



Day One

Submitted by: David Sherman

Several years ago I wrote a proposal for a history of the Combined Action Program. It wasn't going to be any kind of official or quasi-official, third-person-seen-from-a-distance history, but a history as seen by the men who lived it. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get any publisher sufficiently interested in the project to give me an advance large enough to cover the out-of-pocket expenses I'd have in researching the book (as a working novelist, believe me when I say I needed to have my expenses covered). I've still got the proposal filed away and one day hope to dust it off and try again. In the meantime, what follows here is a somewhat expanded rewrite of the short piece I wrote about the very beginning of my own CAP, formed in the days when the program didn't officially exist. There are things in this rewrite that former Marines, most particularly CAP-Vets, will understand that might not do for a more general audience.

Oh, a historical note for those of you who came later. During the mid-sixties the Marine rifle squad was 14 men; the same 13 the Corps has used since World War II plus a lance corporal grenadier who carried the squad's lone M-79 grenade launcher.

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Ky Hoa CAP, Spring and Summer, 1966*

Day One

May 14, 1966. The day was bright and hot in the coastal fishing village of Ky Hoa, about four miles outside Chu Lai. The spring rains were still a week or so away. The ground of the dry rice paddies where third platoon, India Company, Third Battalion, First Marines, set its security perimeter was cracked. We waited patiently, the way combat troops learn to wait. In the center of the perimeter stood a small knot of men: the Marine lieutenant who was our platoon leader; the platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Little; Hien, the village chief; Houg, the Hoa Binh hamlet chief; Hien, the village Popular Forces commander; a few other local officials.

Finally we heard the sound of approaching helicopters. In moments three UH-34s appeared over the scrub trees that bordered this small area of paddyland. Two of the choppers made a low-level circuit of the area while the third circled lazily at a higher altitude. Satisfied that no units of bad guys were waiting in ambush, the two gunships took up orbiting stations around the area and the third helicopter landed to let out a couple of passengers who ran from under the helicopter's rotor downwash to where the small group waited for them.

The lieutenant and SSgt Little stood at attention and saluted the newcomers. One of them, sunlight glinting from the three stars on each of his collars, returned the Marines' salutes and shook hands with the Vietnamese. They conferred briefly, no longer than five minutes, then the two men from the helicopter returned to it. It lifted off and the three birds flew away. The remaining men talked for a moment longer, then SSgt Little broke away and headed in the direction of my squad.

"Sergeant Rock, round them up," he called out.

My squad leader signaled his men, the fourteen men who had been designated to form a Combined Action Platoon, to leave our security positions and gather around the platoon sergeant.

Little looked us each in the eye before saying, "I'm not mentioning any names, but you all know who that was."

We nodded agreement. Even if we'd never seen the man with the stars face to face, we'd all seen pictures of him: Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

"I don't want you to ever tell anybody you saw him here today," Little continued. "You are not to talk to anybody about this meeting. Is that understood?"

Nodding sagely at each other, we agreed. According to scuttlebutt, General Krulak had had a major fight with General William Westmoreland about the conduct of the war. Westmoreland wore more stars than Krulak; it was the kind of argument a Marine general loses. The scuttlebutt said Westmoreland ordered Krulak to return to his headquarters in Hawaii and not return to Vietnam. We were all proud that our general defied the orders of the army general, and we were willing to cover for him.

"That man has given your orders." Little continued. "You're a Combined Action Platoon now. This is your duty assignment. You are not to leave Ky Hoa on operations with anybody. You are not to be reassigned by anyone. If anyone other than that man or his designated representative tells you to saddle up to move out, you tell him you've got orders from higher up to stay where you are. If he doesn't like that, tell him your orders come from someone with a lot of stars on his collars and to check it out. Understand?"

Yes, we understood.

"The rest of the platoon is pulling out today to rejoin the company. You're on your own from now on. Good luck." He shook our hands, then returned to the lieutenant -- most of the Vietnamese had already left.

A moment later the entire platoon was on its feet, headed back to the barbed wire compound outside Hoa Binh hamlet. In another hour the squad was alone, along with a mortar team, a machine gun team, a 106mm recoilless rifle, and two medical corpsmen.

That's how the first CAP in the Chu Lai area was born. Unofficially, of course.

Four months later I rotated back to the World and got out of the Marine Corps. It was another twenty years before I heard anything more about that semi-secret unit. Someone, a newly-met CAP veteran, gave me a copy of a Sea Tiger newspaper from the summer of 1967. It had a photograph of a corpsman and a Marine in the Ky Hoa CAP on a Medcap patrol treating a Vietnamese child's injury.

A few years later I went to the Marine Corps Archives and Research Center in the Navy Yard in Washington, DC to look up the records of my CAP.

There was nothing for me to find: There are no records of Combined Action units prior to the beginning of 1967, despite the fact that 37 CAPs were formed by the end of 1966.

Any and all references to CAPS from the first year and a half of their existence, August, 1965 to the beginning of 1967, are buried in the command chronologies of the various units from which the Marines involved came. So I read through the volumes of the Command Chronology of 3/1 for the spring of 1966. All I found was one sentence in the miscellaneous notes section for April: "...training of a rifle squad was commenced in order to prepare that squad for incorporation into a Combined Action Platoon with a local Popular Forces unit." No mention of who those Marines were, what company they were from, where the CAP was to be located, or even whether the CAP was ultimately formed. Only one other thing appeared before the battalion left Chu Lai for Da Nang on May 22 -- the chronology said that on May 14, Lt. Gen. Krulak visited the village elders at Ky Hoa. No mention of the CAP, though, or of the Marines who were left behind after Krulak's visit.

In hope that I would at least find some names I recognized, I went through the unit roster of India Company. There I found a very odd thing -- on May 19th there was an unexplained bulk drop of men to the administrative control of the Seventh Marines. This drop wasn't referred to in the Command Chronology, the records held nothing to explain it.

However, I knew the meaning of that drop: I was one of the men named, and I recognized several of the others. This list was the roster of Marines assigned to the Ky Hoa CAP. No one who wasn't involved would have any idea of what this was about.

We never had a unit designation. As different battalions from the First, Fifth, and Seventh Marines rotated through the area, we were administratively moved from one to the next. Before I left the country I managed to get a look at my SRB. If that's the only record a researcher has to go by, I must have been some kind of royal screw-up -- I was transferred from battalion to battalion a half dozen times during a four month period, it looked like nobody wanted me. The SRBs of the other men in my CAP must look the same. Someone would have to do a lot of digging to find out that we never moved from where Lieutenant General Krulak put us.

Oh yes. It did happen once. This must have been sometime in June, we were administratively attached to a company over on Porkchop Island. They were moving out on a new operation. The day before they pulled out, the company first sergeant paid us a visit and told us to saddle up because we were going with them. We very politely told him no we're not, we've got orders from someone higher up and he should check it out. He said he didn't have to, we were his, we were going with him on this operation. We politely told him we weren't his and we weren't going. He told us to stand by for court martials if we didn't. We said nothing. That was the end of it, he must have checked it out.