and going to weddings and parties. See "Chuck Ratliff," in Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different*, 28.

[54] Hunter, "Interview with Paul Ek," 25.

[55] During France's long occupation of Vietnam (1887–1954), many Vietnamese converted to Catholicism. There were still numerous Catholic churches and orphanages across South Vietnam during the American phase of the war. For Flynn's account, see Flynn, *Voice of Hope*, 147. Other CAP Marines describe visiting Catholic orphanages in or near their villages to deliver clothing and supplies or simply to visit the children there. For examples, see "Chuck Ratliff," 28; and Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 236–67.

[56] Holm, *In Another Time and Place*, 105–7.

[57] Holm, *In Another Time and Place*, 193.

[58] This is one of the more remarkable stories of a CAP Marine growing to be a part of the local community. See Holm, *In Another Time and Place*, 195–205.

Immersion within a village's society was a common source of sustaining motivation for CAP Marines. Whether that happened by taking part in the local economy, attending social events, or a more profound outlet like worshiping alongside villagers, it gave all CAP Marines a new perspective on the war. Fighting in Vietnam became personal as they learned about the people, thus enhancing their sense of purpose. Many seemed more motivated than ever before to do their jobs well, since doing so meant protecting a group of people they saw and interacted with daily. Estes was emphatic about CAP service giving him a reason to fight in Vietnam. "I felt a sense of purpose and meaning to this war," he writes. "I felt like I was protecting little kids and helping the old men who came to fight with us."[59] Another Marine recalls that he and his CAP became "the boys next door who tried their best to work together and get to know and help the farmers."[60] Warren Carmon, who served in one of the last CAPs in 1970–71, believes that "CAP Marines were a lot more idealistic than the others who served in Vietnam. . . . I remember guys not wanting to go on R&R because it would leave the platoon shorthanded. We felt a responsibility to the people and our fellow Marines."[61] Because the CAP program made living and fighting at the village level the platoons' mission, many of the Marines felt a personal attachment not just to the people in their assigned areas but to the task of defending them.

A primary issue with assessing cohesion and motivation is that both concepts are abstract and difficult to quantify. There is one tangible indication of sustaining motivation among CAP Marines: the high number of men who chose to extend their tours to remain in the program and those who volunteered to return to Vietnam to enter or return to CAP. Evidence suggests this was a common occurrence throughout the program's lifespan, until the early stages of the withdrawal from Vietnam initiated a similar drawdown in the number of CAPs that ended with the program's disbandment in 1971. Indeed, 35 of the 56 original CAP personnel did volunteer to extend their time in Vietnam to remain in their villages.[62] It does not appear that extension rate of more than 60 percent was maintained throughout the program's entire lifespan, but there is ample evidence that a significant number of CAP Marines volunteered to remain in Vietnam.[63]

It was common for platoon leaders to have at least one extension on their records. A report released in December 1969 noted that 40 percent of CAP leaders in Vietnam that year had extended their tour at least once.[64] Many extended multiple times. Robert Holm did so on three occasions; Grunder extended twice. Like Holm, Grunder extended the first time simply to get into the program. Then, despite seeing heavy combat in the summer and autumn of 1967, he prolonged his tour again. "I extended because I liked what I was doing. I liked the responsibility [of leading a CAP] and I felt like I was accomplishing things," he explained. "I felt like that was my village, those were my people, and I wanted to protect them and try to make their lives a little bit better. If the [NLF] were coming in and kidnapping and assassinating people, they were living in fear. I wanted to take some of that fear away." Grunder was wounded in a firefight in November 1967 and evacuated. After a brief stint in the hospital, he returned to his CAP just before dusk on 30 January 1968, just in time for the Tet Offensive, which began a few hours later. At approximately 0400 the next morning, a large NVA force assaulted his

[59] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 166.
[60] William Nimmo, telephone interview with author, 23 February 2021.
[61] Carmon's comments are striking given the time in which he served in Vietnam. By the time he arrived in 1970, Vietnamization and the United States' withdrawal from the conflict was plainly underway, yet Marines in his CAP were willing to forgo time away from combat to continue performing their duties and protecting the villagers in their area. See "Warren Carmon," in Hemmingway, *Our War Was Different*, 169.
[62] Capt John J. Mullen Jr., "Modifications to the III MAF Combined Action Program in the Republic of Vietnam," Marine Corps Development and Education Command, December 1968, Vietnam War Docs, MCHD, Quantico, VA, courtesy of Annette Amerman, C-12.
[63] CAP did not have its own administrative structure (and thus no command chronologies) before mid-1968, thus determining extension rates is difficult. The veterans surveyed for this study do not quite support the argument that the majority of CAP veterans volunteered to extend their tours, but a large number did. Of 44 CAP veterans consulted for this study, 5 volunteered to extend their tours while 8 volunteered for a second tour to return to or enter CAP service. It is also worth noting that interviewees who served between mid-1969 and 1971 (20 of 44) were not given the choice to extend during their first tour.
[64] Allnut, *Combined Action Capabilities*, C-6, F-11–14.

compound. The NVA overran the CAP's position but, miraculously, Grunder's Marines and PFs repulsed the attack.[65] He was wounded again during the battle and sent to teach at the CAP school in Phu Bai as his injuries healed.

After two wounds, numerous firefights, and his platoon being briefly overrun, Grunder wanted a third extension and to return to his village. He appealed directly to 3d Combined Action Group's commanding officer, who agreed to let him regain command of his old CAP, but requested Grunder take a day to think it over. He agreed and decided to pass the time by drinking beer at the Phu Bai noncommissioned officers' club. There, he ran into Sergeant Joseph C. Cerrone, a friend who ran a nearby CAP. Knowing everything Grunder had been through, Cerrone was determined to talk him out of staying. After several hours, and many more beers, Grunder decided to heed his friend's advice and return home. The decision seems to have weighed heavily on him; Cerrone was killed in action soon after.[66] Yet, Grunder maintains that "the CAP experience was one of the high points of my life. It wasn't anything I expected to do, but it really allowed me to grow. How many guys can say 'I went to live in a village and did my best to protect it'?"[67]

Leadership, Task Cohesion, and Combat Effectiveness

Assertive and aggressive leadership were essential to maintaining task cohesion within a CAP. Group members generally respond positively when their commander provides leadership that supports the group's purpose, culture, and values. For a CAP to function effectively and accomplish its goals, it had to establish and maintain a noticeable presence in and around its village. Initiative and aggressive action in the form of continuous patrols was key. CAPs were sometimes at the mercy of a leadership die-roll. Just as an effective leader was essential to ensuring a platoon's success, an incompetent or ineffective commander could undermine and ruin a CAP's cohesion.

Effective CAP leaders understood that the best way to accomplish the shared goal of protecting their village was to saturate the area with daily patrols and ambushes. Holm instilled within his Marines the understanding that "the first line of defense and an essential aspect of CAP security was aggressive patrolling. Nighttime patrols and ambushes were of particular importance."[68] Grunder echoed that sentiment. As the leader of a newly established CAP, he and his Marines constantly patrolled their village and noticed a sudden drop-off in NLF activity within the village. "We were disrupting them," he recalls. "The kidnappings and assassinations [of villagers] pretty much stopped. . . . We stayed focused and that's why we were [successful]."[69] When Tom Harvey arrived at his first CAP in the middle of the Tet Offensive, everything was in confusion and no one seemed to be in charge. Harvey spent his first month there in a purely defensive posture, his CAP desperately clinging to its position against repeated attacks by NLF and NVA forces. The situation stabilized when they received a permanent leader, an experienced sergeant from a reconnaissance unit. Under his direction, they resumed frequent day patrols and night ambushes. Fighting in the area soon died down considerably.[70]

Conversely, a lazy, arrogant, or incompetent leader could erode or even destroy task cohesion in an otherwise effective CAP. That happened in Thomas Flynn's platoon, Tiger Papa Three. It was attacked in force twice in the summer of 1967; both times it barely managed to hang on to its position. Flynn was badly wounded and moved to another location after the first attack. After the second assault, enemy activity died down in the area and remained that way until the Tet Offensive the following year.[71] Corporal Edward Palm was assigned to CAP Tiger Papa Three as a replacement around that time, shortly after its

[65] Grunder interview. His story is also corroborated by Cottrell Fox's interview, and a Silver Star citation for Fox, of which Fox was kind enough to provide the author with a photocopy. Attack recorded in 5th Marines, ComdC, January 1968, item no. 1201046154, folder 046, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 189.
[66] Cerrone's death is also mentioned in Hemingway, *Our War*, 93.
[67] Grunder interview.
[68] Holm, *In Another Time and Place*, 74.
[69] Grunder interview; and Fox interview.
[70] "Tom Harvey," 73–75.
[71] Flynn, *Voice of Hope*, 65–74, 135–44.

new commander, an infantry sergeant, arrived.[72] Palm points out that the sergeant was neither arrogant nor incompetent but that he allowed the seemingly peaceful state of things around their village to lure him and his Marines into a false sense of security. Under his cavalier, laissez-faire form of leadership, the platoon settled into a comfortable routine characterized by complacency and predictability. Throughout the autumn of 1967, Tiger Papa Three did little to expand or maintain the fragile security bubble around its village, giving the PFs and villagers little reason to place their confidence in its Marines. Eventually, the captain in charge of all CAPs in the area forced them to be more aggressive, and a Tiger Papa Three Marine was killed in December 1967 when his patrol was ambushed outside a hut they had made a habit of visiting on a daily basis.[73]

A particularly jarring case of bad leadership is demonstrated in the story of Estes's 2d CAP, 1st Combined Action Company, 2d Combined Action Group, in the spring of 1969. When he arrived that January, its leader was a standoffish but otherwise competent man, and the CAP was an aggressive and effective fighting force. The 2d CAP best displayed its combat effectiveness when it combined with a nearby CAP in late February to ambush and nearly wipe out an entire NVA company. However, the first CAP leader's nerves broke shortly thereafter when they were caught in a pair of successive, well-executed ambushes in which 2d CAP lost two Marines killed and four wounded.[74]

Like the attacks on Tiger Papa Three two years prior, fighting in 2d CAP's area ceased after those two ambushes. A new CAP leader, Corporal Swan, arrived during that time. Swan was an experienced infantryman, but he was lazy and hopelessly naïve. Believing the enemy had left the area, he "ran our C.A.P. [*sic*] with a carefree attitude that fit well with the new guys but sort of bothered me. He'd smoke dope . . . in the day and let us stay in hooches at night" rather than sending out patrols and fortifying the platoon's position, Estes recalled.[75] Despite constant warnings from Estes and his friend Charlie, who had been in CAP a year and recently extended his tour, Swan ran 2d CAP with a sense of complacency that seemed to dare enemy forces to attack. One night, Estes's worst fears came to fruition and they were assaulted by a large NLF force. When the attack began, the entire platoon except Estes, Charlie, and a few PFs were asleep inside a hut they had stayed in every night for the last few months. It was a disaster. Two Marines and the platoon corpsman were wounded. Three more were killed, including Swan and Charlie, along with several PFs.[76] Estes does not say much about who took over after the attack, though it seems like a Marine named Bingham, the longest-tenured Marine in 2d CAP, took command. What is clear is that the CAP shed its complacency, resumed its aggressive patrolling, and took part in several successful engagements until Estes rotated home two months later.[77]

Conclusion

The CAP program offered a solution for slowing the erosion of task cohesion among American soldiers and Marines during the Vietnam War. Living among and forming relationships with Vietnamese villagers added a new dimension to the war that few American servicemembers could experience. Feeling like they were part of a community, or at least the experience of building relationships with the people they were assigned to protect, gave many CAP Marines a sense that they were fighting for something real, rather than a vaguely defined political objective or to reach a specific date on which they could depart the country. Unlike regular infantry units, which operated in sparsely populated areas and frequently shifted from one place to another, CAP Marines came to know the areas in which they lived and fought. Feeling at home sustained many Marines' combat motivation and in-

[72] From 1965 to 1968, CAPs were named and renamed sporadically. It was not until late 1968, when CAP got its own command and administrative structure, that CAP names became uniform.

[73] Palm, *Tiger Papa Three*, 59–62, 93–94, 108–9, 125–32. See also "Major Edward Palm, USMC (Ret.)," 38–40.

[74] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 194–215; and administrative record of ambush, 2d Combined Action Group (2d CAG), ComdC, February 1969, item number 1201022062, folder 22, USMCHD Vietnam War Docs, Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive, 15–16, 34.

[75] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 232. Cpl Swan's full name was not recorded in sources consulted.

[76] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 252–58.

[77] Estes, *A Field of Innocence*, 240–41.

creased their desire to do their jobs well because they had a personal connection to the village and people they were assigned to protect. Those sentiments built and often maintained a CAP's task cohesion, thus enhancing their willingness to seek out and engage their enemies, despite being free of external supervision.

Even the Marines who were dubious about the program's overall efficacy acknowledge the practice of living and fighting at the village level was a sound, calculated response to a strategy that was unsuccessful at best and counterproductive at worst. Edward Palm, a vocal critic of the program, maintains it was "a daring move on the Marine Corps's [*sic*] part, tantamount to breaking ranks in the eyes of some. But much to its credit, the Corps felt it had to dissent from a strategy that clearly was not working and which was proving to be self-defeating." He describes the CAPs as "an enlightened gesture of dissent," in which a small number of Marines broke away from a flawed, impersonal method of fighting that was failing in no small part because its very nature eroded task cohesion among the soldiers and Marines ordered to carry it out.[78]

Task cohesion was thus rooted in the elements of familiarity with, and a sense of duty toward, the village that proliferated within many CAPs. Protecting one's village, rather than surviving one's tour, was the commonly recognized task that bound many CAPs together. If that cohesion was cultivated and supported by assertive leadership, a CAP was often an effective and lethal fighting force. "In a CAP, you had a wonderful job in an exotic, beautiful environment. Your job was to talk to the people and to learn about how they live," recalls one veteran. "It was more than a personal connection to the war; it was an emotional connection to the village environment and its people. After I got comfortable in my village, it felt like home. I realized that life there was similar to my little hometown in Indiana."[79]

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[78] Palm, *Tiger Papa Three*, 50.
[79] William Nimmo, telephone interview with author, 18 April 2021.