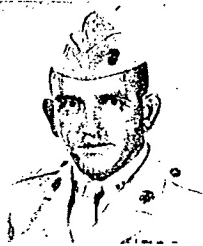


A BRIEFING FOR COMBINED ACTION

By Capt R. E. Williamson

Gaining the complete allegiance and active support of the people at the grass roots level is yet to come in Vietnam, and will take working at.

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RETURNING from his first trip to Vietnam as CMC, Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., noted considerable progress in the Marine Corps' understanding and application of the pacification program.

Progress, yes, but we have not yet achieved the optimum position in this regard. There are several reasons why this is so, but one deterrent is the failure to gain the active support and complete allegiance of the people at the grass roots level.

The Vietnamese who is persuaded to cooperate with his government against the communist element assumes a tremendous risk—the ubiquitous threat of violence against his family, friends and community. There is a lack of balance between reprisals and the benefits of cooperation—clothing, food, education and medical assistance. The most successful solution to the dilemma has been the Combined Action Platoon.

Perceived in terms of its potential the CAP

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offers the best chance to eliminate the Viet Cong threat to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for millions of Vietnamese.

The value of this program is the security it offers while developing a do-it-yourself attitude among those it protects. Its basic premise is positive and constructive—in essence the Minute-man concept; civilians can and should be trusted with weapons for their own defense. The mutual cooperation of the civilians (Popular Forces) and Marines is the crux of the program. And therein lies its success; the willingness of one to trust the other with the ultimate commodity: life.

It should be stressed that the simplicity of the program is deceiving. A strong commitment to an effective program must consider the frequently uncomfortable military risks. Any program which seeks to win the support of uncommitted, indigenous people in an area of terrorist activity must be civilian oriented. Yet this same situation demands an extra margin of military safety. An effective program must constitute a mutually satisfactory balance between military and civilian needs.

One of the chief factors making warfare so difficult as it exists in Vietnam is the unhealthy climate of mutual suspicion and fear between the civilian and the military. The Marine encounters a Vietnamese civilian where he does not expect him to be and thinks of him first as a Viet Cong. He is considered a friend and ally only after the proper papers are produced and satisfactory answers received to certain questions. The civilian in return understandably resents this continuous threat of invasions to his privacy and person as well as the subordination of his individual interests to the sacred cow of military necessity. The military never ventures forth without arms, the civilian never has arms with which to venture forth.

This burden of suspicion is exacerbated by an absence of communications so essential to understanding. The Marine liaison officer working with combined action programs must recognize the area of human relations as his chief and continuous concern. He is in fact our "devil's advocate."

The latitude of trust and respect we are willing to allow during periods of relative calm may alter radically the relations between Marines and Vietnamese. On one occasion, a Marine patrol dispatched to search for suspects of a mortar attack picked up two local villagers who lacked proper identification papers (an error of omission the V. C. assiduously avoid). The villagers stated that the local chief could vouch for their identity and innocence, which he did. But they were brought in for interrogation anyway—just to be safe. The village chief, a duly elected official

approved by the central government, was less than happy over being rated a liar in public, and cast as a leader without sufficient status or power to save his townsmen from a humiliating experience. How easy military courtesy became the sacrificial lamb of military necessity.

On another occasion members of a local village were denied scarce and valuable grazing land for their livestock by the erection of barbed wire. A compromise was worked out which allowed them to establish and operate a marketplace inside the perimeter. This arrangement was cleared through appropriate channels and the market proved quite satisfactory to all concerned. Months later, after numerous personnel changes and reorganization of area responsibilities, it was decided that the market *might* become a dangerous point of infiltration for V. C. The local emporium was promptly and unceremoniously wrecked. However compatible that decision was with military necessity, it did little to enhance free enterprise as a desirable way of life.

Sometime after the above incidents these same people were subjected to a somewhat more serious affront to their human dignity. An extended perimeter required the desecration of ancestral burial grounds. Bulldozing the burial grounds of an entire village marked its inhabitants as unworthy and virtually non-beings.

These two incidents created an atmosphere of embarrassing hostility. Reprisals were carried out in the form of cutting barbed wire, harassing work details and scavenging Marine scrap piles.

Central to such a predicament was the absence of valid channels of communication at the *community* level. The machinery we have for dealing with such problems at the division level presupposes the existence of institutional processes through which grievances are expressed; it assumes that the people involved will in fact express themselves. Not so! Village chiefs nod polite assent to American proposals; information about what we are doing or are about to do is seldom disseminated and frequently misunderstood. Without confidence that an expressed grievance will result in meaningful attempts to arrive at mutually satisfactory alternatives, the demands of face make it essential to avoid any confrontation. We hear only what it is perceived we wish to hear.

Combined action represents a viable alternative for a variety of reasons. By combining a mutually desired goal—local security—with the opportunity for Marines and Vietnamese to work together toward that goal, a sense of partnership is created, an identity of purpose. Respect for the integrity of local command structures and preservation of local unit identity permits both *esprit de Corps* and community pride to develop. If combined action is to achieve its military mission, its members must strive for sound communications. Community contacts must be continuous and personal.

A framework of mutual involvement personalizes, in terms meaningful to indigenous groups, both the war and our presence.

Some Basic Essentials

An effective combined action program clearly is not the result of intuition nor philanthropy. It is not feasible in situations where Marine units cannot reasonably anticipate a stay of more than a few weeks, or where Popular Forces are not available. Given a rational opportunity, the program must begin with full command support and enthusiasm. Our own personnel input should draw upon those individuals who have a clear concept of combined action direction and are eager to become involved with the Vietnamese people. Because success is dependent upon establishing rapport, officers and staff who can relate comfortably with our allies should be selected.

The Marine liaison officer responsible for good working relationships with Vietnamese leaders and their cadres, will be handicapped to the extent that he does not know the Vietnamese language. It is only human to be reticent with those who literally do not understand us. A language barrier seldom avoids mutual reservations. This does not preclude using an interpreter. Both means are necessary safeguards to avoid misunderstanding. In most instances neither we nor they have had the time and opportunity to develop impeccable fluency.

Establishing rapport with the Vietnamese occupies a position of central significance. There are a variety of ways to do so.

First, our delegation should be headed by the most senior company grade officer qualified. The Vietnamese exist in an environment of scarcity and for this reason are sensitive to matters of rank and status. Since the Marine coordinator deals with Vietnamese leaders of rank, assigning a junior officer may create an impression of disrespect or be interpreted as an indication that we attach little importance to the enterprise.

Secondly, personnel inputs should consider the need for the continuity essential to making friends. The Vietnamese are fully aware that any relationships with Marines are temporary, and it would be folly to compound this liability by even more rapid turnovers. Assignments should be made early in the overseas tour and replacements worked into the program well in advance of actual changes.

CAP units at Chu Lai were based within Viet areas where they shared the same accommodations and living conditions. This is important for several reasons:

- It simplifies the process of joint training and operational planning;
- It facilitates language exchange programs; and perhaps most important,

- It reinforces the credibility of our commitment to maintain the security of local civilians.

Our communications were facilitated by establishing telephone lines between village chiefs and our own command center. This may seem quite obvious, but in fact rarely occurs. Readers familiar with our telephone procedure in Vietnam may understand this omission if they couple it with the language problem. One cannot appreciate how much understanding of a foreign tongue is conveyed by gesture until he is on the telephone without it. Despite these obstacles we found the results well worth the frustrations.

Techniques for achieving a sense of American concern for the welfare of P. F. dependents and resident communities are unlimited. While relief and assistance have their place, here it might be more valuable to stress the less publicized need for encouraging the Vietnamese to do things for us. Generosity which cannot be returned breeds hostility, not affection.

While observation and inquiry provide considerable information about Vietnamese customs and beliefs it is neither necessary nor desirable to stay within these boundaries. Bernard Fall's books and articles contain much useful information on various cultural entities. Since remnants of traditional Chinese philosophy permeate contemporary Vietnam, a small, informative and eminently readable book on this subject, *Chinese Thought* by H. G. Creel (available in paperback), is highly recommended. While certainly not an exhaustive list, familiarity with these should make the Oriental less an enigma.

Evaluation should be a fundamental and continuing process. If one measures success in terms of the number of V. C. captured and killed, the amount of ammunition and funds expended, or the quantity of soap and candy distributed, then one may realize a statistical triumph and a practical disaster. But if the criteria of accomplishment involve more subjective judgments, like the development of an esprit de Corps among men of totally alien cultures, a reciprocity of confidence and respect, the construction of a communication system that is open, honest and frank, and the ability to work effectively as a team despite the impediments of language or the dichotomy inherent between the part-time amateur and the full-time professional, then evaluation will at least have validity. If the obstreperous V. C. become concerned enough to make participants a special target for their attentions, then one can begin to claim success with reliability.

The original purpose of combined action was essentially to prepare P. F. units to assume the burden of local security once USMC elements were withdrawn. This is achieved through opportunity for regular military training, development of confidence and a feeling of personal efficacy.