



# THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SENTINEL

## SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

### The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 3 • MARCH 2018



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Intelligence Operations in the Viet Nam Central Highlands: 1972–1975

SOD North Heads East

Chapter 78 Annex: Taking Aim in the Mojave Desert

FOB4 Overrun on August 23, 1968

Book Review: *TANKS IN THE WIRE: The First Use of Enemy Armor in Vietnam*

Special Forces Combat Outpost Pirelli

SFA Chapter 78 February 2018 Meeting





# SENTINEL

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**COVER:** A member of Plei Djereng CIDG recon platoon with his baby daughter. Photo credit: Bob Shaffer



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## From the Editor



Lonny Holmes  
Sentinel Editor

*Intelligence Operations in the Viet Nam Central Highlands: 1972–1975* is a never before told story of one of the final operations conducted by the U.S. before the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Written by Bob Shaffer (his second story written especially for the *Sentinel*) this is a look into a then-classified operation conducted by Montagnards in the Central Highlands during the invasion of the NVA to help support the government of then South Viet Nam.

Travis Mills contributes another untold story of the Viet Nam War with "FOB 4 Overrun on August 23, 1968," where he was critically wounded. The NVA/VC sapper's attack on the MACV-SOG base in Na Nang, where seventeen (17) Green Berets were killed, resulted in "the single largest toll of Green Berets killed in Special Forces history."\* This is the first installment in a series especially written for the *Sentinel*.

When Lt. Mills returns from the Naval Hospital ship his assignment, development and operation as commanding officer of the highly classified MACV-SOG One-Zero School begins. The One Zero School trained these secret recon team members to become team leaders for top secret missions into Laos, Cambodia and North Viet Nam. Be sure to follow this compelling story continuing in the April and subsequent editions of the *Sentinel*. ❖

\*Quote from John Stryker Meyer in "Secrets of SOG: An Unheeded Warning," published in SOFREP.

For more information on the August 23, 1968 Assault of FOB 4 please read: [Warnings Ignored Results in Most SF KIA's in SF History, The Sentinel, Volume 6, Number 5, May 2015](#). This issue of the *Sentinel* can be found at [specialforces78.com](http://specialforces78.com).

Lonny Holmes  
Sentinel Editor



*SOG Chronicles Volume 1* is John Stryker Meyer's newest book.

To learn more about this book visit [www.sogchronicles.com](http://www.sogchronicles.com).

The paperback book or e-book version are available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) (type in John Stryker Meyer in the search box).



John Stryker Meyer  
President SFA 78

Gentlemen of Chapter 78,

The March 10 meeting will be a major event for us.

Our primary guest speaker will be Lang Vei SF troop Paul Longgear, who's story of that history battle is one of valor, courage and intestinal fortitude against extreme odds, a story that still rings true today, 50 years after NVA tanks first emerged on the battlefield at that A Camp.

In addition, Steve Thompson from DoD's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency will tell us about government efforts – including working with Paul, to find, identify and return to CONUS SF MIAs from that battle.

### Here's the meeting details:

#### Time:

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

#### Location:

**The Villa Restaurant** [One block east of Marie Callenders.]  
510 E. Katella Ave.  
Orange, CA 92867

#### Speakers:

SF Soldier Col. (ret.) Paul Longgear, Steve Thompson.

Meeting agenda will be short in order to focus on guest speakers.

### CRITICAL REMINDER:

Please contact Chapter Vice President **Brad Welker** or **Don Deatherage** to confirm your attendance. We need an accurate headcount for breakfast.

### CRITICAL REMINDER # 2:

Please feel free to invite other veterans, law enforcement personnel or ROTC candidates.

I've heard portions of Paul Longgear's presentation in the past, it's compelling, it's amazing and merits a good audience to receive him and his wife Patti.

### Regarding meetings after March 10:

Because Marie Callenders was so noisy at our January and February meetings, I shall be announcing a new meeting location beginning with our April 14 meeting.

### Future Guest Speakers:

April meeting – Guest speaker SOG veteran SOA/SFA POW/MIA Committee Chairman Mike Taylor, will give Chap. 78 the first public disclosure about his trip to Vietnam in January on a parallel mission with DPAA in SEA. The most fascinating part of his trip involved Mike meeting personally with NVA soldiers who served in an NVA unit dubbed simply C-75. Don't be fooled by its simple nomenclature: Its soldiers were SOG-killer/hunter teams.

Other tentative speakers we're lining up will be Yvette Benavidez Garcia, the daughter of SF MOH Recipient Roy Benavidez. She has unique stories on her father, including details about a movie that's been in production for nearly three years. At that meeting, we'll hopefully have chapter member **Lee Martin** in attendance as he holds a most unique place in the amazing MOH-mission Benavidez survived — Lee was with the doctor who was pulling up the zipper on the body bag that contained Benavidez. He could not speak, so he spit at the doctor to let him know that he was still alive.

Gordon Denniston – who has written brilliant commentaries for *The Sentinel* will have a presentation on life as a gunship pilot, complete with footage.

**June meeting notice:** There will be a meeting in June, on June 9, which is the weekend before the SFA Reunion. At this time it'll be a meeting or event somewhere. In years past, we've cancelled it.

**SFA Reunion:** Speaking of the reunion, I shall be going. If you plan to attend, let me know please.

**FINAL REMINDER:** Contact Don Deatherage or Brad Welker to make a reservation for our March 10 meeting!!! ❖

John Stryker Meyer  
President, SFA Chapter 78



From left at the Show of Shows in Louisville, KY: Christy Marks, Chapter 78 members Doug "The Frenchman" LeTourneau and John S. Meyer, George "The Troll" Sternberg Jr., and Anna Meyer.

# THE FORGOTTEN WARRIORS



## Updates on the Montagnards



Three Plei Djereng CIDG



Bob Shaffer

### Intelligence Operations in the Viet Nam Central Highlands: 1972 – 1975

By Bob Shaffer

**NOTE:** For ease of recognition, former Special Forces camps in the central highlands are identified by the name and number they had prior to the departure of USSF from the area in late 1970. The names of the camps and

the unit designations were changed when they converted to Border Ranger status in 1970, but those new names will be unfamiliar to most readers.

Also, the current designation of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) has been replaced by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), a term more familiar to most readers of this article.

As a result of the Nguyen Hue (Easter) Offensive from March through October 1972, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) controlled large portions of Kontum and Pleiku provinces in South Viet Nam. At the time of the signing of the Paris Accords in January 1973, however, policymakers in Washington were more interested in the political developments in Viet Nam than they were in military activities. All American military forces had departed Viet Nam and there was little stomach in the U.S. Government for continued engagement. Except for the Department of Defense, there was little formal demand from most U.S. government offices for order of battle information concerning either Vietnamese side. The American Embassy in Saigon monitored military developments throughout the country, but more as they might interfere with the "ceasefire" process than as a threat to the long-term stability of Viet Nam. The Vietnamese on both sides were under no such illusion. The Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) high command in Pleiku expected the NVA to re-assert its efforts to occupy more land in the central highlands once the monsoon season began (April-May 1973), hampering South Vietnamese air operations. For several months, combat between the ARVN and NVA continued at reduced levels following January's ceasefire.

By late spring 1973, however, it became clear to senior U.S. Government officials that the ceasefire offered by the Paris Accords was not unfolding as planned. To obtain a better understanding of NVA objectives, and what the ARVN might do to thwart them, U.S. officials in Viet Nam organized a program to send montagnard civilians behind the NVA lines in Kontum and Pleiku provinces to gather military and political information. The program was to identify civilians who had lived in villages now in NVA-controlled areas who could collect information on communist troop movements and political activities in those areas, and then return to ARVN-controlled areas to report their findings.

The refugee camps around the cities of Pleiku and Kontum provided a large pool of candidates from which to seek recruits. The ideal candidate would be able to read a map, have enough military knowledge to identify what kind of weapon or vehicle he or she saw, and be able to blend in with the local villagers still living in NVA territory. Candidates also had to be willing to face the risk of running afoul of suspicious NVA troops or trigger-happy ARVN outposts. Few candidates satisfied all these conditions.

The main effort in culling through the candidates was accomplished by a Rhade woman who spoke Vietnamese, French, English, and Jarai as well as her native tongue. She had worked during the 1960s with U.S. Special Forces teams in Darlac Province and was involved in the FULRO movement. Once she had identified candidates from the refugee camps who appeared to have the requisite skills and background, she introduced them to U.S. officials in Pleiku, who made the final selection. Chosen candidates were debriefed regarding their village and family contacts within the communist areas, their ability to recall details of what they had heard and seen, and how they could move securely through the communist lines. They were reminded that they were about to enter a dangerous operating environment and if they had second thoughts about this work, they should say so. At this point, several candidates withdrew from the program.

The NVA had launched its countrywide Easter Offensive in March 1972, initially overrunning the northern provinces of South Viet Nam. In the central highlands, the NVA attacked out of Laos and Cambodia to capture Dak To and nearby Tanh Can base in Kontum

Province in April 1972. With that success, the NVA pushed on to the outskirts of Kontum City itself, where the battle raged for almost a month. Ultimately, the ARVN forces, aided by U.S. air power, forced the NVA from the suburbs of the city and back into the hills. In its haste to capture Kontum City, the NVA had bypassed the Border Ranger camps at Ben Het (A244), Dak Seang (A245), Dak Pek (A242), and Mang Buk (A246) in northern Kontum Province. Those camps now were isolated and served only as outposts that flew the South Vietnamese flag while anticipating with some concern when the NVA might take the time and effort to seize them.

Ben Het was the first camp to draw the attention of the NVA 10th Division elements after they had refit and recovered from the heavy fighting around Kontum City. Ben Het was close to the road that connected the NVA supply networks near Attopeu, Laos to its new depots at Dak To, and thus might be positioned to obstruct the smooth resupply of men and materiel from Laos Base Area 609 to NVA units around Kontum. To prevent such a possibility, the NVA attacked Ben Het and captured the camp in mid-October 1972. Two weeks later Dak Seang fell. Most of the troops in Ben Het and, especially, Dak Seang, were montagnards from the Sedang and Bru tribes. Their losses in the two battles are unknown, but few returned to ARVN lines.

At the same time the communist offensive was reshaping Kontum, the NVA 320th Division in November 1972 attacked camp Duc Co (A-253) in western Pleiku Province. Border Ranger troops from nearby camp Plei Djereng (A-251) supported regular ARVN forces in the fighting around Duc Co, suffering many casualties. Camp Duc Co's importance was its position astride National Route (QL)

19, an all-weather road that ran from Stung Treng in Cambodia, east through NVA Base Area 702, and on to Pleiku City, eventually reaching the city of Qui Nhon on the coast. During its time as an USSF camp, Duc Co had a larger portion of ethnic Vietnamese in its CIDG force than the other highland camps, perhaps because of its easy access to Pleiku. It also had a large Jarai community located in nearby resettlement village Plei Ponuk. With the arrival of the NVA, Plei Ponuk was abandoned; its Montagnard residents scattered back to their old villages or moved to the crowded refugee centers closer to Pleiku. After six weeks of combat around the Duc Co area, the NVA captured the camp.

The NVA efforts against Kontum and Pleiku Provinces in late 1972 had a specific goal: Occupy as much land within the border of South Viet Nam as possible. This goal was not created in a vacuum. In Paris, the United States, South Viet Nam, North Viet Nam, and the Viet Cong representatives were trying to reach a political solution to the long running war. The North Vietnamese had every intention of negotiating from a position of strength and for them that meant a strong physical presence within South Viet Nam. They were not wrong. The final Paris Accords for a "ceasefire" were reached on 27 January 1973. This agreement allowed North Viet Nam to retain all southern territory it occupied. As a practical matter, this meant the NVA had access to all Kontum Province except for a less than 10-mile radius around three sides of Kontum City. The Paris Accords also recognized NVA control of most of western Pleiku Province from the Cambodian border eastward to within 20 miles of Pleiku. With these achievements in place, the NVA settled back to refit, resupply, and prepare for what would be the final stage of the war.



Montagnard girls doing a ceremonial dance at Plei Djereng (note rice wine jugs in foreground)



Current Vietnamese victory column set up near former USSF camp Duc Co (A-253)

It was at this time that Montagnard intelligence collectors were infiltrated individually into the NVA areas. All those in this initial insertion had friends or relatives who held some position in the District or Hamlet-level political organizations directed by communist cadre. Like their South Vietnamese cousins, most North Vietnamese considered the local montagnards primitive, illiterate, and generally unreliable. But if a local Montagnard “official” would vouch for a new face in the village, the NVA would accept the newcomer.

Villagers were required to attend indoctrination sessions as well as to assist the NVA troops in carrying military supplies and building fortifications. This gave the intelligence collectors broad access to developments within the communist area but, per NVA policy, fraternization between Vietnamese and local Montagnards was kept to a minimum. Within this relatively porous environment, the intel agents from Pleiku were able to move cautiously but regularly between the NVA positions around Duc Co and the ARVN lines about ten miles away. The large Montagnard refugee camps in and around Pleiku made it easy for the collectors to blend into the confusion of a military town awash with displaced persons.

Once in Pleiku, individual agents would provide their reports and sit for a debriefing with U.S. officials to go over any unclear information. The routes they took and the people they encountered were discussed in detail. Whenever possible, these reports would be compared with reports from other agents who separately had passed through the same area or visited the same villages. On one occasion, an agent reported the capture and execution by the NVA of a reputed “spy” near Duc Co. Unknown to this agent, the executed “spy” was another intel collector launched from Pleiku.



Current view of former USSF camp Plei Me (A-255)

Much of the information collected by these agents was order of battle regarding NVA troops movements and the locations of new NVA fortifications in the occupied areas, including anti-aircraft positions and ammo dumps. These reports were passed to the South Vietnamese air force who, if the reports provided sufficient details, responded by bombing the sites. On several occasions the aircraft reported secondary explosions following the bombing runs, confirming the value of the information. In mid-January 1974 an agent clearly earned his one dollar a day wage. This agent had been assigned by his communist District chief to guide a recently-arrived NVA battalion at Duc Co through the forest toward the ARVN positions at Thanh An District, almost halfway between Duc Co and Pleiku. Upon completion of his role as guide, the agent slipped away and made his way to Pleiku, where he duly reported the NVA location. The information was passed to ARVN commanders at Thanh An, who pressed forward a regimental response and engaged in a major contact with the NVA battalion. After the battle, ARVN claimed to have found 30 NVA KIA, while suffering 8 of their own KIA and 25 WIA.

Conditions around Kontum were not favorable for such collection efforts. The NVA maintained an iron grip that squeezed the city on three sides, and the almost constant fighting around Kontum from May 1972 until March 1975 prevented the regular movement of either strangers or locals between the warring parties. The establishment of intelligence nets requires time and some record of collection before they can be relied upon. The Kontum theater provided neither. Those few outposts that still held out north of Dak To were too far for any reliable communications. Nor, in fact, was there much they might tell of NVA troop locations, most of which now were in the semicircle around Kontum City. Those few agents that did try to infiltrate NVA areas either came back empty-handed or didn't come back at all.

The intelligence collection efforts in western Pleiku Province continued until March 1975, when the South Vietnamese government opted to abandon the central highlands. Those agents still active at that time sought safety in the anonymity of the refugee camps. Their ultimate fate remains unknown. ❖

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Shaffer served as 1st Lt at Plei Djereng A-251 and was subsequently assigned to B Company, 5th SFGA from 1969-1970. Afterwards he was in government service for 28 years. He worked for Northrop Grumman aircraft corporation prior to retirement.

# SOD North Heads East



Mike Keele

By Mike Keele

Chapter 78 had a full meeting's worth of members on hand at The Fiddler's Green banquet facility at the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base on January 27, 2018. The occasion was a send-off bar-b-que for those,er, highly trained, quiet professionals whom nobody seems to know anything about.

Some seventy of their number will apparently be spending some quality time training Afghan soldiers who are several cuts above the basic infantry or cavalryman the Afghan army fields. A strange thing about these SOD North soldiers is that, while they are easy going and friendly, they don't talk a lot about business. Their numbers tend to be a little more mature, age-wise, than your highly trained Green Beret, and their rank structure looks as though E-7's and E-8's will be pulling KP if the catering truck fails to show up over there. The other thing that separates them from the run-of-the-mill highly trained unit at Los AI, is the height of the fence around their compound-and the ribbon wire atop that. Questions about "what's behind the green door" are met with averted eyes and shuffling feet and "Oh look! Is that a deer?"

Putting all that aside, Ch. 78's current and former presidents, John "Tilt" Meyer and Bruce Long, were seen hovering (if I may use that



Kenn Miller, Bruce Long, Jim Duffy, CSM Brian Beetham, John Meyer, Gary Macnamara, Mark Miller, and Dennis De Rosia

term) from group to group, gripin' and grinin' with the best of them. A very short presentation was held near the end of the afternoon, and the quality of any gathering can be gauged by how long it takes to clear the joint out. In this case, nobody seemed to want to leave, and since nobody said "dismissed", some of us would still be there but the cake ran out.

All in all, I would like to thank those who brought their dogs, which provided me with someone to pay attention to, and could whoever brought the cake get ahold of me. ❖

## Chapter 78 Annex: Taking Aim in the Mojave Desert



Left, John Joyce in foreground firing a suppressed fully automatic 9mm Glock 17L. In the background is a fully automatic rifle.

Above, Brad Welker in his best form in the Mojave Desert.

# FOB4 Overrun on August 23, 1968:

## Prelude to Becoming the Commanding Officer of the MACV-SOG One Zero (1-0) School



**Editor's Note: MACV-SOG ONE ZERO SCHOOL**—This is the story of how then 1st Lt Travis Mills who was assigned to the Studies and Observations Group, Vietnam, began the MACV-SOG 1-0 School. In this first part of a series, we begin when FOB 4 was assaulted and overrun on 23 August 1968 by the North Vietnamese Army where Travis sustained multiple AK-47 gunshot wounds defending the FOB. Over the next several months the Sentinel will continue the One Zero School story which has never been published before.



Travis Mills

By Travis Mills

I arrived at FOB 4 in May 1968. I was initially assigned to 2nd Company of the Hatchet Force. Except for me, all the American personnel in 2nd Company were from a TDY team from 1st Group. The TDY team had their own hooch and didn't have any room for me so I was housed in a hooch on the southeast corner of the Recon area with several other LT's from 1st Company. I spent a couple of months with 2nd Compa-

ny. Near the end of June or early July, the TDY team went back to Okinawa, and I was assigned to RT Python as the One-One. I had been on one mission with Python, when CCN restructured Recon Company. Python's One-Zero was only a week or so from rotating, and the FOB 4 Teams were being consolidated, so Python was deactivated, and I was assigned to Team Coral as the One-One. The One-Zero (SSG Hatcher) was scheduled to rotate in about six weeks and I was to be trained and checked out to take over as the One-Zero. The One-Two was a SGT Podlaski. I ran 3 missions with Coral as the One-One, then in mid-August, Hatcher rotated and I was moved up to One-Zero. We were given a week to train then go back on the target list.

The days leading up to the 22nd and the 23rd were rather uneventful. We were doing the typical training routines of IA drills, movement drills, team gear lists, etc, etc. After we finished training on the 22nd, I took a shower and went to the mess hall. Podlaski and I talked about the team members (he had been on the team with Hatcher for about 4 months and was very familiar with the team members), potential upcoming missions, and team strategy. After dinner, he went to find a poker game, and as I was coming out of the mess hall, they were setting up for a movie, so I wandered over to "theater" (benches on the North side of the mess hall) to check out the movie. It was *In Cold Blood*. I had read the book but had not seen the movie, so I decided to stay. The last scene was Perry hanging at the end of the noose and the only sound was the

slowing "thump" of his dying heart – then *silence*. It was a very powerful scene and I had no idea how prophetic it would be in just a few hours.

When I got back to the hooch, Geoff Fullen, Dave Carr, Ron Crabbe, and another person I don't remember (might have been Phil Bauso) had a hot pinochle game going. I went to the other side of the hooch and talked for a little while with Bob Blatherwick. After a little while the pinochle game broke up and everyone was getting ready to hit the bunk. Geoff and I went out to the "piss tube" and as we were standing there we noticed a lot more flares up from the Marines to the South and to the North. We heard some muffled explosions to the North toward MCAS. Geoff commented, "Looks like the marines are catching hell tonight". I agreed and we went back to the hooch to call it a night. My bunk was perpendicular to the center partition in the hooch. I had a couple of nails in the wall just above my bunk where my CAR15 and web harness hung within easy reach. Boots on the left side of the bunk and trousers and shirt on nails just to the left of my weapon and web gear. After a good day of training and feeling very confident about the team and an uneventful evening, I drifted off to sleep thinking all is well and looking forward to receiving our target assignment.

The next thing I remember was a tremendous explosion. Later I would learn it was a satchel charge that had been thrown into the hooch next to ours. That explosion was followed by several more. I had not heard any small arms fire, so I thought we were under a mortar attack. I immediately rolled out of the bunk, grabbed my trousers, shoved my feet into my boots, just did a quick tie, grabbed my web gear, CAR15 and headed for the back door (east) to my (the team) assigned defensive position along the beach. As I went through the partition to the other side of the hooch, Ron Crabbe fell in behind me and as we approached the back door, Geoff fell in behind Crabbe. We were all headed for our defensive positions.

I was first out the door. It was totally dark, but the white sand of the FOB and other objects contrast made visibility and recognition reasonable. Just as I cleared the door, out of the right corner of my vision I saw an indigenous person at the corner of the hooch (about 8 feet). We had 500+ indigenous (nungs & yards), in the camp and my immediate thought was he was heading to his defensive position also. I hesitated for half a second, then I saw the muzzle flash. He fired a blast of full automatic. The first round hit me in the stomach, entering on the right side, exiting on the left. The force of impact spun me around and I fell with my head about a foot from the bottom step of the hooch. As he continued to fire, it moved to



his left and hit Crabbe who was on the top of the steps, knocking him back into the hooch. As Crabbe fell back into the hooch, he knocked Geoff back into the hooch.

My first reaction was I WAS PISSED! My immediate thought was I had been shot by one of our own guys – I WAS PISSED!. My first action was to try to get up and yell at him, “You son-of-a-bitch – I’m an American!” His reaction was he shot me again! This time he hit me in the arm; I went down again. Now I’m REALLY PISSED! I’m going to shoot this bastard, I don’t care if he is a friendly, so I start to get up again, and the same result, he shoots me again! This time he hits me just under the shoulder blade. So I try to get up again, he hits me in the back of the head; down on the sand again. One more time I’m going to get up and shoot this bastard – one more time he fires – this time in the back of the neck. FINALLY – I get the message – he knows who you are and he’s still trying to kill you! So I finally come to the obvious conclusion – if you stop trying to get up maybe he’ll stop shooting you. (Brilliant deduction Dr. Watson). So I layed still with my head facing him. (Although it took me several minutes to write this – it all happened in about 10 to 15 seconds). He walked over, stood over me with one foot on each side of my head. Although I couldn’t see him, I knew he had the muzzle pointed directly at my head for the kill shot.

At that time, I came to one of the most memorable moments in my life. It is so hard to explain and/or understand, but every person who has been there will understand completely. At that moment, looking at his bare foot, I said to myself – “So this is what it’s like to die”. At the same moment I in my mind I saw the final scene of *In Cold Blood* with Perry’s final heartbeat – Thump – Thump – thump – Silence! I had absolutely no pain – I was totally amazed at the calm that settled over me.

At that precise second, a loud commotion occurred in the hooch. The sapper immediately ignored me and spun around, stepped to the door of the hooch and sprayed the hooch on full automatic. I think most everyone was on the floor, except Geoff, who got hit in the hand. After he emptied his magazine, he casually walked to the

south corner of the hooch (putting in a new magazine). I watched as he got to the corner, kneeled down so he could see back around the corner to watch the back door of the hooch.

Inside the hooch, they were trying to attend to Crabbe. His femoral artery had been hit and he was bleeding profusely. After 30 seconds or a minute, Bob Blatherwick came to the door. He was coming to get me. Without moving and trying to use the best “stage whisper” I could, I told him “Bob – don’t come out!” Bob stopped and hunkered down in the door. He said: “What’s up Trav?” I said; “He’s right there on the corner, waiting for you.” Bob leaned out, looked to the South and said: “I don’t see anything.” I said: “Do you see a sandbag about 3 sandbags up that sticking out further than the other sandbags?” Bob leaned out of the door and said “yeah”. I said: “Shoot it!”. Bob said: “You want me to shoot a sand bag?” I replied in a strong stage whisper: “Shoot the f---ing sandbag!” He said: “OK, OK, OK!” So Bob leaned out the door, lined his M16 down the edge of the sandbags and fired a burst. When he fired the burst, I got up, grabbed my CAR15 and got back in the hooch. (Later on, when I got back from the hospital – I was told he (the sapper) was found with a bullet through his forehead – apparently he was looking right down the barrel when Bob squeezed the trigger.)

Once back in the hooch, Geoff kept reassuring me I was going to be OK. Once he finally convinced me I was going to live, the pain kicked in big time. I remember asking Geoff, “Have you ever eaten a bunch of green apples?” “Damn, it hurts!”

All of a sudden, we heard “Don’t shoot, We’re comin’ in” It was Charlie Pheifer (CPT) coming through the front (west door). He said: “The little bastards are everywhere” I need a gun, mine is jammed – I gave him my CAR15 and he gave me his Browning 9MM. With that he went out the front door.

Somebody said, “We gotta get out of this hooch”. There was a mortar pit just a few meters from the back (east) door of our hooch. We got out to the mortar pit. There were a couple of NCO’s in the pit putting up illumination. We got in the pit, Geoff started pulling charges, handing them to me, and I passed them on to the



Camp Long Thanh



FOB 4 Hatchet Force — Travis Mills 2nd from the left on the front row

gunners. One of the NCO's (I don't remember his name) found a compression bandage and put it on my stomach wound to help control the bleeding and relieve the pressure. Also I discover I had no feeling and limited use of my right hand. The shot through the arm had severed some of the nerves. I could use the forefinger and thumb, but the rest of the fingers were unresponsive, but the left arm and hand were OK, so I passed the rounds with my left hand. After a little while, who knows the actual time frame, Bob Blatherwick showed up in a jeep, he picked up Crabbe and took him to the dispensary. When he left, he said, "Trav, I'll be back."

We continued to put up illum rounds, at some time later, Bob came back – I got in the jeep and just as we left Bob told the guys in the pit, "Keep the flares going, they shot the lights out on the jeep and I need the flares to find my way around." It was surreal ride through the camp. The old TOC was a crumpled, blazing pile of rubble. There were sporadic gunfights around various buildings, buildings on fire, and the weird dancing shadows from the flares swinging under their parachutes. A couple of times we heard the crack of a round passing close by, but we made it to the dispensary OK. Bob slid to a stop, as I was getting out he said, "Take care Trav, see you later". With that he raced off into the dark looking for more wounded.

When I entered the dispensary, it was organized chaos. One of the medics checked me out, put a large, ace bandage type of wrap around me. The pressure really slowed the bleeding and the support eased the pain somewhat. He put me in the "waiting room", told me to watch the back door, and they would get to me as soon as they could. They had some guys in really bad shape that needed their attention. So I pushed a couple of chairs together, laid down across them so I could see the back door, and as long as I

didn't make any quick movements, I was reasonably comfortable.

In the meantime, one of the really critical guys was Scully. He was one of the senior medics. He had been hit at the base of his skull. The medics were working frantically over him. I heard one of them say, "If we don't get him to a hospital soon, he's not going to make it." Another said, "It's too hot to get a medivac in. What other options do we have?" Someone said, "We've got the old cracker box ambulance – we could try to get him into the Naval Hospital down the road. How's the road to MCAS?" Someone said, "Totally unsecure, but it's our only option." One of the medics volunteered to drive the ambulance. One of the medics came to me and asked if I would ride "shotgun" to try to get Scully to the hospital. I said, "Sure, let's go." So they loaded Scully and a couple more of the critical wounded in the back, the medic drove, I was in the right seat. I gave the driver my 9mm, I took his M16. Just as we were going out the gate he looked at me and said, "I sure hope they don't want to waste a good ambush on one raggedy old cracker box ambulance". With that, we made the right turn out of gate for the 3 mile trip to the hospital. I don't remember his name or what his background was before the military, but he would have done any NASCAR driver proud. I never thought that old cracker box could go that fast.

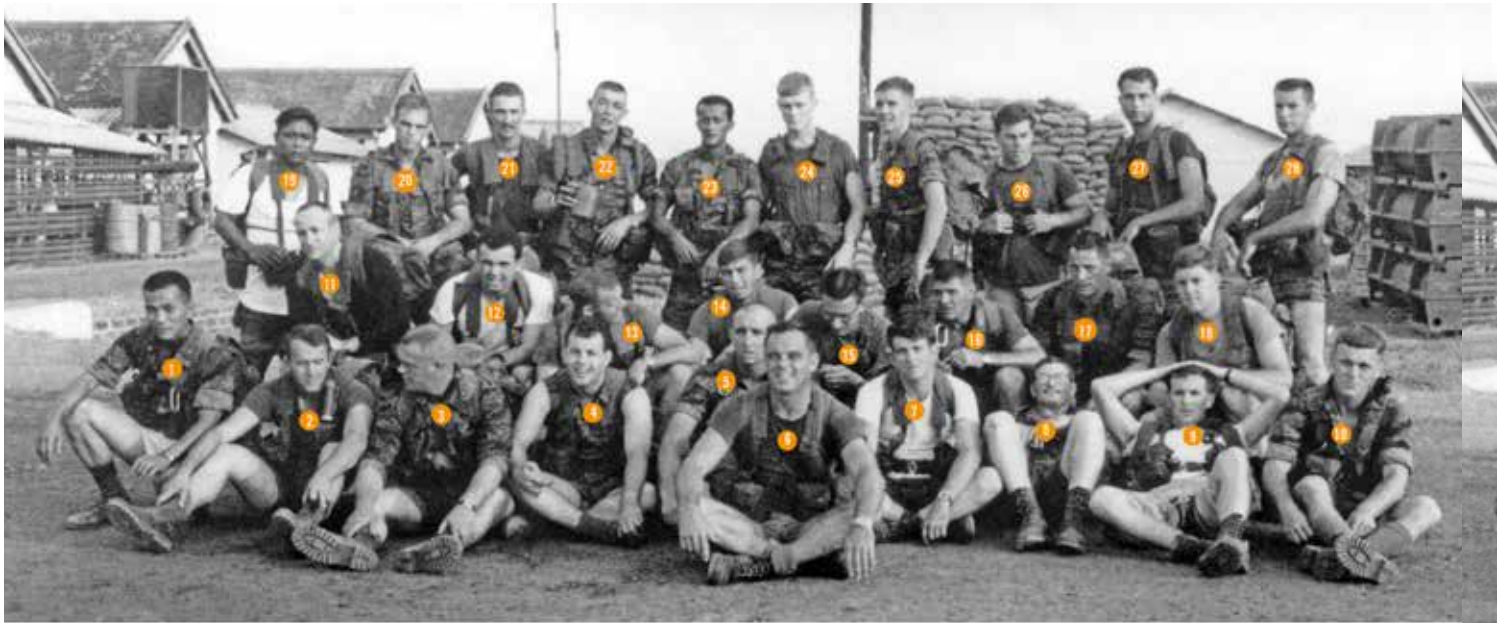
As we barreled down the road the ambulance took a few rounds but no one was hit. Our next biggest concern was the Marine check point/roadblock at MCAS. We didn't know how they would react to a vehicle racing down the road toward them in the dark. Normally, once the roadblock was set up every night, the road was closed – so any traffic was considered unfriendly. When we thought we were getting close, the driver started flashing the lights; I hung

out the window yelling as loud as I could, "Americans! Americans!" I guess the strategy worked – they didn't shoot. After a brief stop, they let us through and the rest of the trip was uneventful.

They immediately took Scully and the other guys into the emergency area. (I learned later that Scully and the others all survived) They checked me over and said the bleeding was pretty much under control and I would have to wait to get into the OR. I was put on a stretcher on some sawhorses to wait my turn. As long as I stayed still it didn't hurt too bad. I spent a few hours there, and as daylight came, more and more wounded arrived. Pretty soon, one of the nurses told me there were too many casualties coming in and they were going to move me to Monkey Mountain Hospital. Shortly, me and 5 others were loaded on a marine helicopter and taken to Monkey Mountain Hospital. Upon arrival I went through the triage again and was put in the queue. Again a long wait, but finally my turn for the OR came.



Taken during the training of the Hatchet Force Company. Left – Charley Miller, Middle – Jim Hectrick, Right – Travis Mills, Center Front– Tahan the interpreter. Please notice that Tahan has sweated through his shirt — when the "Yards" sweat IT IS HOT !!!



Snakebite Team One — Identified members in the above photo are: 2 Bill Werther, 3 Eulis Presley, 5 Alton “Moose” Monroe, 6 Gerald Wareing, 12 Angel Stabolito, 15 Richard Lavoie, 16 Asa Ballard, 17 Henry Jennings, 18 John Cummings, 21 Larry White, 22 Artenis “Bill” Arbogast

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the recovery ward. I had a big bandage that covered most of my stomach, my right arm tied down to my chest, and bandages on my back and neck. As I continued to become more awake I began thinking of the events of the previous hours and started to get into a depressive mood. Again, looking at all the bandages, having only the use of my left hand, I started sinking into the “Why me?” and “What did I do to deserve this?” mode of self pity. About the time I was really starting to feel sorry for myself, I had one of the most profound experiences of my life. They wheeled a young Marine out of the OR and put him next to me in the recovery area. When you are coming out from under the anesthesia, you go through all kinds of wild talking, yelling, and sometimes fighting. This young Marine was going through all types of gyrations and shouting “They’re in the wire! – They’re coming over the wall!”. During his gyrations he kicked off the sheet. When I looked at him he had his right arm gone just above the elbow, and both legs gone, one below the knee and the other above the knee. At moment I heard my grandmother’s voice a clear as a bell – “I used to complain that I had no shoes until I met a man that had no feet”. At that instant my depression vanished and I realized how fortunate I was. I resolved to get healed up, get back to camp and back in the fight. I don’t know that young Marine’s name, or anything about him, but hardly a day goes by that I don’t think of him and the challenges he faced. I will never forget him and I wish him well.

Shortly after that incident some staff member checked my alertness and said they were still getting more wounded and they didn’t have anywhere to put me, so I would be going to the hospital ship. Me and several others were strapped on stretchers and loaded into a marine helicopter and after a short flight, landed on the helipad of the USS Sanctuary, It would be my residence for the next 31 days.

After I had been there a few days I found out just how fortunate I was. The doctor explained my wounds and treatment plan. The stomach wound was the major one. Because I had been coming

out the door and was sideways to the sapper, the round hit me the right side, penetrated under the skin, went across my stomach and exited out the left side. It totally ripped all the stomach muscle away, but because he was so close and the bullet was still quite stable, the stomach wall had a “burn” mark all the way across. It didn’t penetrate the stomach and therefore none of the bacteria, acids, etc., spilled out. Had that happened, he said I would never have survived the infection. The arm wound was a clean, through and through wound. It did destroy most of the nerve tissue and I would most likely have limited use of my right hand. The bullet had missed the bone by 2mm. Had it hit the bone, it would have most likely severed the arm and I probably would have had a low chance to survive the shock and loss of blood. The shoulder blade wound didn’t penetrate very deep, again because I was sideways to him when he shot and it was mainly just muscle and tissue damage. The neck wound missed my spinal cord by just a few mm’s. Obviously if it had hit the spinal cord it would have been a devastating injury, but as it was, it was just severe tissue damage. The doctor surmised that I was one of the luckiest people on this planet.

On the ship, there isn’t much to do, so I had a lot of time to think. As I analyzed his almost missing me with most of his shots I came to the conclusion two factors weighed heavily on that outcome. First, he was quite close, less than 10 feet and second, he was firing on auto. We all know that with a high velocity rifle, the round comes out high (remember the zero range). I think when he aimed and fired, the first round came out high and just barely hit me. He was firing on auto, so the AK climbs, and the other rounds of the burst went over me.

The regulations limit the stay on a hospital ship to 31 days. After that there are two options: return to duty or further evacuation. All my wounds were healing well, and I was aggressively pursuing the rehab. The biggest issue was the nerve damage in my right arm and limited use of my right hand. I was determined to return to

NAKEBIT

William Weather  
Eulis Presley  
Alton “Moose” M  
Gerald Wareing

camp. As the 31st day neared, I continued to lobby the doctor to sign off on my return to duty, but he was steadfast in sending me to Japan for further rehab. After squeezing a tennis ball for weeks and in total desperation on the day of decision, I played my best card. I demonstrated to him I had almost full use of my forefinger and thumb and that's all I needed to pull the trigger, therefore I should be declared eligible for return to duty. He said, "I have never seen anyone as stubborn as you. If that's what you really want to do, then it's OK with me."

The next day the USS Sanctuary pulled into Da Nang harbor, loaded a bunch of us in a launch and ferried us to the dock. I found a marine truck headed for MCAS and hitched a ride. Once at MCAS, FOB 4 was just a few miles down the road so I started walking south and soon got a ride with a truck going that way. They let me off at the front gate.

When I arrived on the Sanctuary my only clothing was a bloody surgical sheet. The Navy issued me a set of "dungarees" when I was discharged. The guards at the gate were not really sure about this strange sailor showing up at the front gate. I finally convinced them to call the TOC. When someone answered the phone, I said in my best command voice, "1LT Travis Mills, reporting for duty!"

In a few minutes a LT arrived at the gate, signed me in and took me to the mess hall. It was noon meal time. It was a bittersweet reception. Seeing old friends and learning of the ones that were gone. My old hooch was now occupied by new guys and all my stuff was in a foot locker in supply waiting to be shipped back to the states. I was assigned a room in the transient quarters. The next day I went to the S-1 and S-3 to see about getting back on the team and getting back in the game, but life had other plans.

But, that's a whole 'nother story... ❖

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Travis Mills enlisted in the U.S. Army, June 1966 — Basic and Infantry AIT. Following AIT Pvt. Travis was assigned as cadre in a basic training unit where he was promoted to Corporal. He then attended OCS at Fort Benning, GA, graduating as the Honor and Distinguished Graduate. 2nd Lt Mills next attended Jump School and was then assigned to the 7th SFGA at Fort Bragg, NC, where he completed the Special Forces Officers Course and then served as XO on an A-Team.

Receiving orders transferring him to Vietnam where he arrived in May 1968 and was assigned to 5th SFGA. Then 1st Lt Mills was assigned to MACV-SOG Command and Control in Da Nang, then to FOB 4 at Marble Mountain. Initially assigned as a platoon leader of the Hatchet Force, he was later transferred to the Recon Company and served as 1-1, 1-0 on RT Python and RT Coral.

Following discharge from the hospital for his serious wounds on August 23, 1st LT Mills was assigned TDY to B-53 in Long Thand to start the MACV-SOG One Zero (1-0) School. In June 1969 LT Mills was promoted to Captain. In December 1969 he was reassigned to 1st SFGA in Okinawa where he spent thirty months as an A-Team Commander on various missions to Korea, Taiwan, the Philippine Islands and Japan. While stationed in Okinawa he graduated from Jump Master School.

In July 1972 Captain Mills was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas. With the down sizing of the Army after the withdrawal from Vietnam Captain Mills was released from active duty and honorably discharged on November 1973.

### Awards and Decorations

Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, CIB, Presidential Unit Citation (MACV-SOG), Vietnam, Chinese and Korean Jump Wings and the "usual" decorations and badges.

## Book Review

### TANKS IN THE WIRE: The First Use of Enemy Armor in Vietnam by David B. Stockwell



Kenn Miller

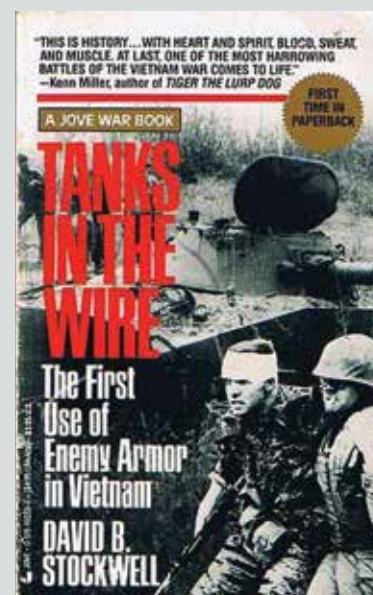
By Kenn Miller

With the fiftieth anniversary of the Tet Offensive and the associated fighting there is renewed interest in the first use of enemy armor in the Vietnam War, and the desperately courageous defense of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp. Over the years, the Battle of Lang Vei has taken on a certain legendary status to students of the Vietnam War — and perhaps especially to past and present day Special Forces soldiers. There have been some excellent books about the battle, but the first of them — and certainly the most descriptively titled — was David B. Stockwell's *Tanks In The Wire*, published in 1989.

When Sentinel editor Lonny Holmes suggested that I write a review of *Tanks In The Wire*, he reminded me that when the book first came out, I'd written one of the blurbs on the book's back cover. While I had forgotten writing the blurb, I sure hadn't forgotten the book. Here's what I wrote way back then:

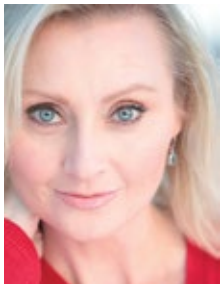
"Once I started reading *Tanks In The War*, I couldn't stop. It is not just a fine piece of historical writing, it was also an exciting and inspiring book. This is history, but it is history with heart and spirit, blood,

Continued on page 17



# SPECIAL FORCES COMBAT OUTPOST PIRELLI

*(Editor's Note: Hollywood recently released a movie about Alex Quade's embedded coverage of Special Forces, called "Danger Close". It briefly touched on the story of 10SFG SSgt. Rob Pirelli. Here's the rest of his, and his ODA-072's story, along with a link to a short tribute film Ms. Quade produced.)*



Alex Quade  
War Correspondent

By Alex Quade - Combat Correspondent

(Diyala Province, Iraq) – Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 072 rolled into the village. It was dead quiet. Nothing moved. Suddenly, “squirters”: people running away from the village; cars leaving at a high rate of speed. Clearly, something of interest was in that village.

A-Team Captain Jason instructed his Team Sergeant Don in one truck, and his

Chief Warrant Officer Jim in the other truck, to stop those squirters and combat-advise the Iraqis to establish a cordon around the village. They did, while he maintained a battlefield over-watch position with his Iraqi Commander counterpart.

Gunfire erupted from within the buildings.

“When we heard it,” said Captain Jason, “The first thing everybody was thinking was, ‘All right, you know, this is it! We get to get into a little fight here. Hell yeah, you know, this is exciting.’ This is what we train for. We’ve been in firefights before and we’ve always done well,” he added.

But the local Iraqi Security Forces with the A-team immediately started taking casualties.

“Guys were going down,” Chief Jim said.

Engineer Rob Pirelli, driving Team Sergeant Don's truck, went in. He attempted to move his Iraqi soldiers into the area to relieve pressure off the first Iraqi trucks that were in the firefight.

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## DIYALA THEN: “INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS”

“It’s the worst danger I’ve seen in three tours in Iraq,” Army Major Derek Jones warned this reporter before heading out to embed with each of his Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha, or “A-teams,” spread across Diyala Province in June 2007. Jones was the Commander of a 10th Special Forces Group Company.

“We refer to the area as ‘the heart of darkness’. It’s truly the heart of al-Qaeda controlled territory right now,” Jones stated. “There’s heavily mined roads, large amounts of al-Qaeda reinforcements within kilometers of each other.”

When his Green Berets of 10th Special Forces Group arrived in Diyala in March, it was an al-Qaeda safe haven and the most vio-

lent province in Iraq. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was fighting to maintain control of its sanctuary and headquarter areas, while Iraqi Sunnis began to turn against them.

“The surge was on in Baghdad, pushing a lot of al-Qaeda up into Diyala. Zarqawi (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq) was killed in Diyala (in a targeted American F-16 bombing in 2006), so it’s always been important to al-Qaeda. That’s the situation we walked into. Inside of Baqubah was nearly a free-fire zone when you drove through there,” Major Jones briefed.

The Iranians were there, too.

“They’re doing my job but on the other side, as the Iranian Special Forces, really the IRGC-Quds force. They are here as advisors, providing arms training, and facilitation to these different Shi’a elements and al-Qaeda. We know they’ve armed both. So they are really playing both sides of this fence to make sure that they maintain some chaos here, so that we can’t be successful. That’s the ultimate goal is that we’re not successful, that we politically lose,” Major Jones added.

One of his “A-team’s”, Operational Detachment Alpha-072, of twelve Special Forces soldiers would be responsible for a huge area where no American troops had been since around the start of the war. They’d just built a Combat Outpost.

“They started out with six Iraqi Security Force elements. It wasn’t looking real good. And they own an area that is probably a quarter of all Diyala (the province has been compared to about the size of New Jersey). And they were going to secure it with 12-guys and these six Iraqi Security Force guys,” Major Jones said.

“Because of the tenacity of that Team, they (took their original six ‘Iraqi guys’) and built it to the largest FID (Foreign Internal Defense) force run by a single team anywhere in Iraq,” Major Jones said. Foreign Internal Defense is one of the Green Berets’ core missions: providing support to a host nation government to help it fight insurgency.

“With that FID force, they have gone in and secured an area that used to be considered by al-Qaeda as a sanctuary, untouchable by conventional forces. And they’ve been able to do that in four months,” Jones assessed.

“We get targeted by name by the enemy, because we’re that effective. So, staying out of the limelight keeps us and, you know, our families safe,” Major Jones began. “But, I think the capability and



Rob Pirelli of 10th Special Forces Group



10th Special Forces Group, ODA, pre-deployment to Iraq

the effect that a small group of soldiers are capable of doing on the battlefield needs to get out. Here we are, small elements, like the battle you saw the other day where, it was less than 30 Special Forces soldiers and 1,400 indigenous soldiers, fighting it out with al-Qaeda to secure an area where there's no other conventional forces. The American public's not seeing that — other than you nobody else has been out there to see that," he stated.

I asked to witness what this A-Team was doing. The Commander consented.

### **THIS IS SPARTA**

"This is Sparta!" The crude, hand-painted sign on the freshly-built wall said it all. The new Special Forces Combat Outpost was alone in cowboy country, Iraq.

It was the proverbial "tip-of-the-spear"; a hackneyed phrase, which for this 12-man A-Team, held true. Perched on the farthest edge of the Coalition's realm at that time, ODA-072 was responsible for the outlaw area stretching east along the Iranian border and north to Kurdistan. The team was alone: no Americans, no Coalition forces, no "Friendlies" had marked that territory since the initial invasion.

"It's a real dangerous area," Captain Jason told me upon arrival there. "Four guys on my team have Purple Hearts already. We've encountered more than a few IEDs, snipers on the rooftops, and there's still the threat of al-Qaeda. There's also Ansar Al Sunna, Islamic Army, different factions working in the area. All of them are pretty strong and they got a lot of support, financially and number-wise," he added.

Spartan it was. One "safe house" surrounded by sandbags, bunkers, T-walls (cement "Texas" protective barriers), outdoor "piss-tubes," and laundry hanging. Wood pallets of supplies -- plastic water bottles and MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) had just been air-dropped in. Another spray-painted sign on a freshly-built shade

area read: "Salchica Fiesta" (if my bad Spanish translation served me correct: did these guys mean, "Sausage Festival?" If so, than at least they hadn't lost their sense of humor way out here, I thought.)

"It's in the middle of nowhere. We moved into a house in the desert surrounded by a barbed wire fence. The Iraqi security posture is not as stringent as ours," Chief Warrant Officer Jim said. "Within a month Rob (Staff Sergeant Robert R. Pirelli) gathered up enough materials through the locals to build a strong defensive position for us," he added.

As the Team's "18-Charlie," or Special Forces Engineer, it fell on Pirelli to build up this compound between their secret missions going after high value targets in Diyala Province during the surge. Each member of an A-team is a gunner first, and then, a highly trained expert in a specific field. As the team's Engineer, Pirelli was not only their demolitions expert, but their construction expert, too.

"Rob basically built the entire camp," Chief Jim said.

For Rob, it was a huge responsibility on his first deployment — with life and death repercussions should his Combat Outpost prove breach-able by the enemy.

"Rob went to sleep in his ACUs (fatigues) because he was literally working until he went to bed," the A-Team's Medic Tim said. "He'd wake up, still in his ACUs, boots on, ready to work in the morning, with a smile on his face. Actually, he'd wake up in the middle of the night to play some online poker, go back to sleep and wake up," Medic Tim laughed

I'd met Engineer Rob briefly on an earlier operation, a company-sized air assault at another location in Diyala, a Forward Operating Base called "Normandy". The 29-year-old with the wide grin had been a Panthers hockey goalie back home in Franklin, Massachusetts. He'd studied criminal justice at Northeastern University and wanted to become a Presidential Secret Service Agent after the Green Berets.

Engineer Rob was known for his thick Boston accent, pranks, and fear of heights. So his Green Beret brothers teased him about joining an Airborne unit, and made sure to let this reporter know: he'd vomited during every parachute jump.

"One time, Rob heaved in his helmet on the plane. Then it occurred to him that he's got to put his helmet on, and jump. Sure as hell, he begrudgingly put the helmet on and vomit was running down his face," laughed Dan, a Green Beret from another team who went through the Special Forces Qualifications Course with Rob and Medic Tim. "I waited a few moments before jumping out, because I didn't want to eat his puke," Dan chuckled.

Pirelli's notoriety cemented when his teammates couldn't understand what he was saying on another operation.

“They’re shoot’n houses at us!” Rob said in his Boston brogue over the radio. In the middle of the mission, every team brother did a double-take.

“I think he’s saying ‘Howitzers,’” one of them translated over the radio.

“When we first established our team house, this whole area was controlled by al-Qaeda,” Captain Jason briefed me inside their new compound. “All the Iraqi security forces were scared to go into the area because they knew they would be killed, executed, or run into an IED,” he stated.

We walked around the team house. There was a weapons room with a crude map of Diyala Province painted on one wall. There was a maintenance area out back with a sign saying “The Swamp”. And, their prized possession: they now had a freezer to keep their water bottles cool before heading out on scorching missions.

“We had to start from scratch; there wasn’t much intel (intelligence information),” Captain Jason continued, “We moved into Tibij village and established this permanent outpost here. It’s pissing all of al-Qaeda off; they’re having to find somewhere else to go. It’s been neutralizing their offensive operations from that time we got here,” Captain Jason said.

“They’re a very ‘austere’ team,” Major Jones warned me before I headed out to this team. “They’re out there at the fringe of the empire. And every single day, as you’ll see there, is truly a fight for survival. Being out in that location, that team is a ‘rough team’: hard-charging. They’re living the Special Forces dream,” Major Jones stated.

“The team is so remote that it took a long time for things to get uncaveman-ish,” Weapons Sergeant Scott said.

Rob never said anything about going on missions between building the Combat Outpost to his family; he took what he did very seriously and didn’t want them to worry.

## MISSION CHANGE

On the morning of August 15th — an intelligence break the A-Team had been waiting for: information of “bad guys in the area” from a source it considered somewhat reliable.

But locals in the area told them, nobody was there. The team decided to do a long-range patrol and bring 200 of their new Iraqi FID force with them as a kind of rolling, quick reactionary force, just in case.

Engineer Rob was not particularly excited about the mission change that day.

“Rob was always eager to go on missions, but he was in the middle of a lot of work at the compound and was in a hurry to get back and get it done,” Chief Jim said.

The team members divided up into their three up-armored Humvees. Each truck had its own contingent: a convoy of Iraqi Security Forces they were advising; a hodge-podge parade of Toyota pickups, taxis and bright jingle trucks souped-up with weapons, like “technical vehicles” in Somalia’s Battle of Mogadishu.

“Rob was tired, thirsty, and in a frustrated mood. The FID force he was advising was getting on his nerves,” Captain Jason said.

The terrain was mountainous, a rough environment of mud huts in



ODA 072 in Iraq, pre-mission.

very small villages. The team suspected it to be where the enemy would bed-down or store logistics. What they didn’t know at the time: it was home to a hardened al-Qaeda cell.

## EAGLE DOWN

Squinters. Gunfire. The A-Team’s Iraqi FID force was going down.

Engineer Rob Pirelli, driving Team Sergeant Don’s truck, went in. He attempted to move his Iraqi soldiers into the area to relieve pressure off the first Iraqi trucks that were in the firefight.

“Eagles down! Eagles down!”

The cry: desperate across the radio from Weapons Sergeant Chris.

And again: “Two Eagles down!”

“It was crazy. Nobody can really get the feeling of having somebody come on the radio and say ‘Two Eagles down,’ which for us, stands for, ‘two of our... our guys are down,’” Medic Tim explained in anguish. “At that second, because I wasn’t next to them, it was a hopeless feeling; a helpless feeling.”

Weapons Sergeant Chris was now the only American Green Beret standing at that location amongst two of his gunned down teammates lying shot on the ground. They were taking fire.

Medic Tim, driving Captain Jason’s truck, headed into the fight.

“There’s someone wearing all black, running on the rooftop with an AK-47!” Their truck’s gunner, Junior Communications Sergeant Eric, shouted.

Ting-ting-ting! Bullets hit their truck.

But Medic Tim focused on reaching his downed teammates. He saw one of them, shot, leaning against the building. Tim rushed to him on foot. The armed insurgent, dressed in black, was on the rooftop above them.

“It was weird. There was definitely ‘fires’ going on. But it didn’t really ‘click’ to me. I was aware that there were bullets going both ways at the time,” Medic Tim said. “It was hectic.”

It “clicked” for the Medic when two grenades came over the wall where his wounded Team Sergeant Don was leaning against.



“There were no ‘bad guys’ directing fire at me. I could see my other team members around the corner returning fire. So I sensed they were pulling cover fire for me and the Captain and the Bravo (Weapons Sergeant Chris) so we could help Rob,” Tim said.

Captain Jason watched as his Medic took off his Engineer’s helmet. There was a lot of blood. He helped his Medic apply gauze to the back of Rob’s head. “How’s Don? How’s my Team Sergeant?”

“He’s bad. We need to get these guys out of here,” Medic Tim replied. He lifted Team Sergeant Don up, and moved him to the back seat of their truck. Don was still coherent. He was speaking; but in a bad state.

“They went off like, right there. OK, this is definitely going down,” Medic Tim said.

Captain Jason watched Tim run to his wounded Team Sergeant Don.

“It was obvious that he was in pain. The look on his face – he was in shock and was hurting,” Captain Jason said. He turned to see Weapons Sergeant Chris crawling on all fours, on the other side of the wall, towards another teammate lying on his back. It was Staff Sergeant Rob Pirelli, their Engineer.

“Rob’s been hit,” Weapons Sergeant Chris yelled as he crawled towards him, and shouted about a sniper on the roof. Captain Jason followed Chris.

“Rob, you are... you are gonna be all right, man (sic). Where were you hit? Where were you hit?” Captain Jason shouted.

Rob didn’t respond.

“Chris, where was Rob hit?” Captain Jason asked his Weapons Sergeant. Rob was lying on his back; no blood anywhere.

“Man, he was hit in the head,” Weapons Sergeant Chris answered. Captain Jason looked at Rob’s helmet. There was an entry mark.

A 7.62mm round from the insurgent’s AK-47 on the rooftop, pierced 19-layers of anti-ballistic Kevlar fabric of Pirelli’s helmet. It happened as he and his teammates rushed the building to “stack”: take down the insurgents inside. The enemy fighter on the rooftop put his gun over the wall, blindly spraying the stack of Green Berets below. One shot hit Rob in the head. Another hit Team Sergeant Don in the pelvic area.

Medic Tim ran from the downed Team Sergeant to assess Engineer Rob. He reached around the corner, grabbed the strap on Rob’s kit, pulled him around the corner of the building, and immediately started treatment.

“The Medic was within the area where they got shot,” Chief Jim said. “My truck was on the other side of the wall trying to cover fire.”

“It was crazy, ‘cause other than the fact that Rob was unconscious, he looked like nothing was wrong with him,” Medic Tim said as he assessed the hostile situation.

Weapons Sergeant Chris grabbed Rob Pirelli’s legs, while Captain Jason grabbed his head, and they put him on their Humvee hood.

“Everything’s going to be all right, Rob,” Captain Jason told the motionless Pirelli.

Medic Tim jumped in the driver’s seat, put the truck in reverse and floored it, all the way back to a location where he thought it was “safe,” behind a small sand berm, while the other trucks provided cover fire.

They lifted Engineer Rob and Team Sergeant Don to the ground so Tim could work.

“Tim! Rob’s convulsing and struggling to breathe,” Captain Jason yelled.

“I was working on Rob,” Medic Tim said, “And dealing with Team Sergeant Don who was bad. I didn’t realize it myself, or wouldn’t realize it, but Rob, he... you know, it was pretty obvious that he was... he was not going to make it from just seeing his... seeing the wounds he had,” Tim said.

“I needed to be on the radio directing troops and calling in the med-evac bird,” Captain Jason said. “So I got some of my other guys to come down to our location to help out with the cas-evac (casualty evacuation) and medical treatment,” he added.

Chief Warrant Officer Jim, previously a medic, came over to help Tim.

“Hey, look at him, he is... he is probably done,” Chief Jim said to Medic Tim. “Don is bleeding now. Let’s save Don because he... Don is gonna (sic) make it, and we know we gotta (sic) stop his bleeds,” he added.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Tim conceded. He’d already stopped the bleed on Rob’s head and had an intravenous drip in his arm. “He’s as stable as I can get him, due to the wounds he has,” Tim added, and turned his attention to his Team Sergeant, who was bleeding significantly.

“He had a gunshot wound entrance in the upper right thigh. It ran through his body and came out the upper left back thigh,” Tim assessed. There was a lot of blood. The Medic and the Warrant packed that bleed. With the hemorrhage controlled, Tim turned back to Engineer Rob Pirelli to see if he could do anything else.



“I re-assessed his wounds; tried to help him with his breathing a little bit. You know, like you see on TV, on ‘ER’, that bag. And ‘bagging him’, trying to get those deep breaths in,” Tim said.

But he was having issues with the bag.

“It wasn’t working too well. I finally got it working all right. And about that time the bird started coming in for exfil (medical evacuation)... and the dust and the noise,” the Medic said.

Tim told himself: “Ok, well, I have done what I could for Rob. And we stabilized the Team Sergeant. Now let’s get these guys on the bird, get them out of here, and finish the fight that’s still actively going on.”

## CONTINUE THE MISSION

The helicopter landed. Medic Tim and Chief Jim loaded their Teammates, their wounded Iraqi Security Forces on the bird.

“The helicopter crew was nervous because we were receiving fire at the time. They lifted off quickly,” Captain Jason said.

“We pushed the bird out and went back towards the building, returning fire the entire time,” Medic Tim said.

The fighting never ceased around them: even while Medic Tim had been tending their wounded, the rest of his Special Forces A-team had continued battling fiercely.

When their Team Sergeant Don was shot, Communications Sergeant Kevin, their senior enlisted member at the time, immediately took charge as Team Sergeant.

“That’s not the exact way I wanted to become a Team Sergeant, you know, under fire like that,” Kevin said.

At that moment Kevin said to himself: “Just get us through this point, get us through this situation.”

The Team still had a mission to complete.

The assault was intense. Weapons Sergeant Chris shot six rounds off their Carl Gustav 84 mm recoilless rifle at the building they’d taken fire from.

“As soon as fire started happening, our entire FID force kind of disappeared on us,” one team member said later. “It’s a good example of: ‘We can train them all we want,’ but when it really goes down, are they going to be there for us? Maybe, maybe not.”

(When I asked Major Jones about this later, he explained: “For the indigenous forces, the idea that they got SF — Special Forces — guys standing behind them, or pulling them from the front, by far keeps them from running in most cases, and keeps them in the battle. And once they’ve done it once, they realize that, ‘Hey, it’s not really the Americans, it’s really us.’ For a sheik or a tribal leader, the idea that they’re working with a Special Forces team is something important. It gives them more legitimacy, more power.”)

“I consolidated our Iraqis and told their commander to direct them to maneuver towards that building,” Captain Jason said. “They needed to start clearing that objective.”

“There are still people returning fire over the hill back towards the house,” Medic Tim alerted.

Captain Jason pulled back their Iraqi Security Forces and called in the 9-Line med-evac request to their Advanced Operations Base back in Baqubah.

Inside the Tactical Operations Center, an expert in Close Air Support called in fast-movers. Air Force Joint Terminal Attack Controller Mike was trained to the unforgiving Special Operations standard. He’d been personally selected by Special Operations Command to align with the A-Teams of 10th Special Forces Group in Diyala. As their CAS enabler, JTAC Mike, call sign “Vampire,” called in an Air Force F-16 to do bomb runs on the building they were taking fire from.

It partially collapsed.

But the team was still receiving enemy gunfire from within the half-collapsed building, despite the bomb drop. So the Green Berets “mowed it down the rest of the way” with their 50-cal.

When the gunfire stopped, the team sent their Iraqi Security Force to search the rubble for anyone still alive.

There was.

“One enemy wounded in action,” Medic Tim said. “He had a pretty severe gunshot wound entrance from the right chest, exiting on the left. He was pretty bad off. We drug him out of the building and provided treatment, then called in another med-evac bird to get him out of there,” Tim added.

A number of insurgents had been killed in action. Among them, the enemy fighter dressed in black on the rooftop, who’d shot Engineer Rob Pirelli and Team Sergeant Don.

“He had a gunshot wound to the head,” Captain Jason stated.

16 insurgents gave up. They were put down and zip-tied. The team gathered evidence and intelligence information, and brought the detainees to a collection point.

“We did some tactical questioning to see if there is any sort of follow-on operation to find out what exactly we basically stumbled upon,” Captain Jason said.

What they’d stumbled upon was a hardened al-Qaeda cell. The fighter dressed in black who’d shot Engineer Rob Pirelli and Team Sergeant Don was the battalion commander for all of al-Qaeda in that area.

## MURPHY’S LAW

Battle weary, the team faced another ordeal getting back to their safe house.

“Hey man, how’s Rob? How is he?” Medic Tim’s teammates asked him on the long drive back.

Tim knew even before they arrived back that Engineer Rob Pirelli wasn’t going to make it. He knew it from his two years of intensive Green Beret Medic training, even if he didn’t want it to sink in. But as his A-team’s “18-Delta”, he needed to prepare his brothers.

“It doesn’t look good for Rob,” Tim said as he drove their Hum-vee back through the dry, mountainous terrain. Their Iraqi Security Force’s dilapidated convoy sped ahead of them, kicking up dust.

“Look, I’m gonna (sic) be completely honest with you,” Tim stated. “He is not gonna (sic) make it.”

“No man, no way,” a couple of the guys on the team wouldn’t believe it. “No man, you know? This happens. He’s gonna be all right, he’s gonna be all right (sic),” they refuted.

Even Captain Jason, sitting next to him in their Humvee, refused to believe his Medic.

“Don was talking when they got on the bird. They’re gonna (sic) be fine. Rob’s going to be OK; they got on the bird. We got them on that bird,” he insisted.

(Medic Tim later explained Rob’s physical reactions to the gunshot wound — his “convulsing” — to me, as an indicator of a brain stem injury, and high up on the “he’s not going to make it scale”).

It was a long ride back, and about to get longer.

In the middle of a mountain pass, the Iraqis with the team, ran out of gas. The team was forced to stop in a spot which looked like a perfect enemy ambush point.

“The Iraqis weren’t prepared for the operation as far as having enough fuel or enough water,” Captain Jason lamented.

They called another A-Team to drive up from the nearest forward operating base a couple hours south of their position, to deliver gas cans for their Iraqis. Once tanked up, the team continued slog-ging through the hills to get their Iraqis back to their base.

Then, the Humvee Medic Tim was driving, quit.

“Without noticing, when we were driving up from when we heard the call (on the radio) that our guys were down, driving up to that building, the vehicle got shot... shot to shit,” Medic Tim said. “You hear bullets coming, you know, ting-ting-ting, off of everything. But didn’t notice anything was wrong.”

The truck’s lights shut off. Electric shut off. All of the Humvee’s systems were shutting down.

“Up ‘til that point the only thing that worked was the throttle and the brake,” Medic Tim stated.

And it was about to get worse.

“My FBCB2 (a communications system for commanders to track friendly and hostile forces on the battlefield) and my SATCOM (satellite communications system) and all my radios are down,” Captain Jason alerted. “I have no communication.”

“This was the Captain’s vehicle: so he’s trying to maintain control of the Detachment while he has no comms in his vehicle,” Tim said. This is what’s known as a break in contact. Their Iraqi Security Force’s vehicle, driving in front of them, didn’t notice and didn’t stop.

“They don’t do very well looking in the rear view mirror,” smirked Medic Tim. “It was a long, long trip back to the base through the hills.”

Captain Jason told himself: “During the operation, you just have to finish the job you started, and hope that everything will work out.”

## COMBAT OUTPOST PIRELLI

When ODA-072 finally arrived back at their spartan combat outpost — they learned that their “18-Charlie”, Staff Sgt. Robert R. Pirelli did not survive the med-evac flight to the CSH (Combat Support Hospital).



ODA 072 in front of COP Pirelli tribute wall, they painted & renamed in Rob’s honor.

Word of Rob Pirelli’s death spread quickly throughout the Special Operations community in Iraq. Dan, a Green Beret from another Operational Detachment who’d been through the Special Forces Qualifications Course with Rob and Medic Tim (and who’d shared stories of Rob vomiting before every parachute jump), was deployed to a different combat zone in country.

“A guy came into our area and said, ‘A guy from 10th Special Forces Group was killed.’ My first thought was, ‘Rob.’ Sure as shit, it was,” Dan said in disbelief. “All I kept thinking about was: Rob always had this really wide, shit-eating grin, ear-to-ear,” he added.

“Everybody handles grief and an experience like that differently. Some of the guys on the Team were deeply affected by it, but they didn’t let it show,” Captain Jason said.

“The guys were sad and pissed off. The Team is like, WTF (‘What the f\*\*’) at that point,” Weapons Sergeant Scott said.

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An official memorial service was held at the 10th Special Forces Group’s Battalion Command Headquarters, tucked away inside Forward Operating Base Taji

Special Forces soldiers not on missions, officers and staffers, gathered. Bagpipe music from the movie “Band of Brothers” played over a loudspeaker. A flag flew at half-staff.

There was a “Fallen Soldier Battlefield Cross” consisting of: Rob Pirelli’s inverted M4 assault rifle with his dog tags hanging off it, Rob’s combat boots, and his Green Beret with 10th Special Forces Group insignia patch.

Battalion commander Lt. Col. Dan Stolz spoke at a microphone.

“Without regard for his safety, Staff Sgt. Pirelli, through his heroic actions, allowed his Iraqi element to move back. His actions resulted in six al-Qaeda killed. Staff Sgt. Pirelli was the consummate quiet professional and Green Beret,” Stolz stated.

Chaplain Black reminded everyone about Rob’s team, ODA-072.

“Seven-Two was sent to the most remote area of our operations. Hear me now brothers: he faced his fears,” Black stated, and quoted

Gen. George S. Patton: "Patton said we should not mourn soldiers who died, rather thank God such soldiers lived."

But Rob's team and company were not there. They were not invited since they had combat missions to continue. The Public Affairs Officer sent them a video DVD of his service, instead.

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Since the brothers of ODA-072 were not allowed to come in from the frontlines for their fallen teammate's ceremony, they made their own tribute instead. They did it in stone; they did it with words.

The Team developed a symbol: a sword, lightning bolts and fire. Junior Engineer Sergeant Kole, who Rob had mentored, painted the symbol on a cement protective T-Wall at their safe house.

"We decided on a color scheme. The green by his name represents our Group (10th Special Forces). It turned out real nice," Medic Tim said.

The Team boldly painted "Combat Outpost Pirelli" on the T-Wall as part of the symbol — renaming their location after their Engineer: the first Green Beret killed in action there. Captain Jason sent the official paperwork to rename the outpost up the Army chain of command.

"When the Chaplain came out after everything happened, the words, 'The house that Rob built' came out. Which is a pretty good description because Rob was the guy behind the scenes of making the place what it was," Medic Tim said.

Tim, the Medic who'd done everything he could for his friend Rob, later tattooed that Combat Outpost Pirelli symbol on his arm from shoulder to elbow.

"My tattoo is my way of remembering and having part of it with me," Medic Tim said quietly.

The rest of his teammates had black bracelets in honor of Staff Sergeant Robert R. Pirelli. Inscribed with the date: August 15th 2007; the place: Diyala Province; and the phrase: "They're shoot'n houses at us," to remind themselves of Rob's thick Boston accent and how much he always made them laugh.

Rob's roommate at the Team house, Intelligence Sergeant Brady quietly pulled me aside before another operation.

"There's lots of times where I remember what I'm doing, and why I'm doing it, so Rob's death wasn't in vain," Intelligence Sergeant Brady said stoically.... ❖



**SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR ALEX QUADE** is a war reporter and documentary filmmaker, who covers U.S. Special Operations Forces on combat missions.

Hollywood released a film about Quade's Special Forces reportage, called "Danger Close"; Hachette Books will publish her first book on Special Forces in 2019.

For more info: [www.alexquade.com](http://www.alexquade.com)

Watch tribute video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB8JHvbhQu0>

## Book Review: Tanks in the Wire continued

sweat, and muscle. At last, one of the most harrowing battles of the Vietnam War comes to life in *Tanks In The Wire*. This is a book that every student of the Vietnam War, every admirer of battlefield courage must read. The gallant defenders of Lang Vei now have a book worthy of their courage and sacrifice."

That's how I felt about *Tanks In The Wire* after first reading it, way back in the previous century. When Lonny suggested I review it, I read *Tanks In The Wire* again, and on second reading, I liked it so much I felt like the praise in my long ago blurb had been inadequate. But what could I do that wouldn't look like hyperbole and exaggeration? The book is that good, and all I can say is, "Read it, and if you have already read it, read it again!"

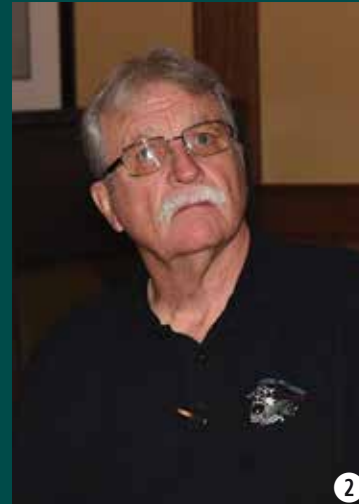
PS: Word is that SFA Chapter 78 will soon (perhaps at different times) be hosting David B. Stockwell, the author of *Tanks In The Wire*, and Colonel (then Lieutenant) Paul Longgear, one of the

outstanding heroes in an extremely heroic battle. Before he passed away, the former Team Sergeant of A-101, Lang Vei, Command Sergeant Major (then SFC) William T. ("Pappy") Craig—a man not shy about his disdain for most officers (especially the Marine officers at Khe Sanh who wouldn't support Lang Vei)—told me that he thought that Lieutenant Paul Longgear should have been awarded the Medal Of Honor for—among other actions—leading the breakout from the Lang Vei command bunker with a PT-76 tank sitting atop it. That's high praise coming from a man like CSM Bill Craig.

PPS: A very good and moving movie about Paul Longgear and his return to Vietnam and Lang Vei many years later is available on Amazon and on YouTube. The title is *The Man Left Behind*. ❖

*TANKS IN THE WIRE: The First Use of Enemy Armor in Vietnam* by David B. Stockwell, Daring Books, 1989, 202 pages

# SFA Chapter 78 February 2018 Meeting



- ❶ Chapter 78 President John Stryker Meyer presenting service plaque to out going chapter president Bruce Long
- ❷ Chapter 78 Vice President Don Deathridge
- ❸ Chapter 78 President John Stryker Meyer preaching to the choir
- ❹ John Stryker Meyer presenting a chapter coin to guest speaker Scott Williams, president of the Freedom Committee of Orange County.
- ❺ James Light and Hamm Sally
- ❻ LTC (R) Dave Thomas and Lenn Fine
- ❼ Mark Miller's new RR M2A1 all-city tactical vehicle with Kenn Miller on left. John Stryker Meyer observing.

