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"Our Answer to the NPA"

The Philippine Army's Special Operations Teams

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Dear Peter,

"No Vietnams here in Bataan," shouted Army Lieutenant Benny Doniego as he tore down the red hammer-and-sickle flag of the New People's Army. This was the climax of a two-hour, anti-communist pep rally led by local military commanders and the mayor. Holding up the red flag, Lt. Doniego asked if anyone in the audience wanted him to burn it. But instead of a chorus of affirmation, only two or three women in the crowd of over 200 townsfolk stood up and said yes, the rest just laughed nervously, many nodding their heads in assent but unwilling to stand up.

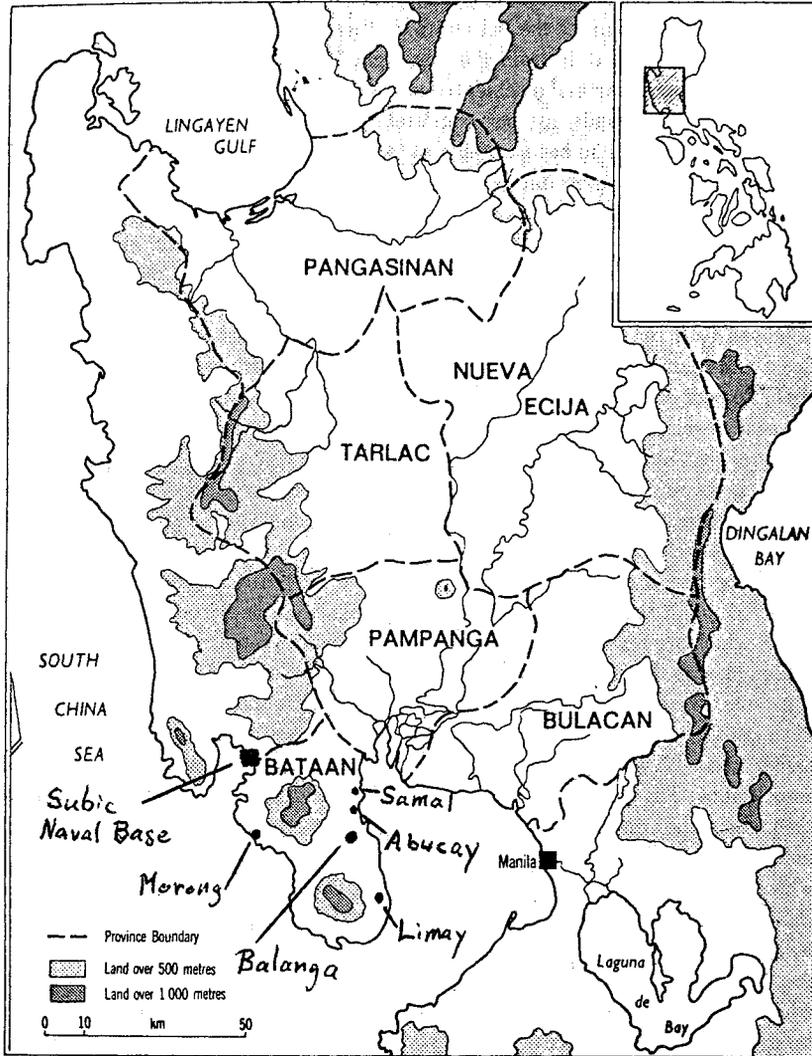
This was a pulong-pulong, or dialogue meeting, organized by the Army to win support among the townsfolk of barangay (village) East Caliguman, population 4,000. And this was the municipality of Samal, population 21,000, in Bataan province. Although many of those attending professed support for the government, Samal has a reputation as a red town. A little over two years ago, during the cease-fire between the New People's Army (NPA) and the government, rebels staged a "peace rally" here in Samal. It was a brilliantly conceived show of strength just 50 kilometers Northwest of Manila. Over 80 fully-armed rebels marched down the main streets of Samal to the cheers of several hundred residents as local and foreign reporters flashed the news throughout the Philippines. Today, Lt. Doniego believes that 20% to 30% of the people in East Caliguman belong to a communist party organization of one form or another.

Lt. Doniego and his platoon-sized Special Operations Team (SOT) are at the point of the Army's much-heralded program to win popular support and the war. Army officers, such as Brig. Gen. Arturo Enrile, Army Chief of Staff, credit the SOT program with bringing about most of the Army's success last year. Said Enrile, "The SOTs counter point by point, the strategy of the CPP [Communist Party of the Philippines]." During the 92nd anniversary ceremony for the Philippine Army on March 21, President Corazon Aquino announced that

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The Central Plain of Luzon



last year, "Special Operations Teams dismantled the political infrastructure of the CPP and won back the support of 845 communist-infested barangays."

By any measure, East Caliguman must be one of the 3,000 barangays throughout the Philippines that the military considers rebel "influenced." Lt. Doniego and his platoon will have a tough time "de-influencing" East Caliguman and later the rest of Samal. Most residents here and in neighboring areas view the Philippine Army as an army of occupation, calling the soldiers "hapon," the Tagalog word for Japanese, in reference to the brutal Japanese occupation forty years ago. "The majority of the people here believe that we are not their protectors," said Captain Edgardo Gurrea, who heads SOT training throughout the Philippines. Captain Gurrea added that locals view "the other side" as their protectors. "The insurgents here are basically the relatives of the people," said Lt. Col. Arsenio Tecson, Commander of the 68th Infantry Battalion. He continued, "They grow up together, they play basketball together, so you can't expect them to tell us who are the NPA."

A look at the SOT program in Samal and other towns of Bataan province is important for two reasons. First, if SOTs work here, they should work just about anywhere in the Philippines. A previous newsletter (ERG-17) described the Philippine military's new campaign plan, Lambat-Bitag (dagnet-snare), which was launched earlier this year. Lambat-Bitag is the military's grand strategy for winning the war; the SOTs are the primary tactic for getting the job done. Second, Bataan and the neighboring provinces of Pampanga and Bulacan are a priority area for the armed forces this year. Army and Marine battalions saturate the three provinces. Two Marine battalions have been pulled out of Manila and sent to Bulacan, while the Army has deployed three battalions in Bataan alone. This newsletter on the SOT program is based on interviews with a half dozen senior Army and Marine officers involved in the SOT program and a three-day visit to Bataan.

I.

Like many good ideas, the SOT program took a while to make its way up to higher headquarters--about four years. "It's a good concept," said a non-American foreign military official. "But it should have been done a long time ago." The SOT program was developed in 1983 by three junior officers slogging it out in the field down in Mindanao. They are Captain Alex Cogmon, Captain Edgardo Gurrea, and Major Nestor Radaza. None of the creators of the SOT program, now hailed throughout the Army as the latest word in counter-insurgency, is a graduate of the elite Philippine Military Academy, which prides itself on holding the monopoly on military thinking. Captain Gurrea, for example, joined the Army in the mid-1970s after graduating from De La Salle University in Iligan City, Mindanao where he had been in the ROTC program and something of a student activist. A modest, yet intense officer, Gurrea now travels from one remote Army outpost to another, setting up and running SOT training centers.

Gurrea, who has been up here in Bataan for over a month, described the program's genesis. In 1981, the 4th Infantry Division moved from Southwestern

Mindanao, where it had been dealing with muslim secessionists, to NPA territory in Northeastern Mindanao. Soon, it became apparent that the division's traditional search and destroy tactics employed against muslim rebels simply didn't work against the NPA. The division's assistant commander instructed the staff for intelligence, operations, and civil-military relations to find out how the division could improve its tactics. The task was assigned to a study group composed of the number-two man from each branch: Cogmon, Gurrea, and Radaza. "We started studying about communism, Mao, Marx, and Lenin," said Gurrea. After analyzing captured CPP documents and interviewing the division's battalion commanders, the study group concluded that their tactics were aimed only at the insurgency's armed element, the NPA, and overlooked the party's organizational structure and its legal fronts. Gurrea explained: "We in the military are trained how to squeeze the trigger and that's all. But we're not only fighting the NPA, it's only one component...The strength of the enemy is their organization, so this [conflict] is one organization against another organization."

The study group proposed the creation of what would be a political arm for the division. That political arm became the first SOT and training still follows the same basic principles. Currently, training for SOT duty has two primary thrusts. First, said Gurrea, "we are trying to motivate our people...to give them an idea of what they are fighting for." Thus training starts with instruction on the nature of communism and the ideals of Philippine democracy. The second aspect involves reorienting the outlook of the soldiers so that they will know the enemy and not automatically regard all peasants as NPA supporters. In the past, said Gurrea, if a unit was ambushed, "generally you considered all the people in the barangay the enemy." Now, soldiers are taught that villagers who have been forced to support or shelter the NPA ought to be won over, not abused. Said Gurrea: "We keep talking to our men, saying that we have to change our face from that of Max Alvarado [a cinema villain] to that a Fernando Poe [a tough good guy]." Philosophically, the training draws on the principles of Sun Tzu: knowledge of self (Philippine history and government), knowledge of the enemy (the nature of communism), and knowledge of one's task (implementing the SOT concept).

The program that the three officers originally proposed for the 4th Infantry Division has now been formalized as a seven step process. It follows explicitly Maoist lines in which the SOT employs NPA-style organizing techniques to counter-organize in the barangay. "Most of what we are doing now is from China," said Gurrea. "We use Maoist teachings, but maintain the family ties of the community."

In the field, a battalion of three companies will generally have one SOT-designated company from which one platoon is trained as the SOT platoon, a second serves as the strike platoon, and the third remains as a stay-behind platoon. Before entering a barangay the team draws on existing intelligence to identify local CPP leaders, organizers from the party's National Democratic Front (NDF), and supporters. Through dialogue sessions, meetings, and vigorous counter-propaganda, which emphasizes the Godless nature of Philippine communism and NPA atrocities, the SOT attempts to isolate the CPP leaders and then publicly identify them. Whenever possible, the team practices Mao's

"four together"--to sleep, work, study, and eat with residents of the barangay. Once the CPP structure in the barangay is neutralized through surrenders, or arrests, the SOT mobilizes the populace. Unarmed Bantay Bayan (village watch) groups are established, whose main purpose is to serve as an intelligence net to report on possible CPP re-infiltration. Locals are also armed and trained as members of the Civilian Armed Geographical Units (CAFUGU) in order to defend their communities against the NPA. The CAFUGU are considered essential for maintaining government support in a barangay since the Army does not have the luxury of leaving the stay-behind platoons for long. The final phase, economic development, lies outside the mandate of the SOTs.

Although a trial run of the SOT program in 1983 yielded initial success, the 4th Infantry Division applied the practice in piecemeal fashion. According to Col. Rene Dado, head of Army Operations, senior officers and battalion commanders of the 4th Infantry Division had a "wait and see" attitude toward the new program, preferring the traditional practice of going after armed NPA units. Not until early 1986, when Brig. Gen. Mariano Adalem assumed command of the 4th Division, did the SOT program enjoy strong support from the division's commander. Adalem pushed to have the SOT program implemented throughout Northeastern Mindanao and began talking it up at higher headquarters in Manila. For added effect in his briefings, Adalem had the study group prepare a detailed report and film on SOTs. Finally, in December of 1987, Adalem briefed President Aquino on the program and Army headquarters directed all units to adopt the SOT program. Adalem's promotion to Commanding General of the Philippine Army in April of 1988 cemented support for this radically different type of Army operations.

II.

Bataan province, population 350,000, is relatively prosperous with good rice lands and fishing along the coast, illegal logging inland, and employment available at Subic Naval Base in adjoining Zambales province. The residents of the towns along the coast, however, share in the prosperity somewhat unevenly. The area is fertile ground for the activists from Manila who have been organizing here for the past two decades. This patient, sustained work means that party and NDF organizers don't have to resort to excessive violence to expand their control and that the military can't get a fix on the location of NPA units. Lt. Col. Tecson, whose 68th Infantry Battalion is responsible for the northern half of Bataan province, said that there are few armed encounters with the NPA. Tecson added that the Philippine Constabulary estimates that over 40% of all barangays in Bataan are CPP "influenced" with 200 to 300 armed NPA regulars in his part of the province. Tecson himself believes that probably 20% of the barangays are influenced with perhaps 100 NPA regulars here. The numbers themselves don't mean much, only that the NPA has widespread support.

I found Col. Tecson remarkably candid, especially given his background as the former spokesman for General Fabian Ver, the notorious Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff under President Ferdinand Marcos. Col.

Tecson freely admitted that the Army was already losing some of the gains that the SOTs had made in Abucay, the municipality where they had first arrived. Of Abucay's nine barangays that had been "won over" by the SOTs last January, four were now being "heavily infiltrated" by CPP organizers. In other words, the CPP organizers who had left town when the SOTs arrived were now coming back home. Said Tecson: "After we pass by, they always come back. But at least the reception [given to the NPA by the residents] has changed."

One problem, said Tecson, is that local officials "tend to co-exist" with the NPA, remaining neutral in the fight between the NPA and the military instead of wholeheartedly assisting the armed forces. Tecson may have been referring to the mayor of Abucay, Enteng De La Fuente. Some military officials here view mayor De La Fuente as an NPA sympathizer because he has criticized the military for past abuses and has a relative who is a local rebel leader. Last June 12, soldiers from another Army battalion killed one resident and wounded three others in an outlying area of Abucay. The soldiers, whose battalion was later transferred, claimed that it was an encounter with the NPA; mayor De La Fuente and others claimed they were civilians.

But it's more complicated than whether mayor De La Fuente favors the NPA over the military. As a good politician, he probably plays both sides. He and his family have controlled the mayor's office for years. One sweltering weekday afternoon, I dropped by his modest house, which sits in a barangay some distance from the main highway. The single concrete road running from the highway twists through the barangay and stops just short of his house. The new, shiny ambulance for the municipality of Abucay, population 26,000, sits not at the town hall or the local health clinic, but in the mayor's front yard for his personal use. Not surprisingly, I found the mayor doing what he normally does on a hot afternoon, napping in back near the chicken shed.

A friend of the mayor told me that the ill-will between the mayor and the military stems not from ideology but from jueting, an immensely popular, illegal form of gambling in which numbered balls are picked from a container. In Abucay, a certain "Boy" Perez runs the main jueting ring. Perez gets his protection from the provincial Philippine Constabulary commander based in the nearby capital of Balanga. Mayor De La Fuente runs the rival jueting ring in town. Not surprisingly, he and the Constabulary's provincial commander don't get along. When I related this story, after changing the names, to a senior Army officer back in Manila he burst out laughing, "That's why the mayor's in with the NPA, he needs his own armed group against the PC [Philippine Constabulary]." I doubt if the mayor is in with the NPA, as described later, he played hard ball to force one rebel to surrender. Probably, as good Philippine politicians do on most issues, he's keeping his options open.

Leaving the mayor's house, I was accosted by three, well-dressed surreal figures who picked their way through the heat and the scampering chickens and children: two women carrying umbrellas and a young man. "Are you a missionary?" they asked hopefully. No, I said, as they tried to press a Tagalog copy of the "Watchtower" into my hands. I was able to beg off buying literature from the Jehovah's Witnesses by saying that I couldn't read it. We

parted ways, but as I made my rounds through the small towns and villages by bus, jeepney, pedicab, and on foot, again and again people mistook me for a missionary. I later realized that the area is swarming with four types of missionaries: the dour Mormons (both Filipinos and Americans), the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Army's SOTs, and the NDF's organizers. No wonder some people here are confused about which path to take.

The point man for the Army's SOTs in the area is a young, cocky, and energetic 2nd Lieutenant, Ding Carreon. A 1987 graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, Lt. Carreon is also a very young company commander. He oversees three SOT platoons (including the one led by Lt. Doniego) that have finished in Abucay and are moving on to Samal. Carreon has become something of a media star. Last January, AFP Chief of Staff General Renato De Villa and the top brass made an inspection tour of SOTs in Bataan. The Marine Commandant, Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Biazon, who had previously instructed Carreon and his classmates at the military academy on SOT-type operations, spotted his former cadet. Biazon pulled Carreon over and had the nervous Lieutenant brief the top brass. Army headquarters now points reporters looking for SOTs toward Bataan, just a short ride from Manila. I found to my dismay that the "hearts and minds" aspect of Carreon's job--handing out candies to the children--has been well-reported by the wire services and several papers. Less reported, however, is an equally important, and perhaps more interesting, aspect of his job: how he uses strong arm tactics to bring in rebel surrenderees.

Carreon said that leading the SOTs in Abucay was much harder than his previous experience in another province. When his team first arrived, said Carreon, "the people wouldn't even show us where the barangay captain's [the village leader] house was." The villagers either kept silent or, even more frustrating for the soldiers, sent them off in different directions. As mayor De La Fuente later said, "my people here are very afraid of the uniformed man...when they [the SOTs] first landed here the people didn't want to talk to the military."

Worse yet, the common tricks that Carreon had used in other pulong-pulong to get locals to volunteer the names of rebels just didn't work here. Even his "magic box" failed. Usually, during the pulong-pulong locals are asked to write, in secret, the names of rebels on slips of paper and place them in a box that is already stuffed with slips containing the names of subversives. Thus, even if locals don't write any names, it will look as if they did when the soldiers pull out and read the slips of paper. But, Carreon said, "in this place, the people wouldn't dare to even pick up a piece of paper. So, I had to make a raid."

Carreon and his men raided an NPA safehouse, capturing four rebels, three pistols, and, most importantly, CPP documents naming local organizers. He then had word sent out to those named in the documents to come in and have a "dialogue" in an Army tent pitched by the mayor's office. Carreon said he let it be known that if they didn't come in, they would be hunted down and shot. Thus, starting with those named, he netted 83 "rebel returnees:" five were party members, one was an NPA regular, 12 were NDF organizers, and 65 were "subversive mass activists." Carreon admitted that these rebel returnees

were lower level personnel: "When the SOT comes in the top CPP/NPA [leaders] flee. But they leave their eyes and ears behind and that's who I go after."

During the Army-sponsored "peace rally" and surrender ceremony last January, Carreon said that the four rebels he had captured in the raid were treated as surrenderees and were given the money due all rebel returnees by Gen. Adalem himself. But, Carreon pointed out that for many of the those who took the oath of allegiance to the government, "the services that are promised to them come late or don't come at all." Carreon doesn't consider it part of his job to follow up on his surrenderees. The agency responsible, whose office I visited next, is the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

III.

Mrs. Mely Pangilinan, a cheerful woman in her late thirties, heads the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), which until recently was the lead agency dealing with rebel returnees. Mrs. Pangilinan and her small staff, practically all women, take an almost maternal interest in the material welfare and protection of their rebel returnees. The DSWD helps rebel returnees "re-deploy" into the community by providing money and food if necessary, helping them find employment, and protecting them from possible harassment by the military or police.

All returnees are entitled to a 5,000 peso (there are about 21 pesos to the dollar) loan. Many returnees use the money to set up their own businesses or go into fishing or pig fattening. In case of illness, returnees are entitled to 300 to 500 pesos for medicines, and 10 kilos of rice monthly should their family need it. Pangilinan stressed that the returnees, whose basic needs were provided for by the revolutionary movement, depend on the government to continue that support until they can find employment. Returnees interested in greater benefits can turn in firearms: the rewards in cash and kind range from 200 pesos for a homemade shotgun to 15,000 pesos for an M-16.

DSWD is quite effective in helping rebels land jobs, some of them along interesting lines. One former rebel was now the bodyguard for the mayor of a nearby town while another worked in the national armory here in Bataan making munitions.

Upon receiving the returnees from the military authorities, Pangilinan and her staff interview them to determine their level of activity in the rebel movement. Pangilinan and other DSWD workers said that the returnees, feeling more comfortable in talking to them, often admit to greater activity in the movement. This is noted in confidence and is not passed on to the military. The result is that about 70% of those who were considered "subversive mass activists" by military interrogators, are reclassified as regular members-- either political organizers or armed members. (There is no apparent incentive for a returnee to claim higher status since both subversives and regulars receive the same level of remuneration for returning to the fold of the law.)

For all of Bataan province since February 1987, 253 rebels returned to the fold of the law, most of them were political organizers or tax collectors and of these 27 were armed regulars. Yet, only two firearms were recovered, a pair of M-16s brought in by the same individual for a bounty of 30,000 pesos. As Pangilinan and the rebel returnees subsequently explained, the revolutionary movement follows the policy that individuals are free to join or leave as they wish, but cannot take with them property that collectively belongs to the movement, ie firearms and other materiel.

As for the rebels who returned under the SOT program, Pangilinan said that she had to "negotiate" with Lt. Carreon to have him turn over the records of 11 rebels that had surrendered to him. These 11 returnees were rehabilitated and then re-deployed to their communities. But Pangilinan said she didn't know the full number of rebels who had surrendered to Carreon and was surprised to learn that it was 83 (this was the number given separately by both Carreon and Col. Tecson). Pangilinan was upset that not a few of the returnees had fallen through the cracks. She claimed that because the Department of Local Government had recently taken over primary responsibility for returnees there were increasing problems with returnees not receiving treatment and services. She also thought that Carreon was a bit too young and immature to be running all the SOTs in this half of Bataan province.

We closed the interview with Mrs. Pangilinan promising to take me to see some of the 11 rebel returnees who had been brought in under the SOT program as well as the one who was now a bodyguard for the mayor of a nearby town. Two items stood out from the interviews. First, the rebel returnees generally received their full material and employment assistance. As a result, they seemed to view Mrs. Pangilinan as a benefactor who could be trusted and who would intervene to protect them. Second, many returnees could simply leave the rebel movement to lead a relatively normal life unmolested by either the NPA or the military. Yet, in some instances the military was closing off the option of neutrality. Following the doctrine that He that is not with me is against me, the military is forcing a few returnees to take, or appear to take, an anti-NPA stance. Rebel returnees, who were interviewed in the presence of Mrs. Pangilinan or an assistant, requested that their real names not be used.

Carlos and his wife live not far from Abucay's town hall. He alternates between construction work for about 50 pesos a day and fishing. She is preparing to have their first child. A bitter man in his late 20s, Carlos joined the revolutionary movement in 1979 after a close relative had been framed and unjustly jailed by the former mayor. He became more active after 1983, becoming a full party member in 1985. As head of his barrio's central committee, he primarily engaged in organizing and instructing other NPA members. He and his wife, who was once one of his students, both still believed in their ideals. She praised the equality that would come under communism and noted that with President Aquino, "we see that the poor are still suffering." They both thought the tactics used by the SOTs were transparently gimmicky. Carlos said that the overwhelming majority of the people in his barangay still supported the NPA, a claim that was seconded by other, non-partisan residents.

So why did he surrender last December? Carlos said it was "because of the pressure of the military on my family." He claimed that the military and the mayor said that they would "liquidate" his older brother, a policeman, unless he surrendered. This was news to Mrs. Pangilinan, who seemed upset and vowed to bring it up with mayor De La Fuente. Carlos said he had not received the 5,000 pesos due him from the government, only 10 kilos of rice and 10 cans of sardines plus some medicines. The military didn't harass him now, although his former comrades from the NPA had twice called him in to discuss his surrender. They asked him to reconsider, pointing out that he had been a valuable member of the movement in whom they had invested time and training. Carlos said there was no need to fear retribution since the movement understood that he had surrendered because of "my limitations"--his decision to protect his brother.

We then drove to the larger municipality of Limay, located about 20 kilometers down the coast to the south, to see the rebel returnee who now worked as a bodyguard for the mayor. Raul, who looked like a tough character but flashed an easy smile, formerly led an NPA unit and had carried a price on his head before he surrendered. He turned himself in after a narrow escape in a shootout with the military in which he felt that he may have been abandoned by his comrades. Raul also wanted to settle down to spend more time with his wife and son. He had no reason to fear possible NPA retribution, he said, because he had left his firearm with the movement when he surrendered. Much to the chagrin of Mrs. Pangilinan's assistant, Raul, like other returnees, viewed his 5,000 peso loan from the government as more of a grant and wasn't in a hurry to pay it back. He and another returnee spoke of the difficulties facing rebel returnees: they claimed that three returnees had been shot in the last year by local military men seeking revenge. I was still puzzled why the mayor would trust Raul as his bodyguard, but then Raul explained that the mayor was a close relative of his. It all began to fall in place. Earlier, a reliable non-military source had told me that during last year's local elections, in exchange for NPA support, the mayor had given the NPA seven M-16s.

In Limay we next met Jun, 19, who had been in the revolutionary movement for over five years. A sharp fellow sporting a punk hair cut, he had risen to become leader of the underground Kabataan Makabayan, (Nationalist Youth) for the entire municipality of Limay before surrendering over a year ago. His reasons were personal, not political. "I surrendered because I wanted a new life, not because of the government's promises." He didn't like President Cory, but just wanted to "become neutral" and look after his family, a wife and an infant son. With his 5,000 peso loan he had bought a used fishing net and now put out to sea with his father every morning. Jun was happy because he had more time together with his small family, but he was also worried.

In June of last year, local Constabulary men had tried to force him to accompany them to a checkpoint and identify NPA suspects. Jun claimed that a PC man put a pistol to his head saying, "If you don't wait with us at the checkpoint, you'd better run." (Kung hindi maghihintay sa checkpoint, tumakbo ka na.) Knowing that if he ran he'd be shot as a fleeing suspect, Jun refused to run or join them at the checkpoint, saying that he was a surrenderee and

knew his rights. Since then, the PC (not the Army) had tried similar stunts to make it look as though he was helping them to identify NPA members. Jun was worried because he hadn't been able to contact the NPA to let them know the real story.

Back in Abucay, I was still naively looking for some "good" stories about rebel returnees: people who surrendered willingly because they liked President Cory. I met a few more who didn't fit the category of "good" surrenderees, so let me end with Arlo's story.

Arlo, a simple man of 34 years, has had a tough life. Orphaned at an early age, he was only able to complete the second grade before he had to work in the rice fields. He followed his elder brother in joining the NPA in 1979 because the movement promised subsistence and a better future. He led a team of seven NPA fighters and had several encounters under his belt. But in 1981, after the rest of his team was wiped out by a squad of Marines and he barely escaped, he decided to surrender. Later in 1985, however, when it was difficult to support his wife and three children by working in the paddy fields for 35 pesos a day, he rejoined the NPA since they promised to provide for his family. In 1987, he surrendered again because his children were sick and without food. With the 5,000 peso loan from the DSWD he went into hog fattening, which was going well until the typhoon of October 1988 struck, destroying his house and his prospects as a hog farmer. The DSWD provided rice to tide his family over and he now fishes, making 300 to 500 pesos a week. He had no problems with either the military or the NPA. As he put it, "Things are OK now." (Medyo maayos na nayon.)

After our talk, Arlo invited me to accompany him to his house to meet some friends and other rebel returnees. It was now dusk and for the first time I was to meet returnees unaccompanied by someone from DSWD. We traveled by jeepney to the neighboring town of Samal, where I would attend the pulong-pulong the following day. I followed Arlo through a maze of small wooden houses until we stopped at one where he, perhaps out of habit, introduced me to his friends as "comrade Erik." I talked with a group of Arlo's relatives and friends, some had been former NPA members but all were poor rice farmers and didn't think much of the government. It turned out that this house had been a way station for foreign journalists who were heading up to the mountains to interview top NPA leaders. Throughout the chit chat, a vivacious former "amazon" kept mentioning something about "petition" and then bursting into laughter. I finally figured out what she, and others, meant: Petition to immigrate to the U.S.--the dream of just about everyone here regardless of ideology.

IV.

2nd Lieutenant Benny Doniego would be leading the pulong-pulong in barangay East Caliguman, Samal. A 13-year veteran of the AFP who worked his way up through the ranks to become an officer, Lt. Doniego isn't as sharp or dynamic as Lt. Carreon, but he is probably more representative of the majority of the platoon leaders who are carrying out the SOT program. Lt. Doniego and

his men were billeted in the local elementary school, and if their previous work in Abucay was tough, they really felt beleaguered here. The NPA had operated a small communications center in Samal consisting of captured AFP radios--PR 77s and the long-range 187s. The rebels would interrupt Army radio traffic and taunt the soldiers asking, "Where are you? Give us your area and we'll fight." The rebels packed up the communications center two days before the SOT arrived in Samal. As we spoke, some school children loitered nearby. Doniego sent them away, saying that they might be spies for the NPA. He added, "we have observed people roaming around us, asking about us, and observing us."

Doniego said that although parents had told their children not to go near the soldiers, slowly his men were winning over the children and their parents. To the parents, "I told them, 'We are not hapon [Japanese] we are your soldiers. We are here to help you because you are the ones paying us.'" Doniego was proud that now that his team had been in East Caliguman for a while and had gotten to know the people, they were no longer called hapon. He claimed that the watchword for his men was no women and no drinking. (This seemed to be confirmed by several residents.)

Doniego noted, however, that there were some things that set him apart from the locals that not even good behavior could change. Like many soldiers, Doniego hails from Marcos' Northern Ilocos region, which has a distinctly different dialect. He joked with locals that "I'm an Ilocano, so don't expect me to speak fluent Tagalog." Soldiers from other SOTs, the overwhelming majority of whom were Ilocanos, said that as native Ilocano speakers they found it difficult to lead a pulong-pulong.

After speaking with Doniego, I proceeded to the house of the barangay captain, Jose Lazarte. Lazarte was on good terms with the military and a soldier was detailed to guard his house. Yet he pointed out that many people remembered that several years ago the Marines had "massacred" four residents, all of them civilians. When I asked one of his daughters to describe how people felt about the soldiers, the first word she used was "natatakot"--frightening. Lazarte noted that most of the 4,000 residents of East Caliguman were relatively well off: about 50 families had a member working at Subic Naval Base on the other side of the Bataan peninsula and many others were skilled carpenters. People here also knew about the refugee center for Vietnamese boat people in the city of Morong also located on the other side of the peninsula. Although the plight of the boat people makes good grist for the AFP's propaganda mill, some locals believed the NDF's line that that most Vietnamese prefer socialist egalitarianism and that only the wealthy few from the old regime chose to leave.

The pulong-pulong opened with all the local civilian and Army notables seated facing the audience: the mayor of Samal, barangay captain Lazarte, Col. Tecson, and a few others. Mayor Enutiano Forbes noted that in previous years there had been "a spate of killings" by military men, but that these soldiers were different. Then Lt. Doniego and a couple of young, sincere-looking enlisted men from his platoon took over from the older officials and explained why they had come to Samal and East Caliguman. By comparing the tri-colored Philippine flag and a red hammer-and-sickle flag that were pinned

up, a young private explained the differences between native Philippine democracy and foreign communism. Democracy, said the private, was "Makadios" (God-loving) while Leninism was anti-Christian. Proof was that on October 13th 1917, supposedly the date of Lenin's triumph, "the anti-Christ was born." On that date the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in Fatima, Portugal. After almost two hours of talks on Philippine democracy the session built up to the climax in which Lt. Doniego tore down the red flag and asked in vain if anyone wanted him to burn it. The nervous laughter and lack of volunteers seemed to persuade Doniego and his men not to follow their original plan of trying to elicit public denunciations of communism. (Similarly, there would be no attempt to use the "magic box" to get the names of subversives.) The meeting soon closed with the soldiers leading the audience in three cheers for democracy and a sentimental Filipino song.

During the meeting, I'd noticed a young woman sitting near me in the back who had at the end intensely clenched her fists and closed her eyes to maintain control. Afterwards I asked her for her thoughts. She replied: "I wanted to burn the flag." She and her companions, teachers at the school, said they wanted to stand up and have the red flag burnt but were afraid to do so because there might be NPA sympathizers in the audience. To use the language of missionaries here, it was clear that the purpose of this pulong-pulong was not "conversion" from communism but "re-affirmation" of anti-communism among the believers. In short, the meeting was a morale-boosting session for the anti-communists in Samal who had felt just as outnumbered as Doniego's men.

As people went back home, I hurried to catch up with Rudy Pascual to get his views on the meeting. If anyone was likely to be openly critical of the SOTs, it was he. The leader of the Alliance ng Magbubukid sa Bataan (a militant peasants' organization), this small, wizened man was, according to military intelligence, one of Samal's leading subversives. (He was also highly-respected by many locals.) But Rudy was running in the upcoming barangay elections and he wasn't about to jeopardize potential votes by saying anything negative about anyone.

I'd had a long talk with Rudy the night before in his tiny house on the edge of town. Rudy had spoken at length about how the government's land reform program had done nothing for the poor peasants and tenants, who he claimed made up almost 70% of the farmers here. He criticized the government's record on human rights, but said that compared to previous military units based in Samal "the 68th IB [the infantry battalion to which the SOTs belong] is better than the Marines."

One of the last people I spoke with in Samal was Reverend Rustico Estioco, a methodist minister. I took him as a representative of local leaders who, out of their concern for social justice, had supported the left in the past, but now were "confused" about who to believe because of the good intentions of the "Cory government." During the Marcos years, Reverend Estioco had given food and support to leftist activists, but then their increasing militancy and use of foul language had alienated him. A thoughtful man, he placed a moderate amount of credence in the anti-communist pamphlets handed out by Doniego's SOT. More importantly, Estioco believed that "the

soldiers now are more disciplined, not like in the past. They are polite and humble."

Although the polite and humble behavior of the Army's SOTs has won some praise, the teams still have a long way to go here in Bataan. Two small events, to me, seemed telling. Lt. Doniego had boasted that the week before the pulong-pulong almost 400 people had watched the film "The Killing Fields," which is shown by SOT units throughout the Philippines and would probably have the greatest impact in Bataan. (Those who attended said that the actual number was more like 50 and most were children.) I asked Doniego how he had rounded up the audience. He said he had told people that he would be screening a film on communism, perhaps one taken at a nearby NPA training camp. (Those who attended said they went to see "The Killing Fields" expecting to see a film starring a local NPA leader.)

The second incident occurred one hot afternoon as I walked along a feeder road that led from the school housing Doniego's SOT out to the main highway. A tiny girl, with her even smaller brother in tow, came by and asked me in Tagalog if I had come from the hapon--the Japanese. For many, the SOTs still belong to an army of occupation.

V.

Lt. Doniego's and two other SOTs are now spreading out to the other 13 barangays of Samal. Later, they will move on to other municipalities, "counter-organizing" at the rate of about one barangay per month, in order to "clear" the northern half of Bataan province. It is an impossible goal set by Army higher-ups. But this marks the first time that the military is systematically following a program that has a chance of producing lasting results. Painstakingly, the SOTs will counter-organize barangays in hopes of encircling and trapping large NPA units as the central part of the AFP's strategy of "gradual constriction." Even if this elaborate plan does not snare company-sized guerrilla units, the SOT approach does hold out the promise of winning over the NPA's mass base. For 1989, both sides, the NPA and the AFP, say that they have rectified past mistakes are now emphasizing organizing techniques rather than firepower.

How well the SOT program will work in the months ahead depends on two key requirements. The first is the extent and duration of the AFP's commitment to the program. And second, whether there is sufficient coordination between government agencies to insure follow-up after the SOTs move on.

Within the Army, enthusiasm is high for the SOT program. Army Commander Maj. Gen. Adalem and his key officers at Army headquarters (at least the four I've interviewed) are very keen on the program. Bureaucratically, the SOT program is well-situated at Army headquarters. It hasn't been fobbed off on the powerless civil relations division, which is the fate of many "hearts and minds" type programs. Instead, it's run by the Army operations center. According to Brig. Gen. Enrile, Army Chief of Staff, each of the Army's 71

infantry battalions has, on the average, one SOT platoon and funds are set aside for these platoons. (2nd Lt. Carreon confirmed that he gets extra funds in addition to the normal monthly operating expenses for his company: 4,000 pesos for operations, 1,000 pesos for intelligence, and about 3,000 pesos worth of supplies.)

Out in the field, the SOT program also benefits from well-positioned supporters. Under the AFP's Lambat-Bitag campaign plan, approximately 16 priority NPA-influenced areas, including the Bataan-Bulacan-Pampanga area, have been targeted for intensified operations. According to a senior Army officer, about two-thirds of these priority areas are under the jurisdiction of Army officers. These brigade commanders know well that their commanding general, Adalem, is big on SOTs. Shuttling between these and other areas is Captain Gurrea who not only leads SOT training sessions but also convinces field commanders of the importance of SOT-type operations. (Gurrea said that when he runs into a field commander who believes in the old, firepower technique, he points to the steady growth of the NPA as proof that new tactics are needed.) For battalion commanders, the importance of the SOT program is driven home in a new "pre-command" course for all battalion commanders that includes an "SOT module" in which the majors and colonels have to go out and live in a village.

This pre-command course has much wider significance beyond just the SOT program, and it is worthwhile to spend some time on it. A non-American foreign military official described the officers who command the Army's 8 divisions and 23 brigades as well-trained and competent. However, the officer, who has visited units throughout the Philippines, claimed that "at the battalion level and below, it all falls apart." He asserted that many battalion commanders are poorly trained, and as fighters, "their hearts are not really in it."

That is beginning to change. Under Maj. Gen. Adalem, the Army has instituted a pre-command course in which battalion commanders spend one month learning how to do their job. Before he returns to the field, each commander must come up with an "action plan" for his battalion. Over half of the Army's battalion commanders have already gone through the course and Army headquarters is beginning to work on a pre-command course for company commanders. "We have seen a lot of improvements in the performance of their battalions as a result of this," said Brig. Gen. Enrile. Foreign military officials also highly praised the program. (For a description of how the course came about see part VI.)

However, there are qualifications to the Army's support for the SOT program. To muster units for large operations, the Army sometimes pulls SOTs out of barangays before they have completed their tedious counter-organizing. Thus, the gradual work of the SOTs can take second place to traditional large-scale sweeps. In another case, Marine Commandant, Brig. Gen. Biazon, had to pull his 15 SOT teams out of Metropolitan Manila and send them up to Bulacan province before they had fully completed their work. Biazon, one of the more influential generals in the AFP, reluctantly conceded, "Yes, I am disappointed" that the Marine teams had to be rushed to Bulacan.

More importantly, the prime mover behind the SOTs, Maj. Gen. Adalem, is scheduled to retire on July 26 of this year. To a large degree, the amount of impetus behind the program will depend on who becomes his successor. Some analysts believe that Maj. Gen. Manuel Cacanando will most likely become the commanding general of the Army for an interim period of eight months. It is unclear to what extent Cacanando will continue to push the SOT program.

Outside the Army, the SOT program runs into problems of support from other AFP units. The Marines are gung ho about the program--Marine Commandant Biazon started doing essentially the same thing down in Southeastern Mindanao at about the same time Cogmon, Gurrea, and Radaza formulated the SOT concept. But the Philippine Constabulary, which fields the equivalent of about 200 companies stationed in towns to carry out police-type work, is less than thrilled about the program. Local Constabulary officials are offended at the notion that the Army can come in and quickly win the public support that has eluded them for so long. In Abucay, PC officers told the young men from the Army that they couldn't expect to succeed where they, the PC, had failed for years.

Moreover, the behavior of many PC officers tends to undermine whatever public support the SOTs may have generated. While Army units are usually stationed some distance from municipal centers and the temptations of city life, the PC is right in the thick of it. The jueting ring in Abucay protected by the provincial PC commander is but one example. I encountered another example on my first night trying to find lodgings in Balanga, the provincial capital. I had noticed two jeep-loads of PC men lounging outside Balanga's largest hotel/nightclub. Upstairs, the provincial PC commander and a dozen of his men were enjoying the good life. His security men were parked there practically every single night that I was in Balanga. Captain Gurrea, working away at the 68th Infantry Battalion's headquarters about 18 kilometers distant, told me he hadn't had time to go into Balanga for some night-life. Ironically, as Army officers become more involved in local affairs through the SOT program, they too will be exposed to civilization's small temptations. After Lt. Carreon told me about his SOTs in Samal and Abucay, he asked me whether I'd take him to the nightclub in Balanga as other reporters had.

While the frictions within the military over the SOT program remain muted, the differences between the military and civilian government agencies are apparent for all to see. The lack of effective coordination between government agencies erodes the gains made by the SOTs. In Abucay, for example, 83 rebel returnees surrendered to Lt. Carreon's SOTs but 72 of them somehow fell into the bureaucratic gulf separating the Army, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Department of Local Government. On the national level, Asian and Western foreign military officials bemoan the absence of a central body that effectively coordinates the government's three main efforts: the deployment of SOTs, the establishment of the CAFGU (Civilian Armed Geographical Units) to insure security after the teams move on, and follow-up with government development projects. As one foreign military official said, "the CAFGU are a central part of the [SOT] program. If they don't have them, then the program will start to collapse."

In some respects, the CAFGU issue encompasses the entire spectrum of conflict in the Philippines: from the terror in the provinces when para-military units get out of control, to budgetary struggles between the AFP and the Philippine Congress, to the even sharper race for the presidency. But the heart of the issue is money and manpower.

For the AFP, the CAFGU are viewed as an essential "territorial force" to make up for a dangerous shortage of manpower. According to a Western diplomat, during the Marcos years the Army concluded in a secret study that it would need approximately 150 battalions to defeat the NPA. Brig. Gen. Enrile disputed that figure. He claimed that the real number was only 120. But, he added, 120 battalions was "a realistic estimate." The Army, now fielding 71 infantry battalions, plans to add 18 more battalions as it raises two divisions over the next two years. But given budget constraints, said Enrile, "We would be very happy if we could gain one division [of nine battalions] in two years." CAFGU members cost only one sixth that of regular troops--540 pesos monthly pay compared to 3,800 pesos--and will fill the Army's perennial need for more manpower. The Army wants to field 80,000 CAFGU personnel. However, the Philippine Congress, perhaps fearing that the CAFGU might be used by Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos to build a mass base for the 1992 presidential elections, has cut the budget for the CAFGU from 580 million pesos to about 380 million pesos. The Philippine general who heads the CAFGU program told me that he can probably stretch this amount to field 65,000 men. He and others are frustrated with Senator Ernesto Maceda, the powerful head of the Senate's Committee on National Defense, who like Ramos has his eye on the presidency. One joke making the rounds among Army officers is that "Senator Maceda doesn't want the AFP to win because then Ramos will be elected President."

The only person who can bring these two rivals to heel is, of course, President Cory. But, as with most issues, the President has stayed above the fray. Said a European diplomat, "I don't hear of Presidential support to get money for the CAFGU." This diplomat views this hands off approach as a failure of presidential leadership. Others would call it good politics.

Officers such as Biazon and Gurrea are enthusiastic about the SOTs but guardedly optimistic about winning the war over the long haul because they are worried about the CAFGU. The AFP has run through a succession of para-military organizations designated as territorial forces to protect communities and deny the NPA easy access. All of these groups, most recently the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), turned out to be ill-disciplined, preying off villagers to supplement their meager salaries and generally abusing civilians. But Army officers say that the CAFGU personnel, unlike their predecessors, will be closely supervised, or "cadred," by regular troops with one officer and 11 enlisted men leading each CAFGU company. Also, unlike their predecessors, the CAFGU members are technically Army reservists. This qualifies them for direct U.S. military aid. To date, the CAFGU have received modest amounts of U.S. surplus M1 rifles and carbines. Whether these guns end up in the hands of the NPA is another matter. A few AFP officers are worried that, like the CHDF before them, the CAFGU will become "armories" for the NPA. But it is the behavior of these para-military units that most concerns officers such as Biazon and Gurrea. "We have to make the CAFGU

program work," said Biazon. "If we fail with them, where is our backstop?" Pointing to the CAFGU, Gurrea said, "this is our last deal. If we fail..."

VI.

In mid-August of 1987, General Richard Stilwell, the retired Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy who the New York Times once called the intelligence czar of the Pentagon, quietly visited a remote Philippine Army camp. Stilwell was conducting an unofficial investigation for the Pentagon. Several hundred miles from Manila, a Philippine Army officer met Stilwell and presented the general with his own, personal report on the condition of the Philippine military. The Philippine officer, thwarted in his pushing for changes from below, later explained that "I decided to go to someone on the outside or at JUSMAG [Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group]...I thought that it [the recommendations] would have more effect coming from outside." The report formed the basis for many of Stilwell's questions as he visited troops in the field; inspected their M-16s (after seeing the poor condition of their rifles he decided against asking the men to shoot at targets as the Philippine officer had suggested); inquired about medicines; and had a brief, coldly polite meeting with AFP Chief of Staff, General Fidel Ramos. Returning to Washington, Stilwell testified before Congress that the Philippine Army could not fight. "The armed forces of the Philippines are not now capable of discharging their appropriate--and limited--role in an overall counter-insurgency program." Thus began a war of words between Generals Ramos and Stilwell. The author of the report, who Stilwell did not name before Congress but praised as "a very, very fine Philippine Army [officer]," got in hot water.

The report also had positive consequences. It highlighted deficiencies in the training of Philippine officers for combat. One of Stilwell's primary recommendations was to improve training. In early 1988, the Pentagon invited the newly-appointed commander of the Philippine Army, Major General Mariano Adalem, to visit the U.S. to learn about, among other things, U.S. military courses for battalion commanders. Shortly thereafter, Adalem instituted a "pre-command" course for all battalion commanders--the backbone of the Army. In itself, the report did not add anything new to what U.S. military officials had already been saying in private. Rather, it permitted one Philippine officer to make an end run around the layers of the Philippine military bureaucracy and provide influential persons with detailed, first-hand information. What follows are excerpts from the report.

"...Not only is training behind schedule, it is also woefully inadequate when judged by the standards of our ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] neighbors like Malaysia and Singapore. In other countries, the best of the crop are sent to school where they are taught by the best. Here it is the other way around. Officers that cannot be accommodated anywhere else are sent to school to teach. We are in the business of perpetuating mediocrity and incompetence by the way we run our training institutions. If you want to help this country, pour all your aid into our training institutions and use

your influence to see to it that only the best are sent to study and be taught by the best."

[Note, the AFP, as a whole, still pays only lip service to training. The head of the AFP training command, an Air Force general who does not command respect, is described by one officer as "only good at parachute jumping." His deputy, a colonel, was relieved of his previous command of an Army brigade because of financial irregularities.]

"The police forces in my country have a wonderful way of solving all the killings that have taken place. All they have to do is attribute the killings to the [NPA's] "Sparrow" units and consider the case closed and solved. The Philippine Constabulary [PC] is supposed to be a police unit. Find out how many of its personnel know how to read fingerprints or go about investigating a crime scene. Aside from lack of professional competence...we are confronted with the numerous abuses of the PC or the INP [Integrated National Police.]

"Examples: A man on his way to visit his sick child in a charity ward was arrested by the police as a possible suspect in a taxicab hold-up. When he was brought to the police station, the victim emphatically told the police officers that they had the wrong man. Do you think that the police released the poor fellow just like that? Oh no. Someone worked on him until he finally forked over his last 50 pesos--money which would have been used to buy medicines for his child. That man will be another NPA recruit, especially if his child dies.

"The brother of an Army officer reported his motorcycle stolen. PC and INP personnel began to trek to this man's house asking for gasoline money to follow up some leads or for money to pay an informer. This went on for about a month until he mentioned the incident to his brother, the Army officer. A check was made and finally it was found that the missing motorcycle had all along been in the CHPG [police] compound. They were just milking the fellow of whatever cigarette or coffee money they could get. The Army officer then requested a LT [lieutenant] if he could possibly bring home the motorcycle. He was told that he could not do that as the motorcycle had to be impounded as evidence. Against whom? No one knew. What the Army officer finally did was to bring in a few more men and get the motorcycle by force.

[Note, police and military elements in Manila commit crimes too. Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Biazon, also head of military and police forces in Manila, relates how last January he heard a radio report of an armored car robbery followed by a shootout. Instinctively knowing that it had to be military men, Biazon dispatched a few of his officers to the scene where they recovered some of the firearms left by the culprits. Biazon had his staff begin to trace the serial numbers. Where did the guns come from? Biazon rolls his head back and looks up sheepishly at the ceiling of his office as if to say, 'You see what I've got to deal with.' The four men worked upstairs in his National Capital Region Defense Command and disappeared when they learned that their office mates were tracing the guns.]

"The human rights issue has been treated by AFP personnel as generally a hindrance to the counter-insurgency campaign. This should not be the case,

instead the human rights issue should spur the AFP to better and more efficient means of fighting the insurgency. The soldier must be perceived as one who deeply respects the rights of others. This is especially crucial in the barrios and other remote places where the government in the eyes of the people are the soldiers. But how can you ask soldiers to behave properly when they know that the money supposed to be sent for their extra rations was used by the CO [Commanding Officer] for some other purpose? How can you expect them to respect the rights of others when their superiors do not even respect their rights?...As for extorting food from the villagers, no soldier will admit to it. And on the surface they could be right. A Filipino villager because of his innate sense of hospitality will always offer food to any stranger entering his house. This offer is based purely on good manners. What the soldier in the field does is to take advantage of this. And the poor farmer is left with nothing to eat because the soldiers have eaten it all.

"Medical service in the AFP is atrocious. Ask how many soldiers have died of simple loss of blood, either because of the lack of a trained corpsman or the lack of med-evac facilities. Med-evac choppers are subject to the whims and caprices of commanders. And if you have commanders who hate to dispatch choppers unless they are aboard themselves, then you have a unit that will do everything to avoid getting casualties. [Note, the propensity for AFP generals to ride in the comfort of a helicopter, even in stormy weather, has resulted in as many active-duty AFP generals perishing in helicopter crashes as from enemy bullets: two in each case.]

"The...operations, where you had a chance to talk to some of the wounded CHDFs [Civilian Home Defense Force, a para-military group] is a good example of the art of avoiding casualties. We sent in two Marine battalions by sea. During the entire operation the landing force commander stayed on board the LST [Landing Ship Transport]. During the entire operation, every single member of the unit, from officers to enlisted men, were judiciously avoiding being shot at even when the CHDF they were working with were already under fire and getting killed and wounded. The situation reached a point where some of the CHDFs were shouting at the Marines to hand over their arms and ammunition and leave the fighting to them. For this operation, the CHDF had 2 killed and 9 wounded. The Marines had only four casualties--four men were bitten by wasps. The Marines are a tough and disciplined unit. That they can act this way in combat must give us ample reason to re-examine ourselves."

Sincerely,


Erik Guyot

Received in Hanover 5/9/89