SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

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

VOLUME 14, ISSUE 6 • JUNE 2023

Secret Weapon
Luck Strikes at Lunchtime

The Meal

Descent

From Thailand to Cambodia — 1996

In Memoriam
Michael F. Keele

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VOLUME 14, ISSUE 6 • JUNE 2023

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

IN THIS ISSUE:

FRONT COVER: On 30 March 1967, SSG Alvin J. Rouly taught a Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) trainee how to use a M79 grenade launcher. Camp Trai Trung Sup, Republic of Vietnam, was the 3rd Corps' Basic Training Center for CIDGs. The camp was commanded by the Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB) and advised by Detachment "A", 5th US Special Forces. (U.S. Army photo, National Archive ID #100310274)

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From the Editor

How Miller
Sentinel Editor

We start with an amazing and engaging story by James D. McLeroy. Sending in a 'Letter to the Editor", he shared an article he wrote for *Soldier of Fortune Magazine* in the 1980s. As the XO of A104 in 1967, with his CIDG patrol in a remote part of his AO, he found himself in deep s**t. Their luck was running out. In desperation, he calls for his "Secret Weapon." Against all odds, he is alive today due to his "Secret Weapon".

Two more submissions from *Sentinel* reader Denis Chericone in his captivating style:

"The Meal" compellingly tells about being under siege for three weeks at Lang Vei. The camp hadn't been hit yet, but food was dwindling to nothing. Fate was to intervene for the better, but he draws you in with his relatable details.

Then in "Descent", his next assignment is out of the highlands on the Cambodian border, and almost as soon as he gets there, he heads out to help out at the site of a deadly friendly fire event. After two heavy days of treating wounds and stuffing body bags, he finally gets to tell his equally drained senior medic where he just came from.

Mark Yablonka enlightens us with another story about his travels as a journalist. This time, he travels from Thailand to war torn Cambodia in 1996. His story runs the gamut from the killing fields of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, the slavery of POW's building the Burma Railroad, the dangers still in Phnom Penh, and running into notables such as Tim Page and Peter Arnet.

We will miss Mike Keele, who passed away in early April. Debra Holm has written a touching tribute to Mike, utilizing material from interviews, articles written by and about Mike, and listening to Gregory Keele's podcast about his father (search for Virtual Startup Academy on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Podchaser, or Google Podcasts to listen). It includes heartfelt note from John Stryker Meyer, who originally brought Mike to a meeting of Chapter 78 after meeting him at a book signing. Mike became an honorary member of Chapter 78 due to his valiantly crewing helicopters for the 1st Cav, who were supporting SOG at the time. Mike's SOG stories/heroism stem from SOG missions in Laos and the A Shau Valley. He was also a member of Special Operations Association, a cop, and much more. He wrote many articles for the *Sentinel* and was always helping out however he could.

We have a brief report about Chapter 29's Special Operators Ball, and their tribute to Medal of Honor recipient, Roger Donlan.

We finish with pictures from our April chapter meeting.

Enjoy! ❖

How Miller
Sentinel Editor

From the President | June 2023

Gregory Horton
President SFA Ch. 78

A quick Google search with the keywords "mobs storm stores 2023" results in 25,000,000 hits. All you really have to do is turn on any news channel to find never-ending highlights of rampant theft, attacks, and destruction in major cities nationwide. Theft is so out of control major shopping outlets can no longer stay in business. Imagine that! A major, multi-million-dollar company closes stores because it cannot absorb the massive theft. And the "defund the police/let crooks walk free" atmosphere our government has fostered is not going to stop soon.

Crooks are becoming bolder because there are zero consequences for their actions. Case in point, in Compton a mob ransacked and cleaned out a 7-11 store at a gas station. The police were there, but the mob was too big. One, *just one*, suspect was arrested. At this juncture, many ask why the cops will not do their jobs. If it were only that simple. The Ferguson Effect, Defund Police, anti-police organizations, frivolous lawsuits — the list goes on.

I am not here to debate the police vs. society question; I am here to draw your attention to one thing — **PREPAREDNESS!**

Market riots are not the only thing that affects our ability to survive. Acts of nature are a major factor too. We have earthquakes here in California, and hurricanes and storms are common in the South and East. COVID was a major stressor on the supply chain and markets. I am sure we all remember the panic buying of toilet paper and going to the store for days without finding a single roll. Imagine that you needed food or something else to survive, and things could get dicey real fast. There are numerous books out there that describe actual "TEOTWAWKI" (The End of the World as We Know It) incidents that should make you do a real evaluation of your personal situation.

Chances of an emergency are real — *how are you going to prepare?* Half the fun is researching what is needed to keep the family safe in a calamity. You are in luck! Google search "preparedness agencies," you will get 116,000,000 hits. FEMA has some great advice to get you started and help you build a kit at https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20210318/how-build-kit-emergencies. The American Red Cross also has some great advice at https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/survival-kit-supplies.html

There are so many sources of food with a 20- to 25-year shelf life it will be hard to decide what to choose. I did it the easy way by buying containers from Costco. They have a variety of good quality products at very competitive prices. Most containers have a high carbohydrate load, important in a survival situation. But in my case, as a diabetic, carbs are not a friend of mine, and this store has straight protein buckets. There are numerous online resources with some fantastic deals too.

Next, you need training to handle an emergency in your home and neighborhood. A good first aid/CPR course and kit are an excellent start (except for you 18-D's). Once again, there are literally hundreds of classes out there. For those who want to take it up a notch, take an advanced class like Tactical Emergency Casualty Care, with lot of tourniquets, pressure bandages, etc. A good source for this type of training is the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians (https://www.naemt.org/education/tecc). Once the family is taken care of, it's time to think about the neighborhood. The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) is a great resource. CERT a national program which trains civilians to help with the community's immediate needs in the event of a major catastrophic event. Check with your local fire department or city government to find out where and when they have CERT classes. Good luck and happy preparation!

Our Chapter meeting in April was fantastic, with a great guest speaker. We were fortunate to land SGM Sergio Venegas. Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, SGM Venegas served in the U.S. Army as a Special Forces Senior Advisor and most recently as the Senior Advisor for U.S. Special Operations in Central America. He has worked in numerous U.S. Embassies as a diplomat and liaison between various foreign and domestic organizations. He was also the Program Manager and Primary Instructor of the Army's Sergeant Major Course tailored for the Special Operations Community. He volunteers at multiple organizations to help those in need.

SGM Venegas held an open dialogue on "thinking outside the box" and encouraged discussion. His starting premise was that, as SF members, we were originally trained to think "outside the box." But leadership has forced SF to get back "in the box" and become a conventional force. SGM Venegas proposed how SF might maneuver itself back "outside the box," which sparked discussion and enthusiastic audience participation. I have not attended a livelier meeting with such an engaging subject in quite a while. I am sure it could have gone on for another hour. My thanks to the SGM for posing so many excellent questions and well-reasoned points of view.

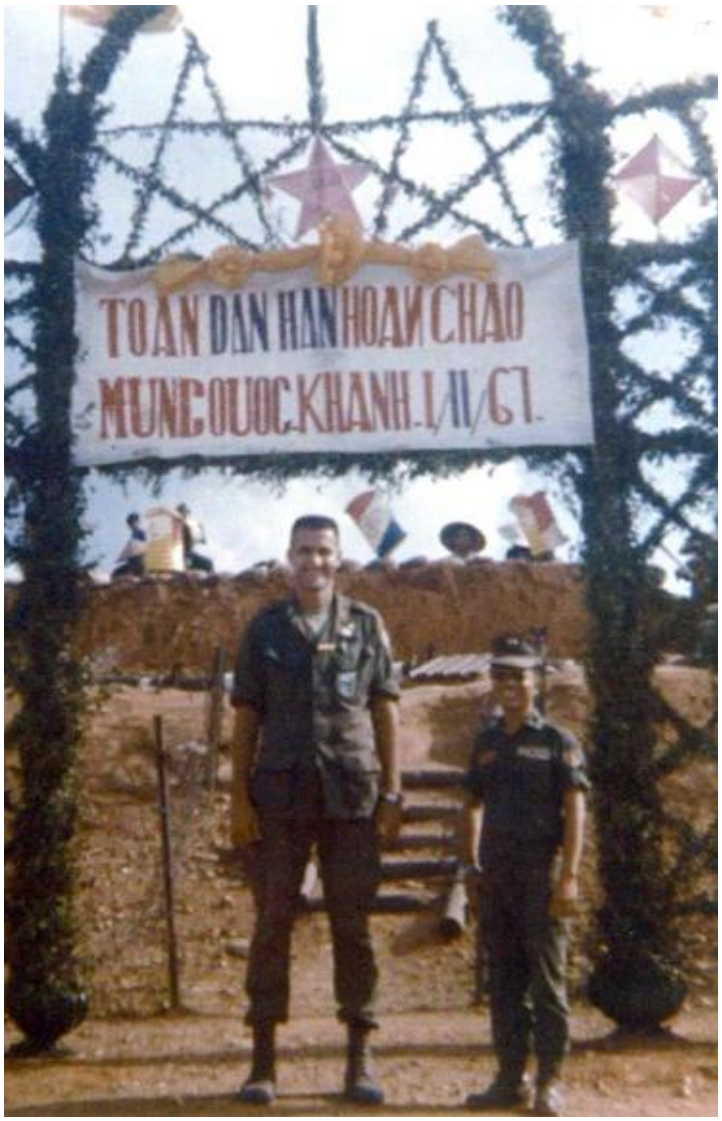
Award-winning author Anne Jacobson will be our speaker at our Chapter meeting on May 20th. I look forward to seeing you there.

Greg Horton SGM (Ret)
President
SFA Chapter 78

Our next Chapter meeting
Saturday, June 17, 2023

LOCATION: The Pub at Fiddlers Green
TIME: Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830
LOCATION: **The Pub at Fiddlers Green**
ADDRESS: 4745 Yorktown Ave Bldg 19
Los Alamitos, CA 90720-5176
(Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos)

Members of Special Forces A-Detachment 104, 1967. Author appears center front; in the back row, third from the right, Team CO Captain Hugh Shelton, future 4-star General and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the LLDB Sgt. in the back row, second from left, fought at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. (Author collection)



Capt. Shelton, at 6' 5," stands next to his LLDB counterpart, the CO of Ha Thanh CIDG Camp, Quảng Tín, I Corps, 1967.

Secret Weapon

Luck Strikes at Lunchtime

Text and photos by James D. McLeroy

Originally published in Soldier of Fortune Magazine's March 1988 edition

No matter how much advanced training, technical support and experience you have, in certain life and death situations sometimes the only thing that saves you is plain, dumb luck. Either that or occasionally God decides to protect the unworthy and incompetent for His own mysterious reasons. That's the only way I can explain what happened to me in Vietnam in 1967.

I was executive officer of Special Forces A-Team A-104 in I Corps, Quang Ngai Province, Ha Thanh District. I was a young, muscular, Airborne, Ranger, Jungle Expert, Green Beret, Infantry first lieutenant, and I considered myself a deadly fellow — all technique, training and esprit. I didn't need luck I was proud of my special training and my special unit, and I was at least as sincere a believer in our cause (killing the communists) as the communists were believers in their cause (enslaving Southeast Asia).

One night at the beginning of the monsoon season, just before first light, I took one of my typical two-platoon Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG — rhymes with "fridge") patrols to recon an area for targets of opportunity for ambushes. By chance, around mid-morning of the following day, we happened across a lone VC whom we took prisoner. He was a scared, skinny, teenaged boy who said he had been recruited by force and had just deserted.

Like most Vietnamese and Montagnard peasants, all he really wanted was to go back home to his village and be left alone.

Our CIDG commander threw him to his knees, put a knife to his throat and threatened to cut his head off if he didn't immediately agree to show us exactly where his supply and infiltration routes were. The CIDG would not have actually cut his throat, at least not with me standing there, but the kid didn't know that, so he eagerly complied. We then fed and reassured him, for which he appeared to be most grateful.

The area where he proposed to take us was way out on the edge of our normal area of operations, an area where our patrols rarely went because it was so far from the relative safety of our camp. It made sense, though, that if we really wanted to find the VC's supply routes, we would have to go looking for them in areas where they didn't expect us to look. I finally managed to persuade the CIDG commander to go. When we got there we carefully set up several area ambushes based on our prisoner's first-hand information.

Late the next afternoon, from my vantage point in the center of our area-ambushes along the VC infiltration trails, I heard several long bursts of automatic weapons fire — all ours. I soon learned that two of our CIDG units had almost simultaneously ambushed two small VC supply columns. In their enthusiasm to win points for our body count bonuses, which were based solely on confirmed kills, my little CIDG

allies proudly presented me with some fresh VC ears. We were, as the saying went in those days, "heavily into" body count. The Special Forces commander in I Corps headquarters had recently flown out to our camp to present us with an actual trophy, sort of like a little bowling trophy, for having achieved more enemy KIAs than any other camp in I Corps for the quarter.

My CIDG interpreter explained that some of the VC supply carriers whom they had just ambushed had had no weapons, which we usually demanded as proof of kills, but the CIDG had wanted to be sure that they got credit for their body count bonuses. Thus the ears. Trying not to appear shocked, I simultaneously congratulated them and gently admonished them from any further ear-taking. I suppose our strategy on that patrol could have been called "winning hearts and minds and ears."

The CIDG troops in other camps may have been valiant irregular civilian-soldier patriots, but most of our CIDG were thieving outcasts and draft-dodging, cowardly mercenaries, only marginally better than the Luc-Luong Dac Biet (LLDB), the corrupt Vietnamese special forces that commanded them. Our CIDG mob was about an even match for small groups of the ragtag local VC, but that was not saying much for either side.

Since both the CIDG and the LLDB were our allies, it was considered critical to our mission as "advisers" to maintain at least a superficial facade of what was called in those days "good rapport with our counterparts." Counterparts or not, the CIDG did not behave like real combat soldiers, and we all knew that it wouldn't do for us to have to depend on them in any serious hostile confrontation with real soldiers.

Unfortunately, the main force VC companies, led by their NVA advisers, were real soldiers. To know them at close range was usually to regret it. Most especially, as in our case, if you did so with no air or artillery support and a few of the local VC's ears in your pockets.

Next day, by unlucky chance, the sacred lunch hour of the CIDG just happened to catch us in an indefensible position. Lunch could really be described as sacred for the CIDG because it was literally more important to them than saving their own lives. As usual, we had to stop dead in our tracks right where we happened to be, precisely at lunchtime, and begin our daily CIDG picnic. I protested in vain.

Although the low jungle growth on the ridge provided us with a modicum of concealment, it gave us virtually no effective cover and no avenues of escape. It was high enough to be conspicuous but not high enough to be defensible, and it was isolated and surrounded by higher ground on several sides. On the other hand, it seemed to be just perfect for gobbling down rice, which was clearly the only point of our being there. Since we were hopelessly stuck there for the ritual noon rice gobbling, I decided to make a routine radio check with our camp.

It alarmed me to hear that our normally calm intelligence NCO was clearly worried. Several of his local intelligence agents had informed him that a main force VC company with NVA advisers, the likes of which we had fortunately never before encountered in our area, was

Typical Ha Thanh CIDG troops 1967

The author and LLDB team members distributing rice to the Ha Thanh villagers, 1967

at that very moment aggressively searching for my patrol. He had checked the report with the intelligence section of Special Forces I Corps headquarters in Da Nang for possible corroboration. Their reports independently confirmed the presence of a VC main force company passing through the area of my patrol. Headquarters had also recommended we be unusually vigilant and cautious. I took their advice to be an example of profound wisdom.

Local VC leaders had apparently been informed of our two successful ambushes — and the missing VC ears — and they were not pleased. Dead VC with missing ears were demoralizing to the rank and file conscripts of the guerrillas, and therefore had to be very quickly and conspicuously corrected with an appropriate response. It seemed that the local VC had asked a main force company passing through the area on its way to more significant targets near the coast to find and make an example of us. This was considered necessary in order to maintain morale in the lower ranks of the VC's local soldiers. We had, in effect, started a sort of rural gang war by flagrantly violating one of the most basic unwritten rules of the territory

The excessive zeal of a few of our CIDG, motivated by their desire to collect another body-count bonus, had apparently upset the balance of power which usually allowed both the VC and the LLDB to prey on the helpless villagers in the area. Obviously, I was a new boy who had to be taught a lesson.

I was suddenly seized with a powerful desire to move my hips off that ridge. We urgently needed to hide, at least until the weather cleared enough to permit air support. Before I could even begin to discuss the possibility of violating the sacred CIDG picnic hour by simply dropping the rice and grabbing the rifles and rucksacks, I heard one of our Browning Automatic Rifles open fire down the little trail that wandered through the middle of the ridge, immediately followed by a burst of AK-47 fire.

I had routinely put out hasty ambushes along both ends of the trail, and as a matter of routine had given the guards my usual instructions not to shoot any point man who might accidentally stumble by. Instead, they were supposed to radio us of the point man's approach and then either *di di* back to us or wait for the main body to appear. As usual, the CIDG guards had decided that if they did exactly the *opposite* of what I told them to do, it would be an act of profound wisdom. They wanted to be sure that the rest of any VC column that happened to be following the unfortunate point man would quickly and prudently run away, which they usually did, thus avoiding an unpleasant firefight for everyone. By shooting or warning the point peons, the CIDG actually tried to keep VC casualties, and thus future VC retaliation, to a bare minimum, while still appearing to do their job for us.

Unfortunately, however, their little trick didn't work that day. A few minutes after our guard had so cleverly shot off the top of the head of the VC point man, I appeared on the scene. That immediate answering burst of AK fire made me fear that we had fallen into a trap. With every passing second I sensed that we were being surrounded. Anyone who has ever fought the NVA or main force VC on the ground knows how quickly and fearlessly they can maneuver through even the roughest terrain and dense vegetation. I had heard about it, but this was the first time I had experienced it.

Hre Montagnard CIDG troops of Ha Thanh SF camp, 1967

Most American infantry units usually did not even try to maneuver effectively after making enemy contact, preferring simply to call in the ever-present artillery or air strikes and let them do the work. This was standard Army practice at the time. Since the NVA and main force VC had none of that kind of fire support, however, they had to be able to move their feet quickly and at the same time use their weapons, which they did as well as anyone could possibly have done in that terrain. Compared to our CIDG, they looked 10 feet tall — and there were twice as many of them.

Sure enough, we soon began to receive heavy bursts of probing AK-47 fire, first from one side, then another, and yet another. The amazing thing to me was how effectively they were surrounding us in that heavy vegetation. I heard the screams of some CIDG being hit. The CIDG usually manifested one of only two possible demeanors on patrol: lethargy or panic. I knew that we were entering a period of very rapid transition from the former to the latter. I saw the man standing right next to me jerk and turn pale as the stock of his carbine was shattered in his hands by AK rounds. We stared at each other mutely for a few shocked seconds, while he half-smiled at me like an idiot. Maintaining our precious rapport even under fire, I idiotically half-smiled back at him. Just then I felt the whistling of AK rounds ripping over and next to my head, then bits of leaves and branches cut by the bursts fluttered down into my face.

I thought about all this for one more nanosecond and then hit the ground in a hyperventilating heap, my PRC-25 radio handset pressed to my head, frantically yelling back to the camp our adjusted situation report. The camp informed me that there was, unfortunately, simply nothing that they could do for us. Because of the rainy, overcast weather, any kind of air support was out of the question, and we had no artillery anywhere near. In desperation, I ordered the team sergeant to fire our big 4.2-inch heavy mortar to support us. His response was something of a shock — not only negative, but almost insubordinate.

"Sir, we can't *do* that! You're at max range for the four-deuce!"

"So what," I screamed back. "Just fire the damn thing anywhere you can about 100 meters around my position!" I quickly spelled out my map coordinates for him, using our standard reference-point code.

"No, sir, you don't understand," came back the strained, urgent voice of my NCO through the squelch. "We *can't* support you at your range, no way! At max range, we've got a margin of error of at least a hundred yards."

That was true, but not the worst of it. We didn't even have a real aiming device for the mortar, just some marks on the wall of the mortar pit. It might just as easily kill us as them. In fact, it had never been fired in direct support of a patrol, only for camp defense and occasional harassment and interdiction fire.

"Fire it!" I yelled again. I was, after all, an officer (although a rather junior version of one), and he was an NCO, so I finally ordered him to just fire the mortar in our direction-period. Reluctantly, he decided to "read my transmission."

When the four-deuce was finally ready, he radioed back: '' For God's sake, sir, y'all get your heads down now, ya hear, 'cause here it comes, and God knows where it's gonna land!"

Author preparing to leave on night patrol.

''Fire the son of a bitch and we'll take our chances!" I roared again. I decided I'd rather be killed by the mortar than be killed or captured by those bastards, which was exactly what was going to happen in a minute if we couldn't distract them long enough to break contact.

Go ahead — fire it," I repeated.

So ahead he went — max charge, max range, Hail Mary, devil take the hindmost, Katy bar the door! Meanwhile, AK-47 fire was steadily intensifying from all sides, as was the shouting and screaming of my now almost hysterical CIDG, who had finally realized that they were hopelessly trapped on their cozy little lunchtime picnic ridge. The M30 4.2-inch mortar tube, although rifled, causes a mortar shell fired at maximum range, unlike an artillery shell, to drop almost like a large falling rock, making very little sound as it falls. The shell for the Army's largest mortar weighs more than 27 pounds and is packed with enough high explosive to virtually pulverize any human being above ground in an area of 40-by-20 meters around the point of impact. The tremendous concussion and shrapnel can also spoil someone's day considerably farther away than that. At better than 5,000 meters from camp and behind several intervening jungle mountain spurs, we could not hear any sound of firing when it left the tube.

As the VC scout squads around us were probing closer and closer with their fire, and the main body of the company was apparently getting ready for a coordinated assault, the huge mortar round from

our camp completed its long journey and landed. Without any warning whatsoever, it suddenly exploded in the low jungle growth about 100 meters below our position, just as requested, with a crashing roar.

The frantic voice of my NCO back in the camp came through the radio static. "Sir, are y'all still there? Over."

"Outstanding!" I yelled. "Fire it again!"

"We *can't* take another chance like that, sir! There's just no telling where the next one might land! Can't y'all break out of there?" He was, in effect, being forced to play Russian roulette with our lives, and he really didn't want to play anymore. I understood, but I didn't care.

"To hell with it!" I screamed. "Just fire that son of a bitch. I don't care where it lands!" I was not exaggerating, and he knew it.

His voice sounded agonized and distinctly mournful. "OK, sir, but y'all get way down now, ya hear?''

We were already as flat on the ground as we could physically be, of course. I knew it would take him longer to get the next shot off because of the intense consultations that were going on down in the mortar pit regarding the critical matter of aiming. We had practically stopped firing back by then because we could not actually see the main body of the VC through the dense foliage, and we knew we were going to need all our ammunition very soon when we would see them. There were moans and cries from the wounded and terrified CIDG.

We knew that those maneuvering VC squads who were effectively reconning us by fire from all sides were trying to get us to return fire blindly so they could locate our key weapons positions. Then they would concentrate their mortar and machine-gun fire on those positions prior to the assault. Their 82mm mortars alone could tear us to pieces, and I suspected they were getting them ready at that very moment. I clung desperately to the radio, trying to derive some reassurance from its continued friendly static, and waited hopefully for our next big mortar shot.

Author with his LLDB counterpart at the Ha Thanh SF camp, I Corps, 1967. (Note the ballet pose.)

I knew that virtually no amount of casualties would stop a fanatical main force, NVA-led VC company in the middle of an attack. I also realized that I was surrounded by mostly cowardly and incompetent irregulars who were themselves surrounded by a superior number of well-armed, battle-tested enemy soldiers. For the first time since I had arrived in Vietnam, I knew what real fear felt like.

Suddenly, I saw the excited face of my interpreter trying to tell me something: The enemy's firing probes seemed to have recently stopped in one of the sectors of our perimeter, and our Montagnard scouts had found no sign of the VC there. The CIDG commander thought that, for whatever reason, the VC might possibly have left us a temporary escape route, and he wanted us to try to break out as quickly and stealthily as possible through that opening. I also noticed that the VC firing had apparently started to diminish, but I strongly suspected that it was a trap to try to channel us into a killing zone. The VC company was so superior to our own CIDG, however, in both quantity and quality, that I figured it simply didn't matter anymore.

I knew, just as the VC knew, that if we tried to retreat our CIDG would simply panic and run rather than staying together and fighting an orderly withdrawal. I also knew that we would never be able to form any effective defensive perimeter once we got strung out in that thick vegetation. We would either get separated or else all get bunched up together. Either way, we would lose what little semblance of a military unit we had, and most of us would soon be slaughtered. On the other hand, if we remained where we were, their mortars would probably kill us before dark anyway. In the dense scrub jungle below the ridge, we might possibly have some chance of escape. The CIDG could really move very silently when they were scared enough to be properly motivated, and we were all extremely motivated at that moment.

I quickly radioed back to camp for them to hold up on the second mortar shot because we were going to try to move out. We grabbed our gear and our wounded, both walking and stretcher cases, and with uncharacteristic discipline and stealth began to silently make our way through the dripping foliage down that hill, not far from the area where I thought the big mortar round had landed. Somehow, we managed to creep right through the mysteriously convenient opening in the VC lines without ever seeing a sign of anyone or having a single shot fired directly at us. Nor did we ever hear the expected mortar barrage behind us up on the ridge. I kept waiting for the sound of pursuit or ambush or mortars or heavy machine guns, but the VC's firing had by then virtually stopped on all sides, and we were simply sneaking away from what had appeared only a few minutes before to be a certain death trap.

Several tense hours later we found ourselves out of serious danger and routinely headed back to camp. I kept trying to figure out what had actually happened, but I couldn't. Somehow, it just didn't seem possible. We already knew the identity of that VC company, its components, its tactics, and its specific objective from various intelligence reports. Even if we hadn't known, I thought as I walked along in a daze, they had already given us their unmistakable signature by

means of their fast, coordinated reconnaissance of our positions by AK-47 fire and their typically efficient encirclement of our perimeter so soon after we had shot their point man.

Our local VC irregulars simply never, ever did that. They didn't have the necessary leadership, training, weapons or confidence to do it. Their only combat responsibility was to snipe, ambush, mine and then break contact so they could do it all again another day.

Yet, when they obviously had us surrounded and outnumbered, with no air support possible, it was almost as if some unseen "movie director" had suddenly ordered the main force VC "actors" to simply move off the set so that we could shoot the next scene, which was to be entitled: "CIDG limping safely back to camp with their wounded." Just like that? We had been as good as dead meat up there and the VC knew it, yet here we were. I kept turning it over and over in my mind, but it still didn't make any sense.

The cumulative tension and stress were finally getting to be too much for me. Although I didn't realize it at first because my voice was still relatively calm, I was literally shaking inside with built-up tension and fear when we finally got back to camp. Even the customary shower and double shot of bourbon couldn't calm me down that night or the next day.

Finally, by chance, our intelligence NCO came upon the explanation for what had occurred. Late in the afternoon of the day following our return, he received a report from one of his chief agents, a prominent Vietnamese civilian in the nearby village. This man had no specific knowledge of our patrol or of the little drama of the mortar back in camp. He reported that the latest "hot word" in local VC circles was that a terrible disaster had befallen a main force VC company passing through our Tactical Area of Responsibility the previous day. Moreover, this completely unexpected and unexplained disaster had seriously demoralized all the local VC supporters and sympathizers there because of it's peculiarly ominous circumstances.

The "word," as he reported in the meeting with our intelligence NCO, was that a main force VC company had been in the process of attacking an outnumbered CIDG patrol which they had trapped a long way from any camp's normal area of operations. The VC company commander, his NVA advisors and most of his headquarters' staff and platoon leaders had been assembled around the VC company commander to receive their instructions for the assault when they had somehow just suddenly been wiped out — simply disintegrated — in one huge explosion, right out of nowhere.

Seventeen of the key people in the company had just miraculously blown up, without any warning, in one explosion out in the jungle, with no airplanes or helicopters anywhere near the place. This sudden disaster had been so confusing and demoralizing to the remaining VC soldiers that they had been forced to disengage immediately and disperse as quickly as possible.

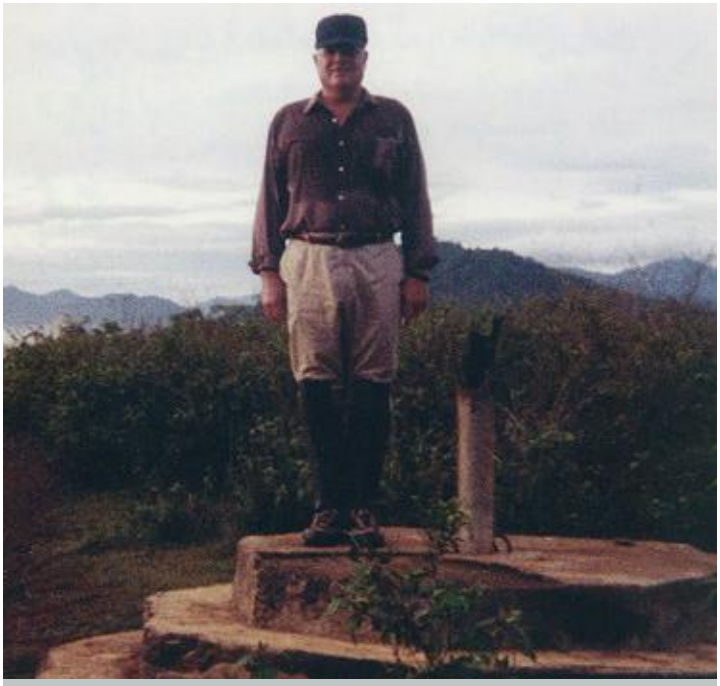
What had all the other VC in the area so worried now was their conclusion that the Americans had apparently introduced some new weapon, something like a small, tactical version of the dreaded "arc-light" (B-52) bombings. This conclusion seemed inescapable in view of the fact that the VC had never seen, or even heard of, anything remotely comparable to that much concentrated and accurate firepower coming from any type of conventional weapons carried by any CIDG patrol before.

Their conclusion, therefore, was that the unfortunate main force of VC company had probably been suckered into surrounding that particular CIDG patrol so that the American Special Forces advisors with the CIDG could have an opportunity to use their new secret weapon to annihilate the infrastructure of one of the VC's better units. The implications of this weapon for the local VC's combat future were clearly awesome.

This agent had uncharacteristically decided to risk his own cover security in order to personally inform intelligence NCO that, whatever our new secret weapon was, it was working unbelievably well and that we should, by all means, keep up the good work. The first tremendous hit already had the local VC staggered, he urged, and just one more number like that would put them right on the ropes.

Our intelligence NCO managed to appear appropriately grave and noncommittal until he could get back to camp to share the story with me. When we both finished laughing, I finally started to relax a little.

I only hope I never again have to be quite that lucky. "Secret weapons" as good a that one are damned hard to come by. ❖



Author standing on the base of the flag pole at the ruins of the Kham Duc SF camp in 1998, 30 years after the Battle of Kham Duc in 1968.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James D. McLeroy completed Infantry, Airborne, Jumpmaster, Ranger, Special Forces and Jungle Warfare training. He served an extended combat tour in 1967-68 as a Special Forces first lieutenant in both 5th Special Forces Group in I Corps and in MACV-SOG.

He co-authored *BAIT: The Battle of Kham Duc*, which was reviewed by Kenn Miller in the March 2019 Sentinel. BAIT has been published in paperback and recorded as an audiobook available on Amazon.

McLeroy was interviewed as part of the Veterans History Project. Listen to his personal narrative on the Library of Congress website https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.113566/?

The Meal

By Denis Chericone

It was the third week of the siege. Lang Vei hadn't gotten hit yet and we were still waiting for relief. Our hunger was gnawing at us. It had been four days of very little to eat. The guys who were good at scrounging ranged out through the marine base but had produced only scraps. Most of the marines were in the same boat. They spared us a few boxes of old C-rations; but that was only good for a day or so. It was reaching in. We tired easily and had trouble sleeping. Our collective mood was a shade or two past pitch black and I found myself leaning on dreams in a hazy distance. I was learning about hunger, its gluttony for emptiness. I know it sounds wrong, all wrong, but It's definitely more than a feeling in the stomach. It carries weight. It has *influence*. It can convince your mind and body of things which aren't in the vaguest of ways connected to the reality around you. It can nourish paranoia. Some of the guys were resigned, some were philosophical, some pulled out an element of practicality: *It's good training*, they said. Others were taunting each other with elaborate descriptions of cheeseburgers, milkshakes and fries. Tommy, one of our younger Spike team guys, sang an old *Dairy Queen* commercial and then held forth on the many variations of potatoes. I never heard so many "Fuck you's" in my entire life and *never* had a potato been so sultry. Simply more ingredients for our extreme discontent and frustration.

Our initial disappointment, you know, being left to molder, unprepared, unsupported, on our own in the middle of a raging hostility, had not gone down very enthusiastically with us. Our second one, being sub-ordinated to the Khe Sanh marine commander, had aroused deep suspicions amongst the men. Who could forget the eruption of Mount Ammo during the first barrage? (Flag urged we refer to it as Mount *Saint* Ammo since so many had met their maker) In any case, we didn't expect much. Number three, loss of our water supply was just sinking in, waiting in the wings along with the ongoing threat of a ground assault.

Dawn was just splaying out when Pitbull assembled most of us in the med bunker and came as close to yielding an apology as anyone ever could. He told us headquarters was trying hard to get us the basics and we shouldn't have to wait too much longer. "I want a hotdog!" wavered out of the group and everyone laughed, even the boss. It thinned the intensity. What could we do? A better world was beyond our reach and we all knew it. Then Louie, a spike team leader on watch along our main trench, popped his head around the entryway saying there was something happening in the minefield. Pitbull yelled a curt "Dismissed!" and everyone followed Louie up the bunker steps. We got ready for war.

There were no bombs. It was early morning and everything was still damp and quiet for a change. We took up various vantage points to scan our minefield. Clipper was standing next to me and asked me if it was Sunday. Then he said the farmers took off on Sundays, you know, church and all that. I couldn't tell if he was serious or simply responding to the strangeness of our situation. He let out a long, low and astonished, "Whoooooaaa!" All of us stared. There was a very large water buffalo sniffing around our minefield probably looking for food. It was hungry, too. A length of barbed wire hung from one of its horns. Guys were pleading it on. "Closer, closer, c'mon!" "Please find a mine. Please, please." "C'mon, honey, be nice." Then, Ka-Blam! A bright flash followed by blankets of smoke, clods of muck and a deep, strained and mournfully long wail like I'd never heard before and still can hear today.

The misguided creature died at the deadend of the moan and four guys were on the remains almost instantly; but not before Flag had knelt down and began whispering into the buffalo's ear. He told me later

how we owed the animal a debt of gratitude. It had provided for us. I'd never looked at it that way before; but I got it. As the men flashed their blades and cut it into sections we all helped carry pieces back to the shredded skeleton of our mess tent where the guys dressed it into steaks, chops and roasts. The Yards waited along with the rest of us, smiling expectantly. They wanted the head, liver, heart and the other things which resembled organs. I don't know where they found it; but they had gathered big bunches of mint leaves and other greens we were not familiar with. If I can get away with saying this it was almost a festive moment. Food!

We built three fires, scrounged frying pans, pots, pieces of flat rendered metal from the mess tent debris and began the barbecue of a lifetime. Bob and Louie fashioned a spit after we finished digging a pit. Chuckles found a big bag of salt and we seasoned liberally. Everyone got something. A few of the guys wound up getting sick from eating too much, too fast, but they suffered happily. The medics had warned everyone to keep the first meal small, eat slow and chew their food; but hunger ruled and the race was on. We ate, and ate and then ate some more. The weird asterisk here is we didn't get bombed on during this time. We didn't even notice until later when we were licking our fingers. Maybe the farmers had a thing about shooting hungry people.

Flag rigged a smoker out of what remained of the field ovens and began smoking bits for later. He said we'd probably get five or six hundred pounds of meat from the carcass and smokers would help preserve what we didn't use. I helped him as we tried to set things up where the smokers would be out of the way. The meat lasted for days.

The next morning mail had shown up for the first time in weeks (someone mumbled something about just desserts). We were ecstatic. Something beside bombs. Mail meant family amongst other things. Guys suddenly inhabited an intimate distance, a zone only they were familiar with. It was all theirs. It belonged to them.

The mood lightened some. Food *and* mail almost at the same time. Get outta here good. Guys were crunching on meat and reading about the lives of their loved ones. I snuck away to explore my own distant cosmos.

Settling into my sandbag recliner, I began rediscovering *Far Away Land*. As the letters spoke the distance narrowed. I could see the people of my own universe. I could hear them. They worried. They advised. They cautioned; but *they didn't know.* They had no idea about this war. They were as lost as I felt myself to be. I wanted to hold it against them, you know, their innocence, their distance from things; but I couldn't. I was too grateful for their ignorance, for the fact that they'd never wind up here. They were blessed, preserved and protected. Who would want something like Khe Sanh in the lives of those you loved; yet I sensed there was something else. It was so obvious I'd missed it. I envied them and I resented them for it. Feeling that way made me squirm. I didn't like it. Resentment is like the flu. It takes over your whole body and makes you feel ugly, disheveled, remote and isolated. I struggled with it. I guess deep down I wanted someone to understand what we were going through, someone to acknowledge what we were doing for them. I wrestled with the self-pity of it.

Yeah, right, feeling sorry for yourself was going to make a difference Uh-huh. It was obvious, it didn't matter. It didn't and it never would. What did matter, though, was that there were people out there who gave a shit, who cared. Mail was reassurance in the end. It was someone holding on to you no matter how many days, miles and bombs lay between you.

Counting your blessings was vital at Khe Sanh. In a way, it was all you had. Even though some of us felt marooned we'd been taken care of, reeled in, held tightly away from starvation. Our families had shown up. They'd followed their concern, tracked their wonder and made sure our hearts were still in the right place. Not even the power of rockets could take that away. ❖

Return to TOC

DESCENT

By Denis Chericone

After I left the north, I was beyond weary. The Siege had taken more than I had. At SF headquarters, the young lieutenant in charge of replacements had been at Khe Sanh for awhile. I didn't recognize him at first as he wore a clean outfit, but he gave me a friendly, "Hi, Kid," and then it all clicked. We caught up for a bit and then he asked me where I wanted to go. I asked him to send me somewhere no one else wanted to go. Happily, he complied with a "Got just the place," and I wound up heading for an A-Team in the Highlands near the Cambodian border. I considered anywhere but Khe Sanh a soft landing.

The Highlands were Montagnard country, lush and rough. There were two large tribes living in the area of the camp: the Rhade (Rah-day) and Jerai, and both were our allies. Around this time, the enemy presence in most of the Highlands was only periodically ferocious, and it would require them to muster a major effort to subdue the Yards living there. They usually laid low, making certain their units escaped detection on their way to more vital objectives further south. Occasionally, though, it became really noxious. If an A-Team was thorough, effective, and managed to catch them when they were vulnerable, the Team then became the enemy objective. A-camps took it for granted that they were marked, and most any border camp was on some NVA hit list.

As our helo contoured the mountains, I felt myself getting excited. I'd been told there were twenty thousand or so Rhade and Jerai living in the bush around the camp. The SF medic responsible for their welfare had gone home, and there was no one to take his place. I was relieved. I could now help people out with a minimum of blood getting in the way.

The camp was in the middle of nowhere. As I looked out from the helo the place seemed to pop out of the bush. The usual: a couple of flimsy prefab buildings, a lookout tower, automatic weapons bunkers, and access trenches. The dispensary, marked with a red cross, sat at the edge of the camp near the entrance. It was all a coarse cut and recently put up. The jungle held tight against the rim of the camp, barbed wire hugging the thick foliage surrounding it. Fields of fire hadn't been hacked out yet, making it an attackers' dream: You could creep up to the perimeter without being seen.

I'd been there for three days when we got the call. Initially, the senior medic had looked at me and shook his head. The other team members felt the same. They thought I was a rube because I looked so young. I didn't say anything about being at Khe Sanh for five months. It wouldn't have mattered much. Blood's the only thing most SF guys use as a marker.

A trimmed-down slick showed up to take the senior medic and myself to the carnage site. They were in triple canopy bush about a mile from camp and had been returning from an operation. We hovered just above the top canopy. As the wind washed through the cabin, the senior medic kicked a huge, rolled up rope ladder out of the chopper. He nodded at me sternly. I got it, and down I went.

It began getting darker after passing through the first canopy. After breaking the second one, I heard the screams. It was very dark now; no shadows. When I touched down, a Montagnard ran by me, shrieking, and smacked into a tree. I looked around. Blood, blood, and more blood. A one-hundred-man patrol, three Americans and ninety-seven Yards. A couple of Cobra gunships had strafed them just once, believing them to be an enemy force. Thirty-five dead, forty-seven wounded. One American gone, one dying, and the third waved me off when I approached, nothing serious.

We spent the rest of the day tending to the stricken and putting people in body bags. We had to rough a couple of guys up to bring them back, but we managed to slash out an opening to bring the helo in.

There was only one ship, so it took quite a while to get things done with. We could have been hit at any time by any number of enemy, and it would have all been over. I remember wondering on the way out if the NVA had seen us and decided to let this one go. More than once was just too much, for anyone.

When we finally got back to the camp, the senior medic told me to come with him, and we wound up in his hooch. He broke out a bottle of good bourbon and poured two very stiff drinks. We touched glasses and downed them in a hurry. We appreciated the effect.

"Where were you before here?" he asked a little cautiously.

"I was up at Khe Sanh for about five months." I answered wearily.

He stared at me for a quick moment, and a wry smile appeared before he looked down at the floor, slowly shaking his head. He was laughing when he looked at me again, "Sorry, kid," and he didn't even know my name. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From Denis Chericone's LinkedIn biography: "While in the military I was posted to a remote and very isolated US Army Special Forces A camp, An Loc. While there I was in charge of a twelve bed jungle hospital where I treated everything from amputations to leprosy. I lived amongst the people of the area, the Gerai and Rhade Montagnards. This was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. They were Vietnam's equivalent to the First Nations people of the Americas. Sociologically light years more sophisticated than the people of the industrialized west, the Montagnards exposed me to me a deeper understanding of the qualities that comprise the essence of being human."

Denis is a writer, both of poetry and prose, and a talented pianist. Hear Denis reading his poetry at the Oregon Poets Satyricon Poetry Series. Hear Denis' original composition "Daybreak", part of his winning submission for the 2021 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival where he placed first in the music division.

From **Thailand** to **Cambodia — 1996**

Cambodia — Angkor Wat, Siem Reap (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

By Marc Yablonka

After three weeks of being Tom Yum souped all over Thailand courtesy of the Thai Ministry of Tourism in 1996, in a weird way, flying into still war-torn Cambodia was a bit of a relief. Not that Thailand didn't mean anything.

While there, I filed a piece for American Veteran magazine on the Kwae River Bridge made famous by the 1957 film *Bridge over the River Kwai*, winner of six Academy Awards. I tried to walk across a rebuilt version of that bridge in a Southeast Asian downpour and gave up half way across for fear of slipping off and falling to my demise.

I wrote about the nearby Kanchanaburi War Museum, housed in a longhouse, with its war relics and photos all laid out on tables informing visitors of the Siamese complicity with the invading Japanese. Meanwhile, a rusted from rain locomotive used by the Japanese to pull trainloads of Japanese soldiers who tortured Allied POWs, forcing them to build the Burma ("Death") Railway, sat astride the museum.

Next, my fellow journalists and I were guided to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery where 6,858 mainly Australian and Dutch POWs, who could not withstand the torture of their Japanese captors, are buried.

I became close to two of those journalists: Rolla J. "Bud" Crick, who was on assignment for the Oregonian, newspaper of his hometown, Portland. But Bud had made his mark in journalism years before as a US Army reporter/photographer during World War II for Pacific Stars and Stripes, which sent him to such hazardous duty stations as the Philippines.

They also sent him to Japan a mere few days after the atomic bombs were dropped to photograph Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It's a wonder that neither Bud nor his offspring did not come down with the infamous, disfiguring, often deadly Hibakusha disease suffered by multitudes of Japanese citizens after the war. Bud lived way into his 90s.

Another journalist along for the ride was Sherry Spitsnaugle. Sherry was on assignment for her hometown paper, the Denver Post. She still writes excellent travel pieces for a variety of online sites.

There was also my friend Jim Caccavo. Jim was the Red Cross photographer/writer in Vietnam between 1968 and `70, during which he also freelanced for Newsweek magazine.

It's thanks to Jim that I had my one and only experience, thank you very much, at Pussy Galore's in Padpong, Bangkok. Until then, I never knew totally nude bar girls could dance the night away doing such unbelievable things with their anatomy!

Bud, Sherry, and I said goodbye to Jim at the Airport Hotel at Don Muang International Airport at the end of our Thailand journey. He was off to Hanoi and the three of us were Phnom Penh bound.

While Sherry stayed with friends, Bud and I holed up at the Cambodiana Hotel, purportedly the safest hotel in what was still cowboy town. And still, the hotel wasn't safe enough to not have guards on each floor armed with M-16s. You didn't go out at night on foot, and you made damn sure that the hotel car took you where you were going and picked you up when you wanted to come back.

Unlike Vietnam, where the cyclo drivers adopt you for an honest pay off at the end of your journey, the cyclo drivers in PP were known to ride you down some dark alley, stop, beat the crap out of you, and steal your money.

Cambodian soldier guarding the US Embassy, Phnom Penh (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

Australian UNTAC Troops, Foreign Correspondents Club, Phnom Penh (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

Tim Page at the Vietnam Memorial, 1997 (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

I interviewed hotel manager Helen Lim for a piece I wrote on Cambodia for the Straits Times of Singapore. "You journalists always insist on going into dangerous places where you shouldn't go, and God bless you if you do," she told me in the course of our interview.

Speaking of going into dangerous places, I said hello to then CNN field reporter Peter Arnett in the elevator of the Cambodiana one night. I also got called a traitor by a spook in the hotel bar when I told him I'd done two tours with the Israeli Defense Forces. Damn! One less friend in the world!

One of the places that was not dangerous was the Foreign Correspondents Club, which overlooked the muddy Mekong River. In addition to local and foreign journalists, it was also the watering hole for UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority Cambodia) troops, embassy types, and backpackers alike.

And being that the windows were glassless, hundreds of geckos, the lizards American GIs in Vietnam dubbed "Fuck you lizards" for the noises they made at night, frequented the place.

The FCC was the first place I ran into renowned British Vietnam War photojournalist, Tim Page. I would meet Page again in Washington, D.C. a year later, when I made my first pilgrimage to the Vietnam Memorial along with him and our mutual friend Sergio Ortiz, USMC combat correspondent based at the Da Nang Press Center during the war.

The FCC was where Bud and I lunched with Sherry's friend, the economic attaché at the American Embassy, who told us, "There are still Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh. They've just traded in their AK-47s and gone into business."

Whether or not they had traded in their AKs in recent years did not take away from the horrific photographs of the past I witnessed at Toul Sleng in Phnom Penh. Toul Sleng had been a school which was converted into a sort of clearing house where it was decided which citizen would go where after being tortured…if he or she lived.

Victims of Pol Pot's genocide were killed just for wearing glasses, just for speaking French, just for being teachers, just for…on and on and on. Three million of them. Very Nazi like, everyone who passed through Toul Sleng on their way to an uncertain future had his or her photo taken. That's how well the bastards documented their own horror.

Legend holds that the Khmer Rouge photographer took his last photo there when he looked through his camera viewfinder and saw the face of his own uncle staring back at him.

One does not have to venture into the Killing Fields that Helen Lim warned against to see further evidence of Khmer Rouge horrors. Fourteen kms. outside of Phnom Penh lies Choeung Ek, an open field in the middle of nowhere which includes a Buddhist stupa with shelf after shelf after shelf with nothing but skulls.

As I walked through Choeung Ek with a guide, he pointed to the ground. "Look," he said. My tired eyes didn't make it out at first, but when they focused, I could see human teeth and bones staring up at me from their place half buried in the dirt at my feet.

Having never journeyed to Auschwitz, where my grandfather met his fate, that was the first time Man's inhumanity to Man slapped me across the face.

Above, a Buddhist stupa with skulls, Wat Tmeay. (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

Buddhist stupa at Choeung Ek, Phnom Penh (Photo courtesy Marc Yablonka)

At Sihanouk's Palace, I did enjoy one comic respite from the tragedies. There, I was lectured on the virtues of Buddhism by a monk. As I looked across the grounds, I spotted one of his fellow monks smoking a cigarette. "What about him?" I asked my monk friend. "Oh him?" my friend replied. "He's just a weekend monk!"

Bud, Sherry, and I next flew a Royal Air Cambodge ATR-72 prop jet and made pilgrimage to Siem Reap's wondrous Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom complexes, dating back to the confluence of Hinduism and Buddhism that is part of Cambodia's ancient history. But for French explorer Henri Mouhout around 1860, the wonder that is both would still be covered over by Southeast Asian jungle.

We were followed by street urchins selling baskets and kramas, the national neckwear of all Cambodians (I bought a black and white one so as not to be taken for a sympathizer of the Khmer Rouge, who wore red ones).

Even with that, the peace that my journo friends and I found there that weekend I shall never forget. At the same time, I will also never forget the Khmer Rouge bullet holes that dotted the walls of both complexes.

From Angkor Wat, we made our way to Wat Tmeay, a hooch-laden village where the wives of all the men killed there during Pol Pot's reign pledged their lives to Buddha and, as Buddhist nuns, shaved their heads. Meanwhile, nearby, their husbands' skulls lay piled atop one another in yet another stupa with an open door so villagers and tourists alike could pay them homage.

Something so moved me to be among the dear nuns, that I reached into my billfold, took out US$10, and handed it to one of them.

All of a sudden, the entire group of them raised their hands in the Buddhist "Wai" (their hands pressed together in a praying motion so often seen in Southeast Asia), and they began to sing a mantra.

"Do you realize what you have done?" our guide questioned me in broken English. For a split second I was afraid I was going to receive a personal escort out of Cambodia for some terrible economic misdeed. "What?" I squirmed. "You've given them enough money for rice for a month!"

As I wrote in my Straits Times piece, "It was hard to focus a Nikon through tears," but I did just that and came home with a picture of those nuns singing that mantra to yours truly as a thank you.

Bud, Sherry, and I flew back to Phnom Penh and went our separate ways. Before I left the city, I stopped by the "Russian" Market and bought an ivory Buddha which still hangs around my neck next to my Star of David. Twenty-seven years later, Cambodia remains indelible in my mind.

Above left, an enterprising young girl selling baskets, Angkor Wat; above right, a Buddhist monk walking by the women's prison, Phnom Penh; below, Buddhist nuns, Wat Tmeay, singing the author a mantra. (Photos courtesy Marc Yablonka)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

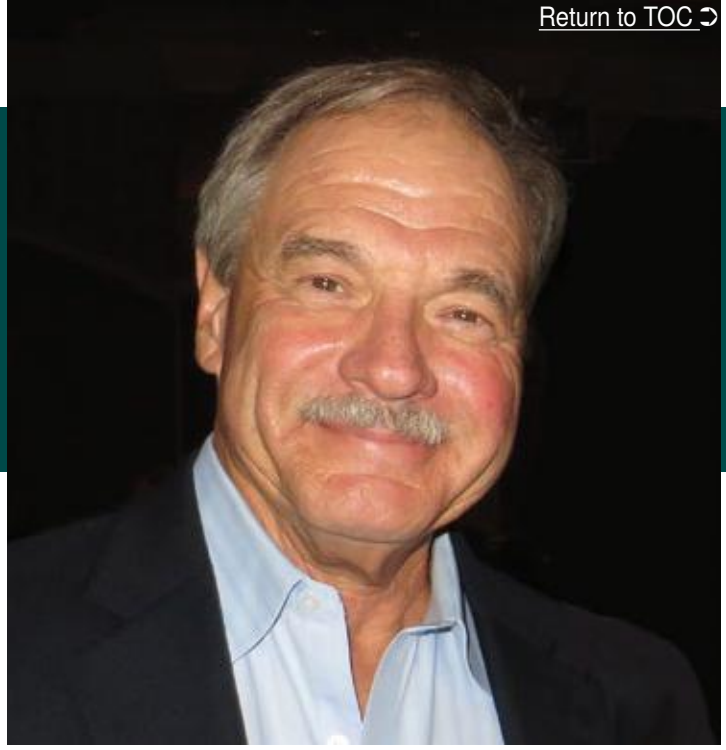
Marc Yablonka is a military journalist and author. His work has appeared in the U.S. Military's *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, *Air Force Times*, *American Veteran*, *Vietnam* magazine, *Airways*, *Military Heritage*, *Soldier of Fortune* and many other publications. He is the author of *Distant War: Recollections of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia*, *Tears Across the Mekong,* and *Vietnam Bao Chi: Warriors of Word and Film*.

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

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

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

SFA Chapter 78 Mourns the loss of Honorary Member Michael F. Keele



By Debra Holm

Michael F. Keele passed away peacefully on April 8th, at age 76, at his Canyon Lake, California, home with his wife Cora by his side, after a long battle with prostate cancer.

Mike Keele was born and raised in Southern California. After graduating from Pasadena City College, he was inducted into the U.S. Army and attended basic training at Fort Ord, California, in 1967. He attended Rotary Wing Mechanic School (first and second echelon) at Fort Rucker in Alabama in late 1967. After completing training, Mike Keele was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, supporting MACV-SOG out of FOB-1 and helped as Khe Sanh was shut down. He earned an Air Medal with 24 Oak Leaf Clusters, a Bronze Star Medal (M), and a Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroic activities.

Returning to civilian life, Mike Keele became a Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff, where he served for 15 years. He was assigned to the Firestone Sheriff's Station, a very busy and demanding place to serve. He wrote about his time there in the September 2018 *Sentinel*.

After leaving the Sheriff's Department, he became an investigator for the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office for the following 17 years. Not wanting to retire, he then worked there part-time for four more years.

After retiring, Mike was able to devote more time to his passion for automotive fabrication — building cars from the frame up.

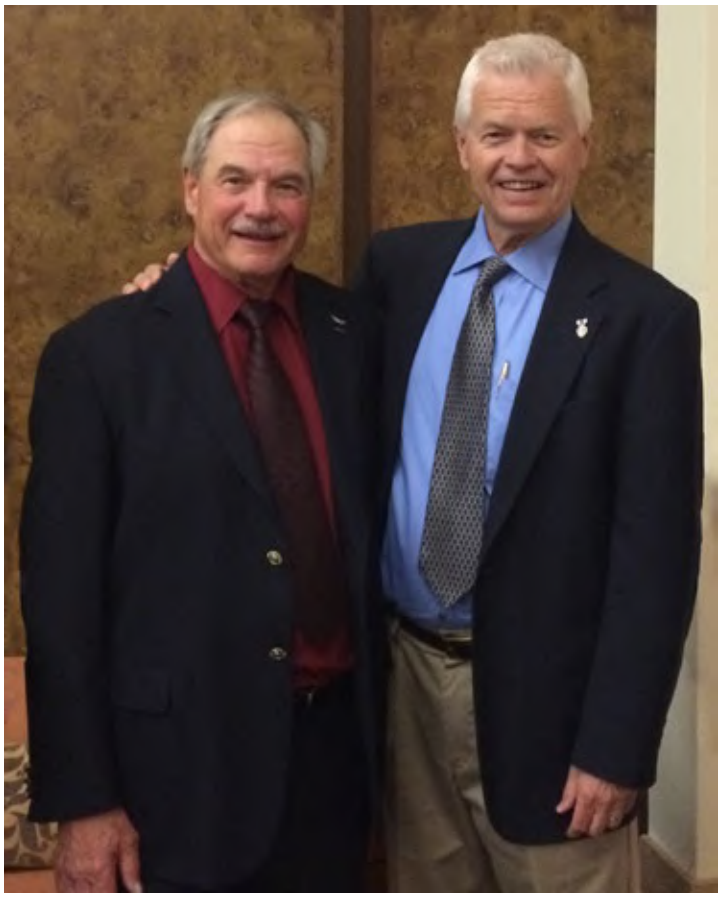
Mike had read John Stryker Meyer's book *Across the Fence* and so attended a book signing in Los Angeles County in 2010 to meet the author.

John Stryker Meyer wrote about that meeting:

> "Thirteen years ago, I met Mike Keele at a book signing in Los Angeles County. I had a few people at my table, and Mike came up and asked if I had ever been in the A Shau Valley — a unique question that got my attention. I said, "Yes sir and you; have you been there?"
>
> "In his usual humble manner, he said, "Yeah, I've been there a few times a few years back."'
>
> "I asked him if he could return in a few minutes. He did, and he stayed there for the rest of the day. It was the beginning of a marvelous, enjoyable friendship steeped in profound respect for the crew chief/mechanic/deputy sheriff.

B/229th trooper Mike Keele in An Khe. Two hots, a cot and clean fatigues. What more could you ask for? December 1967. (Photo from SpecialForces78.com Mike Keele member profile)

> "In typical fashion, it took a while for the modest man to speak of his missions flying across the fence and over the A Shau Valley into Laos supporting SOG recon teams and missions supporting conventional units in the A Shau Valley — the most dangerous area of operations in I Corps in northern South Vietnam.
>
> "During that tour of duty supporting SOG, he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross after his chopper flew into a target under heavy enemy fire, dropped 150-foot-long ropes to the SOG Recon team on the ground, and extracted the entire team, or so they thought. As soon as the helicopter stopped receiving enemy ground fire while flying east to South Vietnam, Mike checked on the status of the men riding on the ropes, only to discover that one man was missing.



Mike Keele and John Stryker Meyer at an ROTC event in April 2017. (Photo courtesy Lonny Holmes)

"After taking the survivors to a safe LZ, the 1st Cav chopper returned to the LZ looking for the missing man while again taking heavy enemy gunfire.

"'That mission always haunted me,' Mike reminisced years later. 'Our job was to get you crazy Green Berets outta Laos and get you home in one piece.'

"Like many of us who survived SOG missions, Mike often reflected on that service to our country as a defining moment in his life.

"Thanks to his service supporting SOG teams, he quickly became a member of the Special Operations Association and the Special Forces Association Chapter 78 in Orange County. Eventually, through our friendship with Chapter 78 SF Legend Richard Simonian, Mike joined the non-profit American Veterans Assistance Program, where we teamed up to help veterans obtain affordable housing, assistance, and information programs on VA benefits, veterans rights, and food give-aways.

"Through his membership in those organizations, he donated thousands of dollars and hours volunteering in unique ways, including writing stories for the Chapter 78 award-winning newsletter *Sentinel.*

"His sense of humor was rich; his caustic wit had a bite to it when commenting on daily events and political nonsense.

"Today, I'm one of a legion of men who have a special spot in our hearts filled with memories of that amazing man.

"May he rest in eternal peace and grace."

Left to right, John Stryker Meyer, Mike Keele, and Lonny Holmes at the Irwindale Speedway about ten years ago. (Photo courtesy John S. Meyer)

Mike and Cora Keele during their wedding ceremony in May 2017. (Photo by Lonny Holmes)

As John has written, Mike was made an honorary member of SFA Chapter 78 on his first visit to a chapter meeting in January 2011. He had joined the Special Operation Association in 2010, where he served as a member of their Election Tally Committee for many years.

Becoming a member of SFA Chapter 78 set Mike on a new course for the remainder of his life, serving other veterans. As John has noted, meeting Richard Simonian led to his work with the non-profits Veterans Affordable Housing Program and the American Veteran's Assistance Group, for which he became the Director of the Board of Directors.

Making new friends and reestablishing connections with people was another benefit of joining Chapter 78.

Mike and Berg Garlow, an honorary member of Chapter 78, like Mike, and an official honorary member of SOA, met in 2011 at a chapter meeting. Having both worked on "birds" in Vietnam — Mike on Hueys and Berg on gunships — at slightly different times in the war, they clicked right away. Additionally, they had even worked with some of the same people. After meeting, they spoke at least twice a week, continuing to stay in touch even after Berg moved to Florida in 2012. After getting married in 2017, Mike and Cora paid a visit to Berg and spent several

nights in the "Honeymoon Suite," which was actually his office that had been converted. Over the years, they had a good time being buddies.

Berg said, "Mike was one of those lives you don't want to end. A good man, a good heart." He spoke with admiration of how Mike had carefully taken care of his affairs, leaving no stone unturned to make sure Cora and the kids would be provided for after he was gone.

Berg shared a story about a conversation he had with Mike:

> Berg told Mike the story of meeting and making friends with Tim Robinson as they were both on their way to Vietnam for the first time. After arriving, they were sent to different assignments. Berg went to Chu Lai, where he became a gunner with Aviation, and Tim was assigned to the 101st Airborne in Phu Bai. Later, Berg was sent to FOB 1 at Phu Bai. He wanted to see if he could find Tim, so on a day off, he traveled to the Phu Bai Combat Base. He found his way to Personnel and was told that Tim had gone home "in a body bag." Berg mentioned Tim had been killed in action during an assault landing in the A Shau Valley. Mike, hearing this story, asked Berg, "Was it the 19th?" Berg was not sure, so he checked. Tim *had* been killed on April 19th. Mike said, "We put those boys in." There was no way of knowing if Tim had been on Mike's chopper, but it was Mike's group that inserted them. This was a conversation Berg had never seen coming.

Mike sent this photo to his friend Berg Garlow on April 5, 2022. He blamed the sunburn on his nose and cheeks on his lack of hair, which had previously provided protection. (Photo by Cora Keele, courtesy Berg Barlow)

Mike reconnected with an old friend, Brad Welker, from his time as a LA Sheriff. They had attended Sheriff's Academy together in the 1970s. After graduation, they both worked at the Firestone station, serving Watts and the surrounding unincorporated areas. Brad remembers Mike as being a great street officer — he was always calm in bad situations, never losing his composure. Mike left the department to work for the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office, and they lost touch after that. They reconnected at a chapter meeting 20 years after they first met and continued their friendship there. They particularly enjoyed visiting the Irwindale Speedway, where Mike was a regular, and hitting the track!

I first met Mike at the Chapter 78 Christmas party in 2014. His face was already familiar from the many photos I had seen from events when working on the *Sentinel*. Mike was a part of nearly every Chapter event. I adored his sense of humor, which was so evident in the articles he wrote for the *Sentinel* just about every month for a number of years. He would often be called on to deliver the invocation at the start of chapter meetings, and his delivery was indicative of the personal relationship he had with his Creator. I would often call Mike when I needed a second opinion on our Chapter website. He claimed his opinion didn't count, that he was just a "grease monkey." But I knew I could count on his honesty and kindness. I was struck by his "never give up" attitude. Mike Keele was definitely one of a kind — the best kind.

Cora and Mike relax with Sam, Berg Garlow's service dog, on their honeymoon in May 2017. (Photo by Berg Garlow)

March 2015, Mike Keele, Kimberly Holmes, Brad Welker, and LTC Gary Macnamara at Kimberly's Police Academy Graduation. All supported Kim and wrote recommendations for her and were interviewed by the agency. (Photo by Lonny Holmes)

Jim Duffy, Mike Keele, and Lonny Holmes, then Chapter President, presenting a Certificate of Appreciation for Mike's support of the Third Annual Green Beret Shooters Cup. (Photo courtesy Lonny Holmes)

In addition to his wife Cora, Mike Keele is survived by his son, Greg Keele, as well as his daughters Laurie Syvock and Lisa Huebner. He also had several grandchildren, including Kayla Syvock (currently in nursing school), Cade Syvock (Idaho Army National Guard), Shawn Huebner (Army Apache pilot, currently stationed in Alaska), Jessica Huebner, Alexandra Huebner and Chase Huebner.

His funeral was held on May 3, 2023, at the Riverside National Cemetery, in Riverside, California.






Before the funeral, above left, Richard Simonian, Lonny Holmes, Brad Welker, Ramon Rodriguez, with Greg Horton standing behind the group. Images from the ceremony. At bottom center, Jim Light protects Mike's portrait from blowing over in the occasional gusty breeze. Bottom right, Cora is presented with the American flag. (Photos courtesy Mike Jameson)

Special Operations Forces Ball

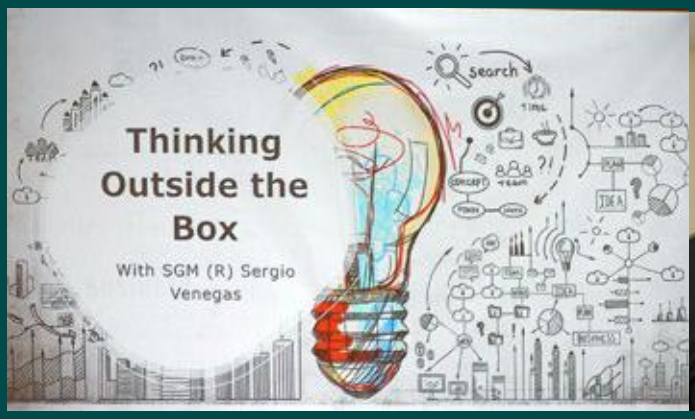
On May 6, 2023, Chapter 78's John Stryker Meyer spoke at the Special Operations Forces Ball held by SFA Chapter 29. "The Ballad of the Green Beret" was played and SF men gathered around MOH Recipient Col. (Ret.) Roger Donlon during the singing of it. He was genuinely touched by the camaraderie of the SF moment — an emotional moment indeed.

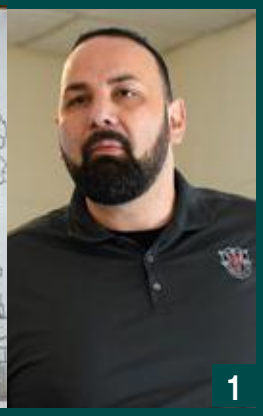
A video of this moment, courtesy of Norma Donlon, can be viewed on the SFA Chapter 78 YouTube channel (https://youtu.be/OE13KDF6LEo)

From left: John Hughes, standing to Donlon's right, CSM (R) Ross Worley, behind Donlon, John S. Meyer, with hand on Donlon's shoulder, and SFA Chapter 29 Treasurer Roy Williams, to John Meyer's left. (Photo courtesy Geoff Helm)

SFA Chapter 78 April 2023 Chapter Meeting

Photos by How Miller and Debra Holm

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1. SGM (R) Sergio Venegas presented “Thinking Outside the Box.”
2. Chapter 78 President Greg Horton presented a chapter coin to SGM Venegas.
3. Robert Casillas
4. Lani Dolick
5. Jim Duffy
6. Bob Crebbs
7. Ramon Rodriguez
8. George Turney
9. Don Prentice
10. Left, Jim Morris, and, at right, Art Dolick enjoy conversation before the meeting.
11. Len Fein
12. Steve Bric and Erik Berg
13. Art Brown and Jim Suber
14. Al Vaitkus, a first-time guest who attended with Erik Berg, served with the 101st Airborne (his personal challenge coin was photographed by How).

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