



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 12 • DECEMBER 2022

## A VERY MACV-SOG CHRISTMAS

Kingbee Pilot Saved  
SOG Recon Team Idaho

Gravediggers of Laos —  
A Poem by Dan Thompson

A DEFECTOR IN PLACE:  
The Strange and Terrible Saga  
of a Green Beret Sandinista  
Part Three



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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: Capt. Nguyen Van Tuong flying Kingbee north to Quang Tri in December 1968. Tuong was a highly regarded pilot of the VNAF 219 Squadron – The Kingbees, an elite helicopter squadron that supported highly secretive MACV-SOG operations in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Nguyen Van Tuong saved SOG Green Beret Recon Team Idaho on several occasions. Read the story of Christmas Day 1968 on page 2. (Photo Courtesy John Stryker Meyer)



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## From the Editor



How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

Our November issue was a record breaking size for us, but there was so much to cover, both good and bad. We all enthusiastically worked extra hard to cover it all.

There was the SFACON 2022, and Alex Quade's wonderful articles, including Chapter Treasurer Richard Simonian's receiving the prestigious St. Neri Award, and the internment of Bruce Long. If you missed it, go to <https://www.specialforces78.com/chapter-78-newsletter-for-november-2022/>, click on the Sentinel cover

picture to view or download pdf version of the November issue. The PDF version includes all the info you don't otherwise see.

This month we start, appropriately enough, with a Christmas story from John Stryker Meyer. Every Christmas he is drawn back to a hill in Laos where, but for an amazing "Kingbee" pilot named Nguyen Tuong, he and the rest of his Strike Team Idaho would have met their end. Decades later Meyer and Tuong were reunited in Orange County, CA.

Then, a Letter to the Editor from Dan Thompson brought us a wonderful poem and the touching story behind it. The title is "Gravediggers of Laos" and it is an absorbing read. Written for the membership of SOA, mostly comprised of SOG veterans, the message to the families of those that were, or remain, missing was enthusiastically and emotionally well received.

Following that is the hard hitting conclusion of Greg Walker's telling of former Green Beret Davis Baez' story. In each part, Greg reveals information unknown to the public and brings out why David was practically destined to follow the path he did with the Sandanistas. His eye opening stories have brought to light efforts of SF that helped turn the tide of Communist insurgencies in Central and South America.

Greg follows with a tribute to SOG legend Robert "Spider" Parks who very recently passed away. Greg had known "Spider" since Panama.

The 10th Group Public Affairs Office team has produced videos of the presentations at SFACON 2022. There is some great history and lessons learned there. You'll find links to the easy way to view each one on our back cover.

Finally, here's a quiz for you. How does one find several years worth of copies of the DROP on the Teamhouse website? The answer is: go to the website: <https://teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org/>, log in, look among the 18 blue headings and find DOCUMENTS. Scroll down until you see The Drop Archive, click on it and select the quarter's Drop you wish to view, all the way back to 2011.

Enjoy. ❖

How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

# From the President | December 2022



Gregory Horton  
President SFA Ch. 78

Every day it seems like we are inundated by more and more negative articles in the press and media regarding the individual troops, units, and the Army as a whole. From “Woke” actions taken by the Command Staff, to behavioral problems of individual soldiers, to mandatory vaccinations, to a myriad of other problems — all the issues are leading to Recruitment woes according to the media, as seen in the following example:

**NBC Connecticut: Disappointing Data Shows Recruiting Woes for Military Service**, by Amber Diaz – Jun 28, 2022 (<https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/disappointing-data-shows-recruiting-woes-for-military-service/2814957/>)

Now I am not going to sit here and try to tell anyone that all is hunky dory in the Army. And I am not going to delve into some of the problems and hurdles our soldiers are facing both politically and just in general. What I want to do is talk about the high-quality people that make up the rank and file of our Great Organization.

Well, as fate would have it, I happen to have a son currently serving in the United States Army with the famous 3rd Infantry Division or “Rock of the Marne!”. And last week I had the good fortune to be able to attend his Promotion Ceremony at the 3-15IN, 2ABCT, 3ID, located on Fort Stewart, Georgia, and pin on his SSG rank (with a good punch to seal the deal). During this ceremony and after, I had a chance to meet JP’s Squad and chat them up a little.

Contrary to the bad press and negative Nancys, there are still plenty of soldiers in the Army (as well as the other branches), where “Duty, Honor, and Country” are not just cute catch phrases. JP’s squad recently competed in the Brigade’s Best Squad competition that was a two-day grind. I have included a photo of them in the final 100 yards of the 20-mile ruck march. During this competition, the first day the

competitors had to complete the ACFT, an obstacle lane and an EIB lane, then the 20-mile ruck. To add icing on the cake, they had to take a written test at the end of the day. Day two was filled with shooting for qualification and culminated with a stress shoot. Oh yes, and a final 10-mile ruck. All this on 2-3 hours of sleep.

In my impression of these young, steely eyed professionals, I found them to be energetic, intelligent, and truly representative of the finest our country has to offer. Upon meeting them, I received a firm handshake, looking me in the eye, and a glint in their eyes that told me all I needed to know. Our country is still in great hands and these men can accomplish wonderful things. If anyone in our Chapter has someone in the military and wants to highlight them, please send me the information and I would like to put out some articles on them and their contribution to the Military.

## ROCK OF THE MARNE

The month of November was busy with preparation for our annual Christmas Party at the Yacht Club. It should be another great event with plenty of camaraderie and fun. If anyone feels the volunteer bug bite them, please let Dennis or me know.

## CHAPTER 78 CHRISTMAS PARTY Saturday, December 10th, 2022

**LOCATION:** Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club

**ADDRESS:** 601 Bayside Dr., Corona Del Mar, CA 92625

**TIME:** 1400 Cocktail Hour • Program starts at 1430

**COST:** \$40.00 per person, same for guests

**Special Note:** VIP’s, Special Guests, such as non-members of C/1/19 FREE

Greg Horton SGM (Ret)  
President  
SFA Chapter 78



SGM (Ret) Greg Horton Pinning the SSG Rank on his son SSG Jonathan Horton. (Photo by SFC Kirsti Horton)



JP’s Squad in the Best Squad Competition as they complete the final 100 yards of their 20-mile ruck march. (Photo by SFC Kirsti Horton)



# A VERY MACV-SOG CHRISTMAS

## Kingbee Pilot Saved SOG Recon Team Idaho

ST Idaho before its first mission across the fence. John Stryker Meyer is in the middle, second row. The team would survive a very special MACV-SOG Christmas (Photo courtesy John Stryker Meyer).

By Stavros Atlamazoglou

December 24, 2021 | Article reposted with permission from Sandboxx.us  
<https://www.sandboxx.us/blog/a-very-macv-sog-christmas-how-a-spec-ops-team-survived-against-all-odds/>

On Christmas Day, 1968, American families woke up to festooned houses and presents under the tree. But thousands of miles away in Southeast Asia, a small special operations team was fighting for its life.

Part of a covert special operations organization, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG), the small team had gone into Laos on a classified mission. It ended up being a very special MACV-SOG Christmas.

U.S. troops weren't supposed to be fighting outside South Vietnam, but the realities of the war and North Vietnam's use of neighboring Cambodia and Laos as staging bases for attacks in the south meant that American commandos had to go there too.

### Search and Destroy Deep in Laos

Spike Team Idaho was comprised of six SOG commandos, three Americans and three indigenous mercenaries. Leading them as the One Zero (1-0), or team leader, was John Stryker "Tilt" Meyer. Shy twenty-two year old at the time, Meyer became a legendary SOG operator, completing two tours of duty at the covert special operations organization.

ST Idaho was an experienced recon team that had run several cross-border operations. Only a month earlier, the team had survived

a mission against all odds. ST Idaho had gone in Cambodia looking for three North Vietnamese divisions, a total of 30,000 men, that had gone missing. The SOG operators ended up finding the missing divisions but almost exchanged their discovery for their lives, barely making it out at the very last moment.

On Christmas 1968, ST Idaho was tasked with going into Laos with an important mission. The primary mission objective of ST Idaho was to locate and destroy a fuel pipeline inside Laos. The SOG commandos were tasked "at the minimum [to] blow up as much of the pipeline as possible," Meyer told Sandboxx News, with a secondary objective to locate and destroy any pump stations that they could find.

The North Vietnamese used the Ho Chi Minh trail complex to transport arms, men, materiel, and fuel to South Vietnam to support the insurgency.

### The Air Aspect

Although SOG recon teams relied heavily on Air Force special operations helicopter squadrons for their insertions, as the war progressed, they depended increasingly more on an elite cadre of South Vietnamese pilots who risked everything to infiltrate and exfiltrate recon teams even from hot landing zones.

Flying the venerable H-34 Kingbee helicopter, these pilots would fly in almost any condition to save their beloved SOG commandos. That bond of trust and comradeship remains to this day, with veteran South Vietnamese pilots attending SOG reunions.

“Our beloved [South Vietnamese] Kingbee pilots were critical to our missions. During the end of '68 and early '69 they were our primary insertion/extraction support into Laos, North Vietnam for RT Idaho. Kingbee Pilot An described how he could fly at night, as he did for Lynne Black's Oct. '69 Brightlight, because he was familiar with the terrain after flying so many missions across the fence into Laos,” John Stryker Meyer told Sandboxx News.

Meyer has written extensively about his and others' experiences in SOG. His books offer a rare first-person view inside America's secret war in Indochina.

On the Christmas Day mission, ST Idaho would rely on the 219th South Vietnamese Air Force to insert in and extract them from Laos. Due to the existence of a potent anti-aircraft umbrella in the area — a SOG helicopter had gone down with all hands a few weeks prior — the Kingbees would fly nap-of-the-earth. On the one hand, this approach protected the chopper from ground fire, but on the other, it made it easier for the enemy to hear them.

The usual approach was to fly at a very high altitude and descend rapidly once over the landing zone. Moreover, the operational geography prevented fixed-wing aircraft from supporting the team.

## A Christmas to Never Forget

ST Idaho's concerns about getting spotted by the enemy turned out to be true. As they approached the landing zone at a very low altitude, they noticed a few locals spotting them. Although these hill tribesmen weren't North Vietnamese, they often cooperated with them out of necessity.

Despite getting spotted, ST Idaho went ahead with its mission.

The H-34 Kingbee put the team on a knoll inside a canyon surrounded by mountains. The SOG commandos immediately noticed that a thick, 10-foot tall blanket of elephant grass covered the area. The vegetation made their going very slow as they looked for a place to bunk down for the night.

As the team was patrolling very slowly to the high ground, the pointman suddenly fired. Everyone hit the deck as a hail of North Vietnamese fire, including rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire, rained on ST Idaho.

There was little merit in continuing with their mission now that the enemy had found them — most probably because of the locals who had spotted them — so Meyer declared a Prairie Fire, vectoring every available aircraft in the region to their position and called for an extraction.

The SOG commandos rushed towards the landing zone to await the incoming H-34 Kingbees. But it was a slow going because of the elephant grass. The special operators could hear noises all around them but the northeast. But Meyer, an experienced team leader, thought it was a ploy to ambush them. His gut feeling was soon proven true when an airborne forward observer spotted massed North Vietnamese troops in that direction.

Although they didn't know it at the time, ST Idaho had just been saved by another SOG team a few miles away that had intercepted enemy radio transmissions. This was the first and only time a SOG team received tactical intelligence on the field.



From left: Kingbee Pilot Lt. Trong, Unk, Capt. Nguyen Van Tuong, John Stryker Meyer at SOG Launch Site in Quang Tri. Kingbee Pilot Capt. Nguyen Van Tuong saved SOG Green Beret Recon Team Idaho on several occasions, including Christmas Day 1968. This photo was taken just a few days prior to that day. (Photo Courtesy John Styker Meyer)

ST Idaho continued its path to the landing zone, making sure to avoid the northeast, all the while lobbing grenades wherever they heard noise coming from.

Then, with the helicopters inbound and as they were approaching the landing zone and safety, smoke began engulfing ST Idaho. The North Vietnamese were using the tactical environment to their advantage and were trying to burn the SOG commandos alive or force them to surrender.

In those final moments of their mission, the special operators used everything they had to stop the flames, even going as far as to detonate strips of C-4 explosives to knock the advancing flames back. North Vietnamese troops were just behind the flames, waiting to pounce at the disoriented ST Idaho.

Then, like out of a Hollywood film, the H-34 Kingbees arrived. At first, they had trouble spotting the team and touching down because of the heavy smoke, but the South Vietnamese pilots once more pulled it off and came low enough for the team to climb on board.

Mere moments after they had cleared the landing zone, flames devoured the spot where ST Idaho had only recently been on.

Suffice to say, the SOG commandos were surprised that everyone on the team came out not just alive but without any serious wounds. After surviving such a close call, Meyer remembers that he was astonished that “we were still alive,” wondering to himself that night if he would survive to see his 23rd birthday, which was only a few weeks away.

For Meyer and his team, this was the second close call in a little over a month. But such was the life at MACV-SOG, where the casualty rate exceeded 100 percent. ❖

# A CHRISTMAS BOND FORMED ON A FIERY OVERSEAS HILL

By Jeff Rowe

December 26, 2013 | Article reposted with permission from Orange County Register

As they have every Christmas for 45 years, the thoughts of two men from different sides of the Pacific will converge on a hill on the Laos-Vietnam border.

It's where one saved the life of the other and forged a lifetime bond; brothers in a twilight struggle destined to go wrong for both of their countries.

Then Capt. Nguyen Tuong was a helicopter pilot for the South Vietnamese Air Force; a normal day was ferrying squads of special forces operatives on secret missions and out of hostile areas, including over the Vietnam border into Laos. Getting shot at was a daily occupational hazard.

In late 1968, Tuong was hauling a squad of six commandos – three South Vietnamese and three Americans, one of them Spc. 4th Class John Meyer. Their mission: To find and destroy fuel pipelines supplying North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.

That's what they were doing on Christmas Day in 1968. Tuong had dropped off Meyer and the rest of his squad. They did not find any fuel lines but a North Vietnamese Army unit did find Meyer's squad on a mountain knoll and surrounded them.

North Vietnamese Army soldiers began to set fire to the head-high elephant grass on the hill and were spraying bullets at Meyer and the five others in his squad. A wall of flame was advancing up the hill. If they stayed on the hill, they would be incinerated; if they left the hill, they would be shredded with gunfire.

Just then, Tuong swooped in, practically flying sideways against the mountain, Meyer recalls. He set his Sikorsky CH-34 helicopter down on the knoll, the rotor downdraft holding back the flames but NVA bullets riddling the fuselage. Within seconds, all six had jumped in; Meyer says as they lifted off, the top of the hill burst into flames.

When Tuong returned to base, he counted 30 bullet holes in his helicopter. It was repaired and he flew it again.

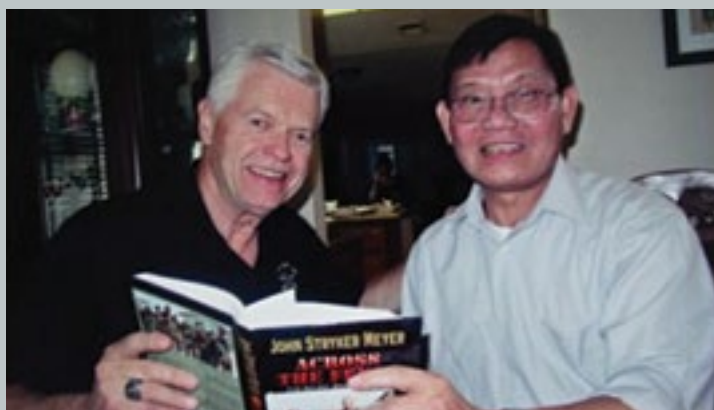
As did many friendships born in the Vietnam war, the Tuong-Meyer comradeship seemed unlikely to survive the American withdrawal. North Vietnam's army had overwhelmed the south; American service men and woman came home to a sullen citizenry. Many American Vietnam-era servicemen and women mentally filed away their war-time experiences and memories; few wanted to know about their experience, nor could they understand friendships forged when life seemed most fragile.

And yet every Christmas, Meyer's thoughts drift back to that knoll on the Vietnam-Laos border, where Tuong saved him and the others.

Tuong came to the United States in 1990, part of the great exodus of South Vietnamese to America after the South fell. But he and Meyer had no idea of each other's whereabouts – or if the other man was still alive.



Left, Nguyen Tuong at Kingbee Headquarters at Da Nang Air Base 1969. Right, Capt. Tuong in Kingbee seat at Quang Tri Launch Site. (Photos courtesy John Stryker Meyer)



Meyer and Tuong review a copy of Meyer's book *Across The Fence* shortly after it was published, which contained a detailed story of that Dec. 25, 1968 in Laos. (Photos courtesy John Stryker Meyer)

Through a friend, he found Meyer, who was living in Oceanside. When they finally met again, Tuong says he "almost cried;" Meyer acknowledges coming "pretty close."

"Meyer is really a good guy," Tuong says. "So kind to everyone around him."

Meyer works for Veterans Affordable Housing in Orange; Tuong is an electrical technician who lives in Santa Ana. The two old comrades see each other a few times a year.

Of that Christmas 1968, Tuong says: "I think if my friend is down I have to pick them up." Christmas 1968 was his best ever, he said, because he saved lives that day. On every Christmas since he "always thinks" about that hill in Laos.

On every Christmas since 1968, Meyer says his thoughts "automatically" return to that fiery day on the hill in Laos. "If it had not been for Capt. Tuong, I'm not here," Meyer says. "How do you thank a man for that?" ❖

**Editors note:** Kingbee pilot Nguyen Van Tuong died from a heart attack on July 23, 2020 in Orange County, CA. More than a dozen Kingbee pilots/crew members and other South Vietnamese Air Force aviators attended Tuong's funeral in Westminster, CA, to pay homage to one of their heroic comrades. After the fall of Saigon, Tuong spent more than five years in a communist "re-education" camp until he was able to escape, come to America and reunite with his loving wife.

# Gravediggers of Laos —

## A Poem by Dan Thompson



Dan Thompson, SOA Poet Laureate

By How Miller

Another letter to the editor brought forth this amazing poem, filled with lots of reminders of the Vietnam War and the efforts that continue today to bring closure to our Gold Star and MIA Families.

Dan Thompson is a member of both SFA and SOA, which is most heavily populated with former SOG members. SOA prides itself in their efforts to keep the memories alive of those lost and continue the fight for those still missing and their families.

Dan wrote:

"I read **"Gravediggers of Laos"** last year at the **Unreturned Heroes Memorial Breakfast** for families of the missing. Mike Taylor asked me to present and afterward graciously tagged me, SOG's Poet Laureate. I'll miss his story telling, leadership and big heart."

The late Mike Taylor was one of the leading forces in the ongoing accounting for the remaining Vietnam War MIAs, the largest number of whom were lost in Laos, as well as Cambodia and North Vietnam.

Dan, an author, wrote *Colors of War & Peace*, a collection of eight short stories. He took an impressive amount of time writing "Gravediggers," continually adding to and refining it. It was, coincidentally, finished just in time for the planning of the Memorial Breakfast. As a result, he read it near the end of the program. Afterward there was a brief but silent pause, followed by a standing and impassioned ovation. His audience was painfully aware of and touched by the vivid imagery and the poem's ability to convey the exotic settings and SOG language, derived from cryptic references.

This breakfast was not only designed to honor the MIA families, but also to allow the SOA community to bond with and *show* them that their lost ones have not been and will never be forgotten. All were deeply moved and gratified. Families and SOA members mingled for hours, exchanging remembrances.

The poem is about a son's search for a father gone missing, after the death of his mother. He journeys to the attic where he finds a meticulously kept collection of records that explain not only who his father was but also clues to who he is.



Here is the poem, followed by explanations of some of the less familiar terms:

## Gravediggers of Laos

God created war so that Americans would learn geography."

— Mark Twain

Comes now a lost voice from Chapbook  
Exhumed from dusty trunk, cobwebbed beams  
Hidden trove, attic treasure hunt  
Plied skeleton key, bow, barrel & bit  
Climbed Master Mel, forsaken son  
In search of father's Eidolon

Beneath two foot moldy stacks  
Curled yellow lips of news clips  
*Citation* *valorous*, 'Regret to inform'  
Alien argot, *Tchepone Muong Phine*<sup>i</sup>  
Beguiled by appellation & epithet  
Tiger Hound, Steel Tiger,<sup>ii</sup> *hieu biet*<sup>iii</sup>

Found he, the wizardry of OZ  
Painted operants, camouflaged  
Phasmids blent with spinney trees  
RT's,<sup>iv</sup> delivered by King Bees,<sup>v</sup> as  
*Bo da*<sup>vi</sup> fled burning grass, grizzly pics  
Bloat-faced cadavers, with Emmett Kelly<sup>vii</sup> noses

There was heartbreak grass,<sup>viii</sup> which wept  
Powdery mist, sickened and killed  
Fast as 5 point 5-6 casings spent  
Green skulking sedge & coiling krait  
Book said missing lay in wait, high  
On topographic cist, massif cloaked in mist

The ledger gave definitions  
Super spooks,<sup>ix</sup> SOG,<sup>x</sup> Oscar 8<sup>xi</sup>  
6 x 6 clicks, No Fire Zones, Top Secret/  
NO FORN,<sup>xii</sup> Special Forces cadre and faithful SCU  
Lay pretzel twisted in tropical queue, as  
Tigers pause with razor claws

This the stage they strode upon  
Humped hogback ridges, cleft jungle jowls  
Razor grass & eucalyptus copse  
Lurking shadows slid from woodsedge, as  
Leeches, swollen & taut, hung high & tight  
Crept tiger-striped fatigues by Starlight<sup>xiii</sup>

What burdens besides fear and loathing?  
The book told of things they carried  
Alice packs, OD cravats, tied to sling swivels  
British Stens,<sup>xiv</sup> AK's, mini-grenades  
URC-10's,<sup>xv</sup> when shit hit, Bright Lights<sup>xvi</sup>  
For dark days, and rounds and rounds of iron rations

Two commandos & five SCU<sup>xvii</sup>  
Stitched by withering fire, as the  
Shushhhh of rockets annunciate,  
Heavy machine guns rake,  
Leapt high from cliff, solo Bru<sup>xviii</sup>  
Air-peddled into tamarind tree, E&E'd

One-Zero,<sup>xix</sup> One-One, four Bru, vanished  
MIA is book's definition, burnt<sup>xx</sup>  
Like stripes on a napalmed tiger  
Yowled the torch that lit the night  
Scorched its hair & scalded feet  
Fearsome creatures last retreat

From pirate chest, dug Mel's hand  
Manila folder with coffee ring effect  
Dog-eared tab, struck through and through  
Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command  
Defense Prisoner Of War/Missing Persons Office  
Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency,  
...bureaucrats, shuffled like cards

Found lost-a/as-in two-foot printed stacks  
Missing men & sent recovery team  
Shot azimuth back, through time & grid  
White-taped & numbered artifacts  
As if Tutankhamen's sepulcher  
Each cubit unearthed, spade the gravediggers

Conical hats, bent-strained backs  
Sifted grommet, buckle, & grenade pin  
Fingers raked like fine-tooth comb  
Monkey skull or tiger bone  
Bore excavator's chagrin  
Found frozen dial, 5:22 & 10

Seiko's fractured face, winked and grinned  
'Neath, two-foot loam, leaf and limb  
Those new geographers lastly sought  
In hollows of thin & decimated cloth  
Hardened glue of bones exhumed  
His father's missing epitaph

Crusted Zippo, skull engraved  
Dirt clogged eyes & charred wick  
35 KILLS IF YOU ARE RECOVERING MY BODY FUCK YOU  
Struck Mel the wheel, sparked he the flint  
Thumbed Seiko's face, inveterate trace, as  
Mystery unwound, what made him tick

Closed Mel the lid, turned he the key  
Locked mother's chest, *Per Stirpes*<sup>xxi</sup>  
Scuffed grateful tear, but put to rest  
With gravitas & Shakespearian wag  
Like Yorick's<sup>xxii</sup> empty skull, his father  
... a fellow of infinite jest

## Endnotes

- i Tchepone-pron. chee-pon-mung-fine, a vital transshipment point on Laotian section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
- ii Tiger Hound, Steel Tiger were amongst a series of Top Secret code names for reconnaissance operations in Laos.
- iii Vietnamese-to understand, pron. way be-et
- iv MACV-SOG Reconnaissance teams consisted of two or three US Special Forces operators and between 4 and 10 indigenous members consisting mostly of Montagnard or Nung strikers, SCU.
- v Vietnamese piloted, VNAF, camouflaged H-34 helicopters. They were some of the bravest pilots who rescued SOG Recon Teams, surrounded and in deep trouble.
- vi Generic name for NVA soldier
- vii Emmett Kelly was an American circus performer, with large red nose, who created "Weary Willie" based on Hobos of the great depression.
- viii Gelsemium flowering plant emits poisonous mist that affects vision and respiration, and can cause death.

ix Special forces operators who collected information through human and other sources, evaluate intelligence with regard to tactical and strategic importance outside the US were called “Spooks.” Cross-border operators of Studies and Observation Group, SOG, were referred to as “Super Spooks.”

x Special forces operators who collected information through human and other sources, evaluate intelligence with regard to tactical and strategic importance outside the US were called “Spooks.” Cross-border operators of Studies and Observation Group, SOG, were referred to as “Super Spooks.”

xi Transshipment points that bordered Vietnam and Laos. It was one of the largest storage facilities and was heavily defended by anti-aircraft (AAA) guns and bunkered infantry. SOG repeatedly suffered high casualty rates in attempts to penetrate this target.

xii Top Secret/NO FORN meant no Foreign Eyes (to include SVN) could read or see anything pertaining to SOG missions, operational plans, or after action reports (AAR).

xiii Night Vision scope-light-sensitive material that converts photons into electrons, that feeds into a series of tiny devices similar to TV picture tubes, each one multiplying the brightness of the image.

xiv Recon Team point men often used British (9mm) Sten guns, with silencer, for quiet kills, during surprise encounters along the trail.

xv Hand held survival radios with direct communication to rescue planes, Covey, and TAC Air, on predetermined frequency.

xvi Codenamed Bright Light was activated when a RT had been compromised and was in imminent danger of being overrun by vastly superior forces or teams that had lost contact with Command and Control. A Bright Light Team or Hatchet Force would be inserted into the target area to extract the endangered team, find dead or search for missing. Most times, due to heavy anti-aircraft fire and concentration of enemy forces, Bright Light Teams could not land, or helicopters were downed like flaming Carrier Pigeons.

xvii Special Commando Unit — pron. skoo — indigenous team members, identified both unit and individual-comprised of Cambodian Khmer, Hmong-Mien, Montagnard or Nung strikers.



Jack Kull, Dan Thompson, Matt Kristoff, Steve Thompson, DPAA Gravediggers with SOA Poet Laureate Dan Thompson. Photo taken at SOAR, 2021, Unreturned Heroes Memorial Breakfast, Orleans, Las Vegas (Photo Courtesy Dan Thompson)

xviii A French term that meshes several non-related Austroasiatic peoples such as the Katuic Bru, the Cham, and Bahnaric tribes, who lived in the central highlands and hated the Vietnamese.

xix One-Zero was US RT, Reconnaissance Team Leader, One-One, Assistant US RT Leader.

xx Tradecraft term for being discovered or mission compromised.

xxi Legal, Latin term, pron. pur-stur-pees, used in wills to describe how estate should be distributed.

xxii Hamlet: Act 5, Scene 1, “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.”

# A Defector in Place: The Strange and Terrible Saga of a Green Beret Sandinista – Part Three

By Greg Walker (ret)  
USA Special Forces

**“Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs of war;  
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth  
With carrion men, groaning for burial.” – Julius Caesar, 1601**

On July 27, 1983, *Comandante* Reyes Mata gave Lieutenant “Justo Martinez” a large sum of Honduran *lempiras* “to purchase mules, supplies, and, especially, food”. Lt. Martinez and several other guerrillas left the base camp at Congolon for the closest town, Nueva Palestina, a three to four-day hike through the jungle on foot. It was a two-fold mission. Martinez was to establish the FAP’s presence in the town, linking it with Congolon. A similar link would then be made with Tegucigalpa, the country’s capitol city. Once accomplished the FAP’s “Internal Front” would become a reality. “We have vested in it our hope for survival,” wrote Reyes Mata in his war diary.

Lieutenant Martinez was given three days to reach Nueva Palestina, two days to accomplish their tasks, and three days to return to base camp. On July 30th, *Combatant* “Marvin” deserted the base camp. Leaving his weapons and equipment the guerrilla took only his watch and blanket with him as he headed back toward the Patuca River. A three-man team sent to take him into custody could not catch the fleeing Honduran. “Marvin” was the first of what would become a relentless tide of desertions over the next six weeks.

On the morning of August 2nd, “Miguel”, “Mairena”, and “Renecito” had slipped away taking their weapons and equipment. This to discourage any pursuit by the FAP. Unknown to Reyes Mata was that two deserters had reached the town of Catacamas and turned themselves in to the FUSEP, or National Police. They shared all they knew with the police, who in turn notified the Honduran Army. General Gustavo Alvarez, head of the Armed Forces, was furious and with good reason.

On July 19th, in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega had proposed a six-point peace plan with Honduras tied to the Contra war. Now, General Alvarez was learning that on this very same date with the support and blessings of the Cubans and Sandinistas, a heavily armed and well-trained Marxist column had crossed the Coco River. Further, it was led by Dr. Jose Reyes Mata and with two Nicaraguan combat advisers with him. It was a betrayal the general would not abide

## Guerrilla Warfare 101

**“The column was already screwing up if they made scheduled contact the same time – and likely the same frequency every day. That’s counter to best practices of guerrilla warfare comms [communications]. The FUSEP reported the column**



**to the Estado Mayor in Tegu and [a] PSYOP/Civic Action effort was poured into the [Olancho] Province. The Honduran SF was spun up, and with Contras tracking the column, updates were provided until the HSF arrived and was positioned to begin kicking ass. The Contras blocked any escape routes should the column [have] decided to evade back into NU [Nicaragua].” – Retired U.S. Special Forces Master Sergeant, Charlie Company, 3/7th Special Forces Group, Panama**

On August 4th, the Honduran Army arrived in Nueva Palestina and established its forward operating base (FOB). Lieutenant Justo Martinez and his resupply team had just arrived, as well. In his diary entry of August 6th, Reyes Mata offers “...we complete 10 days with-



Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega (Credit: LatinAmericaStudies.org)

out food...We are all waiting anxiously for him...". Two days earlier Reyes Mata had personally executed *Combatant* "El Paisa", whose true name was Juan Ortiz. Ortiz was accused of planning to assassinate Reyes Mata and inciting those who had deserted to have done so. A swift jungle trial was held, and Ortiz killed in front of all those other guerrillas present. The execution did not stop the desertions. In fact, they would increase with those surrendering providing even more information about the FAP.

By now the column had lost six of its original 96 members to desertion, capture, and execution. Still, Reyes Mena believed he had won a "great political victory". He'd also lost four M16s, 2 grenades, and roughly 1500 rounds of ammunition and yet the FAP had not engaged in a single armed engagement.

In an August 30th U.S. Department of Defense message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided by the Honduran G-2 and U.S. Defense Attaché, a nine-page report gave the names and position of each guerrilla in the column. In addition, the commanders, sub-commanders, and political officers for each of the four platoons were identified. The true names and alias of the deserters to date and the members of the FAP support staff to include "Comandante Adolfo", or David Arturo Baez Cruz and "Gregorio" were noted; Finally, the battle plan for the column was revealed as it sought to open separate fronts in Honduras.

The deserters had described radio communications capable of reaching Nicaragua and "other countries". Deserter Enoc Benigno told his interrogators the radio had to be used with a dipole antenna put as high as possible in a tree "for better signal propagation." One power source was a car battery and the other a portable generator operated by a mechanical pedal. Comandante "Fidel", leader of the Third Platoon, held all the codes and frequencies. As he had forgotten to pack an extra battery the generator had become the sole source of power for communications. Communication security was poor. Transmissions were daily and always occurred at 0900 and 1600 Hours and were 30 minutes each in duration.

In short order the Honduran Military, working in concert with the U.S. Military and the CIA, began intercepting guerrilla radio traffic. Using the U.S. operated clandestine radio communications intercept sites atop Tiger Island in the nearby Gulf of Fonseca, and another located inland between San Lorenzo and Tegucigalpa, General Alvarez's Special Forces task force began placing blocking forces from Honduran infantry units at key trailheads, villages, towns, and roadways in Olancho Province. Major Leonel Luque was assigned by General Alvarez as the task force commander. Leonel Luque possessed a Military Police background and had attended the School of the Americas in Panama. He was also an important liaison with the Contra effort on the Honduran border and known for his ruthlessness in dealing with subversives.

Reyes Mata allowed for just eight days for Justo Martinez to return to Congolon with supplies. The situation at the base camp was deteriorating swiftly. Listening to their own radio the guerrillas discovered they'd been compromised by the deserters and the Army's response. Reyes Mata ordered the camp struck and the column split in two. His group would remain in the Nueva Palestina area, the other group now commanded by Comandante Serapio Romero

(Frente Oriental) would begin its trek to the Catacamas Mountains. "Gregorio" would travel with this group. "Adolfo"/Baez would remain with Reyes Mata and combatant James "Lupe" Carney. Serapio's unit departed 48-hours before Reyes Mata. Serapio would bivouac at a pre-determined location and allow the slower moving Reyes Mata to catch up before they parted for good. It was determined the FAP would not return to Nicaragua. It would remain in pursuit of its mission to wage war in Honduras.

As the starving band started down the trail, they were joined by combatant Raul Felipe Calix. "[He] appeared, completely beaten, but all right," wrote Reyes Mata. "They had left him alive." Although his diary does not identify the other guerrillas that were with LT Martinez it is reasonable to presume Felipe Calix was one of these. And had managed to escape the Army in Nueva Palestina to warn the FAP they were being hunted.

## Rangers Lead the Way!

**"...the U.S. Southern Command admits 150 American troops, most of them Army Rangers from Fort Lewis, Washington, were parachuted in Olancho on August 5th. They stayed until August 16, engaging in what the Pentagon called 'a simulated counter-insurgency operation' with Honduran forces. August 5th was the day after the Honduran Army's Patuca Task Force arrived in Olancho on its real counter-insurgency mission." – *The Nation*, "The Mysterious Death of Fr. Carney," August 4-11, 1984**



The Honduran Special Forces Squadron was originally trained in La Venta, Honduras, by a U.S. Special Forces operational detachment from the 3/7th SFG(A) then stationed in Panama. La Venta, roughly twenty miles from Tegucigalpa, was the headquarters for both the "TIGERS" squadron as well as the COBRAS. The COBRAS were trained by a separate 40-man mobile training team recruited at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Both efforts took place in 1982. The Green Berets responsible for the COBRAS grew their hair out, wore civilian clothing, and arrived in Honduras completely "sterile". Meaning no dog tags or any other U.S. military identification (the same precautions David Baez had used before crossing the Coco River with the FAP).

Both the Tigers and the Cobras were trained in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorist and unconventional warfare strategies, tactics, and techniques. These included sniper employment, special weapons, hand to hand combat, raids, ambushes, the clearing of airplanes and buildings, and Intelligence collection/assessment. At times individual instructors with unique specialty skills such as photography and demolitions were brought in. Both MTTs delivered a well-trained 120-

man Honduran Special Forces squadron owned by the Army and a 40-man Urban Operations Command, or Hostage Rescue Force (HRF) that fell under FUSEP. Both these elite units were under the direct command of General Gustavo Alvarez, Chief of the Armed Forces.

Working in conjunction with the Tigers and Cobras were the military intelligence teams of Battalion 316. B-316 was the direct result of General Alvarez's long time professional and personal relationships with the military in Argentina. That country's armed forces had been conducting a "dirty war" against communist influence and objectives for over five years. The larger operation began in 1976 and was a collaboration between Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay. CONDOR allowed for extra ordinary cross border cooperation between Intelligence services and special units. Kidnapping, torture, assassination, and "disappearing" suspects by dropping their sometimes still living but most often dead corpses from fixed and rotary wing aircraft was sanctioned.

The United States under both President Carter (1977-1981) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) were fully aware of CONDOR and both encouraged and resourced it. An August 1976 cable to the State Department from U.S. diplomats in Latin America raised early and grave concerns regarding CONDOR being far more than simply intelligence gathering and sharing (Figure 1). Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was at first cautious in his response, but within days sent the subtle message that no further oppositional action was to be taken regarding CONDOR and its goals/objectives by U.S. State (Figure 2).

Although CONDOR was officially shut down in Argentina and that country's direct support of subject matter experts in interrogation, torture, and assassination withdrawn from supporting U.S. efforts in Central America, the over-arching years of collaboration and financial support as managed by the Central Intelligence Agency to its allies in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala had created units such as Battalion 316, a mirror image of its parent, Battalion 601, in Argentina.

B. THERE ARE IN ADDITION, HOWEVER, RUMORS THAT THIS COOPERATION MAY EXTEND BEYOND INFORMATION EXCHANGE TO INCLUDE PLANS FOR THE ASSASSINATION OF SUBVERSIVE POLITICIANS AND PROMINENT FIGURES BOTH WITHIN THE NATIONAL BORDERS OF CERTAIN SOUTHERN CONE COUNTRIES AND ABROAD.

C. WHILE WE CANNOT SUBSTANTIATE THE ASSASSINATION RUMORS, WE FEEL IMPELLED TO BRING TO YOUR ATTENTION OUR DEEP CONCERN. IF THESE RUMORS WERE TO HAVE ANY SHRED OF TRUTH, THEY WOULD CREATE A MOST SERIOUS MORAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM.

FOR S AND S/S ONLY

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: OVIP (KISSINGER, HENRY A.)

SUBJECT: ACTIONS TAKEN

1. UNNUMBERED ARA MEMO DATED AUGUST 30, "OPERATION CONDOR" SECRETARY DECLINED TO APPROVE MESSAGE TO MONTEVIDEO AND HAS INSTRUCTED THAT NO FURTHER ACTION BE TAKEN ON THIS MATTER.

2. 7619068/9, VISIT OF MEXICAN PRESIDENT ELECT JOSE LOPEZ PORTILLO. FROM ARA. SECRETARY APPROVED TRANSMISSION OF THE BORGSCOWCROFT MEMO WITH THE SUGGESTED GUEST LIST.  
KISSINGER

Operation CONDOR, as was formally known as, was supported by U.S. assets and resources. The end game was the destruction of any and all suspected or proven communist movements in both the southern cone (South America) and Central American countries. CONDOR grew out of Cuba's continued and blatant efforts to destabilize Latin America, with Che in Bolivia (and a concurrent Cuban sponsored effort in Argentina at the same time) the basis for such a program. When Nicaragua fell to the Internationalist Marxist revolutionaries under the Sandinista banner, and although by 1982/1983 Operation CONDOR was being shut down and war crimes trials for its creators and participants on the horizon, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala imported CONDOR veterans and their techniques to counter the myriad of Marxist armed groups such as the FMLN, FSLN, and PRTC.

In all fairness the Sandinistas, finding themselves facing the Contras with their U.S. backing, likewise employed former CONDOR specialists for the same if not opposing ideological purposes

Alvarez wanted his own counter-part unit to Argentina's feared Battalion 601. And he got it. The 316 Military Intelligence Battalion's commander reported directly to Alvarez, and was on the same command wiring diagram as the Special Forces Squadron



(Credit: Alchetron.org)

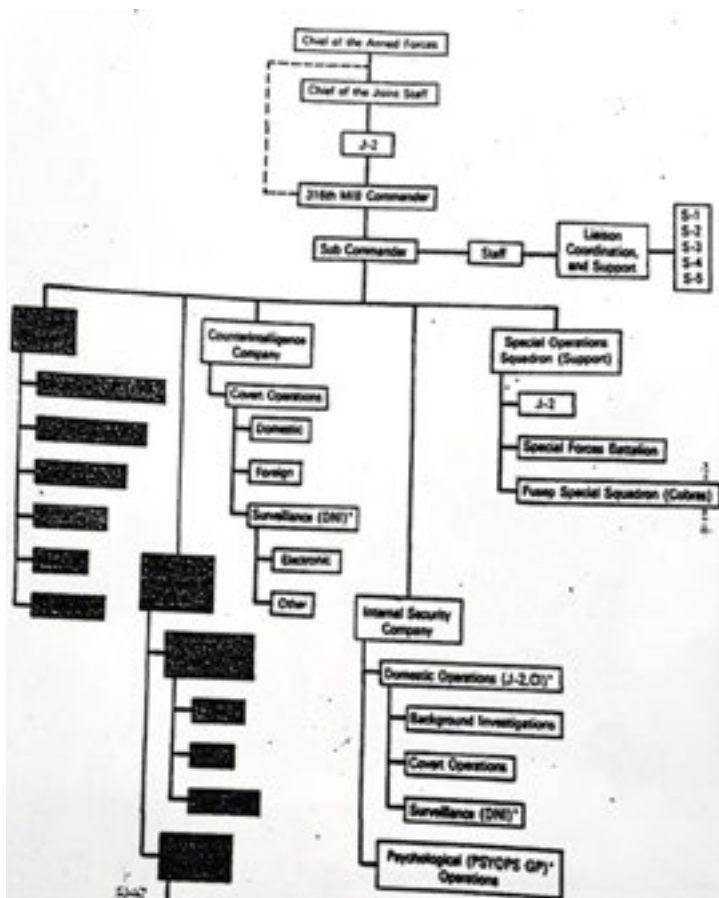
and COBRAS. B-316 oversaw or ran counter-intelligence operations, covert and clandestine operations, domestic and foreign operations, electronic and "other" surveillance efforts. It also had a hand in Psychological Operations although those were run by a separate unit. The "iron fist" for B-316 were the Tigers and the Cobras. When the FAP crossed the Coco River and was discovered, as well as Daniel Ortega's diplomatic treachery, the stage was set for all three units to be put to the test...and with U.S. knowledge, support, assets, and resources.

*"The Argentines came in first, and they taught how to disappear people. The United States made them more efficient. The Americans...brought the equipment. They gave the training in the United States, and they brought agents here to provide some training in Honduras. They taught us interrogation techniques."* – Lt. Oscar Alvarez, Honduran Special Forces, nephew of General Gustavo Alvarez

## Death sentence

*"In accordance with the International Rules of Land Warfare, had [the FAP] established a shadow government, held a piece of territory and governed it, wore uniforms and had an established legal system, they would have received protection under the Geneva Convention. Reyes Mata would have known this."*  
– MSG (ret) Leamon Ratterree, 3/7th Special Forces Group (A)r

Reyes Mata and Serapio Romero went over their final plans. Reyes Mata and his group would continue toward Nueva Palestina and attempt to refit and resupply. Comandante Serapio would take his group, the fittest of the remaining FAP, and move along the Patuca River toward the Catacamas Mountains and, once there, strike inland toward the Capacan Mountain Range and the Tinto River. The guer-



Command, Control, and Missions for BN 316, the HSF, and FUSEP

guerrillas continued to forage in the jungle, and although their food was minimal, they were blessed in having an abundance of water available. A human being in the circumstances the FAP guerrillas were in would die within 48-72 hours without water. However, the sporadic rainfall and the Patuca River with its feeder streams ensured their survival.

What neither commander knew was just how enormous the manpower and resources of the Honduran and U.S. armies were.

On August 28th, with the help of signal intercepts, overflights of specially equipped U.S. Air Force C-130 surveillance aircraft flying out of Howard Air Force Base in Panama, and the provision of five U.S. Black Hawk helicopters from the 101st ABN Division to move Honduran forces swiftly, Reyes Mata's group was discovered, then pinpointed. Honduran Special Forces were inserted and in short order contacted the guerrillas.

The ensuing firefight saw the guerrillas break down into smaller groups to escape and evade their pursuers. Reyes Mata, David Baez, and James Carney stayed together, working their way toward Nueva Palestina where they hoped to find help. In an intelligence report declassified and released on June 29, 2010, mention is made of a pistol belonging to James Carney being turned over to the HRF by two captured guerrillas. The pistol was in turn given to the Honduran C2 as evidence. By now all the guerrillas were severely undernourished and down to skin and bones. Their uniforms were filthy, torn, wet, and hanging from each man's body like a hellish shroud.

On September 4th, it was reported the HSF had surrounded and captured the three men in the vicinity of Arenas Blancas and Cerro Azul. They were within a kilometer of reaching a well-traveled road with only a small stream to cross barring their way.

On September 5th, Major Leonel Luque established a second task force launch site at Rio Tinto to support the hunt for Serapio Romero's guerrilla band. U.S. Black Hawk helicopters began moving elements of the Honduran 5th Infantry to blocking points, as well as at least 50 HSF troopers to be inserted on the band's trail as it traveled along the Patuca River's bank. Contra patrols, tracking the guerrillas as well, were in radio communications with Nueva Palestina and now Rio Tinto, and were likewise eager to locate the band. Overhead, the Black Hawks, having unloaded their troops, began flying aerial reconnaissance in support of the ground operation and acting as communication relay platforms given the dense jungle and mountainous terrain.

On September 7th, contact was finally made, and the first firefight occurred along the Wasparasni River near Salto de al Mona. Although the guerrillas broke contact, the hunt was now fully engaged. A second firefight broke out on the 11th with three guerrillas captured (Castro, Moncada, and Duarte). Serapio had ordered the remaining guerrillas to split into three smaller groups. Sensing victory was at hand, General Alvarez Martinez ordered all available forces to engage. Alvarez made it clear the first 23 deserters had left the FAP on their own. This was in response to, in great part, the multimedia public affairs effort utilizing the deserters to urge their comrades still in the jungle to give up. From this point onward, only prisoners would be taken.

On September 16th, near Culmi Mountain, government forces again clashed with the FAP. There were casualties on both sides. The remaining guerrillas were now heading for Mt. Capapan. If they could reach the mountain they could hunker down and wait for an opportunity to slip down to the well-used improved road and escape by vehicle. Unsuspected by the guerrillas was the major task force headquarters at Nueva Palestina and the HRF launch sites at Rio Tinto, and now Dulce Nombre de Culmi.

On September 17th, the last confirmed firefight between the FAP and the Honduran Army took place near the Capapan Mountain. All captured guerrillas beginning on August 28th were now held at the clandestine U.S. / Contra air base known as El Aguacate located midway between the town of Catacamas and Rio Tinto just off the main highway.

### An outlaw airstrip in the badlands on the border

*"Two American enlisted men told the reporters that they could not enter without the Hondurans' permission. Unlike Americans at other bases in Honduras, the men were armed with automatic rifles instead of sidearms. Asked if there were any Nicaraguan rebels at the base, one of the Americans said, 'We were told they're supposed to be the good guys, and not to shoot at them.'" – "At a Honduras Base, More Questions than Answers," NY Times, December 14, 1983*

The year 1975 was a dismal one for Special Forces. With the end of the war in Vietnam, the United States Army was restructuring itself. Special Forces, which had seen rapid expansion during the war, was now on the chopping block. The 5th Special Forces Group (A) was



The CIA's clandestine airfield in southern Honduras provided safe haven and resupply for the U.S. backed Contra forces operating in Nicaragua. The core leadership and most accomplished Contra fighters came from the "Black Berets", an 80-man commando unit trained and led by Vietnam veteran Michael D. Echanis. When President Anastasio Somoza fled Nicaragua, the "Black Berets" commandeered small boats and after crossing the Gulf of Fonseca, surrendered themselves and their weapons to the Salvadoran military/CIA station at La Union, El Salvador. Echanis was one of three American contractors killed in September 1978 when the private aircraft they were flying in, piloted by Nicaraguan general Ivan Alegré, exploded over Lake Nicaragua. The kill order came from the highest levels of the Somoza government as Alegré was suspected of encouraging a coup against his long time friend, President Somoza. (Credit: ADST)

among the first to see its ranks culled by both involuntary separations from service and normal attrition. The 8th Group, best known for its significant contribution to seeing Che Guevara run to ground in Bolivia in 1967, was to be deactivated. It was only through clever politicking and the documented rapid expansion of communism and Marxist-inspired revolution in Latin America that the 8th was honorably transitioned and became the 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (A) in Panama.

The attrition of seasoned Latin American veterans wearing the green beret to include their language and cultural capabilities as the 8th Group's colors were lowered demanded an influx of, among other skills, Spanish language-qualified speakers. Special Forces in Panama not only conducted mobile training teams throughout Central and South America but also provided military subject matter experts as instructors for the School of Americas (SOA), also located at Fort Gulick.

In March 1976, Sgt. David Baez found himself on leave back to Panama for this very reason. He would be promoted to Staff Sergeant, E-6, that June. Now he was an experienced non-commissioned officer with invaluable experience from his tour with 10th Group in unconventional warfare to include setting up and running clandestine and covert urban guerrilla cells. His tradecraft training with practical field exercises like Flintlock included surveillance techniques, lock-picking, hard and soft target assessments, demolitions, infiltration and exfiltration techniques, recruiting and developing informants, as well as counter-guerrilla operations.



El Aguacate, with its 8,000-foot airstrip, was built with misappropriated U.S. tax money using U.S. armed services personnel, equipment, and resources. Signed off on by General Gustavo Alvarez, the base was primarily used to house, train, and equip Contra fighters with the FDN. Facilities included a field hospital and several cemeteries for Contra dead. (Credit: EIPulso.hn)

**All officers are to have blood on their hands!” –GRAL Gustavo Alvarez Martinez upon ordering the execution of the remaining FAP guerrillas being held at El Aguacate Air Base**

Upon his arrival at Fort Gulick, the young sergeant swiftly obtained On or about September 18th, roughly 36 FAP prisoners being held at El Aguacate were summarily executed. Dr. Reyes Mata was personally shot by a senior task force officer who has long since been identified by the CIA inspector general's 1997 report, although that officer's name is redacted. However, additional references from other sources strongly point toward the task force commander, Major Leonel Luque, as being the FAP commander's executioner.

A contra graveyard was discovered long after the base was abandoned and exhumation of those buried there revealed the dead's remains - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXwOCnYzoz8>

In 1984, two officers—one American and the other Honduran—met at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They were preparing to attend the Special Forces Qualification Course together. Both were Ranger qualified, the Honduran having just completed Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. The American, John McMullen, would go on to honorably retire from the Army as a full colonel. Along the way he would serve with distinction in El Salvador as well as in Honduras.

The Honduran officer, related as he was to General Alvarez, possessed firsthand knowledge of Operation Patuca River, to include the fate of those insurgents executed at El Aguacate. As they went through the Special Forces course together, he began to relate what he knew. “We just talked about it,” recalled Colonel McMullen. “I mostly listened as I was surprised to learn about one of our own, David Baez, being involved as he was.”

During one discussion the Honduran officer showed the American two photographs. In each was a captured FAP insurgent sitting on a bunk. “They looked like concentration camp victims,” McMullen recalled. The Honduran officer told him that the deserters were well treated and fed, but they learned not to give them all the food they wanted right away. “One of the deserters in the photos actually died because he ate too much, too fast. The other became very sick but pulled through,” offered the retired Special Forces officer.

The Honduran officer described what took place after his uncle ordered the executions to occur at El Aguacate.

All the prisoners had been interrogated by professionals from Battalion 316. It was important to learn as much as possible about the now-failed insurgency, especially whether there were other FAP units in Honduras—urban commando units and logistical personnel, specifically. Everything about how they were recruited, when, and where needed to be learned and compared to information given earlier by the first 23 deserters. CinC Alvarez specifically wanted anything and everything that connected both Cuba and Nicaragua to the FAP incursion.

During the interrogations former Green Beret David Baez confirmed his identity as did James Carney. A phone call was made to the U.S. embassy. The confirmed capture of the two Americans was relayed to the ambassador, John Negroponte. The Honduran military wanted to know what the disposition of the gringos was to be given the



In his 1983 report on human rights in Honduras as prepared for the U.S. Congress, Ambassador John Negroponte (center), nicknamed “The Black Prince” by U.S. Special Forces, sanitized the document to the point of parody, as these excerpts from the 1983 edition illustrate: “There are no political prisoners in Honduras”; habeas corpus “appears to be standard practice”; “access to prisoners is generally not a problem for relatives, attorneys, consular officers or international humanitarian organizations”; “sanctity of the home is guaranteed by the Constitution and generally observed.” (Credit: NY Books.com)

execution command from Alvarez. According to the retired Special Forces Colonel, whomever was on the other end of the phone at the embassy basically said, “Get rid of them.”

“All of the guerrillas were taken outside and lined up with their backs toward the jungle,” John McMullen remembers. The Honduran enlisted men were not to take part in the executions and were sent elsewhere. Only the Honduran Special Forces officers were ordered to participate. Reyes Mata was shot. His body would be photographed in two separate poses, both images provided to the Honduran media as proof of his death. Because David Baez had confirmed being an American “Green Beret,” it was decided a young Honduran captain who had recently graduated the U.S. Special Forces qualification course at Fort Bragg would do the honors. Baez was described as having been shot point-blank in the chest by this officer. James Carney was likewise shot.

“He [the Honduran officer relating these details] told me at first the officers were using rifles to shoot the prisoners. But there were so many of them and the rifles became cumbersome, so they finished the executions using their pistols,” McMullen stated.

His account coincides with the CIA IG's report where on page 80, although heavily redacted, the document describes “three or four” of the guerrillas having been flown to Tegucigalpa where they met in private with General Alvarez. They were then returned to El Aguacate and the following instructions given:

220. [REDACTED] After approximately 20 days of being in the field, [REDACTED] and three or four guerrillas to Tegucigalpa. [REDACTED] met with CINC Alvarez privately. After the meeting, [REDACTED] and the guerrillas headed back to Nueva Palestina in a helicopter. [REDACTED] told [REDACTED] that “We have to make them disappear.” [REDACTED] said that the guerrillas were to “die in combat or be executed after we get information from them and in a place they can't be found.” Only officers were to be involved in carrying out the executions and each officer had to participate so that they would not disclose their actions. [REDACTED] an individual: [REDACTED] was given overall responsibility by [REDACTED] for ensuring that the executions were performed by each officer.

80  
SECRET

It can be reasonably presumed the “three or four guerrillas” brought to meet with CinC Alvarez were *Comandante Reyes Mata*, *Comandante Felipe Zapata* (2nd in command of the FAP), *Comandante David Baez*, and *Padre cum Combatant James Carney*. The 1997 CIA report again confirms having identified the officer who shot the guerrilla leader, though his name is redacted.

311. [REDACTED] provided an [REDACTED] officer with information relating to the Olancho Operation indicating that [REDACTED] had shot insurgent leader Reyes Mata with a service pistol after his capture and CINC Alvarez had probably been consulted. This information was sent for informational purposes [REDACTED] to numerous organizations, [REDACTED]. However, it was never disseminated as an intelligence report.

109  
~~SECRET~~

The report also affirms the U.S. ambassador and embassy took a “hands-off” approach to the entire affair and why.

~~SECRET~~

337. [REDACTED] believes that [REDACTED] reporting did not receive fair treatment from components within the Embassy, to include [REDACTED] personnel. He recalls that [REDACTED] comments on [REDACTED] reporting, in most instances, were merely a mirror of State's negative sentiments. [REDACTED] recalls a discussion with [REDACTED] circa 1983 wherein the latter indicated that unspecified individuals at the Embassy did not want information concerning human rights abuses during the Olancho Operation to be disseminated because it was viewed as an internal Honduran matter.

David Baez, identified in the CIA report, is also confirmed to have been captured and then executed at El Aguacate in this extract.

~~SECRET~~

Olancho Department had been summarily executed by Honduran Army officers after being debriefed. Among those executed was Reyes Mata, his Deputy Commander “Commandante Zaata,” and a Nicaraguan advisor who had accompanied the guerrilla force. The

## No fallen comrade left behind

“I am hoping that we can bring some closure to David's death and give him a decent burial in his home country or here in the USA.” – Walter Cargile (ret), USA Special Forces

Word of Baez's execution in Honduras spread swiftly throughout the 3/7th, his last Special Forces assignment. In 2009, Bob S. Senseney, who served as an AST with Baez in 1979-1980, told journalist Juan O. Tamayo that Baez was captured alive and then executed by Honduran Army officers. Master Sergeant (ret) Angel Chamizo, one of the most respected and experienced Special Forces senior non-commissioned officers at 3/7, likewise told Tamayo that, in 1983, at the Sheraton Hotel in El Salvador, two Honduran officers spoke with him about Baez. “They told me that Dave Baez was captured and then executed. I specifically recall them telling me that the execution order came from higher. Word about Dave Baez being killed was already going around SF circles.”

Chief Warrant Officer (ret) Don Kelly, in El Salvador at the time, spoke with a fellow Green Beret who was in the area in Honduras when Baez was executed. Kelly recalls being told that Baez and seven others, “all very skinny,” were captured and later killed.

The consistent presence of Special Forces operators from 3/7th in Honduras before, during, and after Operation Patuca River is not surprising. Charlie Company, 3/7th, had for some time been identified and trained as the battalion's CIF, or commander's in-extremis force for Latin America. Despite the existence of Detachment Delta since late 1977, it was understood the counterterrorism unit could not be everywhere all the time should a terrorist action occur. CIFs were stood up in Special Forces in each battalion to meet the specialized needs for responding to such threats. Training was conducted both locally within the group or battalion setting and at the [SOT school at Mott Lake](#) at Fort Bragg. “Charlie Companies” reflected a high degree of experience, expertise, and capability wherever they were located.

For example, in 1979, when the Sandinista Army was on the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua, C-3-7 was alerted to assist in the expected evacuation of the U.S. embassy there. The CIF prepared to parachute into the nearby soccer stadium, move to the embassy, secure it, and “assist a NEO of U.S. and selected local nationals” under OPLAN 79-100. The company stood by for five days at Howard Air Force Base in Panama until ordered to stand down. However, had the CIF executed its mission it would have assisted embassy personnel and others being flown by helicopter out to the waiting USS Belleau Wood (LHA-3) then off the coast of Nicaragua.

To his Special Forces brothers, Dave Baez, regardless of motivation, remains a fallen comrade not to be left behind.

## Welcome to the jungle

*“They loaded the bodies onto helicopters and flew them out over the jungle where they dumped them.”* – Colonel (ret) John McMullen, USA Special Forces

In the spring of 1984, John McMullen and then Lt Oscar Alvarez, nephew to General Gustavo Alvarez, attended SFQC at Fort Bragg together.

They became good friends.

At one point Lt. Alvarez, who had completed US Ranger School just before coming to Bragg, talked with John about what took place during Operation Patuca, to include the fate of the 40 or so FAP guerrillas who were captured and brought to the El Aguacate air base near the NIC border with Honduras.

Everything Colonel McMullen describes of that conversation regarding the conduct of the OP matches the historical and documented record.

To include Alvarez showing John two pictures he had of deserters who surrendered early on and were starving. As John described, the two were well cared for (part of the early PSYOP plan) and provided food and a safe place to rest and recover. However, one of the deserters in the photos ate too much too fast too soon (His captors didn't know the potential of death by feeding them like this) and he, indeed, died. The other became very ill but was treated and lived.

The roughly 40 guerrillas captured, to include Reyes Mata, Baez, and Carney, were gathered together at the air base. The first 23 deserters

were granted amnesty. The remainder, per General Alvarez, were ordered to be shot as they were deemed not able to be “rehabilitated”.

Reyes Mata, Baez, and Carney were all properly identified. A call was made to the US embassy regarding Baez and Carney as their captors were unsure if they still held US citizenship and what to do with them. The response was in short “Get rid of them”.

Carney had renounced his U.S. citizenship and Honduras had revoked his Honduran citizenship when his actions in the country were deemed a security threat. He ended up in Nicaragua until the incursion. Baez’s U.S. citizenship status was unknown after his defection to Nicaragua. But his U.S SF background and what he’d been doing in counter-contra operations made him, apparently, an easy decision point, citizenship or otherwise.

### Reyes Mata’s fate was a given

All 40 guerrillas were lined up outside with their backs facing the jungle. General Alvarez’s order was that they be executed and “disappeared”. All officers were to participate directly and “have blood on their hands”.

Reyes Mata was shot by the ranking Honduran officer on scene, very possibly from Battalion 316. Carney was shot by another Honduran SF officer. Baez was shot in the chest with a rifle by the 1st Honduran officer to graduate U.S. Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC), then Lieutenant Oscar Alvarez. This, specifically, because Baez was seen to have dishonored his “Green Beret” brothers. Many Honduran officers had been trained by or attended courses at Fort Bragg, so it was deemed fitting he be executed by an SF graduate and officer.

John recalled Lt Alvarez describing the mass execution being finished with pistols. All the bodies were then loaded on Blackhawk helos and flown over the nearby Honduran/Nicaraguan border. They were then thrown out over the triple canopy jungle.

Message: “Don’t come across the border - Death awaits you”.

The long-preferred Condor method of making bodies “disappear” was to use aircraft to fly the corpses out over the ocean, the jungle, or mountains and dump them from altitude. This same approach was used by right-wing death squads in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in the 1980s thanks to Condor instructors from Argentina and Chile.

According to then Lieutenant Alvarez, the order from his uncle was to “return them to the jungle.” “Them” included Reyes Mata’s, David Baez’s, and James Carney’s corpses. The bodies of all those executed at El Aguacate that day were dutifully loaded onto the waiting helicopters, which then flew the 100 kilometers from the base to the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Crossing over into Nicaraguan air space, the helos moved farther inland and began dumping their loads over the thick triple-canopy jungle below.

In the years since there have been many rumors, myths, and outright lies about the fate of the FAP, especially Reyes Mata, Carney, and Baez. In August 1999, based on information and discoveries made on the now-abandoned air base at El Aguacate, forensic teams conducted digs at four abandoned cemeteries located on the base. The Honduran government offered that there was a better-than-average chance that Father James Carney’s remains would be found there.



Oscar Alvarez was the first Honduran officer to graduate the U.S. Special Forces Qualification Course. He attended the course in 1984, along with then Captain, John McMullen. (Credit: InsightCrime.org)

## SOG Legend refutes former DELTA operator claim to have killed Baez

Major General (ret) Eldon Bargewell (August 13, 1947 – April 29, 2019) and I first met in 1979 at Fort Benning, Georgia. We would go on to become good friends up until his untimely passing in 2019.

I asked MG Bargewell about claims made in writing by a long-retired DELTA operator that he (the DELTA commando) had shot and killed David Baez during an operation in Honduras.

“Yes. I was [his] troop and Squadron Cdr from mid 81-84. I never heard of D guys, particularly a troop from my Squadron ever doing anything like this. His claim to have roomed with Baez at [DELTA] selection in 79-80 may be technically correct since candidates slept in open bays.” – January 22, 2019



*“Firstly. Thanks for all you’ve done for veterans. You have been one of the guiding forces in efforts to improve Vets care in the Pacific Northwest. Before I answer – In what month and year did this Baez incident take place?” — General Eldon Bargewell, January 19, 2019*



Likewise, the family of David Baez were alerted the same closure might become available to them.

Given that the Honduran military and past government leaders had long known the corpses of the guerrillas executed in mid-September 1983 had been “disappeared” into the dense jungles of nearby Nicaragua, the raising of such hopes was and remains despicable.

No trace of Carney or Baez was discovered in the desolate graveyards. Only the remains of Contras who had died of wounds, injuries, or illness in the base field hospital.

Lilliam Cruz de Arguelio, David’s mother, received a formal letter dated August 2, 1984, from Robert L. Fretz, then the general counsel for the American embassy in Honduras. In it he expressed his “profound pain” upon learning of the death of her son, David, a “*norteamericano*.” Fretz urged Sra. Cruz de Arguelio to seek a formal death certificate from the Sandinista government. If she could obtain one, then he, at the embassy, would then issue a formal U.S. death certificate so her son’s affairs in the United States could be taken care of.

Jennifer Baez, David’s American wife, had told her husband that if he went to Nicaragua, she would leave him. She did. A formal death certificate from the U.S. embassy would help her resolve any lingering matters coming out of their marriage.

In Nicaragua, the EPS had continued to pay Baez’s wife his military wages, but one day those stopped. His brother, Eduardo, petitioned the EPS for a formal declaration of death so some form of income would continue for the widow and David’s children. His efforts were successful, and a certificate was issued, signed by Captain Marisol Castillo, stating, in part, that “Companero David Baez fell in battle” as a member of the Sandinista Popular Army.

## The aftermath

*Comandante* Serapio Romero escaped capture and, in December 1983, re-crossed the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Upon reporting to the EPS in Managua he wrote his after action report, the only other personal document known regarding the FAP and its demise. It is titled “*Datos Sobre La Columna Del PRTC-H Que En Fi Ano 1983, Compatiera Por La Liberacion Del Pueblo Hondureno, En Las Rofundidades Del Territorio – Junio 4 de 1984.*”

*Comandante “Gregorio”* likewise escaped. He returned to Managua. “Gregorio” was an EPS intelligence officer from Masaya. It wasn’t until much later that he met with Eduardo Baez and identified himself as a survivor of the FAP. His real name was Darwin. Darwin, recalled Eduardo in one of his 2001 *La Prensa* interviews, spoke extremely well of his brother’s actions in Honduras.

General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez was forced from power in March 1984. He flew to Costa Rica where he made a brief speech to the media and later immigrated to the United States. He lived in Miami, Florida, and worked as a consultant for the Pentagon. In 1988, Alvarez returned to Honduras claiming a religious conversion. In 1989, he was shot to death outside his home by leftist guerrillas. He is best known for his comment to former U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Jack R. Binns: “Extralegal methods might be necessary to ‘take care’ of subversives.” He also praised the “Argentine method” of dealing with the problem. Binns swiftly reported his concerns to the then-Reagan State Department. For his integrity he was replaced in 1982. John “The Black Prince” Negroponte became ambassador to Honduras.

Lieutenant Oscar Alvarez, GRAL Alvarez’s nephew, would climb the ranks in the Honduran Armed Forces. Upon retirement he became a dynamic politician and was named Honduras’ minister of security. As a private businessman he became wealthy. In December 2018, Honduran prosecutors implicated Alvarez in a significant corruption case. The year before he’d resigned from his government position and relocated to the United States (Texas) for “health reasons.”

It remains unknown which Honduran officer shot and killed Padre James Carney.

Lilliam Cruz de Arguelio passed away in 2008 without learning the whereabouts of her son’s remains.

Eduardo Baez Cruz left the Sandinista Party in 1986. He founded “Books for Children” in Nicaragua and became an outspoken critic of the failures of the revolution. He passed away in May 2010, his death attributed to a “fall.” He never stopped looking for his brother, David.



David Arturo Baez II, his grandmother Lilliam, and Eduardo Baez Cruz reflect on a picture of Comandante David Arturo Baez Cruz in 2001. (Credit: Juan O. Tamayo / SOFMAG)

Baez’s youngest son, just three months old when his father wrote him what would be the last communication between the two, changed his name to that of his father’s. Of his father’s doomed journey with the FAP, he has only offered “Honduras meant nothing to him.” He has never shared the contents of that last letter between father and son. Today he lives and works in Florida. Upon reading the original draft of this series in 2019 he wrote me to say how much he appreciated learning so much more than he did beforehand, and that the details of this story mirror what he’d been told by family members and friends over the years.

Well you may throw your rock and hide your hand  
**Workin' in the dark against your fellow man**  
 But as sure as God made black and white  
 What's down in the dark will be brought to the light

... You can run on for a long time

**Run on for a long time**

Run on for a long time

Sooner or later God'll cut you down

Sooner or later God'll cut you down

"God's gonna cut you down" – Johnny Cash

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQTCs6aWRSc>



***This series is dedicated to the memories of Major General (ret) Eldon Bargewell and Colonel (ret) John McMullen. RIP, Warriors, RIP.***



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Walker is an honorably retired "Green Beret". He served with the 3/7th Special Forces Group (ABN) in Panama from 1982 until 1985. He is a Life member of the Special Operations Association and Special Forces Association. Today Greg lives and writes from his home in Sisters, Oregon, along with his service pup, Tommy.

# A SPECIAL FORCES LEGEND



Command Sergeant Major (ret) Robert "Spider" Parks passed away after a serious fall that left him in a coma for several weeks. He was overseas and continuing his search for the Missing in Action / Killed in Action. "We say we leave no one behind but we have," Parks said. "We said we didn't have troops in Laos and Cambodia also but we did."

Spider was my battalion sergeant-major at 3/7th SFG(A) in Panama. We linked back up last year at the SOA reunion, which Spider never missed attending until this last one due to his hospitalization. Our community just learned of his passing on October 30th this year. If you didn't know Spider, this is a very good article about him and his mission after retirement — [https://www.thered-stonerocket.com/news/article\\_0a790ad6-0f08-11e7-9b87-a33864bf4b0d.html](https://www.thered-stonerocket.com/news/article_0a790ad6-0f08-11e7-9b87-a33864bf4b0d.html)

God bless you, Spider. Thank you for your service, your sacrifices, and your impeccable example as a "Quiet Professional." DOL! – GW

At far left, Robert "Spider" Parks in Vietnam. Above right, ST Idaho in December 1968 at FOB 1, Phu Bai a few days before the Christmas Day mission. Front, kneeling from left: Nguyen Van Sau (Vietnamese Team Leader), Tuan (grenadier), Cau and Nguyen Cong Hiep (interpreter). Standing, from left: Lynne M. Black Jr., Don Wolken, when he was a Covey Rider for SOG at FOB 1, Phouc (point man), John S. Meyer (One Zero), Robert J. "Spider" Parks — after returning from a mission as a Covey Rider, and Chau. Bottom right, a more recent photo of Spider Parks.



# SFACON 2022

De Oppresso Liber Symposium Series

## Now Available on YouTube

Recordings of SFACON 2022's symposia, which took place at the Antlers Hotel in downtown Colorado Springs between September 21-24, 2022, are available for viewing on 10th Group PAO's YouTube channel. The full playlist of eight videos is available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-qMqt2nuknyTAWBU4PzXnfyJ7F-QrlvC>



### The Originals Panel

LTC (Ret) Mitch Utterback moderates a panel discussion with our Original members of Special Forces who joined in 1952-53. They recount how they were recruited, how they trained, and how they formed our very first SF elements that eventually became Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alphas (ODAs).



### Det-A / SF Berlin

Former Det-A' veteran MSG (Ret) Robert Charest reviews the various phases of this one-of-a-kind Berlin-based SF unit with a truly elegant mission, 34 years of clandestine Cold War activities. He describes the Berlin based SF personnel and Det-A's 1956-early 1970s Unconventional Warfare design, the addition of its Counterterrorism mission, and the 1984 transition to the Physical Security Support Element (PSSE).



### The Original Mike Force

BG (ret) Joe Stringham describes the Mike Force's origin, its unique guerilla makeup with Chinese Nung mercenaries, its initial employments and Mike Force's evolution into a relevant combat design for the counter-insurgency fight; a design that promulgated to every Corps Tactical Zone in Vietnam.



### El Salvador

BG (ret) Joe Stringham discusses the strategic importance of El Salvador, the context of the insurgency and the importance of US support to the government of El Salvador. He further describes the US strategy and the role of a small 55-man SF contribution, conducting combat through strategic operations in a sensitive time when a small band of Green Berets were quietly executing America's fight against communism near our southern border.



### Task Force DAGGER/N. Afghanistan

COL (Ret) Mark Rosengard describes how Task Force DAGGER conducted Unconventional Warfare operations in northern Afghanistan immediately following 9/11, and how this organization reduced the sanctuary then provided to Al Qaeda by the Afghan Taliban.



### Task Force VIKING/N. Iraq

LTC (Ret) Mark Grdovic describes Task Force VIKING's plan for unconventional warfare (UW) in northern Iraq as part of operation IRAQI FREEDOM.



### Shok Valley

On 6 April 2008, ODA-3336 and their Afghan commandos entered the Shok Valley in Afghanistan's Nuristan province to capture Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG). The HIG ambushed the lead assault element in steep mountainous terrain shortly after insertion, and ferocious combat ensued at 10,000 feet for seven hours. SGM Williams discusses this battle that resulted in two Medals of Honor, one Air Force Cross and eight Silver Stars.



### FOB GHAZNI

On August 28, 2013, the Taliban launched a ferocious attack on Forward Operating Base (FOB) GHAZNI in Afghanistan's Ghazni province. Members of ODB-1430 were at the FOB when the Taliban suicide bombers, disguised as Afghan soldiers, blew a 60' hole in the perimeter. MSG Plumlee describes his and his fellow Green Berets' valorous actions alongside Polish and Afghan Soldiers.

## SFA Chapter Meeting Schedule

SFA Chapter 78 meetings are generally held on the 3rd Saturday of the month at the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos, California.

Mark your calendar for the following scheduled dates for 2023:

**Jan 21 • Feb 18 • Mar 18 • Apr 15**