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Special Forces Camp Plei Djereng A-251, 1968

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Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Bob Shaffer pens a feature article on the history of Special Forces Camp Plei Djereng, A-251, from its first construction to relocation and its final days when it was over-run by the Communist North Vietnam Army. Bob returned to Plei Djereng in late 1973-74 — then again for a forty year followup. Bob served a one year tour in Vietnam as a SF 1st Lieutenant.

Plei Djereng like most Special Forces "A-Camps" in II Corps and western I Corps as well as B-20 and B-24 Mike Force had Montagnard Tribesmen as our Strike Force Soldiers. Shaun Darragh, a retired SF LTC, in his book *The DEGA, a Mike Force Novel* discusses in detail the Montagnard People, their customs, culture and leadership as well as fictional combat operations. Several episodes in his novel occur at Special Forces Camp Plei Djereng. For those of us who were at SF A- Camps and the Mike Force in Vietnam many of these occurrences and actions appear to be very close to reality.

I served as a SF Medic at Plei Djereng from April to August 1968, then completed my tour with a SF Mike Force Battalion. Through the years of operation several dozen SF devoted their lives and energy at Plei Djereng and many went off to have distinguished careers in the military or civilian jobs.

On my arrival, CPT Rod Stanger was the Team Leader but was shortly replaced by CPT Charles Burgardt. CPT Burgardt was a West Point graduate on his second tour and went on to B-24 as the S-3 officer in late summer. He subsequently left the army, graduated from law school and practiced law until his untimely death in the early 1990's.

1st Lieutenant Lyle Slane was our XO, however he contracted a severe form of Falciprium Malaria on patrol and I evacuated him to a military hospital where he never recovered. 1st Lt. David Moley who roomed with Lyle at Ft Bragg prior to their tours then became XO and for a short period CO of the Team. Following two consecutive one year tours and on a final extension, David was forced to return to CONUS by a general who said he had enough time in combat. After leaving A-251, promoted to Captain, David led both a company and then a battalion of Mike Force at B-20, Pleiku. David went on to develop his own corporation in personal management after leaving the army. 1st Lt. Mike Trost was the camp SF CAPO officer and later had a very interesting assignment at B-24 Kontum. Mike was also promoted to Captain and was acting Team Leader at SF Camps. Following his tours in Vietnam Mike pursued a career with USPS, then had his own real estate business.

SFC Frank "Speedy" Gonsalves was our Senior Weapons SGT however was the defacto Team Sergeant. Speedy had a very distinguished SF career and retired to North Carolina near Fort Bragg and

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COVER PHOTO: Special Forces Camp Plei Djereng A-251, West of Pleiku on the border in II Corps, RVN, 1968. Note the two blue ink x's on the buildings top. The right one is on the team house, the left is on Lonny Holmes' hooch with the bomb proof T.O.C. deep underground beneath it. The photo was taken in late spring or early summer by the Air Force photo recon group. Photo courtesy Lonny Holmes.

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THE PRESIDENTS PAGE



Bruce Long
President SFA 78

PRESIDENTS COLUMN JULY 2015

The 39th Annual SFA 2015 convention in Portland Oregon was a GREAT success, to say the least. More than five hundred personnel attended. The convention itself was held at the Red Lion Hotel On The River – Jantzen Beach and hosted by SFA Chapter 47.

There were numerous activities, from golfing to wine tours. My wife, Geri, naturally went on a

wine tour and bought a case of wine. Alaska Airlines let us ship it free with our baggage. There were lots of exhibits and vendors. The Special Forces Museum was in attendance and had a lot of gifts for purchase. I spent around \$400 in Chapter money so that Chapter members can purchase some cool items at our July meeting.

Chapter 47 also hosted "Happy Hour" every day from 0800 – 2200 hrs. Let me tell you, some of those old SF guys can really put it away.

Vitra also had a virtual target shooting & scenario room that was made available for FREE to all attendees who wished to shoot Glock 22's or M-4. Vitra is the same company that sold Artemis Defense Institute their complete set-up, and they have a close relationship with the owners, Steve and Sandy Lieberman.

The highlight of the event for me was the Banquet, as the guest speaker was Major General Darsie Rogers, Special Forces Commanding General Ft Bragg. The most significant point that the General made was Civil Affairs and Psychological Warfare (PSYOPS) now come under the Special Forces Command. The total strength of his Command now stands at 22,000 troops. I found the General to be very engaging and easy to talk with during the questions and answering phase. I actually got to speak with him for several minutes prior to his presentation.

President's Meeting – **THE ROAD AHEAD**

National's main concern is the IRS and making sure all of the Chapters are complying. Apparently the IRS paid them a visit and after a week of review gave SFA a clean bill of health, and they want to keep it that way. Their Power Point presentation included the selling of raffle tickets, which we will NOT be doing because of the restrictions and compliance guidelines. This was all forwarded to our treasurer **John Joyce**.

National would also like to see more of us subscribe to the Electronic DROP as the cost to mail and publish the DROP is \$30,000 every three (3) months. This was only a recommendation, as they realize there are a lot of SF guys who don't have computers, and really want a hard copy – so, strictly a suggestion. I for one will be signing up. All you need to do is call Cliff Newman at (910) 485-5433, or even better go to their web site which also contains current, and back copies of the DROP.

Another point that was brought up is dues; the Chapter needs the collect annual dues, and take out the Chapter portion and send in the remaining balance by check to National.

I will be putting out additional information at our next Chapter meeting on July 11th at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club located at 1601 Bayside Drive Corona Del Mar, Ca 92625.

Business meeting 0830 hrs event planning for Oct 17th.
General meeting 1000 hrs.

Any questions please feel free to call or email me. ❖

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Jim Duffy, Major General Darsie Rogers and Bruce Long at the 2015 SFA Convention in Portland, Oregon.

ERIC BLEHM'S "LEGEND": A Must-Read SOG/Aviation Story



John Stryker Meyer

By John Stryker Meyer

Special Forces Senior Medic Lee Martin vividly remembers the first time he saw Green Beret Raul Perez "Roy" Benavidez on May 2, 1968.

Benavidez's bloody, muddy, beaten body was inside a body bag, which was laying on the airstrip at the Loc Ninh Special Forces A Camp A-331 (located near the Cambodian border), waiting to be shipped to the morgue. His body bag was lying alongside the bodies of several American aviators and Green Berets, and a few enemy soldiers who were killed that day during a top-secret mission in Cambodia that turned deadly.

"I'll never forget it," Martin told SOFREP. "He was just a mess. There was no doubt in my mind that he was dead, based on his appearance: the dried blood, sweat, mud, and soft body tissues on his face."

Martin watched as a doctor bent down and gave one final inspection of the Green Beret sergeant. Much to his surprise, Benavidez's lips moved as he spit at the doctor, incapable of speaking or moaning. "His face was so caked over he couldn't open his eyes," Martin recalled. Also, the doctor couldn't see that Benavidez's arms crossed over a gaping abdominal wound that he suffered at the hands of a communist North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier.

Author Eric Blehm brilliantly captures that surreal moment in Green Beret history on page one of his recently penned non-fiction masterpiece, "Legend."

Blehm skillfully crafts a story that takes readers into Benavidez's history, from his early days as a migrant worker with a hair-trigger temper in El Campo, Texas, to the foundational moment in his life when he dedicates himself to honor, duty, and country.

He also covers the surprising 10-year effort that it took for Sergeant Benavidez to be recommended for the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor. President Ronald Reagan draped it around his neck on February 24, 1981—13 years after Benavidez's heroic efforts in Cambodia.

Additionally, for readers who want to know more about the top secret war conducted during the Vietnam War under the aegis

of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG), Blehm frames Benavidez's day in Cambodian hell by expertly explaining the need for a secret war and the motivations behind the men who fought in it, providing an accurate frame of reference that enhances the understanding of Benavidez's core values: Family members had told Benavidez to help those who needed help.

These factors lead him to jump on a helicopter returning to a deadly landing zone in Cambodia to simply help his fellow Green Berets, their indigenous troops, and the fearless aviators who regularly put their lives on the line every day flying in support of SOG missions by traveling across the fence into enemy-held territory. When Benavidez jumped onto that helicopter, he was carrying a medic's kit and a knife. No gun.

After two years spent researching and interviewing, Blehm presents the readers with insightful details into the 12-man recon team that went on the secret mission into Cambodia to find and capture Russian equipment. You'll read about Leroy Wright, the team leader; Lloyd Mousseau, the assistant team leader; and Brian O'Connor, the Green Beret radio-man on the team.

Blehm also breathes life into the key indigenous personnel on the team: Tuan, the interpreter; Bao, the fearless point man; and Chien,



Eric Blehm, author of *Legend*.

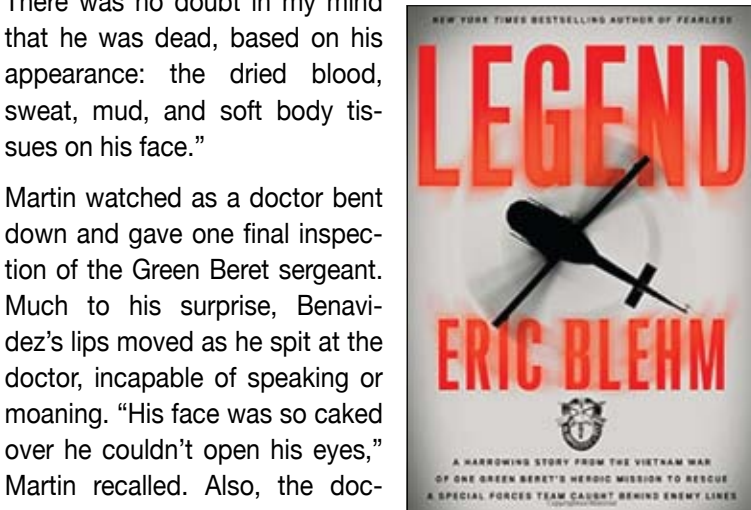
the grenadier. Readers will learn that Tuan had attended a university before joining the ranks of SOG indigenous personnel. A Saigon native, Tuan was well-read and a staunch anti-communist. However, he was also a critic of the corruption within South Vietnam's government.

Blehm pays tribute to the indigenous troops on the Project Sigma recon team who fought heroically beside their Green Beret counterparts. He details their courage under fire by a huge, numerically superior North Vietnamese Army force.

Blehm doesn't stop there.

This California native son, who has written two previous books on Special Operations troops, one on a Green Beret A-Team in Afghanistan and one on Navy SEAL Team Six, brings to life the air-men who served so valiantly in support of SOG missions throughout the war.

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2015 SPECIAL FORCES ANNUAL CONVENTION AND CONFERENCE



Jim Duffy

By Jim Duffy

This year was the 39th annual convention in Portland, Oregon held June 4th through June 10th, 2015. Sponsors of the event included The Special Forces Charitable Trust, the Green Beret Foundation and USAA.

Events offered during the convention included the Victorian-like port city of Astoria, Portland tours and shopping, the Evergreen Air Museum Tour, an Oregon Wine Tour, a Pub Crawl, Garden Tours, a Columbia River Excursion, Golf Tournament, a Mount Hood Loop Tour, and a Field Day and Picnic at Fort Vancouver with a Special Forces A team display.

Brigadier General Darsie Rogers a very dynamic speaker and Commanding General First Special Forces Command, provided a presentation on The State of the Regiment. Chapter 78 President Bruce Long presented him with a Chapter 78 coin which I had in my pocket for such an opportunity. Jim Gant, a former Special Forces Officer, provided a very interesting series of presentations on Special Forces and Unconventional Warfare. Disclosed documents acquired from the raid on Osama Ben Laden has a hand written directive note by Ben Larden to his Intelligence Chief to remove Gant from the battlefield as he was an impediment to Al Qaeda's operational objectives. The Presidents Meeting was attended by Chapter 78 President Bruce Long. At the General Meeting the highlight was the presentation of the Golden Quill Award to Chapter 78 for its excellent monthly Sentinel Newsletter. Lots of kudos to Lonny Holmes for his exceptional efforts as writer, author, seeker of great stories and designer of the Sentinel Newsletter.



L to R – Greg Biela A-109 team mate, and wife Cate; Jim Duffy; Joyce and Chad Johnson, A-109 Team prior to our tour; Tim Marony, Commander 1st Mobile Strike Force supporting A-109 Siege and wife, Chong.

The hospitality room was always abuzz with activity and as usual a great place to meet, greet and swap stories. Krispy Kreme donuts and a variety of snacks and popcorn were available as were refreshments. Vendors opportunities were limited but I enjoyed numerous times at Vir Tra Shooting Systems.

BG Roger spoke at the Banquet and was very impressive. MOH Vietnam recipients Roger Donlon, Bennie Atkins and Melvin Morris were introduced and recognized. I got to talk with all three during the convention.

The greatest benefit of attendance at this or any of the SFA conventions is the meeting up with old friends (Greg Beila former Team Mate, Barry Archer MSF, Tim Maroney MSF, John Cleckner A -102, Joe Marzucco A-109, Chad Johnson A-109 and Randy Fogel) and making new friends. Socializing with numerous other members of mutual background and experiences. This is really what the conventions are all about and is very valuable to all who attend. In the big picture events and schedules may change, be cancelled or uncertain, but the value of friendships is priceless. Members of A-109 had a private event at Joe Marzucco's home.

The 2016 International Special Forces Conference hosted by Chapter 88 will be held June 12th through 19th at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront Hotel in Jacksonville, Florida. You can register now for the conference and hotel online at SFChapter88.org. Full registration is \$175 with extra costs for a selection of sponsored events. ♦



L to R – John Cleckner, Distinguished Member of the Regiment and SF friend since 1968; Barry Archer, Commander of Mike Force supporting A-109 Siege; Bennie Atkins, recent MOH Awardee; Jim Duffy

POLWAR EFFORTS AT US SPECIAL FORCES CAMP A-251 PLEI DJERENG 1968-1970



Bob Shaffer

By Bob Shaffer

In the mid-1960s, most US Special Forces camps in Vietnam had augmented the traditional 12-man "A" team with a third officer designated the Civic Action/Psychological Operations (CA/PO) officer. This position also was known as the Polwar (Political Warfare) officer, the term used in this article. The mission of the Polwar officer was diverse: In addition to pulling regular combat patrols, the Polwar officer's duties included improving local living conditions for the CIDG and their families, especially those family members who lived outside the camp itself; and motivating Vietnamese officials (when available) to expand government services to the local civilians who lived in villages close to the camps. Providing school supplies, obtaining and distributing gifts for holidays and special ceremonies, and reminding both the CIDG and the local civilians of the importance of defeating the VC and NVA also were part of the Polwar officer's mission. While the primary goals of these efforts was to improve the CIDG and local civilians' living conditions and thereby their willingness to support the Vietnamese government, an additional important goal was to motivate the civilians to provide information on the local VC activities near the camp. The following account documents the efforts and results of Polwar activity at Camp Plei Djereng (A-251) in 1968-1970.

By the end of 1966, following a year of almost continuous battalion – and regimental – level combat between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) on one side and units of the US Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, the 4th Infantry Division, and the 25th Infantry Division, as well as Army of Vietnam (ARVN) and Republic of Korea (ROK) units on the other, the military situation in western Pleiku Province entered a brief lull. In late October, following a major battle with units from both the US 4th and 25th Infantry Divisions, the NVA units had pulled back into their camps in Base Area 702 on the Cambodian side of the Vietnam-Cambodia border. There they were free to recuperate and refit without fear of any American or South Vietnamese intrusions. It was at this time that what had been the isolated Special Forces outpost named Plei Djereng (A-251), near the confluence of the Ia Grai stream and the Se San River in north-west Pleiku province, was moved in order to become a "fighting" camp that would both defend itself against large scale NVA attacks as well as support major US Army offensive actions along the Cambodian border. In the two years since its establishment in 1964, Plei Djereng's primary role was to recruit the local Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), in this area montagnard tribesmen, train them to become a reliable combat force, and then to lead

them against local and NVA communist troops. In many cases, this meant serving as a "trip wire" to alert larger US conventional units as to the size and location of NVA forces moving in western Pleiku province and then work with them to defeat the enemy.

In December 1966, Plei Djereng camp moved five miles south of the original site to a small hill about 30 miles west of Pleiku City and ten miles east of the Cambodian border. The new position was close to the intersection of the limited road system in that part of the province, one road running east to Pleiku City and the other south to National Road (QL) 19 near USSF camp Duc Co (A-253). The relatively level area of the land around new Plei Djereng permitted the construction of a 3000' all-weather airstrip that could accommodate fixed-wing as well as helicopter aircraft, a significant advantage over its predecessor. To bolster the role of the new camp as an offensive platform, Battery "A" of the 6th Battalion, 14th Artillery Regiment was co-located at Plei Djereng in early 1967 and remained there until just before the transfer of the camp in late 1970. Among other weapons, "A" Battery contained two 175mm howitzers and two 8-inch guns, the discharge of any of these weapons sufficient to rattle the Special Forces team house at the top of the hill.

Importantly, the new location provided easier access to the montagnard villages scattered throughout the camp's area of responsibility (AOR). For years the civilians in these villages, members of the Jarai tribe, had been subjected to communist propaganda teams and also had been forced to contribute food and manpower to satisfy communist logistical requirements. In the latter part of 1968, NVA forces once again pulled back to Base Area 702 in Cambodia to recuperate and reorganize following the Tet Offensive and other major combat activities in western Pleiku Province. A lull in battalion- and regiment-sized combat operations in Plei Djereng's AOR followed, providing the Special Forces team an opportunity to accomplish two goals: to build improved fighting positions and living quarters for the camp strike force inside the camp itself; and to implement a plan to protect the montagnard civilians from military operations and to separate them from the communist logistics demands.

With the end of the rainy season in October 1968, Plei Djereng began major renovations of the living facilities for the CIDG and their families within the camp. These consisted of several concrete bunkers over 100' long and twenty feet wide, built low enough into the hillside that only the roofs and firing ports appeared above ground. The floors, walls and roofs were poured concrete, with the roofs covered with a layer of sandbags for added protection against incoming mortar and rocket fire. The bunkers were built in the four



Plei Doch village seen from USSF Plei Djereng team house, July 1969.

cardinal directions around the hill, providing 360 degree line of sight to the countryside beyond the defensive wire. Members of the camp strike force were urged to move their families into the camp, and most took advantage of the relative safety offered by these reinforced accommodations.

The construction of these living quarters and additional fighting positions taxed the strength and enthusiasm of the CIDG. For although there was little movement from major NVA units out of their Cambodian camps, Plei Djereng's requirement for constant patrolling throughout the AOR and occasional support to other operational areas did not diminish. There were recurring contacts with local VC trail watchers as well as squad- and platoon-sized units, resulting in casualties on both sides. Plei Djereng's strike force was organized into three line companies of about 90 men each, two recon teams of 20 men each, and a Political Warfare (Polwar) team of 16 men. During this period, a CIDG member of a line company was either out on a patrol, providing local security (in addition to airfield security and local ambushes covering trails leading into the camp and village areas, the camp also provided each night about a dozen CIDG to augment Battery A's perimeter), or working on camp construction. There was little rest for anyone. While this construction work continued, a plan to handle the local civilian population unfolded.

Throughout late 1968 and early 1969, the Plei Djereng SF team and its Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB) counterparts implemented a plan to consolidate the inhabitants of twenty-two separate hamlets within the AOR into one large village located less than

a kilometer from Plei Djereng. This new village was built around an established hamlet called Plei Doch, a name that collectively was used for the entire new population center. The residents of individual hamlets were brought into this new settlement, along with their livestock, ceramic rice wine jars, and any personal property they chose to carry. They built new houses, complete with bomb shelters and animal pens, and began to settle in. By the time the final hamlet was moved, Plei Doch's population had grown from about 400 to more than 4,000, including a leper colony with thirty patients. For some of the new residents the move meant little more than moving from one side of a rice field to the other. For others, the distance from Plei Doch to their former hamlets was 10 kilometers or more, too far to walk everyday to tend their gardens and fields. Almost immediately, some of the inhabitants of the more distant hamlets moved back rather than remain in Plei Doch. All villagers were warned that, although they were free to move about wherever they wanted during daylight hours, at night the entire AOR was considered a "free fire zone" and they would be in danger if they moved beyond Plei Doch.

If their removal to Plei Doch was an major inconvenience for the local civilians, it quickly became evident that it was a significant disruption for the local VC and NVA commissariat. The move of almost 4,000 Jarai civilians to Plei Doch by March 1969 put much of the local population beyond the easy reach of the communists. The scattered hamlets had provided captive audiences for communist propaganda teams throughout western Pleiku Province. Vegetables, rice, and livestock grown by the montagnard villagers were taken by the communists on a regular basis to feed both lo-

cal VC and NVA troops. Able-bodied young men and women (and many not so young) were dragooned into carrying communist munitions and supplies in preparation for battle, and to removing dead and wounded soldiers during and after battle. Many civilians were killed in the course of this forced labor. Even before the last hamlet had moved to Plei Doch, local VC and NVA soldiers made it clear that civilians were expected to return to their former villages and continue to provide support to the communists. Those who refused to return were threatened with dire consequences.

To monitor the security situation in Plei Doch as well as to collect actionable intelligence by debriefing civilians who traveled back and forth to their former hamlets and fields, Plei Djereng established a 16-man Polwar (Political Warfare) Team. The team members and their families lived in the village. In addition to debriefing the villagers, developing local agricultural projects, teaching school, and promoting the Government of Vietnam (GVN) political goals, the Polwar team set up night ambushes around the village perimeter to interdict any VC intruders. As needed, the team members also were attached to line companies and took part in larger field operations. While the Polwar team was the main point of contact for the civilians in Plei Doch, it also became a lightning rod for VC attempts to disrupt the resettlement program. From the beginning of the relocations, VC threats against the Polwar team members and their families were constant and, within a few months, resulted in the resignation of both the Polwar team chief and his deputy, with their request that they and their families be allowed to move into Plei Djereng. (Note: Despite leaving the Polwar team and moving into the relative security of Plei Djereng, the deputy chief was killed in December 1969 during a firefight east of the camp.) The Polwar team chief was replaced by a former local VC who had switched sides and, understanding the issues and the nature of the enemy, provided strong guidance to the other

team members as well as to the hamlet chiefs in their efforts to counteract the communists and encourage the villagers. This Polwar team chief was killed in action near Camp Duc Co in 1972.

By late summer 1969, VC threats had reached the point where many villagers were in the process of packing up and moving back to their former hamlets. Despite aggressive patrolling by the camp strike force, local VC lurked along forest trails and took away any foodstuffs the villagers had collected in their daily treks, leaving them with almost nothing once they returned to Plei Doch. The VC warned that soon they would attack Plei Doch itself, with no effort to spare anyone in the line of fire. In the early hours of 1 September 1969, the local VC did attack, targeting the Polwar compound at the western end of Plei Doch, the point farthest from Plei Djereng. After a salvo of B-40 rockets and 60mm mortar rounds, followed by a longer exchange of automatic weapons fire, the VC pulled back into the forest, leaving behind two blood trails and an AK-47 assault rifle. No Polwar team members were injured, but three civilians were wounded, one mortally.

In an effort to demonstrate GVN interest in the welfare of the villagers in the wake of the VC attack, Vietnamese officials travelled to Plei Doch to distribute food, salt, and blankets, and to discuss future developmental projects. New Life Development (Xay Dung) cadre and Son Thon-Truong Son militia were assigned to Plei Doch to augment the Polwar team's efforts. While this initially strengthened both the physical security of Plei Doch as well as the belief that the GVN was interested in the montagnards' welfare, it did little to curtail communist efforts to gather food and propagandize villagers when they were out on the trails).

In October 1969, while one of Plei Djereng's line companies was on a joint operation with elements of the US 4th Division against entrenched NVA forces in the Plei Trap Valley northwest



Polwar compound at west end of Plei Doch, with Plei Djereng in the distance. July 1969.

of the camp, an NVA logistics officer was killed by another of Plei Djereng's companies patrolling the far southeastern corner of the camp's AOR. On his body was a detailed list of those civilians who had contributed to his collection effort. Perhaps in retaliation, the local VC resorted to terror in a further effort to intimidate the villagers. In early November 1969, two young women travelling to their former village to gather vegetables were captured and killed. One of them, the daughter of a Polwar team member, had her ears and hands cut off and then was shot in the head. The other woman was dragged off into the bushes and never seen again. And back in Plei Doch, the continuing failure of the GVN officials to provide promised support continued to aggravate the villagers. Even the Xay Dung cadre and the Truong-Son militia went without pay and in late October summarily left Plei Doch to return to Pleiku until this problem was resolved.

As often happened at Plei Djereng and other camps in the highlands, the Special Forces team members stepped in to calm the situation, urging the villagers to stay the course and encouraging the LLDB to mobilize GVN support. Since arriving in the central highlands in 1962, Special Forces teams had built a bond of trust between themselves and the various montagnard tribes they recruited into the CIDG. This bond between the two groups was stronger than either group had with the third member of this triad, the LLDB. The mutual antipathy between montagnards and the Vietnamese had boiled over in a series of rebellions at Special Forces camps in 1964-1965, but by the late 1960s overt demonstrations of distrust between the two groups were rare although the enmity continued to simmer beneath the surface.

In the early months of 1970, as the "Vietnamization" of the war proceeded apace, GVN officials at the II Corps, Province, and District levels met with the assorted hamlet chiefs of Plei Doch to promise additional security measures as well as material support.

The GVN officials hardly had helicoptered away from the meeting when local VC infiltrated the village and again threatened the people, saying they would burn Plei Doch and kill anyone who tried to stop them. To reinforce their ultimatum, the VC, apparently with NVA support, mortared the perimeter of Plei Doch and fired rockets into Plei Djereng on 1 April 1970. The village chiefs hurried to consult with the LLDB commander, who told them not to worry. The villagers had heard this before, however, and decided to vote with their feet. When the USSF team medic went to the village the next morning to carry out his routine MEDCAP, he found only about 350 people where the day before there were more than 3,000. The remainder had left Plei Doch during the night and moved into the surrounding forest.

During this period, Plei Djereng continued to take sporadic 75mm recoilless rifle and rocket fire. One 75mm round detonated as it hit the sandbagged roof of 1Lt. Tony Traconi's hootch. Traconi emerged covered in dust and hard of hearing, but otherwise unhurt. Troops from the camp strike force who were not already out on operations to suppress this fire were sent to search for the villagers, but were



Plei Doch village scene, September 1969



Montagnard village 1969

unsuccessful. For two weeks the GVN officials fretted about what to do, but finally on 13 April 1970 sent out a company of Regional Force (RF) troops to find the villagers. Within a few days about 2,500 villagers drifted back to Plei Doch, but they noted upon their return that when the VC and NVA moved away from the area, they had taken all the young men and women between the ages of 14 and 20 years with them "over the river" to Base Area 702 in Cambodia. The returning villagers attempted to resume the precarious life they led at Plei Doch, but VC and NVA pressure were a threat that remained constant. Worse was to come.

US Special Forces team members permanently departed Camp Plei Djereng (A-251) at the end of October 1970, when the camp's CIDG force was converted to the 80th Border Ranger Battalion and the camp itself was renamed Le Minh.



Modern shot of Plei Doch, April 2014. This photo was taken at about the same spot as was photo #1, 45 years earlier



Modern rubber plantation near former Plei Djereng, April, 2014.

Epilogue

Le Minh came under serious attack by the NVA in early 1971. The attack, supported by heavy artillery and tanks, resulted in the final destruction of the Plei Doch resettlement village. Although the NVA pulled back after heavy fighting, the civilians were scattered. Many returned to their original hamlets, many others moved closer to Pleiku in hope of finding a more secure life and some, tragically, were killed in the crossfire. By this time the GVN had neither the resources nor, perhaps, the will to bring the villagers back to Plei Doch.

Le Minh was again attacked and overrun in September 1972, but the NVA pulled back to avoid themselves becoming targets of air-

strikes, leaving the Border Rangers to re-occupy the site. I visited the camp in May 1973, tasked by the United States Consulate General in Nha Trang to report on any violations of the Paris Accords that created the Vietnam “ceasefire.” At that time Le Minh consisted of about 200 men and their families, living within the few living quarters that remained habitable following the series of attacks against the camp during the previous two years. The remnants of abandoned Plei Doch still were visible from the rebuilt team house at the top of Plei Djereng hill, but most of the homes had been burned or otherwise damaged and the encroaching forest rapidly was reclaiming the streets and gardens.

Near the camp's helipad I encountered a former member of one of the Plei Djereng recon teams who remembered me and recounted the news of the former Polwar team I had recruited and closely worked with. All but one had died in combat during the past three years, either at Chu Pao near Kontum, in extended firefights around Duc Co, and finally in the outskirts of Plei Doch the previous year. The lone Polwar team survivor was the man whose daughter had been killed and mutilated by the VC when she was collecting vegetables. He had removed himself from the constant combat around Le Minh/Plei Djereng and sought security in a refugee camp near Pleiku.

Le Minh continued as a GVN outpost in western Pleiku Province until it was overrun one last time in September 1973. In his book *Memory of Tay Nguyen*, NVA General Dang Vu Hiep said the destruc-

tion of Le Minh was necessary to protect the secret construction of an oil pipeline from Cambodia into western Pleiku Province, a pipeline that he said provided important support to the final 1975 victory. This is probably the closest any senior NVA officer ever has come to admitting there was a vast communist military infrastructure on the Cambodian side of the border.

The postwar years in Vietnam have not been kind to the montagnards. Beginning in 1980, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) instituted a land grant program that offered free land in the central highlands to any northern Vietnamese that wished to come south and develop the area. At the same time, the SRV began establishing large government-owned rubber plantations throughout the



Modern view of Plei Djereng hill, April, 2014, looking west. Note PAVN radio antennae on left side of hill crest.

highlands. Vietnamese businessmen were allowed to claim land and establish private coffee and tapioca plantations. Montagnard claims to the land generally were ignored, but they were offered employment on the plantations, working alongside Vietnamese newcomers. Montagnard villages often were destroyed and the residents forced to move into Vietnamese towns that began to flourish along the roadways throughout the highlands. The SRV also has instituted a system of forced assimilation, refusing to teach any of the montagnard languages in school and forbidding the montagnard men to wear loincloths. Over the years there have been occasional montagnard demonstrations against Vietnamese policies, but these have been quickly and thoroughly put down. There is little chance these policies will be reversed.

I returned to Plei Djereng on a personal visit in April 2014, accompanied by a former member of MACV-SOG. We discovered that the Plei Djereng site now has a large Vietnamese community next to it, ironically named “Plei Doch.” The hill on which the USSF and LLDB team houses sat is now a Vietnamese army communications site. We discovered this when we tried to walk to the top of the hill and were intercepted by two People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) soldiers. After they got over the shock of seeing two foreigners in the area (and we had a serious case of déjà vu when we saw them), they informed us we could go no farther, but they did allow us to take pictures facing away from the hill. We did and then departed the area. Today there are no indications there ever was a Special Forces camp on that site (photo at top of page) or a large montagnard village nearby, but evidence of the expansion of Vietnamese houses, shops, and plantations is everywhere. ❖

Bob Shaffer © 2015



A photo of the author as a young man. August 1969.

About the Author

Bob Shaffer served at A-251 (Plei Djereng) as the CA/PO officer from July 1969 to January 1970, then was assigned as Assistant S-5 at B Company, 5th SFGA in Pleiku until June 1970.

After completing graduate school at the University of Arizona, he joined the U.S. Government in 1972 until retirement in 1999, serving in both foreign and domestic assignments. This included a posting in Vietnam from April 1973 through November 1974. Following retirement from the US Government, he worked for Northrop Grumman Corporation from 1999 - 2012.

Letters of Appreciation from ROTC Cadets



**Cadet Myeongeun
Chong**

"Dear SFA Executives,

Good evening, my name is 2LT Chong and I was the award recipient at CSUF ROTC Annual Awards Ceremony on May 15th (I was Cadet Chong then). I just wanted to thank you for the recognition and LTC(R) MacNamara's presentation of the certificate, ribbon, coin and the monetary award. This award was such an honor!

I also received a digital copy of your newsletter with LTC(R) MacNamara and my picture in it. Lastly, I appreciate your endless support for ROTC; I certainly learned so much from LTC(R) McNamara's teaching and mentorship this past year.

Many blessings to Special Forces Association Chapter 78.

Very Respectfully,
2LT Myeongeun Chong
United States Army"

"Dear Mr. MacNamara,

I am deeply honored and humbled to receive an award from such a great organization, and would like to express my gratitude. Although unfortunately brief, it was a pleasure to meet you at the ceremony. I hope to see you in LAPD following my service in the Army. Thank you once again.

Very respectfully,
Joshua Park"

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS CONTINUED

strongly supported SFA National until his death in 2006 from Hepatitis and Liver CA secondary to exposure in Vietnam. SFC Charles Carpenter, weapons SGT and a mentor to me was also transferred to a Mike Force Battalion at Kontum. "Charlie" was KIA at Ben Het leading a Mike Force Company in their defense. SFC Fred Hamilton was our Intel NCO and left the army after nine years to go into law enforcement. SGT Terry Leverton was the team demo man and left the army after his tour and had an early demise in the 1980s. SGT Frank Gomillia, Radio Operator, spent one full year at Plei Djereng, then became a lead radio operator at B-24 Kontum. Frank then left the army and had a very distinguished career as a senior police officer and administrator.❖



A-251 Plei Djereng May 68. L-R, SFC Frank "Speedy" Gonsalves, Lt. David Moley, SSG Terry Leverton, Sgt Frank Gomilla, SSG Lonny Holmes, SFC Charlie Carpenter.

ERIC BLEHM'S "LEGEND": A MUST READ SOG/AVIATION STORY CONTINUED

In this instance, the men of the 240th Assault Helicopter Company were the lead support helicopter element for that fateful mission into Cambodia, lead by Major Jesse James. Blehm points out the harsh political realities of American soldiers and aircrews having to cope with an enemy force supplied by Russia, China, and other Eastern Bloc nations, training and hiding with impunity in Cambodia.

All parties involved in battle that day had signed a treaty agreeing not to send armed troops into Cambodia or Laos. The U.S. State Department knew the communist troops were there but didn't expose them publicly while they made sure that no U.S. troops entered Cambodia, other than the men of SOG and the aircrews assigned to that mission. The men of the 240th AHC, the Greyhound slicks, and Mad Dog gunships flew into the teeth of a heavily armed and entrenched NVA force.

Here, Blehm puts his honed writing skills into high gear, as he lays out minute, painful details of the fight, complete with three extremely helpful maps. For any veteran whose been pinned

down by enemy gunfire, reading this battle account will have you feeling chills up your spine; it evokes memories of battles past. But few battles could be as severe as the hornet's nest that the Project Sigma team entered that day.

As I read the book, I got to know the men involved on both sides of the mission, thanks to the research and interviews Blehm garnered. I couldn't put the book down until I turned to page 276 and read the research and acknowledgments that Blehm outlined.

This is a must-read for any SOG/aviation combat reader or aficionado. "Legend" is available in eBook, hardcover, paperback, and audiobook formats.

About the author

Eric Blehm is the author of the New York Times bestsellers "Fearless" and "The Only Thing Worth Dying For." His first book, "The Last Season," was the winner of the National Outdoor Book Award, and was deemed by Outside magazine to be one of the "greatest adventure biographies ever written." He lives in southern California with his wife and children.