

THE CAP UNIT MARINES

"I dislike modern memoirs. They are generally written by people who have either entirely lost their memories or have never done anything worth remembering." Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

The following article is an edited excerpt from a speech given in 1985, by James DuGuid, Director of the CAP Unit Veterans Association, at Las Vegas, Nevada, to the participants of the VA Symposium on the Treatment of Vietnam Veterans. There is also some background information included from Wikipedia. As a CAP Corpsman, following a tour of duty with the 26th Marines, and having been assigned to both stationary and mobile CAPs, the memories of serving with the Marines of these unique units, have resurfaced every day of my life for more than fifty years. Those haunting memories of yesterday, continue to give the assurances that we did something worth remembering. Views expressed in this article have not been personally verified, but the narrative coincides with my experiences. **After all, I've been there and done that!**

"The Combined Action Program was conceived and operated by the United States Marine Corps from 1965 to 1971. It was designed as a pacification program. In its six-year history the program was rarely known outside of its own members and a few Marines fortunate enough to have had some contact with it. Following the end of the War, the program was all but forgotten, except, of course, by its survivors."

"The reasons for this lack of recognition are varied. However, the major reason lies within the nature of the unit itself. At the height of the Combined Action Program, there were one-hundred-fourteen units, each comprised of fourteen Marines, one Navy Corpsman, and approximately twenty Popular Force troops. These units were strategically scattered from Chu Lai to the DMZ. Each unit was located within a village or hamlet and was, in essence, completely on its own with regard to its pacification activities, and, more importantly, its security and defense. There existed virtually no artillery nor air support for these units. Medevacs frequently waited six to eight hours after enemy contact before evacuating the wounded. Indeed, so remote and isolated were some CAP units that often Marines would go six months without seeing an officer, or returning to a rear area."

"The consequences of having been a volunteer in the Combined Action Program are perhaps made clear by the following information, gathered in the past three years of my research: The average CAP Marine, having already served for thirteen months in Vietnam, volunteered to extend his tour for six more months in order to be a member of this pacification effort. The Marines were required to have had four months combat experience and received rudimentary training in the Vietnamese language, history, customs, and military and governmental organization. Armed with this limited knowledge, and an overpowering belief that their individual participation in this program might shorten the war, and ultimately save lives, these men, these heroic young men, risked their lives and never lost their humaneness."

"Of the approximately 5,000 Marines who went into this program, less than half survived. Of the survivors, it has been estimated that 70% were wounded once, 40% were wounded twice, and approximately 65% received decorations for heroism. In 1968, the Combined Action Program comprised less than 3% of all U.S. personnel in the I Corps area, yet they accounted for 43% of the enemy KIAs. This program was the smallest combat unit existing in Vietnam, but it was also the most highly decorated...."

"...It should be noted that these elite survivors are just that, elite. With almost all whom I have talked to about attending Veterans Rap Groups, or similar therapeutic programs, one strong reservation stands out. That is the CAP unit veterans do not identify with other Vietnam veterans, especially around the issues of experiences with and attitudes toward the Vietnamese people. The CAP volunteers lived intimately with the villagers and formed powerful relationships, which were traumatically severed upon their return to the states. This has resulted in feelings of loss equally as strong as those feelings of loss concerning their fellow Marines. Often these feelings are compounded by a sense of having abandoned the villagers who depended on them...."

"...So what does all this mean? To me it means that you, as professionals, should be on the lookout for these CAP unit survivors and recognize that these are not typical of Vietnam combat veterans. The men volunteered above and beyond the call of duty for the most righteous of reasons, to help save lives. The men were 'Peace Corps Volunteers' with guns. They gave everything they had and yet they are totally alone. They cannot share their experiences with those who understand because there just aren't that many still alive." He estimates 2,000 countrywide in 1985, and we may safely assume that the survivors are much fewer in 2023, thirty-eight years later.

DuGuid's speech concludes with CAP reunion statistics. Officer to Corpsmen ratios, numbers of wounded, and survivors of CAPs that were overrun by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.

A short excerpt from Wikipedia says the following about **CAP Units**...

"With U.S. Marines living and fighting side-by-side with the Vietnamese people, CAP seemed to represent an effective, long-term, around-the-clock commitment to combating the Vietnamese communists at the grassroots level. There were some similarities between what CAP did and what was done by the United States Army Special Forces (aka Green Berets). However, most Marine units worked in the lower lying areas with Nghia Quan units, while Green Beret tended to work with the Nung and Dega tribesmen. An exception to this pattern was Oscar Company, which was stationed at Khe Sanh in the mountainous regions of Quang Tri. The Marines drew from the same local Dega tribe, the Bru, as the Special Forces."

"CAPs seldom used costly supporting arms fire and had a high kill ratio relative to the size of the unit. According to the late Lieutenant Colonel James H. Champion; in April and May 1969, 1st CAG killed 440 VC or NVA, and was killing more NVA than the entire 101st Airborne Division."

"Beginning in about 1968, the CAP concept underwent some changes. Due to factors such as a high number of attacks and casualties among the static CAPS, the roving CAP was started. Roving CAPs had no fixed village – they rotated among two or more villages, and often spent the night in the field. They were very mobile, as opposed to the original static concept, and thus kept the enemy guessing as to where they would be any given night."

"Counterinsurgency operations and, in particular, the establishment of a foreign internal defense lends itself for the greatest utility of employing a CAP-style organization. Recent operations in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia suggest a CAP-style organization could accomplish the assigned mission. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marines reinstated a variant of the CAP. CAP came naturally for the Marine Corps because counterinsurgency warfare was already part of the USMC heritage. From 1915 to 1934, the Corps had a wealth of experience in foreign interventions fighting guerrillas in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Santo Domingo. For example, the Marines organized and trained the Gendarmerie d'Haiti and the Nacional Dominicana in Haiti and Santo Domingo from 1915 to 1934. In Nicaragua (1926–1933), the Marines organized, trained, and commanded the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua. These organizations were nonpartisan, native constabularies the Marines commanded until host-nation forces could competently assume command." One of the Marines in residence at Ben Atchley, was an Officer of Marines with the CAP Unit Program. Ooh-rah!

Semper Fidelis,

Chaplain Ron



CAP 2-3-2, Chaplain Ron's Roving Unit

CAP Môt, by Barry Goodson, Parker County Sheriff's Office, Texas



Lam, Needle Dick, Faggot, and Honcho



Mike Duncan (Missouri) and Doc



CAP School



Smiley



PFs On Patrol



Nghia Quan



Bacsí, ole Doc leading PFs on a patrol



Sgt Gary More USMC, (top) KIA



Smiley, Lizard, and Irving



Doc on Patrol with PFs



Mine & Booby Trap Dog with Handler



Doc at CAP School