

information published anywhere about the Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital.

It is some comfort to know that there is at least some word out there about the activity, even though it doesn't convey the sense of personal involvement, the warmth and the humanity of the many persons connected with it. Perhaps what follows will do some justice to their efforts.

BUILDING A NEW HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN IN WARTIME VIETNAM

By Andrew Hare

One of the most frequently recurring memories of my Vietnam War days is not about young Americans waging war; it's about the unselfish good those men got done when they were not engaged in fighting.

Forty or so years ago I was privileged to witness an evolving miracle. Scores of Marines and Navy men in Vietnam to fight a war were providing, voluntarily and in their off-duty hours, what would become eventually a 120-bed hospital for children of Vietnam villages. And it all was being done in the midst of the chaos and bustle and confusion of round-the-clock wartime activity.

Regrettably, it seems media coverage of Vietnam in those days had no space to include reports of glad news such as this hospital; acts of random violence took precedence, while the good news was put into a sort of lockbox and forgotten. That's a shame, for mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers at least deserved to know the good as well as the bad of Vietnam.

The Force Information Office in Vietnam issued several advisories about the hospital, and late in the war the World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals became involved and published what seems to have been a fundraising brochure about the hospital. Other than those two sources, I have not seen any

In mid-1967 I arrived in Vietnam and was assigned to a Marine Corps unit based at Red Beach, about eight miles north of Danang. Marines from Okinawa had established the Marines' presence in that area a couple of years earlier, and now it was the home base for the Corps' major logistics operations, the Force Logistics Command. Navy Seabees occupied a large base nearby, making Red Beach the center for support activities for the entire I Corps, an area stretching from Chu Lai in the south to the Demilitarized Zone in the north. Units of the First Marine Division – infantry artillery, armor, engineers and reinforcement units – were deployed throughout the area as well.

What's more, the main north-south highway, Highway One, in this part of South Vietnam ran between mean high tide at Red Beach and the military installations. There was, consequently, heavy continuous traffic, both military and civilian. Much of the civilian traffic was southward-bound and consisted of refugees voting with their feet by heading away from enemy forces in the northern provinces.

By the scores they came, over the Hai Van Pass and down to sea level and the Red Beach area. There they scraped together odds and ends to build shelters to become part of the villages that had been in place along the highway for years.

This area along the sea became, consequently, the scene of pulsing activity twenty four hours a day: helicopters in and out, military truck convoys in and out, frequent rockets in, small arms fire scattered around the perimeters.

And in one of those villages close to this mayhem, suddenly there came into being a small hospital, the Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital. But first, a caveat: this all began some forty six or so years ago. Some details are faded memories now. Nonetheless I have no doubt that it did happen.

Soon after they arrived in-country and were set up in their base camps, the Marines went to work implementing the I Corps policy of civic actions to enhance and protect the lives and livelihoods of noncombatants. Called Civic Action Program, (CAP), the agenda called for Marines to assist villages with protection for rice harvests and village markets; for example, potable water sources were developed, school houses provided or repaired.

Included in the CAP effort was a medical component, Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP). In this operation, Navy doctors and hospital corpsmen, with a Marine security force, routinely went to local villages to give medical and dental treatment to families in the village. After a few visits some medical teams became concerned that more than just medications were needed. Generally unsanitary conditions and the absence of means to clean up, wash up and stay clean would not allow for proper healing and recovery. According to one account, a Marine, son of a hotel executive, was so concerned by what he saw that he asked his father to send to him in Vietnam the little-used hotel soaps left by guests. A goodly amount of soap resulted and was much appreciated. Considering the scale of the problem, however, this was too small a help and was discontinued.

In late 1965, medical personnel from one Marine battalion, frustrated by unfavorable conditions prevailing in their area, set up a clinic at their

battalion aid station for MEDCAP patients and brought villagers, mostly children, who needed care away from their villages to the aid station clinic. From that first step, the number of patients grew and the need for more space, more staff and more medications increased accordingly.

It's significant that this acceptance of American assistance on the part of local villagers grew rapidly and widespread despite increasing intimidation and violence from the Viet Cong. Beatings and other abuses were common lessons, intended to frighten villagers away from the Americans.



Before long it became obvious that a larger facility, in a location separate from the Marines' aid station, must be found if the needed level of assistance were to continue. Military funds and equipment could not be used for such purposes. Necessary resources would have to come from private sources, although to do it from the combat areas in Vietnam would not be easy.

Some Navy medical staff involved in MEDCAP contacted friends "back in the world," asking for help in the form of samples of medications handed out by pharmaceutical companies: "Gather 'em up and send 'em to us." The response was quick and heartening. While it was a good idea and got a good trial, it just could not keep up with demand.

A long-term fundraising campaign was commenced by a chaplain at Force Logistics Command. At first it was local among Marines, Seabees and civilians at Red Beach, then spread throughout the Marine Corps' area of responsibility, Chu Lai to the DMZ. Doubtless chaplains in Vietnam were in touch with clergy and religious groups at home, as well.

That effort produced impressive results. By mid-1967, two years after it all began with that first MEDCAP clinic, Navy Seabees and Marine volunteers, working in off-duty hours, had put up a 70-bed building of tin and wood. The hospital was staffed by Vietnamese nurses and aides under the supervision of Force Logistics Command (FLC) doctors and corpsmen.

Very soon after my arrival at FLC, I heard about the Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital from a chaplain there. He was in a fundraising mode at the time, praising the benefits Vietnamese were receiving from donations. But he went further. He spoke about how our own troops benefited, how they derived peace and tranquility, psychic rewards, from being able to visit the hospital where they could hold, carry, talk with and play with the kids. The troops did just that, often and in impressive numbers.

In the fall of 1968, when I left Vietnam, local Vietnamese, with help and supervision from FLC Marines and Navy Seabees, and donations from many military and civilian contributors, were finishing work on a new 120-bed facility. It was being built of bricks hand-made by refugees in Hoa Khanh village. According to a release to the public from the Force Information Office, the Hoa Khanh Children's Hospital was "one of the largest civic action endeavors in Vietnam." The concern for the welfare of noncombatant Vietnamese and the persistence of so many young Americans who gave time, labor, love, money – some also gave blood – to make life better for so many others they never knew and who never knew them had paid enormous dividends.

Postlude: The Civic Action Program (CAP) was Marine Corps' policy only for the I Corps area. Other American forces in the southern provinces had similar programs and provided similar results. As in the Marine experience, those good results seem to have been given low priority in dispatches home.

One of my contemporaries, a long-time friend, assumed responsibility for the Corps' CAP

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programs just after Tet (the Vietnamese New Year) in early 1968. He was killed by a roadside explosive device while on his way to set up still one more project in a remote village.

Late in the war, the World Relief Commission (WRC) became a co-sponsor, with Force Logistics Command, of the hospital to ensure that care would continue to be available after American forces departed. A WRC official reported that the hospital was confiscated by the Hanoi government in 1975 and was run as a hospital for a brief time before being converted to other purposes. The building was demolished in January 2003.

Sad, but not unexpected. Ω