



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 16, ISSUE 2 • FEBRUARY 2025

Book Review and Excerpt from

A War of Their Own

*FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front,
Vietnam 1955–75*

**OPERATION
ASHTRAY**

**Chapter 78
Christmas Party**





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FRONT COVER: A Montagnard platoon—the white armbands on the right arm identify them as FULRO. (U.S. Army)

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From the Editor | February 2025



How Miller
Sentinel Editor

We begin this issue with a letter to the editor. It is the story of a WWII Marine, his ill treatment as a POW working in a mine, and how a debrief in groups of 20 helped him cope.

Then **John Stryker Meyer** tells about the planned **Special Forces Vietnam Memorial**, dedicated to the more than 700 Green Berets who died in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Our cover photo is of Montagnard fighters on patrol. The white armbands identify FULRO members.

Jim Morris, who returned to Vietnam as a civilian volunteering to help FULRO, reviews *A War of Their Own—FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955–75*, written by **Will Chickering**. Jim gives it the personal flavor he is known for in his own books about combat, especially in Vietnam. He backs up Will's work and adds many details from his own experiences.

Will Chickering's *A War of Their Own—FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955–75* covers far more than the heroic battlefield exploits of the Montagnards. While digging into the origins, personalities, and history of FULRO, he struggles to solve the mystery of why and how they disappeared so suddenly when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia. The story from the book that he shares with us here deals mainly with often-overlooked brave actions they took preparing the way for the famous major battle of Ia Drang Valley.

In an effort to bring some of the stories from **Jason Collins'** series of books focused on SOG, called *Pucker Factor*, in this case **Book 4**, Jason recommended "**Operation Ashtray**" by a friend of his, **Bill Spurgeon**. Tasked by Chief SOG to capture an NVA truck driver from the Ho Chi Minh Trail and exfiltrate at night by helicopter. One of the preparatory challenges was to find out how big a charge to use, stopping the truck without killing the driver.

A tip of the beret to **Murphy's law of combat**.

What a party! Every year Chapter 78 looks forward to the **annual Christmas party** at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club in Newport Beach, CA. Debra Holm shares an overview and then much more info in the picture captions she lovingly lays out.

On our back cover we share pictures of our **2024 Member of the Year**, longtime chapter member and supporter, **Jim Duffy**.

Chapter 78 member Jim Cragg, also a past-commander of his local American Legion Post, is a resident of Pacific Palisades and was affected by the recent fire. Here is a link to a television interview <https://tinyurl.com/225jv29p>, in which he compassionately offers the post's facility for use for people and entities that will help affected residents of Pacific Palisades, which somehow managed to survive the fire, virtually intact.

As always, please enjoy and keep sending in your stories about your combat experience. Thanks again for the many stories we have already published. ❖

How Miller
Sentinel Editor



February 15, 2025

Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830

Courtyard by Marriott

5865 Katella Ave, Room A
Cypress, CA 90630

SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

2025 Meeting Schedule

March 15 • April 19 • May 17 • June 21
July 19 • August 16 • September 20
October 18 • November 15
December (to be announced)

Letters to the Editor

From Bob Reed, SFA Chapter 78 member

I am a retired dentist. I remember a patient, a WW2 veteran I treated in the early 1980's. First time I saw him he was about 6'2", 220 pounds with not an ounce of fat on his body, looked like a Marine Corps enlistment ad, solid. As we went through his treatment over the next year or so, we became acquainted with each other. I found out he was a WW2 veteran and a POW. He found I was a Viet Nam Veteran and my father was a Navy WW2 veteran who never spoke of his experiences in the war. We talked about what we did back in our service days. My stories were very lame, his not so much and I want to share that story today, so the story doesn't die with me. This is the result of many minutes of conversation between the two of us. The big picture came out fairly quickly and easily, the details, the nuances to make it all fit together, not so quickly or easily.

He entered the US Army an 18 year old high school grad in the middle of 1940. He did basic training at Fort Ord in infantry. After training he got orders and was shipped to the Philippines. He told me they left San Francisco by ship sailing under the recently finished Golden Gate Bridge and arrived in Honolulu in a few weeks. After a few days in Honolulu, they shipped out to the Philippines and arrived a few weeks later.



They trained in the Philippines, in the jungle, for a few months, and he loved it. He told me he made PFC, private first class and was very proud of his promotion. In early December of 1941, the 8th of December, he told me that they were notified that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor the morning of December 7 and to be on the lookout for an attack on the Philippines at any time. As they were getting ready for an attack, the Japanese started bombing Manila and soon sent troops to take the Island. He was involved in combat against the Japanese Army, wounded in combat after a few weeks, and sent to Manila for treatment.

He was still in treatment when the US Army surrendered, mainly, he said, because they ran out of needed supplies, ammunition, food, etc. Because he was being treated, he did not participate in the Bataan Death March. He didn't find out about the death march until after the war was over. So much he didn't know until later.

He told me that American nurses helped treat him of his combat injuries for which he was very grateful as they did a great job. After his recovery, he, along with many other wounded soldiers, were sent to Japan on a freighter. Crammed into the hold, little food, little water, little room. Very bad, many died and when the bodies were removed from the hold, they were simply thrown overboard, no services, very depressing and made him very angry. All the troops stuck together as best they could. When soldiers were sent topside to throw bodies overboard, they were given water which they took below to be shared by everyone.

When they reached Japan, he and a few others, were sent to work in a coal mine somewhere in the south of Japan, he knows not where really. The coal mine was not fenced in, no guard towers because where would they go? They were assigned to barrack type buildings that I assume were occupied by the mine workers before the war. After the war started, most of those workers, except the elderly, were sent to fight in the war.

Regarding this time, he said, "We were assigned a barrack building, given work clothes that were too small, but it is what it is. We were given blankets to sleep on the existing beds with, and were fed food by Japanese women, in a rice bowl, once a day. Sometimes, if the guards felt we worked hard we would get an extra meal, but not very often. The existing workers in the mine, mostly older men, taught us how to do what we needed to do. Load the mine carts, push them to the outside of the mine, empty the carts, and do it again, and again, all day. We had no idea of time, dates, etc. We just worked every day from dawn to dark even though they were in a coal mine."

He told me he was beaten, starved, basically treated like "shit", his words. He knew he was losing weight as he could tell he was getting weaker. Of the 2-3 armed guards looking after them, one was especially mean, he said *really* mean. He felt like he was being picked on



Prisoners of war cheering their U.S. Navy rescuers, at the Aomori prison camp, near Yokohama, Japan, 29 August 1945. A United States' flag is being held up in top center. Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives. (Catalog #: 80-G-490445)

more than the other prisoners by that guard no matter what he did. He said he just did the best he could to avoid the beatings, but they still occurred.

What was frustrating, he said, was that they had no idea of time or dates. They had no calendars, no watches, could not speak Japanese, although he said he picked up enough phrases to get some idea of what they wanted. All they were able to do was count the winters and summers and mark that on some paper, away from prying eyes.

After some time had passed, he thinks maybe 4 years, he was shocked when a US Army Jeep with three American soldiers pulled up outside the mine and a lieutenant told them all that the war was over. They were told someone would be back tomorrow to take them to a safe location. They were all obviously thrilled.

That night, he told me that he and another POW took care of the mean guard. I asked him what they did, he replied they “took care of the guard” and he would never bother anyone ever again. That was all he said about “taking care of the guard”. No more details but the inflection in his voice made it clear to me what they had done.

The next day, they were all driven to an airport, a collection location where the POWs were sent. Then the POWs were flown to the Philippines, evaluated for a few days by Army Doctors. He told me he weighed less than 120 lbs. when they weighed him. After a few days in the Philippines, they were put on a ship to go back home. Another stop at Pearl Harbor for a few days, depressed at the damage he saw, and then back to the States.

They sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge and got off the ship. At the bottom of the gangway was a soldier telling them that all POW's were to go this way. All the POWs on the ship, and there were many,

were sent to barracks, given rooms, new uniforms, and clothes, and weighed again. He was happy to have gained about 10 lbs. since he left the Philippines.

The next day they were all divided into groups of 20 or so. Each group was put into a classroom with a moderator and told they were going to stay there until each soldier had told his story, answered questions, asked question and felt they had it all “off their chest” as he put it. He said he did not want to talk about what happened to him. In fact, he said very few people wanted to talk. But he told me the moderator, who was a combat veteran, would not take no for an answer, and began each session with questions, many questions, for all the guys in the room.

He said eventually everyone opened up, but it took a lot of time for this to happen, and he is glad it did. He said getting it all out in the open helped him realize everyone had bad stuff happen to them and their fellow soldiers, not just him. He said it was the best time he spent to help put all that happened away, into the background. Changed everything for him, and he said the same was true for almost everyone else.

He said he is fine now. He has no nightmares, no bad dreams. He said he has a happy family with children. We never spoke of his family, never met his wife or children. He also said he had never told anyone outside that day at Letterman Hospital, all the things he told me, and he appreciated me listening to him; I told him I was honored to hear it and until now have told no one.

It seems to me that if the returning Viet Nam combat vets had been able to talk about their experiences as he did, there would probably be a lot less PTSD. Just my opinion. ❖

The Gabriel Field Legacy Project Needs Your Support

From John Styker Meyer SFA Chapter 78 Member:

Fifth Special Forces Group CWO 5 Mitch Taggart points out the area where the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Vietnam Veterans Memorial will be built next to Gabriel Field in the headquarters area on Ft. Campbell, in Kentucky.



Taggart recently showed former 5th Grp. and MACV-SOG Recon Team Leader George Sternberg the construction site that will pay homage to the 700+ Green Beret from 5th Grp who were Killed in Action in S. Vietnam during the Vietnam War as well as the 98 Green Berets who remain listed as Missing In Action. There are 58 MIA Green Berets from the secret war and 40 MIA from S. Vietnam.

The Gabriel Field parade ground has a tree and plaque for every Special Forces soldier killed in action since 9/11.

This fundraiser is seeking public donations to help fund this memorial.

Please consider making a donation to:

<https://www.sfa38.org/products/gabriel-field-project-donation>



For detailed information about the Gabriel Field Legacy Project visit <https://www.sfa38.org/pages/gabriel-field-legacy-tribute>

Book Review

A War of Their Own—FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955–75 by William H. Chickering

By Jim Morris

In one sense I'm the perfect person to write this review. In another I'm the wrong guy, because I'm so intimately connected to the subject that I cannot be objective, and I can't read the book as a general reader would.

In the summer of '73 I was in the lounge of the Saigon municipal airport. I saw a guy at the bar dressed pretty much like me, jeans, harness boots, but with an old SF rucksack at his feet. I shouldered my own rucksack, approached him and introduced myself. He said, "I've heard about you. You're the SF guy who came back to do an article about the Montagnards for Rolling Stone. I'm Will Chickering, the SF guy who came back to do an article about the Montagnards for Harper's." We've been friends ever since, though widely separated by geography. A few years back he told me he was writing a book about FULRO. I've been waiting for it ever since.

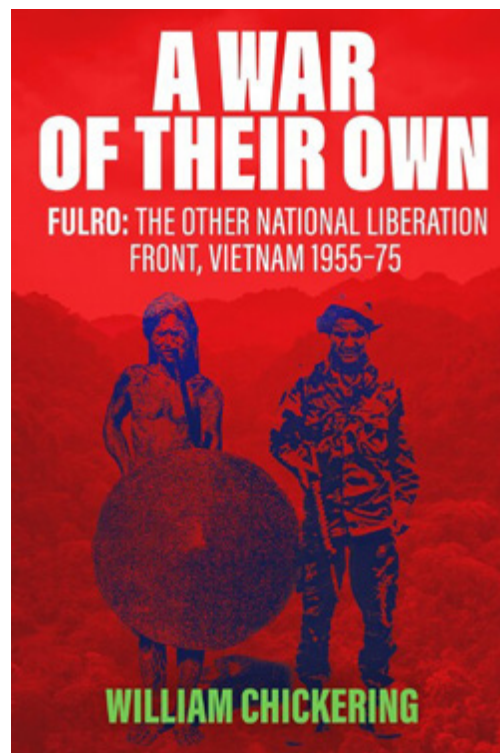
It's here and it's excellent. It is, of course, of special interest to former SF who worked with Montagnards because it will fill in gaps in their knowledge of their own tours that they have carried for fifty years. If you're former SF and didn't work with Montagnards or fight in Vietnam it will illuminate a chapter in the SF epic that you will want to know.

FULRO was the Montagnard separatist organization. Will says it's an acronym for Fronte Uni pour la Liberation de Races Opprimees, Unified Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races. But in 1964 I was told it was an acronym for Fronte Unife de Lutte des Races Opprimees, Unified Fighting front for Oppressed Races, and so I had believed from then until now. Will is probably right because he has the documents.

If you served in II Corps then your Strike Force belonged to it. We ran something like a 10,000-man army and it was wall-to-wall FULRO. In 1964 I was XO of a team (A-424) just outside of Cheo Reo. My CO, Captain Crews McCulloch came back from a patrol with the news that our Montagnards were going to revolt against the Vietnamese, and we better be ready for it. He had it all, their founding documents, their plan, who was in charge, a flag, everything. He told our "B" team commander, Major Rick Buck, and then took it to Saigon. They didn't believe him. The Agency guy who came to investigate actually asked why we would make up this fantastic story. That was just before Crews threw him out of the camp.

We were back on Okinawa when the revolt happened in September, so we missed it. All we heard were rumors. The first thing Will's book did for me was clear up one of those rumors. I had been told that when the Yards revolted at Chuck Darnell's camp, Buon Sar Pa, they shoved the Vietnamese SF troops down the holes in the outhouse and machine-gunned them down there. Turned out they had been executed and buried in a hole that had been dug for a latrine, but not yet used. Not great, but not as bad as the rumor.

A significant point that Chickering raises that as far as I know has not been raised elsewhere is the importance of malaria. Until quinine was developed in the 19th Century nobody lived on the Highlands but the



A War of Their Own
FULRO: The Other National Liberation
Front, Vietnam 1955–75

By William H. Chickering
Casemate (April 1, 2025)
264 pages

Available to pre-order in hardcover

Montagnards, and they paid a high price for the privilege, a 40 percent infant mortality rate. When quinine was developed the Highlands were flooded with immigrants and they took land the Montagnards considered their own. The racial animosity that exists between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese exceeds any I had been exposed to before. I could write a book about just that, and it wouldn't make anybody look good.

There are 31 tribes of Montagnards in Vietnam. They existed by dry rice farming and hunted with crossbows. The men wore loincloths, and the women wore sarongs and usually went topless.

But it would be a mistake to think that because they were primitive they were stupid. When the French were there, they provided educational opportunities for bright Montagnard kids, and they did just fine. Of the group that came here after the war I know a Montagnard millionaire, and another with a master's in social work. There is also a Montagnard published author. Not having educational credentials most made their living with manual labor, but they excelled at it, and I know of none on welfare. The organizers of FULRO were the products of a French education.

In 1968, as a young captain, Will Chickering ran the B-50 (Project Omega) Mike Force. That's when he first met the FULRO folks.

This book is actually two books. One is an objective account of how FULRO was formed, and how its internal politics interacted with its mission and with the war that raged around it. The other is a subjective account of Will Chickering's passionate involvement with a people he came to love. In the same vein this review is also an article about how Will's experiences interact with and illuminate mine.

Here are some of the major players. Y-Bhan Kpor, Y-Dhon Adrong, Y Bun Sur Paul, and Kpa Doh.

Will's friend Bhan had become a Cambodian army colonel by 1975. The tragedy of his life was that he was in the Infantry Officer's Advanced Course at Ft. Benning when his family in Phnom Penh was killed by the Khmer Rouge. Eventually he found his way back to SE Asia, formed a new family, and died there recently.

Dhon was the vice president of FULRO. The short version of what happened to him is that his ego ran away with him and opposed the president, Y-Bham Enoul, directly, which offended enough rivals that he was arrested and executed.

Y Bun Sur Paul was perhaps the best educated of the FULRO leadership. After the revolt he left Vietnam, leaving his family behind. He took command of the former Buon Sar Pa strike force, then a Cambodian army Battalion. They were all executed when the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh

My three main Montagnard friends were Phillippe Drouin, aka Y Kdrowin Mlo aka The Cowboy (The subject of Dan Ford's book, the Cowboy). Nay Lurette, and the very same Kpa Doh.

Kpa Doh gave me my first Montagnard bracelet when A-424 arrived at Camp Buon Beng. Will says his wife was rumored to be very beautiful, but he never met her. I can confirm her beauty, but I don't think she liked me very much. She gave birth to her first son during my first combat patrol and Kpa Doh was the interpreter. She couldn't understand why I didn't immediately abort the patrol and bring him home to her. She was always scrupulously polite, but never warm.

I looked Kpa Doh up when I got back in '67. By then he had been fired as chief interpreter and de facto commander of the II Corps Mike Force. When I found him in Ban Me Thuot he had filed out, acquired an air of casual authority, and a Kawasaki 650. He had also acquired a bad rasp in his speaking voice. As a young man he'd had a brief stint singing propaganda songs for the Diem regime. That's where he met his wife. They sang duets. So, I was pleased to read Will's account of the battle where he acquired that wound. Kpa Doh was up and moving to direct his troops. He packed the wound to stop the bleeding and kept directing his troops until the battle was over.

My other friends did not have better luck. By 1967 Philippe was a FULRO Colonel, commanding a "division" in Darlac province. He got in a fight with a VNSF sergeant over a bar girl in BMT. He and the sergeant stepped outside to settle it. But he had a couple of ex-Mike Force troops guarding his jeep and when they saw their colonel squaring off with the sergeant, they wasted the sergeant. At that time the Viet authorities in BMT tolerated FULRO as a temporary ally, but they couldn't tolerate that.

Philippe had enemies in FULRO, and they iced him for the Viets. For a time, I believed a rumor that he had got away, but in 1973 in Phnom Penh Kpa Doh, then a major in the Cambodian army, confirmed his death. "Man who kill him live two block away. I introduce you." I declined.

In 1964 Nay Lurette was a driver and interpreter for USOM in Cheo Reo. He also did brilliant intelligence work for me. By 1973 he had become the second and last Minister of Ethnic Minorities for the Republic of Vietnam. He died in a re-education camp. Will thinks that was the result of a spontaneous brain bleed. Montagnards say the camp commander said, "This moi is supposed to have a big brain. Let's have a look at it." They believe he was still alive when the Viets took off the top of his head, but that's what they would believe. In any case it was missing when his family got the body back.

That's not in the main narrative of the book, but in the very useful end notes.

There are two other major characters who must be mentioned. The first is Y Bham Enoul, the president and commanding general of FULRO. No one has ever stood higher in the esteem of his people. He was rumored to have supernatural powers. But by the end he had retired to what amounted to house arrest in Phnom Penh. He was executed by the Khmer Rouge.

The last is Les Kosem. He is described as a colonel in the Cambodian army in this book. But in 1973 Kpa Doh introduced him to me as a Cambodian brigadier general. I have no explanation for this discrepancy.

Les Kosem was a Cham whose people had come from Vietnam, and his main goal was autonomy for the Cham people. One could make a case that all of FULRO was his idea, a three-part revolutionary organization. There were wings for the Montagnards, the Cham, and the KKK (Khmer Kampuchea Krom). The six southern provinces of Vietnam had originally been Cambodian, and Cambodia wanted them back.

I spent a great day at Les Kosem's compound in Phnom Penh, plotting revolution with a bunch of Cham intellectuals. Les Kosem was about six feet tall, slim, and engaging. I gave him my SOG knife, and he gave me a camo jacket he had worn as a lieutenant in the French colonial paratroops. When Phnom Penh fell he got out, to Malaysia, though he later died there of cancer. His widow is a leader in the Cham community there.

Will was able to do this book because he had become a medical doctor, worked in an ER in Beijing, and could visit Cambodia, Malaysia, and Paris, to interview the surviving players.

But he was unable to answer my big question. Kpa Doh and his family were among the Cambodians who had taken refuge in the French embassy. The KR threatened to storm the place unless the French turned them out, and they did. Those people were executed.

But later I was told that Kpa Doh had made a deal to fight the Vietnamese for them and was killed in battle a couple of years later. Some of the KR were Jarai, as was Kpa Doh, so the story might be true. If it's true then his widow, or one or more of his boys might have survived.

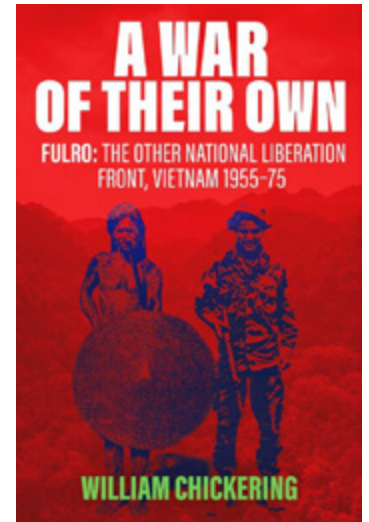
Nobody knows for sure.

I think about that often. ❖

An Excerpt from

A War of Their Own

FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955–75



By William H. Chickering

A War of Their Own—FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955-75; published by Casemate, pages 152-163, used with permission.

Nguyen Huu An, the North Vietnamese general at the battle of la Drang (p. 128), had come to the conclusion there was a way to nullify the American advantage in air mobility.

By drawing the Americans into a forested area with only a few places for helicopters to land—unlike the la Drang valley, which had been savannah—he could construct traps at the most likely places. He envisaged attacking a Special Forces camp first, causing an American infantry division to respond, then leading the division down a daisy chain of small battles by seeming to retreat until, in a clearing he had prepared near the border, the Americans would leapfrog to block the North Vietnamese from reaching their sanctuary in Cambodia. At that point, hidden antiaircraft guns would blast the helicopters out of the sky, and his troops could annihilate any Americans left alive. (“Annihilate” (*tiêu diệt*) was the word used in North Vietnamese Army (NVA) mission orders. Hanoi saw early that US resolve would dwindle with every American killed. Hanoi’s highest military award was the “Hero Killer of Americans Medal.” Achilles rage, killing 20, garnered a First-Class ribbon. Though the word “annihilate” could also mean “wound, capture, cause to desert, or even send fleeing from battle”, in practice it meant kill, and that included executing the wounded.)ⁱⁱ

Nguyen Huu An decided on the Plei Trap Valley.

He and his staff had spent months personally walking the terrain, identifying and numbering likely landing zones, deciding whether each would be a killing zone itself or a gateway to a fortified ambush some distance away. For killing zones, he ordered pits dug to hide antiaircraft machine guns on tall tripods, with bullets as thick and heavy as the butt of an Altamont pool cue. The largest clearing had 12 pits within it, beneath straw mats, placed downwind so as to target the choppers’ underbellies when they lilted up to land.ⁱⁱⁱ

The general was acutely aware the Americans had 24-hour photographic surveillance from high altitude, not simply from the daily buzz of low-flying aircraft, so he insisted no leaves be allowed to wither

above his hidden roads, no streams be muddied even briefly, and nothing edged or straight or pale leap from the dark holes below to strike American eyes. As the time for his trap approached, he ordered the laying of dummy telephone wire and the construction of a dummy footbridge to misdirect the Americans.

He was confident his men had a psychological edge over American soldiers, which he attributed to “superior morale and politics.” He was probably right. Convinced their country’s survival depended on expelling the Americans, they had an advantage in that most terrible of combat, hand-to-hand. In turn, hand-to-hand combat was crucial because the general had deduced one other thing from la Drang—that the only way to escape the ripping metal and roasting petrol dropped from airplanes was to “grip the Americans’ belt,” closing as rapidly as possible with the GIs, literally throwing themselves forward into one-on-one combat.

In the coming battle, he was sure that earth would defeat sky.

He probably did not give much thought to the Americans’ Montagnard troops, whom he referred to as “puppet commandos.”

• • • • •

On the morning of November 8, 1966, almost exactly one year after la Drang, 160 Jarai soldiers of the Mike Force were suited up and lounging back against their packs in loose formation on Pleiku’s runway. Despite their relaxed pose, every man felt a tension inside that wound tighter as the helicopters began their start-up process.

Moving among them in the billowing red dust was Kpa Doh, half-smiling but deadly serious, checking their equipment, himself bullous with grenades and pouches. As chief interpreter, he had no military rank, but his military experience was at least on a par with the Montagnard company officers, if not greater, having spent three years going out on patrols with Americans.

By virtue of his FULRO rank, he was the company’s political officer, essentially its commissar because the Mike Force was almost 100-percent FULRO. Every pay day, he would circulate, collecting everyone’s FULRO dues, one-tenth of their pay. (All Montagnard CIDG camps had a significant proportion of FULRO members, but the Mike Force units—Pleiku and Project *Omega*—had the highest numbers because they contained no Vietnamese at all.)^{iv}

The Vietnamese Security Police accepted this situation, because it made the troublemakers easier to watch, and sent them all more often into the jungle, where they were less likely to infect other Montagnards with their ideas and more likely to die. The police knew Kpa Doh had been instrumental in the Second Rebellion and would have liked to quietly kill him, but when he took refuge in the Mike Force, they sat back to let the enemy do it for them.

He had just informed the soldiers of their mission, going into the Plei Trap, which they all knew was occupied by North Vietnamese. Some even had relatives there who worked for the occupiers as bearers. But what Kpa Doh told them was even more ominous, that they would be moving along the flank of the American 4th Infantry Division, wedged between it and the border. They would be first to make contact with the enemy, at which point they had to stay alive long enough to bring in the airplanes or American soldiers from the division. In other words, they were bait.

The six American Green Berets were their link to the sky, to its life-saving bombs or artillery shells directed onto the enemy, not onto them. However, they had heard this was sometimes an impossible distinction. (Indeed, four months later, Kpa Doh and the Pleiku Mike Force went out on an operation during which 14 Jarai and one American were killed by an errant US bomb.)



Left to right, Kpa Doh, Y-Bham Enuol, and Nay Luett
(Photo by CPT Crews McCulloch)

Whatever inchoate motivations the young Montagnards had—Jarai warrior tradition or hatred of Vietnamese or loyalty to comrades—they must also have had something higher to make them go out repeatedly on such dangerous operations, with no end in sight. It is reasonable to assume this was FULRO-related, either dutiful (gaining combat experience), or patriotic (preparing for their Final Battle with the Vietnamese), or both.

• • • • •

Passing over the massif below, the Jarai shuddered as cold, pure air whipped through helicopter doors, open for the machine guns. Raised in hamlets with no machines more complicated than manual water pumps, they had gotten used to this bounding, bird-like flight in no time, or casually pretended they had, but were happy to return to warm, moist air as the choppers dropped back down to skim the treetops. A brown, frothy river flashed by below, then strobing glimpses into the jungle's depths.

In the distance to the north, razor-crested mountains marked the border with Cambodia. In the flatlands to the west—where they were heading—the border was anyone's guess. As a dividing line, a figment of some Frenchman's imagination long ago, it had been irrelevant until war came along.

The choppers slowed to circle a clearing below. A forest-covered hill jutted up just to the north. It showed no reflections of sunlight through its leaves, but the landing zone itself certainly had a North Vietnamese watcher, who would have stayed long enough to see the first choppers disgorge six Montagnards and two Americans each, then hurry to report the arrival of "commandos." The sight of these small, dark men, with grins and gold teeth, and armed to within an ounce of staggering, cannot have been reassuring to him.

The whump-whump of choppers faded to blood's thudding in the ears. One of the Americans was exhibiting signs of excess adrenaline. Kpa Doh kept ostentatiously calm to protect his Jarai from contagion.

The morning was still cool. This was the beginning of tropical winter when dryness plays the same role as dying light at higher latitudes. As they set out, chinks of clear blue sky were visible through the canopy far above. There was little undergrowth. They moved quickly to get away from the landing zone. Behind them, they heard the clatter of another two units of CIDG arriving, who headed off in a different direction, then silence.

General Nguyen Huu An would have learned by radio within minutes of their landing. But the successive arrival of more units at the same landing zone was too many for watchers to track. The Mike Force left without being followed. A rear guard, put out by the Jarai, made sure.

Over the next half hour, the forest began to drowse. Nearing midday, bird calls ceased. The point man—the most experienced Montagnard, chosen by the Jarai themselves—needed no instructions to slow down. Move, stop, and listen. Move, then stop, then listen. The pauses grew longer as the heat suffocated sound.

The point man froze as he came round a large tree.

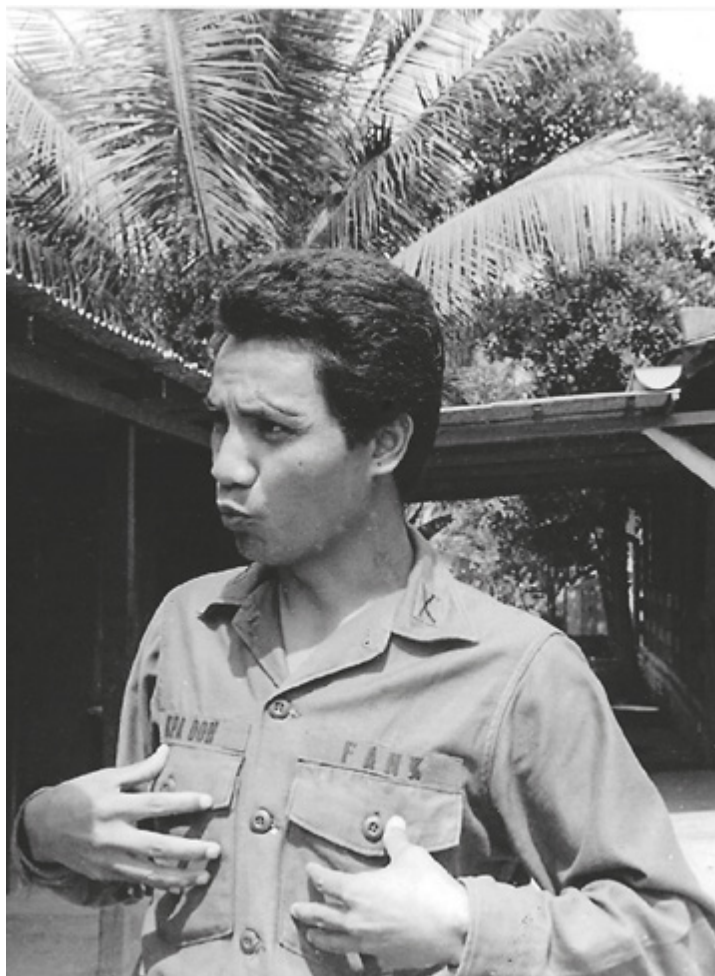
Those behind him knew instantly that he had enemy in front. For long seconds, no one breathed, then the point man ducked as he jerked his rifle up to begin firing. The first three Montagnards scrambled

forward to join him. The tremendous noise went on and on, then diminished to scattered popping—shots being fired back by escaping enemy—then silence.

In a depression below was one dead soldier amid a large number of packs and helmets and parts of anti-aircraft guns, and blood trails leading up the other side. Following the blood, they found more gun parts and eventually assembled three anti-aircraft guns and their tripods.

The dead man had no rank or insignia but was much bigger than the average Vietnamese, thus likely a Chinese artillery advisor. The fact that he was killed outright, but none of the others were, was hard to explain unless he had tricked the point man into giving him time to get off a first shot himself—perhaps their eyes had met for an instant then, with superhuman self-control, he had kept his eyes sweeping the jungle foliage. This had bought him only a few more seconds of life but saved the others.

First blood was a shock, as was the battle roar that had ripped the midday heat. Until now, they could hope the Plei Trap was empty, but the presence of an anti-aircraft detachment meant a very large number of North Vietnamese was somewhere around, perhaps 2,000 men. Even the Montagnards guessed this and were unnerved. Kpa Doh's remedy was to put on one of the NVA helmets and stroll about as though nothing had happened. As he came around a tree, the hyped-up American almost shot him.



Kpa Doh (Courtesy of William Chickering)

Awareness of the beast jumped a notch two hours later when they found its lair, a wide area of bamboo huts with sleeping platforms and classrooms, even a small firing range—all ringed by foxholes. Despite the gloom of late afternoon, deepened by a forest canopy purposefully woven overhead, the bamboo had the gleam of recent construction. The lieutenant decided to spend the night, taking advantage of the defenses, setting out Claymores, explosives that spray shrapnel in one direction on detonation by signal down a wire.

Three of the Americans brought out a deck of cards and played Hearts until dark, a calming thing to do, at least for those calm enough already. Kpa Doh watched them intently, occasionally asking questions as to the rules. (On subsequent Mike Force operations, some Jarai played Hearts too.)

• • • • •

Night was the worst. The North Vietnamese preferred to attack at dawn. They would maneuver as close as possible to American lines after nightfall, during the forest's slow-building frenzy of creature calls. Scouts would crawl in first to cut the Claymore wires, then unspool telephone wire back out to guide them back with their comrades. Then they would wait in the hours of dead silence after midnight, to attack in a rush at daybreak.

Sometimes, but not tonight, the two sides could smell each other in the moist air. Americans thought the Vietnamese smelled like wet clothes. The Montagnards claimed they could tell North Vietnamese by their sickness smell, from malaria and/or months on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Bothersome to all were the mosquitoes wafting in the air around midnight. Unknown to any of them, *Anopheles* was making blood brothers of men about to kill each other. ^v

Close to the equator, the sun drops like a rock and daylight comes up with a rush. Americans were poor at gauging this, but the Montagnards knew exactly when to get ready. If any American still slept, they nudged him awake in the last black hour.

Along the backbone of Southeast Asia, it got cold overnight. Men shivered as they watched the blackness slip away between the trees. But no attack came.

• • • • •

The next morning they set off west toward the Cambodia border, about five miles away. Undergrowth thickened, slowing progress. The point man would drop to the ground from time to time to peer beneath the brush ahead. More worrisome, the canopy overhead was thickening too. Their sky was disappearing, which meant that, if they met a large enemy force, they could not count on bombing because it required visual contact through the canopy.

By now, the general knew exactly where the Mike Force was, and sometime after noon, they started catching glimpses of small groups of North Vietnamese in the distance, eerily motionless, looking right at them. If anyone went in pursuit, the watchers would disappear.

They rested that night on a knoll, again setting out listeners who were instructed to pull back in if any strange noise occurred, a cluck or mournful cry, something that did not belong in the cacophony after



Y-Bham Enoul, a French-educated Rhade civil servant, was the president and commanding general of FULRO. (Courtesy of William Chickering)

dark. They again set out Claymores, like shotguns primed with lead nuggets, but they waited until it was too dark to be seen doing this. The Americans had been issued Dexedrine, to stay awake. No one needed it.

Unknown to them, the general had given orders to ignore them for the time being, to be ready instead for an American infantry battalion that would arrive any time now, about two miles away. At one prominent clearing, the crews of 12 camouflaged antiaircraft guns had been waiting for a full month, sitting at the bottom of earthen pits. Positioned just across the border to pounce on the arriving division were soldiers of the 88th Regiment.

However, word had failed to filter down to every North Vietnamese soldier that there was a company of “Saigon puppet-army commandos” out there in the forest, stealthier than the American infantry. The next day, two Vietnamese were captured. Grilled by a Vietnamese-speaking Jarai, one prisoner revealed he had been told Americans would cut his head off and eat his remains.

With no blood paid yet, Americans might have felt the bill mounting. But Kpa Doh and his Jarai could not have thought in those terms. Their war had no scales, no clocks, no substitutes running in from the sidelines. Their enemy would never cease taking over the highlands unless violently stopped. If they ever allowed themselves to imagine the day their war would be over, the span of time stretching out before them had only one metric—the number of enemy they could kill—just like the North Vietnamese.



General Nguyen Huu An had guessed right. A battalion of the American 4th Infantry Division did airlift the next day into one of the areas he had prepared.

However, by pure chance, the lead helicopter pilot chose to land in a clearing adjacent to the one with the antiaircraft guns, one that was brushy and uneven, letting his troops off at a 10-foot hover instead

of settling down. No ground troops were killed during the landing, though three gunships were shot down. The Americans headed to a low hill 1½ miles northeast of the Mike Force and started to dig in.

The next night, after an hour-long 120 mm mortar barrage, the 2nd Battalion of the 88th NVA Regiment breasted through head-high thorn bushes to attack the low hill, some reaching the Americans’ foxholes to leap in with bayonets.

Surprisingly, the final count of US casualties in this battle was a low five killed, 41 wounded (not counting the helicopter crews).



The Plei Trap operation was Bob Ramsey’s first combat experience, at age 26. Despite that, he found himself calm, which he attributes to extensive prior training. “Kpa Doh was the same way,” he said, “Too busy thinking, taking everything in.” (For both of them, however, it was more likely innate.)

The following is based on Bob’s account, with contributions by Jake, the lieutenant.^{vi} It picks up the story on the fourth day.

They are still moving west toward the border. By midafternoon, they see light ahead through the trees—a large clearing. (General Nguyen Huu An had chosen not to include this clearing in his plan, possibly because it was so close to the border that the Americans would never use it as a major landing zone.)^{vii}

They hold back, sending out small patrols to reconnoiter around its edges. Bob takes one to the right, around the northern end,^{viii} keeping the white shimmer to his left. The forest is triple canopy, thus with little undergrowth, and visibility is good, as far as 50 yards. The sun is still high enough for sunlight to filter through. At one point, he sees two motionless North Vietnamese scouts’ watching them. When the scouts finally move, seen through the trees, they flicker.

Coming around the northern tip, he finds a dirt road coming out of Cambodia, wide enough for vehicles. He then continues his recon down the western side of the lakebed, returning by the same route to report to Jake. The road looks certain to be used. Jake wants Bob to set up an ambush there, but not until after dark. In the waning light of afternoon, Bob retraces his steps to decide on a position, taking key Jarai with him (but not Kpa Doh, who is with Jake).

Because they are being watched, the only possibility for deception is to change location when it is pitch black. Sometime after 7:00 pm, with only a sliver of waning moon in the west and clouds blotting the stars, Bob takes 50 men straight across the bare hardpan of the lake to the location scouted earlier, where they put out Claymores facing the road. He tells the Montagnards that a red flare will be his signal to withdraw straight back across the lakebed. Otherwise, they need little instruction, certainly not in ambushes. Bob sits with his back against a tree, certain something is going to happen, and begins a very long night.

Meanwhile, Jake and the main body of the Mike Force, with Kpa Doh, move further away from Bob, down the eastern edge of the lakebed and set up their perimeter, a semicircle looking out into the forest. Tactically and psychologically, the open space and sky at their backs belong to them and the forest belongs to the North Vietnamese, especially when Jake learns, on a radio call to preregister artillery support, that they are now out of range. So, no artillery, just air.

Sometime after midnight, the Montagnards break out shouting—a violent, startling cacophony—then stop, their bellows echoing into the forest. One of the men heard or smelled the enemy. The usual reaction would be to fire into the night, but the men were sending a message more important than bullets: “We dare you to attack. We are Jarai.”

As daylight creeps through the trees, Jake feels, then hears, the distant drone of the forward air controller (FAC) and raises its pilot on the radio. (A small, vulnerable airplane that flits and swoops, the FAC is a crucial intercessor between earth and sky if troops get in trouble, by directing airstrikes.) The pilot asks for help determining their exact location, as there are one or two other clearings in the area. Jake begins directing him to the correct lakebed. It is about 6:00 am.

Bob had been watching the road appear out of the night, as if the remainder of his fated life—short or long—were in a film bath.

Suddenly, firing breaks out to his front. It is from the men furthest forward at his listening post, then from the rest of his troops. In the gray light, he can make out enemy in a column of three coming from Cambodia. They had begun scattering and dropping when he fired the Claymores, and, in his mind’s eye forever, he sees more of them fall like bowling pins. They begin returning fire. Its volume grows, and he realizes there are more enemy than he thought (later he figures out this was a weapons platoon, with mortars, preparing to set up at the northern end of the lakebed). He fires the red flare, yelling for his men to withdraw. The North Vietnamese fire a red flare, too, which results in their ceasing fire, then pulling back. This makes no sense—unless two red flares meant “withdraw” to them. Their temporary mistake gives his group time to get across 200 yards of dangerously open ground. Last to cross, he helps one Jarai who has been hit. Bullets are kicking up dust around them as they reach the tree line.

Meanwhile, Jake is on the radio to the FAC when he hears Bob’s explosions and the rattle of gunfire. Less than a minute later, his own perimeter is attacked. The North Vietnamese had been out there in

the forest all night, waiting to attack, when Bob’s encounter forced their hand. They are only coming from the south, suggesting they did not have time to encircle him. The first wave of attackers comes in a ragged rank toward the ring of Jarai, who are belly down on the ground in pairs, firing from behind small trees.

The Montagnards have been trained to fire one bullet at a time, but rapidly, aiming at the enemies’ legs because their carbines kick upward. Some do just that, some fire wildly on automatic, and a few do not fire at all, paralyzed. Out of some perverse pride—mirroring the Americans, or perhaps it was the other way around—the Montagnards are not dug in and have no helmets, which costs some their lives, but the North Vietnamese tend to fire high which saves many others. With time, gaps appear in the defensive line as Montagnards are killed or wounded. In the din, they yell to each other. Even the simplest of men grasp quickly what it takes to survive and, from time to time, someone rises to a crouch and moves to fill in.

For their part, the North Vietnamese have been trained to throw themselves forward—to hug the Americans’ belt—to avoid the napalm and bombs sure to come behind them. They have been told the Americans will cower like rabbits, but it is unlikely many believe that, plus they know they are also facing Jarai. They do know that the faster they attack and encircle their enemy, the better their chances of survival. Some are impelled as well by hatred of the invaders. But the rifle fire is more deadly than expected, and the Mike Force has two .30-caliber machine guns. One stops firing early, but the other puts up a murderous wall across the front of half the perimeter until it stops abruptly—there are shouts in Jarai and one brave soul stands up to change barrels (the other barrel having grown too hot)—then resumes fire.

The first attack seems confused and hesitant. Jake has the sense of enemy “just moving around” to his front. Eventually, the North Vietnamese withdraw. They have lost the advantage of surprise, and the minutes are ticking down until the American planes arrive.



Montagnard troops in formation, 3rd Company, Pleiku Mike Force, 1966 (Courtesy of SGM Robert Ramsey)



Montagnard troops (Courtesy of SGM Robert Ramsey)

By attacking from a different direction, they might still derive some advantage, and this is probably what delays their second attack.

Meanwhile, Bob has been making his way south just inside the treeline toward the sounds of battle. His men having preceded him, he is alone, in brushy forest, and beginning to think that all enemy are further south when he comes across a dead Jarai in dark, black-striped fatigues, glistening with blood.

Suddenly two Vietnamese in khaki emerge in front of him. They are sideways to him, but one begins to turn. He shoots both dead with his carbine only half up from the hip. Shortly afterward, he comes across a Vietnamese crawling, with his pants down at his knees “as though gut-shot”—wounded in the abdomen. Their eyes meet. Bob lets him go and keeps moving south, joining the northeastern part of the Mike Force perimeter.

Around 7:30 am, the first airplanes arrive, propeller-driven Skyraiders, ground-attack aircraft from the Korean War that drop napalm and cluster bombs, the latter loosing a stream of bomblets that explode on large branches, showering shrapnel in a rolling wave. For now, it kills only North Vietnamese on the other side of the lakebed.

Mortar rounds start landing near the Mike Force position, the hollow sound of their tube-launches coming from the northern end of the lakebed. Jake and a Montagnard step out of the tree line to fire grenades toward the mortars, and the mortaring stops. Meanwhile, the Americans have guessed the size of the North Vietnamese force—almost four times their own number—and are beginning to worry about running out of ammunition.

A second attack begins, now from the east. Bob takes cover behind a large log, with a nearby eight-foot hedge. Down the line he can see the lone machine gun, already with a large number of enemy dead to its front, not quite a pile yet but two North Vietnamese are using the corpses as cover. One throws a Chinese potato-masher grenade that fails to explode. The attackers come crouching at a trot, screaming, an inhuman sound. Bullets crack in the branches. Trees splinter. Leaves rain. To Bob, it is like the roaring approach of a giant lawnmower. He sees a rocket-propelled grenade zipping toward him for a half-second before

hitting a nearby tree with a deafening explosion that blows him several feet to the ground. Again, the enemy’s attack slows, many now firing from behind nearby trees or on their bellies. He can hear their officers urging them onward in high-pitched voices. He begins lofting grenades over the top of the hedge at concentrations of them. This has the added advantage of killing without giving away his own position. He has eight grenades; when he runs out, he scuttles to collect more from dead Jarai.

On the radio with the FAC, Jake calls for an airstrike “danger close.” When he gets it, some hot fragments strike within the Mike Force perimeter. The FAC needs to know better where they are. Jake steps out from the tree line to throw two colored smoke canisters onto the lakebed. Suddenly, he feels as though a baseball bat hits him full force in the abdomen, dropping him. He cannot move his legs. Under fire, Bob and another sergeant drag him to a safer location.

Around 8:00 am, jets arrive with 500-pound bombs that blast whole trees into the air a second after their screaming runs. This only makes the enemy’s attempt to get close more insistent, with attacks coming from the east, then the north.

However, now the FAC knows exactly where the Mike Force is located. Skyraiders can strafe close to its perimeter with 20 mm cannon, shells that explode on impact and light fires, adding to the haze. The Mike Force reports 50 percent casualties over the radio and requests reinforcements and more ammunition.

In the distance, Bob sees Kpa Doh moving upright through the smoke, which looks first to Bob as if he has lost his mind. Then he realizes Kpa Doh is walking behind a line of his men, probably reminding them to aim low or to save ammunition, or maybe steadying them because they have become agitated by how close the bombing is getting. A couple of them already have minor wounds from hot fragments.

Suddenly, Kpa Doh shakes his head, as though stung by a wasp. Dropping his carbine, he tears off his web gear as if angry, throwing it to the ground. Then, after a pause, he picks up a big stick and resumes walking, tapping his men’s boots as he passes. He has been struck in the neck by an AK-47 bullet. Barely able to speak, he is letting his men know he is still there.

Bob cannot pinpoint exactly when this happened, except that the feeling there were enemy soldiers everywhere was lessening.

“It didn’t even knock him down,” Bob says. “It just looked like it pissed him off.”

Until I heard this, Kpa Doh had seemed inauthentic to me—a cultural hybrid out of place in a story about Montagnard agency. But this—this was 100 percent Jarai. News of it would have spread to Jarai and Rhadé everywhere, instantly raising his status within FULRO.

“His only armor was his heroism.”

Thus say the eroded words on a Cham stela from a thousand years ago, describing a forgotten king. ^{ix}

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The battle was essentially over by midmorning. Fourteen Jarai were killed, 40 were wounded, some badly, and got medevaced out around noon. Kpa Doh waited till last, then went out too.

Fifty-eight North Vietnamese were found dead, scattered about the battlefield. Some ten to twenty lay in front of the machine gun. Further out, some had been killed by airstrikes. Many others—dead or dying—had been dragged away by their comrades.

Elements of the American division began to arrive around noon, airlifting in a small bulldozer to dig a burial pit on the dry lakebed. There were so many North Vietnamese dead that they also brought in a front-end loader to carry their bodies.

Bob watched from a distance as it tipped the lifeless bodies into the pit, heads lolling, still gangly youth.

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All six American Green Berets survived despite being in the thick of battle while one-third of the Mike Force Jarai were killed or wounded. ❖

Endnotes

- i Merle Pribbenow, interview with author, November 28, 2017.
- ii As Merle Pribbenow pointed out to me, there is some irony in the fact that the North Vietnamese Army also had a body count.
- iii Phil Courts, “Shootout on the Cambodian Border,” Vietnam Helicopter Pilots’ Association, at www.vhpa.org/stories/Shootout.pdf; and Phil Courts, interview with author, December 7, 2017.
- iv A sympathetic US master sergeant (Frank Quinn) knew about the dues because he stored the piastres in the unit safe until Kpa Doh made his next trip to Mondulkiri. That virtually all the Montagnard CIDG were FULRO was common knowledge, supported by Jim Morris (*War Story* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1979), 21) and Y-Tiur Eban (interviews with author, 2009 onward) who quoted one FULRO leader (Phillipe Drouin) as boasting, “Any camp where there are Montagnards, these are our troops.” My own Project *Omega* Mike Force battalion was said to have been “rented” from FULRO.
- v Some Jarai on this operation, with known (previously quantified) immunity to local *Falciparum* strains built up over a lifetime in the Central Highlands, nevertheless came down with acute malaria, either because the stress of combat temporarily weakened their immune system and thus allowed the malaria always lurking within them to escape immune control, or because they had been bitten by mosquitoes freshly laden with unfamiliar *Falciparum* strains from the Northern Highlands, i.e., picked up by the North Vietnamese on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and brought south. The timing of these cases’ onset tends to suggest the latter. Note: though Kpa Doh’s unit and its battle are not specifically named in the journal articles from which I extracted this information, it is clear they refer to the Pleiku Mike Force and its major operation in western II Corps in November 1966. Stephen C. Hembree, “Malaria Among the Civilian Irregular Defense Group During the Vietnam Conflict: An Account of a Major Outbreak,” *Military Medicine* 145 (1980), 751–52.
- vi The other three Americans were Frank Huff, Frank Quinn, and Danny Panfil. All three were equally important to the outcome of the battle, but I was unable to interview Frank Huff, killed in action five months later, or Frank Quinn, who was especially close to Kpa Doh and who died of natural causes in New York City only a few years ago. Danny Panfil preferred not to be interviewed. During

the battle, Danny helped Bob drag the wounded Jake to safety under fire, and later, as a medic, worked to save Jake. Frank Huff was with Bob on the night ambush and then, during the battle, took over the radio, calling in airstrikes after Jake was wounded.

- vii No one is exactly sure today which clearing it was. Some believe it was bisected by the border. For unclear reasons, it was named “Pali Wali” by the Americans.
- viii The lakebed was roughly banana shaped and actually on a north-east–southwest slant, but I refer to “northern” end and “western” and “eastern” sides for clarity.
- ix Georges Maspero, *The Champa Kingdom*, translated by Walter E. J. Tips (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), 168.



Author with Hre interpreter at Gia Vuc, Dinh-Nieu
(Courtesy of William Chickering)

About the Author

William Chickering dropped out of Yale in 1963 to enlist in the paratroops. When Vietnam heated up, he became an officer, then joined Special Forces. After Vietnam, he went back to college, then medical school, subsequently working as a doctor in Korea, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Cameroon, and China. He moved to Phnom Penh with his French wife and two children in 2012 to track down the story behind FULRO.

OPERATION ASHTRAY

AN EXCERPT FROM

PUCKER
STORIES OF MACVSOG
FACTOR

From the Veterans in their own words



VOLUME 1 ISSUE 4

By Jason B. Collins

By Bill Spurgeon

An excerpt from [Pucker Factor Stories of MACV SOG Vol.1 Issue 4: SOG Stories From the Veterans in Their Own Words](#) by Jason B. Collins, published by Barnes & Noble Press, 12/08/24, pages 207-215, used with permission.

In January 1970, a 12-man team inserted into south-eastern Laos with the mission to capture a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) truck driver on the Ho Chi Man Trail. This is my exact recollection of that mission, labeled Operation Ashtray.

In late 1969, Chief SOG, Colonel Steve Cavanaugh, charged LTC Frederick Abt, FOB-2 Commander, with the mission to ambush a North Vietnamese convoy in southeast Laos to capture a truck driver. It was believed that a truck driver would be very knowledgeable of the operation of the Ho-Chi-Man Trail and would provide the 7th Air Force with invaluable intelligence to support their B-52 bombing missions.

LTC Abt and his S-3 Officer, MAJ Frank Jaks, devised a plan which would become Operation Ashtray. The mission would require some of FOB-2's most experienced recon team members with Jaks himself leading the effort. Nine recon personnel and two ARVN (Army Republic Viet Nam) Special Forces troops were selected to complete the 12-man team. MAJ Jaks organized his team into three elements: a 5-man snatch team, a two-man early warning element, and a 5-man diversion team. The Snatch Team, led by Jaks, consisted of Daniel Ster, Ray Harris, John Grant and Chuc (ARVN) and had the mission to ambush a truck and capture the driver. The Early Warning element of Tim Lynch and Michael Koropas was to position itself several hundred meters up the road and provide information to the Snatch Team as to what vehicles were coming and what they were carrying. The diversion element, led by SSG Oliver Hartwig, consisted of Recon Company First Sergeant Forest L. Todd, Bill Spurgeon, John Blaaw and one ARVN (unnamed). Their mission was to set an ambush 300-400 meters down the road from the snatch site to hit the next thing that came through their kill zone, after the Snatch Team initiated their ambush, in hopes of diverting NVA attention away from the Snatch Team.

To fully appreciate the mission of Operation Ashtray and the importance of capturing a truck driver one must first understand the operation of the Ho-Chi-Man Trail. Convoys were formed in North Vietnam and loaded with ammunition, weapons, supplies and personnel for transport to the South Vietnam border in support of the NVA war effort. Drivers did not drive a truck the entire way, instead, they drove only a fifteen-to-twenty-kilometer portion of the trip. Driver #1 would drive a truck from Checkpoint A south to Checkpoint B. At Checkpoint B, Driver#2 would continue in the truck to Checkpoint C while Driver #1 waited at Checkpoint B. As trucks were returning, Driver #1 would then drive the next truck heading north from Checkpoint B back to Checkpoint A where he passed it on to the next driver. With this compartmented approach, the driver



Operation Ashtray One members gather around a Russian-made Gaz-63 lorry to assess the most effective way of damaging the vehicle's front tires and stop it without harming the occupants. Standing, left to right, Ster, Hartwig, Harris, Koropas; Kneeling, left to right, Chuc (ARVN), Grant, Jaks. This is the only photo of Operation Ashtray. (Photo Credit: John Plaster)

would become intimately familiar with his stretch of the road and would be able to drive in blackout conditions to avoid detection by overflying aircraft. This made the driver an invaluable asset as a POW in that he knew locations of all truck parks, POL points, command centers, troop areas, caches, hospitals, ammo storage and other significant activities within his stretch of the road. This is why the capture of a truck driver was such a high priority to Chief SOG.

On January 13, 1970, MAJ Jaks called the team members into the TOC for a briefing on the operation. We were all given the opportunity to "volunteer" for the operation before he told us the mission. Of course, we all volunteered! The next day we traveled by C-130 Blackbird to SOG's Naval Advisory Detachment SEAL base in Danang where we would train and rehearse for seven days. During this time, we experimented with several explosive charges that would stop a truck without killing the driver. Through a series of experiments, we determined that a series circuit of 4 claymores, approximately 5 feet apart, connected by Detonating Cord and aimed at the wheels of the truck would do the job. Without knowing the speed of the truck, this would give us a kill zone of about 20 feet to blow the front tire and hopefully stop the truck. We anticipated that the driver's initial reaction would be to hit the brake and slow the forward momentum of the truck, giving the Snatch Team time to assault the truck and grab the driver. We tested the charge on a deadline 2 ½-ton truck, pulled by a Navy wrecker, on the beach in Danang to confirm our theory.

The photo shown at left shows team members discussing the effects of the charge and the theory that it would stop a truck without killing the driver. I took this picture with my Penn-EE, which I left at the launch site in my personal baggage. This was the only photo of Operation Ashtray.

The plan called for the insertion of the 12-man team altogether on the same LZ. On the morning of Day 2, the team would split into two elements and move towards preselected general areas on Highway 110 to establish ambushes. The Early Warning Element would split off from the Snatch Team in the afternoon of Day 2 and move to its overwatch position. The Early Warning Element would monitor the road and relay information to the Snatch Team as to what was coming and when. The Snatch Team would then make the decision to initiate the ambush based on that information. After the POW was captured, the Snatch Team (with POW) would move to a pre-selected LZ for night extraction by helicopter. Flying the extraction aircraft would be the Aviation Battalion's two most experienced pilots, the Battalion Commander and the Battalion S-3. They would be flying with PVS-5 night vision devices.

Early on the morning of 21 Jan the team traveled by C-130 Blackbird from Danang directly to the Command and Control Central (CCC) launch site at Dak To. From there the team was inserted by helicopter on a preselected L Z approximately 1500 meters from the highway. The team then moved approximately 400 meters away from the LZ and established a rest-over-night (RON) position. On the morning of Day 2 the team split into two elements; the Snatch Team and Early Warning Element led by Jaks and the Diversion Team led by Hartwig. Both elements then moved towards Highway 110 to establish ambush positions. The Early Warning element would split off from the Snatch Team later in the day and take up its position.

As the Snatch Team approached Highway 110, the brush was very thick and movement was extremely slow. They stopped within about 10 feet of the road to listen and could see the enemy's legs as they walked back and forth along the road. Ray Harris, carrying a M-79, crouched beside the road looking through the vegetation. One sentry must have suspected something as he stopped, got down on his knees, and starred straight at Ray through a weak spot in the bramble. Ray squinted his eyes and as the NVA looked down that black hole of that 40mm M-79 pointed at his face, he calmly got up and walked back the way he had come from. From this point on, the Snatch Team was compromised. Fully expecting grenades and a potful of blind AK-47 fire coming in their direction, Jaks gave the order to withdraw. Rifle shots from sentries came down the road, one just in front to the south, and Jaks decided to scrub the Snatch Team mission. He radioed the Diversion Team to assume the mission if possible. Shortly after, trucks started moving along the highway. Using the noise of the truck traffic to cover their withdrawal, the team moved to their extraction LZ and set up for the night.

Late in the afternoon, the Diversion Team reached the highway. As luck would have it there was a bomb crater directly across the road on the uphill side that would provide a perfect overwatch position. The bomb crater provided cover and concealment and protection from the blast of the claymores. Late in the day the team placed the claymores in place and the kill zone was established. As I was the demo man on the team, also armed with a M-79, I held the clacker

for the claymores. Additional claymores were placed on each flank, complete with a canteen of CS powder. Shortly thereafter we received a message from Jaks that the Snatch Team was compromised and would not be able to carry out their mission. The Diversion Team was directed to assume the mission and attempt to capture a driver.

The Diversion Team quickly devised a modified plan to do a POW snatch instead of a diversion ambush. Once I initiated the ambush, Hartwig and Blaaw would move to the cab of the truck and grab the driver. I would move to the near side of the truck and engage with my M-79 anyone or anything up or down the road reacting to the ambush. Todd, the RTO, would man the flank claymore on the right and the ARVN would man the left flank claymore. Once the Team had the POW, both flank claymores would be blown, and the team would move towards the predetermined extraction LZ.

The only problem is that the Team was set up on the uphill side of the road, away from the driver side of the vehicle. This would make it extremely difficult to assault the truck from the passenger side and still be quick enough to capture the driver. Additionally, the Team would have to cross the road to be able to move towards the extraction LZ – we were set up on the wrong side of the road. By now it was last light and too late to try and change locations, we had to go with what we had.

Shortly thereafter we started hearing signal shots along the road and almost immediately traffic started moving. We were not aware until the trucks started moving that there was likely a small stream up the road about 100-150 meters. We could hear each truck gear down, slowly cross the stream, and then begin an uphill grade towards our location. For this reason, the trucks were going relatively slow as they passed through our kill zone – definitely to our advantage. From our vantage point in the bomb crater, we could see exactly what was in the truck bed.

After several trucks had passed we recognized the interval between vehicles was about 5-10 minutes. At this point the discussions began; do we hit the next truck or not? It seemed like before we could decide another truck rounded the corner about 50 meters away and we had to determine if it was carrying troops or not. Sometimes the last truck had not cleared the area good before the next truck appeared. We were waiting on the lone truck, with an appreciable distance between the others. We certainly didn't want to hit a truck loaded with troops, especially since our claymore were aimed at the tires! We also didn't want to hit a truck if others were close by and start a fight with multiple trucks! The decision had to be made quickly once a truck was in site!

Because of the heavy traffic on the road that night we had to assume there were a lot of NVA security forces in the area as well. Also, we knew that Jaks team was only three to four hundred meters away from us and they had already been compromised by NVA activity. At this point the discussion became "is this too damn risky?" Since I was the "new guy" on the team (I had only been at CCC for 3 months), I just kept my mouth shut. Several more trucks rolled by, and the discussion continued – hit the next truck or not or get the hell out of here? By about 2230 hours, twenty-three trucks had passed, none carrying troops. Finally, 1SG Forest Earl Todd ended the discussions saying something I will never forget, "this is a

risky fucking business, we're gonna do what we came to do." With that, the twenty-fourth truck rounded the corner and came into our vision. As the truck approached I could see there were no troops. I squeezed the clacker, and four claymores ripped the night. It was on!

The truck stopped directly in front of us. Obviously the ARVN didn't understand the plan as immediately he fired the left flank claymore. He also must have placed a WP Grenade near his claymore as there was suddenly burning WP all over the place (I believe it was Hartwig who got WP burns from the grenade). Simultaneously, for a reason I will never understand, team members began firing their Car-15's into the truck. THIS WASN'T THE PLAN! While they began changing magazines, I jumped out of the bomb crater and moved to my position on the near side of the road. I looked back to see everyone donning their protective masks as the ARVN's claymore had blown CS powder all over the area. I was still clear of the CS so I ran to the far side of the truck to see if the driver was wounded, dead, or gone. The driver door was open and the cab was empty. For an instant I realized I was standing in the open road, with a damn HE round in the chamber, and somewhere behind me in the brush was a pissed off NVA who may or may not be wounded and may or may not be armed. Was he going to shoot me in the back as I searched the cab? I didn't have time to think about it as the entire area turned daylight as burning WP ignited the truck's ruptured fuel tank that had leaked out onto the road. The road and the rear of the truck went up in flames.

Almost simultaneously, another truck, loaded with a reaction force, rounded the corner about 50 meters away and began firing. I engaged with the M-79 and after firing several rounds of HE, I was now getting hit with the CS so I moved to the front of the truck and donned my protective mask. As the team started withdrawing I continued to pump rounds at the reaction force and surrounding area as I moved to the near side of the truck. The firefight continued for several minutes as I scrambled to the bomb crater and continued covering the team's withdrawal with 40 mm HE rounds. After a while there was a lull in the firing. At this point I could hear the team moving up the hill behind me, so I began withdrawing in that direction. Shortly after I linked up with the rest of the team and we continued to move up the hill. The bad news is that the team was on the wrong side of the road, moving away from our extraction LZ. What else could go wrong?

We continued another 200 meters or so and stopped in a small depression near the crest of the hill. We set up our RON site and covered ourselves with poncho liners. Within minutes the NVA moved all along the road below us and began randomly firing up the hill. Fortunately for us, the vegetation was very dense, and we were in a depression, so their fire wasn't effective. Covy arrived on station and asked us to mark our location. Right or wrong, the team leader decided we would not mark our location because at the time the NVA didn't know exactly where we were. He figured if we marked our location the NVA would know exactly where we were and would assault our position. For that reason and the fact that by this time the road and truck had stopped burning and couldn't be used to mark the enemy location, TAC Air was not called in. In less than an hour a truck arrived and pulled the ambushed truck off the road. Unbelievably, traffic started moving again later that night! The NVA continued to fire up the hill, trying to make us disclose our location. We remained quiet and alert for the remainder of the night.

Before first light we did a map check and selected a potential extraction LZ. Knowing the NVA would be online sweeping up the hill at daylight we were moving before first light. After moving a few hundred meters, we arrived at the LZ, established a perimeter, and called for extraction. The Cobras came in first and everything remained quiet. As the extraction aircraft approached it started taking fire from a nearby ridgeline. We engaged the NVA and simultaneously, the aircraft put its nose down and departed the area. As the team withdrew I continued to cover their withdrawal with my M-79. Covey then called in A1E's to work the ridgeline with CBU-25's (Cluster Bomb Units) as we continued withdrawing.

We were directed to another LZ, several hundred meters away. We moved as fast as possible with no further contact with the NVA. On arrival at the LZ we again established a perimeter and called for

extraction. The cobras came in with no enemy activity but apparently some NVA had followed or tracked us to the new LZ. As the extraction bird approached, an RPD opened up. As I had a clear shot, I quickly hit the RPD location with HE rounds from my M-79. The gun went silent, and the chopper was able to land. As I boarded the chopper, we continued taking small arms fire from the same general location. From a kneeling position in the aircraft, I returned fire, as did the door gunner, while the remainder of the team scrambled aboard the aircraft. As we cleared the LZ the cobras and A1E's began working the NVA positions. Relieved, we flew back to the launch site at Dak To. There we linked up with the other seven team members who had been extracted earlier that morning without incident. Later that day flew back to FOB-2 for debriefing, thankful to be alive. ❖



Hard to believe it has been fifty-three years since Ashtray, but I remember it like it was yesterday. This lovely lady sitting next to me is my wife Lola. She is the mother of my three daughters and has been with me for 48 years, through thick and thin, and has been my constant companion in dealing with the demons that haunt so many of us, even today. For that I will forever be grateful.

Bill

MURPHY'S LAW OF COMBAT

1. You are not superman.
2. If it's stupid but works, it isn't stupid.
3. Never share a foxhole with anyone braver than you are.
4. No plan survives the first contact.
5. If your attack is going really well, it's an ambush.
6. The important things are always simple.
7. The simple things are always hard.
8. The easy way is always mined.
9. If you are short of everything except enemy, you are in combat.
11. Friendly fire - isn't.
12. If enemy is in range, so are you.
13. Things that must be together to work, usually can't be shipped together.
14. Anything you do can get you shot - including doing nothing
15. Professional soldiers are predictable, but the world is full of amateurs.
16. Murphy was a grunt.

Frequent *Sentinel* contributor Marc Yablonka sent this to Chapter 78's Jim Morris: "This came in tonight from Dennis Hackin, 25th ID in Vietnam (wrote the novel *Bronco Billy*, which became a Clint Eastwood film, the screenplay for the Peter Fonda film *Wanda Nevada*, and did some editing for Eastwood's *Heartbreak Ridge*). Thought you might appreciate it!"



Christmas Party

Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club
Newport Beach, CA

December 9, 2023

Photos by How Miller, James McLanahan, Mary Cruz, and Debra Holm

What a party!

Special Forces Association Chapter 78 hosted its annual Christmas Party on December 14 at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club in Newport Beach, CA. The evening was filled with camaraderie, celebration, and gratitude as members and guests enjoyed keynote remarks from LTC Johann Hindert, ceremonies, presentations, awards, a festive dinner, gifts, singing, and lively musical entertainment.

Chapter President Aaron Brandenburg served as the emcee, with support from Vice President James McLanahan, dedicated volunteers, and the attentive yacht club staff. A Color Guard from the Sunburst Youth Academy was present to perform the Presentation of Colors. Chapter member Bob Crebbs led the solemn and moving Missing Man Ceremony, honoring those who could not be with us.

Singer Cadet Mendoza of the Sunburst Academy delivered a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem. Jim Duffy was recognized as Member of the Year, celebrated for his unwavering attendance at

Chapter events and his tireless promotion of the Chapter. His dedication was evident in the table full of guests he personally invited to share in the festivities.

Another highlight of the evening was the presentation of a patriotic plaque to Debra Holm by Chapter member Eric Berg, on behalf of the Chapter members. This token of appreciation recognized Debra's contributions to the Chapter throughout the year.

The culinary experience did not disappoint, thanks to Executive Chef Georges Rapicault and his exceptional staff, who provided a superb dinner. Returning to entertain us once again was singer Frank DiSalvo, whose performance featured Sinatra classics, holiday favorites, and other timeless tunes. His talent was a perfect addition to the evening.

As you'll see in the accompanying photos, many of the wives joined the celebration, adding warmth and elegance to the gathering. It truly was an evening to cherish, as we celebrated our shared bonds, honored those who could not attend, and reconnected with old friends.

A sincere thank you to everyone who made this event so special. ❖



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1 2 The Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club, located in Corona Del Mar, with a view of Newport Harbor in the daylight, and in the evening, neighborhood boats cruise the harbor lit up for the holidays.

3 *Sentinel* Editor How Miller greets Jim Lockhart.

4 Art Dolick and Ham Salley

5 Suzanne Lockhart and Lani Dolick

6 Laretta Rustad and Ashton Zimmer

7 Members contributed items for the event raffle.

8 Chapter Secretary Gary Macnamara displays his winning raffle ticket.

9 Frank DiSalvo provided musical entertainment throughout the evening.

10 DJ David Huynh with Chapter Vice President James McLanahan

11 Guest Speaker, LTC Johann Hindert



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- 12 Chapter President Aaron Brandenburg led the meeting.
- 13 Aaron with Chapter Vice President James McLanahan
- 14 AVAG Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto delivered the Invocation.
- 15 Sunburst Youth Academy's Cadet Mendoza sang the National Anthem.
- 16 Bob Crebbs performed the Missing Man Ceremony.
- 17 The Missing Man table
- 18 Eric Berg, at right, presented Debra Holm with a plaque on behalf of the Chapter members in appreciation for her assistance.
- 19 LTC Hindert began his presentation by discussing his book, *German Irregular Warfare*, presenting two attendees with copies.
- 20 Kathleen Brandenburg assisted Aaron with the raffle.
- 21 SFC Bentzen with Starburst Youth Academy Cadets.
- 22 Father and son SF—MSG Greg Gietzen and SFC John Gietzen. John, who was accompanied by his wife Yolanda, became a Life member of Chapter 78 upon graduating from Q-Course in 2021.



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23 SGM Chris Wood and Seneca Wood
 24 Steven Betancourt, Sarah Betancourt, Brenda Clapp, Johann Hindert, Mel McLanahan
 25 Jim Lockhart, Suzanne Lockhart, Linda Salley, Hammond Salley, Gus Populus, Patty Populus
 26 How Miller, Geri Long, David Thomas
 27 Nazia and Nimo Aslami
 28 Mike Jameson, Christine Jameson, Bob Crebbs, Arline Crebbs, Doreen Matsumoto, Art Dolick, Darrell Holm; in front, Debra Holm and Lani Dolick

29 Eric Berg, Jean Rosenberg, Doreen Matsumoto, Martha Reed, Bill Reed
 30 Debra and Darrell Holm
 31 Liz Rios and Norberto Villegas
 32 Robert Pugh, Tammie Burns, Kathleen Brandenburg
 33 Mel and James McLanahan
 34 Doreen Matsumoto and Mary Cruz

SFA Chapter 78 2024 Member of the Year Award



Long-time Chapter member and past Chapter President Chapter 78's CPT (Ret.) James "Jim" Duffy was named the Chapter Member of the Year for 2024. He was honored for his steadfast support of the chapter over the years. Jim has been a constant presence at chapter meetings and all chapter events, and he actively promotes the chapter. Thank you Jim!



Jim was presented with a custom designed tumbler etched with the SFA logo.



April McClure, Sharon Hancock, Jerry Romiti, Regina Duffy-Romiti, Burt Rodriguez, Joenne Rodriguez, Ashton Zimmer, Laretta Rustad, and Jim Duffy.