

Marine Times article, May, 2000, about the CAP Program. The graphic is from the opening page of the CAP Web Site. It is Tim "CAPVet" Duffie, Web Site Editor, in the Lai Phuoc Hamlet, Trieu Ai Village, Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, 1967, with one of his friends, "Little Hue".

Combined action platoons heaped friendly aid on Vietnamese villages

By Keith A. Milks
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Severely wounded and weak from blood loss, Lance Cpl. Miguel Keith knew the enemy attack had to be stopped. Having already blunted one North Vietnamese assault on May 8, 1970, Keith unhesitatingly charged 25 North Vietnamese soldiers massing for another. Killing four, he forced the rest to flee before he fell, mortally wounded.

Keith's courage rallied his fellow Marines and South Vietnamese counterparts in Combined Action Platoon 1-3-2 in the Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam. They overcame the enemy attack. As the last Marine to earn the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, the 18-year-old Omaha, Neb., native served at the grassroots of the United States' Vietnam strategy.

As early as 1965, Marine planners believed the fundamental ingredient to success in Vietnam was to move into the South Vietnam hinterlands. In I Corps' area of operation alone, more than two million Vietnamese rural villagers lived under threat of Viet Cong coercion.

The Marine Corps and Navy embarked on a program of civic action, traveling to outlying villages and dispensing medical care to villagers. The programs soon developed to a point where corpsmen established regular sick calls.

Nearly every South Vietnamese village was protected by the Popular Forces, rag-tag groups of local militia empowered by the South Vietnamese government. Although the



PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM DUFFIE

Tim Duffie, a member of a Combined Action Platoon in Vietnam, poses with a youngster he called "Little Hue" in Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam.

PFs were ill-equipped and poorly-trained, the Marines realized their potential for countering Viet Cong guerrillas.

Marine rifle squads and Navy corpsmen were moved into select villages, and these Combined Action Platoons were married with the local PFs. The Marines formed a nucleus around which the PFs, and the village as a whole, could resist Viet Cong influence.

The Marines trained the PFs and led them against the enemy while the squad's corpsman promoted health care in the village. Gen. Lewis Walt, who commanded the Marines in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967, called the program the "Velvet Glove."

The program, combining friendly aid and armed presence, was a major part of a "heart and minds" campaign. The Marines lived among the villagers day and night, completely integrating themselves into the community. Although support from larger Marine bases such as Da Nang and Chu Lai were a radio call

away, life in the villages provided a sense of isolation that formed a unique bond among the Marines and the villagers.

The central government hoped the CAP program would develop a sense of trust in government among the rural citizenry.

Program organizers hoped it would weaken the communists' hold over South Vietnam's rural areas.

From its inception in 1965, the program spread across the country.

As America began withdrawing from South Vietnam in 1969, the program had evolved into 102 platoons organized into 19 Combined Action Companies under four Combined Action Groups. In all, close to 5,000 Marines and sailors served in the program.

More information about the Marine Combined Action Platoons can be found at www.capmarine.com, a site devoted to the program run by former CAP Marines. □

Staff Sgt. Keith Milks is stationed at Headquarters Marine Corps. He can be reached at KAMBTP@aol.com