



Fast Rifles

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The Marines had the fastest rifles in the village of Binh Nghia. It wasn't long until the second fastest belonged to their comrades-in-arms, the Popular Forces

No one was sure at first the concept would work--not in the summer of 1966. The village of Binh Nghia, in Quang Ngai province, was a battleground. The district chief at Binh Son was responsible to the province chief for the state of affairs at Binh Nghia and several other villages. He estimated that, during the past several years, 750 young men from that village had joined main-force VC units. Two independent VC companies and one full battalion were roaming the district. Of the 4,575 persons in the villages, 600 were known VC sympathizers. So the decision by the 7th Marines to establish a Combined Action Company in Binh Nghia was not made without an acknowledgement of the hazards involved.

Something had to be done. The morale of the local Popular Forces platoon was low and ebbing fast. They had been hit by the VC so often that their confidence was shattered. The enemy held the offensive and controlled the daily lives of the civilians. The guerrillas worked and lived at home, banding together at night for military excursions and political activities. Full-time regulars of the Viet Cong main force units entered Binh Nghia at will to seek supplies or hold meetings. Marine patrols and ambushes, operating from remote combat bases, made contact often, killing many soldiers and disrupting movements of large forces. But that alone was not enough. The villager scurried about with averted eyes, and the PFs clung to the shallow safety of their fort. It was obvious who controlled Binh Nghia.

During the first week in June, 12 Marines from Charlie Company were selected to go to the fort and work with the PFs. They were picked on the basis of a mature understanding of the Vietnamese problems as well as for sound tactical sense. The primary mission was to raise the fighting spirit and ability of the 28 PFs of Binh Nghia. The Marines were commanded by a corporal who took things slowly at first, allowing his men and the PFs time to become accustomed to shared watches and joint patrols. The individual friendships between the tall Americans and the Vietnamese militiamen were struck naturally. The language barrier was breached, not by formal language training, but by the basic desire to communicate. These Marines displayed a natural knack for making themselves understood because they wanted to communicate, even though they did not speak Vietnamese.

By late June the presence of the Marines had been generally accepted by the villagers and the PFs. The NCO in charge thought the time had come to remove the fear the PFs had of night contact with the VC, and to show the villagers that darkness did not have to be a time of dread.

The village is a two-mile long complex of six hamlets, bordered to the south by a wide river and to the north by a large expanse of sand-dunes. The Marines lived at the south end of the village. Their fort, set back 200 yards from the river in a rice paddy, was a solitary adobe building and a large tent, surrounded by a shallow moat studded with punji stakes and a tall bamboo fence. At night the VCs moved in and out of the village, crossing the river or infiltrating through the dunes. Their freedom of movement allowed them to collect taxes, take out rice, and visit their families. There was always at least a platoon of guerrillas in the local area. They moved in groups varying in size from 2 to 200. The Marines set out to stalk them.

The technique was simple and relied upon total integration of the American and Vietnamese forces. Marines and the PFs at the fort made three and sometimes four patrols and ambushes every night. The patrols were small, generally not exceeding three Marines and three or four PFs. They were extremely well armed. Each Marine carried an M-14 automatic rifle with bipod, four to six grenades, 300-400 rounds with a liberal mix of red tracers, and one or two M72s (high-explosive rockets). The patrols never knew if they would hit a VC courier or a whole company. (The probability of the latter applied to one fishing hamlet called My Hue. To that sullen and hostile place went only platoon-size combat patrols.)

The PFs at first were badly frightened at the idea of hunting the VC in the dark. The Marines taught and trained them by example, taking the point, setting the pace, demanding night discipline and throwing out sharp, full volumes of fire when engaged. The enemy, not prepared for such tactics, was thrown off balance. The CACO patrols made no attempt to drag away the bodies of guerrillas they killed. After weapons and documents had been collected, the corpses were left sprawled in the rice paddies, or along main trails, so that the fallen enemy could be carried back to their hamlets by members of their own families or other Viet Cong. Among the villagers, the CACO unit was gaining the prestige the enemy was losing.

The Marines had the fastest rifles in town. They knew it, the enemy knew it, and the villagers knew it. Confidence, like fear, is infectious, especially when it derives from success; and so the PFs, under their new tutors, began to improve. In June, they had not wished to patrol or fight at all. During July, they would at least venture forth at night provided Marines went with them. But they were not very effective in fire fights. They were slow to fire, random in their target-selection procedures, and awkward at night movement. The Marines praised the PFs effusively when they did well: when a patrol went awry because of carelessness on the part of a PF, the Vietnamese sergeant was told in no uncertain terms to ensure that discipline would be enforced by the proper leader in the proper way. The PFs were learning.

Determined to check this new, aggressive unit, the enemy gathered a sizable force. They struck the Binh Nghia fort in strength in early July, only to be ambushed from behind as they crossed a rice paddy. In the ensuing fight, the Marines lost their first man, but the VC were routed and lost face. The PFs became more confident.

In mid-July, the VC tried again. Their determination reflected the effectiveness of the CACO. This time they attacked a force of five Marines and three PFs who were lying in ambush along the northern bank of the Song Tra Bong river. The VC, crawling close in along the paddy dikes which stretched for 200 yards to the rear of the ambush party, attempted to hit the force from behind. A PF posted on rear lookout saw the enemy and alerted the patrol leader who had his force wriggle about to face the enemy. They held fire until the VC were within 50 yards. The effect was devastating. The VC were trapped with nowhere to go. By using bipods, the Marines delivered fire in grazing arcs which not only cut down the enemy on the dikes, but also raked clean the tree-line on the far side of the paddies. At the edge of that tree-line the VC leaders had clustered to watch and direct the attack. It was a bad blunder which they did not have time to correct. The sudden concentrated fire of the Marines and PFs caught them standing erect and scythed their ranks. The final tally of the night's action, which lasted less than eight minutes, stood at 21 enemy dead, including a company commander and a platoon commander. The Marines and PFs took no casualties.

The villagers were dumbfounded and the PFs could hardly believe it themselves. The enemy force had passed through the hamlet of My Hue saying they would destroy the Marines and PFs. The bodies brought back to the hamlets did not include one PF.

The scale of the fight was exceptional. Throughout the summer, however, firefights in the dark were the rule. The fort averaged 11 contacts a week. If a night went by without a fight, respective squad leaders, Marine and PF, would kid their troops for taking it easy.

"What were you people doing--picking daisies?" or "I didn't hear a round fired all night long!"

By August the PFs had become much more aggressive. Trails at which they used to balk, were now traveled freely. They watched the Marines care for their weapons, and followed suit. They began to conduct night patrols alone. Being familiar with the habits of their enemies and buoyed by their growing prestige among their families, relatives and friends in the village, they sought out members of the local VC infrastructure. The number of guerrillas captured within the village rose so markedly that it was a rare day when a prisoner was not brought in by the PFs. Meanwhile, the Marines had become great favorites in the village: they knew literally hundreds of the villagers by name.

The Combined Action Company did not bring peace to Binh Nghia in 90 days, however.

The Battle For Binh Nghia

There had been many rumors but little solid information. Supposedly there was an informer in the fort, and the VC were planning an attack in overwhelming strength. These rumors continued throughout the late summer. Without solid facts or real clues to work on, the Marines continued patrolling as usual.

The blow fell shortly after midnight on 15 September. Six of the 12 Marines and 16 of the 28 PFs were out on ambush or on village patrol. A squad of VC gained entrance in the rear of the fort through a post whose guard had mysteriously disappeared. Outside, the 21st VC Company attacked with 80 men from two different directions. The Marine on radio

watch in the machine gun bunker, sprayed the area with automatic fire, preventing the enemy from overrunning the fort. While dodging grenades, he called for illumination and reinforcements, and then, slapped by successive shock waves and wounded by shrapnel from the grenades, he blacked out. A PF dragged his body to shelter. Another Marine, carrying an automatic rifle, raced from the tent where he was sleeping, and was blasted to earth by a sub-machine gun. The battle raged at close range for 15 minutes before the enemy were driven from the fort.

Before the firing ended, all six Marines in the fort were casualties. Only one survived. The PFs had held firm on their own, throwing rocks and using fists and rifle butts when they ran out of ammunition. Both Marine and PF squad leaders died that night. But the sense of solidarity and cooperation they had instilled in the combined unit did not. The six CACO Marines who reached the fort after the fight set out the next night with the PFs to fight again. That spontaneous determination was the critical factor in the struggle for the village. They refused flatly the offer of relief, or the temporary emplacement of a Marine platoon in Binh Nghia. It was their village and they would protect it, and they preferred to do so by working with each other.

In small groups the CACOs from Fort Page set out to patrol the hamlets early on the night of 16 September. That same night the Viet Cong company came back; this time they entered the village itself. Thinking they would receive no interference from the PFs and Marines at the fort, they boldly walked straight down the street leading to the market place in the main hamlet of Binh Yen Noi.

Walking up the street from the fort were two Marines and three PFs. The PF in the lead almost collided with a VC standing in the shadow of a house. The VC broke and ran for cover. The PF yelled, "VC--VC!", then he shot and killed him. The PF had time to snatch a machine gun from the body before the other VCs recovered from their surprise and opened fire. Bullets snapped toward the CACO patrol from all directions. The five men flopped down in a rough star formation and the duel began. The fight would rage until dawn. A radio operator called for reinforcements from the fort, and for illumination from the 81mm mortars. The PFs, with excellent ability to detect movement in the shadows, identified targets for a Marine, who popped his M79 grenade launcher as fast as he could load.

Another combined squad from the fort reached the patrol in less than 10 minutes, while flares began bursting regularly overhead. The VC tried to work their way back to the river and get across under cover of their rear guard; but an old lady, at whose house the Marines had eaten several times, ran from her home and pointed out the spot where the VC rear guard was lurking. A few Marines and PFs crawled around the flank while the rest laid down a base of fire and the rear guard position was blasted away in a hail of grenades.

The Marines and PFs, now numbering around 20, gained the bank of the river as the VC neared midstream in dozens of small, round wicker boats. The CACOs swept the river with streams of tracers and fired over a dozen M72 rounds at the vulnerable targets. Even while the firing was still going on, the villagers gathered to watch and talk in amazement.

"You would have thought it was daytime out there," a Marine said. "It was incredible."

That night the VC lost 10 in the village itself and an undetermined number on the river. There were no CACO casualties.

Two nights later the enemy tried again. This time a VC squad made the tactical blunder of attempting to ambush a CACO patrol head on. Their own flank was turned and two of the enemy who had climbed trees for better vantage points were toppled to the ground while their comrades fled.

By October, the action had slackened. The unrelenting pressure on the guerrillas was telling. Consistency is a primary ingredient for a successful pacification, and every single night the Marines and PFs would set out a least three ambushes in Binh Nghia. Their full attack of Fort Page did not bring the enemy the respite they had anticipated. In fact, it had precisely the opposite effect. Not only did the enemy continue to encounter pressure from the CACO unit within the village, but, in addition, his sanctuary to the south across the river became the favorite hunting ground for two Marine rifle companies.

Acceptance

There were few VC-initiated incidents in November in the village of Binh Nghia. As a result, the combat actions slowed considerably, and, although in December there were several shoot-outs against targets on the river, the CACOs have struck at the enemy on land only rarely since the battles in September. By 1967, Binh Nghia was no longer a battleground. From a variety of sources and reports, the district chief and his sub-sector advisor have estimated that there are less than 12 active guerrillas left in the six hamlets. The village is now secure; but it is not self-protecting. The main basis for stability and security in Binh Nghia is still slung loosely over a Marine's shoulder.

The rapport between the people of Binh Nghia and the CACO Marines has been building slowly and steadily. Each Marine has three or four close friends among the families of the villagers, and many meals are taken within the hamlets at the insistence of the villagers. On many occasions, Marines on night patrols passing by certain houses have received information about VC activities whispered through windows in broken English. The PFs and village leaders provide additional intelligence.

The CACO acts as a clearing-house for all military movements within the village complex. The Marines and Vietnamese plan their patrols and plot their on-call night illumination missions together. No Marine force enters the area without checking with the CACO first. Medical evacuation by helicopter and fire support are available. The Marines are convinced that these are very important factors contributing to the high morale of the PFs. Furthermore, any villager requiring swift aid may also be transported by helicopter. During the fall of 1966, 59-man Revolutionary Development Care (RDC) teams moved into two of the villages six hamlets. Their arrival in no way impeded the work of the CACO. The Cadre leaders took to checking in with the CACO Commander to settle military matters as if it were the most natural procedure to follow. For certain checks and visits, the village Police Chief got into the habit of requesting a combined PF/Marine escort, where before he would only take national police.

The extent to which the CACO at Fort Page in Binh Nghia had become solidly established was graphically demonstrated at the village fair held during the last week in December, 1966. The Village Chief and Police Chief planned the fair in order to draw the villagers together; their attention was held by games and songs, and the hope was to inspire a solidarity of feeling against the Viet Cong. The Village Chief invited the CACO Marines to come, not as guests, but as participants.

In the market place of the hamlet of Binh Yen Noi, a wooden stage had been erected for the fair. There were two benches set in front of the stage. Behind them sat thousands of villagers, packed in tight to watch the entertainment. After a number of villagers had sung songs or acted out skits before a most appreciative audience, two Marines and a PF mounted the stage to moan and mimic some of the latest rock-and-roll records, to the accompaniment of much hooting and laughter. When the fair quieted down toward midnight, those Marines in attendance gathered some PFs and RDC militia and faded into the darkness to relieve others on watch or patrol. One patrol checked the fishing hamlet of My Hue. There were six men--three Marines and three PFS--in the patrol. There was no contact that night, which was Christmas Day in the United States.

The Future There is no real concussion to this story, not yet anyway. The Marines and the PFs and the RDT militia will be going on patrol in Binh Nghia village tonight, and tomorrow night, and the night after that. The task is not finished, but it is well started and gaining momentum.

In every village where the CACOs have been established for several months, the morale of the villagers and the confidence of the PFs have risen remarkably. Military advisors, USAID personnel, and other outsiders, who have had occasion to observe those villages over long periods of time, have commented on the change. Conversely, the number of Viet Cong-initiated incidents in CACO areas has decreased. In many villages, the Viet Cong have sharply contested the arrival of a Marine CACO squad. In such cases, savage fights have raged intermittently on the small-unit level over a two or three month period, and sometimes longer, until the CACO finally has beaten down the enemy. With local variances, the concept is being tried and expanded in other Corps areas. There is no swift solution to the problems of a social revolution. The guerrilla warfare in Viet Nam is a syndrome of a mass of social, economic and political ills. It is these ills, not just the guerrillas, which a pacification strategy must eliminate. For that reason, the Marines in a CACO must do more than just kill the enemy. It must be recognized and acknowledged that the progress of a Combined Action Company will be slow and can be measured only over long months, not short days. The work requires patience and perseverance from our riflemen, as well as the more heralded virtue of physical courage. This strategy makes no claims to be the total solution for the entire Viet Nam pacification problem; but it has met the test of time, and grown stronger as it has matured.

With the enemy seemingly reluctant to offer open challenge after being shattered in every large conflict during the past year, 1968 will see an increased emphasis upon revolutionary development programs at the grass roots level. Inherent in the CACO program are potentialities which relate directly to revolutionary development. These additions to the primary mission of CACO do not reflect paper ideals turned out by an administrative hierarchy; they have grown naturally from the interest of the individual Marines within a CACO, from their feelings about the welfare of the PFs and the villagers.

The Marine volunteers of a Combined Action Platoon are chosen for their sound tactical sense, their discipline, and the enthusiasm for the job. These Marines provide that essential ingredient most villagers seek: security. They come to a village primarily as riflemen looking for action. The fighting is conducted, however, in a highly discriminatory manner. An air or artillery strike has never been called within the village of Binh Nghia. In that village complex over a six month period, six Marines, seven PFs, and 48 Viet Cong were killed. In over 100 firefights, only two villagers were killed accidentally.

After the Marines have worked in a village for several months, they are accepted by the people in a manner which is best described as patriarchal; and they respond in kind. This is not hard to understand in view of the Marines' backgrounds. Many come from low income families or racial minorities. By instinct they sense the plight of the villagers, sympathize with them, seek to help them. Cooperation is possible once the Marines start looking at the Vietnamese as people and not as objects.

In time, the firefights in a CACO village die down, although in itself that is no sure indication of pacification. The Marines become restive. They sense there is much more they can do. Yet, while moved by the desire to help, they are handicapped by lack of knowledge.

Various American agencies, such as USAID, have this knowledge. They have the expertise to create plans, provide material, and run the project over-all. But these agencies do not have the people to staff programs at the village level. CACO, on the other hand, does have this manpower. It also has organization and discipline.

Properly used and supervised, CACO can become a catalyst for development at the village level. Where there are Vietnamese Revolutionary Development Teams, it can aid and support them. Where there are no such RD Teams, it can work to help the PFs, hamlet chiefs and elders bring about change and progress. CACO is an interim program to assist the Vietnamese. It is not designed to displace the village leadership or replace the RDT programs. More importantly, in actuality it has not worked out that way. Village chiefs and Revolutionary Development Teams leaders have been quick to use the CACO units in their support.

CACO could be the natural agent at the village level for coordination and control of various programs. A dozen Marines can run a close check on four or five hamlets on a day-to-day basis. If taught to look for certain indications of progress, or to follow given steps of a program, Marines could provide definite impetus to development projects, as well as specific information concerning them. Given guidelines, the Marine CACO commander could help measure the progress of specific programs and the effectiveness of the village or team leaders. Above all, the Marines would follow through--they would be there, in the same village, day after day, month after month, for one to two years. They would provide a continuing basis for security, for honesty, for determination, and for progress. When the PFs are able to adequately protect their village, and when the village leader can run the program with enough able help, the Marines will leave.

Two operations are essential if the rise of the Combined Action Company is to be raised to the level of its potential: education and cooperation. Before a Marine joins a CACO, he should receive a detailed and realistic evaluation of the Vietnamese society, with a particular stress upon the village system. The Marines and the PFs and the RDT must be alerted to the program available to their village, and to possible methods of implementation. The Army Civil Affairs Company, USAID, and the Vietnamese provincial aid organization, have a wealth of knowledge and could be the primary, if not the only, teacher. In this context, a system must be established to promulgate and effect the land reform law Premier Ky has declared. A farmer who owns his own land and can raise a family in an atmosphere of security, far from being a revolutionary, is a staunch, conservative defender of his government. Witness the histories of Japan and of the United States. The gathering of ideas for specific programs utilizing the CACO organization could come from the various agencies, the province, district, and village chiefs, and the Marines and PFs and RDT themselves. It should not be forgotten that a good sergeant is a shrewd judge of human nature who bases his suggestions on practical observations.

CACO units are alienating the guerrillas from the people not by sole reliance on the negative means of death and destruction, but also by providing the villagers stability and the prospect of an improved economic life. The ramifications of the Combined Action Company concept touches on the potential uses for both our military and the armed forces of other nations as vehicles for the development of societies, not their destruction.

Cooperation is vital to this strategy, particularly at the village level. The story of Binh Nghia, and of the Marines who fought there, speaks for itself. It is from the grassroots that cooperation between CACO Marines and other interested agencies and the Vietnamese has sprung: this is the kind of revolutionary progress essential for the success of rural pacification.

The concept of the Combined Action Company is a radical departure from the traditional view of the military's role in society. Its strategic implications merit careful analysis. The explosive forces of a revolution in Viet Nam or elsewhere will not be contained by return to the status quo. Neo-isolationism is a dream. No longer is it a question of whether we should involve ourselves in the affairs of other nations; now it is a question of how and for what ends. The military cannot be placed back on the shelf, to be used only for "purely military affairs." We cannot hide in history.