



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 2 • FEBRUARY 2022

## **SON TAY RAID** **SPECIAL EDITION**



### **The Real Son Tay Raid — 51 Years Later**

**Are You Invisible?**

**SFA Chapter 78 Special  
Fundraiser Success —**

**Meet Chapter 78 Member Nimo**

**IN MEMORIAM: MG John K. Singlaub**



# SENTINEL

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 2 • FEBRUARY 2022



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

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**FRONT COVER:** Code named "Cherry One," the MC-130E Combat Talon I, tail number 64-0523, the lead aircraft in the 1970 Son Tay Raid, takes its final flight during an aircraft retirement ceremony at Cannon Air Force Base, NM on June 22, 2012. (Photo by Airman 1st Class Alexxis Pons Abascal, Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs)



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## From the Editor



How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

January has brought significant changes to Chapter 78. We have a new president and vice president getting their feet wet and bringing new ideas. And now we find that Chapter 78's oldest member, former Chief SOG, Jack Singlaub, passed away peacefully on 29 January at 100 years of age. Please check out the back cover.

MC-130 Combat Talon (Cherry One) which was the Son Tay Raiders' pathfinder into North Vietnam is shown on the front cover.

Our favorite Afghan Interpreter, Nimo has a "new leg," a new wife, and is mastering his duties helping the Afghan refugees. The article "SFA Chapter 78 Special Fundraiser Success" gives some background on Nimo that security concerns prevented us from telling before. He continues to be a respected and valuable member of the SF community.

On page 2 "Are You Invisible?" gives instructions on how you can join in on the exciting new opportunity to share with former Green Berets and pass our knowledge and experiences forward.

Retired Green Beret Greg Walker has given us a fresh perspective and new details about the November, 1970 Son Tay Raid. There is even a humorous side story here about a classic SF move. His excellent book, *At the Hurricane's Eye: U.S. Special Operations Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm*, includes extensive and authoritative coverage of the raid. Besides the exemplary planning and execution, the raid is lauded for producing better conditions for our POWs.

Wade Ishimodo mentioned that the Iran hostage rescue operation Eagle Claw benefited from the excellent planning and execution of the Son Tay Raid, but lacked the cohesive and experienced air assets that were present in 1970 RVN. That, and other lessons learned, led to dedicated SOF structures and doctrines, leading to

the robust counterterrorism capabilities we now have. You can see his talk at the Las Vegas 2021 SFA convention: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi8ltD6HG4I>.

**NOTE:** SOF.NEWS' one man show and Sentinel contributor, retired Green Beret, John Friberg, has been busy helping coordinate Afghan rescue operations. He offers a revealing update at <https://sof.news/misc/extended-break-2022/> and a link to his <https://afghan-report.com/> ❖



Wade Ishimoto speaking at last October's SFA Convention. His talk can be viewed on the [SFA Chapter 78 YouTube Channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...) at the link list at left.

How Miller  
Sentinel Editor



# From the President | February 2022



Gregory Horton  
President SFA Ch. 78

Well, this was an outstanding first month for our board. We started out with a planning meeting where we discussed where we were headed as a Chapter and threw out some ideas for trips to various locations during the year — the Nixon Library, the Ronald Reagan Museum, the USS Iowa and Artemis were some ideas. A BBQ Day is also on the table. The only limiting factor is the stinking COVID Bug. But as venues open up, we will try to plug them into our schedule.

We discussed the SFA Teamhouse website and the training I'd sat in on conducted by **Keith Rutledge**, the National SFA VP. It is a very powerful website with a lot of great features. Besides your biographical information, there are sections for your interests and business information (if you have one). If you put your company information in there, thousands of members will have access to your data. The section on Mentors caught my eye and I suggested that one for Law Enforcement be added. With the Mentor block checked, someone looking for help transitioning can find out who can give them assistance with their questions. I would recommend that everyone get in the Teamhouse and if you have any questions, we have our own in-house expert, Debra Holm, who can get you on track. Contact her at [sfachapter78@gmail.com](mailto:sfachapter78@gmail.com) if you need help.

We had **Nimo** and Nadia at the meeting for a very special event. Our chapter, led by **Richard Simonian** and **Len Fein**, raised money to fund Nimo's new prosthetic leg and presented him with a check for its purchase. Nimo gave us a briefing on his current involvement with the refugee families and Commandos that served with the US Army Special Forces for years in Afghanistan. With the assistance of Richard and his company, Nimo is vetting the families and settling them into select housing tracts in Southern California. I don't need to elaborate on the chaos of leaving their country, but most of them came with nothing but their clothing. Once they got here, they were given a small sum of money and temporary shelter. So needless to say, they need everything. The Chapter's website has a page with a list of items they need and an address where they can be mailed to (<https://www.specialforces78.com/afghan-refugee-housing-project/>).



I went to Costco.com and had two boxes of flatware sent there. Yes, some don't even have utensils to eat with, but I think our Chapter can step up to the plate and really help these allies out.

Our Chapter meeting on the 22nd of January was well attended with 56 attendees there, including a large group from C Co, 19th SFGA. Major Bob Ashley gave an excellent update on his company's status and their mission focus. They have a very busy schedule which will keep them hustling this year. **Richard Simonian** suggested that the Chapter could possibly fund life memberships in the Special Forces Association for interested members of Charlie Company. The Board will come up with the criteria and see if any of them are interested.

**Nimo** gave his presentation to the general membership and once again talked about the current status of the Refugee Communities he was assisting. We discussed how we planned to set up the donation program and get the membership involved. Nimo also discussed his military career and his involvement with the various Special Forces units. One thing that really made me introspective, was when he told us that he was involved in fighting since he was 14 years old. I thought about what I was doing as a 14-year-old in "beautiful downtown Burbank," and then imagined being in combat at that time. I can't even wrap my mind around that. I am definitely going to help them out, wherever and whatever I can do.

Once again, the Chapter is going to be involved in gathering .22 LR ammunition for the Boy Scout Marksmanship program run by Scott Jones of the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club. Any member wishing to donate, please bring your ammo to the February meeting.

The next meeting will be 19 February 2022 at the Pub at Fiddler's Green, JFTB Los Alamitos — Breakfast 0800 and the meeting will start at 0830. Please e-mail **VP Dennis DeRosia** at: [dderosia@cox.net](mailto:dderosia@cox.net), no later than Thursday February 17th, midnight. We need an exact headcount. ❖

Greg Horton SGM (Ret)  
President  
SFA Chapter 78

## Thanks to generous donations SFA Chapter 78 Special Fundraiser was success!

Chapter 78 President Greg Horton presents Nimo with a \$40k check to fund the replacement of his prosthetic leg at the Chapter's January 5th Board of Directors meeting. From left to right, Past Chapter President Bruce Long, Greg Horton, Chapter member Nimo, Chapter member Len Fein, and Chapter Treasurer Richard Simonian.

Read more about Nimo and his work with Affordable Community Living's Afghan Refugee Housing Project on page 3.



# TEAMHOUSE



## ARE YOU INVISIBLE?

**Sign into the SFA Teamhouse at  
[teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org](https://teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org)  
to complete your member profile.**

Visit [www.specialforces78.com/teamhouse-member-profile-instructions/](https://www.specialforces78.com/teamhouse-member-profile-instructions/)  
for easy step-by-step instructions.

By being visible in the Teamhouse, you can actively participate in the SFA brotherhood — sharing your knowledge, interests, and support with the nationwide network of team members.

?????????

U.S. ARMY



# SFA Chapter 78 Special Fundraiser Success — Meet Chapter 78 Member Nimo

By How Miller

Nimo is thrilled with his new prosthetic leg, called a Hydraulic Ottobock that was donated to him with the help of SFA Chapter 78 among others in the SFA community. He says that he greatly appreciates all who helped; they have no idea how much pain he has been enduring for years. With his old, ill-fitting, and clumsy device he would get so many bruises in a single day that he needed to rest on the next day to recover, unable to work. Now he is able to work easily every day, and he even said it “kind of feels like my own leg.”

Besides the enormous difference in simply having something that fits properly, he now has something which actually helps him walk, not something he had to drag from behind him with each step. Not only does the ankle bend, allowing him to place his feet flat on the floor when he sits, but the hydraulics provide power to help him walk and climb stairs. He said it pushes him instead of holding him back. This clearly will help him navigate life more easily for a long time to come.

Nimo explains that even though his given name is Niamatullah, when he started working with American Special Forces at the age of fourteen they started calling him Nimo, which was much more efficient when quick communication was necessary, such as in combat situations. As his work skills and language skills grew he was asked to be an interpreter and became an invaluable team member. He worked through various critical assignments with different SF groups over the years. Eventually he emigrated to California, settled in, and later accepted another assignment wherein he returned to Afghanistan.

He was back in California when Afghanistan fell. Besides all the anxiety of hearing about other interpreters being killed by the Taliban, and fear for his relatives that remained in country, his future wife, Nadia, an American citizen, was stuck in Afghanistan for months after the fall. She had been visiting her relatives and her passport had been stolen by an apparent Taliban while he was supposedly helping her get into the Kabul airport in August. She had to hide from the Taliban until she was transported out of country by an NGO far away from Kabul. This is why we were so secretive last year about Nimo's real identity.

Nimo and Nadia are now on another new adventure as they recently married. They have the well wishes of all who know this wonderful couple. Nimo is now employed as Project Manager of Refugee Housing for the non-profit Affordable Community Living. His duties include all phases of assisting Afghan refugees who have been vetted to have worked with American forces, often with SF. He coordinates their transfer from other NGO locations in the U.S. to one of two California manufactured home communities, one in Ridgecrest and the other in Mojave. These locations are ideal in that they largely resemble the desert environment where the immigrants



Chapter 78 member Nimo at the annual Christmas party, Dec. 2021

were living in Afghanistan. The parks are also rural and now house other Afghans on whom these folks can rely on for mutual support.

It is fun to listen to Nimo describe the various things he is called on to do to help these folks become accustomed to their new environment. That ranges from accustoming them to American culture, to simply showing them how to use appliances they are not familiar with. It also involves lots of behind the scenes administrative tasks, such as helping arrange for schooling, and working with agencies such as DHA to set up food stamps, Medicaid, cash payments, and other legal paperwork.

He also hires some of them to do jobs where they can learn new skills such as painting and basic carpentry. Each family is given 6 months free rent and Nimo is hopeful that all will become self-sufficient within that time frame.

They are still in need of house and school supplies. Because the families traditionally sit on the floors to eat around a cloth floor covering, on some kind of carpeting, the bare floors in their new houses are uncomfortable and there is a need for large rugs, such as 9'x9' or 9'x12'. Many of the immediate needs, such as plates and silverware, have been provided for now, but school supplies including backpacks, paper, and pencils are a current need as well.

**To learn how you can help  
Affordable Community Living's  
Afghan Refugee Housing Project visit**

<https://www.specialforces78.com/afghan-refugee-housing-project/>



# The Real Son Tay Raid – 51 Years Later

By Greg Walker (ret), US Army Special Forces



Author, Greg Walker, with Son Tay Raider, SGM Jake Jakovenko (photo courtesy Greg Walker)

## Forward

In July 1997, I enjoyed the opportunity to spend several weeks at Ft. Bragg with the Army's Special Forces Command. While there, I delved into Operation IVORY COAST, gathering up additional and exclusive facts which further enhanced what has already been published on the subject from credible sources.

In 2017, I spent a relaxing week with retired Sergeant Major Vladimir "Jake" Jakovenko, who was with the Greenleaf Assault and Security Element during the Son Tay Raid. Jake added more to the story, his recollections priceless.

The Son Tay Raid is a tribute to exceptional personal courage and commitment. It is also the epitome of long-range raid planning, preparation, and execution. Its many successes are well understood by those in the special operations community. The only smoke and mirrors involved were designed by those warriors who carried out this extraordinary assault into the enemy's heartland against those who bore the brunt of its fury.

This article is dedicated to the memory of my dad's and my friend, Jim Butler, founder of the Special Operations Association (SOA #001). RIP, Warrior, RIP. You are missed.

## The Real Raid

Charged with conducting unconventional warfare in North and South Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Laos, the special operations group, SOG (Studies and Observations Group) consisted of three field commands. These were Command and Control North, Central and South. CCN was always the largest of the three commands and its missions included cross-border operations, the tracking and attempted rescue of POWs, agent networks and psychological operations directed against the North Vietnamese.

The first successful SOG project was SHINING BRASS, whose commander was former WHITE STAR project officer Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons. Both WHITE STAR and SHINING BRASS were extremely successful special operations conducted under clandestine/covert circumstances.

By 1966, Simons was serving with SOG as commander of OP-35, a project responsible for all cross-border operations into Laos, Cambodia and later, North Vietnam. Retired General Jack Singlaub recalls assuming command of SOG from Brigadier General Donald Blackburn, who commanded SOG in the mid-60s. "When Don left to become the SACS and I took over SOG in 1966, Simons was in charge of OP-35." Two officers Simons worked alongside during his OP-35 tour were Dick Meadows and Elliot Sydnor, both of whom would later be handpicked by Simons to lead teams "Blueboy" and "Redwine" into Son Tay.

Blackburn, who became special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities (SACSA) in Washington D.C. after his tour as "Chief SOG", was the final approval authority for all SOG operations passed from MACV through the commander in chief Pacific (CinPac) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington, D.C. The importance of this direct linkage between SOG-CCN commanders/operators and Operation IVORY COAST (Son Tay) has long been overlooked by those studying the raid. However, it is perhaps the most important factor in the raid's equation, as we shall soon see.

In a 1992 interview conducted between this writer and General Jack Singlaub (ret.), General Singlaub offered a raid against Son Tay had been studied by SOG in late 1968, nearly a year and a half before IVORY COAST would be launched. Son Tay as a POW compound had been discovered during OP-35's BRIGHT LIGHT missions, meant to rescue POWs from suspected sites in Laos and North Vietnam. Over two hundred such ops had been run with no successful conclusion. SOG's OP-34 was responsible for escape



and evasion networks inside North Vietnam and was administered by the Joint Personnel Recovery Centre (JPRC). Between the two projects a great deal of hard intelligence about both the ground and the enemy was collected and updated, passed on to MACV-SOG, the SACS, and then JCS.

Years later, an army helicopter pilot who flew recovery missions for CCN would say this of Butler, “I used to hate hearing Jim whispering to us on the radio. He’d say ‘come and get us’...and you knew he and his team were sitting right in the middle of the NVA watching them. It was some of the hairiest flying I ever did going after Butler.”

Singlaub confirms SOG began planning a raid on Son Tay during his tour as commander. “...as best as I can recall, I’d left SOG before it was completed,” says the general. The study was wrapped up under Colonel Steve Cavanaugh, who replaced Singlaub at SOG. It was presented for operational consideration but turned down. Today, Singlaub believes the decision was a wise one. “The serious (intelligence) leak at the (South Vietnamese) minister’s level likely would have compromised the mission either before it got underway, or once it was on the ground inside North Vietnam.”

Again, what is critical to remember at this point is SOG’s already researched plan for assaulting Son Tay as early as 1967. This plan, along with the operational presence and participation of SOG-CCN’s earliest operators, would become the foundation for Operation IVORY COAST launched three years later.

Singlaub believes SOG had the personnel and equipment capable of successfully undertaking a raid in Son Tay. Keeping the training and the plan secret would have been the unit’s greatest challenge as SOG was essentially in-theatre, with all the drawbacks such close proximity holds. “Son Tay was no secret to us,” confirms General Singlaub. “We knew about its status as a POW camp well over a year before the (1970) raid was launched.”

The particulars of Operation IVORY COAST are superbly documented in both Benjamin E. Schemmer’s work on the subject (*The Raid*, Avon, 1976) and *At The Hurricane’s Eye* (Greg Walker, Ivy Books, 1994). Not available in Schemmer’s account of the Son Tay and published for the first time in “Hurricane”, is the American led SOG recon mission into Son Tay prior to Simon’s launch from Udorn, Thailand.

Seventy-two hours prior to Simon’s hitting Son Tay, CSM Mark Gentry was told to cancel one of his project’s Earth Angel missions. Earth Angel operators were Vietnamese dressed in enemy uniforms while penetrating North Vietnam for the purpose of gathering intelligence. As they operated far behind enemy lines the most often used method of infiltration was by high altitude-low opening parachute drops, or HALO. Gentry’s Vietnamese team was scheduled to freefall into the Son Tay area when their mission was cancelled with no reason given. In 1994, Gentry said he was told after the fact the cancellation was due to IVORY COAST.

In interviews with Jim Butler, identified in *At the Hurricane’s Eye* as “Frank Capper”, One-Zero for RT Python, the Earth Angel mission was scrapped in favor of an American led recon. This team was made up of three CCN One-Zeros, two North Vietnamese Kit Carson Scouts from the Son Tay area and one CIA operative. The team launched from CCN’s HEAVY HOOK mission site along the Thai border. Due



Former CCN recon team leader and founder of the Special Operations Association (SOA) Jim “Snake” Butler was a BRIGHT LIGHT “One-Zero” during his five tours at CCN. “Our intelligence gathering teams entered North Vietnam whenever we wanted to,” he says today. “It was common for us to evade their (NVA) radar using helicopter flying in from several hilltop launch sites along the northern Laotian border. We pretty much came and went as we pleased.” Butler’s codename during his tours with the downed pilot recovery project known as HEAVY HOOK was “Fat Capper.” (photo courtesy Lindsay Butler)

To view the James Butler Tribute visit <https://vimeo.com/567075017>

to HEAVY HOOK’s helicopters being heavily armored their range of operations were limited. The team was therefore loaned one of Simon’s now pre-staged reserve helos in order to get to Son Tay.

The helicopter refueled at the CIA mission support site at Longcheng, in Laos. It then infiltrated North Vietnam’s air space using one of the CCN air lanes used successfully over the years for just such operations. The team landed several kilometers from Son Tay, moving by foot to a position where it could observe both the POW compound and that of the so-called “secondary school” 450 meters to the South of the prison.

According to Butler, it was Sergeant Dale Dehnke who led the team into Son Tay. During their stay the operators confirmed specific information gathered by SR-71 and drone flights, as well as from past intelligence debriefings of local inhabitants and captured NVA soldiers gathered by the CIA. Dehnke’s team could not confirm or deny the presence of American POWs at the compound due to its prison walls.



SGT Dale Dehnke  
(photo courtesy James Butler)

However, they did verify the continued presence of North Vietnamese regulars at the prison. It was this guard force the raiders encountered as Dick Meadows' assault team crash-landed inside the compound.

Also verified was the presence of both North Vietnamese and Chinese troops in and around the former school now being used as a military installation. According to my exclusive interview with the co-pilot of Simon's helicopter the night of the raid, this installation was briefed as both a threat and possible distraction beginning at the onset of IVORY COAST's planning. "We were told there were enemy troops at the secondary school was so close to the prison."

This concern on the pilots' part was twofold in nature. Their primary fear was that the two installations were so similar in layout and construction that they might be confused due to any number of circumstances. In fact, this is exactly what occurred during the final leg into Son Tay proper. The second consideration had to do with how swiftly the military personnel at the secondary school site could deploy a response force against the raiders at the prison. The 450 (+ or - 50) meters separating the two sites could be covered within minutes by either foot or vehicle and Sergeant Dehnke's intelligence gathering mission showed those mixed troops at the former school were well armed and motorized.

Discovered also was the fact the force at the school compound stacked their weapons in its courtyard at night. This bit of information would prove invaluable to Simons' Greenleaf team when it found itself deposited by accident outside the now-confirmed barrack's walls.



Again, Jim Butler remembers the effectiveness of these new NVA units beginning in mid-1969. "With the new enemy tactics time was what you didn't have. Once they had our position pinpointed, they'd begin throwing human-wave attacks against it. We're talking fifty to sixty men at a time until they simply overran the perimeter and everyone inside it. They didn't give a damn about their own casualties, they just wanted that recon team dead." (photo courtesy Lindsay Butler)

Dale Dehnke was killed in action on 18th May 1971, while operating in the Da Krong Valley inside Vietnam. Ironically, Sergeant Dehnke was due to rotate home and had volunteered to "strap hang" the mission assigned to newly formed RT Alaska. According to Jim Butler, Dehnke felt the new team could use his expertise as it got its feet wet. Even more ironic is the fact the NVA battalion that overran RE Alaska's hilltop position was one of those trained by an elite cadre of Chinese advisers. These advisors were co-located with other Chinese military personnel at the former secondary school at Son Tay.

Their mission? To train and advise what became known at CCN as "headhunter" battalions; units designed to locate, track and kill SOG recon teams.

Headhunter tactics as trained by the Chinese included the use of an extensive network of trail watchers and trackers, coded signals to chase and turn the teams once they were put on the run and effective use of the roughly 500-man battalion's human assets. SOG recon teams were so well trained and disciplined and carried so much firepower per man that engagements with larger enemy forces were commonly won as long as the fire fight was short, fast, furious and eventually supported by both gunships and rescue. This all changed when the larger, more heavily armed, Chinese advised NVA units showed up on the scene.

"Once we were compromised on the ground you just wanted to get the hell out," recalls Butler. "My team discovered the best way to break contact was to rush right at the trail watcher's position when he fired. Too many other teams didn't do this, and they ended up getting waxed."





## Whodunit? CCN's most mysterious mascot

Exfiltrating at night the CCN recon team grabbed a water buffalo calf discovered at the LZ point. According to Butler, close friend of Dale Dehnke, the “snatch” was a legendary prank. The animal was removed at HEAVY HOOK’s launch site from Simons’ loaned helicopter prior to its being returned to Udorn. The calf became the project’s mascot, with Captain Butler offering “it grew fat and sassy” with time.

It was the rumor of such a prank that landed Simon’s raiders in hot water with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. This after buffalo dung was found in one of the helicopters assigned to the task force. As no one outside of a small cadre of the raid’s command and control group even knew of the “black” recon into Son Tay by Dehnke & Company, the investigating body charged with looking into the allegation never visited HEAVY HOOK where the animal ended up.

With this in mind it is apparent IVORY COAST’s common thread was its sharing of former CCN commanders/operators, intelligence as well as assets, and a professional desire to ensure the raid’s greatest chance of success given the accepted presence of foreign military advisers whose specialty it was to engage U.S. special operations forces.

On 20 November 1970, at 23.18 hours, Operation IVORY COAST was underway. With over 170 intense rehearsals under their belts the raiders and flight crews were literally prepared for any eventuality.

An in-depth review of the official after-action report written by BGen. Leroy Manor, Commander of the Joint Contingency Task Group, JCS regarding the Son Tay raid reveals no expense or limit was placed on those volunteers now headed for the POW compound.

Every item considered necessary for success had been brainstormed, evaluated, accepted/rejected/modified and then trained. The command element had selected only the best of the 300 men who’d volunteered for an unknown mission with no announced objective or incentive. Security surrounding the operation in all of its phases was intense. What finally left Udorn prior to midnight was easily one of the fittest, most combat experienced special operations raid forces ever fielded. From Armalite Single Point rifle sights and CAR-15 to Simons’ team’s “heavily overcharged” satchel explosives meant to “minimize personnel exposure and to ensure destruction of the target,” nothing had been left to chance.

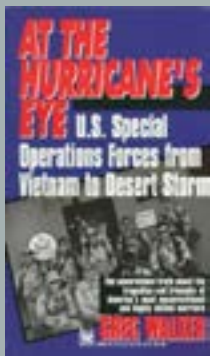
The close quarters combat training of the raiders was equally demanding. Already formidable shooters the commandos’ skills were enhanced with countless hours on the range and in live fire rehearsals during the hours of daylight and darkness. By launch date they were capable of engaging an enemy force assigned to rear guard duties at a level of surprise, accuracy and violence of action previously unheard of for a force its size. This is why not only Simons’ support team (Greenleaf) but also Meadow’s (Blueboy) and Sydnor’s (Redwine) were able to kill or wound all those whom they engaged with such effectiveness.

The former secondary school located less than 500 meters from the Son Tay prison had long ceased to provide civilian education.



“Anybody who gets in our way is going to be dead.” — Col. Arthur ‘Bull’ Simons (U.S. Army)

Intelligence reports showed it, as well as other facilities in the immediate area, had been turned in to military complexes, or logistic centers. According to an exhaustive report (“The Role of the Air Force in Assault on the POW Camp at Son Tay, 1978”) done for the Air Force Academy by Alfred Montrem, Walter Britton’s co-pilot, the reinforced school-cum-military barracks resembled the POW camp. So closely did the two appear in general nature only a two-story building at the barracks could be used as a discriminator as the prison camp had no such structure.



"We'd been warned while training at Eglin Air Force base in Florida that such a mistake was possible...I wasn't paying attention to the final checkpoints as I made our approach. I wasn't looking for the road, or the river (Song Con), which was supposed to be right outside the prison. When I saw the outline of the structure, that's what I headed for." — LTC. Warner Britton (ret.), *At the Hurricane's Eye: U.S. Special Operations Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm* (photo courtesy Greg Walker)

Manor's report on the operation never refers to this installation as a school, or as "the secondary school". It calls the site what it was at the time, a "military complex 400 meters south (to the right of the inbound course) of the objective..." Then Major Montrem told this writer in his first public interview in 1992 that he remembered "seeing strange radio or television antennae" atop the two-story pagoda-like structure inside the complex's walled compound during his aircraft's multiple flights over it during the raid. Although an NVA photo said to have been taken of the complex the "day after the raid," only one shattered building is depicted with the admonition that this single structure represented the former school. Copious aerial photographs combined with intelligence reports and the American led recon team's own confirmation of the complex's layout and true nature (not to mention debriefings of Simons and his 22 raiders) decry this unfortunate reporting error.

The Sunday Tampa Tribune (1st June 1997) carried the story of Son Tay revisited by retired Air Force officer Norm Bild. Bild, who met Meadows while attending military classes at Hurlburt Field, Florida, made two trips to Vietnam in 1995. While the first was confined to the south, Bild did manage to go to what was North Vietnam the second time around.

He and his interpreter visited the village at Son Tay and spoke with people who knew of the fight. A 21-year-old Vietnamese agreed to take the two visitors to the old prison site where Bild took several photos and recovered a bit of prison barbed wire. Police arrived and detained the two, releasing them only after Captain Bild (ret.) signed

a statement promising never to come back. A \$20 fine was paid, making Norm Bild the only known American citizen to recently visit and photograph what had been Son Tay prison.

Bild mounted one of the photos he took of a prison cellblock along with the strand of wire he'd taken from the camp. This photo is accurate ref. The line drawings used by the raiders to train for their assault on the cellblocks. These items are today part of a memorial plaque commemorating the raid on the POW camp at Son Tay, done in memory of Major Richard "Dick" Meadows.

Why did Simons' team land at the wrong military complex? As explained in General Manor's official after-action report, as well as this author and Benjamin Schemmer's books on the subject, all helicopter flight crews involved in the actual assault experienced the same initial navigation drift. This error was due to the winds at the time, a factor everyone involved in flight operations was warned might happen. If it did, the under correction would put the airborne raid force online with the advisor barracks and not the prison.

As the raid unfolded the lead helo (Apple Three) pilot increased his air speed to 120 knots, somewhat adjusting his direction once released by the MC-130 Combat Talon (Cherry One) which was their pathfinder into North Vietnam. Although Major Frederick M. Donohue could not yet see the objective he dropped the formation's altitude to 50' above the earth and headed in toward what he believed was the prison.



Alfred Montrem (U.S. Army)



Richard "Dick" Meadows (U.S. Army)



## Son Tay Area Map

**Note:** In studying one of many photos for this story I noted all the windows have bars on them...much like a prison. Comparing the building shown in the photo with line drawings done of the buildings/cells found at the POW camp, it is most likely this structure existed at the prison, not the "secondary school". Unless – of course – the NVA found it necessary to keep their secondary students behind bars. Also noted are the many trees surrounding the building shown. Again, line drawings made from an SR-71 and drone overflights show the prison area to be alive with trees, ranging from 20' to 40' tall, were discovered – by Meadows and his assault team – to be closer to twice this. (USA JFK Museum)



Apple Two was piloted by LTC John V. Allison, whose crew was carrying Captain Elliot Sydnor's twenty-one-man commando/security team. Code named Redwine, Sydnor and his men were to secure the southern portion of the camp as Simons' Greenleaf team took the northern sector of the prison. Dick Meadows, whose aircraft was code named Banana, was to crash-land inside the compound roughly twenty feet from where the POWs were being held. It would be Blueboy who would blow an opening at the southern end of the prison's east wall. This breach would be where the POWs and the assaulters would exit. To accomplish the task Blueboy would rely upon a special three-pound C-4 charge.

Banana's wreckage was to be further demolished using a three-pound mixture of C-4 and thermite. This charge was constructed in a thirty-inch length of four inches fire hose. It was to be placed under the floor in the bilge sump between the fore and aft fuel tanks.

All the attacking teams were cross trained in each other's assigned missions in case one or the other was unable to participate. In this case, Redwine assumed Greenleaf's taskings once it was established Simons was not yet in position at the prison due to Britton's error in landing him nearly half a click off.

Again, according to Alfred Montrem, this error came about because Britton had not participated in any of the Eglin AFB flight training, assigned as he was to the command group. Vowing to fly the mission regardless, Walter Britton possessed only 30 hours in an HH-53. Major Montrem, on the other hand, had over 1,000 and had participated fully in the Florida train-up phase. The night Bull Simons was to land at the prison compound in support of Dick Meadows would be the first time Walt Britton flew an HH-53 in to combat!

Read more about Alfred Montrem at <http://www.veterantributes.org/TributeDetail.php?recordID=1590>

As the assault unfolded both Donahue's and Meadow's helos flew over the secondary complex. Although Apple Three declined to fire the base up at the last possible second, Banana's assault team did so with relish. It is important to note during the train up phase every consideration regarding combat effectiveness was taken into account. This also included where to place selected weapons systems in the aircraft to undertake specific targets with the most possible rounds on target with the time window available. The goal of this type of planning and training was to engage and destroy enormous number of targets both accurately and in the shortest time possible.

The secondary compound was long identified as a military – not civilian – installation. It was further known this compound housed both NVA and foreign advisors, specifically Chinese troops. It was understood this adviser element represented both air defense and special operations personnel, whom the NVA guard and support force were



During an FTX to Puerto Rico in 1977, SGM Jakovenko (left rear) and VN veteran Mike Echanis put on a no-holds barred hand-to-hand demonstration. Jakovenko and Echanis were close friends and both exceptional martial artists. Mike would later describe "Big Jake" as one of the toughest men he'd ever met. (photo courtesy COL (ret) Juan Montes, 5th SFG(A))



In late 1978, SGM Jakovenko and members of his Special Forces ODA provided the color guard at the burial of their close friend and Vietnam veteran, SP4 Michael D. Echanis. Mike was killed along with SGT Chuck Sanders, also a member of Jake's team, in Nicaragua. After the services Jake removed his ribbon bar, to include the Silver Star he received after the raid and gave it to the Echanis Family. It resides in the shadow box Ms. Liz Echanis, Mike's sister, had made in her brother's honor. (photo courtesy Liz Echanis)

responsible for protecting/servicing. Overall, it was projected in light of both ground and aerial intelligence estimates that no less than a company size element (60-90) would be found at this compound. The ability of this force to respond immediately to the POW camp by either foot or vehicle could be counted in single digit minutes. The compound was originally one of those targets assigned to a sortie of A-1 Skyraiders whose role it was to fly close air support for the raiders.

With this in mind, how did Simons and his force indeed wound and/or kill what has been estimated to be close to 200 enemy soldiers during Greenleaf's nine harrowing minutes on the ground? For the first time we now know the answer.

When Dick Meadow's assault team fired up the compound it did so under the following circumstances. During the train-up phase, intense attention was given as to how to utilize the helicopter platforms' firepower to its best advantage. Per the official after-action report on this subject, "A need was recognized for additional skills in firing machine guns and shoulder weapons from the assault helicopter in flight during its landing phase."

The HH-53 platform was chosen over the UH-1H for a number of reasons. One of these had to do with accurate, sustained firepower. "During the test many changes were made in individual firing positions in order to arrive at a system that would allow maximum number of rounds placed on the high threat areas (the gate and NW tower). With this consideration in mind, left-handed shooters were placed in position to give greater accuracy and longer engagement period."

The report says, further that "The HH-53 helicopter allowed on 7.62mm machine gun mounted in the left front window and ten shoulder fired weapons positioned in the windows, right door front door and on the ramp to be fired. This system provided excellent accuracy and 360-degree target coverage."

What this did was permit the assault team to deliver a minimum of 100 rounds of M60 fire on to the target, as well as three 30 round magazine per man of 5.56mm ammunition during the final landing phase. With over 1000 rounds of highly accurate fire striking anyone or thing unfortunate to be caught sleeping, the initial body count would be impressive. This is exactly what occurred when Banana's well-trained team/crew opened up on the interior of the secondary compound's inhabitants.

Watching the compound and not Meadow's helo, Walter Britton failed to follow the rest of the flight as it made its way over to the POW compound, the navigation error corrected by Apple Three's pilot and noted by Banana's crew. At H+1 minute Britton dropped the ramp of his helo and Greenleaf exited. Almost immediately a half dressed, dazed NVA guard ran in to Simons, who shot him dead with a .357 revolver.

The Headquarters element was exposed to "automatic weapons fire" and elected to penetrate and assault the compound. From the intelligence updates received, Greenleaf's personnel knew who, what, and about how many bad guys they had inside. They also knew the element of surprise was lost at the POW compound due to the assault team's inadvertent firing up of the wrong camp. Once inside, the assaulters cleared "the billet at the southern end of the compound utilizing concussion and fragmentation grenades and rifle fire accounting for ten NVA soldiers killed."

The fire team elements were advised by Simons that extraction and reinsertion was imminent. By H+2 minutes the compound had been penetrated and the fight was on. At H+3 minutes Element 1 secured the landing zone and provided protective fire to south and west. Element 2 was taking automatic weapons fire as soon as their boots



A most kind and generous handmade gift from SGM (ret) Jakovenko after our visit. (photo courtesy Greg Walker)



hit the dirt, so it moved in an easterly direction, taking enemy troops located on the road east of the compound under fire.

From H+2 to H+5 minutes the Headquarters Element continued to fight its way through the compound's southern billets. According to the report, "More enemy personnel than expected were encountered and a large volume of automatic weapons fire was coming from the two-story building located in the center of the compound." A gunner from Element 1 detached himself and placed accurate M79 grenade fire on to this threat, knocking it out so that by H+3 minutes..."this billet was secured."

With the two-story building, later confirmed to be the compound's armory, cleared, Element 1 now came under fire from the western edge of the camp. This time an M60 machine gun was brought up to silence the opposition. Element 2 began moving down the road outside the compound, killing and clearing armed opposition on both flanks in a northerly direction for roughly 150 meters. Due to the fury of the fight, the distance involved and the darkness, no enemy confirmed kills could be judged over the course of the fire fight.

Simons directed this element's leader to "close and secure the south-east portion of the extraction LZ", and at H+4 minutes the element began this movement.

With only 26 minutes available to the raiding force, Bull Simons later said he was only concerned his people would miss out on the main assault at the POW compound. At H+5 minutes the Headquarters Element was just finishing its engagement of more enemy personnel than expected by clearing the southern end of the two adjacent billets "with fragmentation grenades." Four NVA soldiers made a break for the already silenced armory and were gunned down as they left the short-term safety of the eastern billet they'd been fighting from.

At roughly H+6 minutes Simons directed all elements of Greenleaf to fight their way to the extraction point. With 60 seconds the Support Group Leader (Simons) had a full accounting of his people at the LZ, which had been marked using strobe lights. At this point Element 1 secured the LZ and "placed suppressive fire on the western portion of the compound" where apparently Greenleaf was still

taking incoming fire. Element 2 closed off the LZ from the south and at H+9 minutes Simons called for his helo.

"We heard 'Wildroot' (Simons' call sign for the raid) request extraction," Montrem remembered during his interview with this author. "We needed a flare to guide in on, and after asking for one, both Britton and I saw a strobe light activated almost exactly where we'd originally landed." On the audio tape made of the raid's radio transmissions, Simons can be heard asking the flight crew if they "need a map?" to find him once the extraction was called for.

Again, Al Montrem, "We just flew in and picked them up, shuttling them over to Son Tay and dropping them off outside the walls." After this second combat insertion in less than 10 minutes, Apple 1 headed for its holding area to await recall from Simons. By now Meadows with his Blueboy team had accomplished its assigned tasks inside the POW camp, and "Bud" Sydnor's Redwine team was successfully handling Greenleaf's mission upon being so notified to take up the slack as Simons fought his way in to – and out of – the secondary compound.

Sydnor's people also dropped the bridge over the Son Cong River as a convoy of NVA troops was crossing it to reinforce two of their military installations now under attack. As all of this was taking place, the A-1s were called in and began hitting targets all around the POW camp. This included the small footbridge between the adviser and POW compounds, as well as the secondary camp itself. This mission was called in by Simons himself as Greenleaf was finally being landed at the correct objective.

In conjunction with Dick Meadows' own airborne assault element and a sortie of A-1s, Simons and his men indeed engaged and killed an impressive number of enemy personnel both in and around the secondary camp. An exact body count would never be possible as there was no one other than the North Vietnamese left to sort through the pieces once the raiders departed. Certainly, the NVA would never release any record of its casualties given the huge loss of face they suffered. Such a body count would have to include all those personnel killed at both camps, as well as those on the roads and manning Son Tay's air defense systems.



The Raiders carried tomahawks for both close quarters battle and extraction needs. This one belongs to SGM Jake Jakovenko. (photo courtesy Greg Walker)

Further, the North Vietnamese never admitted to the presence of foreign advisors, especially the Chinese. To publicly admit a number of such "visitors" had been blown away in the most daring raid of the war would have compromised the North's policy of "plausible denial," while jeopardizing such personnel being speedily replaced under either clandestine or cover agreements. According to the Captain Udo Walther, Simons' executive officer for Greenleaf, "It wasn't a secret that there were Chinese there (at Son Tay), and it wasn't a secret that there were a bunch of them." Walther stated he took photographs on the scene of dead Chinese and that he informed his debriefers of their presence during the attack. He does not know where his photos went once the film was turned over.

What Walther did keep was a Chinese officer's belt buckle he took off a body at the secondary compound. In 1973, Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot would fly all those 70 POWs who'd been held at Son Tay to San Francisco for a reunion with the raiders. Walther's war trophy would be given to Perot "on loan" for display purposes.



Udo Walther  
(photo courtesy Greg Walker)

*"No public statements regarding this operation are permitted even after its completion unless by CTF-77 IAW directives received from higher authority...press and other visits to units involved in this operation are to be discouraged...Upon termination of this operation, this OPORD will be destroyed....". — Commander-Joint Contingency Task Group, JCS*

Thankfully, the above did not occur and the triumphs and lessons learned from Operation IVORY COAST were not lost. True, no U.S. POWs were recovered that night in November, but it was accepted prior to mission launch that reports of their being moved might indeed be correct. "I felt we owed whoever might have been there the effort," General Don Blackburn has recounted for the record. "I knew we could get in without being detected (courtesy of CCN's unauthorized, unreported ground recon of the area 72 hours prior). I believe there would be no casualties on our side because of the level of training and the caliber of men involved. Plus, there was the additional impact of letting the North Vietnamese know we could mount such an operation. Until then, it had been their pattern to do whatever they please inside South Vietnam while we just stood by."

At 23.18 hours on a dark night in November 1970, that all changed. ❖



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Walker is an honorably retired "Green Beret" and long-time Special Forces historian.

His awards and decorations include the Special Forces Tab, the Combat Infantryman Badge (X2), and the Washington National Guard's Legion of Merit.

Mr. Walker is a Life member of the SOA and Special Forces Associations.

Greg concluded his working career after serving as a SOCOM Care Coalition case manager and Veteran advocate (2009-2018). Today he lives and writes from his home in Sisters, Oregon, along with his service pup, Tommy.

# SON TAY RAID — Suggested Reading

*The Son Tay Raid: American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten* by John Gargus — Gargus not only participated in the planning phase of the raid, but also flew as a lead navigator for the strike force.

*Who Will Go: Into the Son Tay POW Camp* by Terry Buckler — released to mark the 50th anniversary of the raid, it includes stories written by 40 of the Raiders, participants, and POWs.

*Secret and Dangerous Night of the Son Tay POW Raid* by William A Guenon, Jr. — an eyewitness account of the raid by one of the pilots who flew the C-130 aircraft in the raid. It includes an account of the pilots return to Son Tay prison 24 years later.

## Additional related articles in past issues of the Sentinel:

[November 2016](#): "Air Operations for the Son Tay Raid" by John Gargus

[February 2017](#): "The Son Tay Raid Rescue Mission: A Pilot's Story" by John Wares

[December 2019](#): "The Son Tay Raid: A Raider Remembers" by Terry Buckler

[April 2021](#): "A Visit to the Son Tay POW Camp— Did a Surprising Tour Guide Provide the Answer to a Decades Old Mystery?" by John Gargus

"My Visit to the Son Tay POW Camp — A Memoir" by S. Vaughn Binzer



## SFA Chapter 78 January 2022 Chapter Meeting

Photos by Dennis DeRosia and How Miller



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1. SFA Chapter 78's newly elected President Greg Horton and Secretary Gary Macnamara open January's meeting.
2. Vice President Dennis DeRosia recounts how he used the SFA Teamhouse website to connect with former SF medics.
3. C Co, 19th SFGA's Major Bob Ashley and Doug Way.
4. Left to right, Dennis DeRosia, Greg Horton, and James McLanahan catching up after the meeting.
5. David Gibbs, now a member of Chapter 78.
6. Nadia and Nimo. Nimo reintroduced the himself to Chapter mem-

bers. He also updated all on the efforts to house and assist the Afghan refugees being settled into communities by Affordable Community Living. Both he and Nadia work with the residents one-on-one at the parks.

7. Jim Duffy updating members on Artemis classes and other related business.
8. Jim Duffy and Karli, who attended the meeting with her husband David Gibbs.
9. Members mixing prior to the highly attended meeting.
10. Rick Carter's custom SF Jacket was admired by many.

# IN MEMORIAM

## MAJOR GENERAL JOHN K. SINGLAUB



Major General John Singlaub died at the age of 100 on Saturday January, 29, 2022 surrounded by his wife of thirty years, Joan, and his family at his home in Franklin, Tennessee.

John Singlaub was born in Southern California, a graduate of Van Nuys High School and UCLA. He had an illustrious career in the US Army and beyond. He served in World War II with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as a member of a Jedburgh team inserted into southern France. He then went to China to join OSS Detachment 404 to train and lead Chinese guerrillas against the Japanese. Just before the Japanese surrender, he led a parachute rescue mission behind enemy lines to Hainan Island which resulted in the surrender of an enemy Prisoner of War camp and the subsequent release of 400 Allied prisoners. He commanded troops in Korea and was CHIEFSOG for two years in Vietnam, running the super secret MACVSOG in enemy territory, and remained active for decades more.

MG Singlaub's assignments include commanding officer, 1st Battle Group, 16th Infantry, 8th Infantry Division, Europe; chief, Training Division and later deputy assistant chief of staff, G-3, Headquarters, 7th Army, Europe; assistant chief, Force Development Plans Division, Plans and Operations Directorate, Washington, D.C.; chief of the Special Operations Group, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; assistant division commander, 8th Infantry Division, Europe; chief of staff, Project MASSTER, Fort Hood, Texas; deputy chief of staff for personnel, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C.; deputy assistant secretary of defense, Washington D.C.; commanding

general, U.S. Army Readiness Region IX, Denver, Colorado.; chief of staff, 8th U.S. Army, United Nations Command, U.S. Forces, Korea; commanding general, U.S. Army Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia.

MG Singlaub's military education includes the Infantry officer basic and advanced courses, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the Air War College.

MG Singlaub's decorations and awards include two Distinguished Service Medals, the Silver Star, two Legion of Merits, two Bronze Stars, the Soldier's Medal, two Purple Hearts, two Bronze Star Medals, the Air Medal, the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the Master Parachutist Badge and the Army Aviation Badge. In 2011, Singlaub received the prestigious SOCOM Bull Simons Award for his exceptional service in special operations.

In 2016 The United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) established the MG John K. Singlaub/Jedburgh Award award in his name, which is "presented annually to a deserving recipient who [like Jack] exemplifies the Special Operations Forces Next traits, the Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) promise, and demonstrates an unwavering commitment to bettering ARSOF."

MG Singlaub retired after 35 years of active service June 1, 1978.

A legend in the U.S. special operations community, Major Gen. Singlaub will be remembered as one of America's great warriors and an outstanding leader of men. ❖