



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78
The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

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SOG Versus NVA Sappers

**Celebration of Life for
Conrad "Ben" B. Baker**

The Honorary Chinese Paratrooper



From the Editor

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FRONT COVER: A special warfare Airman from the 124th Air Support Operations Squadron fires his M4 carbine during a live-fire exercise near Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho, October 17, 2019. The training included static and movement-based training scenarios. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Joshua C. Allmaras)



Jim Morris
Sentinel Editor

The January Sentinel looks pretty good, and I was congratulating myself on that when Howard and Nancy Miller picked me up to give me a ride to the February chapter meeting. Then, soon after we left my place, Howard busted me for not giving him a photo credit on the Christmas party.

On the surface that might not seem like a big deal, but as an editor I have to take it as a major gig. People deserve credit for a good job, and Howard's photos were a significant contribution to the January issue. I promise, How, it won't happen again.

There are a couple of other things that, in retrospect, I coulda- shoulda-woulda done differently. Tilt Meyer's excellent piece on "SOG Recon Versus NVA Sappers" really should have been in the January issue. Some of the story takes place on New Years Day of 1968, and other parts on New Years of 1969. On the other hand maybe delaying the story a month was not a major screw up. The things that happened on those days were nothing to celebrate.

For that matter my own story in this issue, "The Honorary Chinese Paratrooper", should have been in the December issue. It's the story of how I went to Taiwan to buy Christmas cards for the 1st Group and came home a decorated "hero".

A key element of that story is my friendship with Tom Kiernan. He and I both had two TDY tours in Vietnam from the 1st Group. Then I went back to 5th Group for a PCS tour in Vietnam and he was a MACV advisor in Hue at the same time. Years later I went to visit him in Columbia, SC where he was in law school. One of his classmates mentioned he had two Silver Stars. I said, "Jesus, Tom, what did you do to get two Silver Stars.

He replied, "You remember an average day in Special Forces."

"Sure."

"We had two days like that."

"Honorary Paratrooper" first appeared in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. I was delighted when they published it, because they do very few humor pieces. Usually it's all blood and gore and charging the hill with a knife clenched in your teeth. Action is wall-to-wall in adventure magazines, and every combat man has a couple of those kinds of stories. But more than a couple and you become what they call a "casualty".

Much more common in the service are the stories that cause you to slap yourself on the forehead and exclaim, "I ain't believin' this!" For an organization that prides itself on uniformity and order the army is a marvelous source of absurdity.

Tilt has another story in this issue, one that is both sad and glad. We mourn the passing of Ben Baker, a most remarkable man who ran the Counterinsurgency Support Office on Okinawa and came up with most of the nifty stuff that enabled SF to do such a remarkably successful job in Vietnam, from tiger camo to exploding ammo left in enemy caches, to indigenous LRRP rations.

Not all of those innovations were successful. My favorite unsuccessful one was bata boots with fake bare footprints instead of cleats. They didn't work well, but what a wonderfully zany idea! ♦



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specialforces78.com
and sfa78cup.com



CHAPTER OFFICERS:

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Vice President Don Gonneville Susan Weeks	Chaplain Richard Simonian
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Bruce Long, President SFA 78

Welcome to our February 2020 edition of the *Sentinel*. Let me start by thanking all Chapter members who attended our January meeting. We had thirty members plus three guests, including our guest speaker Nick Brokhausen and his wife. Nick's presentation covered his experiences with Det 1 in Germany and while serving with MACV SOG in Vietnam. Nick has also written a second book, titled *Whispers in the Tall Grass*. Both books can be found on [Amazon](#).

Also, let's give a warm welcome to a new Chapter member, **Mike Jameson**. Mike served with 46th Company in Thailand at several remote locations. Mike was presented a Chapter coin (see photo on page 2). Hope to see him at our next Chapter meeting.

The first order of business was swearing in the new Officers. This was conducted by **LTC John Bleigh**, active duty Southern CA Recruiting Commander, and a Chapter member. The swearing in included yours truly for President; VP's **Don Gonneville** and **Susan Weeks** (Honorary Member), Secretary **Gary Macnamara** and Treasurer **Richard Simonian**.

The January meeting was primarily a planning session for the year 2020. The Chapter as a whole really wants to 'Step it Up'. Therefore, we plan on doing some live fire exercises, training with Artemis on some of their new high tech equipment and with Xiphos, a security company founded by retired Green Berets located in the Sacramento area. Their training will involve personal home security and self-defense. We also discussed taking some field trips. All of this will be overseen by our new VP **Don Gonneville**, who has a wide background with different organizations and a varied military background. These are two very important projects.

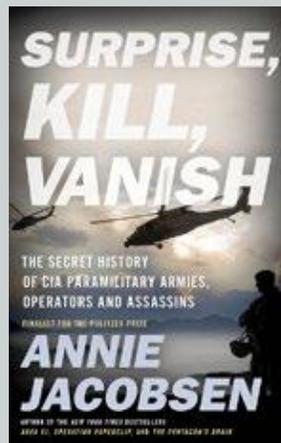
The Chapter Membership agreed that this year's Christmas Party will be held on December 13th, 2020, and will be held at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club. Mark your calendars now.

One very important point was presented by **Don Deatherage** during our discussions, and that's how do we really help our fallen Green Berets?

Here are some Points of Contact;

1. Green Beret Foundation (210) 775-1510.
2. Special Forces Charitable Trust (860) 767-1510.
3. Army Emergency Relief (703) 601-2768.

February Chapter Meeting With Guest Speaker Annie Jacobsen, Author



Annie Jacobsen, *New York Times* bestselling author and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, will be the guest speaker at the [July 2019 meeting](#). Her last presentation at the July 2019 meeting captured everyone's attention, and this presentation will no doubt be equally excellent.

If you are planning to attend the February 8th meeting please e-mail **VP Susan Weeks** at: Businesshelp.ca@gmail.com, no later than Thursday February 6, midnight. We need an exact headcount.

DATE: February 8, 2020

TIME: 8:30 a.m. Breakfast will be served.

LOCATION: Embassy Suites

**ADDRESS: 3100 East Frontera, Anaheim, CA 92807
(The SE Corner of Hwy 91 & Glassell St.)**

These figures you might find interesting — in 2018, the Green Beret Foundation invested \$1,917,529 in programs & services for 4,173 families.

In closing, we will be hosting our Chapter meetings **starting on March 14th at the Fiddlers Green Bldg 19 at the Joint Forces Training Center, located in the city of Los Alamitos, CA**. For those of you who don't know, the Joint Forces Training Center is the home of the 40th Inf Div along with A Company, 5th Battalion 19th Special Forces (A). All times to remain the same. Further discussions will be held at our next Chapter meeting on February 8th.

Also, let's start preparing for the SFA Convention in Las Vegas. Check out the website, www.sfacon2021.com. Our Chapter will be co-hosting this event with SFA Chapter 51 in Las Vegas. POC **John Joyce**, john@sfacon2021.com or (702) 649 2292. ❖

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

Attention Chapter Members

The Sentinel

FEEDBACK LOOP

Starting in March we are initiating an email column for mail from members. We really want to know what you think. We may not print every one, or all of every one, but we'll keep it interesting.

Send your emails to editor Jim Morris at jimmorris31@gmail.com. Please include your member number with your message. ❖



As mentioned at January's meeting, here's the site and info regarding Amazon Smile. Choose whichever organization you choose (I picked The Green Beret Foundation), your donations will accrue during every six months, then be forwarded to the organization you've chosen. If your organization is not present on their list, you can add it through the website. The new organization will need to follow up with documents to Amazon.

Log into this website (smile.amazon.com), sign in with your account info and pick your organization for donations. Amazon pays 0.5% of all purchases to your choice. ❖



New Recommended Suppliers for SFA Clothing and Accessories

For those of you who have asked for information for purchasing an SFA blazer and tie, here is the information with links to each site recommended by the SFA.

The best shop for an **SFA Blazer** is at blazerboutique.com. They do not carry the pocket patch, which can be ordered from SFA.

The best shop for a new **Beret** is General Jackson's at genjax.com. When ordering a beret you can also order the appropriate flash and the sewing service (\$3) if you need it.

For a new **regimental tie**, those are available at the JFK Museum gift shop at <https://www.jfkwebstore.com/store/>. You can also call the gift shop at (910) 436-2366 to place an order (Mon.–Tues. and Thurs.–Fri. from 11 am – 4 pm Eastern Time).

If you need to renew your **medals and awards**, the Medals of America website is useful:

https://www.medalsofamerica.com/medals-and-ribbons#/filter:branch_of_service:Army

Other SFA merchandise can be ordered via the order form at this link (call the phone number at the bottom of the form for questions or to order by credit card):

<http://www.specialforcesassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Merchandise-Order-Form-revised-11-17-17.pdf>

Orphaned “Montagnard” Girl Facing Deportation, Needs Help

This was brought to our attention by both Mike Bengé, well-known montagnard activist and Jim Coyne, former 101st ABN doorgunner and Soldier of Fortune correspondent.

You might be interested in supporting this GoFundMe:

My Home is the U.S.

My name is Elizabeth Rahlan-Ksor. I am 18 years old and currently a senior at Page High School in North Carolina. I am Cambodian & Montagnard, who was abandoned in a hospital and adopted by my Montagnard-Jarai parents. My parents fled to Cambodia

from Vietnam to escape religious persecution. Since immigration here at 6 months old, Greensboro has always been my home and I want to pursue dentistry after I graduate. However, my life has been placed on a halt because of my case and paperwork. My family and I have been fighting my case for 5 years. This has taken a toll on us and we are not financially stable to keep on fighting. All of the money I am raising is for legal aid in getting my adoption paperwork corrected in Cambodia and North Carolina so that I can re-file my green card.

To donate to this fund visit:

https://www.gofundme.com/f/63rct5-help-me-stay-in-the-us?utm_source=customer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=m_pd+share-sheet

Even a small donation could help Elizabeth Ksor reach this fund-raising goal. And if you can't make a donation, it would be great if you could share the fundraiser to help spread the word.

Thanks for taking a look! ❖

January 2020 Chapter 78 Meeting



Gary Macnamara

By Gary Macnamara
SFA Chapter 78 Secretary

The meeting was called to order at 0832 hours by President SGM Bruce Long with thirty Chapter members and two guests in attendance.

After the Pledge of Allegiance led by Sgt.-at-Arms Mark Miller and the Invocation by Richard Simonian, Tilt called for a moment of silence in remembrance of the Special Forces troops, all law enforcement personnel, fire and first responders who were killed (KIA) this past month. The number still missing (POW/MIA) and otherwise unaccounted-for (KIA/BNR) from the Vietnam War is still 1,587. Of that number 90% were lost in Vietnam or in areas of Cambodia or Laos under Vietnam's wartime control: Vietnam-1,246 (VN-443, VS-803); Laos-286; Cambodia-48; PRC territorial waters-7.

Chapter 78 welcomed new member Mike Jameson.

SGM Bruce Long introduced Nick Brokhausen and his wife. Nick, who had previously spoken at the September 2018 Chapter meeting, was this meeting's guest speaker. Nick gave a great presentation of his experiences with Detachment 1 in Germany and his experiences with MACV SOG circa 1970. Copies of his books, *We Few* and *Whispers in the Tall Grass*, his most recent book which was released in November 2019, were also available to members.

NEW BUSINESS

Swearing In of New Chapter Officers: LTC Bleigh swore in the Chapter Officers for 2020. Bruce Long is the Chapter President for 2020. Don Gonneville and Honorary Member Susan Weeks are the Co-Vice Presidents. Richard Simonian will continue as Treasurer. Gary Macnamara will continue as Secretary. Richard Simonian will be our Chaplain. Mark Miller will be our Sergeant-at-Arms. Jim Morris will assume the duties of Editor of the *Sentinel* from Lonny Holmes. Ed Barrett will continue as our ROTC Coordinator. Don Deatherage, assisted by Susan Weeks, will continue their work on our Chapter web site. Mike Keele will continue as the Enforcer and as the Special Deputy Assistant to the Treasurer.

Christmas Party for 2020: Bruce Long asked the members to confirm our 2020 Christmas Party date. The consensus was that 13 Dec 2020 (Sunday) would be a good date.

Meeting Location: SGM Long recommended that we have at least some of our

meetings at AFRC Los Alamitos. One of the benefits would be that members of "A" Company and SOD (North) could attend. The membership was receptive to the idea. March's meeting will be held at AFRC at the Fiddlers Green Bldg 19.

Training: Bruce recommended that we conduct some of our training at Artemis and with Xiphos. Artemis has some new 3d Reality Firing Program and scenarios.

Field Trips: SGM Long recommended that we have some field trips to various museums and airfields. Don Gonneville will research this idea.

Florida Convention 2020 and Las Vegas Convention 2021: For the 2020 Convention in Florida we are planning to send at least one representative. For the 2021 Convention we are supporting Chapter 51 in holding the conference in Las Vegas. John Joyce will have information for this event on our chapter Web Site. The 2021 will be held on 21-15 Oct 21 and attendance is expected to be 10,000. It will be held right after the SFA Convention.

GENERAL DISCUSSION:

Order of Saint Maurice: Jim Duffy was asked if he could prepare applications for six candidates for the Order of Saint Maurice. He will be assisted by the Chapter Secretary

Chapter Calendar for First Quarter of 2020: Bruce opined that a visit to one of the local museums either at Chino or an alternate site might be one of our activities. He also wanted to establish a date for a live fire firing day at one of the local ranges.

ROTC Presentations: Ed Barrett will be our ROTC Coordinator for this year. The Chapter Secretary received approval to purchase copies of the Army Officer's Guide for Fullerton Graduates and to obtain copies of the United States Constitution.

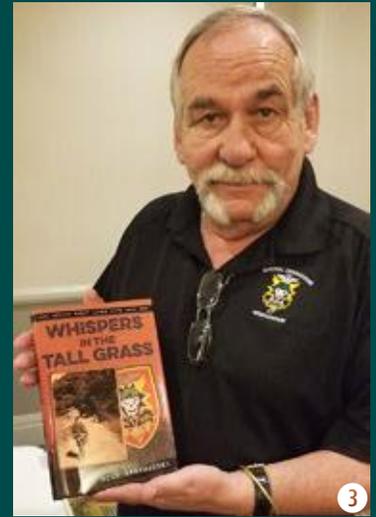
DROP Magazine: We have missed some of the deadlines for DROP articles. Mike Keele will obtain some photos for upcoming editions of the DROP magazine.

Next meeting: Embassy Suites, Anaheim on February 8, 2020, at 0830 hours ([see President's Page for details](#)).❖



LTC Bleigh swearing in 2020 Chapter 78 Officers, left to right, President Bruce Long, Co-Vice President Don Gonneville, Treasurer Richard Simonian, Co-Vice President Susan Weeks and Secretary Gary Macnamara. (Photo by How Miller)

SFA Chapter 78 January 2020 Meeting (Photos by How Miller)



- 1 Chapter 78 President Bruce Long presents a chapter coin to new member Mike Jamison.
- 2 New member Mike Jamison introduces himself to the group.
- 3 Guest speaker Nick Brokhhausen displays a copy of his newest book *Whispers in the Tall Grass*.
- 4 LTC Bleigh, our recruiter describing efforts and events.
- 5 Chapter member Mike Keele

- 6 Chapter member Len Fein made a short presentation.
- 7 Chapter members John Creel and Thad Gembacz
- 8 Chapter members Jim Duffy, Dave Thomas, and Rick Carter
- 9 Chapter members John Creel and Susan Weeks, along with others, enjoying breakfast prior to the meeting.

Celebration of Life for Conrad “Ben” B. Baker



John S. Meyer

By John S. Meyer

A celebration of life was held for Conrad “Ben” B. Baker, 91, January 4 at American Legion Post 105 in Redwood, CA hosted by SFA Chapter 23 and the American Legion. Because of his dedication and due diligence over the years, Baker was formally inducted into the Special Forces Regiment as the 12th Honorary Member on April 27, 2017 by Colonel Nestor A. Sadler, Commandant of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

Pastor Tim Drisdelle officiated the celebration of life for Baker. Chapter 23 Member Jim Shields eulogized about Baker’s rich history as a youngster growing up during the Great Depression before joining the Army in World War II and working with Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Soldiers presented Baker’s widow Shirley with an American flag, after the formal, ceremonial folding of it. Chapter 78 member John S. Meyer addressed Baker’s career during the Vietnam War’s eight-year secret war conducted in Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam under the aegis of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (SOG). SOG brass turned to Baker, the deputy commander for the Counterinsurgency Support Office (CISO) for everything from new highly-specialized equipment and weapons to indigenous rations. Based in Okinawa, he frequently traveled to Southeast Asia to meet the warriors he served.

As more Green Berets began serving in Vietnam and in the secret war, they often submitted unique, specific supply requests to CISO, for items that weren’t available in routine military supply channels.

As Meyer said, “James Bond had “Q.” SOG had Ben Baker.

“Because of the clandestine nature of the secret war, CISO and SOG had top priority for anything from air conditioners to SOG knives to weapons,” Meyer said.

In a 2017 interview, former OSS agent (Ret) Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, who served two years as Chief SOG – the officer in charge of SOG from August 1966-68 – described Baker as the critical, behind-the-scenes player in SOG’s secret war. “He was a supply wizard. Whether we needed High Standard 22s with silencers or special equipment for our indigenous soldiers, Ben would get it for us, one way or the other.”

In a [2017 interview](#) Baker told the *Sentinel*, “We did a lot of little things to help the men of SOG and other agencies. For example, in the early days of the war, SF used the HT-1 radio, but those radios used BA-30 batteries, the old lead-acid battery that was highly



Honor Guard staff sergeant presents the ceremonial flag to Baker’s widow Shirley Baker. Presiding Pastor Tim Drisdelle looks on. (Photo courtesy of George Eleopoulos, SFA Chapter 23)

inefficient. We changed to alkaline batteries and we purchased the best, which were made in Japan at that time. We had no ‘must buy American’ mandates. Our job was to get the best supplies needed for our troops, plain and simple.”

Within SOG annals, Baker is a legend for many reasons, including his unique inventions and items he purchased and/or helped to refine, which include:

- Inventing indigenous rations: Early in the war the Montagnards were getting the runs from U.S. rations. Baker traveled across Southeast Asia talking to key nutritionists and put together indigenous rations, which consisted of precooked rice placed in a plastic bag, shaped like a tube. The rice was laced with Vitamin B because the Yards had a vitamin deficiency. Baker went to Taiwan, got pre-cooked rice, then developed several rice seasonings, beef, fish, squid and mutton, to name a few. When he went to the Navy Laboratory requesting the official order, the bureaucrats told him it would take two to three years to produce it. Baker went to a company, placed an order for 30,000 meals for “about a buck a piece.” Shields said that by the end of the Vietnam War, CISO had produced approximately 88 million rations. Even highly respected 5th Special Forces Group Commander Col. Robert Rheault lauded Baker for getting those rations for the indigenous troops.
- Inventing “Eldest Son” ammo that exploded when used by enemy troops in their AK-47 or 81 mm mortar, killing or maiming the enemy. Baker and CISO staff also had old PRC-10 radios packed them with C-4 and would leave the battery in it and drop it in enemy territory. When an enemy would squeeze the talk key, it would explode.
- Inventing the first SOG Knife: The first model was honed from a Jeep spring, due to its metallic strength. He went on to use the stacked leather handle on it, that was an idea Baker got from his father’s Marbles Gladstone Skinning Knife. The SOG knife had a seven-inch blade with an upward edge to the blade for maximum penetration. Baker said he designed it so the weight and balance made it a good throwing knife too. Green Beret Medal of Honor Recipient SGM Jon Cavaiani told Baker he threw the

knife at an NVA soldier and it killed him. The first order of 1,300 SOG Knives went to Yogi Shokai, the Japanese trading company CISO worked with at that time.

- Indig Rucks: Baker invented the Indig Rucks because the things the CIA were using at that time were too big for the indigenous troops working with SF and the agency. All SOG teams used those rucks throughout the war.
- Improved the jungle boots: At CISO Baker and key staff members took trips to Southeast Asia to talk to the men in the field because they believed that it should be the man in the field who should determine what their troops need, not some bureaucrat sitting behind some desk at DoD or the White House. Baker told the *Sentinel*, “When they came out with jungle boots we put the metal plate in the bottom due to the gosh-awful punji sticks the SF men and their indig were encountering in ‘Nam – punji sticks that had been dipped in human excrement, to worsen the infection.”

Baker made more than 80 visits to SEA during the Vietnam War. If they needed socks, CISO would send them bundles of socks. If they needed black berets, CISO staff got them and shipped them in a timely fashion. When black rain gear was requested, CISO got them to SOG men. Today, those blacks pullover SOG rain jackets are collectors items valued at hundreds of dollars.

Meyer pointed out that there was a practical side to Baker too: “At one point, every team wanted 12 or 13 Rolex watches, the Oyster model I believe. They got Seiko watches instead that cost \$6 or \$8 apiece.” The Seiko watches were among the first self-winding watches with a luminous dial, and had the day and date on it. The luminous dial was so bright SOG recon men had to cover it with gloves or black electric tape at night.

Also, there were times that Baker or his staff would send experimental weapons to SOG recon teams for testing and opinions. For example, during 1968 at the top secret SOG base, FOB 1 in Phu Bai, CISO staff sent a gyro pistol and a large pump shotgun that fired the 40 mm round used in the M-79 grenade launcher. The gyro pistol was turned back, and the experimental pump was turned back after ST Idaho carried it on one mission. It had a bad habit of jamming while extracting the empty cartridge. When it worked, five rounds could be fired in less than a minute, which gave a six-man recon team a lot of firepower, but a lot of extra weight to carry in the field.

Baker was a WWII veteran who served briefly in General Douglas MacArthur’s headquarters staff before putting his organization and logistics skills to work with Field Engineers. In 1963 he was working in Okinawa when Special Forces Capt. David E. Watts put together the Counterinsurgency Support Office (CISO), with Baker leading the development of the new office. CISO supplied clothing, weapons and equipment to Special Forces, some federal agencies and to indigenous forces operating in Vietnam and denied areas. Baker served as deputy CISO commander from June 1963 to October 1972 when he traveled the width and breadth of Vietnam. His travels included more than 80 trips to forward base camps in Vietnam.

Continued on page 7



The Army Honor Guard performs the formal flag folding during the Baker service. (Photo courtesy of George Eleopoulos, SFA Chapter 23)



Photos of Ben Baker, including him with a box of indig rations, with wife Shirley and Colonel Nestor A. Sadler, Commandant of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School on April 27, 2017. (Photo courtesy of George Eleopoulos, SFA Chapter 23)



Among those attending the Baker celebration of life were from left: Bekkee Estes, SOA President Rick Estes, Chapter 23 member Pete Lawrence and Chapter 78 member, John S. Meyer. (Photo courtesy of George Eleopoulos, SFA Chapter 23)

U.S. Army Special Forces Taps:

CSM(R) Merlyn Deray Eckles
September 9, 2019
Kennedale, Texas
Special Forces & MACV-SOG



Bonnie Cooper

By Bonnie Cooper

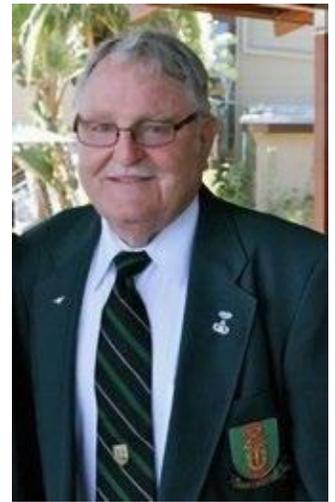
Command Sergeant Major Merlyn D. Eckles SFA D552L

Merle Eckles was born on 29 April 1935, on a farm near Quimby, Iowa. He joined the California National Guard in 1955, and completed basic training at Fort Ord, CA. From 1956-1957, he served with the 17th Infantry Regiment, in Korea.

Later, Merle volunteered for Special Forces and subsequently served with the following units: Co. B, 17th SFG(A) from May 1961 to Oct 1965; Co. A, SF Training Group from Oct 1965 to Feb 1966; Co. B and C, 3rd SFG(A) from Feb to Sept 1966; B-56, 5th SFG(A) from Sep 1966 to Oct 1967; 12th SFG(A) USAR from Oct 1967 to Mar 1980. Merle was especially proud of his wartime service in Vietnam with B-56 Recon. From July to Nov 1991, during the First Gulf War, he was the CSM for the 88th S&S Bn in Saudi Arabia. During his military career he completed the Intermediate Speed Radio Operator Course, Airborne School, Jumpmaster Course, Ranger School, SF Operations and Intelligence

Course, SF Tactics & Techniques, Advance SF Intelligence, Senior NCO Development Course.

Merle was honorably retired from the military after 35 years of combined Active and Reserve service. Among his many awards and decoration are the Combat Infantryman Badge, Master Parachutist Badge, Special Forces Tab, Ranger Tab, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star Medal w/V, Meritorious Service Medal w/olc, Army Commendation Medal w/olc, Good Conduct Medal w/2-clasp, National Defense Service Medal w/star.



CSM(R) Merlyn D. Eckles

Before her passing in 2006, Merle was married to Gail. They had one son William Darby Eckles. From a previous marriage, Merle had a daughter Tamara Lynn Andrews. Merle worked many years for the San Diego Gas & Electric, before retiring from the company.

Merle was a dedicated and active life member of the Special Forces Association and the Special Operations Association. He was a charter member and the first Chapter President of the SFA Chapter 75, when it was formed in San Diego, CA in 1997.

On 9 September 2019, Merle died of cancer near his home in Kennedale, TX. He served his country and Regiment well in peace and war. Merle will be greatly missed by his family, friends, and the Special Forces community.

De Oppresso Liber

Editor's Note: A celebration of life for Merle Eckles was held on Saturday, January 18th, 2020 at St. Mark's United Methodists Church in San Diego. Members from Chapter 75 were in attendance, as Merle was a member there before moving to his final RON in Texas.

Celebration of Life for Conrad "Ben" Baker continued

He conducted many of those missions with Special Forces Legend SGM Walter L. Shumate at a time when Baker was instrumental in organizing and executing classified operations that had a significant positive influence on the Special Forces mission, including providing unique and experimental weapons tested by SOG Recon Teams and other top secret operations.

When Baker was inducted as an honorary member of the Special Forces Regiment, Chapter 78 Member Singlaub sent a note to Baker that read:

"Dear Ben, I just want to add my feelings to your recent honor and to thank you for spending so many years providing your special

skills and ideas to the whole Special Operations Community in the Western Pacific. We all benefited from your activities and years of service.

"Please accept my most sincere thanks and congratulations. John K. Singlaub, Maj Gen, USA (Ret)."

After Baker celebrated his 90th birthday, he read Singlaub's quote to Meyer. "I'll never forget that note," Baker said.

In a recent phone call, Singlaub echoed the sentiments of SOG warriors and their indigenous troops when he added that Baker would be remembered for his service to SOG and the CIA. ❖



SOG RECON VERSUS NVA SAPPERS

By John S. Meyer

In late 1967 and early 1968 The North Vietnamese introduced a deadly new combat element into the eight-year secret war of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (SOG)– NVA sapper teams, highly trained communist soldiers with one mission: Kill SOG Americans.

During the summer of 1968 – the deadliest year of the Vietnam War, recon team members talked among themselves about the “rumor” of NVA sappers, wearing only loincloths and bandanas, armed with AK-47s and hand grenades. During a pre-mission briefing for a target in the A Shau Valley, in August 1968, S-3 warned of reports of NVA sappers.

Tragically, on the morning of August 23, 1968, at FOB 4 in Da Nang, rumors became real with horrific results as a well-planned, early morning sapper attack left 16 Green Berets dead – the highest total of SF killed in one day in SF history.

Rewind to New Year’s Eve 1968 at FOB 1 where Camp Commander Major William Shelton ordered extra base security, including having all reconnaissance teams and Hatchet Force personnel on alert in case the local VC or NVA attacked. Months earlier, a VC had placed a marker on the roof of the Green Beret Lounge, which VC or NVA mortarmen could use as a target guide-on. In preceding days, one of the Hatchet Force NCOs had found a camp worker carefully counting his steps as he walked away from the clubhouse. That was a common practice for mortarmen or artillerymen to improve their accuracy on a proposed target. As we prepared to ring in the New Year, the jukebox blared, the drinks flowed, the men played the slot machines, and the poker stakes were high. But there was an edge to the evening’s festivities. Shelton ordered the club closed early, in case of enemy activity.

Before it closed conversation around our poker table turned to the FOB 4 team on the ground in the MA target area, around the DMZ river as it extends into Laos. One-zero Rodney Headman told us how happy he was to have been extracted in time to spend New Year’s Eve at FOB 1, instead of across the fence. A few comments were made about how the team in the target area planned to celebrate New Year’s Eve. Someone mentioned that the Americans had taken a bottle of Jim Beam to the field for the occasion.



John Meyer and Robert J. “Spider” Parks in 1968 at FOB 1 Phu Bai. (Photo courtesy John S. Meyer)

Headman and I gave each other a skeptical look. Personally, I wondered how they could carry a glass bottle and not break it. Another recon man said the two SF troops were unhappy about having to run a target on New Year’s Eve. However, the S-3 brass cut them no slack and sent them out anyway. I knew one of the team members, Wayne Hawes, from Special Forces Training Group and considered him a good recon man. He had served in Canada’s military before joining the US Army and becoming a Green Beret. I loved his biting sense of humor.

The other two Americans, Jim “Mickey” Hall and Mike McKibban I knew only slightly. Hall had been in the Army 11 years and was highly respected. McKibban got bored at West Point, thought he’d have more fun in Special Forces and wound up at FOB 4.

Around 2200, Robert J. “Spider” Parks told us that he and the Covey pilot were going to fly into the team’s AO at midnight to wish the men a “Happy New Year.” While Spider’s O-2 was over the target area, the mortarmen at FOB 1 lit up the sky with flares of various colors and other rudimentary explosive devices, welcoming in the New Year.



Left, SOG trooper on patrol. Right, SOG on patrol. (Photos courtesy John S. Meyer)

When he returned to base, Spider told me it sounded as though the Americans had too much Jim Beam. He gave the team holiday greetings and a reminder that they were in Laos. The only activity we had at FOB 1 was from a poorly trained VC mortar crew who lobbed some mortar rounds at us, but they landed in the ARVN compound to the south instead.

Bright and early on 1 January 1969, Spider left FOB 1 early for a commo check with RT Diamondback. He talked to the team's radio operator and returned to Phu Bai. Later in the morning, however, the 1-2 requested a tactical extraction from the AO because there had been a lot of enemy activity around them. While Spider was talking to the 1-2, he heard a burst of AK-47 fire and screams. Then silence. For a long time he was unable to raise anyone on the radio. He knew something was terribly wrong. He finally got an indigenous team member who said that the Americans were dead, but the indidge had survived the attack.

Back at FOB 1, around 1200 hours, someone from the commo shack came into the club and said a Vietnamese team member was on the radio, talking to Spider. That was very bad news. Several of the recon team members in FOB 1 headed toward the commo shack. Before we got there, Tony Herrell, a veteran recon man, came around the corner with more bad news. "They were hit by sappers. It doesn't look good," he said.

As always, when a team was in trouble, several team members pulled out their PRC-25s, attached a long antenna, and monitored any radio traffic they could pick up. From FOB 1, SF troops usually could hear the Covey rider talking to the team on the ground. Transmissions from the team, however, were too far away to be picked up in Phu Bai. The only news this first day of the New Year was bad. We could hear the Covey rider patiently talking to the Vietnamese team members on the ground. They were obviously

shaken. At first, we assumed the Vietnamese team members were wounded. But as time passed, it was apparent that the three Vietnamese were alive and had suffered no combat wounds. In addition, there were no NVA casualties.

It appeared the Americans had been slow to react to the deadly sapper attack. In a matter of seconds, the sappers killed the three SF troops and chose to leave the South Vietnamese team members alive. The news about the sappers was a triple dose of bad news: First, we had three dead Green Berets. Second, reports we had received for months about NVA sappers being a lethal force in the areas of operations in Laos and Cambodia were now confirmed. Third, by killing only the Americans, the NVA pulled off a psychological coup. By leaving the Vietnamese team members alive, their survival would plant seeds of doubt and dissension between SF troops and our little people.

That tactic worked momentarily at Phu Bai. Some of the U.S. personnel in camp, those who didn't work daily with the little people, openly questioned the loyalty of the Vietnamese team members. (Autopsies of the three Americans would later confirm that they were killed by enemy AK-47 rounds, not CAR-15 ammo.) I went over to the ST Idaho hootch and told Hiep and Sau to have the team be alert for any untoward comments from U.S. personnel in camp. I also asked them to learn as much as they could about the Vietnamese team members as quickly as possible. They later reported back that the Vietnamese men were solid recon men.

I headed back to the comm center. The radio room usually took on an eerie silence after a team had been pulled out of a target. That afternoon was no different. The only sounds in the comm center were radio tones, hums and static while the men waited for the helicopters to return to base.

Whenever a team was hit as badly as this recon team had been, the comm center took on an additional somberness. On the first day of 1969, it was tomb-like. Three Americans dead, no apparent intelligence other than that all of SOG now knew that the NVA sappers were as good as they had been touted in earlier briefings.

For Herrell and me, it was hard to swallow because we had lost a friend. Forever. For several minutes we just sat there, deep in our own thoughts. It had been about ten minutes since the pilots had called in to report that all of the fateful team members had been recovered and were returning to Quang Tri.

None of the aircraft extracting the team received significant ground fire from the NVA. To me that was a definite indicator the NVA wanted to send a psychological message along with the carnage the sappers had wrought on that team. On 30 November, we had lost seven SF troops and an entire Kingbee crew. Thirty-two days later, we lost three Americans.

And since this was a secret war, Walter Cronkite could tell viewers that he no longer believed in the war, but he couldn't tell the American public about another day in SOG.

I stood up and started to walk out of the comm center. A war-weary voice broke the long silence in the comm center with a short, clear transmission: "Happy New Year." His words caught me off guard.

I thought of those three words in the context of the many close calls ST Idaho had survived since the day I joined it, the same day Sergeant First Class Glen Oliver Lane, Sgt. Robert Owen and an entire ST Idaho team had disappeared in the Prairie Fire AO. I thought of how every member of ST Idaho would probably have been killed in action had it not been for the heroics of Kingbee pilots, Marine and Army helicopter gunship crews and Uncle Sam's Air Force.



Summer 1969, Spider Parks, Don Wolken and John Meyer at Ft. Devens.

On 1 January 1969, the NVA upped the ante and the thought of going across the fence with this new enemy element in the mix sent a sobering chill down my spine. I walked over to the club and had my first drink since August.

ST Idaho boarded Kingbees to launch into an MA target in another attempt to find the NVA gasoline pipeline.

And while we headed north to Quang Tri, 101st Airborne Division choppers carried the six men south. When the choppers landed

RT Diamondback Members KIA 1 January 1969



SSG JAMES MICHAEL "MICKEY" HALL, came from Benton, Kentucky and was buried in Marshall County Memory Gardens Cemetery in his hometown. He left behind a widow and three children, including a daughter born 11 days after his death. He was on the 4th month of his third tour of duty in Vietnam. He had been in the Army 11 years. His awards included the Bronze Star for meritorious service.



SP4 WAYNE LINDSAY HAWES was a native of Canada. He was survived by his wife Jacqueline, his mother Mrs. Elsie A. Hawes and a brother, Clinton Darrell. He was buried with full military honors on January 23, 1969 at Forest Lawn Cemetery (Burnaby, British Columbia). Wayne's name is on the Canadian Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The North Wall) in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.



SSGT MIKE MCKIBBAN was born in Vancouver, Washington but after his mother's death, he was adopted by his Uncle John Parisotto at the age 7 and grew up in Kalmath Falls, Oregon. At age 10 he was an award winning marbles player. In high school he wrestled and played football. For a short time he attended the United States Military Academy (West Point). He was survived by his adoptive parents and sisters Sue, Toni, Linda; brother John and his biological father James F. McKibban.

(Photos and information courtesy Bonnie Cooper)

on the helicopter pad, Colonel Jack Warren ordered every man in FOB 4 out to the site. He was held in high regard by SF troops because he genuinely cared about his men. It had been said that because of his dedication to the SF mission and the men of SF, that he would never advance beyond the rank of colonel. He had remained in SF too long, a career decision the traditional Army hierarchy despised and punished.

This fateful team was from FOB 4, which Warren commanded. At the time, FOB 4 was transitioning into becoming Command and Control North (CCN) as part of a major consolidation of resources within SOG. FOB 1 would join FOB 4 in Da Nang. Where once there had been six FOBs, there would now be three bases, CCN in Da Nang, Command and Control Central (CCC) in Kontum, and Command and Control South (CCS) at Ban Me Thuot.

After the three corpses were unloaded from the helicopter, Warren gave a terse, teary-eyed speech to his captive audience. Warren warned everyone that if they were careless in the field, death was the result of that carelessness. Then he bent down, opened a body bag and picked up a portion of a body of one of the dead Americans. Now he was crying and screaming at his men to never be careless in the field. Warren was never the same after that. Neither was SOG. Rumors were replaced with deadly results. ❖

Book Review

Parthian Shot by Loyd Little



Kenn Miller

By Kenn Miller

Warning: This is a paean, an advertisement, more than a mere book review, don't expect to get the full story from this book review. It is still possible to find copies of *PARTHIAN SHOT* if you look for it, and you will be in for a splendid time if you do.

Loyd Little, the author of the amazing novel, *PARTHIAN SHOT*, served as a Special Forces medic in the Mekong Delta in the early days of the Vietnam War, and his novel came out in 1973. Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, more and more books by Vietnam War veterans — many of them by Special Forces — were being published. Most of them were published, ignored, and soon sent to the remainder bins. In the 1960s and '70s, the American literary world was not very fond of the Vietnam War, and those who served in it and dared to write about it without craven apology.

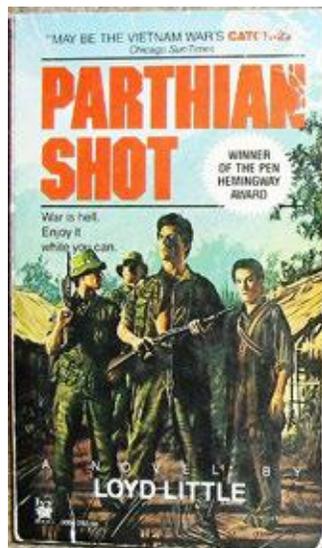
But when it was newly published *PARTHIAN SHOT* got extremely positive reviews and comments. The Chicago Sun-Times called it “maybe the Vietnam War’s *Catch-22*.” I think it is at least that good — or better than *Catch-22*. The New York Times called it a “Finely balanced satire...A comic apocalypse.” Barkham Reviews says *PARTHIAN SHOT* is “A work of genuine quality...A comic novel in the classic sense of the form.” *PARTHIAN SHOT* won the Pen Hemingway Award. During an era when the military and its members were widely despised by those who considered themselves “the intelligentsia” Loyd Little’s novel was widely praised — and then forgotten.

PARTHIAN SHOT is the story of a half team detachment, A-376, that was officially returned to Fort Bragg at the end of its deployment, but had not actually returned. The men of A-376 were still in

their camp near the town of Nan Phuc, forgotten by their controlling C-Team and the whole U.S. Army. The rains were coming down hard, the local VC were getting feisty, it was getting dangerous to waterski on the Bassac River, the Green Berets were running out of money and everything else, and the area was beginning to flood, so the six men of A-376 hold a meeting and decided what to do. And that’s where this splendid, roguish story begins.

For fear of giving away too much and ruining this story, I will tell no more. If you haven’t read *PARTHIAN SHOT*, you will be glad you do. It is a whopper of a Special Forces story — a true Green Beret classic. ❖

Editor’s Note: *Parthian Shot* is available in hardcover and mass market paperback on [Amazon](#). New copies are very expensive, but good used copies are at reasonable cost.



Parthian Shot

By Loyd Little

Ballantine Books
(January 12, 1987),
289 pages

Last Out: Elegy of a Green Beret



How Miller

By How Miller

I'm not a performance art critic, but I saw the play "Last Out" on 19 January in Santa Barbara and felt compelled to share the experience.

It was well balanced doses of intensity, humor, sound and lighting effects, and most of all — great acting.

On this simple set, these four superb multi-role actors grab your heart and don't let go.

It is for each of us to determine if we can risk the intensity of the material; but they do have a couple PTS professionals at each performance for the rare occasions when their services might be useful.

LTC (R) Scott Mann who spent 18 of his 23 years' service with Special Forces, 3½ years combat deployed to the sandbox, plays Danny, a career Green Beret NCO with many deployments. Scott is also the scriptwriter, and he and his real wife started the production company on their own.

Len Bruce was an SF Team Sergeant, spending multiple deployments in the sandbox. One of his roles is Danny's officer friend and in another he speaks with a convincing Pashtun accent.

Bryan Bachman spent 8 years with the 82nd Abn Div. including combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is very convincing, both as a Green Beret's (Danny's) son and as a non-hearts-and-minds chickens**t officer.

Ame Livingston is an accomplished actress of some 20 years including stage and television. Besides directing the play she plays Danny's girlfriend — then-wife in a performance you are not likely to forget.

This play has an amazingly thorough grip of the complexity of issues faced by today's professional combat soldiers. So many of them, especially in SF, are serving a seemingly endless procession of six month combat tours. Many of us who served in Vietnam were satisfied with one or maybe two one-year combat tours. Only the career soldiers went more than that, and usually only by volunteering.

This leads to an increasing burden on the families which is so amply and emotionally demonstrated by this play. The same burdens that were borne by our loved ones, but more of it.

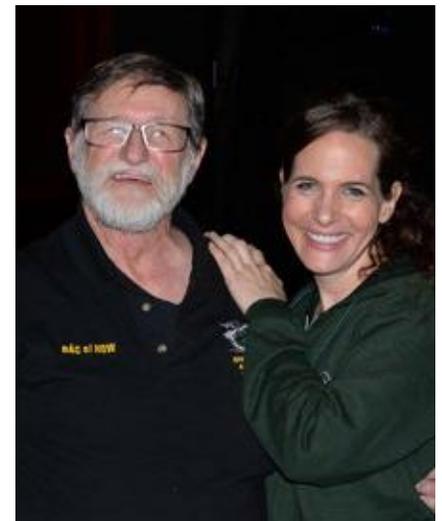
The play is also just the tip of the iceberg that is the outreach that this group does. Scott is also an author, TED speaker, and driving force behind outreach programs such as www.theheroesjourney.org



Above, at top, the cast from *Last Out: Elegy of a Green Beret*. (Jamie Dunn / Heroes Journey photo)

Above, center, How Miller and Scott Mann, writer of *Last Man Out*, who also played the role of Danny, and The Wall (Photo by Rick Carter)

Right, How and Ame Livingston, director of Last Out and who played the role of Danny's girlfriend/wife. (Photo by Rick Carter)



which helps Vets put their experiences down in words so they can get some perspective and leave some footprints for the next generation to benefit from. He also has a website: <http://www.rooftopleadership.com/> which offers free leadership guidance, based on applying a Special Forces hearts-and-minds approach.

There is a very good interview with Scott by one of our local digital newspaper contributors, Judith Smith-Meyer:

https://www.noozhawk.com/article/play_last_out_elegy_of_a_green_beret_aims_to_inform_true_costs_of_war.

Also there will be a performance in Coronado in November, and they are hoping to secure an L.A. date as well. ❖#

Beat the Reaper



THE FIVE RITES

By Jim Morris

I got the title for this column from an old Firesign Theater skit from the sixties, about a quiz show on which the loser gets offed. But it seems like a good title for a fitness column for the old and battered. I am expecting an interested audience, as it is difficult to imagine an organization whose members are so old and battered, and yet in such good shape. This doesn't happen by accident, so you're probably already doing something. I'm going to share what keeps me from falling completely apart, and hope others will do the same. I'm always looking for new and less boring exercises.

This one is the key set in my workout, and has served me well for many years.

THE FIVE RITES

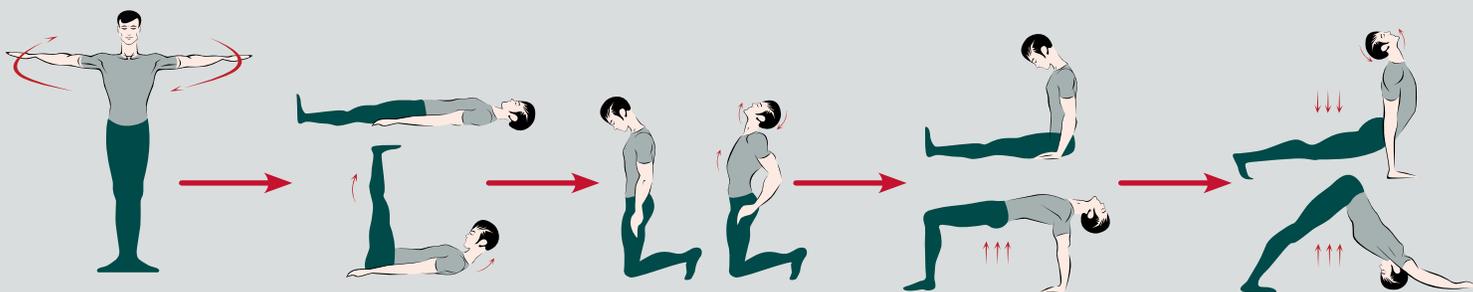
It's a set of five anti-aging exercises, supposedly Tibetan, originally set forth, at least in the West, in Peter Kelder's book *The Ancient Secret of the Fountain of Youth*. You don't need the book to do the exercises. I'll tell you how, and then recommend you Google it, as there are at least two video demonstrations, one by the ubiquitous

Dr. Oz. But the book is a good read, with an interesting story of how the set was discovered by a British colonel, who later taught them to Kelder. No one could believe how old the colonel was. I was sixty-six when I started doing them, sixteen years ago, and that's how old most people guess I am today.

I was given the book by my sister, Sandra, who knows more New Age stuff than anybody else I know, and I let it sit in a stack by my desk for two years before I read it, as I was a bit put off by its talk of chakras and the like. The theory behind it is that one ages when the chakras (the body's energy centers) wind down, and the purpose of the exercises is to wind them back up again. Yeah, sure! But, hell, they were free and Sandra has never steered me wrong before.

The idea is to start with five reps and add a couple every few days until you built up to 21. So I did that and the improvements started immediately. Most exercises build up slowly and you feel better after awhile. These brought an immediate rush of energy, and by the time I reached 21 reps added a couple of energetic hours to my day.

Okay, here's what they are:



1 Whirling. Stand, put the arms out horizontal, and whirl in a clockwise direction 21 times. The book is insistent on whirling clockwise. It also points out the youthfulness of the whirling Dervishes, but they whirl counterclockwise, so who knows?

2 Lie on your back with your arms at your sides and raise your legs vertical 21 times. Inhale on the upswing, exhale coming down.

3 Kneel and lean back as far as you can, putting your hands behind your back, and then back up 21 times. Inhale on the lean, exhale on the straighten.

4 Sit with your hands beside your hips, palms down, legs extended, draw the legs back to where they're vertical from the knees down and swing the torso up horizontal, so you, kind of, make a table out of yourself, and then come back down, again 21 times. Inhale on the upswing, exhale on the down.

5 Get in the front leaning rest, only instead of doing pushups go into what yogis call "Downward Dog", or, in other words make an A-frame out of yourself, then swing all the way down, arms still extended vertically, but with your belly on the floor, again 21 times. Inhale going up, exhale coming down.

That's it. Takes ten or fifteen minutes, and the results are little short of miraculous.

The Honorary Chinese Paratrooper

Seeing Your Buddies Covered With Glory First Eats Your Lunch



By Jim Morris

In the early months of 1963, I received some odd assignments, as assistant adjutant of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne). I supervised the carving of a large pair of parachute wings out of ice for a formal ball. I ordered the names of officers departing from the Group headquarters engraved on boxes of dessert bronzewear purchased cheaply in Thailand (field grade) and on sterling silver silent butlers purchased even more cheaply on Okinawa (company grade). I had my ass chewed into slivers of bloody fat for misspelling Lt. Col. Matola's ("Motola") name on his farewell gift, a brass usabata. I do not to this day know what a usabata is, or what purpose it may serve, other than as a platform for engraving.

I found all this deeply humiliating.

My selection as assistant adjutant had nothing to do with any administrative skills I might have, which were nil. I had become the assistant adjutant so that I might perform the additional duty of Public Information Officer. There was no slot for a PIO in the Table of Organization and Equipment of a Special Forces Group. But the Group Commander, Col. Robert W. "Woody" Garrett had determined that his best shot at even one star was good publicity for the Group.

This was so because the general who commanded the U.S. Army, Ryukyu Islands (USARYIS) Lt. Gen. Paul W. "Small Paul" Carraway hated, or was rumored to hate, combat troops. In 33 years of military service he had never, as Colonel Garrett put it "smelled smoke in combat."

Col. Garrett, on the other hand, had smelled a lot of it. In World War II he had at first commanded a company in the 6th Ranger Battalion, as did Bull Simons. Then, at age 27 Col. Garrett had been promoted to major and taken command of the battalion. This guy had been Bull Simons commanding officer. To me he was a god.

But a strange and whimsical god. Hence my being highjacked to Group Headquarters.

While I was cranking out press releases my buddies, my classmates from SFOC were going to Vietnam, on six-month temporary duty tours, and returning covered with glory.

Me, I was covered with a pair of novice parachutist wings and shame.

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Col. Garrett challenged me on one of those occasions on which I groveled and

begged to be put on a team and sent in harms way. "You get more training than anybody."

Good Training

This was true in a way. I got to do all the flashy stuff, so I could write it up for the 1st Group magazine, *The Liberator*, or for *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. I made night drops in Korea (frozen DZ, fractured coccyx) and water jumps into the East China Sea.

I sat in a rubber boat, with a full A-team, on the deck of the USS Perch, the Navy's troop carrier sub for the Pacific, at night under a quarter moon, and heard the horn blow and the command, "Dive! Dive! Dive! Dive!" followed by a frightful "FRA-A-A-CK!!!" as the gills or whatever the hell they're called opened, and the water gurgled, and the sub sank out from under us, and the froth rose around us.



Young Captain Morris, newly returned from Vietnam and reinstated as Assistant Adjutant of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), chokes down an hors d'oeuvre at a Dining In ceremony. Captain George McKenzie reaches for another hors d'oeuvre. (Photo courtesy Jim Morris)

Photo at top of page: Morris's Chinese Jump Wings Certificate.

We paddled hard, so the giant gloop of the sub going down wouldn't take us down with it. Then we rowed to Northern Okinawa for a simulated snatch of a nuclear scientist or some such. Phosphorescent plankton dripped off the paddles as we rowed for shore.

So, great! I was learning all the sneaky pete ways to infiltrate, but I was losing basic skills. My code speed was about eight words a minute and dropping fast. I hadn't fired a weapon of any sort since Bragg, much less learned how to repair foreign weapons.

It would have been some consolation if I believed that publicity would get Col. Garrett promoted, but I actually believed it would have the opposite effect.

Alas, Gen. Carraway, our rose-growing, administration-loving five-foot five and one-half foot general was never going to promote Col. Garrett or anyone like him to flag rank. Colonel Garrett's best shot would have been to keep a low profile and make sure his paperwork was perfect. This, as you know, is not the Special Forces way.

Consider, if you will, the event for which I had had the jump wings carved from ice, our formal ball. This event, so far as I could determine, had no function other than to convince Gen. Carraway that the officers of Special Forces were not thugs and snake-eaters, but were in fact perfect little gentlemen, patiently serving their time, dotting their i's and crossing their t's.

We had the ice-wings and the cake. The officers wore mess whites and the ladies long gowns. We raised our glasses in formal toasts. We put on innocuous skits. We danced the night away. Indeed, it all went perfectly until the general, well pleased so far, left at ten-thirty, so as to be up early the next morning to cultivate his roses. He was most displeased, however, to discover an SF captain and



All Morris's friends are going to Vietnam, and returning covered with glory. He is stuck writing press releases on Okinawa. (Photo courtesy Jim Morris)

an SF major, both drunk as lords, in their beautiful mess whites, duking it out in the parking lot.

Both were transferred to the 503d the next day, but the damage had been done.

Parenthetically, the 503d had not yet been redesignated the 173d Airborne Brigade. It was formally known by the cumbersome title The First Airborne Battle Group, 503d Infantry Combat Team, Reinforced (Separate). I once heard a Marine lieutenant ask an officer from the 503d, "Okay, SF has Airborne in parentheses after their designation, and they yell "Airborne! Airborne!" on their runs. What do you guys yell, "Separate! Separate!"

Jocks and Engineers

Col. Garrett had promised he would only keep me in the PIO slot for six months, then put me on a team bound for Vietnam. But to me six months was an eternity. Most of the junior officers in SF had a couple of years in a TO&E Airborne unit, either the 82d or the 101st. Most were OCS guys with enlisted time. Most were jocks, engineers, Rangers. And they were going to Vietnam and returning covered with bronze and silver stars, CIBs, Vietnam jump wings, Montagnard bracelets.

I was none of that. I was a ROTC kid with a degree in journalism who had come to SF from a basic training center. I was on fire to prove myself.

And they wanted me to go to Taipei to buy Christmas cards for the Group.

That's right, Taipei for Christmas cards. We'd been running a joint exercise with the Chinese Special Forces on Taiwan. Some of our best teams had been running around in the hills for three months. Col. Garrett and selected members of the Group staff were going over for the critique and I was to accompany them.

Printing was cheap on Taiwan. The combined Officers and NCOs Wives Clubs had put together a project to get knockout Christmas cards for the Group, and as assistant adjutant I was to be the project officer. I was delighted with the opportunity to go to Taiwan, but Jesus! Christmas cards?

The wives had come up with four designs and I had to narrow their choice to one.

I can only remember two of them now. One was a gag card, a cartoon Santa Claus going down the chimney wearing a green beret and a bellicose expression, carrying an alicepack full of automatic weapons, old rifles with long bayonets, and grenade launchers. The other was midnight blue, with a fourpointed gold star and the words "PEACE...Our Profession" in Olde Englishe letters. I had to pick one, from a consensus of the senior NCOs.

The consensus of the senior NCOs was that they didn't need to be bothered with this shit. My favorite reaction was from the Charlie Company sergeant major. "What the fuck is this?" he snarled, waving the midnight blue card. "'Peace...Our profession' my ass. You get a card that says, 'War...Our Profession', and I'll buy that son of a bitch."

“Not really in keeping with the spirit of Christmas, Smaj,” I said. He gave me a look that made the utterance of the sentence, “Who gives a shit?” completely unnecessary.

As far as I know nobody did, give a shit that is, except the wives clubs. I certainly didn’t. And I don’t think the matter weighed heavily on Col. Garrett’s agenda.

Too Much Accident Area

These things were on my mind as I drove my rusted old Rambler to my home in beautiful Awase Meadows. My wife and I lived in a virtual cartoon of suburbia in the hills overlooking an expanse of paddy-diked rice fields, and beyond them the coastal strip of highway one, with its 35 mph island-wide speed limit and its signs. One said “FOLDING SCREEN” on one side, but “FLODING SCREEN” on the other. My personal favorite was “TOO MUCH ACCIDENT

AREA—FUTENMA POLICE DEPARTMENT.” Every bar on the island had a sign that said, “All under 21—No stay!”

Most of my classmates at SFOC had come to Okinawa together to staff the newly formed Delta Company of 1st Group. Those of us who were married had found housing together in newly and oddly constructed off-base housing. Across the street were Tom Kiernan and his wife, Grace. I hadn’t known Tom well at Bragg, but we’d come to Oki on the same flight. Tom had come to SF from the 101st. He was a Ranger.

He was pulling into his driveway on a popping Kawasaki street bike as I pulled into mine in the Rambler. He swung off he bike, tall, angular, with narrow shoulders, an impressive schnoz, quite Roman in fact, and high cheekbones. I dismounted from the Rambler, being careful not to dislodge any big flakes of rust. My car was rotting from beneath in the salty air of Okinawa.

“Hey there, Mr. PIO,” Tom called. “What’s shakin’?”

“I’m going to Taiwan,” I said.

“Neato!” he replied. “I’m going to Vietnam.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I responded cheerfully.

My contact on Taiwan was Bill Rován, another classmate who had been assigned first to Okinawa, then selected to be Executive Officer of the resident team on Taipei.

It took all of two hours to transact my business in Taipei. I would monitor the critique, but basically I was through.

The debrief, at least what I saw of it, was nothing like what I expected. I never saw a map, chart, or graph. I have to assume that the teams and staff sections held their own, where those things were in evidence. But I was in bloused khakis with Col. Garrett, and his contact was Gen. Chao, who, as they used to say back in Oklahoma, “put on the dog.”

With us it was all Chinese modern décor, padded chairs at coffee tables, with chilled rolled wash clothes on a platter, to cut the heat of the day. “Tea or coffee? Hors d’oeuvre?”

An L or T Configuration

I learned that all things had not gone as planned throughout the exercise and many valuable lessons were learned thereby. For instance, at that time the standard SF way of lighting a drop zone for a night drop was to fill number ten cans, the kind that are used to pack large quantities of vegetables, stewed tomatoes and the like, for mess halls, half full of sand and gasoline and laid out in an L or T configuration with another offset to show the direction of the wind.

What the Americans did not know was that Taiwan had a large number of brick factories and these brick factories had their chimneys laid out in L and T configurations, resulting in the American teams being dropped more or less at random all over the island. The methods they used to get from where they landed to their assigned areas were many and varied, but often involved the use of taxicabs.

The conversation of the higher commanders at that coffee meeting was earnest and serious, but I couldn’t understand any of it. There was an exchange of really fancy plaques.



Morris got to do the flashy stuff, like rappelling, but he was losing basic skills. His code speed was down to eight words a minute, and he hadn’t fired a weapon since Bragg. (Photo courtesy Jim Morris)

One thing I did learn though, was that there was going to be a friendship jump the following morning. Then we adjourned for a twenty-five course Chinese dinner for about five hundred, everybody who had participated in the exercise and everyone who had bought Christmas cards. This was followed by truly amazing acrobats.

“Hey, Bill,” I said after the acrobats. “I’m hurtin’ for a pay jump. How about getting me on that manifest?”

“Sure,” said Bill. “Got any fatigues?”

I shook my head.

“I’ll loan you a pair of cammies.”

Quasimodo With a Hernia

This was before the Agency ordered fatigues for us in the tiger-striped pattern, so the cammies Bill loaned me were in the Sears Roebuck woodland pattern. That afternoon we went by his team house and he got them out of his locker. I was four or five inches taller than Bill. They were tight and I couldn’t blouse the trouser legs, but they would serve. There was a similar problem with the chute.

These were standard U.S. Army T-10s, but the straps had been cut down and sewed down for the smaller Chinese jumpers. I couldn’t let the straps out far enough for a comfortable fit. In the whole rig I looked like Quasimodo with a hernia.

That afternoon Rován delivered me to the flight line, squeezed into his cammies, the legs hanging even with my boot tops. All the Americans who had participated in the exercise were drawn up in ranks and I fell in on the back end. A couple of ROC C46s were parked beside the strip. So was a big pile of T-10 assemblies; chutes, reserves, and kit bags. One rank at a time we drew our rigs, chuted up and were organized into sticks. It was the very definition of a Hollywood jump, no rucks, no weapons, no wind.

Nonetheless the old adrenalin surged. I was thrilled at the prospect of jumping a C46. This was the aircraft that had flown paratroopers to Sicily, to Normandy, and which had flown the Hump to drop supplies to teams fighting the Japanese in China and Burma. No matter how goofy I looked or felt this was a thrill I would remember and savor.

I didn’t know anybody on the airplane, but they were fun to watch. For one thing, even though I didn’t know them, they all knew each other. They had been running around in the woods for three months, and for the most part hadn’t seen anyone but their own team and the Chinese acting as their guerrillas. They were choked with war lies, and could hardly wait to compare notes about the exercise. Most jumps are pretty intense, but there was a party atmosphere. The aircraft was filled with chatter and raucous laughter.

Then someone yelled, “Hey! Who’s the jumpmaster?” We all looked around, but nobody pled guilty. It wasn’t a problem. I was one of perhaps three guys on the plane who wasn’t jumpmaster qualified. Finally somebody else yelled, “Let Major Peters do it. He’s the tallest man on the aircraft.”

A tall major, about 6’6” stumbled to the front of the plane and made the stand up motion. He didn’t say anything. We stood up and he crooked his finger and tugged at an imaginary static line. We hooked up and checked our static lines without command. He patted his reserve and we checked our gear and the pack of the man ahead.

Finally he cupped a hand to his ear and called “Sound off for equipment check!” The guy at the end of the stick called out “OKAY!” and slapped the guy in front of him on the ass. The call rippled forward without numbers, because no one had the slightest idea of his number in the stick. Major Peters moved into the door. There was no grabass now. It was showtime.

Blue Above, Green Below

The light winked green. Major Peters disappeared. The stick began its slow shuffle toward the door, left foot leading, stomping, gathering speed like a train leaving the station. The guy in front of me disappeared and I wheeled into the door. Blue above, green below. Lung Tan Drop Zone was like a pool table the size of Rhode Island, a huge flat manicured lawn.

I vaulted up and out and felt the four little pops on my back that told me the rig was open. I looked up into a perfect green canopy with the sun shining through it. It seemed only a moment later that the ground rose and I hit and rolled, one of my few perfect parachute landing falls.

I got out of the rig and stood up straight for the first time in about an hour. It felt good. My jump pay for the next three months was assured, and that felt good too. I rigger-rolled my chute and put the assembly in the kit bag, shouldered it and walked to the turn-in point, feeling loose.

I expected to hook up with Rován and get ready to go back to Oki. But we were assembled in ranks again, and a small Chinese general who bore a marked resemblance to Porky Pig came out, and made a ringing speech about how we were all going to the Mainland together. “After you, my dear Alphonse,” was the thought that went through my mind.

Then the general went down the line and put Chinese wings on us all. I could think of nothing as the general approached but the utter glee I felt that for a brief time at least my shirt was going to be more gaudy than Kiernan’s. The fact that it meant not a goddam thing only added to my pleasure.

Tom stepped out of his house to greet me when I drove the rusty Rambler into my gravel drive. Apparently he was just in from the field. He wore filthy fatigue pants, flip-flops, and a home-died green t-shirt. His face and hands were still covered with green grease-paint. He held a beer in one hand. His team was just about ready for deployment. I approached him, smiling, chest out, Chinese wings gleaming. He looked at me and said, “You son of a bitch!”

I was happy. ❖



U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. David House



U.S. Army National Guard photo by Maj. David House



U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Paige Behringer



U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jason Hull.