

Tiger Papa Three:

A Memoir of the Combined Action Program

Part I

by Maj Edward F. Palm



The Combined Action Program, which linked a Marine squad and corpsman with a 15- to 30-man Popular Force platoon and assigned them to guard specific hamlets and villages, is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and successful counterinsurgency techniques to emerge from the Vietnam War. In this two-part article, the author relates his 1967 experiences with the program—experiences that suggest the challenges and difficulties that must be anticipated and overcome if we are to include the combined action technique in our capabilities for the future.

"Tiger Papa Three," back in the days before such things changed daily, was the radio call sign of the 3d Platoon of Papa Company, 3d Combined Action Group, operating between Dong Ha and Cam Lo in Vietnam's northern Quang Tri Province. As a Papa-Three rifleman and patrol leader, I took special pride in that flamboyant call sign, even though we could never lay claim to the stealth and ferocity commonly associated with tigers. We at least belonged to a colorful and cavalier group, the Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam. Ours was not simply to search and destroy. Ours was to win hearts and minds at the grass-roots level.

Combined action placed Marine rifle squads, each augmented with a Navy corpsman, in traditional Vietnamese villages to live and work alongside the local village militia, commonly known as Popular Forces, or PFs for short. The Marines and PFs of a combined action unit were to form a cohesive team, pursuing a twofold mission. First and foremost, the unit was to root out the Viet Cong infrastructure and protect its village from further enemy incursion. The Marine role in this ambitious undertaking was principally to train and inspire the PFs, raising their morale through our presence and example. Together, then,

the Marine-PF team could go on to tackle the secondary but vitally important mission of winning the loyalty and support of the people. This was to be done by providing both effective security and assistance with practical self-help projects aimed at raising the standard of living in the village.

The idea is rapidly gaining ground that combined action was one of the few things we did right in a war gone wrong. Large-scale search and destroy operations occasionally produced high body counts from among North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and mainforce Viet Cong units, but they usually left the Communist infrastructure intact, and they often alienated the people through their indiscriminate and disproportionate use of our awesome firepower. Inherent drawbacks aside, however, search and destroy was always meant to be only the leading element in a larger three-pronged strategy, the other two elements being clearing and pacifying. Gen William C. Westmoreland relegated the last two largely to the South Vietnamese, insisting that American forces bear the brunt of searching and destroying. Recognizing that precious little clearing and pacifying was taking place, and that a low-level insurgency could smolder almost indefinitely despite the apparent gains of search and destroy operations, the

Marine Corps began to experiment with combined action as early as August 1965. The Corps received little help and no encouragement from Westmoreland's Military Assistance Command Vietnam, but LtGens Victor H. Krulak and Lewis W. Walt, among others, had faith in the concept and would not let the program die. It was consolidated and expanded in February 1967 under the leadership of LtCol William R. Corson, and the units were actually moved into villages on a full-time basis. It was a daring move on the Marine Corps' part, tantamount to breaking ranks in the eyes of some. But much to its credit, the Corps felt it had to dissent from a policy that clearly was not working.

In all honesty, I probably owe my combined action experience to that period of rapid organizational buildup following February 1967. For once, my timing was right. I was a rear-echelon Marine and had never even heard a shot fired in anger when I got into the program in July 1967. I served as a combined action rifleman through that December, arriving back in the States on 5 January 1968. It was my good fortune to come along just as the program was expanding and the old-timers were beginning to rotate. Otherwise, I may never have seen one of the most revealing and frustrating facets

qualified for full-fledged service, and an occasional veteran who had managed to survive five years in the regular army. We were led by a Marine sergeant, who had no direct authority over the PFs, and by a PF sergeant, who had no authority over the Marines, nor any obligation to take direction or advice from them. The relationship between the two sergeants was collegial at best, nonexistent at worst. Papa Three answered to parallel Marine and Vietnamese commands. These commands were headquartered together at Cam Lo. But, as events would prove, they, too, were a house divided.

What the program lacked in effective joint command and control, however, it should have made up for through its freedom and autonomy. Papa Three certainly could not complain of oversupervision or micromanagement. We saw the company gunnery sergeant, who usually made the rounds with the supply truck, for at best a few minutes each day. The company commander would perhaps drop by once a week. For the most part, the day-to-day operation of the unit was left to our young buck sergeant, whose

privacy I will respect by calling him "Sarge" throughout. He was responsible for everything, including the planning and execution of patrols. The patrol overlays, of course, had to be encoded and radioed to the company commander for approval. But I don't recall any of Sarge's proposals ever being rejected. As long as Papa Three met the program mandate of two patrols a day—one a daylight excursion, the other a night ambush—he was pretty much left to run things as he saw fit. Sarge was easygoing, friendly, and unflappable, his leadership style tending toward *laissez-faire*. Consequently, all of us liked him, and most were well aware that life in Vietnam could be much worse than what we enjoyed at Papa Three.

I know I was happy to be there. I have read that CAP Marines were all combat-tested veterans. That may have been so in the beginning, but not by the time I got there. The CAP had been my *deus ex machina*, lifting me out of a boring job as a supply clerk in the 3d Engineer Battalion rear.

I had enlisted in the Marine Corps right out of high school in 1965. As with most who volunteered in the days



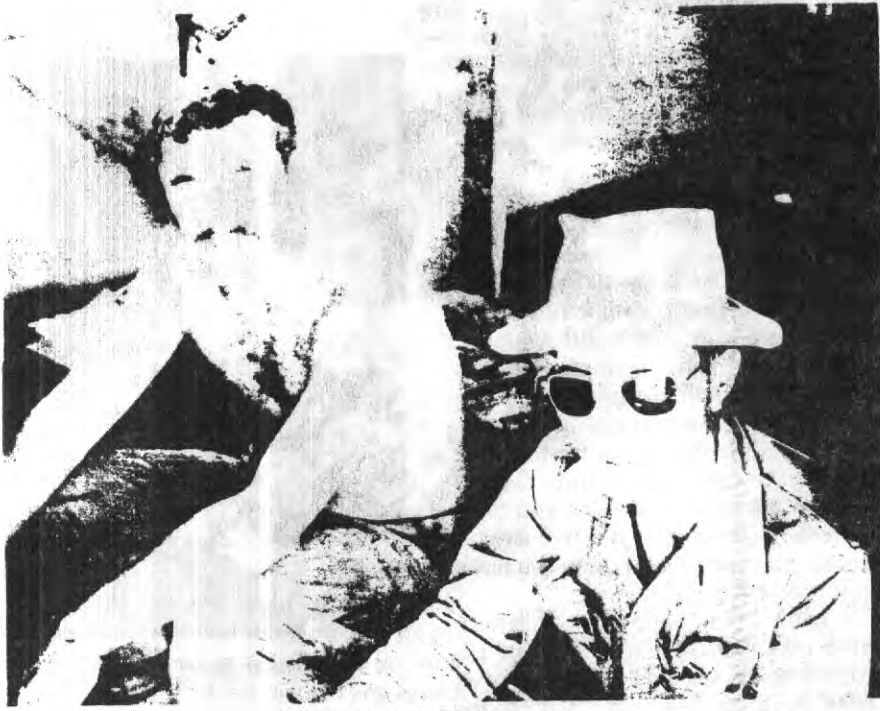
A PF (popular force) preparing for patrol.

before the military began to bribe people with technical training and educational benefits, I harbored vague dreams of glory. But they were hardly inspired by Vietnam, a war I knew almost nothing about and which I couldn't imagine lasting long enough for me to get into. Mostly, I was running away from home, fleeing northern Delaware and the blue-collar, industrial-strength monotony that seemed my birthright and destiny should I stay. It seemed an especially cruel joke, therefore, to have drawn supply as my occupational specialty, and I was most unhappy with the life of a supply clerk in Vietnam. My first six months in country turned out to be nothing more than the same prosaic, humdrum routine I had experienced in the States, only compounded now by somewhat Spartan living conditions and a seven-day workweek. But even worse than the boredom was the thought of coming home after 13 months in Vietnam only to admit that I had sat out my tour in safety, filing supply documents in a base camp.

I had probably established my reputation as the worst supply clerk in the history of 3d Engineers and had been relegated to the H&S Company supply room when I first heard of the CAP. One day at chow a sympathetic company clerk happened to mention that we had been assigned quotas for the program and that a team would be coming through the very next week to interview prospective "volunteers." (I seem to recall the quotas were mandatory, but I could be mistaken.) He went



The author on patrol in vicinity of Papa Three.



Sarge with PF friend.

on to tell me what he knew about the program, which wasn't much, only that it entailed living and working with the Vietnamese and that anyone with at least four months in country and a clean disciplinary record was eligible. I had heard enough. Combined action seemed a ticket out of supply and an opportunity to see some of the war I had come halfway around the world to see. I was the first or second to sign up for an interview. I am not sure, but the battalion postal clerk may have beaten me to it.

Up to this point, my contact with the Vietnamese had been limited to supervising laborers on two or three occasions and to a weekly haircut from the barber who set up shop under a tarp just outside our wire. I really had no strong feelings about the people, or about the war, one way or another. I had gone on a couple of patrols around the perimeter and through the neighboring villages, but they were uneventful. The only thing I had going for me was the enthusiastic recommendation of my commanding officer, who was probably only too glad to get a disaffected and unmotivated supply clerk off his roles so he could get another one.

The interview, as I recall, was perfunctory at best. It was conducted by a gunnery sergeant and lasted less than five minutes. He asked how long I had been in Vietnam, how much contact I had had with the Vietnamese people,

and how I felt about them. I, of course, built my occasional supervision of Vietnamese laborers into a warm and richly rewarding experience. In truth, I hadn't even known their names and wasn't able to communicate with them beyond crude gestures and a few words of Pidgin English.

But the clincher was a hypothetical situation. The gunny asked me to imagine I had been assigned to the program and that a PF had stolen my camera. What would I do? The right answer was self-evident, and I laid it on with a trowel. Drawing on the liberal sentiments I had heard just seven or eight months before in a one-week jungle warfare course at Camp Lejeune (I was in the first group fortunate enough to bypass staging at Camp Pendleton), I answered that I realized we seem extraordinarily rich to the average Vietnamese and that the temptation to take what they think we can afford to lose must often prove overwhelming. I claimed I would never take matters into my own hands, but would report the theft to my squad leader, expecting that he would take the matter up with the senior Vietnamese. Pretending to Christian sufferance and forgiveness, I concluded that if I never got my camera back I would humbly chalk it up to experience, being careful never again to put temptation in the way of some poor PF. Whether he believed me or not, the gunny had obviously heard what he

wanted to hear. He told me on the spot that I was accepted for the program, provided I didn't mind working out of my occupational specialty. I would be assigned as a rifleman. I couldn't believe my good fortune, having just talked the Marine Corps into throwing me into the briar patch of my choice.

Leaving the interview tent, I caught up with PFC Dennis Young (not his real name), my mail-clerk friend who had also been looking to escape the terrible trials of life in the rear with the beer. He, too, had made it through the interview. The gunny had told us both we could expect orders in about two weeks, and true to his word, it was just about two weeks later that Young and I, along with a third man we didn't know, found ourselves leaving 3d Engineers forever.

The first stop was the program's headquarters and school in Phu Bai. The school, which was nongraded, lasted only two weeks. The curriculum, as I recall, was more tactical than cultural. We were issued and fired the M16, which was new at the time to those of us in combat support and combat service support units. We spent a solid day learning to call in and spot artillery, hiking to the top of the highest hill in the area for livefire practice. We reviewed the rudiments of squad tactics, patrolling, and map reading. We brushed up on communications.

We did hear at some point from a sergeant who ran one of the Phu Bai area units. The theme of his talk was Vietnamese sexual mores, and he seemed somewhat obsessed, implying that we could all expect to suffer what might seem to us homosexual advances. Such practices, he explained, were considered the only acceptable sexual outlet before marriage in their culture, and it would at least be a sure sign of your acceptance should a PF come on to you. For the sake of the program, he counseled us, it might be better to acquiesce than create an incident. Most of us, I suspect, resolved not to get too close to PFs if we could help it.

We also received a few hours of language instruction from a young Vietnamese lieutenant who treated us, a group of lower-ranking enlisted Marines, with all the deference one might accord a gathering of major generals. Nevertheless, we went off to our respective villes armed with the Vietnamese equivalent of *la plume de ma*

tante and other useless phrases.

I remember little else of the curriculum. But the school does stand out in my mind as a time of eager anticipation and as probably the most pleasant couple of weeks I spent in Vietnam.

I suppose I have never been one to half-step. Toward the end of the school, one of the instructors asked if any of us were willing to volunteer for Papa Company up north. Papa Company, he explained, was new and the program was not yet well established up there. Units had been hit, and the villagers were still aloof and largely indifferent to our civic action overtures. It sounded dangerous and exciting, and after what that sergeant had told us, I thought I might prefer my Vietnamese a little distant and not too friendly. In a cavalier mood, I raised my hand.



LCpl James L. Reeves.

So, too, did a tall and imposing blond-haired lance corporal I couldn't help noticing early at the school and whom I would get to know very well in the months ahead. His name was Jim Reeves—like the country and western singer, he was fond of pointing out, "only spelled with an 'a'." Reeves had first come to my attention the afternoon we made that long climb in Phu Bai's wet heat to practice artillery spotting. Undaunted by the climb, he was standing atop a sandbag wall, arms outstretched over the valley below, loudly proclaiming to all who would listen that the view made him feel like God. I noticed him again on this occasion because he was browbeating the man next to him into volunteering as well. I would come to know this man as "Scotty," a quiet and unassuming Canadian who had enlisted in the Marine Corps to see something of our war.

Our joint odyssey began with a C-

130 flight to the Papa Company rear in Dong Ha, where we were assigned first not to Papa Three but to Papa One in Cam Lo. Papa One was very much the company showplace. It was located less than a mile from the district headquarters that housed both our commanding officer and his Vietnamese counterpart. This meant that Marines and PFs alike were on their best behavior and that even the villagers were fairly friendly. Apparently, Papa One had never been hit, and there were those who arrogantly assumed it never would be. The day patrols were pleasant walks in the sun. The night ambushes were uneventful. In the three or so weeks Reeves, Scotty, and I spent there, we took one wildly aimed sniper round, and one of our claymore mines exploded spontaneously, injuring no one. It might have been idyllic had it not been for the leadership.

No matter where I go, it seems ever my fate to arrive just after or at least in the waning days of the golden age. Papa One's charter members were all short by the time I got there, and the original platoon sergeant—a young, laissez-faire sort—rotated within a week of our arrival. He was replaced by an archetypal lifer, a third- or fourth-term sergeant named Flores (not his real name). Flores had a mania for neatness and order and a talent for squaring things away. Under his direction, we pulled weeds, restrung and tidied up our barbed wire, raked the dirt under the hooches, and did all manner of disagreeable things we expected to do in garrison but not in a combat zone. Flores was relentless and generally led by example, pitching in and getting dirty along with us. But we remained unimpressed and uninspired, engaging in frequent petty mutinies and nearly constant satire.

Deliverance came in early August. We awoke one morning to learn that Papa Three had been hit in force overnight. They had held, but barely. One Papa-Three Marine was dead; two had been seriously wounded. Papa One was ordered to make up the losses, and I was neither surprised nor unhappy when Flores chose me, Reeves, and Scotty for transfer to Papa Three. In fact, I welcomed it. In volunteering for Papa Company, I had imagined I would be struggling for the program's very survival. But Papa One had seemed more sinecure than struggle.

Papa Three seemed to renew the promise, holding out to young men as

green as we were the lure of danger and excitement. The attack that had brought us there, to my mind, was an important validation. A few Viet Cong (VC) bodies had actually been left in the wire. Moreover, the village was rumored to be unfriendly, with the VC still pretty much in control. Papa Three had never made any significant civic action inroads there.

My early experience with Papa Three certainly seemed to bear out that assessment and all the rumors. Shortly after my arrival, we awoke one morning to the sounds of general consternation in the village. Investigating, we discovered the VC had slipped in and assassinated a government official. Not long after that, in broad daylight and within sight of our compound, a truck hit a command-detonated mine. After medevacing the driver, who seemed to have suffered serious internal injuries, we found the wires and the place in a stand of tall grass only about 50 meters away where the VC had lurked, waiting and watching the highway. Clearly, we were tested and even taunted periodically at Papa Three. But the day-to-day life was hardly as dramatic as these two incidents might suggest. On balance, it is now clear that the most pressing problem we faced that fall was forming a cohesive team.

Once again, I had arrived to find a unit in transition. Within a week or two, most of the old guard had rotated and only three remained: a quiet and unassuming corpsman, an embittered loner of a lance corporal who held himself aloof and viewed all the new arrivals with contempt (fortunately, he rotated soon), and a gregarious Illinois farm boy answering to the nickname "Heinie." Aside from these three, the unit was literally reconstituted with people drawn from other Papa Company platoons, along with a few from a newly graduated CAP school class. We were an odd assortment. Here, to paraphrase from Vietnam-novelist Tim O'Brien, is who we were or pretended to be:

Heinie was a German-American and a self-styled fascist who had been encouraged in his affectation by another member of the old guard, a superannuated lance corporal also of German extraction and with a reputation for erratic behavior. "We Krauts have to stick together," this individual had supposedly told Heinie, and Heinie never tired of singing his praises. Sup-



On patrol on our side of the river.

posedly, on the night of the attack, Heinie's hero had stood up on a bunk and jumped recklessly into the wire with a K-bar in his teeth. They found him the next morning, seriously wounded in the groin. I have since located and spoken to another member of Papa Three's old guard, a Marine who for some reason was transferred to Papa One at the same time Reaves, Scott, and I were sent to Papa Three. He denies anyone did anything so foolish during the attack. Whether apocryphal or not, however, the legend spread throughout Papa Company. I recently heard the tale from a former Papa-Two Marine, but I have to wonder if it originated with Heinie. He was a gifted storyteller and a compulsive talker. He was never one to let the literal truth get in the way of a good story, and believed, along with Emerson, that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." He seemed to hold contradictory opinions on everything ranging from PFs to war protesters back home. Depending on his mood at the moment, for instance, Heinie either planned to beat up the first protester he encountered or let his hair grow and join the movement himself.

There was a black machinegunner from a line battalion via another CAP unit named Jimmie. A gentle soul who had either found religion during his time with the grunts or brought it with him (I never knew which), Jimmie quite publicly confessed his fear of the field upon joining us, volunteering to do the cooking and cleaning. All of us respected his candor and humility, and Sarge honored his request. He became our cook and seldom went out on patrols. As he spent most of his

spare time reading the Bible, behind his back we called him the "Reverend Mr. Black," after a popular song of the day. But he was obviously sincere, and no one ever worked harder to honor his share of a bargain—although he did lack both talent and inspiration in the cooking department. I remember suggesting to him on one occasion that a little salt and pepper, not to mention some hot sauce or Worcestershire, could go a long way toward making our B-rations a bit more interesting. Jimmie, however, just didn't feel he had the "right to season another man's food." Later that fall, Jimmie, who had been seriously overweight, contracted amoebic dysentery. None of us realized how serious it was at the time. When Jimmie couldn't extricate himself from our little outhouse, which featured half-screen construction and commanded an excellent view of the wire in one sector, we thought we saw a way to make the best of a bad situation. Passing his rifle and cartridge belt in to him, we asked if he wouldn't mind standing guard, seeing as how he was stuck there anyway. Never one to complain, Jimmie meekly agreed. We medevaced him the next morning. He came back about three weeks later and 30 pounds lighter.

It was old home week, I discovered, when I got to Papa Three. I found myself reunited with my old mail-clerk buddy Dennis Young. He had gone to another Papa Company unit after CAP school and had also been transferred in the wake of the August attack. I remember him as a loner who seemed to have no end of trouble adjusting to the program and getting along with the rest of us at first. It all came to a head one afternoon, precipi-

tating a minor crisis and an especially painful memory. He had adopted a puppy that cried incessantly—obviously too young to be taken from its mother. When Sarge insisted he do something about the problem, Young stormed out with a shot gun and blew the puppy to bits. A fight ensued, and none of us were sorry to see Young lose. The incident troubled all of us, raising serious questions about Young's stability and reliability. But whatever was bothering him seemed to have been purged on that terrible afternoon. He settled down after that, going on to do just fine when it really counted.

No squad is complete without one. We were blessed with our own Gomer Pyle, a well-meaning but hapless young PFC who seemed never quite tuned in to what the rest of us were doing. I think he infuriated all of us at one time or another with his inability to get up on time for guard. But he was unpretentious and humble about his shortcomings, and none of us could stay mad at him. I'll call him Pohlmann. He, too, came out all right in the end—which, as the reader will discover, may be a cruel pun.

But if Pohlmann was our Gomer Pyle, his opposite number had to be Reaves, easily the most self-assured and self-possessed of Papa Three's cast of characters. He was a radio operator and had come to us via a radio battalion. That experience, coupled with reading Leon Uris' *Battle Cry*, had confirmed him in the belief that communicators are uniformly smarter than the rest of us, a position he would good-naturedly defend by the hour. Always outspoken and opinionated, he could occasionally be overbearing. He was physically imposing as well, solidly built and well over six feet tall. But his judgment was usually sound, and he seemed to be one of those people who always know just what to do or say—a born leader, to use a much-abused phrase.

I watched him defuse a fight once, disarming both parties with gentle humor and irony. On another occasion, I watched him resolutely help retrieve a badly decomposed body from a river, a nauseating task requiring more intestinal fortitude than most of us could muster. Even when his fiancée sent him a Dear John, appropriating their entire "joint" savings account, he managed to laugh it off. I think we all admired and respected Reaves. But I remember him most for

his wry sense of humor and his obvious intelligence. He was simply smarter than most of the people around him, and he knew it.

His plan, he once confided in me, was to get out of the Marine Corps to go to college under the G.I. Bill. He had seen enough of the mud and blood. If he came back in service at all, it would be as a Navy officer on a submarine. I can still see him crouched down, hanging by the elbows from an imaginary periscope, mimicking the languid pose Hollywood submarine officers all strike. I think he was serious about college at least, and I count it a great loss he never got to go.

Reaves and one other Marine, the son of a career Air Force officer, seemed to be the only Papa-Three Marines to have had the benefit of a solid middle-class upbringing. Reaves was the son of some sort of consulting engineer and had lived in several parts of the country. The rest of us were provincial by comparison, distinctly working class and largely nondescript.

To my knowledge, Sarge was the only one who had had extensive combat experience. He had been a squad leader with a battalion of the 9th Marines. But he never spoke about that experience. He had apparently extended his tour for six months, joining the program and Papa Three immediately following his 30-day extension leave back in Detroit, his hometown. By remarkable coincidence, our senior corporal, his assistant, was a fellow Motor City man. They had never met before reporting to Papa Three. But they apparently had friends and favorite haunts in common, and they soon became inseparable. Together, they formed our command element while the rest of us formed two five-man patrol teams.

The teams served in succession, setting out with 5 to 10 PFs on a daylight patrol one day and a night ambush the next. For the team that wasn't patrolling at any given time, there was guard to stand and work to do around the compound. The PFs must have been formed for patrols on an ad hoc basis, as we never seemed to get the same group twice despite our best efforts at suggesting, and even demanding, some semblance of stability and team cohesion. For my part, I found myself promoted from rifleman to patrol leader within a couple of weeks of my arrival at Papa Three. I rose, I must admit, more through default than merit. Next to Sarge's assistant, I

was the only corporal, and there were no volunteers for the job.

Papa Three was responsible for patrolling an unrealistically large area, one encompassing nearly nine grid squares and two major village complexes. Making matters worse, a deep and fairly wide river, the Song Cam Lo, cut diagonally through the area from northwest to southeast, dividing it nearly in half. Our only means of patrolling the northeastern half, containing the two largest villages, was to cross the river by boat. As we had no boats of our own, we would proceed to a particular point along the southern bank, a place marked by a set of stone steps, where our PFs would hail a couple of elderly Vietnamese, a man and a woman, who would row over to get us in flimsy canoes with single fishtail-type oars. Just who these two were, or who paid them, I never learned. But they seemed always on call and ever ready to row us across the river by twos and threes.

It was a time-consuming and inescapably dangerous practice. It made a mockery of patrol security, virtually broadcasting our imminent arrival and practically inviting an ambush. Why the enemy never took advantage of the invitation, trapping half of us on the northern side and shooting the rest of us like fish in a barrel, I'll never know. Perhaps they thought it too easy and were suspicious. More likely, they had bigger things in mind and didn't want to attract attention. Whatever the reason, we never took so much as a sniper round in crossing the Song Cam Lo. That river, nevertheless, would be at the center of our problems, aptly symbolizing in the end a cultural gulf we never could get across.

It was on the banks of the Song Cam Lo on a beautiful day in late September that we first fell out with our PFs. I cannot claim Marines and PFs had ever been especially close at Papa

Three. But up to this point, the bolder and more curious PFs would mingle with the Marines in the evenings, joking and cadging C-rations. And since my arrival at least, all the PFs had seemed willing to follow along passively on patrol, wherever we would lead. Papa Three had not made contact with the enemy since the August attack, and we had seemingly settled into a comfortable routine, and had even grown somewhat complacent, when for no apparent reason our PFs mutinied.

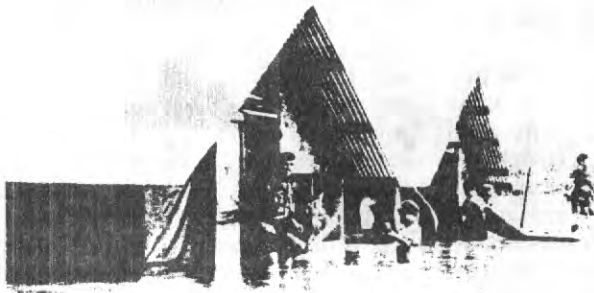
The plan that day called for us to cross the river and patrol the village on the northern side, as we had done without incident on numerous occasions before. We had briefed the PFs and had shown them the patrol overlay before setting out that morning. They knew where we were headed, and none voiced any objection or betrayed the least concern during the briefing. But when we got to our familiar crossing point, they promptly sat down, refusing to budge or even to hail the local ferry service. When we demanded to know why, "*Beaucoup VC*" was their common-sense reply.

We tried to get them to see that as more of an opportunity than an obstacle, an opportunity we were mutually obligated to exploit. But they remained unmoved—in both senses of the word. We tried reason, ridicule, cajolery, and even threats—all to no avail. Heinie even did a little pantomime of a PF sneaking up on and slaughtering an unsuspecting VC, proclaiming the experience to be "Number 1!" He drew a few laughs, but their position remained unchanged, "*Number 10! Beaucoup VC!*"

At an impasse, we radioed back for instructions and were told to "wait out." After an extremely awkward 10 or more minutes of staring at one another, word finally came back to let our Allies have their way this once



Preparing to cross
Song Cam Lo.



High tide at Papa Three.

and to patrol the southern bank. Our commanding officer would supposedly take care of the problem back at Cam Lo. None of us realized it at the time, but we had in fact already seen our last joint patrol across the river. We were to play out this same frustrating scene several more times, always with the same result: a sit-down strike along the riverside. Eventually, we were ordered to patrol on the other side without PFs, an order we initially carried out with great trepidation and which eventually would have tragic consequences. There were indeed "beaucoup VC" over there.

On balance, however, I would have to admit that most of what we suffered at Papa Three was more tragicomic than tragic. Like Shakespeare's unfortunate Ophelia, "too much of water" had we that fall.

It started raining heavily one morning, continuing steadily into the night. We had gone out on patrol that afternoon and had noted that the streams and the Song Cam Lo were running high, prompting us to cancel a planned crossing. But no one seemed unduly alarmed, and I remember hitting the rack that night at about 2130, expecting to be awakened for guard at 0400.

The next thing I knew, someone was shaking me and uttering a seemingly senseless warning. I must have been slow to respond, as he repeated it: "Better get up; the water will be over your rack soon." I turned over at that point, dropping one arm over the side of the cot and into the wading pool that had been our strongback hooch. I had awoken to the wonder of "water, water, everywhere." Looking at the waterproof Seiko I had bought at the Phu Bai Post Exchange during combined action school, I noted it was not yet midnight. As the water was almost



Enjoying the pool party.

over my cot already, and as our hooches were built on two-foot stilts, there must have been at least four feet of water covering our compound. The cheap Vietnamese footlocker containing all my clothing was submerged. Somehow, I managed to find my boots. Fortunately, as we usually did, I had slept in my clothes, and my rifle and cartridge belt were safely hanging on nails in the wall. We went on 100 percent alert—not because we feared an attack at that point, but because no one had a dry place to sleep, and there was nothing else to do.

By the time it stopped raining the next morning, the flood had crested at more than five feet and was over our heads in the lower parts of the compound. Ironically, just the day before, Cam Lo had received intelligence we were to be hit. That very afternoon, therefore, we had been reinforced by a squad of grunts, all of whom had taken the flood in stride and were spending the morning merrily wading and splashing around the compound on air mattresses. There was nothing to do at that point but join in the fun. Those of us who lived there, however, realized there would be a bill to pay for this impromptu pool party and that it wouldn't be paid by our guests.

The month following the flood ranks as the toughest I spent in Vietnam. The water receded within a day, and the weather turned clear again and even pleasantly cool. But everything was covered with a couple of inches of vile-smelling paddy silt. Out of concern for our health, as well as the likelihood of further floods once the monsoon began in earnest, the company commander ordered us to abandon the original Papa Three and to rebuild on the high ground on the southern side of the highway directly across

from the old site. It was much more easily said than done, we soon discovered, as we reluctantly moved out of our now contaminated but still relatively luxurious (by Vietnam standards) strongback hooches, taking up lodgings in fighting holes and shelter halves on a barren hill.

Combined action Marines, I now realize, had been spoiled compared to their counterparts in infantry battalions. But we in Papa Three can at least claim to have had the crash course in unaccommodated grubby living. We had no clothes other than the ones that had dried on our backs. Our others were full of silt, and we were a long way from any laundry services. One or two of us tried washing clothes in the river, but too much mud remained suspended in the water, leaving the clothes not much improved. Meals



An evening at home and under roof.



Members of attached squad look on after the flood.

were now three C-rations a day, whereas we used to feast on two B-ration meals and one C-ration each day. Worse, when we were not patrolling or standing guard, we were now attempting to salvage as much as we could from the old compound to build a new one from scratch. It was hot, backbreaking work, made all the more difficult by our inexperience and ignorance of combat engineering. We got so that we actually looked forward to patrols as a welcome break from the tedium of filling countless sandbags (most at the original site were too rotten to recover) and stringing endless strands of barbed wire without gloves.

It was during this period that an ugly rumor began to circulate. Our commanding officer, so the story went, had been warned by the village chief not to locate Papa Three in a low area

so close to the river, as the area often flooded during the rainy season. The story had it, however, that based on his engineering experience from Georgia Tech, our commanding officer felt he knew better than any unlettered village chief. Hence, all our trauma had been avoidable. Whether there was any truth to the rumor, I don't know. It had that apocryphal quality so many stories in Vietnam had, that "I-heard-it-from-a-friend-of-a-guy-who-knew-a-guy-who-was-there" kind of quality. We believed it at the time, however, because we were bitter and it seemed somehow easier and more reassuring to see ourselves as the victims of friendly folly than of an indifferent universe. The fact is, the original Papa-Three site never flooded again while I was there, despite torrential monsoon rains that November and December.

Hard times, of course, are supposed to bring out the best or the worst in people. This one hardly brought out the best in our PFs, making a bad situation even worse. Resentment had been building ever since the PFs opted out of patrolling the other side of the river, and now it seemed that rebuilding our compound was to be strictly an American responsibility as well. Our compound, after all, wasn't their home, only their appointed place of duty. They could afford to be cavalier about the flood. "*Beaucoup nuoc*," they had laughed and joked, and we had all joined in at the time, buoyed up with a good feeling of shared adversity. But that feeling of camaraderie was short-lived. The humor paled as day after day passed with Marines filling sandbags and stringing barbed wire almost totally without PF assistance. We would complain almost daily to *Trung si* (Sgt) Quang, their platoon ser-



The good life.

geant, who agreed in principle that it was our compound and that Marines and PFs alike had a vested interest in making it as defensible as possible in the event of attack. That is, in "principle" he agreed. In practice he never managed to scare up more than an occasional PF or two to work along with us on the compound defenses, and the unlucky selectees invariably seemed to find some excuse to leave after only an hour or two of work. The other PFs, of course, made it their practice not to hang around the compound, reporting only for guard or patrol duty. In rebuilding, as in patrolling the far side of the river, Marines were on their own.

Worse, we soon came to feel our own headquarters had abandoned us as well. Barbed wire was dribbled out stingily a spool or two at a time. We had, as I recall, two shovels, but only one sledgehammer for pounding stakes and no barbed wire gloves. We often resorted to pounding stakes with large rocks rather than idly awaiting a turn with the sledgehammer. Without carpentry tools, much less carpentry skills, there seemed little hope of improving our living conditions. Morale soon ebbed, and our progress became halfhearted and desultory.

Sarge managed to keep us working after a fashion, but was never able to buck us up. We needed to be shaken out of our lethargy and self-pity. Sarge, however, seemed capable only of shaming us into working. Without saying a word, he would simply pick up a shovel or a spool of barbed wire and set to work. One by one, we would join in. But our hearts just weren't in it, and after nearly a month on the hill, all we had to show for our labors was one sandbag bunker and an unfinished triple-concertina and apron perimeter.



Trung si (Sgt) Quang.



Six feet of water engulfs the area.

We had pretty much despaired of ever seeing the reconstruction completed when a chance visitor from on high wrought a dramatic change in our fortunes.

Looking back on Papa Three today, I can see just how much we owed to dumb luck and to a kind and forgiving fate. This personage who would contribute so much toward our recovery had never intended to visit us. He was merely passing by and stopped, probably out of idle curiosity.

We had been filling sandbags on our hill overlooking Highway 9 when we noticed a lone jeep stop short just past our compound. When it turned around, starting up the hill toward us, our first thought was that it must be the company gunny or commander on his way somewhere else, on second thought, stopping off to check on us. But when the jeep finally got up to us, out jumped two men we had never

seen before. One was big, burly, and middle-aged, and wore glasses. The other was thin and young. Both were wearing helmets and flak jackets, and it wasn't until they were virtually on top of us that I noticed three silver stars on the older man's collar protruding just above his flak jacket. Before anyone could jump to attention, much less salute, he had begun shaking hands and introducing himself all around, saying, "Hi, I'm Gen Cushman. What unit is this?"

I think we were still in shock when Gen Cushman seated himself on a sandbag, inviting us to do the same and to tell him about our unit and our problems. And that's just what we did. Everyone from Sarge on down poured out his heart and soul in an impromptu and animated request mast. We related the story of the flood, repeated the unfounded rumors, complained of the shortages, maligned the PFs for

not pitching in and for not patrolling the other side of the river, and in general painted ourselves as orphans of the storm. All the while the younger man, obviously the general's aide, stood off to the side, taking notes. Gen Cushman listened patiently to our lament, never interrupting. When we were through, he promised in a relaxed and folksy manner to do what he could to help us out; and without further ado, he and his aide got back in the jeep and drove off.

For several minutes after the general's departure, we sat in stunned silence as the enormity of what we had done began to sink in. Most of us had never even seen a lieutenant general close up, much less poured out our hearts and souls to one. We were sure nothing good could come of it, and more than one of us expected reprisals for jumping our immediate chain of command.

Much to our surprise, however, we never did hear from our company headquarters. But we did indeed hear from Gen Cushman. Word came about a week later in the form of a detachment of Seabees who suddenly showed up with heavy equipment one morning, ready to go to work. Within three days, our hilltop was leveled, a defensive trench was dug, and two hardback hooches and an outhouse were built. Papa Three had recovered from the flood, and we no longer had any excuse not to get on with the quest for hearts and minds. LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., senior Marine in Vietnam and future Commandant of the Marine Corps, had indeed kept his promise to do what he could to help us out.

USMC

> This memoir will be concluded in next month's MCG.



Seabee starting work on new Papa Three.

LtGen Cushman was true to his word.





Part Two

Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time

by Maj Edward F. Palm

This is the second and concluding part of a memoir that began last month, recalling the experiences of the Combined Action Program in Vietnam.

The flood stands out in my memory as a clear line of demarcation in Papa Three's progress. As our fundamentalist cook Jimmie would point out, our history had taken on a distinctly biblical cast. This time it had been the flood. It would be the fire next time. But in the interim, we could look back on our own antediluvian period. The formative events of that age had been the attack in August, the rotation of the old guard, and the refusal of the Popular Forces (PFs) to patrol the other side of the river. The first remarkable event of the postdiluvian period, of course, had been our impromptu audience with (then) LtGen Robert E. Cushman, Jr.

By intervening in the course of Papa Three's events, Gen Cushman was responsible for rebuilding not only our compound but our morale. The PF problem was far from solved. We were still patrolling the far side of the river alone, and there was lingering resentment over the conspicuous absence of PFs during the dark days of reconstruction. But overall, we were again living a relatively comfortable life by Vietnamese standards, and more importantly, we no longer felt abandoned by those who put us out there in the first place.

There have been too many popular depictions of Vietnam as a place of unmitigated horror and a moral vacuum where men sunk to precivilized states of barbarism and savagery. Such was not my Vietnam experience. When I consider how most of my days in the Combined Action Program (CAP) were spent—when I recall "the way it mostly was," to borrow another phrase from Vietnam novelist Tim O'Brien—I remember a daily routine that was usually neither onerous nor unpleasant, and I recall that the eve-

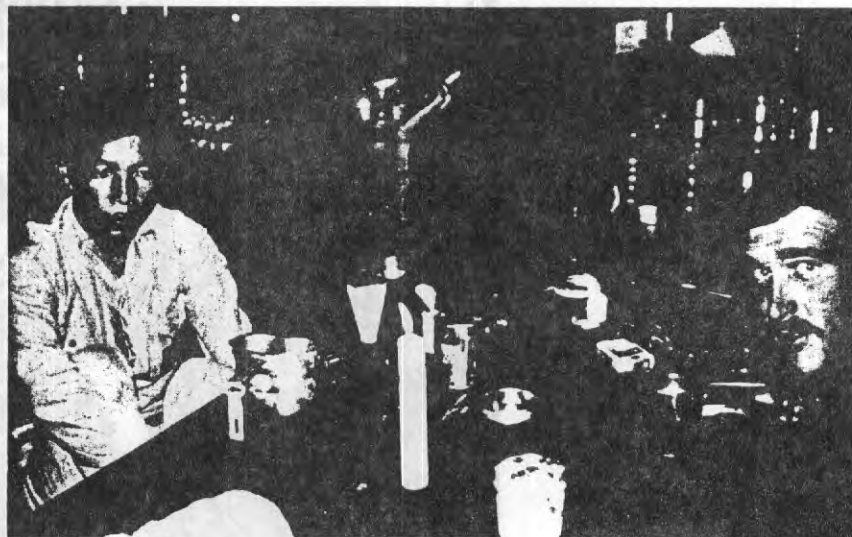
nings especially, in O'Brien's words, "could sometimes be fine."

Trung si (Sgt) Quang and two or three of the bolder PFs would very often come over in the evenings for coffee. The image of two or three PFs and as many Marines sitting around a table in thoughtful silence, sipping C-ration coffee from improvised grenade canister mugs, haunts me still. Under the circumstances, even C-ration coffee could seem a treat, and the company wasn't half bad either. These occasions were the closest we ever came to a rapprochement. The atmosphere seemed imbued with at least some degree of fellowship, a mute recognition that, on both sides, we do what we must do.

I also have fond memories of bull sessions we had that fall, some of the most interesting of which were inspired by Bobbie Gentry's teasingly ambiguous "Ode to Billie Joe." From the first time we heard it over Armed Forces Radio, we were captivated by the song. Our little open-air seminar

met several nights running after chow. Papa Three's unlettered scholars ranged on sandbags offering various opinions about why Billie Joe jumped from the Tallahatchie Bridge and on what role the young female narrator had played in bringing him to his private doom. The song seemed to strike a sympathetic chord of self-pity in all of us, and we would inevitably get sidetracked to the topic of the girls we left behind and the omnipresent threat of the Jody's of the Vietnam era, draft dodgers and war protesters. Reaves in particular seemed able to relate. His fiancée had apparently been growing restless for some time. But by our self-indulgent standards at least, he took it stoically, only exhibiting a marked tendency to hum or sing at odd moments snatches of the Martha and the Vandellas song "Jimmie Mack." This song seemed to speak to his condition, posing the musical question, "When are you coming back?"

Our enthusiasm for the strange war



Trung si Quang, his assistant, and Sarge conferring over coffee.

we found ourselves in would wax and wane regularly, often within the course of a typical day. Never at a loss for words, Heinie generally articulated what the rest of us felt—although perhaps not so strongly as he did. We could always count on Heinie to feel especially bloodthirsty first thing in the morning with the sun shining brightly. The thing to do, in his opinion, would be for two or three of us to slip out in the middle of the night, swimming the river with K-bars in our teeth and rifles in plastic bags. Operating as a small killing team, *sans* PFs, we could steal into the village at the northern edge of our tactical area of responsibility, quietly kill a couple of Viet Cong (VC), and slip back out undetected, thus sowing seeds of terror among our enemies. By afternoon, without reference to his first proposal, Heinie would usually scale down, presenting a somewhat less daring plan. The keynote would still be stealth, but the killing team would terrorize our own side of the river. By late afternoon or dusk at the latest, our Rambo precursor could generally be heard declaiming on the ingratitude of "these people" and questioning the wisdom of going out on patrol at all. "Why should we," he would ask rhetorically, "risk our asses for people who won't fight their own war?"

Why indeed? But I realize today we were as frustrated by our own ineptitude as by the reluctance of our PFs. Past events and the general indifference of the people had made it abun-

dantly clear we were not operating in a pacified area. The enemy was out there and, as we were to learn in early December, out there in force. Yet between August and December, Papa Three never made enemy contact. In the five or so months I spent with Papa Three, I achieved the distinction of leading more than 60 night ambush patrols and at least as many day patrols without ever finding the enemy. (The other team leader, as the reader will discover, would have shared my distinction but for that fateful patrol in December.) Only one night ambush was ever triggered during my tenure. Our unsuspecting victims that night turned out to be a group of wild VC pigs. They squealed in terror, but even they apparently got away unscathed. I would like to write that we likewise struck fear in the hearts of our human enemies, or at least inspired a healthy respect, but I think I would be lying.

The inevitable suspicion, of course, was that our PFs were in league with the enemy and were tipping them off about our patrols. Our suspicions were seemingly confirmed one night when a Marine professed to have caught a PF signaling the village with a flashlight just as we were about to set out on patrol. The PF denied it, and there were no other witnesses. But feelings had been running high on both sides since the PFs had refused to patrol the other side of the river or to help in rebuilding the compound. Sarge and *Trung si Quang* had to step in to quell a near riot. We were more than ready

to believe the worst at the time. From what I now know of the Vietnamese and their war, however, I can see it did not require that our PFs be in active collusion with the enemy for Papa Three to be ineffectual.

Our PFs had obviously made their accommodation with a seemingly unbeatable enemy that usually asked no more of them than that they stay on their own side of the river. From the provincial perspectives of our PFs, moreover, the other side of the river might as well have been another country. Today, having the advantage of 20-20 hindsight, I suspect an enemy gearing up for the Tet Offensive had put out the word to all whom it may concern: Stay on your own turf. Under the circumstances, our PFs probably simply saw no advantage in crossing the river, in effect going begging and borrowing after trouble. Likewise, they didn't have to alert the enemy of our coming. We saw to that, as we were hardly very subtle in our patrolling. It is certainly tempting to blame the PFs for all of Papa Three's shortcomings, but the truth is we came by our incompetence naturally and without any Allied assistance.

One patrol in particular stands out in my memory as a shining example of just how inept we could be. The great irony is that, tactically at least, we did everything right on this patrol. Operating without PFs, we spent the night in a remote ambush site on the far side of the river, setting out before dawn for a nearby village. This village

On patrol.



was a sullen place, seemingly devoid of military-age males—always a bad sign in Vietnam. Our plan was to hit the village at first light, catching the people off guard and searching for caches of weapons or supplies. We found no such items. But, in the first house we came to, we did find a young man dressed in a khaki shirt and khaki trousers. There was no doubt that our sudden arrival came as a surprise to this man at least. He was visibly shaken, and his behavior was atypical.

By and large, most of the villagers in our area would affect a demeanor of stoical indifference, trying to ignore us and go about their business even as we rummaged through their possessions and tore their houses apart. This man, however, couldn't do enough to help us search. He even took the initiative, opening things and pointing out nooks and crannies we hadn't even thought to check, all the while protesting, "No VC, no VC!" Not finding anything, we wished him a good day and moved on. It would not be until that December, after we had taken a couple of main-force VC prisoners, that I realized our host of some two months before had been protesting too much. Our prisoners that day were wearing the same khaki.

We had obviously surprised a VC on that previous occasion and had let him go—not out of compassion but rather inexcusable ignorance. Like most Marines in Vietnam, we too aspired to kill VC, and we were exceedingly frustrated by our inability to do

so. But, in my view, entirely too much has been written about the savage, racist character of the war, charging us with cynically inflating body counts with civilian casualties. The popular view persists that such practices were widespread and largely condoned; the rule being, "If it's dead, it's VC." Perhaps other units did pursue a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy. But I can testify that Papa Three, probably the least supervised of all units in Vietnam, exercised self-restraint.

On another patrol, for instance, we could have added an old man to our body count but didn't. He was a curfew violator who wandered into the killing zone of our ambush before sunup one morning. The "If-it's-dead-it's-VC" proposition may have been debatable, but there was universal agreement in Vietnam that anything moving about during hours of darkness was VC, or at least could be presumed to be such. We were set up that morning at a trail junction just outside one of the larger hamlets. It was at least a half hour to sunrise when we heard someone coming down the trail. We were sorely tempted to open up as soon as we could make out the shadowy figure against an even darker backdrop. Someone whispered to the patrol leader, "Want to open up?" "When in doubt, shoot" was the conventional wisdom in Vietnam, and the squad leader almost acceded. But by that point it was evident something was not quite right with this shadowy apparition coming steadily toward us.

The gait was sprightly, even nonchalant, and we suddenly realized he was dressed all in white. "Hold your fire!" the patrol leader shouted. "It's only an old man."

We took him into custody and turned him over to the village chief, who probably only warned him about the dangers of breaking curfew and sent him on his way. I have no doubt that, had we been of a mind to, we could have murdered that old man with impunity. It would have been dismissed as one of the fortunes of war, an unfortunate accident occasioned by his own folly in venturing out before sunrise. Many of the so-called atrocities and the undeniable excesses of the war, I suspect, happened under similar circumstances, and I do not mean to imply that we always held the high ground morally.

As I look back over my six months in the CAP, I am struck by the irony that I never knew a Vietnamese—not really. I knew five or six PFs by name and they me. But they were superficial acquaintances at best, not friendships. I could blame the language barrier, of course, none of us speaking more than a few handy phrases of Vietnamese, and they knowing only the usual French-English Pidgin. But anyone who has ever been in such a situation knows that, with a little ingenuity, you can communicate amazingly well using little more than such all-purpose adjectives as *beaucoup* or *petit* and "number 1" or "number 10." A little pantomime and a few universal ges-



Crossing Song Cam Lo.

tures round out the process. In our early days at least, and even continuing up to the strain of the reconstruction period, we managed to communicate well enough to engage in horseplay and mutual ribbing—always a good sign that the situation was perhaps not irretrievable.

I remember in particular one attempt to share with our PFs our view of the best in American culture, a newly arrived issue of *Playboy*. (We were interested mainly in the feature articles, of course.) The centerfold that month was especially buxom, and we signaled our appreciation in the standard manner, labeling her "number 1." The PFs disagreed violently, however, denouncing the pride of American womanhood as "number 10." "Same-same water buffalo," one of their number explained, and a lively debate ensued on the relative merits of Vietnamese versus American women.

The sexual mores of the traditional Vietnamese are, of course, prudish and even puritanical compared to ours. But there seemed to be no harm in exploring our mutual feelings about sex so long as the topic remained abstract. It was when the issue became immediate and pressing that we had problems.

Much of the goodwill we managed to build up through horseplay or drinking coffee together in the evenings was more than offset by such seemingly innocuous acts as greeting young girls with a familiar "*Chao Co*" (Hello, miss) as we passed on a trail. We had been told back at CAP school that this was definitely a faux pas, the Vietnamese considering it virtually an assault on a maiden's honor to address her so familiarly before being properly introduced. But we either forgot or didn't care, young American men being incorrigible in certain areas, and the PFs never failed to become visibly agitated and upset each time it occurred. Realizing this, I suspect, more than one Papa-Three Marine continued to greet young women just to get a rise out of the PFs.

On the other hand, we never failed to become visibly agitated and upset each time we found the PFs engaged in what we considered homosexual conduct. Our CAP school instructors, as I mentioned previously, had tried to prepare us for this aspect of Vietnamese culture. But it would be another 10 years at least before America would come out of the closet on homosexuality, and to a man, we couldn't tran-

scend the prejudices and double standards of our culture. We could understand in principle why a society that so rigidly prescribed and regulated the relations between the sexes, including an absolute ban against premarital and extramarital heterosexual relations, would condone mutual masturbation. Most of us were even large enough to feel that whatever two consenting PFs did on their own time was their business. It was when we caught them doing it on guard duty that we had a problem with this practice.



Corpsman treats a villager's baby under the watchful eyes of LCpl Reaves.

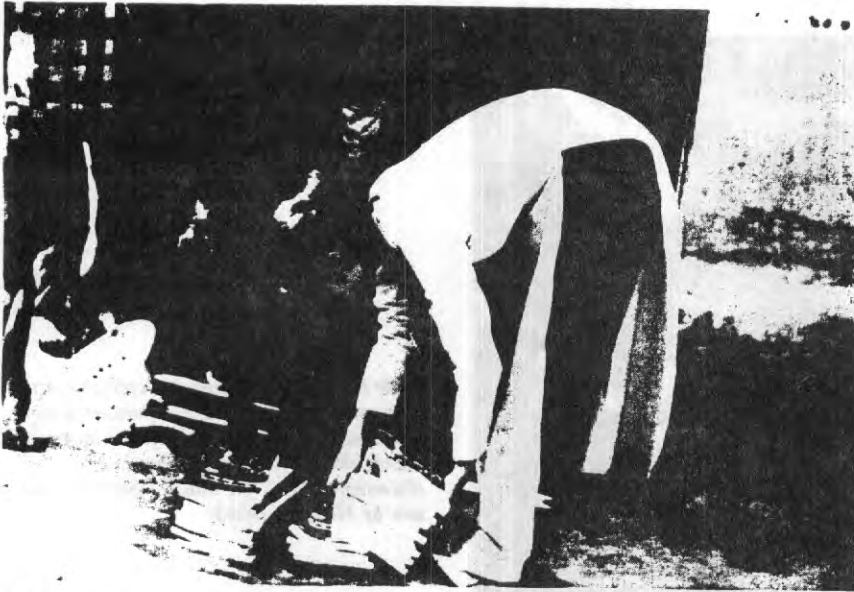
"Strange effect of ill breeding and narrow principles," some may charge, but we just couldn't see how the participants could remain vigilant while caught up in the business at hand. To make matters worse, the PFs caught in such a compromising position didn't seem in the least embarrassed. The one saving grace was that, to my knowledge, no Marine ever became the object of such advances. Ironically, some would point to that as evidence we never found acceptance among our PFs. But, as we were well aware, one can expect an average group of young Marines to go only so far above and beyond the call of duty, not to mention the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Just as I had been led to believe, theft did indeed become a major problem and another area of division between Marines and PFs at Papa Three. It was one thing to pretend tolerance and sympathy during an interview, another to remain stoical or saintlike in suffering an actual loss. Most of us learned in very short order to safeguard major valuables. The real problem was a continual pattern of petty theft. Every morning we would

awake to find that a few more barbed wire stakes or another roll of barbed wire had walked out of the compound overnight. C-rations practically had to be kept under guard 24-hours a day. But even more frustrating, things of only sentimental or purely personal value would disappear regularly.

I made the mistake one day of leaving an exposed roll of 35mm film unattended on the shelf over my rack. When I returned for it, less than an hour later, it was gone. In front of all the PFs there that day, I expressed my anger and did my best to explain that the film was of no value to anyone but me. Through pantomime and pidgin, I communicated that the film had already gone through my camera and therefore had no resale value. There was no reaction at the time, but I must have made my point. About a week later, after I had already despaired of ever getting my film back, a PF I knew by name approached me, offering to "souvenir" me a roll of film. It was, he explained, "number 10" that a PF or PFs unknown had stolen my film. He claimed that, wishing to make amends for his brethren, he had taken it upon himself to go to Dong Ha to buy me a new roll of film. I thanked him and accepted the film. Noting that the leader had been wound into the cassette, indicating that it was probably already exposed, and noting that it was the type of film I had lost, I took a chance and sent it in for processing. It was my film.

This one incident stands out in my memory as perhaps the closest we ever came to winning anyone's heart or mind at Papa Three. We were told at CAP school that we would be able to interact with the Vietnamese people in ways the brutal French professionals, the *légionnaires* and the elite paratrooper regiments, never could. We had rough edges, to be sure. But sooner or later, we were assured, the Vietnamese would warm to us. Our irresistible boyish charm, our irrepressible enthusiasm and disarming friendliness, would win them over eventually. This, of course, was long before Lt William Calley, USA, would disabuse us of such notions, creating in the popular mind, at least, a Vietnam where atrocities were both common and condoned. I know nothing of such a Vietnam. I can honestly write that, despite the admittedly lax supervision we operated under, I never witnessed anything remotely resembling an atrocity, nor even a single incident of abuse.



Village schoolmistress reluctantly accepts textbooks; our one civic action project.

during my tour with Papa Three. When it came to winning hearts and minds, however, I am certain we fared no better than the French. In fact, given the scale of our commitment, I suspect the Vietnamese liked us even less than they had the French.

We could read it in the studied indifference of the people as we passed, the way they ignored us even as we searched their houses and property; they considered us barbarians. We couldn't even sell our civic action projects or our medical assistance. At the insistence of our headquarters, we repeatedly asked the village chief what the village needed or wanted in the way of civic improvements. He would promise to think about it and get back to us, but never did. The only thing we ever did in the name of civic action was to present the village school with new textbooks. But no one asked the schoolmistress whether or not she needed new textbooks. We simply showed up one day and delivered the books. The schoolmistress seemed reluctant to accept them at first. She did in the end, but she was less than profuse in her thanks. Likewise, we never had any great call for our medical services. Occasionally, a mother would come by seeking help for a child suffering from cellulitis or some other infection. Once, a middle-aged man came in suffering from a festering bullet wound through his hand. When he could present no satisfactory explanation for the wound, we turned him over to our headquarters for questioning. But, in general, most of the people who lived in the vicinity of Papa Three didn't want anything we had to offer.

I remember in particular an especially revealing conversation we once had

with our PFs on the topic of why we were there. They were amazed and somewhat skeptical to hear that we weren't happy to be in Vietnam. They simply assumed combat was what we lived for. Why else would we seem so eager to prosecute a war they had long since learned to live with? It was evident they had made their accommodations with the other side. The practical effect of this arrangement was to place the other side of the river off limits. I judged our PFs harshly at the time. We all did. But I have since tried to put myself in their place. They stayed in our compound under our protection only every third night. They were otherwise on their own. To their minds, I would imagine, we were not capable of toppling the existing order, only of bringing a part of it down on their heads. Consequently, I believed our PFs were always looking for ways to distance themselves publicly from us and our cause.

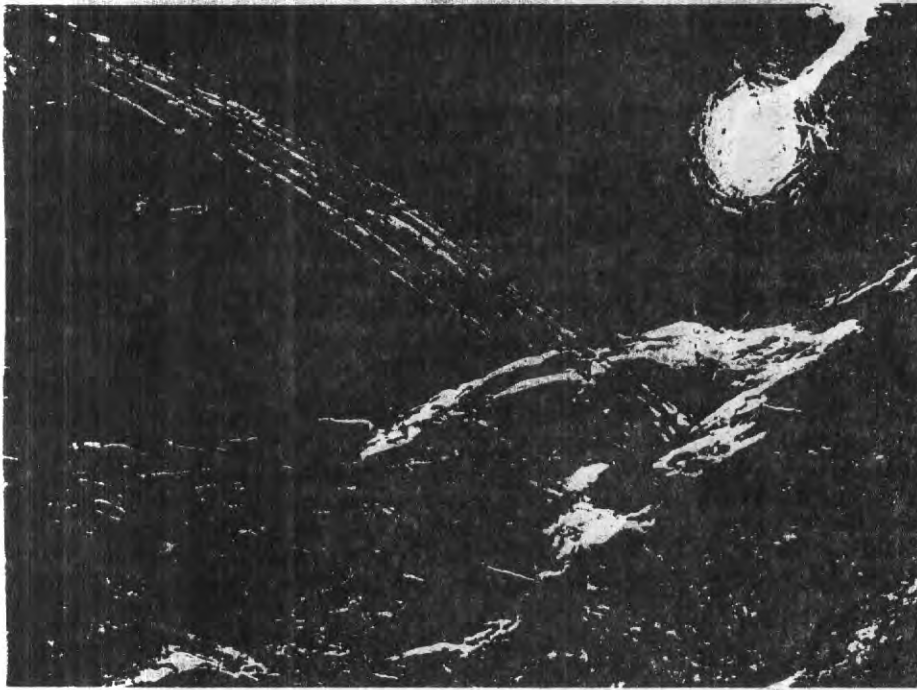
They finally found just the pretext they had been looking for one night in November when "Puff the Magic Dragon" came to call. "Puff" and "Spooky" both were popular nicknames for the AC-47, an updated version of the venerable old C-47 transport plane. A typically Vietnam variation on the theme of "something old, something new," Puff sported the latest in electrically driven Gatling guns capable of firing 6,000 rounds per minute. Puff also carried a seemingly endless supply of parachute flares and, in our area at least, was employed primarily at night against suspected North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troop concentrations. Watching Puff in action could be an amazing spectacle, an awesome sound and light show that made you

feel almost sorry for the other side. The extremely rapid rate of fire made the tracers blend into an unbroken stream of fire stretching between the plane and the ground, and the overlapping reports of the guns would meld into an eerie burping sound. Rumor had it Puff could put one round in every square foot of a football field with just one pass. We could believe it. Puff had been a frequent visitor that fall to the hills south of our compound. Always before, however, he had appeared at least two or three miles away and had seemed to work his way away from us. On this particular night, however, he suddenly appeared no more than two miles to the southwest and actually seemed to be working toward us.

One of us, I don't recall whom, asked the question on all our minds: "Do you suppose he knows we're here?"

"Of course," someone else replied, "he has the location of all friendly units plotted." Confirmed in that faith, we had not been practicing light discipline. We never did, actually, the location of our compound being no secret (to foe at least), and Puff's flares had lit up the area like daylight anyway. Puff continued making passes, moving within a half mile of the compound, until the flares he had dropped burned out. With the area again plunged into darkness, Puff's location suddenly became a cause for concern. But no one felt any real anxiety until the next flare appeared. It burst forth over the hills on the eastern side of our compound, within only two or three hundred yards of our wire.

We heard the buzz and cracking of bullets before we heard Puff's distinc-



Air Force AC-47 sported the latest in electrically driven Gatling guns that fired an unbroken stream of fire. "I could feel the impact of rounds hitting within inches of my head. . . ." (Painting of "Puff the Magic Dragon" in action by Maj Jack Dyer.)

tive report. We instinctively dove for a long, four-foot-deep trench the Seabees, with their backhoe, had thrown in free of charge. No trench, of course, would have protected us from the hail of fire we took that night had Puff been directly overhead. But, fortunately, he opened fire from out on our flank. The fire was angled and somewhat masked by the facing bank of the trench. Still, it was a very near thing. As I crouched at the bottom of that hole, I could feel the impact of the rounds hitting within inches of my head and was stung by fragments of rock and dirt.

Trite as it sounds, I remember lying there as the rounds hit thinking this is it, this is just like in the movies. I felt a perverse pride at being in real and imminent danger at long last. My elation was short-lived, however. It suddenly occurred to me we could be in serious trouble with Puff's next pass. Mercifully, I didn't have time to dwell on the thought. Pohlmann suddenly appeared at the edge of the ditch caterwauling to the effect that he had been shot in the ass.

Where he had been when Puff opened fire I don't know. I tried to tell him to get in the ditch and get down before Puff came back, but he was hysterical by then and was soon rolling around on the ground clutching his punctured behind. When he rolled over close to the edge, Reeves and I saw our chance. I grabbed him by the collar. Reeves caught an ankle, and we both yanked. Pohlmann came tumbling in, landing squarely on his back-

side. His screams were pathetic, but he was at least as safe as the rest of us.

Fortunately, our radio operator had had the presence of mind to take a PRC-25 with him when he dove into the ditch. While we were catching Pohlmann, he was getting through to our headquarters, and they managed to reach the fire support coordination center posthaste. Puff did not make a second pass. Instead, we heard the sound of his engines fading as our radio operator relayed to us the welcome news that Puff had gotten the word. Ironically, I don't remember the name of the radio operator to whom we owed so much that night, although I can still see him in my mind's eye. He was destined to save the day once more before I left Papa Three. But to my knowledge, he was never recommended for so much as a Navy Achievement Medal.

In the immediate aftermath, we discovered that two Marines and one PF had been lightly wounded and that another PF had been seriously wounded. In Pohlmann's case, the round had entered at the top of one buttock and exited at the bottom, just above the leg. Scotty, who had been asleep in our hooch at the time, had suffered a rude awakening, taking a round through the fleshy part of his thigh. One of the PFs had been shot through the forearm. I don't recall where the other one was hit, but he didn't survive. The medevac chopper was there in minutes. Pohlmann made us carry him to it, along with the mortally wounded

PF. The other PF walked aboard. Scotty walked, despite the round he had taken through the thigh.

No sooner had the chopper lifted off and the noise faded than a PF ran up to Sarge loudly proclaiming, "Nguy guyen cher!" (*Nguy guyen*, pronounced "neo-quin," meant government soldier, the way PFs typically referred to themselves. *Cher* meant dead.) Leading us to a fighting hole out on the perimeter, this harbinger of death shined a flashlight on a figure slumped forward in the narrow hole, face against the dirt at the leading edge of the parapet. Of a morbid turn of mind, our guide pointed out that the thick black hair was even thicker with blood at the top near the crown of the head. Grabbing a shock of hair, he pulled the head back, illuminating the face. The bullet had exited below the nose, taking the upper lip and front teeth with it.

A dead PF, of course, did not rate a medevac. The PFs wrapped him in a poncho, and his relatives came and bore him away the next morning. I remember this sad delegation. It was soon after they left that we had the most bizarre confrontation we ever had with our PFs.

Since the reconstruction, we had been a house divided, physically as well as culturally. They, in effect, had claimed one half the compound and we the other. Combined action, in my experience at both Papa One and Papa Three, had never entailed complete integration. There had been a de-

gree of segregation in the original Papa Three, with PFs claiming one strongback and bunker as their exclusive domain. But there had always been a healthy amount of interaction. Now we seemed to have an invisible boundary running through the middle of the compound, with emissaries from both sides making only occasional polite diplomatic forays across the border. On this particular morning, we were visited by a delegation of five or six PFs, who accused us of calling in Puff to get even with them.

We were initially dumbstruck at the accusation. Recovering somewhat, we tried to point out that two Marines had been wounded and all of us were placed in jeopardy, making their charge patently false and more than a little absurd. But in light of how much more heavily they had suffered, they refused to see our wounded as anything other than a miscalculation on our part. They could not, or would not, see their part in the incident for what it was, an unlucky accident of fate. Puff had fired from off their side of the compound, making for a steeper and more dangerous angle of fire on their side than ours—as evidenced by the PF killed in his fighting hole. We tried to show them what had happened by scratching diagrams in the dirt, but they seemed to remain skeptical. In the end, we asked them to trust us, assuring them that someone would be called to account for such a serious mistake.

As it turned out, no one came out to investigate, and we never heard a word officially. Pohlmann and Scotty came back sufficiently healed about two weeks later, reporting that the pilot and copilot had visited them in the hospital and apologized, explaining how difficult it is to know exactly where you are in the air over Vietnam at night. To my knowledge, no one came out to apologize to the PFs or their families. But Pohlmann and Scotty did receive Purple Hearts, which they said were officially listed as due to enemy artillery.

It was about the same time as their return that we received another delegation of PFs, this time headed by *Trung si Quang*. He announced that, by order of their *dai uy* (captain), all PFs had to go out on an operation that would last about a week and that would exclude Marines. We should have seen it coming but didn't. Their "one-week" operation lasted nearly two weeks and would be followed by

two more separate PF operations between early November and late December 1967.

Throughout this period, our commanding officer was reportedly working hard at the district level back in Cam Lo to heal Papa Three's schism. In the meanwhile, our marching orders were to continue patrolling without PFs. We were not really anxious on that score. We had been patrolling off and on without them for nearly two months by this time. Our principal complaint was in being left short-handed in guarding the compound at night, and our initial concern was for what they perhaps knew that we didn't. Were we going to be hit in force some night soon? But, as our nights and days continued to pass without incident, our anxiety on this score gradually gave way to the old familiar bitterness. We couldn't help but notice that, for a group supposedly committed to important operations, the PFs had left quite a few of their number loafing around the village.

Regardless of whether the PFs were out on a bona fide operation or not, I don't blame them for the next major event in Papa Three's sad saga. No one in particular was responsible; we were all responsible. It comes under the heading "Fortunes of War." Personally, however, I continue to marvel at the persistence of a stubborn fate seemingly committed to keeping me from harm that year. I marvel at it, and I continue to feel vaguely and irrationally guilty about it. I was not slated for the day patrol on 4 December 1967. My team was scheduled for the ambush that night. Much of what I am about to relate, therefore, will be the testimony of those who were there that day.

Six Papa-Three Marines set out that morning on what by that time had become a routine patrol. Their mission was to see and be seen in the remotest corner of our area, a small hamlet on the other side of the river about 2,000 meters out. It was one of those rare days in northern I Corps. The clouds were beginning to build dramatically, a promise of the impending monsoon. But for the time being, the sun was shining, and it was actually cool and balmy. The pleasant weather probably contributed to our complacency that day—that and the fact nothing had ever happened on any of our patrols. There had been warning signs, however. No matter what time of day we came through this particular hamlet, it

seemed strangely deserted, although people clearly lived there. The odd person we would encounter—usually an old man or woman, never a man of military age—would hurriedly pass by, eyes fixed firmly on the ground. Still, nothing ever happened there.

We had grown so accustomed to patrolling there that we began to violate one of the most basic rules of the game. We stopped time and again to take our break in one particular abandoned hut that stood adjacent to the main trail. We had carelessly set a pattern, and the enemy had taken note of our carelessness. I don't know how many times we got away with such carelessness; I only know that this time we didn't. They let the patrol settle in on their break and then opened fire from a treeline not more than 50 yards away.

Miraculously, only one man, Reaves, was hit in the initial burst. The others managed to reach the cover of a small root cellar unscathed, returning fire immediately. Not more than a minute or two into the firefight, Heinie holstered over to ask Reaves how he was. "I'm OK, but my hand's busted!" he stoically replied. Those were his last words. When Heinie checked again only a few minutes later, he found that Reaves had taken a round squarely through the head.

The enemy's mistake that day was in standing off in the treeline and not closing with the trapped patrol. That gave the radio operator just enough time. And as luck would have it, he was the past master who had gotten Puff called off in the nick of time only a few weeks before. Topping that performance, he had two helicopter gunships on station in minutes. With their arrival, the siege quickly disintegrated into a rout. Before it was all over, the gunships would claim six confirmed and five probable kills, although no bodies were found.

But this much was certain: Reaves was dead. Four Marines had been wounded, two seriously. One of the wounded had taken a round through the elbow when one of the gunships mistook our reaction force for the enemy. He was medevaced back to the States. We heard later that he lost the arm. The closest call and the cheapest Purple Heart that day went to my ex-mail clerk friend, Dennis Young. A bullet creased his head near the ear.

We did take two prisoners that day. The returning patrol found them lying in the muck of a rice paddy, trying to



VC prisoner under interrogation.

hide behind a dike. I helped guard them and later witnessed their interrogation conducted by an intelligence team that came out to our compound. Underneath a liberal coating of rice paddy mud, both prisoners were wearing plain khaki uniforms of a sort I found vaguely familiar but couldn't quite place at the time. It would be a day or two before I would make the connection. Under interrogation, one prisoner remained stoically silent, refusing to give even the proverbial name, rank, and serial number. The other wept and talked profusely.

They were main-force VC, members of a psychological operations company that shared our tactical area of responsibility and competed with us for the hearts and minds of the people. Just as our PFs had us, this VC company had North Vietnamese advisers. Their *modus operandi*, however, was to disperse throughout the area, hiding in groups of two or three by day and regrouping at some prearranged location at night. Hence, to a group of innocents abroad, such as we, they remained virtually invisible, often hiding in plain sight. That man dressed in khaki who had seemed so eager to help us search his house some two months before had no doubt been one of their number. Interpreting such ineptitude as arrogance perhaps, the local VC reportedly had wanted to hit us for some time, but their NVA advisers had opposed it, arguing that the time was not right. By 4 December 1967,

however, the locals had obviously won the debate, and it was thanks only to American air power that they didn't win the day—quite possibly with a shootout.

It was no thanks to our PFs, of course, that the patrol hadn't been wiped out. They were out on an "operation" at the time. But our bitterness at our supposed Allies was eclipsed this time by a complaint nearer and dearer to our hearts. For the Marine Corps at least, these were the early days of the M16, and true to form for that time, every rifle had jammed when it was needed the most. I remember Heinie in particular melodramatically throwing his M16 on the ground and denouncing it as a "piece of shit."

Ironically, through practical experience, some of us by that point had come to suspect what would later be borne out through official inquiry. The principal cause of the problem was the ammunition. We had noticed that our M16s seemed to work fairly well with ammunition made by Remington, but would consistently fail to extract every third or fourth round with ammunition made by other suppliers. Remington ammo wasn't always available, however, and a few Papa-Three Marines were too skeptical of the M16 to believe the brand of ammo really could make a difference. Heinie, for instance, had his father send him a .38-caliber pistol, and Reaves consistently volunteered to be the grenadier, carrying the M79 grenade launcher.

Another Papa-Three Marine would carry only a shotgun. They probably considered those of us who tried to load only with Remington rounds superstitious. The fact remains that even this precaution wouldn't guarantee flawless operation. In 1967 *all* M16s occasionally failed to extract spent rounds and jammed. The enemy's AK-47, on the other hand, may have been heavier and not nearly so aesthetically pleasing, but it was a marvel of reliability. I watched Heinie test fire an AK-47 he had captured that day. One of the prisoners had had it with him in the rice paddy, and it was caked with mud. Heinie only made sure the chamber and barrel were unobstructed, otherwise firing it as is. It operated flawlessly, emptying a 30-round banana clip on full automatic without a stoppage.

There was one formality that had to be attended to in the immediate aftermath of the ambush. Someone had to go to Charlie Med in Dong Ha to identify Reaves' body. I volunteered; I felt it was the least I could do. The company gunny came by in a jeep, and together we set off for Charlie Med. Neither of us knew exactly where to go. We stumbled into triage first, only to have an irritable corpsman abruptly chase us away from a couple of doctors working intently over an unconscious figure. Demanding to know our business, the corpsman brusquely directed us to graves registration, which was in a small unmarked shack out

back. Here we were again challenged, this time by a lugubrious-looking sergeant who opened the door only wide enough to peek out at us. The gunny explained why we were there, and the sergeant grudgingly swung open the door admitting us to the most macabre scene I had ever witnessed.

My dominant impression remains that of a cottage industry of death conducted in a matter-of-fact manner that only served to heighten the horror. We suddenly found ourselves standing in the midst of at least six rustic preparation tables constructed from two-by-fours and sheets of corrugated roofing



Lucky Marine with captured AK-47.

tin. The floor was concrete and appeared to have been hosed down recently. Three bodies lay out in plain view. They had been stripped naked and apparently hosed off. Asking us to "wait one," the sergeant went over to a desk at the far side of the room to assemble some paperwork. Completely ignorant of the procedure, I assumed one of the three bodies must be Reaves and that I should be proceeding with the business at hand. None looked at all familiar, and I forced myself to walk up to one of the tables for a closer look. Bending over the face, I suddenly realized with a start that I was looking into a flattened, bullet-punctured eyeball.

I had just about convinced myself that this unfamiliar visage must be Reaves transformed by the shock of death when I was startled by a strange,

thundering command: "I thought I told you to pick that up!" I assumed at first the command was directed at me, and I was wondering what I was to pick up when a shy little lance corporal darted in front of me and, with a sheepish grin, bent down at my feet, coming up bare-handed with a fist-sized chunk of brain tissue. I was completely unnerved by this point, but the distraction at least had come just in time. Before I could foolishly try to identify the wrong body, this same lance corporal was leading me into a back room saying, "Reaves is this way."

I soon found myself in a narrow room facing a bank of stainless steel drawers, such as I had seen in any number of television and movie morgue scenes. Checking the numbers on the drawers against a sheet of paper, my guide went to one of the lower drawers, pulling it out between us. I remember that it extended the entire width of the room, touching the opposite wall, and that the room was dimly lit, the only light coming from a window at the far end. The body was in a translucent, zippered plastic bag, which the lance corporal unzipped and pulled away along the entire length of the body. This time I was sure. I recognized Reaves at a glance and said so. But before he would let me go, my ghoulish guide insisted upon tilting the head first one way and then the other, in the process revealing the gaping exit wound on one side. Satisfied at last that I had made positive identification, he zipped the body up, slid the drawer back in, and led me out.

A couple of formalities remained. I had to sign a form attesting to the positive identification, and the sergeant asked me to verify and witness a considerable sum of money Reaves had had on him. The sergeant handed me a wad of bills, asking me to count them. Ordinarily, it would not have been a difficult task. It was only about \$300, although in small bills of Vietnamese-style Monopoly money, Military Payment Certificates or "MPCs." But I found myself just too shaken to concentrate. I think I was on my third false start when the sergeant and gunny stepped in and counted the money for me. Somehow I managed to sign a receipt for the money and the rest of Reaves' personal effects, all of which were entrusted to me to take back to be included in the inventory with the rest of his things. We were done at last. On the way back the gunny said, "Hell of

a way to make a living, isn't it, Palm?" I agreed it was, and neither of us said another word all the way back to Papa Three.

The next day, another Marine and I helped Sarge inventory and pack up Reaves' gear. When we got to a Marine Corps ring recovered from the body, the other Marine—whom I remember well but won't name—spoke up, claiming that Reaves had said he wanted him to have this ring should anything ever happen to him. Sarge and I both realized it was a bald-faced lie. The two had never been close friends. But it was not a valuable ring, and we didn't think Reaves' family would want it under the circumstances. Sarge asked me what I thought. I said I thought it would be fine. But before handing over the ring, I stopped to take a good look at it. It was the standard model available in any PX—a gold alloy with a red stone and carving on the sides. There seemed to be something unusual about the carving, however. It appeared to have been done in some sort of rough red inlaid material. All at once, I realized what it was. Grabbing a canteen, I washed the blood off Reaves' ring, handed it to the man who had asked for it, and together we finished the inventory.

In the end, there was nothing to do but resume our routine. Probably the saddest thing about losing someone you have lived and worked closely with under such circumstances is how rapidly you adjust to the loss. Those who haven't been there seem to find this aspect of the experience especially troubling or distasteful. I remember a bitter argument I had a couple of years later with a non-Vietnam veteran friend over My Lai. He pronounced me "shallow" because I didn't agree that the casualties Calley's men had previously taken in the area somehow mitigated what they did at My Lai. This is posturing, not honest emotion. Never having experienced it, my friend couldn't grasp the sad truth and the essential ambivalence of combat as reported on by Michael Herr and many others. A man feels many things when someone he is close to is killed in combat, but paramount among those feelings is generally relief that it wasn't him. We are just constituted that way.

There was one final scene to be played out between us and our PFs that December. Only about two weeks after we were ambushed, while Marines and PFs were still going their separate ways, the PFs were ambushed



under circumstances very similar to ours. They managed to break off contact without air power, however, making their way back to our compound with one dying and two lightly wounded PFs. After we evacuated their casualties, they shocked us with the announcement that they were going back out to settle the score with the VC. What is more, they asked us to come along. We couldn't quite believe this latest development. It was so out of character for our PFs that I am not sure I understand it yet. The VC must have broken a longstanding covenant, perhaps unfairly holding them responsible for what our helicopter gunships had done. Whatever the motivation, our PFs seemed gung ho at last, and many of us were thinking that we had perhaps given up too soon on combined action. Filled with renewed hope and confidence, we eagerly radioed for the required permission. After several minutes, the answer finally came: "Permission denied!"

I don't know why our commanding officer wouldn't allow us to go. Perhaps it was more than petty revenge at the way our PFs were treating us. Whatever the reason, I believe it was a mistake. We missed a golden opportunity to reestablish some semblance of solidarity, and I don't know when, if ever, a similar opportunity presented

itself. I was short by then, and Marines and PFs were still going their separate ways when I rotated only a couple of weeks later.

My last days at Papa Three, in retrospect, now seem portentous. On two consecutive nights in late December the compound was raked with short bursts of automatic fire from the general direction of the village. No one was hurt, but our attention was diverted—just long enough probably to move troops across Highway 9 down below our compound. A few nights later they repeated the process, this time firing a single rocket at us as well. I actually saw it take off from somewhere within the village. Fortunately, it overshot us, exploding harmlessly on a hill about 200 meters behind our compound. On another night, the bridge only about 500 meters east of us came under attack. Using our 60mm mortar, we fired illumination for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) platoon guarding the bridge, and it held. An ARVN lieutenant came over the next morning and thanked us all personally. On Christmas day, because of the usual truce, we were forced to watch an NVA platoon brazenly cross an open area with impunity. They were less than 1,000 meters away, and Heinie, who had been practicing with our mortar, was

just dying to reach out and touch someone. But we were allowed to fire only if fired on that day. We could only report the sighting.

Clearly, all these incidents now seem to portend the momentous Tet Offensive just around the corner. It was evident that something was coming, but none of us could have foreseen the scope of the coming offensive. It just didn't seem possible in late 1967 that the enemy could rise up in force and challenge us openly throughout most of South Vietnam.

As for me personally, being down to the single digits by late December, I naturally assumed the enemy had simply stepped up efforts to get me while they still had the chance, and I was beginning to suspect some complicity on the part of our headquarters by then. By my calculations, I should have been out of the field several days earlier when a radio call came in for another Papa-Three Marine to pack up and catch the supply truck to Dong Ha. I knew I had been in-country a couple of days longer than this guy, so I had Sarge get on the radio and ask about my orders. "Not in yet," came the discouraging word. We had all said our goodbyes, and the truck had come and gone, bearing away the lucky Marine, when we got another radio call. Someone had double-checked,

discovering that my orders were in after all. If I could get to Dong Ha in time to catch a 1300 flight to Phu Bai, I could leave that day.

It was already 1000, but it didn't take me long to pack what I needed and to give the rest away. I was out on Highway 9 hitchhiking by 1100. Ironically, Jimmie, the man we had all denigrated as the "Reverend Mr. Black," was the only one to come out to wait with me. Within 10 minutes, a jeep stopped to pick me up, and suddenly Papa Three and six months of my life were receding behind me. I didn't know what I was heading toward. I was only 20 years old, and I had no definite plans or ambitions at the time. I was, of course, happy to be heading home—back to "the World" as we called it. But I wasn't as happy as I had imagined I would be, and I was surprised to find myself feeling strangely ambivalent at the prospect of actually leaving at long last. I think I realized even then that, wherever I was going and whatever I would do, very little of my subsequent life back in the World could ever match the intensity and poignancy of those five short months at Papa Three.

Epilogue

That was the Combined Action Program as I knew it. People have often remarked at how lucky I was to have rotated when I did, and I suppose I was. But I am left with mixed feelings about my presumably good luck—nothing so melodramatic or self-important as survivor's guilt, more like a feeling of self-annoyance and acute embarrassment at having given up on a play and walked out in the fourth act only to learn later that the plot had suddenly taken an unexpected and interesting turn in the fifth. Now I may never know how it all turned out for Papa Three during Tet.

I did hear from Jimmie in early January while I was home on leave. He wrote to tell me our mascot, a dog we called "Sloopy," had had pups, an event we, of course, had been anticipating when I rotated. Other than that, nothing had changed. I wrote back, but I never again heard from Jimmie or anyone else at Papa Three.

Before beginning this article, hoping to tie up this loose end, I spent a fruitless day at the Marine Corps Historical Center poring over the III MAF Command Chronology and various other operations logs. I found a terse report of our 4 December ambush and

a copy of the message report to FMFPac. I also learned that at 0930 on the same day, the enemy ambushed another squad-sized patrol, "inflicting a wound in the left eye of their scout sniper." The "wound," I knew, had been mortal. His was the body I almost mistook for Reaves' that day at graves registration in Dong Ha. Searching further, I discovered that both Papa One and the district headquarters at Cam Lo came under attack at 0200 on 2 February 1968, precipitating a "successful" operation code-named KENTUCKY. Two Marines and a soldier, probably an adviser to the district, had been killed, and 22 Marines had been wounded. Enemy losses were placed at 96 killed, 22 taken prisoner. I checked throughout the Tet period, finding no further mention of any Papa Company unit.

The prosaic truth, I suspect, is that nothing very significant happened to Papa Three during Tet or I would have found some trace. The Marine-PF schism was probably healed after a fashion eventually, or at least they resumed going through the motions. The enemy probably continued to leave well enough alone, bypassing Papa Three in favor of more important objectives. If any reader knows anything to the contrary, I would appreciate hearing. But it would form only a coda or a postscript. The story essentially ended, as I see it, in the ides of December 1967 with that "permission denied." On that day, I believe, we missed our first and last opportunity to become a cohesive team working toward the same objectives.

I would like to believe, with some, that combined action was the best thing we did over there. But we always saw only what we wanted to see in Vietnam, and in my experience, combined action was merely one more untenable article of faith. The truth, I suspect, is that where it seemed to work, combined action wasn't really needed, and where it was, combined action could never work.

The objective was certainly sound. There was a demonstrable need for an effective grass-roots program targeted toward the VC infrastructure, for the most part left intact by large-scale search and destroy operations. But combined action came as too little, too late. The VC infrastructure was too deeply entrenched, literally as well as figuratively in some places. They had had more than 20 years to win hearts and minds before we blundered onto

the scene. We were naive to think 13 Marines and a Navy corpsman could make much difference in such a setting. The cultural gulf was just unbridgeable out in the countryside.

One could argue, of course, that the fault lay in us at Papa Three and not in the program. We were hardly the combat-tested ambassadors in green described in books and official accounts of the Combined Action Program. Our experience was varied, our motives mixed. But to have had a chance at all, the program would have to have been expanded throughout Vietnam; and as I can attest, the modest increase that had opened the door for me had already let in the indifferent and the intolerant. I believe we never could have found sufficient numbers of Marines with the intelligence, sensitivity, and tolerance to make combined action work on a large scale. We were having difficulties and, at best, mixed results as it was. The fact remains, we simply do not recruit and train Marines to be diplomats.

Still, as a gesture of dissent against a search and destroy strategy that wasn't working, the Combined Action Program was more than worthwhile. When the firepower enthusiasts were deriding pacification, cynically asserting that as long as we had them by the balls their hearts and minds must follow, the Marine Corps took a larger, more enlightened view. We realized the war would never be won militarily alone, that it was first and foremost a cultural contest. We at least understood the problem, even if our solution was impracticable and overly idealistic.

All of us who went to Vietnam bore the brunt of friendly folly as well as enemy fire. I now see combined action as largely futile and even quixotic. But personally, I don't regret a day spent tilting at the VC infrastructure at Papa Three. I feel privileged to have had a close up view of a part of the war only glimpsed by those in line battalions merely passing through. Combined action, to my mind, stands as a kind of microcosm revealing all that was fundamentally wrong with that ill-conceived war, but I am proud to have served as a CAP Marine nevertheless. The program perhaps placed us in an impossible position, but that was nothing new for Marines, of whom more has always been expected. In the words of the old Parris Island running jingle, "got what I asked for, got what I came for" in volunteering for the Combined Action Program. USMC