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## Book Review: War in the Villages: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War

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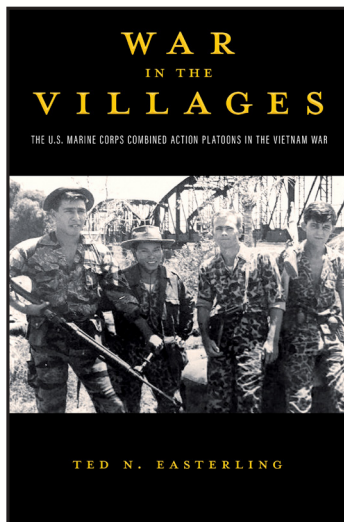
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Reviewed by Dr. William Thomas Allison, professor of history, Georgia Southern University

Vietnam War counterinsurgency efforts warrant scholarly attention, yet US Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) remain understudied and constrained by the lingering “attrition viz. pacification” historical construct. The Marine Combined Action Platoons’ counterinsurgency innovation to place small, specialized units among villagers in the northern South Vietnam I Corps Tactical Zone provided security and stability while denying the People’s Liberation Army Forces (also known as the Viet Cong) access to a fertile, rice-producing region. In *War in the Villages*, former marine and Vietnam War veteran Ted Easterling (PhD, University of Akron) enhances our understanding of Combined Action Platoons and their effectiveness.

Easterling evaluates the CAP program with a top-down and bottom-up approach. From the command level, he highlights the pacification tactics dispute between General William Westmoreland, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam commander, and Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific commander, and the lack of command support for the CAP program. According to Easterling, a stark divide existed between Westmoreland’s “strategy of attrition” and the Marines’ emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification (22–24). At the ground

level, Easterling’s selection of oral histories explores CAP organization and operations, the challenges of working with regional and popular forces, the prioritization of military resources to interdict the People’s Liberation Army Forces and People’s Army of Vietnam forces operating in the western area of I Corps Tactical Zone, and the corruption among the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and South Vietnamese government officials—all of which hampered long-term security and stabilization. Easterling concludes though the Combined Action Platoons were a “carefully chosen and appropriate counterinsurgency method,” the “potential of the CAPs as a counterinsurgency concept in the Vietnam War in general was squandered” (207).

Easterling’s examination begins with an overview of counterinsurgency concepts and terms. The first third of the book includes chapters on the early evolution of the enclave strategy and the first iterations of joint action platoons in the I Corps Tactical Zone area of operations juxtaposed against what Easterling argues was Westmoreland’s preferred strategy of attrition. Easterling hits his stride in chapters 5 and 6 on the “Phong Bac Experiment” led by Marine Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson and the establishment of an independent CAP command, respectively. The remaining

chapters discuss the Tet Offensive and the impact of Vietnamization on the CAP effort and evaluate the CAP program's effectiveness and significance.

Easterling offers a straightforward examination of the program's conception and why it did not gain the traction he believes it deserved. He details how Combined Action Platoons operated in more densely populated coastal areas where counterinsurgency methods had the most immediate effect and lasting potential. Although Easterling deems them largely successful, he admits neither the Marines nor Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, had the resources or personnel to carry out a similar program in the mountainous, less-populated interior. Although many Marines in Combined Action Platoons extended their tours of duty, Easterling suggests a lack of understanding of the program resulted in commanders seeing the platoons as places to reassign troublemakers. Moreover, poor Vietnamese language training among marines assigned to the platoons remained a serious challenge throughout the program's existence.

Easterling's work lacks intensive archival research and fails to contextualize the CAP experience in broader American counterinsurgency and pacification efforts in South Vietnam. With the exception of the Marine Corps Archives, Easterling neglected to consult a wealth of relevant archival resources in the National Archives, the US Army Heritage and Education Center, and Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Archive. Moreover, Easterling's overreliance on the autobiographies of Westmoreland and Krulak and his uncritical acceptance of their purported strategic disconnect weakens his work. Gregory Daddis presents a convincing argument in *Westmoreland's War* (Oxford University Press, 2014): "False arguments about a futile strategy of attrition have relied on imprecise language which fails to consider how Westmoreland realized the war's outcome depended on more than just military might"

(Daddis, 182). The reliance on memoirs, such as Philip Caputo's *BOOK Rumor of War* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), is disappointing; numerous oral histories and other archival sources could have provided more insightful and diverse documentation. His bibliography does not include Edward P. Metzner's *More Than a Soldier's War* (Texas A&M University Press, 1995), Richard A. Hunt's *Pacification* (Routledge, 2018), Martin G. Clemis's *The Control War* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), or the works of Andrew Wiest and Robert K. Brigham on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, any of which would have provided a broader context and helped evaluate Combined Action Platoons against Army Special Forces and Mobile Advisory Teams.

Easterling convincingly argues for the innovative nature of Marine Combined Action Platoons, but these units operated in a narrow field of debatable effectiveness, which alone would not have changed the war's outcome. Easterling admits the war was "unwinnable" (205), but he oversteps in suggesting the platoons had "the potential to achieve a better outcome for the U.S." (207).

As a brief introduction to the Marine CAP program in Vietnam, *War in the Villages* offers a sound starting point. Still, much remains for deep exploration, including Marine training of regional and popular forces; how Combined Action Platoons fit in the broader counterinsurgency effort; and Marine, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, views on the CAP effort. The ground remains fertile for more sophisticated scholarly inquiry, which Combined Action Platoons surely deserve.

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