

# FACT, FANTASY AND FILM AT 11

## CBS News Wins One for Charlie at Cam Ne

by Craig Roberts



Author on Bridge Two, just east of Cam Ne. This steel bridge replaced French concrete bridge blown by Viet Cong before arrival of U.S. forces.

### TRUTH WILL OUT

Craig Roberts was a member of the 9th Marine Regiment from May 1965 to June 1966. He participated in three major campaigns in I Corps and served as an automatic rifleman in line companies, an adviser to the ARVN Rangers (Biet Dong Quan) and served on the sniper test program for the 3rd Marine Division. He was present during the incident described in the story, and participated in three separate search-and-destroy missions in the Cam Ne area.

Craig is currently an 18-year veteran police officer with the Tulsa Police Department, and an infantry major with the U.S. Army Reserve serving as the ground liaison officer attached to the 125th Tactical Fighter Squadron, Oklahoma Air National Guard, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Craig is also a free-lance journalist, having written several magazine articles and one non-fiction book about Vietnam, *The Walking Dead*, which will be published by Pocket Books (Simon and Schuster), in November 1988. He is currently working on another non-fiction book concerning the history of the American sniper.

*"War is a stupid and brutalizing affair. This type of war perhaps more than others. But this does not mean that those who are fighting it are either stupid or brutal. It does mean that the whole story should be told. Not just part of it."*

Marine Corps Gazette  
1965, referring to Cam Ne

THE sun rose out of the South China Sea, casting rays of crimson above the peaks of the Hai Van mountains to the east. Climbing higher, it pushed the darkness to the west until the blackness of night finally surrendered to another day. Within an hour the Marines who waited patiently around the amtracks [armed, amphibious tracked vehicle] began to sweat. Like a blast furnace in hell, the heat would intensify until it took your breath away. Even the mere act of walking would drain a man of strength in minutes. Such was August in I Corps.

Finally word came. Marines mounted the huge green metal monsters while engines roared to life. Black smoke from the exhausts shot into the air, and the LVTs [landing vehicle tracked] turned toward the water's edge. One after another, they lurched and clanked into the muddy river. Twelve hundred meters up the Song Cau Do lay the objective, a village complex marked on the map as "Cam Ne."

The Phong Le bridge grew smaller as it faded into the shimmering heat waves. Soon, the amtracks rounded a bend in the river and the company of Marines knew that they were now in VC country. Ahead, on the south bank of the Cau Do, lay Cam Ne — and the Viet Cong.

The Marines expected the enemy. They expected the mines and booby traps. They expected tunnel complexes, bunkers and even a hostile population. But they did not expect what was about to happen that hot, steamy day of 3 August 1965. It would not be the guerrillas in black, elusive as they might be, who would pose the greatest threat to the men churning up river in the amphibious tractors. It would be the American news media — and two minutes of film — that would bring Cam Ne into living rooms across America. Two minutes of film that would attack the Marines more viciously than any Viet Cong.

Cam Ne, a village complex of six hamlets separated by a checkerboard of rice paddies, rested five miles south of Da Nang along the bank of a river delta where the Cau Do, Tuy Loan and Yen rivers came together. Long known as a Viet Cong stronghold, Cam Ne had communist connections dating back to the French Indochina war when it was a haven for the Viet Minh.

The sweep operation that was underway was not picked at random by the Marine Corps brass. As the amtracks crawled up the river bank 1,000 meters beyond Cam Ne, Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, commanded by Captain Herman B. West Jr., knew of the village's past. Today's



CBS reporter Morley Safer committed both media sins of omission and commission when covering Marine attack at Cam Ne, 3 August 1965. A vivid two minutes of footage showed him narrating the story while in the background a young Marine, apparently engaged in a fit of jungle savagery, casually set fire to the grass roof of a hut with a Zippo lighter. What Safer failed to point out was that the village concealed the entrance to a massive Viet Cong tunnel complex, and had been a known communist stronghold since the days of the Viet Minh during the French Indochina war. Also, some Marines on the operation said later that Safer had specifically asked the Marine to torch the hut behind him so he could get it on film. The result was a lasting impression on the home front that South Vietnamese civilians were helpless victims of unwarranted, wanton U.S. military aggression. Photo: AP/Wide World



sweep was ordered after a series of events that had begun on 12 July.

Twenty-two days earlier, on that July day, I stood cooking in the heat as I stared across the Cau Do toward our objective. As an automatic rifleman in Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, I looked forward to the day's activities with mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension. We were to cross the Phong Le bridge in force, wade 1,500 meters of waist-deep rice paddies and set up a blocking force for a clearing operation on the outskirts of the first village across the Da Nang (Cau Do) River. This would be our first combat operation since arriving in Vietnam two weeks before.

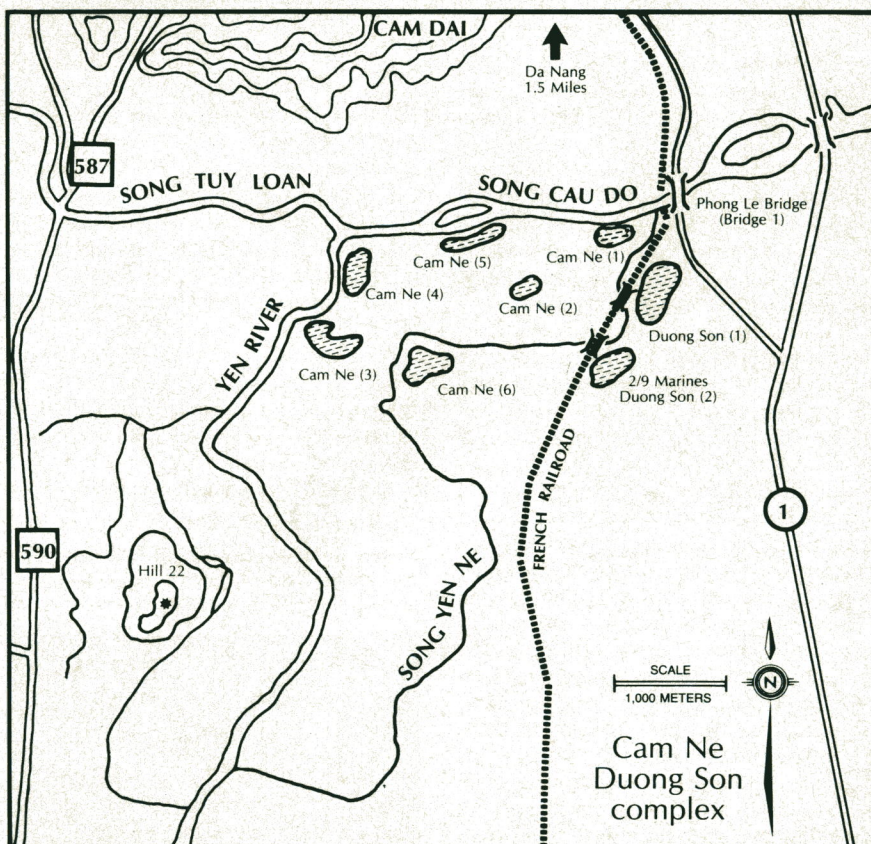
Wearing heavy flak jackets, packs and helmets, we made our way across the steel bridge and entered the muddy paddies. To our left, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, formed a line and began advancing on Duong Son (1) (See map).

If there was any doubt about the sympathies of the inhabitants, it was soon dispelled.

Company B met strong resistance in the village. I could hear the familiar sound of M14s and the strange crack of the communist weapons as they exchanged fire. By the late afternoon, Bravo Company had secured the village — at the cost of three Marines killed and four wounded. When the Viet Cong disengaged, they withdrew to the northwest — to Cam Ne.

As the sweep of Duong Son progressed, Delta Company, 3rd Recon Battalion, working on the south side of the hamlet, came under fire from across the paddies. During the ensuing firefight, eight men were wounded. Looking at the map, the recon people could identify the enemy's position — Cam Ne.

The recon Marines pulled back and called for air support. The F-4B Phantoms of MAG-11 responded and soon had put "steel on target." Some rose from Cam Ne, and a Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog spotter plane made a



Author's platoon crossing paddies on way to sweep Cam Ne complex. Photo: DoD





Front cover of leaflet dropped at Cam Ne before sweep encouraging surrender and "Chieu Hoi" of Viet Cong. Photo: Craig Roberts

pass over the target area. The pilot confirmed six dead VC bodies still in plain view and secondary explosions in the vicinity, thought to be a mine field.

We occupied Duong Son and dug in to stay. The following two weeks would prove to us that the vast majority of enemy activity came from Cam Ne. Each night, we received incoming fire from the tree line that marked the hostile village across the paddies.

The Duong Son and Cam Ne complexes were a nest of Viet Cong activity. Twelve days prior, in the early morning hours of 1 July, a sapper team of 10 North Vietnamese soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment infiltrated Da Nang air base. Under cover of Viet Cong mortar fire, they succeeded in destroying an F-102 fighter and a C-130, and damaged two more F-102s and another Hercules. One NVA prisoner had been captured. They had come from the Cam Ne-Duong Son area and had crossed the Cau Do during the night of 30 June.

Two weeks later, we had taken Duong Son, but Cam Ne still remained in Viet Cong hands. To kill a snake, you have to cut off its head.

On 3 August, Operation Blastout I began. While the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines and an ARVN battalion moved north along both banks of the Yen River toward Cam Ne to provide a blocking force, Delta Company's amtracks climbed out of the river and disgorged the sweating Marines. Once outside and organized, they advanced on line across the maze of rice paddies toward the source of our troubles.

Intelligence sources had reported that Cam Ne was occupied by a company of Viet Cong. It was known that the entire hamlet was a complex of tunnels, bunkers, booby traps, punji pits and spider holes. The Marines' orders were to overcome and destroy any position from which they received fire, whether it was from "a position,

hedgerow, trench line, bunker, spider trap or any other location."

At approximately 1015 hours, the company came under fire. One Marine was wounded as the troops struggled forward toward the tree line on the edge of the village. As the company pressed on, the Viet Cong withdrew farther into Cam Ne.

Entering the village, Delta Company found it impossible to keep on line, and the sweeping force began breaking up into small groups. Each worked their way forward through the maze of thorned bamboo tree lines and hedgerows in isolated fire teams. Foot traps, punji pits, booby traps and spider holes were everywhere. The village itself was ringed by a fighting trench, and each grass hooch sat near or over a bunker.

The LVTs followed the infantry into the village and crushed through hedgerows and bamboo tree lines, setting off several mines and booby traps.

The interconnecting tunnels and camouflaged firing positions favored the VC's hit-and-run tactics, and they used them to their advantage. As a squad searched a hut and moved on, the elusive guerrillas would pop up behind them, shoot at the Americans and disappear.

The combination of heat, harassing fire and slow movement frustrated the Marines. One platoon received automatic weapons fire from a grass-roofed hut and returned fire. Their assailant disappeared into the tunnels. Their orders were clear: The Marines began burning the huts that hid and protected the enemy.

A Marine helicopter banked over Cam Ne and landed in a cloud of swirling dust. Among its occupants were Major General Lewis W. Walt, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, and a CBS news team — the reporter was CBS correspondent Morley Safer.

Safer and his cameraman entered the vil-

**Deadly punji pits lay concealed around Cam Ne. Photo: DoD**



lage during the day and began filming the activities. By the time the film was edited for television, one scene would burn a lasting impression in the minds of the American people.

The scene was of a lone Marine setting fire to the grass roof of a hut with a Zippo lighter. Mr. Safer's dialogue, heard by millions of Americans, follows:

SCENE: Safer standing in front of smoking hut facing camera.

SAFER: "This is what the war in Vietnam is all about. The old and the very young. The Marines have burned this old couple's cottage because fire was coming from here."

"Now when you walk into the village, you see no young people at all. Fire was coming from ... automatic ... light automatic weapons fire was coming from all of these villages. It's not really one village, it's a string of huts ... [scene changes — camera shows two Vietnamese women raking debris out of burned hut with rake] ... and the people that are ... are left ... [turns to cameramen] come this way [unintelligible] ... and the people that are left are like this woman here, the very old ...."

SCENE CHANGE: Safer lying on ground talking to Marine in prone position.

SAFER: "Seen action like this before Marine?"

MARINE: "No I haven't. Not like this I





haven't."

SAFER: "Did you — uh — set fire to these houses here?"

MARINE: "No, we were just off to the left of it when it was burning.

SAFER: "Were you getting fire from them?"

MARINE: "Somewhat, not too much, just a little sniper fire."

SCENE CHANGE: Safer follows Marines through village. Camera shows scenes of Marines moving through smoking and burning huts, a flame thrower setting fire to a roof, civilians being directed out of village.

SAFER: "It had first appeared that the Marines had been sniped at and that a few houses were made to pay. Shortly after, an officer told me, he had orders to go in and level the string of hamlets that surrounds Cam Ne village. And all around the common paddy field that feeds these hamlets, a ring of fire. A hundred and fifty homes were leveled in retaliation for a burst of gunfire. In Vietnam, like everywhere else in Asia, property ... a home ... is everything. A man lives with his family on ancestral land. His parents are buried nearby. Their spirit is part of his holding. If there were Viet Cong in the hamlet, they were long gone. Alerted by the roar of amphibious tractors and the heavy barrage of rocket fire laid down before the troops moved in. The women and

**Marine enters opening to Viet Cong tunnel system, similar to massive tunnel system beneath village complex at Cam Ne. Photo: DoD**

the old men who remained will never forget that August afternoon." [Safer pauses to show crying women in group].

"The day's operation burned down 150 houses, wounded three women, killed one baby, wounded one Marine, and netted these four prisoners." [Camera shows four Vietnamese men with blindfolds being escorted by Marines]. "Four old men who could not answer questions put to them in English. Four old men who had no idea what an I.D. card was."

SCENE CHANGE: Close-up of Safer facing camera:

"Today's operation is the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American firepower can win a military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose home is a — that means a lifetime of back-breaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side."

[Pause]

"Morley Safer, CBS News, near the village of Cam Ne."

At the beginning of his presentation, Safer stated, "Fire was coming from ... automatic ... light automatic weapons fire was

coming from all of these villages."

He then contradicted his own statement later with, "It had first appeared that the Marines had been sniped at and that a few houses were made to pay."

What none of us understood or could comprehend in those early days of the war, was the Viet Cong's callous ability to use the civilian populace as a shield. The fighting men in the field in Vietnam rapidly learned this. The news media never did.

While this was going on, I watched from Duong Son (1) across the paddies. I could hear both Marine and Viet Cong weapons on several occasions as the sweep progressed. I could see columns of smoke rising above the village, but there had been *no heavy barrage of rocket fire* as Mr. Safer stated to all of America that night.

Safer stated, "The day's operation burned 150 houses ..." According to Marine reports, 51 huts were destroyed. It appears that the news media was using an "inflated hooch count."

Could it be that Safer did not know of the air strike that was called in by the Recon Marines two weeks before?

By late afternoon on the 3rd, Capt. West's company had only progressed a quarter of the way through the complex. He realized that he didn't have the assets or

*Continued on page 82*



## FACT & FILM

Continued from page 45

strength to occupy this type of terrain effectively after dark, and ordered a withdrawal to the Yen.

When his troops were once again in the paddies west of Cam Ne, the Viet Cong surfaced from the tunnel complex and reoccupied the tree line. Delta Company again drew fire from Cam Ne. This time the exhausted and frustrated Marines replied with 24 105mm howitzer rounds fired by Delta Battery, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, located south of Hill 327, and his own battalion's 81mm mortars.

The Viet Cong fire ceased and the Marines boarded their amtracks. On their way down river to the Phong Le bridge, they once again came under fire from Cam Ne (1) and (5) on the river bank. The VC had returned.

After Delta Company returned to the Phong Le bridge, Capt. West reported that the company had uncovered 267 punji traps, six Malayan whip booby traps, three grenade booby traps, six anti-personnel mines and one multiple booby-trapped hedgerow. They had demolished 51 huts and 38 tunnels, trenches and prepared positions. This all occurred in only one quarter of the village complex.

One of the platoon commanders, Second Lieutenant Ray G. Snyder, stated Cam Ne

was an "extensively entrenched and fortified hamlet."

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, explained that "burning was the only way to ensure that the house would not become an active military installation after the troops had moved on past it."

Even *Newsweek* correspondent Francois Sully, during a conversation about Cam Ne with the 9th Marines S-2, Major Charles Ward, said "... breaking up the group and leveling of the village structures were the only feasible actions short of a military assault."

Seven Viet Cong were reported killed, but proof was hard to come by. The VC habitually dragged off their dead, creating a great morale problem for American troops. We could see our casualties, but often could see little damage done to the enemy.

Among the casualties of Cam Ne were four wounded villagers and a dead 10-year-old boy who had been caught in the crossfire of the Marines and Viet Cong during one exchange of gun fire.

Eight days later, on 11 August, while on a sweep of Cam Ne (6), I was walking along a trail on the west side of the village. To my left — on a dike in the rice paddies — was a machine-gun team led by the weapon platoon leader, 2nd Lt. Richard Regan. Three shots rang out from the direction of Cam Ne (3) to our west, and Regan went down, shot through the head. Another shot from Cam

Ne struck the machine-gun ammo bearer, Private First Class Gonzales, penetrating both calves and sending him into the muddy water. My squad dropped to the path and frantically scanned the distant tree line. Some of the squad fired toward a small structure in the distance that would be the most likely sniper position.

Then the sniper made the mistake of moving and I fired a burst from my automatic rifle, knocking him into the rice paddy. Lance Corporal Albert Ekstein fired a white phosphorous rifle grenade which burst over the Viet Cong's body. This was one they wouldn't drag off. Another Marine had died because of Cam Ne.

We would sweep one village, only to receive fire from the next. When we moved there, we would be fired upon by the one we just left.

Was the Cam Ne village visited by Morley Safer a series of fortified hamlets as described by Delta Company? Two weeks later, I found out. After continually receiving fire from Cam Ne (1), (2) and (5) between the day of Delta Company's sweep and 17 August, my battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. George R. Scharnberg, received orders to again clear the hamlets. This time we would hit them with greater strength — four companies instead of one. Two would serve as a blocking force or "anvil," and two would sweep, forming the "hammer." The force was to once again prove insufficient. A gap at the east end of the hamlet

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would be the enemy's salvation.

After moving all night, we were on line and prepared to move by the first signs of daylight on Wednesday morning, 18 August 1965. Before we got the orders to move, helicopters equipped with loud-speakers flew repeatedly over the village with a Vietnamese soldier ordering the villages to leave the hamlet. This was followed by leaflet drops urging the Viet Cong to surrender.

After a trickle of villagers exited Cam Ne, we entered. We had evidently entered from a different direction than that of the original sweep, as I found almost no huts damaged. What I did find was a complex system of tunnels, spider holes, punji pits and trenches. Each house hid bunkers and tunnel entrances. Mines and booby traps filled the village and everywhere we looked we found evidence of VC. At one fence line, two Marines were wounded when a mine exploded that had been booby-trapped to the fence.

We could tell by the cooking fires and items left scattered around that the enemy had withdrawn hastily. The silence and the smoke from the charcoal cooking fires that drifted through the trees added to the eerie feeling that we were walking into a trap. Even the village's animals — pigs, chickens and water buffaloes — were left behind and roamed about freely. The Viet Cong had faded away. But to where?

It took all day to sweep through the hamlet. The heat was unbearable, and the movement slow. Each gate and tree line we came to held trip wires and booby traps. Every path was lined with foot traps filled with poisoned steel spikes. By the time we reached the eastern edge of the village, we were exhausted.

No sooner had we formed a perimeter on the outskirts of the village, occupying a VC trench, than it started. A shot rang out from across the paddies. A young blond Marine 30 meters to my left jerked over backwards, shot in the chest by a sniper. Immediately, more shots followed and within minutes we were in a firefight with what turned out to be a reinforced company of hardcore Viet Cong that had taken up positions across the paddies at Cam Ne (1).

During the firefight that followed, one of our machine gunners, a black corporal, was shot through the lungs and killed instantly. Forty meters to my left, PFC George Renninger saw the sniper that killed the corporal hiding behind a bush in the rice paddy only 200 meters away. He rested his M14 in the crook of a tree and took up the slack of the trigger. The Viet Cong somersaulted into the air and fell into the paddy. More muzzle flashes came from a small temple 400 meters away, and I opened fire on it, peppering the walls and windows with angry 7.62mm hornets. We were now encountering what Delta Company had been up against. Viet Cong fire grew in intensity. Bullets impacted around us, kicking up small bursts of dust and chopping branches from the trees over our heads.



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The captain ordered our FO to call for fire support. The artillery observer studied his map and decided he could best direct the fire from a small point of land that jutted out into the paddies to our front. Signalling his radioman, he moved out.

No one knows exactly what happened next. Even though the first four rounds impacted on target in the trees occupied by the VC, the next four exploded around the FO — one being an air burst over his head. He and his radio operator were knocked out — and with them, the only radio on the artillery frequency.

The barrage then walked down the trench we had occupied. One round impacted near one of our fire team leaders — a Corporal Oller — and almost severed his arm, blowing him through a fence into the rice paddy. The last round impacted eight meters from my position, showering me with sand and dirt.

When the barrage ceased, we crawled from the trench only to be met once more by a high volume of fire from the stubborn guerrillas. Our return fire coupled with several 106mm recoilless rifle rounds discouraged any further action on the part of the VC.

By the time the operation had ended, the battalion had pulled 37 Viet Cong suspects out of the tunnels, destroyed more than 50 bunkers and spider holes, and retrieved documents, rice caches and ammunition.

The next morning we left Cam Ne. But Cam Ne had not seen the last of the Marines. On 17 March 1966, the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines under Lt. Col. Joshua W. Dorsey

III, would sweep the Cam Ne complex again. This time the Marines would kill two Viet Cong — at least two who had not been dragged off by their comrades — capture 13 suspects, a Viet Cong nurse, two ARVN deserters, and confiscate over a ton of hidden rice. Across the paddies to the southeast, at Duong Son (2), the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines would kill five more VC and capture many enemy documents.

Did the Marines overreact to the threat at Cam Ne as was the impression left in the minds of the American people? Morley Safer did not report the events that led up to the sweep by 1st Battalion. He did not mention their strike that was called in on the village by the Recon Marines, nor did he show any of the killing devices left for the Marines by the VC or elaborate on the Viet Cong tactic of using the civilian populace as a shield.

Perhaps he didn't know. Perhaps he didn't ask. Perhaps he did not want to confuse his televised presentation with the facts. In any case, what the American public saw in their living rooms 8,000 miles away would be what the media wanted them to see — and think.

Cam Ne was only the beginning. The next eight years would see a proliferation of one-sided, irresponsible reporting by the American press. Those of us in the field, American men and women doing what we were sent to do, never asked for pro-American propaganda. We only asked for fair, truthful and unbiased reporting. When a story is told, it should be the whole story.

Today's news becomes tomorrow's history. Cam Ne. To those of us who were there, it was a well-fortified haven for the enemy. For those who saw two minutes of film on their television sets on Walter Cronkite's *CBS Evening News*, it was the scene of an overbearing American Marine casually and sadistically destroying a peasant's home. It was two minutes of what the American news media wanted to portray the war in Vietnam to be.

It was two minutes at Cam Ne. ✕

## GUAT FIREPOWER

Continued from page 51

no attempt was made to hide our presence. Our company-size patrol was broken into two groups, one deploying in the bulrushes along the river and the other moving about 200 meters inland to provide rear security. I stayed with the ambush element and immediately noticed that our position had previously been trampled down and was littered with rusty C-ration cans. Obviously this site had been used by the army many times before. The Gs were bound to know its location and were unlikely to cross right in front of it, especially in broad daylight.

Our position wasn't a good one. We had no cover, and it was difficult to see the river for the foliage to our front. This really didn't matter much as most of the troops just made themselves comfortable and went to sleep.

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# GREENE

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