



THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SENTINEL

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Presidents Page

Book Review — Courting Danger

**The Battle Of SF Camp A-102
Tien Phuoc, Vietnam: The Story of a
Navy Seabee and an SF Medic**

**Wreath Laying Ceremony
To Honor President John F Kennedy
Letter to the Editor**





Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Wreath Laying Ceremony to honor President John F. Kennedy

On October 20, 2015, **Major General James E. Kraft, Jr.**, Commanding General 1st Special Forces Command, will be hosting a Wreath Laying Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery to honor **President John F. Kennedy** and his commitment to the Green Berets.

At the Presidential funeral on November 25, 1963, **Sergeant Major Francis Ruddy** laid his "Green Beret" upon the grave of the fallen president.

On November 11, 2011, **Brigadier General Edward M. Reeder, Jr.**, Commander of the U.S. Special Forces Command, and **2nd Lt. Christopher Kennedy McKelvy**, a great nephew of the fallen President, laid a wreath at the Kennedy grave in a ceremony to honor the fallen president's commitment to the Special Forces. Thus began a Special Forces tradition recognizing our fallen president.

Special Forces Association Administrator **Cliff Newman** attended both the 2011 and 2012 Ceremonies. Cliff also provided information about this event.

For further historical information on this ceremony please see the Winter 2011 edition of the "DROP."

Invitations are required to attend this special event.

Thanks to **Jim Duffy** (LTC, ret.), this issue of the Sentinel has a feature article on the 1969 Battle of Tien Phuoc, Vietnam. Jim called me from the Special Forces National Convention in Washington and suggested this might be a good piece of SF History to relate to our readers. He then put **John Cleckner** (Major ret.) on the phone who was the Team Leader of A-102, and we discussed the history of his camp. The story features two men, one a Green Beret Medic and the other a Navy Seabee. Both as well as all team members played a significant role in defending the A-Camp from NVA assaults. Little did I know at the time, but back in 1967, prior to both of these SF Officers deployment to Vietnam, CPT Cleckner was the CO of SF Company A in Training Group and LT Duffy was his Executive Officer. Talk about a small world, several enlisted SF Trainees' who we all know were in their company; **John Plaster** (Major, ret.), **John Stryker "Tilt" Meyer** and the future SFA President, **Jack Tobin** (LTC, ret.), also an enlisted soldier. ♦

Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

IN THIS ISSUE:

Presidents Page	1
Book Review —	
Courting Danger by Marc A. Theissen.....	2
The Battle Of SF Camp A-102 — Tien Phuoc, Vietnam: The Story of a Navy Seabee and an SF Medic.....	3
Wreath Laying Ceremony To Honor President John F Kennedy	6
Letter to the Editor	6

COVER PHOTO: A-102, Tien Phuoc Vietnam, May 1969.
Photo courtesy John Cleckner

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THE PRESIDENTS PAGE



Bruce Long
President SFA 78

PRESIDENTS COLUMN OCTOBER 2015

Our monthly business meeting was conducted at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club along with a buffet breakfast. A total of sixteen (16) Chapter members attended and two (2) guests.

Our guests were Elizabeth Eastin, Director of Development for CSUF, and Mrs. Lopez, the main contributor for the proposed ROTC Military Obstacle Course program at CSUF. Their

presentation was very informative, and the Chapter will take under advisement, on our participation.

Gary MacNamara and **Don Gonneville** will head up the committee to meet with LTC Waters OIC for the ROTC CSFU program, and discuss our concerns.

The general meeting started just after 1000 hrs. and adjourned at 1130 hrs. The reading of the minutes was waived and the Treasurers report was given by your President, as **John Joyce** was unable to attend due to prior family commitments.

Our October 17th event recognizing A/5/19 is just around the corner. **SFC Rob Pugh** from A Company advised that the parachute jump will be conducted at 0800 hrs. (subject to change) on Anderson

Drop zone located at Los Alamitos Joint Training Base in the city of Los Alamitos, CA 90720. All Chapter members are invited.

The October Chapter meeting will be conducted at 1600 hrs. at the Fiddlers Green Club which is just South / West of Anderson DZ in building 19, located on Yorktown Ave. When you enter through the main entrance, the banquet room is on the RIGHT. This should be a short abbreviated meeting.

Cocktail hour will be at 1700 hrs. The Chapter will donate \$500 with individual members donating \$700 for a total of \$1200 towards an Open Bar.

Buffet Dinner will be served at 1800 hrs.

Our guest speaker will be **Cliff Newman**, Executive Director of the Special Forces Association (SFA).

Jim Duffy will be overseeing the raffle prizes that will be given to A Company and SOD North personnel after dinner.

Please see strip map for above locations

I would really like to see a good turnout of Chapter members for this event. Remember, we are recognizing A/5/19 who will have just returned from Morocco, Africa after a forty-five (45) day deployment.

Any questions please feel free to contact me. ♦

Bruce D Long
President
SFA Chapter 78
SGM, SF (Ret)



Joint Forces Training Base
11206 Lexington Dr.
Los Alamitos, CA 90720

The Pub at Fiddlers Green
4745 Yorktown Ave.
Bldg. 19
Los Alamitos, CA 90720
(562) 795-2168

Drop Zone Parking
located on Saratoga Ave.

BOOK REVIEW

COURTING DISASTER

Author, Marc A. Thiessen



Mike Keele

By Mike Keele

If Marc Thiessen had somehow written this book five years before he did, the Left would have branded him a Witch and declared that burning at the stake was too good for him. On the other hand, the Right would have declared him a loon, with far more imagination than credibility. As it is, the book was written in the very early part of Obama's reign, with little but

the facts to be stated. The events were still clear in the minds of the CIA operators affected by the machinations of the Executive branch, which was hell-bent on fulfilling Obama's pre-inauguration proclamation to "fundamentally change this country."

Thiessen wrote this book to clarify the massively distorted image the media has created of the Intelligence gathering practices of the United States — and its allies, to a lesser degree — while presenting an equally massively distorted image of our enemies in this war.

Thiessen was hired as a speech writer in 2001, serving Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and then writing for George Bush from 2004 on. His book begins by proclaiming that it should not have had to be written. It is a lament of the degrading of our government's credibility from the very onset of the War on Terror. Disagreements over what could legally be done to combat this new and amoral enemy, and the legal roadblocks which were effectively employed against the Bush Administration's intelligence program have paved a smooth road for terrorism to flourish in our midst.

Thiessen lays a foundation of justification for harsh interrogation techniques on the doctrine of exigent circumstances, for the practices used by our intelligence gatherers. No prior enemy's actions can be compared to the assault by al Qaeda on the United States — and the non-Muslim world — in this century. With many years of observation under its belt, al Qaeda's brain trust created

a method of warfare designed to circumvent every protocol of decency written into the rules of modern warfare, while hiding behind those same rules to protect themselves. In this war, where small units — even individual soldier's — actions are planned, refined and perfected to insure maximum damage with minimum loss to the enemy, intelligence gathering is by far the most fundamental element of defense. It also allows us to transition from defense to offense when knowing the enemy's plans.

Thiessen describes in some detail the delicate procedures designed by the interrogators and interviewers for extracting information from prisoners of war and the motives behind them. He describes the tactics and philosophy of information extraction from hardened terrorists. He names the protagonists for the terrorists, describes their tactics and motives and provides a clear picture of their successes.

As an example, while Bush II was still in office, the notoriously left-leaning State Department worked hard to undermine the CIA's ability to utilize "enhanced techniques" of interrogation on high level terrorists, citing moral issues and a need to be humane to these prisoners.

Some of those "enhanced" procedures remain secret, and thereby useful to this day. In other cases, Thiessen describes the practice of



Marc A. Thiessen, author

"leaking" details of enhanced methods of interrogation to a press which is more than willing to "tell all," ostensibly to sell papers. The leaks might well be best described as a "torrent." The information is leaked with the knowledge that enemy fighters and their tacticians, learning of the leaked techniques, are able to create countermeasures allowing them to avoid disclosing information. Many of the "enhanced" techniques, referred to as "torture," are nothing more than clever mental manipulation. Thiessen cites examples of gullible reporters disclosing details of torture described to them by terrorists which were never verified prior to disclosure. On the bleeding heart surface, the stories sound gruesome. Upon examination, only a fool could believe such fabrications.

Continued on page 6

THE BATTLE OF SF CAMP A-102 TIEN PHUOC, VIETNAM:

The Story of a Navy Seabee and an SF Medic



John E. Cleckner Sr.

From the notes of John E. Cleckner Sr.

Laying in a rice paddy in early January 1969, Captain John Cleckner, Commanding Officer of A - 102, Tien Phuoc in I Corps Vietnam, was leading two indigenous companies of Montagnard troops and their recon platoons in an operation when they encountered a large NVA troop movement. Heading East bypassing his camp, moving toward the South China

Sea and the towns of Tam Ky, An Hoa and Chu Lai, CPT Cleckner counted hundreds of soldiers and porters carrying combat gear, rockets and large bundles. His first thought was this could be an African Safari except for the large amount of combat equipment.

Realizing that this large unit must be eliminated he contacted the artillery battery comprised of 155 mm guns located at his A Camp and they began a fire mission including HE and WP to destroy the NVA column. Following thirty minutes of sustained fire CPT Cleckner called the LLDB Commander (Vietnamese Special Forces) for a BDA. He refused. No followup was done much to his dismay.

Little did the members of A-Team 102 realize at the time, but this operation was the beginning of an attack on their camp that would last until September 1969. On February 23, 1969 a month and half later Camp Tien Phuoc was hit by a NVA Heavy Weapons Regiment. The prolonged battle was on!

Beginning in late 1968 thru early 1969 intelligence reports repeatedly noted the build up on North Vietnamese forces in the area adjacent to A-102. This also consisted of elements of the 3rd Regiment of the Second NVA Division. CPT Cleckner and the members of his team began in earnest to reinforce the camps defenses. One problem the team could not directly address was the rebuilding of their dirt runway which provided the team with supplies and reinforcements. Requests were repeatedly made to the C-Team in Da Nang and higher headquarters for combat engineers to upgrade the runway for use by C-123 and other aircraft.

In early 1969 a huge Sikorsky "flying crane" flew into camp and deposited engineering equipment adjacent to the runway. One man climbed out of the huge "chopper" and began moving the



Three members of A-102 at Tien Phuoc, I Corps Vietnam getting ready to go on operation with the camps Montagnard strikers, top L to R, then bottom row. Indigenous (Montagnard) radio operator, Cpt Cleckner, SSG Cashion, LT Dan Schulte, and three Montagnard Strikers



A-102 Team Commanding Officer,
Captain John Cleckner

equipment. CPT Cleckner was following this individual with his binoculars and asked his team who this guy was! His and their comments were “this guy is going to get himself killed.”

Several members of A-102 jumped into team vehicles, 3/4 ton trucks, and locked and loaded the .30 caliber machine guns and sped to the rescue of this lone figure on the runway. On their arrival the individual was getting out of a dump truck wearing a uniform no one recognized. CPT Cleckner asked him who he was. “I’m Godfrey” and some unit that the team members did not recognize. CPT Cleckner then asked him what he was doing. “I am here to fix your runway.” “Where is the rest of your crew” spoke Cleckner. Godfrey then said “I am the crew. I am a Navy Seabee and can do the job!”

So Cleckner asked him what his rank was. Godfrey replied in Navy terms and Cleckner again was mystified! So trying to clear the mystery in military pay grade terms Godfrey said he was an E-4. CPT Cleckner and members of the team then informed the Seabee of the danger of rebuilding the runway due to frequent incoming rounds and interdiction by the NVA and suggested that the two SF Engineers and camp security “help.” Godfrey was pleased at this support from the Green Berets!

Petty Officer Third Class “Seabee” Godfrey worked from daylight to dark every day and his work became routine. “I had nearly forgotten about him until the night and early morning hours of February 22-23, 1969,” said CPT Cleckner. “Just after 2am we came under heavy attack by the NVA with artillery fire then frontal assaults on the camp. During a heavy rocket attack just after dawn the camp XO...LT. Denny Drewry and Senior Medic...SSG Bob Cashon were both seriously wounded.” Petty Officer Godfrey approached CPT Cleckner and said, “what can I do to help?” He mentioned that his heavy equipment had been destroyed and that he was trained on the .50 cal. machine gun. Cleckner then assigned Godfrey to work with the Team Sergeant, MSG Ramon Mori, to man a .50 cal. bunker on the east side of the TOC. For the following nine days and nights they fought together with great valor.

At this phase of the assault on Tien Phuoc it was estimated that over 4000 rounds of indirect fire landed on the A-Camp. By intelligence the NVA suffered over 900 killed and wounded.

On March 6, PO Godfrey was seriously wounded but continued to man the .50 cal. machine gun during assaults. “When I heard of his wounds I had him medevaced” said CPT Cleckner. Following evacuation of Godfrey, Team Sergeant Mori told CPT Cleckner of the heroics performed by the Navy Seabee. Impressed with his team sergeants comments Cleckner recommended PO Godfrey for a Silver Star and a Battle Field Promotion.

The fighting continued and intensified despite support from The Americal Division and the 101st Airborne. TAC Air support was provided by all services which included the Air Force, Navy and Marines. “By the 15th of May we had been fighting for two and a half months against the NVA. Many SF Team members, especially the medics were wounded and required medevac and thus replacement.

SGT’s Cliff Neill and Francis Fox arrived as a replacements for Jim O’ Donnell.

By early May the NVA’s assault on A-102 had resulted in the Green Beret’s losing possession of their badly needed airstrip. On May 13-14 CPT Cleckner decided to organize an assault to retake their airstrip. MSG Mori, MSG Lloyd Lampkins and CPT Cleckner would each take a Montagnard Company and attack the NVA holding the airfield from the NW and SW.

Cleckner said, “I always take a medic with me on combat operation and decided on the new man, SGT Cliff Neill. I warned Cliff that there would be casualties.”

“On May 15 we went into the attack from a linear position on high ground above the NVA who were dug in along the airstrip from west to east. Firing down on them and tossing numerous grenades put a momentary halt on their resistance. One C-123 swooped in



SF Team A-102, Tien Phuoc Medic SGT Cliff Neill at a SF function wearing his Legion of Merit award from Vietnam.



L to R- Barry Archer CAPO Officer, John Cleckner CO, Bill Laprade XO, Phil Jacques Commo, Bob Keller CAPO Officer, attending SF National Convention.

and low-lexed its load and turned on its jet assists to leave when it began taking small arms fire. Another bird came in on a fast run and took a B-40 rocket thru the fuselage without exploding. The gutsy pilot dropped his load and left. A third aircraft was not so lucky and lost an engine but made a swift exit.”

Ready to call in close TAC Air Support, CPT Cleckner was at the relocated CP speaking with the FAC when a B-40 rocked exploded killing everyone except him. Unfortunately his left leg was hit by shrapnel on the inner thigh resulting in a severe vascular injury.

SGT Neill responded immediately from about twenty yards away dodging small arms fire and stabilized CPT Cleckner, applying tourniquets and starting IV's to infuse serum albumin. Viewed by members of the team to be near death, Cleckner was called in KIA.

However SGT Neill continued to provide excellent care and had the CPT moved to the camp helipad for rapid evacuation.

Arriving at the Americal Evac Hospital to a waiting team of doctors, who responded with surprise to see he was still alive, he replied “hell yes I am.” They told him he would loose his leg but would survive. Following several surgeries to include a vascular graft on the femoral artery John Cleckner survived. And his leg was preserved and functional.

Later during the battle SGT Cliff Neil was brought a badly wounded villager requiring an amputation of her leg to survive. Her recovery was monitored by doctors at the Americal Hospital and the C-Team Surgeon.

For his exemplary efforts as an SF Medic SGT Cliff Neill awarded the Legion of Merit. A very rare award for an enlisted man.

Medic Jon McCloud preformed heroically and was awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart. Bob Cashon fought hard and was severely wounded..... Jim O'Donnell was awarded three Bronze Stars with “V” for Valor. He graduated from medical school after discharge. The Medics of A-102 had performed magnificently.

Casualties from February 24 thru March 24 1969: SF KIA -1, CIDG KIA-54, SF WIA-12, LLDB WIA-3, Navy WIA-1, CIDG WIA -136*

The Seabee Command downgraded PO Godfrey's Silver Star to a Bronze Star with “V” for Valor, and awarded him a Purple Heart and promoted him to E-5, Petty Officer Second Class.

“My Team and I honor Godfrey to this day as part of our team and as a brother Warrior. That is my Seabee Story, about a guy named Godfrey. I never did know his first name, but he was one hell of an Engineer. He rebuilt our runway enabling us to be resupplied during a five month siege of our A Team and he still had time to kill a whole bunch of bad guys while wounded.

*Green Berets at War: Shelby Stanton, P-192
Story edited by Lonny Holmes



Major John Edward Cleckner retired medically from the 7th Special Forces Group. Major Cleckner was a prior enlisted soldier having served with the 82nd Airborne Division, and 3rd Special Forces Group after completion of SF Training. He then graduated from OCS, was commissioned a 2nd Lt., beginning his career as an officer with the 82nd Airborne Division eventually commanding Hq & Hq Company of the 508 PIR. He then returned to Special Forces having several choice assignments in CONUS. He was recruited for the Phoenix Program in Vietnam and ultimately Commanded two different A-Teams. He was then appointed 5th Group briefing officer by Colonel Rheault.

His decorations include the Soldiers Medal for Heroism, Bronze Star for Valor, Bronze Star for Meritorious Service, Purple Heart with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Army Commendation Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal with Bronze Star, Combat Infantry Badge and Master Parachutist Badge plus service and foreign awards.

Major Cleckner was appointed a member of the Special Forces DMOR and has been awarded the Saint Phillip of Neri Medal and the Ohio Medal of Valor. He has strongly supported the community and veterans issues since his retirement.

For further information see his DMOR biography at http://www.soc.mil/swcs/RegimentalHonors/_pdf/sf_cleckner.pdf



Letter to the Editor

August 25, 2015

Lonny,

As I told you, Jim or Dan Pirelli send me copies of your Sentinel each month. It is the best newsletter in the system as far as I'm concerned. I enjoy it more than the DROP actually.

Again, this month you nailed it again. Great reporting and writing about important stories about our SF History.

Thanks for Sharing.

I can't tell you how I am looking forward to the Tien Phuoc story.

John Cleckner



WREATH LAYING CEREMONY TO HONOR PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY AND HIS COMMITMENT TO THE GREEN BERETS

on Tuesday,
the twentieth of October, two thousand and fifteen
at ten minutes past noon

Hosted by
Major General James E. Kraft, Jr.
Commanding General
1st Special Forces Command
(Airborne)(Provisional)

Arlington National Cemetery
President John F. Kennedy Gravesite
Arlington, Virginia

Attendance by Invitation Only

BOOK REVIEW: COURTING DISASTER CONTINUED

Thiessen makes comparisons of the methods of torture used on American POW's of the Vietnam War with the interrogation and interview techniques used by our intelligence community in the War on Terror. Medal of Honor recipient Leo Thorsness, whose back was broken and his body "wrenched apart," by the North Vietnamese during interrogation, is quoted as saying "publicizing our enhanced interrogation techniques only emboldens those who will hurt us." He adds that "I would not hesitate a second to use enhanced interrogation, including waterboarding, if it would save the lives of innocent people." Admiral Jeremiah Denton, who famously blinked out "torture" while being filmed during an interview by Japanese reporters in Hanoi during the war, said "some of the things they did to us (in Vietnam) were torture. I passed out dozens of times from torture. We're not exerting that kind of excruciation." These are a fraction of the examples of support from former POW's who support the enhanced interrogation techniques now used, which refute the position of John McCain, who was also a POW who was treated poorly by the Vietnamese, but works tirelessly to undermine our ability to extract information from prisoners of war.

In sum, Marc Thiessen wrote a book in the early stages of the War on Terror which shows the growing cracks in America's moral and defensive fabric. What could be called "leaks" in post 9/11 terms has become a deluge of details on practices and tactics required of the intelligence gatherers to be combat and strategically effective in the ever evolving War on Terror. ♦