



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 6 • JUNE 2024

The Lair of Raven

Book Review and Excerpt Inside!

**Special Forces
Association
Chapter 78
MOH Luncheon**

*Saluting Their Courage...
Honoring Their Memory.*

We are proud to participate in the
Lao Hmong-American War Memorial



Dedicated to the Lao and Hmong soldiers who fought courageously
alongside American soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War.
Their demonstration of profound bravery, loyalty, and commitment
to the United States during the Vietnam conflict is an inspiration
to people of both countries.

This Memorial reminds future generations of our enduring appreciation
of a people, a time, and a sacrifice that must never be forgotten.

This Memorial was made possible through the efforts of the City of
Fresno, County of Fresno, and the Lao Hmong-American War Memorial
Committee and through the generous contributions of members
of the Fresno community.

Dedicated December 21, 2005
Mayor Alan Autry
Fresno, California

**Air America Was
Not Alone:
There was CASI**

**The DASL's
(Rhymes with "hassles")**



SENTINEL

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 6 • JUNE 2024

From the Editor



How Miller
Sentinel Editor

The Medal of Honor Luncheon was held by Special Forces Association Chapter 78 at the end of April. The event, orchestrated by VP James McLanahan, was a resounding success. Notably, we extend a special “tip of the beret” to Melanie McLanahan for her exceptional efforts as well. Debra Holm describes the event and the sponsors.

“The DASLs,” written by Fred Rice, describes how seemingly useless second lieutenants became a group of exceptional Green Berets.

This issue’s next section focuses on Laos and is largely inspired by Marc Yablonka, our regular contributor, whose most recent book is *Hot Mics and TV Lights*.

Marc shares one of his articles previously published in the Hmong Daily News, “Air America Was Not Alone: There Was CASI.” About a lesser-known group of people who flew in Laos and elsewhere in secret for the CIA and others, these folks also provided integral support for Vung Pao and his Hmong troops.

Next, Marc reviews *The War Machine* by Barry Levy. Marc reviewed the book, which is a work of fiction, due to how it highlights the contribution of 30 to 50,000 Canadians who joined the American war effort in Vietnam. It turns out he also found it to be a good read.

Marc also sent me something that mentioned the Ravens, FACs in the Secret War in parts of Laos not covered by SOG. They directed the actions of our jets and other aircraft in support of Hmong General Vang Pao and the CIA. I had to find out about those brave men whose counterparts in Vietnam were a lifeline for those of us on the ground.

In *The Lair of Raven*, Craig Duehring reprises what he and the other Ravens did there. Many of them flew FAC missions in Vietnam before volunteering for some unknown, but guaranteed frequent excitement. My review of the book is followed by a selection from the book.

Next month’s *Sentinel* will include a review and excerpt from Marc Yablonka’s *Tears Across the Mekong*, which shifts from activities over Laos to the experiences of the Hmong and others on the ground.

At the back of the issue, we showcase two interesting additions to our YouTube channel (@sfachapter78), about the history of challenge coins, including references to the 10th SFG (A) in Germany, and another incredible tale about a remarkable Green Beret, Nick Lavery.

There is also a reminder to register for SFACON 2024. An “All-Green Beret” Caribbean cruise—it’s heavily booked, but there is still room.

Please also enjoy our April chapter 78 meeting photos. The meeting featured a presentation by Eric Brun, author of the “Viking Battalion,” featured in our April Sentinel. (<https://www.specialforces78.com/book-review-the-viking-battalion/>)

Enjoy. ❖

How Miller, *Sentinel* Editor

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FRONT COVER: The Lao Hmong American War Memorial located in Fresno, CA. Dedicated in 2005, it honors the Lao and Hmong soldiers who fought courageously alongside American soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War. Their demonstration of profound bravery, loyalty, and commitment to the United States during the Vietnam conflict is an inspiration to people of both countries.

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From the President | June 2024



Aaron Brandenburg
President SFA Ch. 78

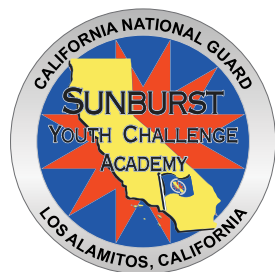
Medal of Honor Luncheon

In a stirring demonstration of honor and appreciation, SFA Chapter 78 organized a fundraiser event featuring the esteemed keynote speaker, [MSG \(R\) Earl Plumlee](#), a genuine American hero and the recipient of the prestigious Medal of Honor. This event not only pledged but also delivered an inspiring and impactful gathering, where participants convened to honor MSG (R) Plumlee's exceptional valor and selfless dedication to his country while raising funds for various groups in need.

MSG (R) Plumlee's exceptional courage and unwavering commitment to duty epitomize the highest standards of bravery and sacrifice of the United States Army Special Forces. As a Medal of Honor awardee, his actions on the battlefield have left an enduring impression on all who have heard his tale. His leadership in the face of adversity, his devotion to his comrades, and his readiness to place himself in harm's way for the greater good stand as a shining model of heroism for us all.

The fundraising event offered a distinctive opportunity for attendees to listen to firsthand narratives of his experiences, gain insights into his values and principles, and learn from the lessons he has accumulated throughout his extraordinary journey. Alongside hearing MSG Plumlee's account directly, Chapter 78's MOH luncheon raised funds for Afghan refugees and the [Sunburst Youth Academy](#) as well.

The support for Afghan refugees is a vital endeavor to provide essential aid and assistance to those grappling with displacement and uncertainty. This fundraiser sought to foster compassion and solidarity within the community, extending a helping hand to individuals and families compelled to flee their residences due to conflicts and instability. By joining forces to raise funds and awareness for Afghan refugees, we were able to generate resources for educational supplies, aiding them in securing a brighter future. This noble cause embodies the virtues of empathy, generosity, and humanity, demonstrating the potency of collective action in effecting a meaningful change in the lives of those in need.



Furthermore, we successfully raised funds for the Sunburst Youth Academy. Serving as a beacon of hope and opportunity for youths in search of a transformative path towards personal development and success, the Sunburst Youth Academy is renowned for its commitment to empowering at-risk youths through education, mentorship, and

life skills training. Providing a supportive and structured environment where students can unlock their full potential and map out a positive trajectory for their future, the academy focuses on academic excellence, leadership cultivation, and character enhancement. By



SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

June 15, 2024

Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830

Courtyard by Marriott

5865 Katella Ave, Room A, Cypress, CA 90630

2024 Meeting Schedule

July 20 | August 17

September 21 | October 19 | November 16

December (to be announced)

impacting students with the tools and resources necessary to surmount challenges, set objectives, and strive for excellence in all facets of their lives, the Sunburst Youth Academy nurtures and guides participants towards becoming responsible, resilient, and self-assured individuals prepared to make a positive impact in their communities. The academy stands as a testament to the transformative influence of education and mentorship in shaping young lives and fostering a brighter tomorrow for all.

In summary, the SFA Chapter 78 fundraising event was a testament to the power of honoring heroism, commending selflessness, and supporting worthy causes. It is essential to acknowledge that our luncheon would not have been possible without the leadership, guidance, and unwavering determination of Chapter 78 Vice President James McLanahan and his wife Melanie. Together, they have established a benchmark for future events. It was truly a momentous occasion that inspired us to strive for excellence, unified our participants for the greater good, and left a positive imprint on the community.

Warm regards,

Aaron Brandenburg

President

Special Forces Association Chapter 78



SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION MEDAL OF HONOR LUNCHEON

SUNDAY, APRIL 28, 2024

ON THE GREENS CONFERENCE CENTER, CYPRESS, CA

By Debra Holm

Special Forces Association Chapter 78 hosted its first fundraiser on April 28th at the On The Greens Center in Cypress, CA. Our honored guest and speaker was retired Medal of Honor recipient [U.S. Army Master Sergeant Earl Plumlee](#).

The venue, beautifully decorated by volunteers from [Tennis Serves Others](#) (TSO) and the [Sunburst Academy](#), bustled with guests browsing raffle items and auction displays. The event opened with remarks from Master of Ceremonies LTC Johann Hindert and SFA Chapter 78 President Aaron Brandenburg, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and an invocation by American Veterans Assistance Group Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto.

A delicious lunch preceded a captivating talk by Master Sergeant Plumlee. He shared his journey, from Marine to Green Beret, culminating in the story behind his Medal of Honor.

Raffle winners were drawn, followed by a Live Auction featuring unique experiences and items, like a private jet ride to meet the [Affordable Community Living \(ACL\) Afghan refugee community in located in Mojave, California](#).

The Live Auction included a presentation by Masood Farzan, Community Manager for the ACL Afghan refugee community. Masood holds English classes for 50+ children in the community. The auction included a "Fund A Need" segment to provide an opportunity for donations to purchase supplies for the Masood's summer sessions.

SSG Sydney Stevens of the [Sunburst Youth Academy](#) also spoke to share about the program, and two cadets were recognized by SFA Chapter 78 for exemplary performance. A Tootsie Roll knife, rack and training were auctioned, with the proceeds to go directly to the Starburst Academy.

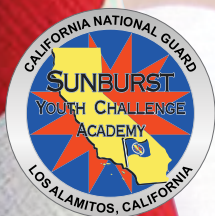
Reza Honarvar of [The Heavy Machine](#), located in Lake Forest, CA, was on hand to speak about the customized Glock 19 SFA 78 Pistol and Live Fire Training at Academi SW. This auction was won by a member of Chapter 78!



U.S. Army Master Sergeant Earl Plumlee, MOH



Master of Ceremonies LTC Johann Hindert, Melanie McLanahan, MSG (ret.) Earl Plumlee



A heartfelt thanks to Melanie McLanahan, [Tennis Serves Others](#) and the Starburst Academy, who provided essential assistance for this event.

NOTE: A video of MSG Plumlee's presentation will be available on the [Chapter 78 YouTube channel](#). Subscribe to our channel and select notifications to get the word when it is posted.



Special Forces Association Chapter 78 members gathered for a photo with LTC Hindert and MSG Plumlee.



Don Deatherage, Tom Turney, and Len Fein



Bob Crebbs and Ramon Rodriguez



LTC Johann Hindert, Richard Simonian, and MSG (ret.) Earl Plumlee



Erik Berg and his wife, Gloria Jean



SGM (ret.) Tony Bell, Rick Carter, Earl Plumlee, Tom Turney



Richard Simonian, Ramon Rodriguez, Art Dolick



April McClure, Jim Duffy, Sharon Hancock



Mike and Christine Jameson



Robert and Jaclyn Casillas and LTC Johann Hindert



Geri Long and Donna Miller



Aaron and Kathleen Brandenburg



Lani Dolick and Debra Holm



LTC Hindert and Chapter 78's Richard Simonian with the ACL Afghan Community members



LTC Johann Hindert



Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto



Aaron Brandenburg



Melanie McLanahan



Laura Anderson, and Jenny Thurrel of TSO



Sunburst Academy cadets with advisors



Kelley McBride and Jenny Thurrel of TSO



Chapter 78 member Don Gonneville



Raffle baskets



AVAG's sponsored banquet table ready for guests



Jenny Thurrel, Melanie McLanahan, Lisa and Tom Rutherford



LTC Hindert and Melanie McLanahan



Earl Plumlee shows the SFA 78 Glock to Len Fein



SSG Sydney Stevens of the Sunburst Academy



Masood Farzan, ACL Community Manager



LTC Hindert and Reza Honarvar of The Heavy Machine

AUCTION / RAFFLE ITEMS DONATED BY

The Heavy Machine
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Afghan Community
Any Given Day
California Pizza Kitchen, Mission Viejo
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Debra Holm
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Laura Anderson
Leah and John Dietz
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Reza Honarvar
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THANK YOU TO YOU ALL FOR YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS!

THANK YOU TO OUR EVENT SPONSORS



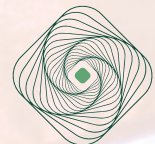
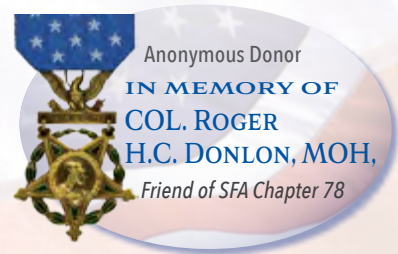
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The DASL's

(Rhymes with “hassles”)

By Fred Rice

Special Forces is now well into its eighth decade. Here is a look back at some of the events that shaped its early years.

In early 1961, before Vietnam and even before the return of the Green Beret, a unique group of officers who became known as “DASL's” made an impact on the early growth of Special Forces and the Special Warfare Center.

Special Warfare was still in its first decade and still in its initial growth phase. Trial and error was a common practice during this time as Special Forces continued to develop its own unique operational doctrine. One trial under consideration was the evaluation of light-weight “Pack 75” howitzers as possible indirect support weapons for unconventional warfare.

Experienced Artillery officers would be needed to study and develop unique methods of employing howitzers, and to train SF personnel in their use, so the Special Warfare Center, as it was then known, requested that 25 Artillery Captains be assigned to Special Forces as Infantry under the “branch immaterial” category.

Apparently, Artillery branch was not too keen about the prospect of losing that many experienced Captains to what was then still considered by many as an experimental and undesirable assignment, so they decided to send more “expendable” officers instead.

At about the same time, members of the West Point Class of 1960 who had branched Artillery and had graduated from both Ranger and Airborne Schools at Ft. Benning, GA were nearing completion of the Artillery Officers Basic Course at Ft. Sill, OK. The class was called together and notified that anyone who wished to volunteer for assignment to Special Forces would be excused from their original initial duty assignment.

The response was quick. The first hand to go up was that of 2LT Fred Rice, followed quickly by 2LT Nick Rowe, who was seated beside him. They were followed by more Second Lieutenant classmates, all Ranger, Airborne and Artillery qualified, until there were seventeen hands in the air. Added to the group later was 2LT Gary Stiles, who had graduated from Artillery OCS at the same time, bringing the total to eighteen.

This may not have been exactly what Special Forces had in mind, but it was apparently all that the Artillery was willing to provide. Although the young officers did not know it at the time, this would make them the first Second Lieutenants ever assigned to Special Forces without having served there previously and earning their commission through OCS.

The group's new orders were to report to HQ, 7th Special Forces Group, at Ft. Bragg on 5 May, 1961, which happened to be the same day that Alan Shepard became the first American to travel into space.



1LT Fred Rice and 1LT Nick Rowe @ Tan Son Nhut Airport, Saigon, RVN, 18 July 1963. Rowe had just arrived from the US on the same plane that would take Rice home. Rowe is wearing the Vietnamese 1LT insignia just given to him by Rice “for good luck.” They were West Point classmates and close friends who went through Ranger, Airborne, Artillery and Language schools together. They were “buddies” through their Special Forces training and took up sports car racing and skydiving together. Rowe was also an usher at Rice's wedding. Less than three months after this picture was taken, Rowe was captured by the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta and was held prisoner for more than five years before escaping in December 1968. Rowe established the US Army's SERE school at Camp Mackall, NC. Rowe was assassinated by Communist guerrillas in the Philippines in April 1989. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

One by one, all eighteen found their way to the Group Headquarters on Gruber Road and reported to the Adjutant for duty. Astonished at first, the Adjutant became accustomed to the gold bars as the day went on and instructed them to report back for a briefing at 1700 hours.

The young officers sat quietly in the second floor briefing room, not knowing what to expect, when the sound of heavy boots came up the stairs, accompanied by a string of expletives that continued until LTC “Rusty” Riggs, the 7th Group Executive Officer, stood in front of them and began a profanity-laced tirade, which went something like, “I don't know who the f*** sent you here, but we sure as s*** don't need you, and we're going to do every f***ing thing we can to get rid of you as soon as possible! You have no experience, and you don't know s***! You're nothing but a bunch of G**D*** Dumb Ass Second Lieutenants, and we sure as hell don't want you!” The group started to wonder whether volunteering for Special Forces was the right choice after all.

A few minutes later, the Group Commander, COL Clyde Russell, entered the room. He suggested that LTC Riggs may have been a bit overzealous and hasty in his desire to get rid of the young officers. He explained that since he was stuck with 2LTs instead of CPTs, he would try to make the best of the situation. It was clear, however, that the original idea of evaluating “Pack 75's” was now dead.

Since the Lieutenants had no previous Special Forces experience, or experience of any kind for that matter, it was decided that they would learn their trade from the ground up by attending the same MOS training given to enlisted Special Forces soldiers. For the

[Continued on page 20](#)

AIR AMERICA WAS NOT ALONE: There was CASI



C-130 taking off from Lima Site 20 Alternate, Long Tieng, Laos (Photo courtesy Lee Gossett)

By Marc Yablonka

This article first appeared in the Hmong Daily News on December 21, 2023 (<https://hmongdailynews.com/air-america-was-not-alone-there-was-casi-p626-154.htm>)

In book after book on the secret war in Laos, Air America gets the very honorable mentions it definitely deserves for the flights it flew with personnel and materiel aboard in support of the Hmong and Lao fight against the Pathet Lao communists. And yet, Air America was not alone in that endeavor. Another airline in Laos at that time was Continental Air Services, Inc., or CASI as it was better known.

CASI was a subsidiary of Continental Airlines established after the latter purchased BirdAir, the aviation wing of Laos-based Bird & Sons Construction Co. from its owner, William H. Bird, in 1965. CASI maintained 22 mainly STOL (Short Take-Off and Landing) aircraft and employed 350 pilots and ground crew, according to www.wikipedia.com,

“CASI's original purpose was to operate aircraft and ground facilities to support projects involving construction, oil exploration and engineering companies as well as contracts with [USAID](http://www.usaid.gov) and other government agencies. Since CASI was operating under US government contracts, CASI had a liaison with the US government, Pierre Salinger [former journalist and press secretary to President John F. Kennedy], who was designated as Vice-President of the operation,” www.wikipedia.com states.

CASI's missions in Laos were a combination of flying for USAID [the US Agency for International Development], and the CIA.

CASI also operated out of Vietnam, and Thailand between 1965 and 1975, when Laos fell to the Pathet Lao, approximately one month after Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces and Viet Cong.



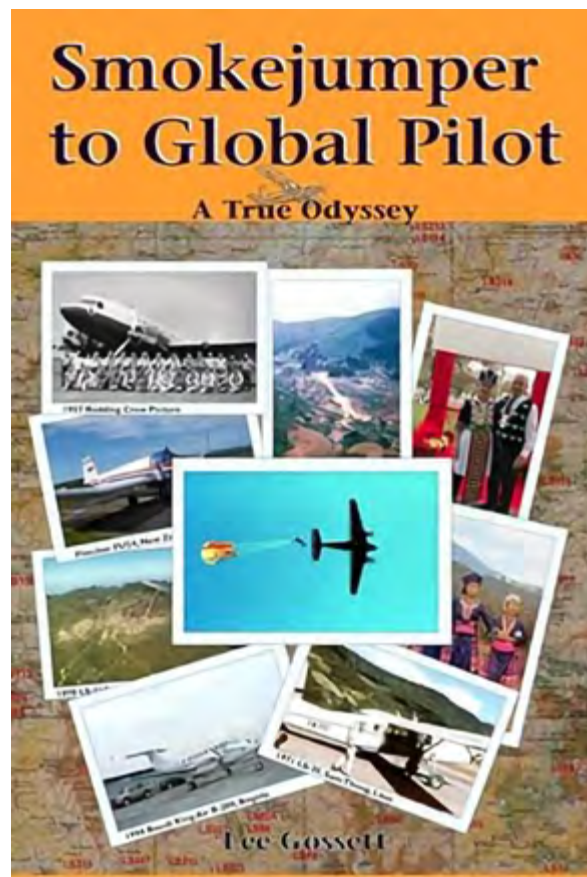
Lee Gossett with Hmong tribespeople beside a Pilatus Porter airplane on the Plain of Jars. (Photo courtesy Lee Gossett)

One retired aviator who flew for the airline is Lee Gossett of Central Point, Ore. He flew for the airline between 1968 and '72, after multiple careers as a Smoke Jumper for the US Forest Service, and as an Air America “Kicker” [one who literally kicked supplies out of airplanes to the Hmong hill tribes and SGU fighters waiting below].

Gossett had first come to Laos in 1964 to kick for Air America, but then left after a year, first to work as a US Forest Service smokejumper, parachuting down to fight fires, then after flight training, to fly as a crop duster in New Zealand and a bush pilot in Alaska.



Lee Gossett 'kicking' cargo in a C-123, 1964: "You name it, we hauled it, and rigged it."



Lee Gossett's book *Smokejumper to Global Pilot: A True Odyssey*.

"In 1966, Air America contacted me and offered me a pilot position in Saigon on the Caribou program. I later transferred to Vientiane and flew for Air America for 18 months, then crossed over to work for CASI, where I remained until 1972," Gossett told the Hmong Daily News.

Even though he left Air America, Gossett has nothing but the highest praise for its pilots, especially those who flew helicopters.

"In my estimation, they were the best of the best. Many US military pilots who were shot down over Laos owe their lives to the gutsy Air America helicopter pilots. I have seen firsthand when the Mayday call came in from a downed pilot, the Air America pilots dropped what they were doing and immediately flew to the aid of downed pilots," he wrote in his book about his life as an aviator, *Smokejumper to Global Pilot: A True Odyssey*.

He also estimated that Air America had 60 percent of the fixed-wing business and CASI, which did not utilize helicopters, had 40 percent.

Gossett, a veteran of the US Army Reserves during the Cuban Missile Crises era, flew the Beechcraft Baron and Pilatus Porter [STOL] aircraft from CASI's bases in Long Tieng, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Pakse.

"I flew [USAID] for public health, which included American doctors and medics and Hmong medics to remote Hmong villages. Most of my flying was in support of the CIA doing aerial drops, air ground communication and point to point missions hauling Hmong troops and doing ammo and food drops," he said.



Gene Rainville in Vietnam, 1963 (Courtesy Gene Rainville)

Gossett recounts one very harrowing mission in his book. It consisted of two Hobo Skyraiders, two Pony Express helicopters, and Gossett, who was flying a Beechcraft Baron with a CIA Case Officer known only as Chuck. They attended a briefing to infiltrate a Lao team and exfiltrate another Lao team at a specific location.

"Just as we reached our cruising altitude, and right over Route 7, one of the Hobos called out, 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday.' The Hobo had a broken oil line, and oil was pouring out of the large radial engine by the bucket loads, streaming over its wind shield and fuselage. The pilot announced he was going to eject," Gossett wrote.

"The Hobo pilot again announced he was going to 'punch out.' Chuck told him to hang in there for a few more seconds and he would be in a 'better area.' I was beginning to wonder if there was a better area, as we were losing altitude at the same time. Chuck keyed the mike and said, 'Now.' You didn't have to tell the Hobo pilot a second time. He ejected in a heartbeat, and his ejection seat thrust him upwards. His chute opened immediately and he floated down under a good canopy."

After leaving Laos in 1972, Gossett continued flying in New Zealand and in Central America during the conflict there for the US Military's Special Operations Group.

Lee Gossett hung up what he calls his "fly-for-hire wings" in 2003, but, says he, "I continue to fly my beloved Piper Super Cub to the remote Idaho backcountry each summer with my wife, Mary. It's been a great journey."

Another pilot with both CASI and Air America on his résumé is Gene Rainville of Hilton Head, So. Carolina. Like Lee Gossett, Gene Rainville came to CASI after serving in the military. In Gene's case as a Marine aviator from 1961-'66, during which he flew the H-34 helicopter. Also, like Gossett, he flew for Air America between 1966 - '68, also piloting the H-34 out of Udorn, Thailand, and then CASI, for which he flew the C-46 Curtiss Commando, C-47 Skytrain, Beechcraft Baron, and Dornier fixed wing aircraft from 1968 to 1975.

Among the "Customers" Rainville flew for CASI were Edgar "Pop" Buell, noted volunteer with the International Voluntary Services agency, and the also noted CIA operative "Tony Poe" (née Anthony Poshepny).

Most of his flying amounted to logistic work, dropping rice bags down to the Hmong who were strategically camped out in the Laotian hills awaiting battle with Pathet Lao and their fellow communist North Vietnamese Army troops, according to Rainville.

1975 was a sad year for him, for he was in all three Indochinese countries when they fell to those communists that year.

"I was in Saigon when it fell in April, Phnom Penh also in April, and Long Tieng [Lima Site 20 Alternate] in May. I witnessed a history that I will never forget. I was left with a creeping depression," he remembered.

Rainville's flying in Vietnam prior to that is particularly indelible in his mind so many decades later.

"This week we move soldiers forward to this hill. Next week they're abandoning it. We were flying young kids in and flying them out wrapped in burlap bags. When we came into an LZ [Landing Zone], we had to be careful not to land on bodies. That was no fun," he stressed.

Rainville said he enjoyed working with the Hmong in Laos but laments the fact that the US left thousands surrounded by a North Vietnamese Army division to fend for themselves.

One Hmong whom Rainville was able to save, however, was Royal Lao Army General Vang Pao.

"My job that day was to take Vang Pao, his wives and children, out of Long Tieng to a nondescript landing strip 'somewhere' in Thailand," Rainville recalled. Whereupon they were met by several US government representatives.

"We flew illegally. No flight plan," Rainville added.

He had flown the General on other occasions while working for Air America and remembers well how they spoke in their shared second language, French.

When he reflects on his time in Southeast Asia, Rainville says, "I felt I was a patriot. That flying for the Marines was a fine thing to do."

When he thinks back to his time flying for Air America and CASI in both Vietnam and Laos, he says, "Living with and understanding different cultures was the most interesting part of my life."

And 1975 was definitely a turning point for the life Rainville was leading.

"That was the end of my career in Southeast Asia," Rainville said. "I was getting reproached from my family. My mother told me to come home and amount to something like my two brothers who had PhDs."

And that was exactly what Rainville did.

"The CASI fleet was flown to Singapore. I cashed in my chips, came home, and got a job selling Cessna Citation jets. There was no place to play soldier anymore," he said.

"All in all, my time in Southeast Asia was most precious." ♦

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*, *Vietnam Bao Chi: Warriors of Word and Film*, and *Hot Mics and TV Lights: The American Forces Vietnam Network*.

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.

Book Review

The War Machine by Barry W. Levy

By Marc Yablonka

Well-written Vietnam War fiction always borders on nonfiction. The parlance, the slang, and the idioms that emerge from America's now second longest war are embedded deeply within the dialogue and the action. "Bookoo," "Dinky Dao," and "Lock and Load" come immediately to mind. That is especially true when it's written by a veteran who was there. In the case of the novel *The War Machine*, by Canadian writer/actor/documentary filmmaker Barry W. Levy, who did not serve in the military, that last credential is not present, but it matters not. The *War Machine* (Double Dagger Books, 263 pages, paperback \$19.99, Kindle \$6.99) takes readers on a literary ride as realistic as the film *Platoon*, and as indicative of the world back home as *The Deer Hunter*.

"The writer is Canadian?" a reader may ask. "What's the connection?" Simply that, according to author Levy (and Fred Gaffen, in his own book *Unknown Warriors: Canadians in the Vietnam War*), estimates of 30,000 to 40,000 Canadian young men served in American uniforms in Vietnam. They did so because they thought the cause was right. Or they considered it payback for the American flyers who came north and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II before the US entered the war. More likely was the fact that many Canadian males were attending US colleges and universities during the war and, thus, were subjected to the draft.

In addition, Monsanto and Dow Chemical, manufacturers of the chemical Agent Orange and Napalm respectively, maintained factories where both were manufactured and tested in Canada.

Legend also holds that President Lyndon Johnson tried desperately to pressure then Canadian PM Lester Pearson into officially committing Canadian troops to Vietnam, but Pearson refused. Depending on the story one believes, LBJ either reacted negatively to an anti-Vietnam War speech Pearson gave, or personally lifted Pearson up by his collar during the latter's visit to the LBJ Ranch. In either case, Johnson was purported to have told Pearson, "You're pissin' on my rug!"

Levy tells us that American recruiters steered Canadian volunteers towards the Green Berets and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Special Operations Group (MACV-SOG), which operated in the Central Highlands with the indigenous Montagnard troops, many of whom spoke French, because recruiters erroneously thought that all Canadians spoke French, too.

Though not originally French-speaking, *The War Machine's* main character, David "Kick" Tacker picked up enough French to get by in Vietnam as a special operator attached to MACV-SOG. He travels in his mind between his tours in Vietnam, and 1988, which finds him in Vancouver, British Columbia, attempting to make sense of both his past and his present.

"When Kick opens his eyes, he's looking down at his cowboy boots, and notices they need a good shine. But there's something weird about the floor. It looks runny. On the other side of the stall door, he sees the tiny bare feet of a child. He opens the door and finds the young Vietnamese girl he saw a few days ago. He's been seeing her off and on

for years. One of his boots is on her shoeshine box. 'What are you doing here?' he asks. The girl looks at him. 'Shoeshine?' She's very calm as she shines his boot, which is melting into the box. 'Big jungle, soldiers fight,' the girl says softly. 'Huge tiger picks me up. Meet your ancestors. Shoeshine?'"

Soon Kick is in Dusty's Bar, remembering his first day in country out loud for Kelly O'Leary, a reporter for the Vancouver Telegraph newspaper. She only had an inkling about Canada's connection to the Vietnam War... until she interviewed Kick.

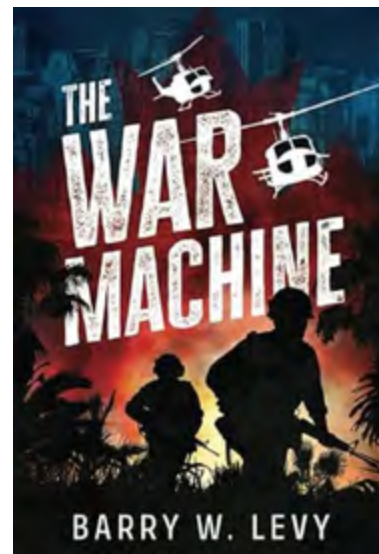
"Just when it was feeling like a pretty cool vacation, the pilot tells us, 'We're coming into Cam Ranh Bay, and it's a hot LZ.' That means a landing zone under fire. The plane came in fast and steep. There were no stairs, and we all jumped. Mortars were exploding all over. Three men broke their legs jumping. We found cover until the shelling stopped, and that was our 'Welcome to Vietnam'. From that point on, it was a long waking nightmare," he tells her.

The War Machine is full of battle rattle that makes the reader feel as if he or she is a participant in the war. As in this scene where Kick's platoon is engaged in a fire fight with Viet Cong.

"Two more VC patrols scream into the LZ. Frosty and Beach jump from the Huey and help Hollywood, while Watt grabs Kick. They all scramble inside the bird as it heaves itself off the ground with Hollywood's legs still dangling out the door. The on-board gunners open fire from both sides at the approaching Viet Cong. AK-47 rounds ping off the bottom of the Huey for a few seconds until they are lifted out of range. Kick strains his ears for the hiss of a rocket-propelled grenade, but it never comes," Levy wrote.

At the end of the book, Kelly O'Leary, the journalist who had interviewed Kick in Dusty's Bar in Vancouver, is before the TV cameras on ABC News face to face with famed anchorman David Brinkley, exposing the US and the world to the extent to which Canada's participation in the Vietnam War was far more than welcoming draft dodgers across the 49th Parallel.

The War Machine would be a fascinating compliment to the bookshelves, not only of Vietnam veterans, but also professors and students of the war, Canadians, and anyone else who was previously unaware of how deep Canada's connection to the war in Southeast Asia really was. ♦



The War Machine

By Barry W. Levy

Published by Double Dagger Books

(March 28, 2024)

264 pages

Book Review

The Lair of Raven by Colonel (Ret.) Craig W. Duehring

By How Miller

The Lair of Raven, by Craig W. Duehring, is about the Secret War in 1960's to 70's Laos. The North Vietnamese communists and the Lao equivalent of the Viet Cong (called the Pathet Lao) were trying to turn the Kingdom of Laos into a communist state. Simultaneously, they were moving men and materials from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to help their war effort in South Vietnam. The group of secret U.S. Forward Air Controllers (FACs), known as the Ravens, helped to stop them.

While much is now known about the Studies and Observations Group (SOG), run largely by Green Berets and indigenous troops, such as Montagnards and Nungs, they operated mostly in the eastern 25 km of Laos, Cambodia, and some of North Vietnam. The rest of Laos, west and north of the SOG AO, was where the CIA supported the Royal Thai Army and especially the Hmong-dominated SGUs, which were led by famous Hmong General Vung Pao.

The author, after a 7-month tour as a FAC in South Vietnam, extended his service to be able to join a secret outfit called the Ravens, where he served for the next 12 months. Through his use of his personal flight logs, awards and commendations that he was in charge of writing, his own memories, and various other research, he has given us an example, in very personal terms, of what his small group of brave American pilots did and fits that into the context of the communists' attempt to subjugate all of what was known as Indochina.

He relates his own history and that of many other notable Ravens. The pace was grueling, frequently flying more than 10 hours in a day, conducting reconnaissance, assisting Search and Rescue missions, spotting and interdicting enemy troops and vehicles, and directing air strikes by American pilots in support of troops in contact. All of this was while being shot at by various anti-aircraft weapons.

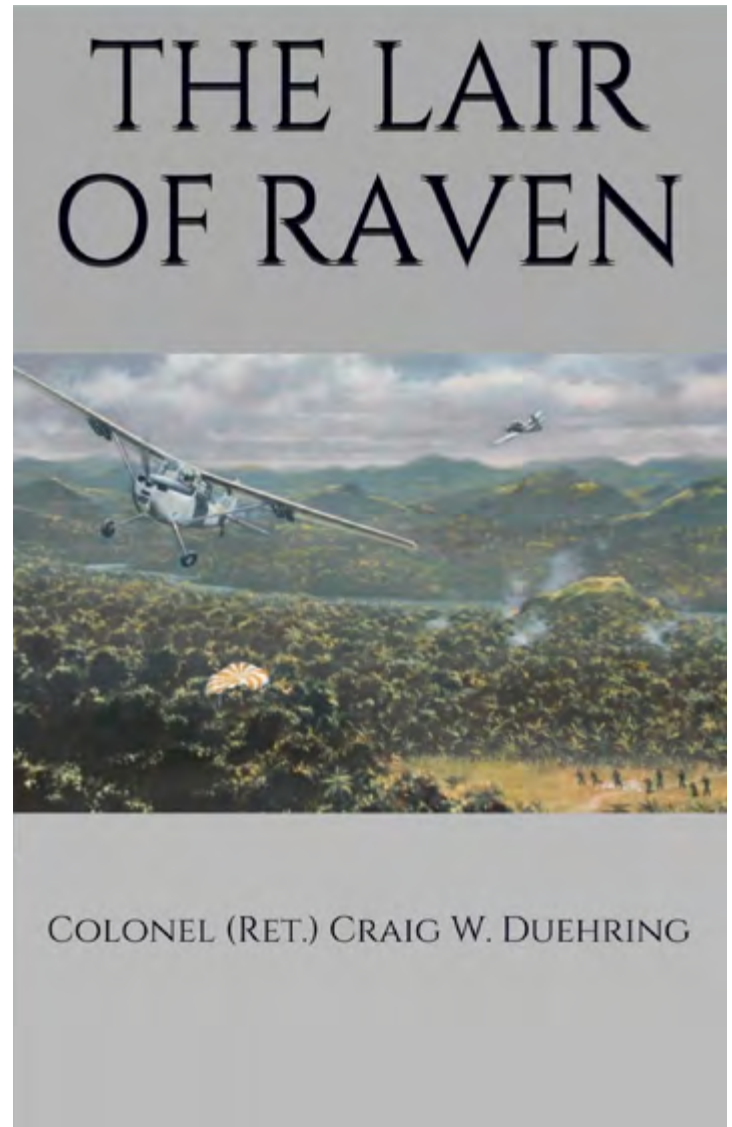
Craig describes this action with the same ease that he quarterbacked everything from waves of F104s and A1 Skyraiders to CH47 Chinooks. He also relates the pain of losing fifteen of his friends. When Craig was being given his orientation in Laos, he asked what to do if he was captured. He was told, "You won't have to worry about that."

So, while flying an AT-28, an O-1, or other planes low, slow, and unarmoured, sometimes they used themselves as bait to find enemy gun emplacements. Then they would direct waiting planes to strafe and bomb the enemy, thus slowing the flow of men and materials south to South Vietnam while helping Laos retain its sovereignty.

His writing exudes the respect he had for the Lao and Hmong pilots, back-seaters, and troops on the ground. He also advocates for help for the Hmong, which we stopped helping in 1973. The book details where to find more information, including at the Raven's website, <https://ravens.org/>, and informative videos.

Next month, moving from Laos in the air, Marc Yablonka's *Tears Across the Mekong* will show the effects of the secret war from the perspective of those who endured it on the ground.

Craig has shared a sample of his book, starting with his entry into Laos and a quick introduction to the Raven's style of combat. You will find this excerpt starting on the next page. ♦



The Lair of Raven

By Colonel (Ret.) Craig W. Duehring

Published by Colonel (Ret.) Craig W. Duehring, USAF

(December 10, 2014)

234 pages

By Colonel (Ret.) Craig W. Duehring

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An Excerpt from

THE LAIR OF RAVEN



COLONEL (RET.) CRAIG W. DUEHRING

Editor's Note: Author Craig Duehring, having acquired many flying skills, used and improved them during his tour in Vietnam. He was in a small, slow propeller driven plane, braving danger so that he could keep those of us on the ground supplied with intel and fire support. That includes earning 2DFCs, one in my A camp's AO (Duc Hue A325), which ran between his FAC base at Duc Hoa and the Cambodian border.

A short time before the Cambodian Incursion began (May 1st through June 30th 1970), Craig decided he wanted to "see more action" and extended for another tour to join a secret unit, working clandestinely in Laos.

This selection from his book picks up where he finds out, upon returning from a FAC operation, he is immediately going to the unit, much sooner than he expected. It ends talking about the wonderful Hmong people.

Chapter 3 Arrival in Laos

Laos

So, I said goodbye to my Army and Air Force buddies and headed off to my new life. On Friday, April 10, 1970, after one night in real civilization in Bangkok, I boarded the "Klong" C-130 flight to Udorn RTAB in northern Thailand. Once there, we circled the base for at least an hour awaiting clearance to land. Out the side window I could see fires burning at various spots on the base. Later, I learned that an RF-4 had been shot up over the Chinese Road and lost control on final. The pilot shoved the engines into afterburner and both aircrew members bailed out. The flaming aircraft struck the AFRTN station at change of shift and killed 19 people. It then traveled through two "Colonel's trailers," took out a newly remodeled but unoccupied wing of a barracks and ended up in the swimming pool. One of the aircrew members landed in the BX parking lot and his ejection seat smashed through the roof of the base theater and landed in the front row.

I dragged my way to the passenger terminal where I was met by an officer attached to Detachment 1 of the 56th Special Operations Wing – or "home" when we came to Udorn and our unclassified PCS destination. He asked if I had any civilian clothes in my bag to which I replied, "Yes." He continued, "Then go into the men's room and change and give me your wallet." I handed over my wallet and dragged my duffle bag through the swinging door. When I came out, he said, "You will never wear a uniform again until you are back in the states on your final PCS move. And, these cards that refer to the military such as your club card, your check book with your rank on it, etc.

all have to be removed.” As we drove to the Det. 1 headquarters, he continued, “I will lock your uniforms in a CONEX and these cards and checks will be kept in a safe in Intel where you can get at them, if needed.” He gave back my ID card, my Geneva Convention card and my flight cap. In the event that we were shot down and unable to escape, he explained, we were to attempt to claim our rights as prisoners of war with our cards and to quickly put our flight cap on in an attempt to be captured “in uniform” and not shot as a spy. By the way, it never worked. No Raven, who was not able to escape, was ever taken alive. This fact was brought out to me very graphically some months later when my very good friend, Park Bunker, who followed me into the Raven program, described his own death on the radio as it took place. Another Raven who was shot down after I left, who probably died in the crash, had his body stacked on top of the airplane where it was burned in full view of his friends.

I spent a great night as a guest of my newly found friends at Det. 1. Their jobs were to instruct Thai, Lao and Hmong student pilots how to fly the AT-28. This airplane was the Navy version of the T-28 Trojan with the large engine and 3-bladed propeller. It was outfitted with 6 wing bomb stations and 2 wing-mounted .50 caliber machine guns. When they weren't instructing, they flew bombing missions into northern Laos. We got to know all of these Air Commandos and usually saved the best targets for them. Imagine the challenge in teaching a young man to fly in combat when he didn't even know how to drive a car—and in a language that was foreign to his tonal language.

Two days later, I was driven out to Det. 1 where I met my first “real” Raven (possibly Will Platt), who dumped me into the back seat of his Bird Dog and off we went, across the Mekong, landing at Wattay Airport at Vientiane. There was a small air terminal on the west side of the field but much of the north and east sides were filled with Air America airplanes – neat airplanes like C-130's, Pilatus Porters, C-47's, C-123K's, Volpar's and bunches of helicopters – UH-1's and H-64's. It was magic. We taxied off the southeast end of the runway and onto the ramp where the Lao T-28's were parked in neat rows and O-1's were parked individually among sandbag and PSP revetments. We drove down to the American Embassy compound where I met the chief Raven, Lt Col Bob Foster – probably the finest Air Force officer I've ever met. What a change from where I had come. I left the worst Air Force officer I've known and sat down with the best. I was nearly in shock.

The Kingdom of Laos was divided into 5 military regions simply numbered MR I through MR V. In each was a major city that hosted the flying operations of the Royal Lao Air Force, Air America and the Ravens. The cities were Vientiane, the royal capital of Luang Prabang, Pakse, Savanneket and General Vang Pao's guerilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Twenty-one Ravens were authorized in country but I never saw quite that many during my 11-month tour. But, there was a rapid turn-over. The concept was that a FAC or fighter pilot would serve in Vietnam for 6 months of a normal 12-month tour; then he spent 6 months as a Raven. The Raven tour was split into two 3-month tours; one at Long Tieng or Lima 20 Alternate, as it was also called – or just plain “Alternate” – and 3 months at one of the other sites. The reason for this was simple. About half of the Ravens were flying out of LS-20A at any given time because that was where most of the fighting was taking place. The threat was consistent up there while at other locations, the threat was more sporadic.

I had been told that, because the NVA had been rocketing LS-20A every night, the Ravens stationed there had moved back to Vientiane to sleep but flew north every morning, cycling out of LS-20A all day before returning to Vientiane. This was normal during the dry season when the NVA could move heavy equipment over the dirt roads and through shallow rivers. During my welcome interview I prayed that I would be sent to LS-20A and finally, Mr. Foster (the officers were all referred to as Mister) said, “Well, Craig, I am going to send you up to Long Tieng to work with Gen. Vang Pao.” I felt ready to jump up and cheer. “What I want from you is to do the best job you possibly can.” “And, if” he continued, “in the process, you piss somebody off; you send them to me because 50% of my job is to keep people off your back so you can fight.” Thus, began the steady growth of deep respect that I developed for this man in the months that I was privileged to work for him. From that point on, I would have done anything for him. And, I would have died before I let him down.

Almost as an afterthought I asked, “I was scheduled to come to Laos a couple of weeks ago and didn't get the word to move so another guy was sent and I was told that there wouldn't be an opening until August. Then I was told to hurry up and go. Can you tell me what happened?” Mr. Foster took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. “Hank Allen,” he began, “was scheduled to return home a week or so ago. The person who came to replace him was Dick Elzinga. Dick arrived 10 days ago. As is the custom, the departing FAC normally checks out the new guy so Hank and Dick took off from Vientiane the next morning (March 26, 1970) in a Bird Dog and, after (I think) a stop at Long Tieng, took off and were never heard from again.” It took only a second for what he said to sink in. If I had received the radio message and departed on time, that would have been me in the back seat of that missing airplane. So, I replaced the guy who replaced me. That story set the stage for many close calls that were to occur in the months ahead.

I met my new family that night including A.D. Holt, Stan Erstad, “Weird” Harold Mesaris, Jeff Thompson, Brian Wages, Jim Cross, Mark Diebolt, and Jim Struhsaker who was also known as T-shirt because of his habit of flying in a white T-shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots. He also had the greatest handlebar mustache I've ever seen—with the possible exception of the one worn now by Sam Elliot. We probably ate a quick dinner before heading down town for a night of bar-hopping. Our little house was crowded and so the new guy got the couch in the front room.

On Wednesday, April 15, 1970, the guys raced through a pre-dawn breakfast and took one of the jeeps to the airport to take-off for a full day popping bad guys. Tom Palmer, a major in the Air Commandos, sat down with me for a minute and explained what my check out would consist of. At the airport, I grabbed my shoulder bag of new 1:50,000 scale maps with a 1:250,000 over-all navigation map, a set of 7 X 50 binoculars, my Smith & Wesson .38 combat masterpiece, a survival vest, a set of dark glasses, my helmet mounted with a boom mike and hiked out to the back seat of a waiting T-28. We took off and headed up towards the mountains and the famous Plaine des Jarres (PDJ). The others were already out there and putting in air strikes in the morning sun. Tom showed me the territory which consisted of mountain after mountain after mountain. Try as I might, I was so lost I couldn't believe it. After all, I'd never flown in mountains before and certainly not when people were shooting at me. Tom put in an air strike or two and, after 2 hours, we landed at the secret base of

Long Tieng (also known as LS-20A, Lima 20 Alternate, Alternate or Channel 98 for the TACAN station on the ridge nearby). The 4,200-foot runway lay hidden among the sharp, karst mountain peaks with houses and huts and ramps all around it. The only way to land was to the west while the only way to take-off was to the east. As soon as a pilot cleared the end of the runway on take-off, he side-stepped to the right to allow the other aircraft to land in the other direction. You landed every single time as the sharp peaks at the west end made a go-around very unlikely. I quickly noticed the rusting wing of a C-123 that tried a go-around quite unsuccessfully.

Long Tieng, Laos, Lima Site – 20A

We took a short break, met the Intel crowd and some of the maintainers – including both Air Force crew chiefs and Air America contract Filipino crew chiefs. Then we climbed into an O-1 with me in the front seat and Tom in the back. Now it was my turn to put in some air strikes which I did, apparently to Tom's satisfaction. My log book says "Saw 5-man NVA patrol; 2 A-1's Dragon White; 2 A-1's Dragon Red; 2 F-4E Gallup; 1 Sec(ondary) Fire; Mr. Palmer in back." We landed after lunch and hiked up to the Air America hostel for some fried rice before Tom turned me loose on my own. He introduced me to the chief "backseater," Captain Yang Bee who the guys called General Ky since he looked a lot like the South Vietnamese Air Force Chief of Staff, General Nguyen Kao Ky. The backseaters (call sign "Robin") were soldiers in VP's army who had learned English to one degree or another and who often rode with the Ravens to translate the requests of the Hmong officers on the ground. Sometimes we flew with them and sometimes we did not. I tended to fly with them very often. Yang Bee was the best and his English was excellent. He



Capt Yang Bee (Photograph Raven William E. Platt Collection)

was also a very dynamic individual who was very close to VP. Tom's specific instructions were to go out and get familiar with the area but do not direct any air strikes – especially on the first day in country. Give them to the other Ravens. I clearly understood and told him so.

We took off and Yang Bee started talking excitedly on his radio in the back seat. After a bit, he called to me on the intercom. "27" he said. They couldn't remember our names but knew our individual call signs; mine was Raven 27 which told the world that I was from Military Region II. "We must go LS-26 (Xieng Det) now. Many enemy, maaany enemy attack right now." A troops-in-contact situation or TIC; the highest priority mission was underway. "Yang Bee, we can let one of the other Ravens handle it. We are not supposed to direct air strikes today." "No," he replied, "no other Ravens are airborne. We must go quickly. The fighters will be coming soon." I checked with our radio operator and sure enough, all the other Ravens had landed to refuel. I was up there alone. There was nothing else to do but to call Cricket, the orbiting (ABCCC) Airborne Command and Control Center, and see what fighters could be sent to me.

We arrived overhead of the besieged outpost while Yang Bee kept up a steady stream of unintelligible chatter with his contact below. Soon, a flight of A-1's, Zorro 44 & 45, showed up and I directed them on the battalion-sized enemy force which was holed up in a deserted village and at other locations surrounding the Lima Site. The A-1's were a great asset because they could stay in the area for hours and carried every kind of ordnance imaginable. The fire was extremely accurate and the enemy moved around quite a bit. When the A-1's were Winchester (out of ordnance) a second flight of A-1's, Firefly 40 & 41, came on scene. By this time the enemy was on the move so we simply chased them. There was a lot of ground fire reported but that comes with the territory. They were followed by a flight of 2 F-105's, Dallas 1 & 2. Finally, a third flight of 2 A-1's, Firefly 46 & 47, arrived and we chased the enemy into the jungle and forced them to break off the attack. The Hmong soldiers were extremely happy and said that 100-200 enemy soldiers had been killed by our air strikes. I landed after a 3-hour mission, really feeling like one of the guys. It was late in the day, so after refueling, Yang Bee and I flew back to Vientiane. We became good friends as the months passed. Amazingly, he is one of the few backseaters who survived.

I didn't think too much about the mission until I spoke with one of the flight leads again several weeks later. He was astounded to learn that my "reward" was the "thanks and love of the Meo (Hmong) people." They were all awarded DFC's. He sent a letter on my behalf to the embassy, and I was subsequently submitted for a DFC, as well—my 2nd.

Here is the letter that the flight lead sent to the embassy. I have a photo copy.

Undated letter—probably around May – June, 1970

Department of the Air Force, Headquarters 56th Special Operations Wing, APO San Francisco, 96310. Subject: Letter of Commendation

To: Mr. Robert Drawbaugh, Project 404, APO 96352

This letter is written in hopes of rectifying an apparent injustice to Raven 27. On 15 Apr 70 I participated in an operation with Raven 27 and two other flights of A-1's which resulted in the saving of a Lima site, countless lives and the rout and destruction of the

enemy forces. It was my understanding that this letter was to have been written by the Flight Lead of the first flight. I recently discovered that it was never submitted, consequently this correspondence, even though belatedly.

On that date, Raven 27 answered the distress call of friendly forces at a Lima site under attack by a battalion of hostile forces. Issuing a request for strike aircraft he proceeded directly to the scene and through directions from the friendlies and careful, low altitude searching he discovered the enemy forces hiding in a nearby, now deserted village. By the time the first flight of A-1s arrived he had located several concentrations of hostiles and proceeded to accurately brief and work the targets. After each attack, Raven 27 swung down low over the village to assess the effect of the ordnance and to detect any movement of the enemy troops. Once the hostiles were struck, they began to fire back and every pass by Raven 27 drew heavy SA/AW ground fire. His marking was so accurate that the enemy were driven from their hiding places, many of them killed enroute, and forced to seek refuge in available fortifications. Raven 27 however, had observed each movement and he directed my flight against the bunkers. With complete disregard of the heavy ground fire, he went back in after each pass to make corrections for the next ordnance. So devastating was the placement of ordnance that the enemy broke and ran. Raven 27 terrorously (sp?) stuck to their trail in spite of their concentrated attempts to shoot him down. Following them up into the hills, Raven 27 directed still a third flight of A-1s against the now decimated force. His final flight completely disorganized and scattered the remaining hostiles and the force was never encountered again by friendly forces. A later friendly sweep through the area revealed 150 KBA in the village and along the route of the retreat.

Raven 27's courage in the face of extremely intense and accurate ground fire made it possible to save the friendly Lima Site. His accurate and professional FACing resulted in the confirmed death of 150 enemy troops. His outstanding abilities are deserving of high recognition.

Signed: Richard E Michaud, Lt Colonel, USAF, Asst Deputy Commander for Operations

So, on my first day in Laos, I 1) was checked out; 2) flew 4 sorties; 3) flew 9 hours and 10 minutes of combat time; 4) kept a friendly outpost from being overrun; and 5) earned a DFC! I knew it was going to be a hell of a tour.

Vang Pao

On the evening of the second day, Jerry Rhein, the AOC Commander, took me to Vang Pao's house for dinner. Jerry was a remarkable pilot, an air commando from the ground up who was assigned to run the air support mission for General Vang Pao. Jerry was a combat veteran in the A-1 Skyraider and later in the year, he led the A-1's on the famous Son Tay raid into North Vietnam. General Vang Pao was a legend throughout Southeast Asia. He was a Hmong (or Meo as we called them at that time; Meo means savage) and the first Hmong to be commissioned in the French Army. According to Bernard Fall, in his book "Hell in a Very Small Place," Lt Vang Pao was one of only a



Craig Duehring, Bill Lutz, Jeff Thompson, Maj Gen Vang Pao, Nate Classen, Jim Hix, Grant Uhls, Chad Swedberg, Radio Operator, Long Tieng 1970

handful of Laotian officers who performed exceptionally well. In fact, he led a company of 300 soldiers during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. He rose to become the only Hmong general in the Laotian Army. He was also the leader of his people and led the fight against the communists for years. He had six wives, one from each of the major families of the Hmong. He held the power of life or death and his decisions, for his people, were final. There are many legends surrounding this man, most of which are impossible to prove. But it can be said that, at that time, he was at the zenith of his power and he was smart, dynamic, charismatic, considerate and still human.

I changed into clean clothes and we drove the very short distance to VP's house in Jerry's jeep. While the general hosted dinner at his house every night that he was at Long Tieng, you never really knew who might turn up. So, we walked up to the door where VP was talking and waited for him to notice us. "Jerry, my friend, welcome to my house," the general began. "General Vang Pao, I would like to introduce our newest Raven, Raven 27." As I had practiced, I joined my hands together at the fingertips and raised them above my eyes along with a slight bow, in the Buddhist tradition of showing respect to a high-ranking individual. Simultaneously, VP stuck out his hand to shake mine. Then we both changed what we were doing—he joining his hands together and I thrusting out my right hand. We tried once more to coordinate our greetings and, finally, with a laugh, he grabbed my flailing hand and shook it firmly. "Welcome. And come inside."

As I recall, the food was fairly simple—chicken, boiled whole and chopped with a meat cleaver, rice, fruit and vegetables and, of course, the inevitable White Horse scotch. There was very little furniture in the house so we sat on the floor. Several months later, I participated in a baci or ritual ceremony that involved the honorees sitting against the wall while VP sat in front of the first man. The first honoree held out his right hand, palm up and gently touched his left temple with his left hand. Those around him, who wished to honor the honoree at the same time, touched his elbow while touching their own temple with the other hand. Person after person would do this until there was a chain of people, each touching one side of his own head while touching the elbow of the person next to him. This allowed the bad spirits a route of escape. VP would take a length of clean, white



Baci at Gen. Vang Pao's House

string from an ornately carved silver bowl, and then bring the string up under the right wrist of the honoree, tying it with a square knot and twisting the ends in his finger tips and gently tucking the ends under the string. The idea comes from the spirit-worshippers of the region who believe that the body has many souls. By themselves, the souls are weak and vulnerable to bad spirits. However, tying them together with string makes the person stronger. As the string is tied, the one tying the string wishes the honoree health, long life, happiness, wealth etc. Then, a few small food items such as a package of crackers, a hardboiled egg, a banana etc. are placed into the hand and topped with a shot glass of lao-Lao, the traditional distilled liqueur or, in the case of VP's house, White Horse Scotch. The honoree bowed slightly and attempted to raise his hand in a Buddhist greeting, then chugged down the shot of scotch. Once VP shuffled to the next man, his chief of staff would come and repeat the procedure followed by other well-wishers, all of whom knew where the plate of drink-laden shot glasses was set. During a lull, one of my fellow Ravens suggested that I eat something since the scotch had a delayed reaction.

The next morning after the baci, I awoke with the worst hang-over I've ever had and about 15 – 16 strings on my wrists. I cannot drink dark liquor to this day. For special occasions there was often music provided by traditional instruments. On the occasion of the Hmong New Year during the winter (dry season) of 1970-71, we left the baci and danced on the roof. I doubt the Hmong ladies took much pleasure in dancing with us. And, the dancing was totally unlike western dancing. The ladies lined up in a line on one side while the men lined up across from them. The dancing was the twisting and turning that you normally associate with Thai dancers. On yet another celebration, we watched as thousands of Hmong walked up a mountain holding lit candles. I don't recall the reason for the celebration but the effect of thousands of flickering lights on the mountainside was impressive.

This would be a good place to repeat a story that I heard from several reputable sources in the CIA about how they had introduced White Horse scotch to VP. It seems that, early on, VP asked the agency folks what Americans would like to drink. One of them replied that scotch was very much appreciated to which he replied, "Good, order a case of the best scotch for me." Knowing that they had probably opened Pandora's Box and that the agency would be providing scotch for a very long time, they picked up a case of White Horse and he quickly settled for that. The rest is history.



Jim Cross Headstone and Scotch

On April 23, barely a week after my baptism by fire, another new Raven arrived by the name of Dave Reese. He was scheduled to replace Jim Cross who was within a few days of going home. Jim was a very sharp officer who had worked as a Senate page. He planned a career in politics and already had an impressive network set up. Dave Reese had come like all the others, from a tour in Vietnam. He was a very likeable guy who seemed to fit right in. I don't recall what we did the day he arrived but it probably involved touring the local

bars and clubs in Vientiane. On the morning of April 24, 1970, we all met at the table at our house in Vientiane and each person said what he intended to do that day. I remember sitting across from Dave Reese, now the new guy, but I don't remember the conversation. We headed out to the airport and I flew to some area that I've long since forgotten. At lunch time, Jim and Dave landed in the U-17 after looking around the area, grabbed a bite to eat and took off again, all while I was airborne. I was about to land when I heard a call from Mark Diebolt, who was flying the AT-28 and who was talking to Jim Cross, but I could only hear one side of the conversation. Jim and Dave had unwittingly flown over Roadrunner Lake which, recently, had been surrounded with heavy duty 37 mm anti-aircraft guns as well as ZPU 14.5 mm machine guns, and on towards Ban Ban. Somewhere around there, the U-17 took 3 hits of anti-aircraft fire. Jim pointed the aircraft south and sought to put some healthy distance between themselves and the big guns. Mark Diebolt intercepted him at the southern edge of the PDJ and saw the aircraft below him in a steady descent. Jim said he had jettisoned his rocket pods and was hoping to clear the ridgeline in front of him. Mark looked down and actually saw the trees of the jungle through the hole in the wing. A cloud moved between them and, when Mark cleared the cloud, he saw smoke and fire rising from just short of the ridge line. Only the AT-28 carried a parachute so bailing out was not an option. We were unable to recover the bodies.

In 1994, my wife and I quietly flew into Laos for a 10-day visit. During that time, we stopped at the American Embassy and were briefed on the progress of finding MIA's. When they showed us the location of the dig for Jim Cross and Dave Reese, I knew immediately that they were looking in the wrong place. They were on the south side of the low ridge (i.e. the back side) while Jim and Dave had crashed on the north side because they could not cross the ridge line to the valley in the south. They promised to try again.

While I was still the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, a member of my staff brought a message to me from the POW/MIA folks in San Antonio. They wanted me to know that they had recovered some bone fragments which had been positively identified as coming from Jim Cross and Dave Reese. I was in a state of shock and, at the same time, extreme joy. Actually, there were 3 groups of remains – one from Jim, one from Dave and one that definitely came from the wreckage but could not be positively identified as either man. In October, I flew to Ohio where I had the honor of presenting the flag to Jim's father along with fellow Raven Ron (PF) Rinehart. Then, in the spring of 2010, I participated in the burial of Dave Reese as well as the burial of the common remains here at Arlington National Cemetery. Members of both families attended, united now as they were on the day that the news was given to them 39 years earlier. Several Ravens attended as well. It was an emotional time for all of us. As is the custom for all Ravens, we threw a nickel on the grass (to save a fighter pilot's ass). Later, I returned to the grave one last time and left a shot glass of scotch on the marker.

Life at Long Tieng (LS-20A)

The life of a Raven was incredibly unstructured. At LS-20A, we had a Raven house or "hooch" as we called it, which was built of all dark wood. There was a large room where we could watch 16mm movies



Floyd (aka Papa Bear)

that came in by C-130 along with the food and normal supplies. The room had a bar that got plenty of use although we actually preferred the CIA bar over the bear cage. There were 3 black bears in that cage, which butted up to a rocky hillside and contained a cave. The male bear was simply known as Floyd or Papa Bear. Then there was Mama Bear (or Eartha) and Baby Bear – sort of what Goldilocks found in the bears' house. They were fed but Papa Bear liked his booze. The safest way to supply his "needs" was to remove a floor board in the bar over the bear cage. Floyd would stick his snout through and make begging noises until someone poured a beer or something else into his waiting mouth. One night we were mean to old Papa Bear and poured down just about everything we had in the bar – to include some awful peppermint schnapps. Given enough alcohol, even a black bear can get drunk. Well, he finally sat down on his butt and moaned. Then, he got up and headed towards the cave where Momma Bear had parked herself at the entrance, with Baby Bear behind her. When Floyd approached, Momma Bear swatted him on his nose which knocked him back on his behind. I guess the poor guy spent the night on the concrete floor because, the next morning, he was sitting there with red eyes and moaning with a probable hang-over. Oh, the poor guy.

We had a kitchen but usually ate our meals with the CIA guys in the dining hall they had, that was run by some excellent Thai cooks. There were bathrooms with pictures of stick figures showing how to use a toilet seat. This was necessary because the Hmong who worked for us used our facilities, too. Since they were used to squatting on the ground, they often hopped up on the toilet seats before using them. Their weight was too great and the seats inevitably broke. We had a radio room in that building which was run by Combat Controllers from Hurlburt Field in Florida. One day, one of our radio operators, who will remain nameless, found an old pistol in the desk drawer. It fascinated him and he cleared it of ammunition, so he thought, so he could have a better look. I walked into the radio room just as the gun fired and a hole appeared in the floor between my feet. We stared at each other in shocked silence for a moment while I did a quick check of my body for unplanned leaks and he started babbling "I thought it was empty. I looked at it first. I've always been around guns all my life. I'm very, very sorry." Then he broke down into tears. I didn't even have time to get angry. All's well that ends well. It was an accident and only one of many close calls.



CIA Bar above the Bear Cage—Tom King, ?, Jim Hix, Jim Rostermundt, Bill Lutz, “Snake”

Our bedrooms were located in a 2 story “U” shaped house built out of cinderblock. My room was upstairs on the left as you entered the interior of the “U.” When I looked out my window, I could see the runway as well as the massive mountain in the distance that looked, to my imagination, like the stone tablets of Moses were displayed on the top. I had a cot and a wardrobe for my clothes. There may well have been a dresser there, too. I had bought a crossbow from a Hmong huckster and had hung it on the wall. My rifle was stored elsewhere but I hooked my pistol belt and the huge Randall hand-made survival knife with sharp teeth on one side and my name etched on the blade, over the “bed post,” such as it was. There was a desk pushed under the lone window that allowed me to watch the flight line as I wrote letters or read books and magazines. Above the window was an opening that was supposed to be covered by heavy, clear plastic. In the summer months, the fresh air was appreciated but, in the winter, it got very cold – not quite cold enough to freeze, but very cold. I bought an electric heater for my room but, every time the heater turned itself on, it would pop the circuit breaker and all the lights would go out in the rooms throughout the building. It got to the point where you hear an audible “snap”, the lights would go out and people started cussing out my poor little space heater (or me). So, I just turned it off and bundled up.

One day in October, I heard that a team of assassins may have entered the valley. We decided to wear our pistols for the rest of the day including the inevitable visit to the bar over the bear’s cage. Two gentlemen returned to their rooms to find the screen slit open but there was no evidence of intrusion. Since we had often heard that there was a bounty on our heads, we took the warning seriously. However, my only threat came the following night when I entered my room and saw the biggest, ugliest grey and black speckled spider I’ve ever seen in my life, clinging to the painted cinder block wall near my bed. I slowly took off my boot and tried to smash it with the heel but the position was awkward and the spider dropped to the floor just as I cracked the wall with the heel of my jungle boot. It raced across the floor and even across a cardboard box. When it ran on the box, the feet made rapid tapping noises – it was that big. Instantly, I concluded that only one of us was spending the night in that room so I aggressively caught up to it and smashed it with my boot against the floor. Damn, it was big.

Intel had a room that we stopped at for the latest information. As the months rolled by, I became more cynical of the ability of the Intel community to provide much of anything that was timely and useful. Mostly, they were in the receive mode and sent what we learned back to 7/13th Air Force at Udorn. But, they did provide the day’s list of fighters (FRAG) along with their TOT’s. If we hadn’t discussed our plans the night before, we pulled them together at that time and each man just announced what he was going to do and what fighters he thought he could use. Once we were in the air, we kept in close touch with each other on the FM radio and modified our plans as necessary.

We were surrounded by endless mountains and jungle growth. There were flowers of all kinds and, especially, orchids which seemed to thrive in the high mountain environment. Jim Rostermundt (aka “Rooster”) bought orchids from locals and had his room filled with them. He said there were an estimated 5,000 varieties of orchids in Laos, of which only 3,000 had been identified and named. I think he owned one of each!

We also bought Hmong rifles, those wonderful hand-made flint lock rifles with hexagonal barrels and a wooden pistol grip. When we bought one, it came with a powder horn (actually made from an animal horn), a piece of bear skin that covered the firing mechanism, a small horn for flash pan powder and a small gourd to hold the shot in. No two rifles were ever alike. They were completely handmade. I bought three.

The Hmong were mostly animist which meant they believed spirits inhabited everything – the rocks, the rivers, the mountains – everything. These spirits could be a great threat especially since they also believed that people were born with not one, but many souls. You were strongest when your souls kept close together. That is why, at a baci, strings were tied around your wrists – to tie the souls together and to give you strength. Little children were often seen with a cord around their necks and an amulet hanging from the cord containing good luck charms. The charms would ward off evil spirits while the cord would bind the young child’s spirits together. I snapped a great picture of a Hmong boy and his brother, wearing this cord and amulet, when Terri and I visited the PDJ in 1994.



Hmong boys on the PDJ, 1994



Little Hmong girl with crutches
(Photograph William E. Platt Collection)

There was a little girl, a beautiful little girl, who lived and played near our house. I saw her nearly every day. While her friends walked around as usual, she used a small crutch that was fashioned by one of the CIA folks. As a small child, she had become ill and her parents summoned the shaman, who dealt in colored injections. What these injections consisted of, no one knew, but they were every color under the rainbow. So, he took his dirty needle and shoved it into her leg, severing the femoral nerve. Thus, her lifeless leg dragged behind her and she pulled herself along. She was always smiling and giggling, and playing peek-a-boo or something similar. I believe I read that one of the CIA guys got her out of the country and brought her to America. I hope that is true.

The Hmong men wore a mixture of clothing styles. The soldiers wore uniforms, of course. But, the civilians wore the traditional black outfits (pants and shirts – which hung loosely over the pants) and the tight black cap with a brightly colored tuft on the top. It was reminiscent of Chinese clothing. Many of the young men had transitioned to western clothing. The young guys who worked in our house wore old clothes when they worked but, when they were going out for the evening, they showered and changed into very nice trousers and carefully ironed shirts and looked like they were going to a disco somewhere. They even wore western leather shoes but had to walk along the muddy streets with great care.

It always astonished me to see Hmong men wearing black suits on special occasions like Hmong New Year's, weddings or funerals. Where they kept them, I do not know. I recall watching a bull fight on a holiday and seeing many of the men wearing black suit pants, white shirts and black vests without coats. They also often wore the black cap with tuft on these days, too. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—

The Honorable Craig W. Duehring is a native of Mankato, Minnesota. He joined the Air Force in December of 1967 and immediately entered Air Force Officer Training School followed by Undergraduate Pilot Training at Craig AFB, Alabama. He saw service during the Vietnam War in 1969-70, as an Allen Forward Air Controller with the 25th ARVN Division. In 1970-71, he was a Raven Forward Air Controller based in Laos. Subsequent assignments included a T-37 Instructor Pilot and Flight Commander at Craig



Craig W. Duehring
(U.S. Dept. of the Air Force)

AFB and Base Fuels Management Officer at Langley Air Force Base. He was an A-10 Flight Commander and Chief of Wing Training at RAF Bentwaters from 1978 to 1981. He served at HQ USAFE in the Tactical Fighter Operations Division from 1981 – 84. He returned to RAF Bentwaters in the A-10 during the period 1984 – 86. He returned to West Germany in 1986, and was stationed at Norvenich Air Base as American Community Commander and Commander of the 7502nd Munitions Support Squadron. He was subsequently Deputy Commander of Operations of the 406th Tactical Fighter Training Wing at Zaragoza Air Base 1989-91. He then spent 1992-93 studying at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, D.C. followed by a tour as the United States Air Attaché to Indonesia from 1993 to 1995. Duehring retired from the Air Force in 1996, having attained the rank of Colonel.

Col. Duehring's awards include the Silver Star, Defense Superior Service Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross with one oak leaf cluster, and the Air Medal with 26 oak leaf clusters. He flew a total of 834 combat missions and 1525.8 combat hours. In 1988 he was awarded the Lance P. Sijan Award as the top leader in the United States Air Force in the senior officer category.

In 1998, he was an unsuccessful candidate for the United States House of Representatives on the Republican ticket for Minnesota's 2nd congressional district. Duehring became the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs and performed the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs in the period immediately before and following the September 11 attacks. In July 2006, Duehring became Acting Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Manpower & Reserve Affairs). In November 2007, President George W. Bush nominated Duehring to be Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Manpower & Reserve Affairs), and Duehring subsequently held this office until retiring from public service on April 30, 2009. In September, 2009, His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI conferred a Papal Knighthood on Duehring in the Order of Saint Gregory the Great at the level of Knight Commander with Star. On September 1, 2010, Duehring was appointed by Governor Bob McDonnell as a member of the Board of Directors for the Virginia National Defense Industrial Authority. On April 12, 2014, he was inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame. ❖

The DASL's (Rhymes with "hassles") continued



Team A-12 meets newly elected President of The Dominican Republic Juan Bosch at Costanza, Dominican Republic in March, 1963. Lt. Dan Orr, A Team Executive Officer shaking hands.

next few months, they sat alongside enlisted students and received concentrated training in weapons, demolitions, communications, operations and intelligence, with an overview of SF medical training.

In order to release a number of more experienced and qualified SF officers for other duties, the Lieutenants were also assigned to administrative duties for the newly formed Special Forces Training Group under the command of LTC "Buzz" Miley.

Their days started with reveille at 0400 hrs, PT at 0500, breakfast at 0600, classes from 0700 to mid-afternoon, followed by company admin duties. After dinner, usually at the Smoke Bomb Hill Officers' Club Annex, they relaxed with a few drinks while listening to war stories from some of the more experienced SF officers.

Sandwiched into the middle of this busy schedule were jumps with experienced SF Master Parachutists out of a variety of old and exotic aircraft, such as C-46's, C-47's, C-119 "Flying Boxcars" and even Navy SA-16 amphibians. It was all very unique and valuable training.

As time went on, the young officers took a liking to the name given to them by LTC Riggs. One evening, several of the DASL's were gathered at the Smoke Bomb Hill Annex, when an officer from another unit began giving them a hard time for being inexperienced and out of place in Special Forces. LTC Riggs, who was seated in his usual spot at the bar, told the officer to stop and get out. "They may be dumb asses, but they're my dumb asses, and no one else better f*** with them unless I say so!"

The DASL's knew that they had arrived, and that LTC Riggs had taken them under his wing. "Dumb Ass Second Lieutenants" was shortened to its acronym, and they started proudly referring to themselves as "The DASL's." The unique nickname has stuck over the years, and they still refer to themselves as "DASL's" to this day.

The DASL's soon proved their worth and began getting key operational and school assignments that recognized their value to Special Forces.



Bill Bailey on patrol near Dak To, 1963

In August, half of the DASL's were sent to the Army Language School in Monterey, California for a year's study in a variety of foreign languages. Keith Garner, Chuck Luton and Fred Rice studied Thai in anticipation of assignments to White Star Mobile Training Teams in Laos. Bill Bailey, John Denton and Pat Flannery were assigned to Arabic classes, with an eye to training missions in the Middle East. Dan Orr and Jim Pearl studied Spanish in preparation for the formation

of new SF Groups in Latin America, and Nick Rowe was assigned to Chinese Mandarin for reasons unknown.

The other half of the group, including Jack Hixson, Jim Hopper, Don Prosser, Bert Spivy, Gary Stiles, Dick Sutton, Tom Tamplin, William Vencill and "JJ" York remained at Ft. Bragg and were present when President Kennedy visited and reauthorized the Green Beret. They went straight to White Star Teams on operational "missions" (now called "deployments") in late '61 and early '62 after completing the Special Forces Officers Course, or "UW School," which later became the "Q Course."

The group returning from the Language School got a variety of assignments. White Star had been discontinued while they were in school, so half of them were assigned to the 5th Group when it was formed and were assigned to teams that deployed to Vietnam after they completed UW School. Others trained for missions in Latin America.

The DASL's were involved in the initial development and implementation of much of the early doctrine for counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam. Their solid initial performance also opened the door soon after for other 2LT's to be assigned to other groups as Special Forces went through its rapid growth phase in the early 1960's.

Many of the DASL's distinguished themselves in a variety of fields over the years. Their most recognized member was COL James N. "Nick" Rowe, who was captured by the Viet Cong in October, 1963 and held prisoner in the Delta until his escape more than five years later.

COL Rowe went on to develop the SERE course at Ft. Bragg, which has trained thousands of Green Berets and others. Sadly, he was assassinated by Communist guerrillas in the Philippines in 1989. Another DASL, Bill Bailey, went to Dak To, Vietnam as XO to then-CPT Charlie Beckwith, who later established the Delta Force.

Three DASL's became doctors, Denton as a civilian and Flannery and Sutton with the Army. Hopper and Pearl became successful attorneys. Rice was elected to three terms as a New Hampshire State Representative.

Two DASL's became authors. Sutton wrote, "Operation White Star" about SF operations in Laos. Rowe's "Five Years to Freedom" detailed his POW imprisonment and escape. He later wrote, "The Judas Squad," and co-authored, "The Washington Connection" with Robin Moore, who is best known as the author of "The Green Berets."

Still others became highly successful business owners and executives, college professors, military historians and elected officials. All in all, they acquitted themselves well in both military and civilian careers.

Five DASL's retired with the rank of COL, five as LTC's and two as Majors. Others left before retirement with ranks from 1LT to MAJ. Collectively, the DASL's earned numerous awards and decorations: 2 SS, 4 LM, 18 BSM, 3 DMSM, 23 MSM, 1 AM(V), 6 AM, 3 PH, 121 CM and 12 CIB's. Of the seventeen original members of the group, eight are still living and most stay in frequent contact with one another.

Overlooked in the "official" histories of Special Forces, the DASL's nevertheless paved the way for many other junior officers to join and contribute to the Army's most distinctive and distinguished unit, the Green Berets. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Fred Rice is a member and past president of SFA Chapter 54 in Boston and currently lives in North Carolina. He is a frequent visitor to Ft. Bragg where he has been a regular speaker on leadership for SOF CCC classes.



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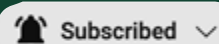
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SFA Chapter 78 April 2024 Chapter Meeting

Photos by Rick Carter, How Miller, and Debra Holm

Guest Speaker, Erik Brun, Presents the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate)

- 1** Erik Brun, one of three editors of the *The Viking Battalion: Norwegian American Ski Troopers in World War II*, spoke on the history of the 99th Infantry Battalion (Separate). An excerpt of the book was featured in the *April Sentinel*.
- 2** *Sentinel* editor How Miller refers to a copy of *The Viking Battalion* while introducing Erik Brun. How's review of the book had also appeared in the *April Sentinel*.
- 3** Erik Brun proudly displays the Chapter 78 challenge coin which had been presented to him by Chapter 78 President Aaron Brandenburg.
- 4** Two Norwegians, Erik Berg and Erik Brun
- 5** President, Aaron Brandenburg
- 6** Nimo, Project Manager of Afghan Refugee Housing
- 7** Melanie McLanahan
- 8** Melanie McLanahan went over details related to the Chapter's Medal of Honor Luncheon with chapter members.
- 9** At the start of the meeting, AVAG Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto gave the invocation.
- 10** Masood Farzan
- 11** Art Dolick
- 12** Don Gonneville
- 13** Robert Casillas
- 14** Ramon Rodriguez
- 15** Steve Bric
- 16** James Carter and Mike Jameson



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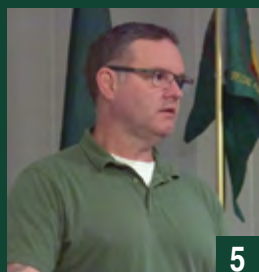
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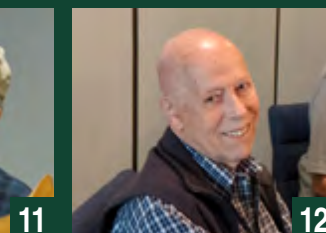
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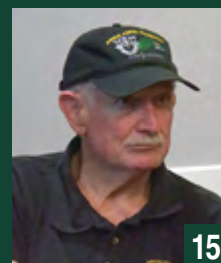
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