



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 9 • SEPTEMBER 2021

**9.11.2001
NEVER FORGET**

**Special Operations
Task Force-71,
Afghanistan, 2007**

EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS

Paying For It With Our Sanity

Desert Storm

**Sf Team Fights for Survival
Behind Enemy Lines**

PART ONE:

**The “Double Nickel” —
Special Forces in El Salvador**

The Escape of Anh Tuan Tran: Part One





SENTINEL

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 9 • SEPTEMBER 2021

From the Editor



How Miller
Sentinel Editor

As this issue goes to publication, we are all focused on getting allies out of Afghanistan safely, while it is rumored Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah are to become members of a 12-person governing council under an Emirate President, as a transitional government — time will tell.

This *Sentinel* will be the second to be emailed to all SFA members, after receiving a warm reception to the first one, the August issue. Again we have interesting articles from a range of SF involvement, from Vietnam to El Salvador,

Desert Storm and Afghanistan, not in that order, followed by current news and a brief reference to the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Our 5th SFG(A) ODAs inserted into Afghanistan starting on October 18, 2001 and we will cover some of that in the October issue.

A memorial, and pictures, provided by SOTF 71, of action in the field in Afghanistan. Two members of the team were at our August meeting to tell us more about what happened back then, while updating us on present events.

Alex Quade shares an intensely personal experience and pleads for us to seek help when appropriate. Her photographer, Greg Danilenko, took most of the pictures in "Paying For It With Our Sanity". Her poignant story deals with dangers we face by being at the tip of the spear.

John Friberg, Editor and Operator of the excellent site SOF.News tells of how Americans, and SF in particular, value the lives of civilians, and often endure added danger because of it. A Green Beret hideout during Desert Storm was discovered by children, who were allowed to leave, eventually leading to intense fighting.

Greg Walker recounts a very successful SF effort that few really know about in El Salvador. Limited by an arbitrary limit on the number of SF advisors permitted in country, and a prohibition against fighting alongside their indigenous allies, they did what they had to, to get the job done. He sets up the situation in Part 1, including how other communist nations, including Vietnam sent advisors to help the communists.

Marc Yablonka shares "The Escape of Anh Tuan Tran" about the experience of a former South Vietnamese Marine in the "re-education camps" in Vietnam after the fall. It sounds like a movie script, but it really happened. His different treatment at different locations is illuminating. Stay tuned for part 2 next month.

Though the *Sentinel* is called a news magazine, outside of chapter news, we usually deal with perspective on past SF activities and personal accounts. The urgency of the current situation in Afghanistan begs for coverage.

Kabul: in scenes reminiscent of the fall of Vietnam, as this goes to press, a lot of the world's attention is focused on how to extricate large numbers of American allies from Afghanistan before the Taliban quit trying to appear benign in public, while they are secretly hunting those who worked with the Americans and other Western allies. As they did

Continued on page 2

IN THIS ISSUE:

President's Page.....	1
<u>Special Operations Task Force-71, Afghanistan, 2007.....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Paying For It With Our Sanity</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Desert Storm – SF Team Fights for Survival Behind Enemy Lines.....</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>PART ONE: The "Double Nickel" — Special Forces in El Salvador.....</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>The Escape of Anh Tuan Tran —Part One</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Attention SFA Members: MEDIC!</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>SFA Chapter 78 August 2021 Chapter Meeting.....</u>	<u>22</u>

FRONT COVER: New York, USA — May 24, 2018: America's Response Monument in Liberty Park near NYC 9/11 Memorial in New York.



Please visit us at
specialforces78.com
and sfa78cup.com



CHAPTER OFFICERS:

President Bruce Long	Coordinator of ROTC Program Ed Barrett
Vice President Don Gonneville Susan Weeks	Chaplain Richard Simonian
Secretary Gary Macnamara	Sentinel Editor How Miller
Treasurer Richard Simonian	Immediate Past President John Stryker Meyer
Sergeant At Arms/ Quartermaster Mark Miller	

Funding for the SFA Chapter 78 Sentinel is provided by



VETERANS AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAM

A program of American Veterans Assistance Group

888-923-VETS (8387) • VeteransAffordableHousing.org

The *Sentinel* is published monthly by Special Forces Association Chapter 78, Southern California — art direction and design by Debra Holm, Dinwiddie Holm Graphics. The views, opinions and articles printed in this issue do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Army or the United States Special Operations Command the Special Forces Association or Special Forces Association Chapter 78. Please address any comments to the editor at sfchapter78@gmail.com.



US ARMY SPECIAL OPS COMMAND



US ARMY JFK SWCS



1ST SF COMMAND



1ST SF GROUP



3RD SF GROUP



5TH SF GROUP



7TH SF GROUP



10TH SF GROUP



19TH SF GROUP



20TH SF GROUP



8TH SF GROUP



11TH SF GROUP



12TH SF GROUP

From the President | September 2021



Bruce Long, President SFA Chap. 78

Our August meeting at the Fiddlers Green in building 19 at the Joint Forces Training Base (JFTB) in the city of Los Alamitos came off without a hitch. We had forty members and guests in attendance.

John Joyce of SFA Chapter 51 (former member of SFA 78) gave us all a quick overview of the upcoming convention in October of this year. Also in attendance from SFA Chapter 51 was Lonny Holmes (along with his daughter, Kim) and Brad Walker. As of this date, there were less than one-hundred rooms still avail-

able at the Orleans hotel with over eight-hundred personnel who have sent in applications along with their checks who plan on attending.

Debra Holm is officially an Honorary member of SFA 78. I personally presented her with her silver metal I.D. card.

SFC Ken Atkinson, NCOIC S-3 OPS C/1/19 SF (A), gave us a quick update on their activities, which included an Airborne Operation onto Anderson DZ located JFTB. Ken also gave us an update on the new PT test, known as the **Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT)**. There are a total of six events: 1. Strength Deadlift; 2. Standing Power Throw; 3. Hand-Release Pushups; 4. Sprint/Drag/Carry; 5. Leg Tuck; 6. Two (2) Mile Run. For more details, visit <https://www.army.mil/acft/>. A real ball buster.

Our guest speaker COL Pat Mahaney (Ret) provided us an in depth look on what is currently happening in Afghanistan. Also in attendance was one of the COL's Afghan interpreters simply known as Nimo, who provided boots-on-the-ground scenario. The Chapter overwhelmingly recommended that he be made an Honorary member of our Chapter. At the writing of this column, I have submitted his name along with supporting documentation from the SF community to National. No photos of Nimo will be published due to Operational Security (OpSec).

Next month our main topic for discussion will be the SFA Convention and volunteers needed to make this Convention a total success.

We will also receive an update on the issuing of CCW in LA County, and an update from Debra Holm on the implementation of our new software program, and how it impacts the Chapter.

Our next meeting will be Saturday, September 18th, same time, same location. Please remember to RSVP Don Gonneville at don@gonneville.com on your plans of attending this very important meeting.

Our October meeting will be held in Las Vegas.

As usual, if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to me.

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

Look Who's Reading the Sentinel

USAF FACs & GENs (r) who flew CAS & MISTY in Vietnam. ("Misty," is a group of combat-experienced fighter pilot volunteers who formed a top secret squadron in South Vietnam, provided Fast FAC in F-100s.) These men also original RTB, "Red Tag Bastards".

Top row: LG Erv Rokke (former DAT to Moscow during last days of USSR, Dir.Intel USEUR, Dean Natl.Def.U, Dean USAFA), Jerry Smith (B-52 pilot), Rip Blaisdell ("world's greatest fighter pilot", 1k hrs single engine combat)

Middle row: MG Don Shepperd (former CMDR ANG, Misty), COL PK Robinson (POW, Misty), Jim Mack (Misty)

Bottom row: War reporter Alex Quade, Tim Gilmartin and Bob McNaughton (both retired from airlines)



From the Editor continued

when they gained power before, they would often appear sympathetic in public while “enemies” were visited and killed by men with completely hidden faces in the night.

Americans with passports are largely being allowed to reach HKIA for evacuation. Not so much for interpreters and others that worked with us, and their families are subject to threatening visits by the Taliban. This is still a worry for many of the lucky tens of thousands who manage to get flights to safety.

Whether it is just our focus on the interpreters who worked with us, or an actual fact, interpreters seem to be at the top of the list of those in peril of elimination. Many have already been killed, especially during the last few months. It seems anyone who still has personal contact with them is trying hard to help. Time and numbers do not favor them. During our chapter meeting one of our guest speakers, an Afghan interpreter, got word of another interpreter having been killed. We are being secretive about his identity for the safety of his relatives who remain there.

Recent news is filled with ISIS-K bombings and rescue efforts by SF and other Vets. People that are close to our chapter, as well as around the country and probably the world, are working the phones tirelessly to do what they can. Most of us can only hope for the best.

Needless to say, there are many from all different wars who will strongly feel hurt, anger, and depression at this time. If you are one, please reach out for help. There is help beyond your personal support network available. For example:

24/7 Crisis Hotline: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Network

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

1-800-273-TALK (8255) (Veterans, press 1)

Crisis Text Line

Text **TALK to 741741** to text with a trained crisis counselor from the Crisis Text Line for free, 24/7

Veterans Crisis Line

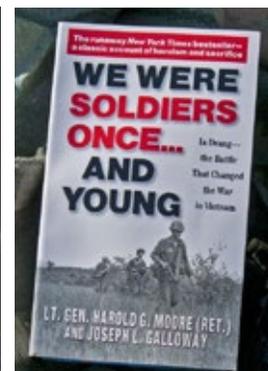
Send a text to **838255**

Joe Galloway a legendary war correspondent, who has been described as Vietnam’s Ernie Pyle, and was a mentor to Alex Quade, was 79 when he died Aug. 18 at a hospital in Concord, N.C.

Dennis Anderson on August 22, 2021 on coffeordie.com described a meeting with Joe.

“Joe was at home in L.A. — as much as he had been in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, or the streets of Moscow during the Cold War. He had been bureau chief for United Press International in all three places. He was the essential globe-trotting, veteran journalist.” (<https://coffeordie.com/remember-ia-drang-galloway/>)

Joe has described how he desperately finagled a seat on a chopper in to the heat of the Ia Drang Valley battle. In giving permission LTC Hal Moore said something like “If he’s crazy enough to come out into



At left, Joe Galloway is presented a branding iron by Maj. Gen. Michael Bills, commanding general, 1st Cavalry Division, during a screening of *We Were Soldiers* at Fort Hood, Texas, June 11, 2015. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Calvert, U.S. Army). At right, *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young*, the 1992 book by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and war journalist Joseph L. Galloway about the Vietnam War. It was adapted into the 2002 film *We Were Soldiers*. (Photo by Spc. Ken Scar, courtesy of DVIDS)

this, let him come.” Joe, taking along his personal M16, ended up being the only civilian to win a BSV in Vietnam. An auspicious beginning to a long and heralded career.

And finally, here’s a feel good moment as Sunisa Lee, a Hmong American (SF’s allies in Vietnam) wins Olympic Gold: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r645C0hYHtY>

This *Sentinel* will likely reach you near to the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. There will be much media coverage about the event, so we will just touch on it here. On October 18th, 2001 is when the first 5th SFG(A) ODAs inserted into Afghanistan to begin America’s and the Western World’s on-the-ground response. As mentioned earlier, we will cover some of that in the October *Sentinel*.

Below is a link to a recent FBI description of the events of 9/11/2001, the beginning of a long fight which continues today against Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. It includes the first American response by some of the passengers on Flight 93 heading east over Pennsylvania. This is why we went to Afghanistan in the first place, led by those three SF ODAs of the 5th Group.

<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/remembering-911-attacks-20-years-ago-shaped-todays-fbi-082621>

Also included below is a link to Alex Quade’s 19-minute Horse Soldier video, including interviews with a few of the real “Horse Soldiers” and the making of the “America’s Response” statue which is now at the World Trade Center, and is the subject of this month’s cover photo.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7YD5KVszRY>. ❖

How Miller
Sentinel Editor



Special Operations Task Force-71, Afghanistan, 2007

REST IN PEACE



SSG Michael D. Thomas, 18B
(KIA 27 APR 2007)

SGT Timothy Padgett, 18D
(KIA 08 MAY 2007)

SSG Joshua Whitaker, 18C
(KIA 15 MAY 2007)

By Alex Quade, War Reporter,
Honorary SFA National Lifetime Member

Sentinel readers are getting this exclusive “sneak peek” at SOTF-71’s photos of some of the ops leading to, during, and after “*that Chinook shootdown op*” in Sangin and Northern Helmand, Afghanistan, spring/summer 2007. “We knew what we were facing in Helmand Province,” SOTF-71 CDR Pat Mahaney said. “It was extremely kinetic,” ODA-726 CDR Pat Nelson added. 7SFG ODAs engaged in more than 235-TICs (troops in contact) during their 217-day rotation. Unfortunately, three 1st Batt, 7SFG Green Berets were KIA during the intense fighting and high ops tempo. Afghanistan was the most dangerous place on the planet at the time — a fact most were unaware of, as public focus had shifted to Iraq. (Read Alex Quade’s stories in the [August 2021 *Sentinel*](#), and her upcoming book to learn more.) ❖

SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN ACTION



Paying For It With Our Sanity

By Alex Quade, War Reporter,
Honorary SFA National Lifetime Member

*“After so many years and so many wars, the dead and I have come to a certain understanding. If our paths should ever cross, they were to lie still, and I would, in return, give them as much dignity in their tragedy with my pictures as my skills permitted. There are things I wish I were not good at. This is one of them. I feel no joy or pride in that. **It is a service that I provide as a member of mankind, paying for it with my sanity.**”*

The world is not always pretty. Some choose to ignore it in fear of seeing the truth and confronting it. And there are those who accept such a cruel reality and do the best they can, if not to change it, then to at least record it for the chronicles of time, for future generations, in the hope that those who will come after us, will look at what we did to one another, and say — ‘We will not repeat the sins of our Fathers. We will be different.’ It is only a hope. **But without faith in humanity and hope for a better world, what else is there to live for?**”

THAT... was the letter my late cameraman sent me after our last combat mission together – that “Chinook shootdown op”.

Greg Danilenko passed away suddenly, a few years ago. He was my CNN teammate, before I became a one-man-band to continue covering Special Forces.

For me, Greg’s shooting was visual poetry.

I’d asked to work with him, specifically (after refusing to work with my former cameraman, whom I could no longer trust – you cannot



Rare photo of Greg Danilenko smiling. Iraq, June 2007 (Courtesy Alex Quade)

operate in hostile environments with people who don’t have your back – *but that’s another story*).

Greg was difficult – but so am I.

The first time we worked together, we “clicked” professionally. His footage was a joy to edit. Not a frame he shot was wasted energy.

He told me, he came out of “self-imposed war zone retirement”, just to work with me — because I was known as “A Photographer’s Producer” – who would make his pictures sing. I didn’t figure out why he’d imposed this hiatus, until later.

Greg said he was up for the mission. In hindsight, I wonder if he knew it would be his “last hurrah.” I knew I could count on him to get great “bang-bang”, because he’d covered the Chechen conflict — which had bothered him. I don’t know if he ever shared that with anyone other than me — he would cry about “All the dead boys” he’d shot footage of long ago, when he drank vodka.

I thought — because he was as “hard core” as I was, with work and war zones under our belts — that I wouldn’t need to worry about



Alex Quade embedded with CCTs and STS, watching CAS over battle in valley below Sper Wan Gar OP, Apr 2007, Afghanistan. (Photographer Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)



Danilenko snapped this photo of Alex Quade using her IBA as pillow for power nap in 125-degrees, between CAV & 10SFG ops, Baqubah, Iraq, June 2007. Because, he said, she was “a workaholic who rarely slept.” (Photographer Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)



Alex Quade finishes F16 flight — pulled 9.3 Gs! (Photographer, Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)

him. He said he could handle it — but I've always wondered if I pushed him too far — with that long, last mission with the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Greg was a serious Russian and rarely showed emotion — so the relief on his face when I landed after an F-16 ride-along doing aerobatic maneuvers — was a big surprise.

"I thought you were going to die," he said. I was grinning ear-to-ear; he was horrified.

He glared at me — after I dangled from a helicopter with the PJs, then he shot amazing, "you-are-there" footage as we bounded with them in the dark. Even in the action, he "edited in the camera", finding angles and details.

Greg had an "eye" — and a signature, artistic shot — always of a sunset or the sun behind some piece of hardware. That's where he found beauty.

We "GOT" each other — though he was not enamored with my plans to fly AF cargo hip-hop (instead of commercial business class



Alex Quade dangling from helicopter with AFSOC PJs. (Photographer, Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)

with drinks). I figured, if it's good enough for the troops, it's good enough for we who cover the troops.

He was "less than pleased" — when we bunked in for a week with Canadian SOF at Kandahar Airfield (KAF), with the CCTs and STS guys we were with, as we waited to push out to Sper Wan Gar and Lash Kar Gar. The Canadians liked to walk around wearing nothing but a towel, singing in French — "*Bonjour, Mademoiselle...*" (Think towels were added merely because this lone female was now temporarily living with them.)

Greg was stubborn and irritable — refusing to shoot moments I'd enthusiastically point out in the field with the troops that I thought captured humanity in the situation we were in — "Alex, I didn't come to Afghanistan to shoot video of soldiers playing with goats and chickens." So, I did it myself. He wasn't very excited about the camel spider they'd captured and turned into a pet-in-a-metal-bucket, either.

I exasperated him. My work ethic was what impressed him — "I've never seen any reporter get this access with the military ever," and



Waiting for sunset to launch fatal air assault, KAF, May 30, 2007. CH-47 'Flipper' unit on tarmac. (Photographer Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)



'Pet' camel spider. Embedded with SOF at Observation Post near Lash kar Gar, Afghanistan, Apr 2007. (Courtesy Alex Quade)

“I know I can trust you to do justice to my footage,” — were the nicest things he ever said to me.

He refused to talk to me after *that* combat operation that was too close for comfort.

“His eyes were wide as saucers, when I told him a Chinook got shot down,” our JTAC Jimbo told me later. I’d separated us on that air assault — figuring if we’re each shooting footage, we’re covering more ground. He was in a Blackhawk with Command; I was in another Chinook with the Joes.

I failed him.

Perhaps I should’ve sent him home as soon as we landed back at Kandahar Airfield after that Chinook shutdown mission. But, he’d decided to speak to me again, and said he was good to head to Iraq; and after the “3-Beers-Allowed” policy at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, he seemed better.

Fought a word battle in my head — “I can’t push people as hard as I push myself.” (Maybe that’s why Ranger Bob Howard and I related to each other so well. Bob also told me he “Can’t stand hurt feelings, whining and complaining” — *but that’s another story.*)

Made a hard decision. Mission-Men-Me.

...To continue the mission...

...To take care of my battle buddy...

...To go it alone.

So, I sent him home early from Iraq. I lied to him. Said there was only room for me on the next embed with 1SFG’s CIF, Commanders In-extremis Force, doing ops in notorious areas of Baghdad, such as al-Shula and Sadr City.

When I finally came “home” (translation: re-supply between 10SFG ops in Diyala Province near the Iranian border), I secretly talked with

Greg’s boss — to make sure he was ok, to explain what happened on the “that Chinook shutdown mission,” that it may have affected him, that he might need help.

“He hasn’t been the same since he got back,” his boss confided.

I felt guilty.

I had Greg’s back, though he never knew it. He only knew I was the workaholic who sent him home. But, I still felt like I’d figuratively left a battle buddy behind to deal with his trauma, so I could continue the mission of covering SFODAs without him.

Greg and I didn’t talk for a long time after our last mission. He was “feeding the beast”, doing day-in/day-out coverage in New York for “the mother ship” (CNN). I was busy running around by myself downrange covering Special Forces teams.

Then, he sent me this letter.

And another.

And another.

And another.

A trove of impressions from our frontline experiences, focusing on the work we do in hostile environments:

“...It is a service that I provide as a member of mankind, paying for it with my sanity. The world is not always pretty. Some choose to ignore it in fear of seeing the truth and confronting it. And there are those who accept such a cruel reality and do the best they can, if not to change it, then to at least record it for the chronicles of time, for future generations...”

Greg never went back to war again. He was fighting his own battle — just like many of the soldiers we’d covered.



Upper left, heading to CH-47 aircraft for air assault May 30, 2007, into Sangin River Valley, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (Photographer, Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)

Below, left to right:

Air Assault into Helmand Province, from KAF, May 30, 2007. (Courtesy Alex Quade)

With CCTs and Canadian SOF calling in CAS for battle in valley below Sper Wan Gar OP, Helmand Province, April 2007. (Courtesy Alex Quade)

TIC. Embedded with troops, Helmand Province, June 2007. (Courtesy Alex Quade)



Though I've been a one-man-band for nearly 15-years — **I miss having a teammate.** Having a cameraman was a privilege. Working with someone so talented was also a privilege. I learned a lot from Greg.

Right before he left this earth, Greg reached out asking to work together again in Syria and other war zones. He'd left CNN. His second marriage ended in divorce after coming home from "that Chinook shutdown op." His third marriage was crumbling.

"One other thing you must grasp... my son graduated from West Point this spring, that was no accident. My daughter Becky is grown up. You know the ODA rotation. My sense of smell tells me you need a person on the ground," he wrote.

I don't know if he was turning over a new leaf — or seeking that old "fix" — that comfortable and reliable standby for so many of us — running away back to war, where everything seems clearer. I just knew I couldn't take him with me. His emails became more fervent.

"You're not listening. I'll find gear. You gotta work with me... God, you are so stubborn!"

But my gut told me he was "non-deployable." He'd be a potential liability to the teams when they were already stuck with me. Greg kept emailing, despite my declines.

"You need to start trusting people in your life... yeah, I'm still an asshole. If I can't find gear, I'll still go... if for no other reason than to get objective feedback from that area for your print or social media. At this point, I do not have an expiration date for this trip," he pleaded.

"Stand down," I told him. "Ok," he replied.

Within a month, Greg Danilenko was dead.

Another casualty of "that Chinook shutdown op." Another casualty of war. Another statistic.

I didn't share his writings, out of privacy and respect, until his mother Paula Garb reached out to me later. Greg's son Thomas had already served in Afghanistan, daughter Becky was married. She gave me permission to share Greg's writings — that it might help others.

"After the divorce, which coincided with the worsening PTSD symptoms, Greg started to go off the rails with his drinking. He was ashamed to admit to anyone how he was dealing with the pain. The trauma became so deep he couldn't manage it," Greg's mother wrote.

"I think, too, that journalists just don't have the kind of support systems that the military provides these days. It's hard enough for soldiers to get treatment, but the journalists are completely on their own," she added.

Greg Danilenko is now at peace.

He was a great father, son, cameraman, teammate, and friend.

I will always honor him, his work, and his family — as I do the troops I cover in tough situations.

For those of us who run towards danger, it seems obscene to talk about our pain, when we've seen what we've seen of other people's pain. We use our job as our best defense.

Combat veterans, first responders and journalists reading this — if you can relate to any of the above — please talk with someone about it. Share your experiences with someone. What you did has value and meaning.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

God bless Greg's family. God bless our Fallen. God bless all those who go into harm's way. ❖



Above, Day 2 of Chinook Down Op. Leaving compound for overnight town clearing ops, Kajaki Sofia area of Helmand Province, Afghanistan (Photographer, Greg Danilenko, courtesy Alex Quade)

At right, Danilenko's son, Thomas, graduates USMA, West Point. From left to right, Mom Paula Garb, daughter Becky, son Thomas, Greg, Greg's 3rd wife. (Courtesy Alex Quade)



Desert Storm –

SF Team Fights for Survival Behind Enemy Lines

By John Friberg

(2021, February 24, [sof.news, https://sof.news/history/sfoda-525/](https://sof.news/history/sfoda-525/))

Desert Storm – 30 Years Ago

In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait claiming that the country on its southern border was historically a part of Iraq. President George Bush assembled a coalition of nations to defend Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States from further aggressive Iraqi action and to eventually oust Iraq from Kuwait. The US and other nations immediately deployed air assets and ground troops to the Saudi Arabian peninsula. Over several months a massive troop buildup occurred with the positioning of military forces in the Gulf region. The defense of the Arabian peninsula was called Desert Shield.

The offensive military action to relieve Kuwait from Iraqi occupation was called Desert Storm. The air campaign began in mid-January 1991 — lasting over a month. The ground offensive lasted just 100 hours ending on Feb. 28, 1991. On Feb. 28, 1991, the Gulf War came to an end. A coalition of international military forces, led by the United States, conducted an offensive that removed Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

During Desert Storm, several U.S. Army teams of Green Berets were infiltrated deep behind enemy lines to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance missions. Some of these Special Forces teams were compromised by civilians who discovered their location. A few

of the SF teams had to fight enemy combatants until they were exfiltrated by helicopter.

On Feb. 23, 1991, SFODA 525, led by CW2 Chad Balwanz, was inserted by helicopter at night, and moved to a hide site to observe traffic moving south along Highway 7, at a location north of the Euphrates River. This 5th Special Forces team would soon find itself fighting for survival against an overwhelming enemy force.

On the night of Jan. 23, 1991, the day before the ground offensive of Desert Storm began, Special Forces reconnaissance teams were inserted deep behind enemy lines in Iraq to gather and report intelligence of Iraqi troop movements. Many were put in areas over 150 miles inside Iraq — far from friendly forces. The teams had at least three members — sometimes eight or more. Each team had at least one communicator responsible for sending and receiving messages from the command and control node.

These Special Reconnaissance (SR) teams were emplaced in enemy territory in support of both the XVIII Airborne Corps and the VII corps. They were on watch for movements of SCUD missiles, elements of the Republican Guard, and other significant enemy activities.

The teams would carry rucksacks that contained water, food, radios, ammunition, batteries for the radios, and more. In addition, other equipment such as a GPS, knife, compass, and medical kit were hung in various configurations on their combat vests. Rucks and other equipment could easily reach over 150 pounds. Add to that the equipment and materials needed to dig and camouflage the hide site.

Most teams would insert via MH-60 or MH-47 helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) at a location far from the observation site yet within walking distance. Once infiltrated, at night, the team would move by foot overland to the target area, select the hide site, and begin the process to dig in and camouflage the area before early morning light.

ODA 525 had infiltrated in two MH-60 Black Hawks from Task Force 160 and moved overland with their heavy rucks (175 lbs) to the target area. The eight team members dug in at a location, about 300 meters east of Highway 7, that offered a good observation point. The highway was one of the main routes that ran from Baghdad south through the Euphrates river valley. The team finished the process of building the hide site before dawn on the morning of Feb. 24, 1991 and settled in to observe the highway.



SFODA 525 Fight for Survival Desert Storm 1991

“Hide Site”

As the morning sun came, up the team could see and hear a lot of civilian activity in the area. There were people tending to cattle and sheep; women were collecting firewood; and children were playing. The area had more people in the area than the team had anticipated and intelligence reports had indicated. The soil was very difficult to dig into, so the hide site was less than optimal.

The team was soon discovered by three children — a boy and two girls. The SF detachment reached a critical decision point — what to do with the children. The children left the team's location unharmed. The team decided to change their location and began movement to another area. Not long after that an adult with Bedouin headdress approached the team with children . . . and saw members of the team. The unarmed adult was allowed to leave — which he did in haste.

Before long, the team had armed Bedouin tribesmen in their immediate area, which was followed with the arrival of Iraqi soldiers. The team was in a tenuous position — miles behind enemy lines, lightly armed, and vastly outnumbered with no ground mobility vehicles to evade.

Within minutes the team was engaged in a battle with the 150-man Iraqi force. In the first ten minutes of the battle 40 Iraqi soldiers lay dead and many more were wounded.

The battle continued through the day. The team leader, Balwanz, called in for air support. The team was supported with air strikes that kept the Iraqi troops from overrunning the team's position. Many of the bombs were dropped 'danger close'. Estimates of enemy deaths were from 100 to 300 personnel due to the SF team and supporting aircraft.

The SF soldiers used emergency PRC-90 radios and signal mirrors to communicate with the supporting aircraft during the battle. Although the fight had lasted hours, none of the Green Berets were killed or wounded.

By nightfall the fight was under control — the team and supporting craft had kept the Iraqis at bay. The team moved to an area more suited for a helicopter exfiltration. That evening, after darkness settled in, two MH-60s from TF-160 landed near the team's location and brought the team to safety and to King Fahd International Airport. ❖

References:

Thomas, Rhys. (2016). *Danger Close: The Rescue of ODA-525*. Lulu. <https://bookshop.org/a/753/9781365626548>

Johnson, William M. (1996). *U.S. Army Special Forces in Desert Shield/Desert Storm: How Significant an Impact*. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, pages 68-70, PDF. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA312864.pdf>

"Voices in the Storm: Against all Odds", *Frontline*, PBS. — The Gulf War. Chad Balwanz, the team leader of SFODA 525, is interviewed about the team's mission. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/voices/2.html>

"Chad Balwanz", *Hazard Ground Podcast*, Episode 140, Oct. 31, 2019. Hear the firsthand account of ODA 525 and their fight to survive from the team leader of the Special Forces detachment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsmgOU2ILo8>

SOF and Desert Storm

A wide variety of special operations units were deployed during the Gulf War. Coalition nations provided special operations forces to the fight — among these were the British Special Air Service (SAS) and Syrian Special Forces Regiment. The United States provided an array of SOF units to include Army Special Forces, Army Rangers, Army Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Navy SEALs and Special Boat Units, Air Force Special Operations squadrons and Combat Control Teams, Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units, and Marine Force Reconnaissance.

These SOF units conducted a variety of missions. Navy SEALs were busy with special operations missions along the shores of the Persian Gulf. Army Special Forces units conducted a number of different missions, to include direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, CSAR, border surveillance, and coalition warfare support. Some SOF units would be assigned a new mission — SCUD hunting. The SOF aviation units were very busy with infiltrations, exfiltration, combat search and rescue (CSAR), and other special operations missions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Friberg

John Friberg is the Editor and Publisher of SOF News.

He is a retired Command Chief Warrant Officer (CW5 180A) with 40 years service in the U.S. Army Special Forces in active duty and reserve components. He has deployed multiple times to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations throughout the world during his military career.

After retirement from the military, he worked as a counterinsurgency advisor in Afghanistan (2012-2014), as a Security Force Assistance SME for NATO in Europe and Afghanistan (2015-2017), and providing support to military exercises as a contractor in the U.S. and overseas. He holds a Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree (ALB) from Harvard University, concentrating in International Relations.

NOTE:

SOF News provides online content and a free nearly daily newsletter (email) on news, analysis, and commentary about special operations, national security, and conflicts around the world. It has temporarily suspended activities but will return in the fall. You can sign up for the daily newsletter at www.sof.news.

PART ONE:

The “Double Nickel” — Special Forces in El Salvador



SF soldiers assigned or attached to the U.S. MilGrp -El Salvador were awarded the JMUA early on in the campaign.

By Greg Walker (ret)

“Operating under the potential and real dangers of both political and physical fire, U.S. Armed Forces personnel designed and carried out a program to help build the Salvadoran Armed Forces from a small, ill-equipped and poorly led force to the point where it is now well on the road to becoming one of the finest fighting forces in Latin America.”

~ Mr. David Passage, charge d’ affaires, U.S. Embassy San Salvador, Memorandum to U.S. Southern Command CinC

Passage, whose duty station was the embassy in San Salvador, goes on to point out that U.S. Military Group (MilGrp) personnel “have been shot at” and “that they are high priority targets for enemy attacks.” According to the memorandum, then-ambassador Thomas Pickering “specifically requested to be associated” with the recommendation that a Joint Meritorious Unit Award (JMUA) be authorized to those members of the MilGrp assigned and attached and who served for over sixty days in any capacity between January 1, 1981, and June 7, 1985. “The Military Group has been paid the ultimate compliment,” wrote Passage. “The Communist-backed guerrillas have publicly ascribed to them the fact that the guerrillas are losing their war. No commendation can be written that is so credible a testament to their effectiveness.”

The “Double Nickel”

“Congress and the administration had agreed to this limit with little discussion or rancor. This was something like a handshake deal. When some members attempted to write it into law, they failed. This seems like the way policy and politics ought to work. Honorable individuals of two branches of government and two parties decide what the issue is — we want to avoid creeping from training and advice to full-scale involvement à la Vietnam. How do you do it? You keep the numbers too small to get into real trouble. What size is that? The 55-man limit, in which so many put so much stock (and many thought was the law of the land) was arbitrary and had been reached in offhand fashion.” (El Salvador in the 1980s: War by Other Means by Donald R. Hamilton, 2015)

In 1981, fifteen Green Berets were deployed to El Salvador. They were selected for their linguistic abilities and training expertise. The composite team under the command of then Captain David Morris was stationed in the Republic of Panama with the then forward deployed 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Fort Gulick. Their mission? Train the struggling Salvadoran Army’s first immediate reaction battalion, the Atlacatl, at Sitio del Nino just twenty miles from San Salvador.

However, this was not the first time U.S. Special Forces had interfaced with the Salvadoran military. American advisers began working alongside Salvadoran military units in 1962 when the first mobile training team (MTT) was deployed to conduct a counterinsurgency/civic action/psychological operations survey. On June 30, 1972, the 8th Special Forces Group, preceding the 3/7th in Panama, was deactivated. It then became the 3/7th which would carry out the bulk of upcoming MTTs to El Salvador, specifically from January 1, 1981, until the United Nations brokered Peace Accord in February 1992.

Dr. Todd Greentree was a junior political officer with the U.S. Department stationed at the embassy in San Salvador during this period. In May 2021, Greentree shared his assessment of the political/military situation in El Salvador during his tenure there. “Saigon had fallen just a few years earlier,” he points out. “But after Nicaragua, the U.S. was not going to lose another country to the Soviet Union and Cuba in Central America. President [Jimmy] Carter found aiding the Salvadoran government extremely distasteful, and his ambassador, Robert White, was an emotional human rights crusader, especially after the four churchwomen were raped and murdered [by Salvadoran troops] on his watch.

“Yet it was Carter who authorized lethal assistance to the Salvadoran military in one of his last decisions before leaving office in January 1981. Reagan inherited El Salvador as [his] first foreign policy crisis. He eventually embraced counter-insurgency but was initially more concerned to reassure Americans that El Salvador was not going to become another Vietnam.”

Forced to appease public opinion at home, the Pentagon devised a plan to establish a limit on Special Forces advisers to serve in El Salvador. As fifty-five advisers were already stationed and working in El Salvador the decision was made to preserve the funding already in place. The Pentagon told both the President and Congress, when asked, that fifty-five in-country advisers/trainers was a satisfactory number. After that the manpower ceiling was “etched in stone,” according to a former MILGRP commander. In 1979, funding for the growing civil war in El Salvador stood at \$12 million dollars. By 1982, this amount had increased to \$80 million. Mission requirements (i.e., a military victory over the communist insurgents) increased, as well. The guerrilla forces fighting under the banner of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) were proving to be far more organized, better funded, and trained by Cuban, Nicaraguan, North Vietnamese, and East German advisers than originally anticipated. “No one wanted to take the chance of seeing the increased aid cancelled,” offers a former MILGRP member. “It was obvious more advisers were required to carry out

the additional taskings, yet the limit of fifty-five would not be challenged." It was believed that requesting additional advisers would invite disaster. Political and social push-back was growing in the United States, fueled by the negativity of the Vietnam war still fresh in the minds of many Americans and the 5th Column of Marxist organizations and social activists groups in the United States.

The peace movement ramped back up to mount protests against U.S. aid to El Salvador

"The War Powers Act and the Reagan administration's careful avoidance of its triggers guided military action in El Salvador in two critical ways. First, it created the 55-man limit on the size of the MILGRP. Although this limit never had the force of law, it became an informal but honored deal between the administration and Congress: Keep it at 55 and we the leadership will not seek a confrontation over the War Powers Act. The second was the administration's pledge to Congress that U.S. military personnel "will not act as combat advisors, and will not accompany Salvadoran forces in combat, on operational patrols, or in any other situation where combat is likely." This second pledge defined the operational boundaries for U.S. personnel." (*El Salvador in the 1980s: War by Other Means* Donald R. Hamilton, 2015)

The "Double Nickle," as the Green Berets serving in El Salvador self-described themselves, became a tripwire limit for the Congress to demand adherence to. Fortunately, there was a way around the "55" and the Pentagon used it almost immediately.

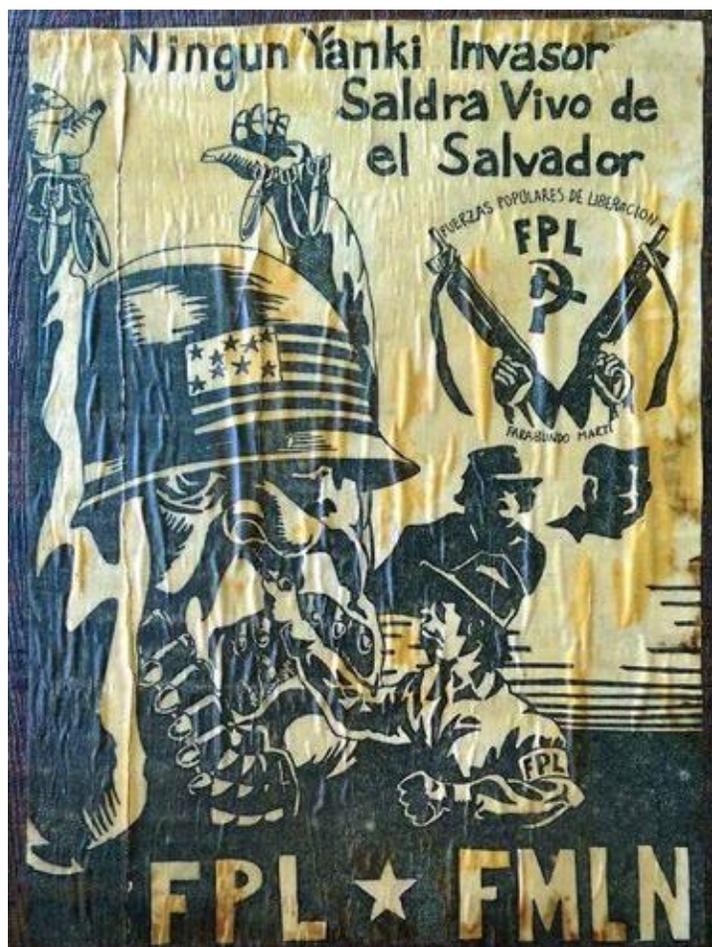
"Don't get caught"

Policy loopholes existed which allowed for additional Special Forces qualified soldiers to be assigned legally in-country. The positions allotted to the MILGRP were filled with Green Berets who would not be counted under the "55" line in the sand. In this manner, the number of uniformed advisers/trainers assisting the Salvadoran military was between 85 and 100 "snake eaters" at any one time. The advisers were complimented with an additional 50 to 75 CIA paramilitary advisers/trainers, many of these Vietnam veterans of the MACV-SOG special projects during the Vietnam war, a fair number who had remained in Special Forces reserve units after leaving active duty.

And Congress did its part on both sides of the aisle. "The six-man permanent party in the MILGRP was insufficient to support all the movement of all the supplies and MTTs flowing into the country. Congress was notified, did not object, and the staff was increased to twelve. After about 18 months, it became obvious that Salvadoran soldiers injured on the battlefield were dying or becoming permanently disabled because Salvadoran battlefield medics were insufficient in numbers and deficient in training. The U.S. had the capacity to train them but did not have a means to do so within the 55-man limit. Eventually Congress informally agreed to exclude members of a medical MTT from the count." (*El Salvador in the 1980s: War by Other Means*, Donald R. Hamilton, 2015)

Special Forces advisers received imminent danger, or combat pay, the appropriate documentation provided by the MILGRP commander stating the adviser had been/was exposed to hostile fire.

In a 1986, Army legal decision regarding the increasing submission for combat awards and decorations for those who were either taken under enemy fire or in the field with their Salvadoran units conducting



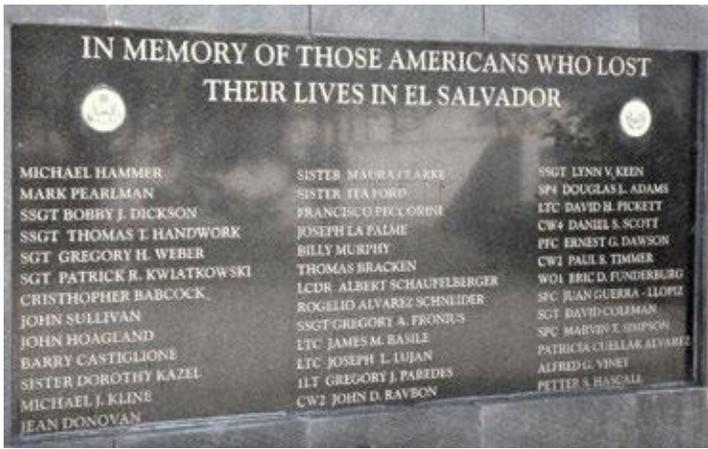
"No American invader will leave El Salvador alive". Leaflets like these were commonplace during the war and American Special Forces advisers were at the top of the guerrilla hit list." (Author collection)

operations, the JAG advised the Pentagon there was no legal reason such awards should not be authorized. The Army, in specific, was quick to ignore the decision for purely political reasons, whereas the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force continued to approve such awards and decorations for their service members in El Salvador.

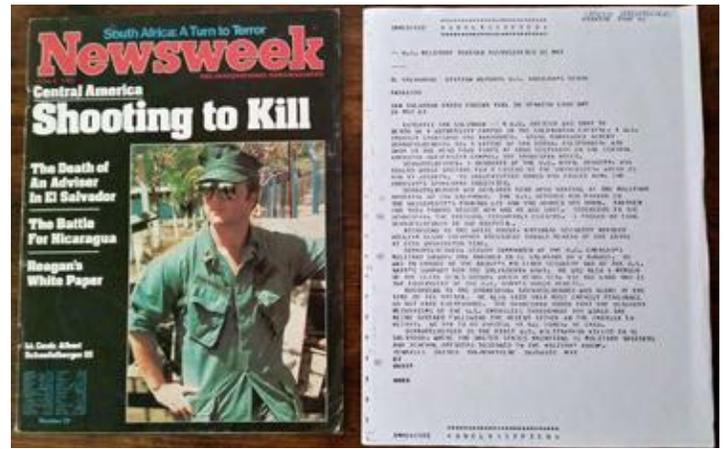
"We were in a war. Everyone knew it was a war," recalls one Army adviser/trainer. For the Green Berets in specific the unwritten warning was not to get caught by the international media in the field or carrying anything more than a handgun.

"You could expect to be put on the First Thing Smok'in back to Panama if you were photographed or filmed with an M16 rifle," recalls a retired El Sal veteran. "We were authorized to draw and carry M16s, MP5 submachine guns, grenades, and shotguns once on the ground. Sometimes we drew the weapons from the Salvadoran units we were working with. Other times we drew them from the embassy armory. It was a cat-and-mouse game with a mild reprimand if you got caught."

And from a former embassy public affairs officer. "Most of the international media stationed in El Salvador understood that our guys carried something other than a pistol. I (and many others) told journalists and anyone else who would listen that the policy and congressional understanding was that the trainers were forbidden to be "equipped for combat" and that a long gun did not meet that standard.



A stark reminder at the U.S. embassy of those Americans killed during El Salvador's civil war. (Photo courtesy Greg Walker)



The author visited with LCDR Schaufelberger the day before he was assassinated. (Photo courtesy Greg Walker)

I think politicians in Washington panicked and demanded the guys [be] sent home after being photographed with M-16. Most of the serious journalists understood that the guys sent home were not guilty of anything substantive."

In the meantime, Purple Hearts were already being approved, albeit very quietly, for 3/7th Green Berets wounded in-country like SSG Jay Stanley in February 1983 while traveling by helicopter in what was described as an "operational flight". Stanley was returned to Panama to recover from his wound. He received a Purple Heart. Two warrant officers and a master sergeant were deemed responsible for his being on the flight and were put on "the next thing smok'in" back to their unit at Fort Gulick.

Killed in action – stories behind the body count

Thirty-nine Americans were killed over the course of the ten-year civil war in El Salvador. In the case of those who were U.S. service members, how they died was all too often misrepresented by the U.S. Government at the time or outright lied about.

May 25, 1983 — LCDR Al Schaufelberger, 33, of Chula Vista, California, deputy commander of the U.S. military advisory group in El Salvador and the embassy's senior security officer was the first American service member killed in El Salvador. He was shot in the head three times as he sat in his car on the campus of the University of Central America in San Salvador, waiting for his girlfriend. A Marxist guerrilla group claimed it conducted the assassination. An FBI investigation conducted in-country offered the Navy SEAL officer had been killed by a jealous former boyfriend of the young woman. However, in a 1993 interview, former guerrilla commander Gilberto Osorio affirmed the attack was conducted by a small urban terrorist cell seeking to become the sixth fighting force under the FMLN umbrella. The FMLN had rejected the group's request and in turn its members sought to demonstrate their effectiveness. The fierce political blowback from Schaufelberger's murder forced the FMLN to disown the killers.



Staff Sgt Bobby Joe Dickson Staff Sgt Thomas Handwork Sgt Patrick R. Kwiatkowski Sgt Gregory H. Weber

Four U.S. Military–Marine Security Guards were killed in the Zona Rosa attack in San Salvador, El Salvador on June 19, 1985. A warning was received at the U.S. embassy about an impending attack, but the Marines were never informed nor prevented from off-duty activities in the city. Embassy guards were not permitted to carry sidearms unless on duty. (Photos U.S. Marine Corps)

June 19, 1985 — the Zona Rosa attack — four marines were the first American military personnel to be killed since May 1983, when Lieut. Comdr. Albert A. Schaufelberger was shot to death as he sat in his car on the grounds of the Central American University.

The slain marines were members of the guard force for the United States Embassy. They were wearing civilian clothes and per embassy policy were unarmed while off-duty. Two other marines survived the attack without injury.

Two individuals allegedly connected to the Zona Rosa operation, Pedro Andrade and Gilberto Osorio, were living in the United States. At the time of Andrade's arrest in El Salvador in 1989, he was alleged to have masterminded the attacks. In June 1990, he was allowed to enter the United States on a three-year public interest parole. Osorio is a United States citizen and is still living in San Francisco, California. After a May 1995 CBS *60 Minutes* expose, hosted by Ed Bradley, the U.S. Department of Justice investigated both Osorio and Andrade. Andrade, identified as the mastermind for the operation, was found to have become an informant for the CIA, which later allowed him and his family to relocate to the United States. Upon this discovery, Andrade was deported back to El Salvador.

Osorio, who fought under the name "Gerardo Zelaya," is a former guerrilla commander whose last command was with the FMLN–PRTC, the

most violent army of the five such forces under the FMLN flag. It was the PRTC that sanctioned the attack on the marines. According to the U.S. DOJ report, “Osorio was one of the founding members of the CPS, which was formed in November 1979 to support the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR), a Marxist terrorist group composed of students, peasants, and labor unions whose objective was to establish a Marxist government in El Salvador. The source also reported that Osorio had worked on “El Pulgarcito,” a Salvadoran newspaper. The source reported that Osorio and Martinez were going to travel to Mexico City, where they would meet with Rafael Manjivar, a member of the Communist Party of El Salvador. They would then travel to El Salvador to establish direct contact with the guerrilla groups and join them in the struggle in any capacity that the Coordinadora [Leadership Coalition of Leftist Groups in El Salvador] wanted. The source advised that Osorio wanted to join the fighting groups or terrorists.”

Osorio was found not to have participated in the actual attack but in his role as Chief of Operations for the PRTC he, as likely as not, knew of the plan.

A warning was received at the U.S. embassy about an impending attack, but the Marines were never informed nor prevented from off-duty activities in the city. Embassy guards were not permitted to carry sidearms unless on duty.

March 31, 1987 — Relatives of SSG Gregory A. Fronius, a 28-year-old Green Beret sergeant, were told he was slain during a guerrilla attack on the Salvadoran brigade's headquarters at El Paraiso. They were informed Fronius had died in his barracks while asleep when a mortar shell struck. In fact, Fronius had bolted from the barracks to rally Salvadoran soldiers for a counterattack. Fronius, fighting alone from an elevated position, bought time for Salvadoran officers to secure the command bunker when several guerrilla sappers (trained by the North Vietnamese in Nicaragua) shot him multiple times. Fronius, slipping down a stairwell into the courtyard below, was mortally wounded, as his autopsy report was obtained years later in a FOIA request of the Army showed. Upon reaching his body the guerrillas realized he was still breathing. Enraged to find an American adviser had thwarted their plans to attack the bunker, they placed a shape charge beneath his body and detonated it.

Upon returning from San Salvador, his team leader, Major Gus Taylor, helped collect the young Green Beret's remains. “We recovered about 17 pounds of Greg,” he told this author over the course of several interviews. The rest was scattered...we had to pick pieces of him out of the overhead trees.”



Today the language lab at 7th Group is named after the 1st Green Beret KIA in El Salvador. (Photo courtesy Greg Walker)

Taylor and another member of his mobile training team would set out with selected Salvadoran snipers from the base after he had met with the then U.S. MILGRP commander. For 30 days the men hunted down and shot any guerrilla or guerrillas they encountered. Taylor, deeply affected by the loss of Fronius, would later provide crucial photographs and information to the Veterans of Special Operations – El Salvador while they were being interviewed by CBS's Ed Bradley in 1995. Greg's brother, Stephen, was also interviewed. He also met privately with Taylor.

In June 1998, at the largest awards and decorations ceremony held by the 7th Special Forces Group (A) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, SFC Fronius' 12-year-old son stepped forward to receive his father's posthumous — and initially denied by the Army — Silver Star.

May 1996 — while attending the dedication of a memorial at Arlington National Cemetery honoring those KIA in El Salvador, Ms. Judy Lujan, wife of Army Lt. Col. Joseph H. Lujan, recalled the Army telling her that her husband died in [July] 1987 when the helicopter carrying him crashed into a hillside during stormy weather. (View the Memorial ceremony at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3uy8Ey23Is&t=36s>)

“But the Army never produced her husband's personal effects or photographs of his corpse, despite her repeated requests,” she said yesterday. “I can't get on with my life, I can't do anything, until I know for sure he's dead,” she stated. (Public Honors for Secret Combat, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/05/06/public-honors-for-secret-combat/f764f45e-1b75-4e8c-8c32-94844434d5e0/>)

After the crash, the Army had announced the bodies of those killed had been recovered and returned to Panama. It was a lie.

Harry Claflin is a Force Recon veteran of the Vietnam war. He spent nine years in El Salvador as a trainer and combat adviser and was commissioned as a captain by the Salvadoran Army. His capabilities, accomplishments, and professionalism were officially recognized by both the Salvadoran Armed Forces and the U.S. MilGrp as well as the United States Marine Corps. He is an Associate Member in Good Standing of the Special Forces Association.

“None of the bodies were recovered,” recalled Claflin in early 2021. “The lake is over nine hundred feet deep. I was there at the [Air Force] base when the crash happened. It was really foggy, and the pilot misjudged the height of the bank and hit hard. I was in my BOQ, and it woke me up. I got with [Mike] Kim who had been teaching SCUBA to a team from the PRAL recon company. He said where it went into the lake was the deepest part.

Marine Force Recon veteran Harry Claflin trained and advised the Salvadoran parachute battalion, and later created and trained the Special Operations Group (GOE). Commissioned as an officer, he would spend nine years in El Salvador as a combat adviser and mentor.

“The lake gets warm from time to time. I did not know it was still an active volcano. The last time it had any active action was in 1986 when we had the earthquake in San Salvador. If it blows it will take Ilopango city and the air base off the face of the earth.

“That is the reason all the military aircraft were moved to Cumalopa, and a new base built. The only thing left at the old base is about two hundred paratroopers and base maintenance. The runway and

part of the old base is a civilian airport now.”

The nighttime mission Colonel Lujan and the others were killed was a medevac effort. Two Special Forces advisers, assigned as trainers at the Salvadoran training base in La Union, had gotten into an argument over a Salvadoran female. During the confrontation, one of the Green Berets shot the other with his M16. Due to the seriousness of the incident senior American military officers were onboard the helicopter as investigators.

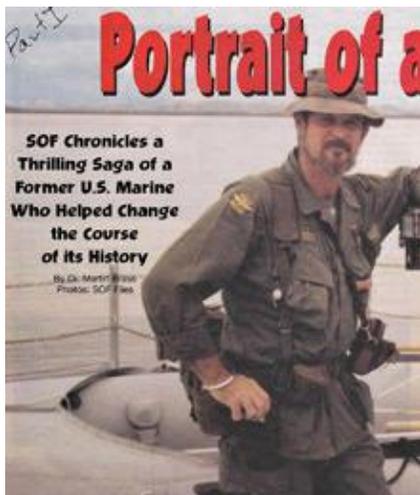
Just seven minutes after taking off the pilot was forced to attempt to return to the airfield due to extremely poor weather. It was during this attempt that the crash occurred. The Pentagon identified the victims as: Sgt. 1st Class Lynn Keen, 27, a Special Forces medic; 1st Lt. Gregory J. Paredes, 24, a pilot; Chief Warrant Officer, John D. Raybon, 29, copilot; Spec. 4 Douglas L. Adams, 22, of Corvallis, Ore., the crew chief; and Lt. Col. Joseph L. Lujan, 41, Special Forces. Also killed was Air Force Lt. Col. James M. Basile, 43, of Cheshire, Conn., the deputy commander of the U.S. Military Group attached to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador.

The only survivor was identified as Sgt. 1st Class Thomas G. Grace. An official said Sgt. Thomas G. Grace, 32, an Air Force medic, was seriously injured in the crash. Salvadoran civilians found Grace and called for help. A Salvadoran helicopter crew had also launched at the same time but took a different flight route due to the weather conditions. It successfully reached La Union and transported the wounded Special Forces soldier to San Salvador. The Green Beret, who was evacuated by the Salvadoran helicopter, underwent surgery at a San Salvador hospital for a severed artery in the neck, a Pentagon spokeswoman reported. He was reported in stable condition and later flown to an Army medical center in Texas.

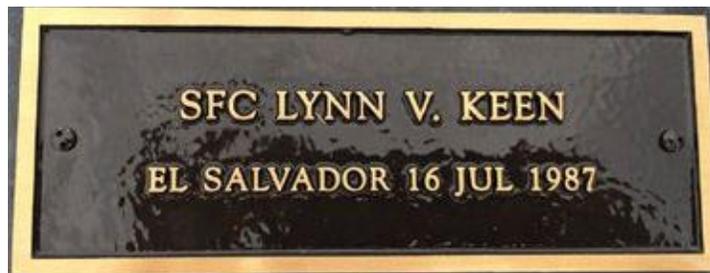
Although consideration was given by the Pentagon to recover the bodies from the lake, it was determined the effort would have required hardhat divers and would have been a major undertaking during an ongoing shooting war. An inquiry by this author as to the status of the missing service members and any thought of mounting a recovery operation today was submitted to the Defense MIA/POW Accounting Agency in Hawaii. At the time of publication there has been no response.

The hard right over the easy wrong

In the case of U.S. special operations forces and how they affected



Marine Force Recon veteran Harry Claffin trained and advised the Salvadoran parachute battalion, and later created and trained the Special Operations Group (GOE). Commissioned as an officer he would spend nine years in El Salvador as a combat adviser and mentor. (Robert K Brown/Soldier of Fortune, Sept. 2007, <https://www.sofmag.com/sof-fights-communism-in-el-salvador/>)



SFC Lynn Keen, MOS 1840D, was assigned to A-Co, 3/7th SFGA at the time of his death. (Photo courtesy Greg Walker)

the longest war in Central America, their performance and credibility clearly outshone that of both military leaders and politicians back home. In March 1993, to his great credit, former USA Special Operation Command commander GEN Carl W. Stiner (ret.) sent the author a formal letter in support of combat awards and decorations. “I concur with your proposal,” the highly respected Special Forces officer wrote. “Without the superb support of the special operations forces in El Salvador, the duration and intensity would have been even greater.” ❖

PART TWO — Green Berets, Gunships, and “60 Minutes” finally turn the tide of battle both in El Salvador and years later, back home in the United States.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Walker (ret) served with the 10th, 7th, USASFC, and 19th Special Forces Groups (Airborne). He is a veteran of the war in El Salvador and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Mr. Walker founded the Veterans of Special Operations – El Salvador, a grassroots fraternal organization that was at “the tip of the spear” in the 10-year long political campaign to see combat awards and decorations authorized for those who served, all Services, during El Salvador’s civil war. He is a Life member of the Special Operations Association and Special Forces Association.

His awards and decorations include the Combat Infantryman Badge (X2), the Special Forces Tab, the Meritorious Service Medal (X3), and the Washington National Guard Legion of Merit.

A DoD trained and certified Warrior Care case manager with the U.S. SOCOM Warrior Care program (2009-2013) Walker advocated for the most seriously wounded, injured, or made ill Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen serving during the Global War on Terrorism.

He is the author of [At the Hurricane's Eye — U.S. Special Operations Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm](#) (Ivy Books, 1994), among other literary contributions to U.S. SOF history.

Today, Greg lives and writes from his home in Sisters, Oregon, along with his service pup, Tommy.

THE ESCAPE OF ANH TUAN TRAN

Part One

By Marc Phillip Yablonka
Author and Military Journalist

As Americans, we have tended to look at the Vietnam War through an American lens. Concerned for ourselves as a nation, whether we fought in the war or protested it from the safety of the American heartland, we have tended to think about that long ago conflict as only ours. But there was another prism through which we might have been looking all along. That of the people whom we had sworn to protect: the people of South Vietnam.

One such person was a Republic of Vietnam Marine who also fought for his country and paid a heavy, heavy price: Anh Tuan Tran.

After graduation from Trường Bộ Binh Thủ Đức (Officer's Infantry School in Thu Duc) in 1972, Tuan joined the Vietnamese Marine Corps and was assigned to C Recon Company, HQ battalion of the Vietnamese division, operating in Quang Tri Province as 1st Lieutenant, reconnaissance squad leader.

The whole division at that time consisted of three combat brigades, with one recon company, one artillery battalion, one medical company for each brigade, with the Vietnamese Airborne Division forming the first line of defense against the North Vietnamese Army.

"Because I was on the front lines, being in an elite force, I was always ready for any enemy movements. My recon company was the eyes and ears of the 369th Brigade. Depending on the orders from HQ, we frequently penetrated enemy territory to collect intel," Tuan said from his home in suburban Toronto.

He was stationed at and around Dong Ha, Con Thien, right next to the DMZ a full two years after President Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy, which severely limited American involvement in Vietnam.

In early February 1975, (two months before the fall of Saigon) Tuan's unit had orders to transfer its position to the local regional forces. From Quang Tri Province they moved to Da Nang to defend the city. Upon arrival, Tuan and his team were under heavy artillery bombardment from the mountains. Their mission was to penetrate enemy positions to locate and report coordinates to RVN Marine artillery units, and to return fire.

"My team had to infiltrate at nightfall. Ascending a high observation point, I tripped on a booby trap. The grenade exploded and I didn't feel my leg. Everything went dark; my NCO had to transport me back to HQ on a makeshift hammock."



Anh Tuan with his RVN Marine unit seated for their graduation photo. Anh Tuan is second from left in the second row with arm on elbow of fellow Marine. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

“That was a very scary time. I was not afraid of dying, I was afraid of living the rest of my life as an amputee. I was so young. I’d hardly lived my life at all,” Tuan said.

He spent three days at the triage center of the medical team and was transferred to the Central Military Hospital in Bệnh Viện Duy Tân, adjacent to Da Nang Air Base.

“One night there were rumors the city was going to fall. Around midnight, the last flight of a C-130 to Saigon took off with only heavily wounded aboard.”

“One guy next to me bandaged his head and was carried away to the plane. I was not that quick thinking and remained at the hospital.”

The next day, a Marine GMC truck took Tuan back to the Marine headquarters medical unit located near Bãi Biển Non Nước Beach. An Airborne GMC came to pick up their own. The hospital slowly emptied out. Everybody else was on their own.

For Tuan, that meant evacuation at the beach.

“Every one of us was ready. We all looked out towards the ocean. At dawn, lights appeared, revealing three ships on the horizon: one big ship and two smaller ones. The two smaller ones moved slowly to shore. Suddenly, the sea came alive. A strong gust of wind sent rafales of high waves to the shore. Battalions upon battalions lined up in columns ready to board,” Tuan recalled.

“But suddenly, far up on the highway appeared three M113 armored carriers, one speeding towards the Marines’ columns on the beach.” When it breached the security perimeter, the Marines sent warning M79 shots. The M113 returned fire with its M60 on board, sending the Marines scattering all over. It continued speeding towards the ocean, entering the water, and started floating towards the ships, but sank after the waves overcame the vehicle. The guys who drove it thought their amphibious light tank could operate on the sea. Poor guys! Ignorance does kill,” he said.

“Someone must have leaked the evacuation information to the populace because suddenly, after the M113 arrived, thousands of civilians, women, and kids with their belongings, came running to the beach; they stepped over each other, fighting, creating chaos. The sound of artillery shells exploding got closer and closer, finally landing on the beach, creating carnage, killing a lot of innocent people.”

“It was a ‘sauve qui peut’ situation. ‘Chacun pour soi-même,’” [run for your life. Each one for himself], Tuan said in his second language. “Total panic. Everybody jumped into the water, trying to swim to the ship a few hundred meters away from shore. I got rid of my crutches and jumped into the water, trying to get in sync with the waves, pushing upwards with my healthy leg. When a wave came, I went up with it. When it passed, I landed on the ocean floor. I waited for the next wave to jump up again while edging slowly towards the ship. I remember my feet not touching the sand but something soft many times. It must have been somebody who had drowned underneath me,” he said.

Half way, Tuan grabbed a floating device someone had made from a poncho.

“Without it, I don’t think I could have reached the ship. So many people were climbing aboard that it became heavily overcrowded and started to be stranded. I was lucky to have my Marine uniform on top of my hospital gown,” he said, recalling that one Army captain was sent back to the beach because his ship was for Marines only.”

That ship transferred Tuan and his fellow Marines to the bigger ship, which then transported them to Phan Rang. It then went back to Cua Viet to rescue more Marines.

Tuan’s thoughts now drift back in time to the Tet Offensive of 1968 and its aftermath.

“When the VC occupied the city of Hue and massacred 3,000 people who were found buried in mass graves, whenever people saw or heard that government troops were leaving, they knew that NVA was going to seize the opportunity to move in.”

“And if the VC came, and you didn’t get out right away, you would never have the chance to leave. So, there was an exodus of people with their belongings crowding all the highway and routes going south. Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng (Horror Highway) which happened when VC artillery shells targeted fleeing people on Highway 1, Quang Tri Province, killing thousands,” he said.

Years later, after having escaped Da Nang on the Marine ship, Tuan had this to say:

“Exiting the ship, I followed the flow of people heading south, using all means of transportation: walking, busing, riding on Lambretta 3-wheeler scooters, Camionnettes [minivans]. At that time, people usually gave free access to injured soldiers. That’s why I was wearing my Marine uniform shirt with the hospital pajama pants,” he said.

When Tuan reached the checkpoint at Bien Hoa, he put on his officer insignia epaulettes, was saluted by a Marine MP, and driven to Lê Hữu Sanh Hospital inside Rừng Cấm Marine Base, Thu Duc.

The surgeon removed shrapnel from Tuan’s leg and told him he was lucky not to have an infection, and that the salt water during Tuan’s swim to the Marine vessel might have kept his leg from being infected.

“I stayed until the end, and I walked home before the VC came and took over. During my stay at the hospital, I was informed that my unit was stationed at Vung Tau, but because my doctor did not release me, I could not go back. Who knows what would have happened if I had gone back?” he asked, remembering that most of his fellow Marines in the final days of the war used small boats to go out to sea and were picked up by the US Seventh Fleet.

In the last 46 years, Tuan has had ample time to reflect on the final outcome of the war in Vietnam.

“Looking back, the two main factors that decided the outcome of the war came down to the structure, the making of the soldier. First, the NVA soldiers’ mental state had been nurtured in an environment of blind obedience to the Communist Party since birth. They believed that the south suffered under an oppressive regime, and they were willing to sacrifice their lives to liberate the country. Each NVA sol-

dier was brain-washed every day by the commissar political adviser. He feared his own peers would report any weakness. They called each other "Đồng Chí," which meant 'same vision, same goal.' They used any means — lies, threats, misinformation, torture, even killing — to reach their goal," Tuan believed. "They were robot soldiers."

"By contrast the South Vietnamese soldier was influenced by his family, his humanity — he could not kill, mistreat elderly, women, children — and most importantly, he could think. He didn't believe in propaganda. He knew right from wrong. That made him weaker than the robot soldiers who pushed through everything to achieve their goal," Tuan said.

The second factor, in Tuan's opinion, was the equipment.

"The robot soldier required minimum basics: food to survive and weapons to kill. Everything else was secondary. He wore sandals and a hat for protection. He required no salary. For one South Vietnamese soldier, you could produce 100 NVA soldiers; the ratio was always 10, 20, 50, or 100 to one in every battle. There must have been a reason why the South lost the war."

Tuan expands on what he feels that reason was.

As soon as the NVA and VC entered a city, with the help of local followers, they took control of all government facilities, and started patrolling the streets with propaganda themes on loudspeakers. They soon requested people to register their household and encouraged denouncing 'anti-revolutionaries' and reporting all enemies of the people.

"People were confused and scared," he added. "Who was considered the enemy of the people? Would they be executed? Would there be a new Hue massacre but on a bigger scale?"

A new order came the next day, advising all military and government employees of the "old regime" that they would be pardoned if they voluntarily registered to undergo re-education classes: from Private 1st class to NCOs, three days; for junior officers, ten days; for captains up to generals, six months, according to Tuan.

"They had to bring their own food and clothes, 'Failing to do so would face serious consequences,'" the notice said.

"I watched the first 'catégorie,'" Tuan said in French, "go and come home. After all, we junior officers were only small potatoes. It would be only ten days, plus the neighbors were watching. The communists were very good at sowing fear to control people. They were masters at lies and misinformation."

"I showed up at lycée Jean-Jacques Rousseau, my old high school, the pickup point for District 1 in Saigon. I saw some of my friends from university. When we filled out the paperwork, we were told that they knew everything about us, that they seized the Ministry of Defence, and had all the documents. They just wanted to confirm if we were honest to confess our crimes to the people. [They told us] we would be punished if we were not."

Tuan and the others were organized into ten-person teams with one designated leader to be responsible for each team.

"That night we were loaded into covered Molotov vans. After hours of driving on suburban roads, they made us sit down in columns in a big industrial yard. Then they loaded us into the belly of a big transport ship. I will never forget how dark and suffocating the space was when they closed the lid above us," he remembered.

"After a few hours, suddenly they opened the lid and released us into the yard to be head-counted again. Then we were loaded back into the Molotov trucks, and the convoy headed back to the city and drove northeast. This time the guy sitting in the back poked his head out from time to time and gave us the information about where we were going."

At dawn they reached a big walled compound.

"I know this place," one guy said to Tuan. "It's Thành Ông Năm."

Thành Ông Năm was the ARVN military civil service base in the Hố Môn District, in the outskirts of Saigon, not far from the now famous Cu Chi tunnels in what Tuan referred to as "VC country."



Tuan very soon realized that what he and the others were told would occur was light years away from the reality.

"In the morning, we had to exercise for half an hour. After that, each group sat down in a circle. We started to introduce ourselves. Everyone was forced to express an opinion about the 'revolution', the crime we committed towards the people, if we had any regrets, etc. All of us were exhausted and sleepy after the night before, but we had to keep going."

"In the evening, the political teacher visited each group to answer questions. The most important questions were, 'Are we going home after ten days?' 'How long are we going to be here?'"

They were told, "As long as you study good, you have a chance to go back to your family."

"He never defined the word 'good,' and that was the only time he showed up to talk to us for the next seven days; I knew then I wasn't going to be home after ten days like they said in the announcement. Like thousands of others, I was being duped by a cunning adversary," Tuan realized.

Many years later, at an RVN Marine reunion in California, one of Tuan's friends told him that he was transferred all around the country, camp after camp, doing hard labor for more than six years. But because he was a junior officer, he was not taken to camps situated in the north like the more senior ones.

"That made me remember the first time we were loaded into the cargo ship. It was a mistake. That ship was for those who were destined to go to camps far away in the north."

Tuan started to plan his escape

"The longer I stayed, the harder it was going to be to escape," he told himself. "People started observing each other. They started changing. They started to adapt to reality. They started reporting on each other."

The prisoners were not permitted to go outside their barracks after 8 pm.

“Only NVA soldiers in their loose green uniforms were moving around. Some went outside the compound through a door with a light bulb shining into their faces and said some ‘mot de passe’ [password] to the armed guard on duty,” Tuan recalled.

“On day seven, earlier in the evening, I noticed an NVA uniform being left to dry on a clothesline, outside the next building, just outside our perimeter. It was still there when darkness fell at 8 pm. I told my team leader I had to go to the toilet outside. I waited for a few minutes and then climbed over the concertina fence surrounding our barracks to get the uniform. I knew that nobody expected a move like that in the early days. There was no light except the moon, so I strolled around like an NVA soldier, making sure not to get too close to anyone around. But I couldn’t go through the door. The armed guard would know right away when he looked at me, I only had the uniform, no sandals. (The NVA footwear), no NVA pith helmet. I could not speak with the northern accent, and I didn’t know the ‘mot de passe.’”

Tuan wandered around for a while, thinking and following the wall until he found a lower portion. Seeing nobody around, he managed to climb over and find himself on the other side.

“My first thought was to get away as far as possible. If someone discovered my absence and reported me, then the farther away the safer.”

There were people walking on the streets, living life normally, and Tuan felt safe in his NVA uniform. There was a food stall on wheels selling sugar cane juice with ice. I approached and ordered a glass, trying to imitate the northern accent, pretending to be from the north. By the look of the girl handing me the glass of juice, I knew she thought there was something funny about this guy with his funny accent. At the time it didn’t matter. I was enjoying the first cold drink I had had in a long time,” Tuan reflected.

“I asked her, ‘Which way to Saigon?’ She pointed her finger to the street leading to the highway, still with her curious look. I paid her with the money I hadn’t had the chance to spend since I showed myself to captivity, and started moving in that direction. The farther away the better.”

As the time reached nine o’clock the streets in the town began to empty of citizens.

“Little did I know that there was a curfew at 10 pm. I was concentrating on walking fast, without raising suspicion. Some dogs barking when I walked past a house made me feel uneasy. There was nobody outside on the road now. So, I took the chance to put as many kilometers as I could between me and the compound.”

“Suddenly, out of nowhere, three silhouettes appeared, pointing AKs at me. ‘Đồng Chí! Dừng lại! (Comrade, stop!). Where are you going at this hour? Where is your unit? What are you doing in this area?’ [They were speaking] in the northern accent. I couldn’t answer any of those questions.”

“They pulled me into their checkpoint and started questioning me. They discovered I was a fake. More guys came. They decided to tie me up and wait for their superior. He came and started the interro-

gation. After a while, he concluded that I was a dangerous enemy trying to infiltrate and murder them.”

For two or three days, Tuan endured questioning and torture. They woke him up every four hours and tried to get him to confess his intention. They put him in a cage so small that he got cramped up and couldn’t move around.

“I gave them a fake last name and address so they couldn’t link me to my escape, but between beatings, I forgot what I said before. In the end I had to tell them the truth. I thought that they would take me back to the compound, but they transferred me to the civilian police.”

Tuan was transferred to the famous Khám Chí Hoà city prison, an octagonal prison built by the French that was then being used by the communists.

That would not be the last time Anh Tuan Tran ran afoul of the communists, however. When asked how many times he escaped, he listed his tribulations thusly:

“Two times. The first time from the Hốc Môn compound; recaptured; jailed in cage at the smallest level of government, Xã Phường. Then next level up, Quận District prison; city prison Khám Chí Hoà.”

He then spent more than three years in another communist re-education camp, Suối Máu Biên Hoà, from which he escaped. He traveled to the Central Highlands city of Pleiku in an attempt to walk through the jungles of Laos to reach freedom in Thailand. Unfortunately, he was captured by Pathet Lao communists and brought back to Kontum.



When Tuan was caught by the NVA unit, he was interrogated and beaten.

“But I guess because they didn’t have a holding place, or they didn’t really consider me dangerous (I didn’t have any weapons, didn’t offer any resistance), they delivered me to the local VC in the morning.”

Tuan related how he was held in a cage like an animal and questioned for several days by a lower government official, “Cấp Phường Xã” in Vietnamese.

He was then transferred to the prison of the higher government office, “Cấp Quận”. This very old and solid district prison was built during the French era.

“I was sent in a sort of holding structure in concrete. I remember it had a big steel door leading to an alley with a row of ten double cells, one on top of the other on both sides. The cell was very small and had a very low ceiling. It had one small opening for air. It held six prisoners. Once inside, you could not sit up straight. You could only crawl in and lie down next to each other. It was like the six of us were inside a big drawer. It was so claustrophobic that I had to fight my fears to stay sane. The prisoners were from common criminals (theft, burglary, assault) to political ones (anti-revolutionary denounced by someone or defying re-education orders). Each cell had one large ammo box for prisoners to urinate in. It was emptied two times a day at meal time. Prisoners were allowed outside for a half an hour

during lunch and had to ask permission from guards to go to the toilet. Every newcomer had to spend up to two weeks in these suffocating, humid, terrifying holding compartments before being released to the general population in bigger cells,” Tuan recalled.

“At lunch time, the cook, also a prisoner, brought in a big pot of rice and put one long handled spoon of rice into each prisoner’s holding container.”

Tuan did not have anything to receive the rice and had to trade one third of his portion for a piece of nylon cloth to hold the rice.

“In the evening, after dinner, the guard locked all the compartments and the principal door. He resumed peeking into the compartments the next morning. I was trying to deny the reality of my present situation, and think of something pleasant and happy, like when I was a student at the University of Dalat before being drafted.”

“Suddenly, I smelled smoke. I started panicking, thinking about being roasted in that hole. One of my cellmates yelled something and pulled out a cigarette made of crude tobacco rolled into a small piece of newspaper. He reached his hand over to the next cell through the steel bar door and retrieved some sort of cotton shoelace with the embers in one end. He then lit his cigarette and passed a lighting device to the next cell.”

“Thus, the ember lighting device was circulated around through each cell. People started enjoying their smoke inside the prison. We risked being sent to the shackles room if we got caught. Still people liked to defy prison rules. Someone succeeded in smuggling in matches. So started that magical event,” Tuan said.

The next day, he joined in the fun by exchanging half his rice portion for one cigarette.

“That was the most enjoyable moment I had during my time in that prison. The effect of that smoke sent me through the clouds. I felt dizzy and out of this world.”

During Tuan’s captivity, he realized that, although they also considered him an enemy, the VC of the south were less aggressive, less cruel than the NVA from the north. They often told him that he deserved to starve to death for being the enemy of the people. They took turns beating him up even when he didn’t resist.

In contrast, the VC tried to be more aggressive in appearance, but they gave him food and water and didn’t show much animosity as their counterparts from the north.

“In the early days, the guards that the officials used were often young guys without education. They just gave them an AK, told them what they wanted, and they [the young NVA] executed [the task] perfectly with enthusiasm,” Tuan believes.

“They considered prisoners sub-human. They treated us very harshly. The rule was when we approached a ‘comrade citizen,’ we must stand still, one meter away from them, ask for permission to speak, and only move when he gave us permission. Imagine how you would feel when a stupid kid with the AK has so much power over you!”

One of the prisons Tuan was subjected to, Chí Hoà City Jail, was a prison for civilians. But during the Vietnam War, the VC turned it onto a holding jail for common criminals, but mostly political dissidents.

“Anyone considered dangerous or simply anti-revolutionary (Phản Cách Mạng) was put there. In my cell, most prisoners were young, but there were also older ones. In my group there was one grey-haired gentleman in his sixties who was a long-time retired Airborne captain from the French Legionnaires, one intellectual looking old man with wire rim glasses, who must have been a professor or a high-ranking government employee. There were a few airmen, [including] a helicopter pilot, a group of young Airborne officers, who were very close knit. The majority were denounced by neighbors or local informers. We were often interrogated many times a day and encouraged to spy on each other. That’s probably why most of us kept to ourselves,” Tuan feels.

The daily routine in Chí Hoà was very mundane and forceful.

“There was “điểm danh” (roll call) two times a day, in the morning and in the evening. Between hours, patriotic and revolutionary songs. I think [my] survival instinct outweighed any ideological thinking. If you are forced to save your own skin over the others, either to have more chance to be released, or to simply have better treatment, day after day, month after month, year after year, you will succumb to it. Communism is expert in controlling people’s minds and bodies.”

To him that explained why every Special Forces team sent to operate in northern regions controlled by communists was apprehended right away when they ventured into the populace.

“Everybody knew everybody, everybody spied on each other. You could not have chicken while other people around you could only afford rice mixed with “khoai mì”.

In jail, the prisoners were deprived of any notion of time. Their days were spent waiting for hot water and food.

“I remember feeling a sharp pain in my stomach when the leader of the group failed to divide the rice portion equally and had to take back one spoonful from each of the portions he’d already distributed to fill up the three last ones,” Tuan said, stating that there were two categories of prisoners in his cell, the ones who received parcels from their family and the ones who were “mồ côi” [orphans].

“Unlike the privileged ones, we orphans were always looking forward to receiving our very small portion of rice every day. Over time, we got so hungry that, at lunch time, all eyes were on the guy who was in charge of distributing the rice. We gathered around in a circle with our containers in front of us and watched closely the hand that delivered the precious substance that sustained our lives. When the pot was empty and there were still two or three portions to be filled, he had to take back a spoonful from each portion already filled to make the last ones. People groaned, and some protested.”

“You are taking too much from mine!” “You are taking too little from that guy!”

“Every grain of rice counted in that fight for survival. You got weaker and weaker, and soon food was the only thing that occupied your mind. No more thoughts of rebellion or anything else. Everyone exposed their true self: the once proud pilot became humble, obedient towards the kid, “cán bộ”, when he gave orders from outside

the cage. The privileged formed their own group and guarded ferociously their treasure (food, medicine, clothes). And they usually had “serviteurs” [servants] to protect and entertain them,” Tuan said.

“There was one guy who could tell stories, the whole set of 12 books* of ‘Cô Gái Đồ Long’, a very popular martial art book series. Every night the privileged people gathered around him and listened to him for hours. There was another guy who could perform crackling massage moves on you for a piece of raw sugar. Food equaled power in there,” Tuan said.

In the corner of each cell, there was a squatting toilet where people could wash themselves with a bucket of water if they could bribe the prisoner “room chief” (trưởng phòng), according to Tuan.

The “chief of the room” was designated and trusted by the VC guard and was responsible for almost everything, from distributing meals

and water to controlling the mood of prisoners. He was the one who reported directly to the cán bộ. He didn’t get transferred as often to other rooms or pavilions for no reason like the rest of us.”

“I think we experienced skin disease in this time period because of malnutrition and close contact living.”

Tuan endured that life until he was transferred to the Suối Máu re-education labor camp in Bien Hoà Province. ❖



PART TWO: Life in the Suối Máu re-education labor camp and how Tuan made his escape to a new life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Marc Yablonka is a military journalist whose reportage has appeared in the U.S. Military’s *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, *Air Force Times*, *American Veteran*, *Vietnam* magazine, *Airways*, *Military Heritage*, *Soldier of Fortune* and many other publications.

Between 2001 and 2008, Marc served as a Public Affairs Officer, CWO-2, with the 40th Infantry Division Support Brigade and Installation Support Group, California State Military Reserve, Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos, California. During that time, he wrote articles and took photographs in support of Soldiers who were mobilizing for and demobilizing from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

His work was published in *Soldiers*, official magazine of the United States Army, *Grizzly*, magazine of the California National Guard, the *Blade*, magazine of the 63rd Regional Readiness Command-U.S. Army Reserves, *Hawaii Army Weekly*, and *Army Magazine*, magazine of the Association of the U.S. Army.

Marc’s decorations include the California National Guard Medal of Merit, California National Guard Service Ribbon, and California National Guard Commendation Medal w/Oak Leaf. He also served two tours of duty with the Sar El Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces and holds the Master’s of Professional Writing degree earned from the University of Southern California.

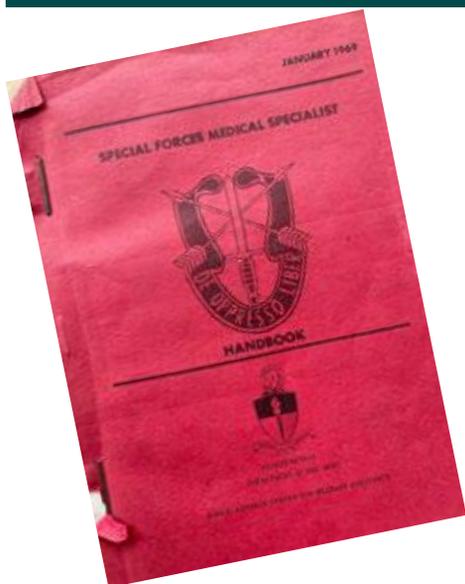
A t t e n t i o n S F A M e m b e r s !

M E D I C !

Hey Doc, a bunch of us are getting together during the SFACON in Las Vegas this fall. If you were a 91B/18D, we would love to see you there. In preparation, we are gathering photos from medical training, field dispensaries, etc.

As a 91B myself (70-79), I often felt I had a somewhat privileged position on the teams I was assigned to, and know that many other Medics felt the same way. Our goal with this gathering would be as follows:

- ▶ Promote comradery within the group
- ▶ Share stories of the impact being a medic had on our lives, both in and out of service
- ▶ Find out which of us used our SF medical training to transition into civilian medical positions
- ▶ Explore how we may be able to assist currently active duty 18D’s transition into civilian medical fields
- ▶ Demonstrate the evolution of the SF Medical Aidman training program from the 60’s to current practices



Please send your photo’s, and any stories that you wish to share, to Dennis DeRosia at dderosia@cox.net, so that we can compile them into a brief presentation. More information on where and when we will be meeting at SFACON to come.



WELCOME
TO *Fabulous*
LAS VEGAS
NEVADA

**SPECIAL FORCES
ASSOCIATION
2021 CONVENTION**

The 2021 Special Forces Convention "SFACON" promises to be one of the biggest, SFA Conventions of all time. Las Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world and we promise to throw a lot at you over the course of 4+ days. Our host hotel, The Orleans, has a huge hospitality room which will feature an "open" bar for the entire convention. Don't miss this one!



October 22-25th
Immediately following
SOAR

SFACON
www.sfacon.com

Starts with free welcome breakfast
10am - 10/22/2021

FEATURING

- Open Bar All Days
- SF Speaker Symposium
- Butler Purple Heart Run
- M Hotel Day Club After Race Party
- Death Valley Motorcycle Ride
- Golf Tournament
- Valley of Fire Tour
- Mob Museum Tour
- Shopping Outlet Tour
- AND MORE
visit sfacon.com for updates

SFA Chapter 78 August 2021 Chapter Meeting

Photos by Dennis DeRosia and How Miller



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13

- 1 Guest speaker COL Pat Mahaney (Ret).
- 2 John Joyce, President of Chapter 51, original editor of the *Sentinel* (2010-2011) and 2021 SFA Convention Director, provided Chapter members with a SFA Con update.
- 3 Great Green Berets span generations of wars! Left to right: SF Original, Richard Simonian; Ranger Hall of Fame and former Chapter 78 President, Ramon Rodriguez; SOTF-71 CMDR COL Pat Mahaney; War reporter, Alex Quade; former Chapter 78 President COL Jim Duffy; Nimo, cropped from the photo for security reasons.
- 4 Chapter President Bruce Long presents a Chapter coin to Don Ray, guest of Chapter member Steve Bric. A letter Don Ray had written to Steve about the loss of Steve's brother, Bill, in the attack on FOB4 was printed in the [August 2021 Sentinel](#).
- 5 Left to right, *Sentinel* Editor, How Miller; Chapter 51 Vice President Scott La Morte; Kim Holmes; past Chapter 78 President and past editor of the *Sentinel* (2012-2019), Lonny Holmes.
- 6 Chapter 12 member Mike Lam was in attendance. We hope to see him at future meetings.
- 7 SFC Ken Atkinson, NCOIC S-3 OPS C/1/19 SF (A), gave us a quick update on C Company activities.
- 8 Debra Holm, art director and graphic designer for the *Sentinel* since 2012, now an honorary Chapter member, received her official silver metal i.d. card from President Bruce Long.
- 9 Honorary SFA member Alex Quade brought Black Rifle Coffee, a veteran-owned coffee company, for all meeting attendees.
- 10 Alex Quade speaking with Chapter member Jim Suber and his wife Irene after the meeting.
- 11 Jim Morris, past editor of the *Sentinel* (2020), speaks with COL Pat Mahaney after the meeting.
- 12 John Joyce introduces his guest, Jim Cragg of S.O. Tech.
- 13 Chapter 51 member Brad Welker, former member of Chapter 78.