



SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

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Colonel W.C. "Clint" Norman (Ret.)
Remembering Our Brotherhood

Book Review and Excerpt
***Those Who Face Death: The Untold
Story of Special Forces and
the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance***
by Mark Grdovic

A Legend Before His Time:
"Chargin' Charlie" Beckwith



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FRONT COVER: This issue honors a pioneer of Special Forces, Colonel William C. "Clint" Norman, who will celebrate his 100th birthday on February 23, 2026. A highly decorated and respected combat leader, Colonel Norman retired after 30 years of continuous service, with decorations that include two Silver Stars, the Purple Heart, three Legions of Merit, and numerous other awards and decorations. Jack Damron and Teri Ross, a daughter of COL Norman, have teamed up to write the article honoring him, which you can read in this issue, beginning on [page 3](#). (Cover artwork by Debra Holm)

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From the President | January 2026



James McLanahan
President SFA Ch. 78

Happy New Year, Chapter 78 members! As we step into 2026, I am honored to serve as your new Chapter President. I am continually inspired by this group's dedication to each other and to our Special Forces community, and I approach this role with great optimism for our chapter's future. We have a lot to be proud of from the past year and even more to look forward to in the year ahead.

One of my personal highlights of 2025 was our [Second Annual Valor Luncheon](#) fundraiser in April. We were honored to host Marine

Corps Veteran Tony Viggiani, who recalled the battle for which he was awarded the Navy Cross. Thanks to the hard work of our volunteers and the generosity of everyone who attended, we not only strengthened our Chapter's operating budget but also raised enough to donate \$9,000 each to the Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy and to a fund supporting Afghan commandos and their families. These contributions are making a real difference. Sunburst empowers at-risk youth to turn their lives around, and our donation to the Afghan community is helping our former allies build new lives after the war. It was truly a proud moment to see Chapter 78 come together in force for these worthy causes. Credit here is due to Johann Hindert, my lovely wife Melanie, with strong support from Debra Holm and the staff from [On the Greens Catering and Events](#) (looking at you Sandra Llanes). Thanks!

Later in the year, Chapter 78 was well-represented at the [Special Forces Association National Convention](#) in Las Vegas. This gathering of the Special Forces brotherhood (held jointly with the Special Operations Association's reunion) was a great time (the first one I have been able to attend). There were great speakers and presentations the whole week. It was inspiring to see our chapter actively participating in this national event and upholding the Special Forces traditions of camaraderie and esprit de corps.

Looking ahead, let's build on our momentum by increasing opportunities for camaraderie, charity, and remembrance. In addition to our regular meetings and luncheons, we hope to organize more special activities for our members in 2026. For example, we are exploring:

- A chapter trip to Normandy, France, in June to commemorate the D-Day anniversary and pay tribute to those who came before us— Special thanks to Tom Turney for spearheading this effort.
- Regular "Range Day" outings where members and families can practice marksmanship and enjoy fellowship in a relaxed setting
- A group ski trip during the winter months to strengthen our bonds in a fun, family-friendly environment
- Continuing signature gatherings like our annual Valor Luncheon and other fundraisers that support both our chapter and deserving causes

One event I am particularly excited about is our upcoming Valor Luncheon on the 19th of April. This year, we are honored to have one of our own Chapter members, [Henry "Dick" Thompson](#), as the keynote speaker. Dick is a highly decorated Green Beret and a MACV-SOG veteran whose exploits during the Vietnam War are too big for a Hollywood movie. His firsthand stories and insights will make this luncheon an unforgettable experience. It's not every day we get to hear directly from one of our own in front of the big audiences as we have had at the luncheon. I encourage all of you to attend and invite friends. Having a Chapter 78 member as the keynote speaker is a testament to the caliber of people in our ranks, and it will be a proud moment for us all.

I look forward to working with each of you to make these plans a reality. I invite every member to get involved, whether by coming out to our events, volunteering for projects, or simply sharing your ideas on what you'd like to see from the chapter. Together, we will continue to strengthen our community and support fellow Green Berets; that's how we make Chapter 78 an integral part of the Special Forces family. Thank you for your trust and support. Let's make 2026 even better than last year. ❖

De Oppresso Liber,
James McLanahan
President, SFA Chapter 78



SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

January 17, 2026

Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830

Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos

The Pub at Fiddlers Green
4745 Yorktown Ave Bldg 19,
Los Alamitos, CA 90720-5176

Next month—February 21, 2026

Iron Mike's in Yorba Linda, CA

2026 Meeting Schedule

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

From the Editor | January 2026



How Miller
Sentinel Editor

Our newly elected Chapter President, James McLanahan, is taking over for Aaron Brandenburg as his term expires. James was Aaron's Vice President. Please check out James' first President's Letter, where he lays out some of his future plans for the chapter, confidently building on past successes.

LTC (r) Clint Norman, pictured on our cover, will be 100 years old on 23 February. Here's a tribute to him by SFA Chapter 55's Jack Damron, including Clint's illustrious SF career

and beyond, highlighting his exemplary service, including as CO of B52 in Vietnam, personally rescuing a wounded soldier and directing the safe extraction of his team, and helping plan the now-textbook Son Tay raid to rescue American POWs in North Vietnam. Happy 100th, Clint!

Those Who Face Death, which is the English translation of Peshmerga, was written by now-LTC (ret.) Marc Grdovic, who, along with his Battalion CO, then LTC Ken Tovo, are likely the only two people who were participants in the whole mission from beginning to end.

The mission, during the Allied invasion of Iraq in 2003, was to keep as many as possible of Saddam Hussein's army tied up in the North so they could not be used against the mainland offensive in the South. The two main Peshmerga factions, PUK and KDP, worked toward the common goal of eliminating Saddam's government, aided by Special Forces and others.

A significant obstacle needed to be overcome: eliminate Ansar el Islam, who were Islamic extremists allied with Al Qaeda, so the Peshmerga

would be able to use most of the troops involved in containing that hostile group in the fight to topple Saddam. That suspenseful and hugely successful effort was Operation Gothic Serpent.

Chargin" Charlie Beckwith. A human perspective from a "couple of guys" who worked for him—Irv Jacobs and Ben Rapaport. They say Charlie was destined to become a Special Forces legend, and they give highlights of the huge impact he had on Special Operations, such as his working with Colonel Tom Henry to co-form and activate Delta Force as a counter-terrorism unit. Operation Eagle Claw to rescue American hostages from the Iranians laid bare the necessity for dedicated specops assets and drastically better communications and interoperability between the military branches for these kinds of endeavors. This led to the highly successful joint command under USASOC and JSOC.

But they focus on the human side of Charlie, for example, his penchant for giving some people nicknames (Irv Jacobs became "Jake" and Ben Rapaport became "Rap") to his ability to convey meaning with a few short words, which mixed well with his focus on mission accomplishment and mixing new concepts with the tried and true.

Please feel free to check out the November meeting pics and description.

As you can tell, we use a lot of material contributed by SFA members. Please share with the Regiment by sending us your stories of being deployed with SF. ♦

How Miller
Sentinel Editor

SAVE THE DATE SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2026

3RD ANNUAL SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION VALOR LUNCHEON

FEATURING GUEST SPEAKER

U.S. ARMY LTC (RET.)
HENRY "DICK" THOMPSON, PH.D.

Legendary MACV-SOG Veteran, Codename "Dynamite"
Internationally recognized consultant, educator, speaker and author



COLONEL W.C. "CLINT" NORMAN (RET.)

Remembering Our Brotherhood

By Jack Damron and Teri Ross

Inside the realm of the Special Forces brotherhood, there are those we remember as friends, mentors, leaders, and heroes. As members of the most elite fighting force in the world, then and now, all stand out for their service with admiration and high regard. A pioneer of Special Forces, Colonel William C. "Clint" Norman is one of these soldiers, who will celebrate his 100th birthday on February 23, 2026

During this time, Colonel Norman achieved a number of truly outstanding accomplishments.

At the age of 17, during WW II, he enlisted in the Army and later received his commission from the United States Military Academy in 1949, when he entered into active duty as a young Second Lieutenant, ready to make his contribution to our country and the SF way of life. A highly decorated and respected combat leader, Colonel Norman retired in 1980 after 30 years of continuous service, with decorations that include [two \(2\) Silver Stars](#), [the Purple Heart](#), [three \(3\) Legions of Merit](#), and numerous other awards and decorations. Like all Special Forces soldiers, the Colonel consistently overachieved in everything he did.

After graduation from West Point, he attended the Basic Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, then on to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he completed airborne training. Afterwards, Colonel Norman was assigned to the 511th Parachute Regiment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

In 1952, Colonel Norman won his first Silver Star and the Purple Heart while serving with the 7th Infantry Division in Korea. As a platoon leader, then-Lieutenant Norman and his unit were directed to overtake an enemy bunker that was providing withering fire onto their position. When initial attempts failed, he secured a malfunctioning flame thrower and, while exposed to enemy fire, made the necessary repairs and single-handedly attacked the bunker, employing the flame thrower to overcome and destroy the emplacement.

After completing the Army Advanced Infantry Course and Ranger School in 1954, Colonel Norman was assigned to the Airborne School where he became a "Black Hat" for Tower/Jump Week and then served as a Ranger instructor for the Florida phase.

Following this, in 1956, he completed the Special Forces Officer Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He was assigned to the 77th Special Forces Group where his team volunteered for the development and operation of the first Special Forces HALO detachment.

In 1959, Colonel Norman attended the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, then returned to West Point as a tactical officer, military history instructor, and led the West Point Parachute Club. Completing this assignment in 1963, he attended the Army Language School at Monterey, California, where he studied the North Vietnamese language.



William "Clint" Norman graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Class of 1949

Colonel Norman then moved on to command the 1st SF Group in Okinawa. In 1965, he was assigned to the 5th SFG in Vietnam, where he served as the CO of Detachment B-52, and later as the DCO of the 5th SF Group.

In September 1966, his second Silver Star came during his role as the CO of Detachment B-52 in Vietnam. Colonel Norman learned of a reconnaissance patrol in trouble, receiving heavy ground fire, and requiring immediate extraction. He then boarded a rescue helicopter on its way to extract the team. He directed the pilot to hover down into a hot LZ, where he jumped 15 feet down to the team with the free end of a hoist line, secured the seriously wounded team member, and directed the team to another LZ for rescue. Without question, this action saved the remaining team members and the life of the wounded soldier.

Colonel Norman also won his first LOM while serving as the Deputy Commander of the 5th SF Group, for extraordinary leadership and service to his country.

Later in his career, Colonel Norman distinguished himself as a member of the Office of the JCS, J-3, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, Special Operations Branch, and Chief of the Special Operations Division, with primary responsibility for planning and developing the concept for the Son Tay prison raid into North Vietnam. These raid plans were highly cellularized and known only to a few, key senior personnel. This planning model is still referenced today as part of the development of other classic special operations missions. For this service, Colonel Norman received his second Legion of Merit.

The Colonel was reassigned following his successful tour with the JCS, to the Canal Zone in Panama, from 1973 to 1976. He served as the Commander of the Security Assistance Force for Latin America

(SAFLAN), the 3d Battalion of the 7th SFG, and other support units at Fort Gulick, CZ. Later, as a Colonel, he was assigned as the Director of Operations, J-3, at Quarry Heights, CZ. This position was normally a 2-star billet within the United States Army Southern Command.

From 1976 to 1980, Colonel Norman completed active duty as the Inspector General for the 6th Army at the Presidio of San Francisco. His 3d LOM was awarded at his retirement.

During his career, Colonel Norman also won the CIB (2d award), the Master Parachute Badge, and the Ranger Tab, among others. Post-retirement Army Regulations allowed for the award of the Special Forces Tab.

His family is a continuing source of pride. He resides in Carmel, California, and is married to his bride of 71 years, Jo Ann, who served alongside Colonel Norman as the textbook military wife. Together, they have two daughters, Teri and Heidi; one son, Bryan; five grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. Colonel Norman's family has proudly risen to the service of our country — brother Lewis S. Norman graduated the USMA in 1944 and retired as a General officer in the Air Force after serving with the Army Air Corps; son William B. (Bryan) Norman graduated the USMA in 1980 and retired as a Colonel in the Army, and his wife Carmen, retired as a Lieutenant Colonel; grandson William Parker Bates graduated West Point in 2016 and is still serving on active duty; and granddaughter, Amber Norman, graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2024 and serves today as a Lieutenant in the Air Force. A great family with deep roots in the service of our country.

Congratulations to Colonel Norman. 100 “Happy Birthday” wishes are in order for this Special Forces brother whose life work has demonstrated the true meaning of our “warrior ethos”. Salute. ❖



Colonel Norman was awarded his first Silver Star and the Purple Heart while serving with the 7th Infantry Division in Korea.



Jo Ann and Colonel Norman

Book Review

Those Who Face Death: The Untold Story of Special Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance by Mark Grdovic

By How Miller

LTC (Ret.) Mark Grdovic (pronounced grid-uh-vich) has written an exciting and knowledgeable account of the U.S. Army Special Forces' remarkable efforts in Kurdistan that contributed to the success of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He and his 10th SFG (A) Battalion Commander, LTC Ken Tovo, are probably the only two who saw the operation from conception to conclusion as active participants.

They took painstaking efforts to ensure each ODA knew that the real mission was to tie up several of Saddam Hussein's divisions in the north so they could not be used to combat the ground offensive taking place in the south of Iraq. During pre-mission planning conducted in isolation, he and Ken were able to visit each team early and at the end to make sure they were asking questions without judgment so they could be confident in knowing the commander's intent, and they could act largely independently. This was a key to their remarkable success.

Mark keeps us always abreast of the larger picture, including his many maps, so you feel like you really know what is going on, as though you were actually there. He describes personal interactions, moods, and the thread of gaining trust with the hardened veterans leading the Peshmerga, which translates to "Those who Face Death".

There were many factors to contend with, including a threat from Ansar al Islam, a sizeable Islamic extremist group affiliated with Al Qaeda. They had to be dealt with to allow the Peshmerga the freedom to then turn south and face the Iraqis at the "Green Line", the de facto border between Saddam's control and Kurdish control.

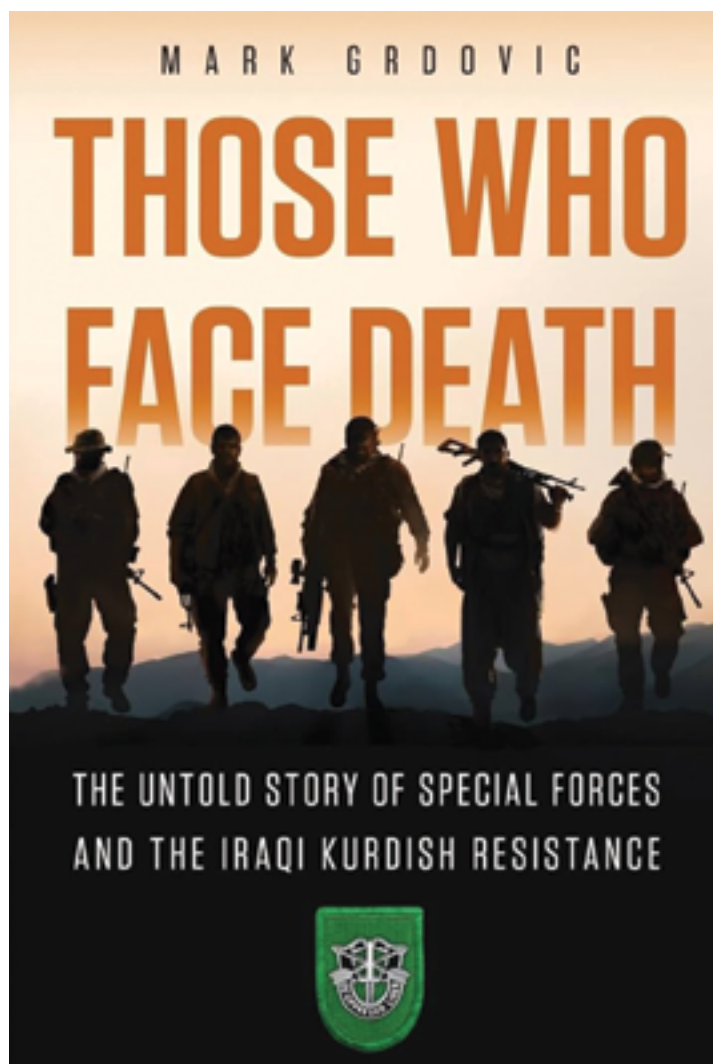
There was the fragile peace between the Kurdish PUK, with whom Mark was embedded, and the KDP, with whom Ken was embedded. They had recently been in a civil war between the two for control of Kurdistan.

Not to mention the U.S. conventional army units having their own priorities, culminating in the PUK taking Kirkuk weeks before the very formidable 173rd Abn Bde was planning to strike.

Mark recaps and summarizes lessons learned at the end of the book. This will be a valuable resource going forward for SF and others in future conflicts, large and small.

Those Who Face Death is both a celebration of the joint achievements of the Peshmerga and Green Berets and all the allied forces, and a clear-headed assessment of lessons learned.

Beginning on [page 6](#) of this issue, Mark shares with us Chapters 11 and 12, from the personal and immediate lead-up to Operation Viking Hammer to eliminate Ansar al-Islam, and the exciting beginning parts of the battle. ❖



[Those Who Face Death: The Untold Story of Special Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance](#)

By Mark Grdovic

Published by Copper Mountain Books 08/15/2025

254 pages

Available for purchase in hardbound, paperback, audiobook, and Kindle at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

From Dr. Dennis Walters

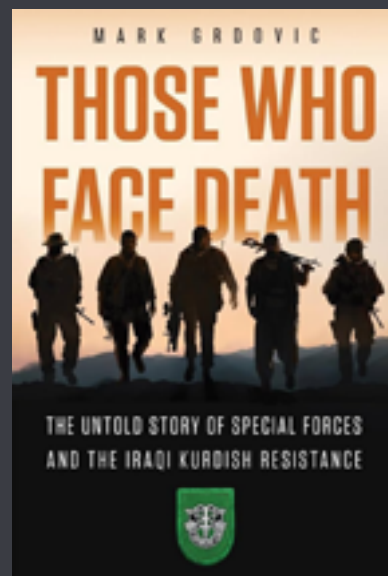
Director U.S. Department of Defense, Irregular Warfare Center

History is replete with stories of soldiers doing the seemingly impossible in the face of overwhelming odds. Mark has created a riveting account of this critical piece of US Army and special operations history, finally providing some long overdue context and perspective.

An Excerpt from

Those Who Face Death:
The Untold Story of Special Forces and
the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance by Mark Grdovic

The Kurdish Woodstock & Operation Viking Hammer



Editor's note: *The mission was to engage Saddam's troops in the North of Iraq during the 2003 invasion and prevent their use in the south against the advancing coalition. Operation Viking Hammer was to eliminate Ansar al-Islam, Islamic radicals who were enemies of the Peshmerga. This would free up troops to use against Saddam that would otherwise need to stay in place to keep Al Ansar at bay.*

By Mark Grdovic

An excerpt from *Those Who Face Death: The Untold Story of Special Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance* by Mark Grdovic, published by Copper Mountain Books, 08/15/2025, pages 111-115 and 117-124.

CHAPTER 11 THE KURDISH WOODSTOCK

To win any battle, you must fight as if you are already dead.

—MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

I GOT UP JUST BEFORE SUNRISE, EVEN THOUGH I'D BEEN LYING AWAKE for far longer. I felt like I had the weight of the world on my mind, and I felt nauseous—partly from apprehension and partly from lack of sleep. I made a cup of coffee to warm my hands from the 45-degree cold night air and climbed the ladder to the roof of the PUK building headquarters on the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah where we had established our SOTF headquarters. I took ten minutes, admiring the mountains in the distance, centering myself, and preparing my mind for the day ahead.

I thought to myself how beautiful Sulaymaniyah was as its lights sparkled in the distance. The morning twilight highlighted the ring of mountains that surrounded the valley. The short-lived springtime grass transformed the area into a lush green landscape in beautiful contrast to the normal drab gray-brown rocky outcrops or snow-covered terrain. I watched a pack of roughly twenty feral dogs roam the outskirts of the PUK compound, training their squad of new puppies to announce any movement along the perimeter.

As I finished my coffee, I considered how much we had done to get to this moment. I was largely responsible for the plan up to this point. Had we done everything we could to prepare for what was ahead? What was the week ahead going to be like? It was surreal to think about the attack that we were about to conduct. I kept asking myself if we had done everything we could to prepare. Would the attack be successful? I couldn't help but think of the expression I kept hearing the Kurds use: "inshallah," if God wills it.

It was time to go. I came down from the roof, and we loaded up in vehicles for the two-hour drive to Halabja.

As we arrived in town, it was impressive to see so many Peshmerga assembled for one battle. Approximately 10,000 Kurdish forces were closing in on Halabja at this point, staging to conduct the attack. No doubt it put quite a burden on the infrastructure to support these people. They all still needed to eat and have water, so there was additional pressure from the logistics of it all—a growing momentum that served as a reminder that the attack needed to happen.

Halabja looked like a Kurdish version of Woodstock—there were Kurdish guys living in every little building and camping out on the lawns next to the buildings with small tarps. When evening came, they built hundreds of campfires with broken wooden trash to warm themselves and cook their last meals of whatever food they found. Everyone stared into the fires, hypnotized by the flames and lost in their own thoughts.

For the last few days, the teams had been conducting some harassment operations with mortars and crew-served weapons and close air support when we could get it. Fortunately, the day before the actual ground attack, we got word that we would finally be receiving the desperately needed lethal aid. The US government had acquired the former Soviet-style weapons and ammunition months ago in Eastern Europe and now the Air Force was finally going to deliver the goods. Not only was it a huge morale boost, but practically speaking, guys had been talking about going into this attack with only a few magazines, which is obviously not what you want to be carrying. Better late than never. The planes landed at the Suly West airfield and our

convoy moved the aid by truck. As we distributed the lethal aid at Halabja, morale went sky-high. It was one step closer to where we wanted to be for the attack.

Soon after we arrived, we got bittersweet news. The IMKI was going to stay out of the fight, but the IGK was all in with Ansar. Unfortunately, our missile strike on the 21st had bad timing. One of the missiles struck their headquarters while they were holding a meeting to vote if they should join or separate from Ansar. We learned it also killed Saddam's liaison officer to Ansar who was in attendance. The IGK alliance created a new problem for us. We had an entire new set of enemy positions on the north flank that we hadn't planned for. A decision was made to split ODA 091 to support the Black Prong and the newly added Orange Prong on the northern flank. The team leader, CPT Eric Fellenz, remained with the Black Prong and Team Sergeant MSG Kevin Cleveland assumed responsibility for the Orange Prong.

Around midafternoon, word reached us in Halabja that Jalal Talabani was trying to broker a ceasefire between the PUK and Ansar with the IGK. When the PUK commanders on the ground heard the news, they did not receive it well. The time for talk had passed. Tovo headed back to Sulaymaniyah to explain why this was no longer an option. He was successful and returned a few hours later.

I was lying on the cold concrete floor, chilled and wide awake. It seemed no one else was sleeping around me, either. Somewhere around 0400 I could hear the first of several people start to stir and check their equipment again. Everybody knew what we were about to do. The air was calm, but the trepidation was palpable.

It felt like we were a medieval army attacking a walled city at first light. You could look out and see hundreds of small campfires. There was a strange calm that was distinctly different from the buzz that had been in the air all week as both sides had sporadic engagements with each other. Now, by contrast, it felt like the night brought a temporary period of uneasy calm over the entire region. It was unsettling.

Everything seemed to almost stop. Suddenly, the world had shrunk and the only things that mattered in that time were what was in your immediate vicinity. The three men sitting near you, quietly checking their gear, trying to eat something or sleep. There was no other world than this one, right now.

As I got myself together and collected my kit, I saw Bafel Talabani. I had developed a considerable amount of rapport with him by this point. I genuinely liked and respected him. He was a critical connector for us because of his English skills, but it's a disservice to him to say he was just an interpreter. As the son of the leader of the PUK, he didn't need to be here, but he was. His cousin Lahur was the same way. They seemed to always be at the most important place at the right time. They felt a responsibility to be a part of this fight. In fact, Bafel's father wasn't happy with him for allowing himself to be in the middle of the danger.

"Where are you going to be during the attack?" I asked. "I'll be with 081," he responded in his British accent.

I nodded. I knew that meant he'd be with the Yellow Prong. "How much ammo you got?" I asked.

"Four," Bafel revealed. I had ten magazines for my M4, which did him no good as they were a different caliber of ammunition than his AK-47. I hated the fact that we had different rifles. My mind hastened back to the Cold War era when 10th Group used to maintain AK-47s for every Special Forces soldier, specifically for the unconventional warfare missions in Europe.

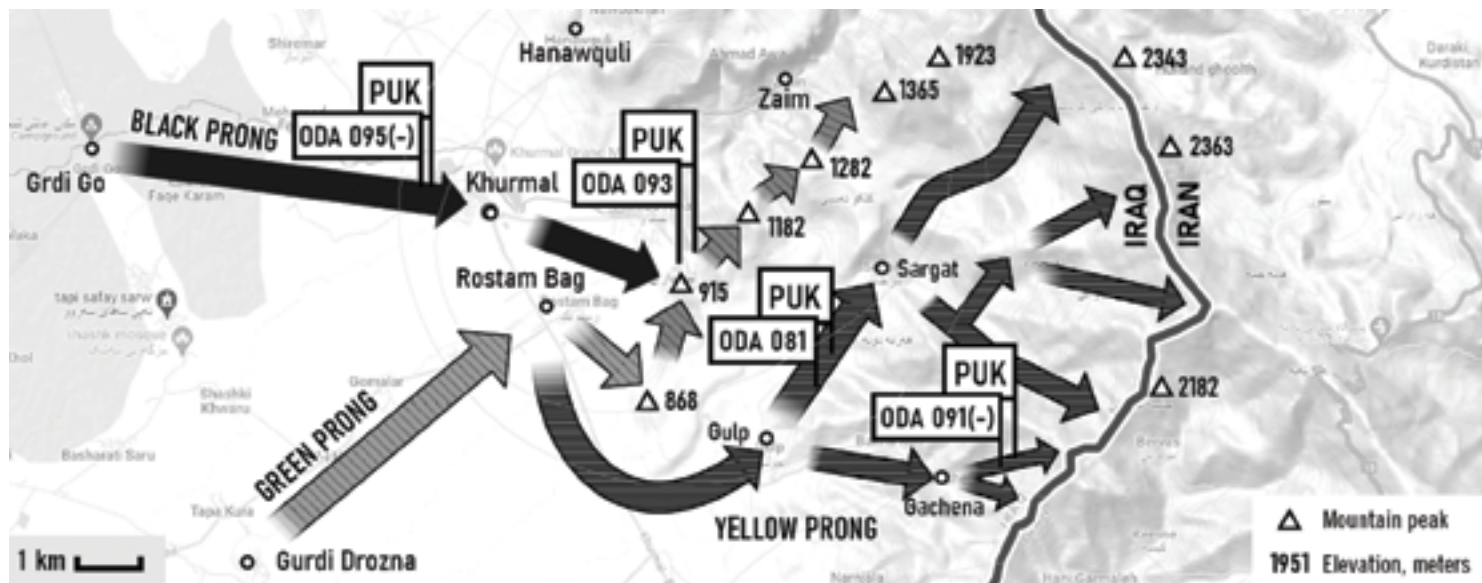
Prior to deploying, lessons from Afghanistan were starting to emerge where simply firing your M4 in a sea of AK-47s could put you at considerable risk because they sound very different. In the middle of a huge firefight with AK-47s, as soon as you hear an M4 fire, it's instantly clear an American is shooting. The Taliban in Afghanistan quickly learned that killing an American also meant cutting off the close air support. Back at Fort Carson, I suggested we consider going in with AK-47s for these reasons. As we discussed this, Tovo thought we would really want our M4s because they had superior optics on them. I pointed out that we could put those optics on the AKs, but it didn't matter because it wasn't an option. In 1996, 10th Special Forces Group turned in all of their operational AK-47s because the prevailing belief was that they wouldn't need them again.



LTC Tovo meeting with Kok Mustafa and the prong commanders in Halabja. Note the blank side of his map on the Iranian side of the border.



MAJ George Thiebes (center) oversees the sand table brief for the attack on Ansar al-Islam.



Map: the Green Yellow and Black Prongs

Sometime prior to this, I had actually talked to Bafel about getting me an AK-47, because I would have preferred to not stand out as the lone American with an M4 amongst a group of Peshmerga.

When I asked, Bafel shot back, “I would love to give you an AK, but my government is just not that comfortable giving you that type of lethal aid. I’ll see if I can get you guys a bolt-action rifle or something.” I must give Bafel credit for his sarcastic wit and sense of humor. In all seriousness, he explained that giving me an AK-47 would mean literally taking one out of the hands of a Peshmerga.

Now as Bafel was getting ready to leave the PUK HQs in Halabja and join up with the Yellow Prong, I reached into my ammunition pouch and pulled out a grenade. “I feel bad that I can’t give you any ammunition, Bafel, but at least I can give you this. I hope you can give it back to me when this attack is done.” I could see the gratitude in his eyes as he accepted the grenade.

His reply spoke to this moment of friendship. “Thank you. Grenades might be a good thing to have,” he said simply.

“Good luck,” I replied, as he moved out to join 081.

By now, everyone was awake and moving around. The calm was over and we were now bracing for the storm. It was mechanical. Everyone knew what to do and was getting it done. At certain points in life, time either seems to speed up or slow down. This was a fast morning and time sped up and seemed to gain momentum, especially during the last hour. My thoughts raced through all the preparation we had been doing and everything that lay ahead of us. Now, there was simply nothing more I could do. It’s like studying for one of the biggest—if not the biggest—exams of your life. At a certain point, you have to close the book and hope like hell you’ve done enough preparation, because it’s about to start.

As I looked out across the field at thousands of Peshmerga, any anxiety I had now started to subside. I wasn’t sure if we would be able to do this in time to stop Saddam, but I was confident that Ansar’s reign of terror over Halabja was about to come to an end.

CHAPTER 12 OPERATION VIKING HAMMER

On difficult ground, press on.

On encircled ground, devise stratagems.

On death ground, fight.

—SUN TZU

IT WAS STILL DARK AS WE MADE THE FIVE-MINUTE DRIVE UP THE DIRT track to the top of Gurdi Drozna. The outpost atop the hill provided a bird’s-eye view to the start of the battle. I was standing alongside LTC Tovo, Kok Mustafa and the Charlie Company Commander, MAJ George Thiebes. We watched as the thousands of Peshmerga in long convoys of pickup trucks jockeyed for positions along the narrow roads. A few dump trucks had been converted into makeshift armored personnel carriers with sandbags and steel plates. Toward the front of each prong, a group of approximately one hundred men assembled. These would be the spearheads for each of the prongs.

At 0600 exactly, the single D-30 artillery piece fired a round, signaling the start of the attack.



The visit to Gurdi Drozna to see the Ansar al Islam defenses.



Members of ODA 081 and 093 on the Green Prong during operation VIKING HAMMER. SSG Chris Crum takes aim with his Barrett 50 cal. Sniper rifle (lower right).

THE GREEN AND YELLOW PRONGS

The objectives along the Green Prong's axis of advance included hills 868, 915, 1182, 1285 and 1365. The hills on the military maps were named based on the elevation of their peaks, depicted in meters above sea level. The Green Prong started their attack toward the first objective, hill 868. The sun was just starting to rise as the prong started taking some sporadic machine gun fire from the first line of enemy forces. The PUK responded with a volley from their 107 mm Katusha rockets, 106 recoilless rifles, 23 mm anti-aircraft gun, and 82 mm mortars. Within ten minutes the first aircraft was overhead. A Navy

F-14 dropped a single bomb on a position blocking the Green Prong and, in an instant, the fighting position was completely destroyed.

The other defenders higher up the valley had full view of the display before them, like fans watching a sporting event in a stadium. In the distance a B-52 dropped a line of bombs along the length of one of the higher ridgelines. I couldn't help but wonder, now having seen firsthand what was coming, if their extremist fervor was starting to waver as the reality of the situation started to sink in.

At the base of hill 868, the prong's commander, Kok Abdulla, remained crouched behind a rock wall with one hundred Peshmerga and ODA 093. As the fires shifted to hilltop 915, a B-52 dropped its ordnance on the next hilltop behind that, hill 1182. Kok Abdulla blew his whistle and the assault force of Peshmerga and Special Forces, following their commander, went over the wall and started the attack.

The Yellow Prong, with ODAs 081 and 091, was already moving about two kilometers to the southeast of the Green Prong. The Yellow Prong's objective was to seize the town of Gulp, which sat on a crossroads to the entrance of two valleys—one of which led to Sargat and the other to Gochina. ODA 081 and a contingent of Peshmerga were to seize Sargat and the chemical/biological testing facility and ODA 091 with their Peshmerga would take Gochina.

The Green Prong's advance and subsequent objectives would take them along the north side of the valley that oversaw the Yellow Prong's advance toward Sargat. This would allow the two prongs to

support each other with fires. SSG Chris Crum was an engineer and demolitions sergeant from ODA 081. He was one of three men who would move with ODA 093 on the Green Prong to help coordinate their efforts. In addition to the array of equipment the ODA had with them, Crum also had his M82 Barrett sniper rifle. The rifle fired .50-caliber match grade, armor piercing, explosive incendiary rounds. The rounds were originally intended for targeting vehicles and helicopters. The round explodes after penetrating a target, hitting the occupants with burning shrapnel as well as potentially igniting any fuel or ammunition.

With the thirty-pound rifle in hand, SSG Crum followed the Peshmerga. In addition to the rifle, he carried seventy rounds, his radio, a couple grenades, a pistol, and some water. Combined with his body armor he was carrying approximately eighty pounds of gear. The Peshmerga, by comparison, had no body armor, carried relatively little ammunition, and had no radios or water. He knew keeping up with them in the steep terrain would be a challenge.

Within minutes, the Peshmerga closed the distance and were flooding over their position, engaging any enemy who might have survived the air strike. As they advanced up the hill, a young Peshmerga about twenty-five meters away from the Americans exploded. They were advancing across a minefield and the craters from the air strikes slowed their movement. On the top of the hill, the Peshmerga swiftly directed the team members along a path between the small rock piles denoting buried mines. There were hundreds of them.

Looking through the scope on his rifle, Crum could see the Yellow Prong below had already cleared Gulp and was pressing up the valley. The ground around him was littered with dead Ansar fighters. There was little time to take stock as they had to push on to hill 915 to maintain contact with the Yellow Prong's advance. As the group crested the top of hill 915, the convoy from the Green Prong had driven up to meet them. After a quick resupply of ammunition and water, the element decided, in the interest of time, to tactically drive toward hill 1182 until they made contact.

In the valley below, the Yellow Prong was met with a hail of machine gun fire from a small hill near the entrance to the village of Gulp. The Peshmerga instinctively started running toward the fire. Suddenly the charge was interrupted by the sound of a low-flying jet breaking the sound barrier. The group stopped charging to look up and see the aircraft.

When a fighter rips through the air, the sound is more than loud—it's violent. Imagine the sound of tearing paper, only thousands of times louder. You can also tell when a fighter spots its intended target. The way it flies distinctly changes to something much more deliberate and aggressive. Watching the aircraft roaring overhead, it felt like we had brought mechanical dragons with us and suddenly unleashed them on the enemy.

As the hilltop exploded and the machine gun went silent, the screaming Peshmerga charged forward along the road into the village. One of the NCOs from ODA 081, SSG Mark Giaconia, was following the Peshmerga assault. His mind made a note of the gunfire to his far left on the high ground and he could hear the distinct sounds of Chris Crum's Barrett sniper rifle. He wondered how his team was holding up, but then his mind quickly returned to his own situation as he noted the severed body parts of enemy fighters along the road.

As the Yellow Prong entered Gulp and moved among the multitude of buildings, they came upon a mosque in the village center. Several dead fighters lay in twisted positions around the perimeter and inside the building. Among the dead were piles of leaflets in Arabic. On the cover were propaganda images: burning American and British flags and a picture of the World Trade Center collapsing. As the group inspected the mosque, another convoy of Peshmerga from the Yellow Prong, along with ODA 091, broke off to the right and continued toward the town of Gochina, roughly two kilometers from the Iranian border.

The Green Prong advanced to just below the crest of hill 1182. Despite the earlier air strikes, the top was still manned by a handful of fighters. The Peshmerga engaged the positions with their 106 mm recoilless rifle and heavy machine guns, causing the fighters to take cover behind a rock formation. SSG Crum spotted the group of fighters with his Barrett sniper rifle and estimated their range as 1400 meters. His first few rounds hit a few feet to the right. The impact caused the rocks to fragment, triggering the fighters to move farther to the backside of the hill.

As the Yellow Prong advanced up the road in the valley toward Sargat, they came under intense fire from the high ground on their left. The team sergeant spotted the fighters and directed the team to fire their M240 machine gun and MK-19 at the positions. SSG Giaconia was carrying an M21 sniper rifle. Looking through his scope, he could make out the bearded fighters taking cover on the hilltop. He could distinctly see them engaging the Green Prong. He inhaled, then slowly exhaled as he squeezed the trigger. The round struck its target and the fighter fell to the ground.

From hill 1182, Crum recognized the sounds of the MK-19 and realized it was 081 and the Yellow Prong. They were both engaging the same group of fighters from two sides. As the fighters took cover from the MK-19 rounds, Crum sighted in on two of the Ansar fighters. Making the adjustment from his last engagements, he fired one round and then another. This time he hit both targets. Crum and his teammates from the Yellow Prong continued to suppress the remaining enemy as the Peshmerga moved closer for their final assault. After they cleared the final positions, the Peshmerga secured hill 1182.

Continuing toward Sargat, the Yellow Prong had to advance through a curve in the valley that took them out of supporting view from the Green Prong. After the previous engagement, SSG Giaconia started to grow concerned that the columns were beginning to get separated from each other. He had lost contact with the other two elements from his ODA, one under the control of CPT Brian Rauen and the other under the team sergeant's control. He was unable to reach anyone on the radio. Just then, as Sargat came into view, the column came under intense fire from their front. Somewhat channelized by the terrain, the members of the prong had little terrain that provided suitable cover.

He quickly took cover behind a small rock wall. The fire was significantly more intense than anything he had previously experienced. The sheer volume of bullets flying back and forth looked like a horizontal rainstorm. SSG Giaconia, completely exhausted from the twelve hours of fighting, was feeling a dark wave come over him. Despite all his previous brushes with death, this was the first moment when he truly felt like they might not survive. Then CPT Rauen, the team

leader of ODA 081, somehow sprinted through the hail of bullets, dodging gunfire to dive next to his guys behind the wall. CPT Rauen was attempting to rally his team, telling them they had to get up, get moving, and press forward to some cover about twenty meters off the road.

Although the situation was incredibly dire, Rauen's surprising calm and positive demeanor triggered something in Giaconia. It reenergized his resolve that they were going to survive this fight, or at least go out fighting. Rauen again took off running amidst the hail of gunfire to his next position. Giaconia realized immediately the captain had dropped his map. A moment later, Rauen returned, running through the fire again. Over the cacophony of gunfire, Giaconia shouted "You're going to get killed! I would have brought it to you."

CPT Rauen shrugged off his concern and responded, "I needed my map."

Giaconia and the Peshmerga with him continued to take fire as they darted from one position to the next, eventually low crawling to get to their final covered position. They were collocated with CPT Rauen, Bafel Talibani, and Randy from the CIA. Bafel was on the satellite phone with his father and Randy joked this would be the last time he would accompany Green Berets on an operation. The valley echoed with the sounds of a heavy machine gun firing from a bunker on the high ground, most likely a Soviet-era 12.7 or 14.5 mm Dshka machine gun.

They realized if they didn't destroy the gun, it was going to destroy them. They hatched a plan to run the couple hundred meters back to their pickup trucks, drive the trucks to the base of a piece of high ground and then carry the M2 .50-caliber machine gun, tripod, and ammunition up the hill to engage the enemy gun. The team's medic, SSG Ken Gilmore, and communications sergeant, SSG Blake Kramer, joined Giaconia and made the mad dash toward the trucks under fire. As they ran with tracers moving past them in both directions, it dawned on the NCOs there was a fair likelihood of accidentally being shot by a confused or frightened Kurd. They started shouting in hopes of not surprising the Peshmerga by running toward them.

As they reached the trucks, the group loaded up and prepared to drive closer to the base of a nearby high ground. As they started forward, a burst of fire hit the windshield and exited the passenger's window without hitting anyone in the cab. They sped 300 meters to the base of the hill and dismounted. With their weapons slung on their backs, Kramer lifted the entire eighty-pound gun and the attached sixty-pound tripod and hefted the entire assembly over his shoulder. Gilmore and Giaconia grabbed as many ammo cans as they could carry and directed half a dozen Kurds to do the same.

Fighting the forty-five-degree rock scree and mud slope, the group clambered 300 meters up the hill. Exhausted and enraged, they dropped their heavy loads to the ground. Instantly, the three-man team went to work. One man straightened the tripod and adjusted the gun in its cradle while another scanned for the target and the third opened the ammo cans and placed a belt into the feed tray. Within a minute Kramer was plunging effective fire onto the enemy bunker 600 meters away. Through his M21 sniper rifle scope, Giaconia watched as bullet after bullet fired from their .50-cal passed through

the bunker where the enemy fire was originating. He watched as the bullets entered the building and passed out onto the other side. The sound of their gun echoed across the valley, drawing the attention of the Ansar fighters, who understood the threat it now posed. Despite the barrage of enemy small arms, the three NCOs wisely sank as low as possible and continued to pour fire into the bunker. After 200 rounds, the enemy gun was finally silent. From their vantage point, they now watched as the Peshmerga assault force flooded over the enemy defenses and arrived at the Sargat facility.

As they made their way to back to Sargat to link up with the rest of the team, one of the Kurds named Wahab stopped them. He had been following along during the firefight trying to catch up to the Americans. Wahab presented them with what can only be described as a charcuterie plate of meat and cheese. Mark looked at him in utter disbelief. “What is this?”

“I figured you might be hungry,” Wahab offered. “I know Brian [CPT Rauen] likes soda, so I brought him a soda, too.”

The soda tasted especially sweet as the group took a short and much-needed break to have some lunch and regroup. They sat a few feet from the facility, which by now was a large pile of rubble with a fence around it. Gunfire several hundred meters away reminded them that fighting was still underway. The trucks that had functioned as personnel carriers earlier were now ambulances. As the trucks stopped, a steady stream of blood flowed off the tailgate and pooled in the road. The team’s medics looked at the wounded and did what they could. A casualty collection point had been established near the first objectives of the day and was manned by the battalion surgeon, MAJ Rick Ong, and his surgical team. They dealt with dozens of wounded, some walking miles with gunshot wounds to reach the collection point.

As the trucks departed, the team did a cursory search of the facility. The team leader decided to delay the facility inspection for the exploitation team that would come in the following morning. Hundreds of charred and mutilated enemy bodies lay all around the facility. ❖



LTC (Ret.) Mark Grdovic shared stories about his time in Iraq during Task Force Viking at the 2022 Special Forces Association Convention in Colorado Springs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LTC (RET) Mark Grdovic served with the US Army for over 23 years, including 19 years as a Special Forces officer. He served with the 10th Special Forces Group, the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center, US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) and the White House Military Office (WHMO). His experience includes multiple deployments to Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan and crisis response operations in Europe and Africa. Since retirement in 2012, he has served as a defense consultant and contractor supporting USSOCOM in a variety of capacities. LTC (Ret.) Grdovic holds a Master’s degree in National Defense Studies from King’s College London. He lives in Florida with his wife, Gretchen.

Visit www.markgrdovic.com for additional details LTC Grdovic and his book *Those Who Face Death*, to read additional reviews, to view bonus material from the book, to request a speaking engagement, or to order his book.



The Untold Story of Special Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance | Mark Grdovic

The Team House hosts Jack Murphy and Dave Parke have a conversation with Mark Grdovic, who recounts his experiences as a member of the 10th Special Forces Group during the Iraq War, particularly focusing on their operations with Kurdish forces.

[Click here](#) to view the episode on YouTube.

The Team House is a weekly livestream/podcast focusing on U.S. Special Operations, intelligence, and military experiences. Episodes are available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube, and other major podcast platforms.

A LEGEND Before His Time: “CHARGIN’ CHARLIE” BECKWITH



By Irv Jacobs and Ben Rapaport

Introduction

“Chargin’ Charlie” Beckwith was destined to become a Special Forces legend. Introduced to the Army at an early age—he watched polo matches at Fort McPherson, Georgia and dreamed of an Army career—he later turned down an offer from the Green Bay Packers in lieu of commissioning from University of Georgia ROTC. While Charlie would never reach the status of general officer—he was too much of a maverick and burned too many bridges behind—his foresight, courage, and perseverance would earn him a coveted place in the annals of the Special Operations community, writ large.

That said, this article is not a typical replay of Charlie's exploits, as exceptional as they were. While we have chosen to briefly recount the highlights of his career chronologically to show his impact on special operations, our intent is to focus as well on how Charlie the man engaged, contributed, and reacted to them. To accomplish this, we have presented, in italics, our personal anecdotes related to Charlie, while the general historical facts remain in normal typeface. The first italicized entry from each of us bears our names; thereafter, only the initials are used. The historical facts are generally well-known, and have been drawn primarily from online sources such as *Wikipedia*, *togetherwe-served.com*, government documents, and Charlie's obituary. We take full responsibility for the accuracy of this narrative.

Early Career

Charles Alvin Beckwith was born in Atlanta in 1929 and went on to become an all-state football player in high school and a three-year starter at guard for the Georgia Bulldogs. Commissioned in the Infantry in 1952, Charlie spent several years in conventional units, first as a platoon leader in the 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division in Korea following the conflict in that theater, and then as a company commander in the 82nd Airborne Division.

After graduating Ranger School in 1958, Charlie's fortunes turned and his ascent in Special Forces and special operations was launched. Charlie would eventually become known for establishing 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment, Delta (Delta Force) and, ironically, through the failure of Operation Eagle Claw, indirectly contributed to the institutionalization of joint special operations.

Volunteering for Special Forces and assigned to the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) after Ranger School, Charlie deployed to Laos in 1960 as an adviser on Operation Hotfoot (later merged into Blue Light). In 1962, Charlie embarked on an exchange tour with the British 22 Special Air Service Regiment that was to define the remainder of his career in special operations.

The Genesis for Delta Force

At that time, U.S. Army Special Forces engaged almost entirely in unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense, providing advice and assistance to indigenous forces and training

them in resistance operations. He deployed with the SAS in the Indonesian Confrontation (and, in the process, contracting leptospirosis which he was not expected to survive), became enamored with the SAS's practices in organizing, assessing, and selecting personnel, their tough, realistic training, and their execution of counter-terrorist tactics and techniques.

Upon returning from service with the SAS, as a captain, he began a long and, initially, unsuccessful campaign of requesting that U.S. Army Special Forces establish a unit along the lines of the SAS, with direct action included in its missions. His voice went unheard for more than a decade.

The Interim Period

Instead, returned to the 7th Group and, in 1964, promoted to major, Charlie became the Group S3 and set out to change the way that Special Forces trained based on the SAS training and operational model. It was at this juncture that the authors first came to know him and came under his influence.

Ben Rapaport: *Having joined Special Forces in Spring 1963 as a 1st Lt., assigned as the 7th Group S-2 (Training), I noted that HQ personnel were anticipating Charlie's imminent arrival from the UK. I did not know why, because everything and everyone were new to me. Then, one day in he walked. I was staring at a six-foot, three-inch muscular man of few words who spoke rapid-fire in a slight Southern drawl. It did not take long for me to recognize that he was an extraordinary officer, motivated, accomplished, and as serious as a heart attack. For whatever reason, Charlie took a liking to me and began calling me Rap.*

Irv Jacobs: *Shortly after Charlie became the S3, I was reassigned from command of an ODA to serve as the Group's Assistant S3 (Training) becoming, in effect, an agent for converting Charlie's training ideas and practices into reality. (He called me Jake.) The core of these was to establish a training base near Blowing Rock in western North Carolina, some 150 miles from Fort Bragg, and to rotate the Group's detachments through it for week-long, diversified, hard-nosed training in the rugged terrain of the surrounding Pisgah National Forest. As a hands-on officer, Charlie could frequently be found roaming the Pisgah terrain checking the training or meeting with his team at the Blowing Rock site to critique it, always with his signature cigarette dangling from his lips.*

This training became consequential for the Group's detachments and personnel that had already begun deployments to Southeast Asia and which were to continue—albeit not under 7th Group command—for the next decade.

BR: *It had been well-established that Charlie was always thinking outside the box, always striving to revolutionize SF training. The Pisgah deployment would be unconventional warfare training in which the ODAs would wear civilian clothes, blend into the community, live among them.*

He stated one objective to me: "Rap, I want the teams to be able to send and receive encrypted voice traffic using other than our military-approved frequencies. You're a Signal Officer ... make it happen."

Still a First Lieutenant, this was way beyond my skill set and authority, but I knew this much: the NTIA (Department of Commerce) manages the U.S. Military's radio spectrum; the FCC, an independent agency, allocates specific frequency bands for amateur and Ham radio operators; and MARS is a DoD ham-radio program. I went to Washington, D.C., met with the FCC, explained the exercise and the importance of Charlie's unusual objective. I returned to Fort Bragg with written approval that, for the duration of the exercise, ODA radio operators can use MARS radio frequencies to transmit and receive encrypted voice and Morse-code messages. Additionally, MARS operators will be authorized to send and receive Team messages, if asked to do so. I'd just earned another Charlie attaboy.

IJ: *It was during this same period that the authors began to know Charlie better and be afforded brief glimpses into his personal life. His sometimes-gruff exterior masked an inner depth of feeling for*



his fellow human being, but always in the context of accomplishing the mission. And according to Beckwith folklore, when the mission involved extended training in the field – such as the Pisgah training – his family – his wife and three daughters – were not exempt from his dictates: he required them to eat C-rations during his absences.

BR: What I best remember were two things about this Pisgah training. Charlie believed many of us needed better skills in land navigation so, before we deployed, he said, “Rap, find me maps of our exercise area that do not have a UTM grid.” Huh? Well, after a little homework, I learned that they exist, and I obtained raised-relief maps from the U.S. Geological Survey for the participants. (That earned me yet another attaboy from him.) One evening, sitting with Charlie on a forest mountain top, he revealed his personal views of Army service. He asked: “Rap, are you married?” “No Sir.” He said: “The Army and marriage don’t mix well.” “Rap, are you religious?” Not very, Sir.” He said: “The Army and religion don’t mix well.”

IJ: From the 7th Group, Charlie volunteered to return to Southeast Asia (Vietnam) in 1965. By this time, both Ben and I were serving in the 5th Group, Nha Trang, Ben commanding the Group Signal Company and I, just having been elevated from a ‘B’ detachment to the Group staff as the S1 (adjutant). (The Group was Provisional until early 1965.) Charlie, however, was not slated to join Special Forces in-theater, so one fine day in mid-1965 I received a phone call from Charlie (not yet deployed) pleading to be assigned to the Group – “Jake, ya’ gotta’ get me into SF!” Pulling some strings, I did manage to accomplish that feat, and when he deployed to Vietnam, he was assigned to 5th Group and given command of Project Delta, a highly-trained force of primarily Chinese Nungs that conducted long-range reconnaissance and quick-reaction operations for the Group.

BR: The singular event that still sticks with me is that I flew from Nha Trang to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon, to meet Charlie on his arrival in country and escort him to Nha Trang. I could not believe my eyes. He exited the commercial aircraft wearing our exclusive jungle fatigues carrying a rucksack and an AR-15. Before I could ask how had he managed to take a weapon from a CONUS arms room, he volunteered: “I zeroed in this weapon at Fort Bragg, and I have no intention of letting it go.”

IJ: Immediately upon taking command of Project Delta, Charlie began to clean house among the existing SF cadre whom he deemed as unfit, but all of whom he would have to replace. In a burst of imagination, he composed a flyer that he wanted to send out to all SF units in the Group soliciting replacements. The flyer, in addition to listing the requirements Charlie established for the volunteers, read: “WANTED: Volunteers for Project DELTA. Will guarantee you a medal, a body bag, or both.” He ran the flyer by me and the Group commander; the latter was of the opinion that there would be no takers. On the contrary, Charlie had to turn people away.

The most well-known of Project Delta’s operations that Charlie led was the successful reinforcement of the ODA at the SF camp at Plei Me, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam about 25 miles south of Pleiku City which, in the larger context, came to be known as the Siege of Plei Me. In addition to the ODA and its “sister” South Vietnamese special forces detachment, the camp was manned by

about 400 Civilian Irregular Defense Group soldiers, local Montagnard irregulars. That battle, that began on the night of October 19, 1965, marked the first major confrontation between North Vietnamese regulars and the U.S. Army in Vietnam. It ultimately involved, in addition to U.S. and South Vietnamese SF and the forces they were advising/commanding, the 1st Cavalry Division, significant Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces, and massive close-air support, and it turned out to be the prelude to the Battle of Ia Drang which began in mid-November 1965. (President Lyndon Johnson called Charlie during the siege to congratulate him.)

In early 1966, Charlie was severely wounded. He had taken a .50-caliber round to the abdomen and, once again, was given little chance of surviving, but was evacuated to make a full recovery. He went on to assignment to the Florida Phase of Ranger School where, in his inimitable style, he revamped the scripted curriculum to Vietnam-oriented jungle training. But this turned out to be little solace for his warrior nature and early 1968, following the Tet Offensive, found Charlie back in Vietnam, this time commanding the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. The 2/327 was instrumental in road-clearing operations that paved the way for the establishment of Firebase Bastogne, located along Highway 547 halfway between the city of Hue and the A Shau Valley.

After a stint with the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, in 1973-74, and now a colonel, Charlie returned to Fort Bragg in 1975 as the Commandant of the U.S. Army Special Warfare School, and this is where his fortunes began to rise in earnest in SOF. Beginning with his report to senior leadership after his return from SAS in 1963 which was relegated to the back burner, Charlie continued to tilt at this windmill at every opportunity thereafter, with similar results. However, his tenure at USASWS now put him in a position where he was more likely to be heard.



Delta Force is Hatched

BR: *In June 1975, I was the Chief Communications-Electronics Officer, USA John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, Fort Bragg; at the time, the legendary General “Iron Mike” Healy was the Commander of the Center, and Charlie was the Commandant of the Special Warfare School. One day, Charlie called stating that he was developing a special-mission unit and asked if I knew and would recommend an SF communicator for this unspecified unit. I chose SFC Angel Candelaria, my senior NCO in the office; he was interviewed and accepted. (Candelaria carried the SATCOM radio in Operation Eagle Claw.) During my tenure, there were rumors of another unit in development, Blue Light. Army DCSOPS, LTG Edward C. Meyer came to Fort Bragg, and MG Robert Kingston (General Healy’s replacement) briefed him on both developing units. General Meyer chose Delta and quashed Blue Light.*

In the late 1970s, with international terrorism on the rise, Charlie was finally given the green light to form his proposed counter-terrorism unit, and in November 1977, Delta Force was officially established by Beckwith and Colonel Tom Henry, the co-developer of the unit. Delta was based on the SAS direct-action model, but included hostage rescue, specialized reconnaissance, and covert operations. It was headquartered at Fort Bragg, interestingly enough in what had been the post stockade, an already fairly secure facility.

After activation of Delta, no time was lost in implementing an assessment process from among an initial set of volunteers. Those who passed the initial screening were put through a grueling selection process in early 1978, involving land navigation problems in mountainous terrain while carrying increasing weight to test their endurance, stamina, and mental resolve. An initial training course was held from April to September of that same year, and in the fall of 1979 – some two years after activation – Delta was certified as fully mission-capable, ready to perform its initial missions.

BR: *In June 1996, as a LTC assigned to DCSOPS, the Pentagon, I was charged with oversight of Active, Reserve, and National Guard Special Forces communications. In September, my boss, MG Charlie Bob Myer, instructed me to join an already-established, DCSOPS-led planning committee to fund Delta. I would be the Signal representative among several Infantry and Armor officers. It was a time when DoD and the Army were seeking ways to save money. On my very first day, I was told that the proposed plan was to issue Delta handheld AN/PRC-6 and the manpack AN/PRC-10, Korea-vintage radios that had been in storage at Anniston, Alabama Army Depot for many years. I immediately left the meeting and went to my boss to report this bizarre proposal. His guidance: “Ben, do what is necessary.” I decremented an Army communications program, redirecting \$6.4M to the embryonic Delta. In December 1978, I got a surprise phone call from Charlie who, in his customary terse manner said: “Rap, I got the money, thanks, and Happy Hanukkah.”*

Into the Cauldron – Operation Eagle Claw

IJ: *During the period that Delta Force was moving toward its goal of mission-capability, both Ben and I had retired from the Army, I then being employed by a training management firm in downtown District of Columbia and Ben by a research-and-engineering firm in the DC environs. We had not seen Charlie in several years. One day, while*

sauntering through the DC business district on a lunch break in early 1980, I happened to glance into a doorway on M Street and, lo and behold, saw Charlie loitering there. We reengaged, and when I asked him what he was doing lurking in the doorway of a business in downtown DC, he responded with his covert, self-effacing smile (yes, Charlie smiled occasionally!) and an innocuous response that left me scratching my head. It was only a month or two later that it became evident that Charlie—and, no doubt, several Delta operators—had been performing reconnaissance training in advance of Operation Eagle Claw.

BR: *It’s hard to believe, but the Special Forces community is quite small. MSG Hugh Gordon was my First Sergeant when I commanded the Signal Company in Vietnam. He told me that he was an ROTC Instructor at the University of Georgia when Charlie was an ROTC cadet there. In 1980, retired, I was working for a Defense contractor that had the task to make recommendations to improve Delta’s communications. My firm chose me to conduct the study. As I was parking my rental car at Delta HQ at Fort Bragg, here was Hugh, now a Wackenhut employee and Delta security guard. We talked of old times, and he told me that after the Eagle Claw mission, Charlie returned to Fort Bragg, and they reunited, reminisced, and shared a bottle of Wild Turkey. As they drank, Hugh watched Charlie cry, not so much for the failed mission, but for the eight who died in the Dasht-e-Lut desert.*

If Charlie was to have gone down in flames, nothing could have been more cataclysmic than Eagle Claw, the failed operation to rescue the 52 Americans taken hostage on 4 November 1979 – shortly after Delta became mission-capable – and held in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Volumes have been written on the whys and wherefores of that operation that took place in late April 1980, but, in brief, it failed because of unexpected weather, maintenance problems within the helicopter contingent, command-and-control problems among the multi-service component commanders, and the tragic collision of a helicopter and a ground-refueling aircraft, resulting in eight fatalities and three WIAs. Charlie was the ground force commander for the operation, leading almost one hundred Delta Force personnel and a number of other special operators.

BR: *In the early 1980s, Irv and I wound up in the same research-and-engineering firm in Northern Virginia, supporting mainly DoD agencies. In the late 1980s, Charlie was in DC. We hadn’t seen him for several years, but he knew where we worked, visited the company, and gave us an unclassified, but detailed, account of what went wrong in the desert. He still had not found himself at peace.*

While Eagle Claw itself may have failed, it yielded some very specific force-structure lessons that have been institutionalized within special operations and proven themselves time and time again:

- Most importantly, Eagle Claw highlighted the inability of the service components to cohesively work together. This resulted, in April 1987, in the establishment of the U.S. Special Operations Command, a unified combatant command with four subordinate service component commands and one sub-unified command, Joint Special Operations Command. Delta Force, created by Beckwith, is under the operational control of JSOC.

- Creation of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, to remedy the lack of well-trained Army pilots capable of low-level night flying.
- Creation of the Joint Communications Unit, to standardize and ensure interoperability of the communication procedures and equipment of JSOC and its subordinate units.

Operation Eagle Claw effectively ended Charlie's military career. Disillusioned with the outcome of the operation, he retired from the Army in 1981 and formed a security consulting firm in Austin, Texas. He died peacefully in his sleep at home on June 13, 1994, but he is definitely not forgotten. He had begun beating the drum for changes in Special Operations early in his career, and continued to do so while being thwarted at every turn. But through his foresight, initiative, and perseverance, he forever changed the nature of Special Forces training, and he ultimately created an elite counter-terrorist unit that set the bar for similar units worldwide. It's no surprise that a November 12, 2020 *Business Insider* article included Charlie Beckwith as one of the "3 legendary leaders who made America's special-operations units into the elite forces they are today."



At left, Army Major General James B. Vaught, who was the Joint Task Force commander for Operation Eagle Claw, and at right, COL Charlie Beckwith, who had been appointed as the ground force commander, before the start of the mission in April 1980.

Charlie, The Man

Throughout his military career, Charlie was known for using colorful, graphic, often outrageous language, and it was this turn of phrase that frequently defined him. You'll find many of his memorable quotations online, but here are just two examples. "Make a simple plan, inform everyone involved with it, don't change it, and kick it in the ass." After the conclusion of the disastrous Eagle Claw mission, Charlie met President Carter who thanked him, and Charlie asked if he could tell the President something. When granted permission, Charlie said, "Mr. President, me and my boys think that you are as tough as woodpecker lips" (Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis. The Last Year of the Carter Presidency*, 1982).

To complement this narrative, we've included how several others viewed Chargin' Charlie Beckwith. The following comments from the media are listed in no particular order of relevance.

- "The mettle of the man [Beckwith] is best evidenced by his decision to abort in the desert. In militarily untenable circumstances, he unhesitatingly elected life of his command over personal martyrdom in a historical footnote. One can only speculate where a lesser soldier would have led us" ("Reader Comes to Beckwith's Rescue," MR Letters, *Military Review*, January 1984, page 69).
- "Beckwith said the mission was doomed by too much internal bickering among bureaucrats who did not have enough experience with high-risk missions. ...I do regret not putting my foot down more often," he said in 1982. But when asked if he objected to history's portrayal of him as the leader of a calamitous mission, Beckwith replied with characteristic bluntness: "It's the damn truth" ("Obituary: Col. Charles Beckwith; Led Failed Iran Raid," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1994). *The New York Times* announced his death on June 14, 1994: "Colonel Charlie Beckwith, 65, Dies; Led Failed Rescue Effort in Iran." In it Charlie remarked: "It was the biggest failure of my life. I cried for the eight men we lost. I'll carry that load on my shoulders for the rest of my life."
- "As [U.S. Navy Captain Paul B.] Ryan (*The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission: Why it Failed*, 1985) puts it, once the American servicemen were inside the embassy 'it was certain that the Iranian guards would have been met by a stream of bullets', and in the words of 'Chargin' Charlie' Beckwith—another commander of the operation—the Iranians would simply have been 'blown' away. When asked by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher at the 16 April briefing what would happen to the Iranian captors. Beckwith reportedly replied, 'we're going to shoot each of them twice, right between the eyes'" (David Patrick Houghton, *US Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, 2001, page 9). This last was in keeping with the sign that Charlie kept on his desk at Fort Bragg, which Kai Bird pointed out in *The Outlier* (2021, page 528): "Kill 'em all. Let God sort 'em out."
- "I knew Charlie and his men—their attitudes, their skills, their competence, and their leadership—and I have no doubt that if we could have gotten them to Tehran, they would have pulled it off. There is ample evidence from former hostages interviewed that suggests that the rescue attempt would have been successful" (Eric L. Haney, *Inside Delta Force*, 2002, page 256). CSM Haney was a member of Delta who took part in that operation.



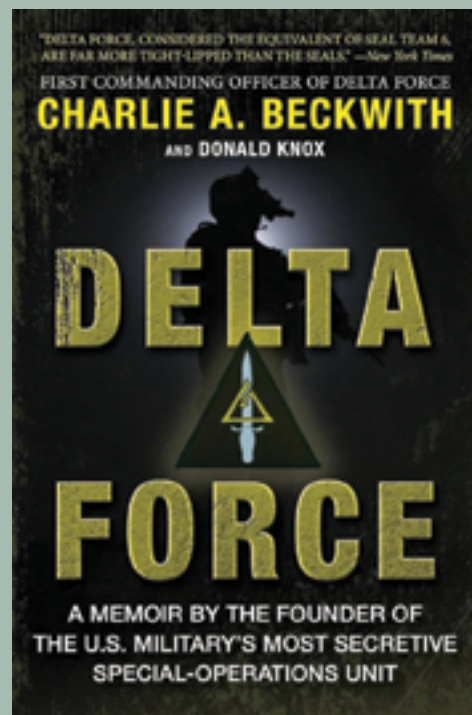
- “Fourteen years earlier [1980], on his dream mission, on the sands of a place named, Desert One, in Iran he [Charlie] had watched his Operation Eagle Claw go up in flames in an accidental collision of two aircraft. His Delta Force had gone on to many successful missions since that searing failure. He was tough—of mind and body—surviving severe wounds in two wars and slaying bureaucrats who stood in the way of soldiers’ needs. He was ‘old SF,’ and he was an honorable man” (John H. Corns, *Our Time in Vietnam*, 2009, 63). (LTG Corns and Charlie crossed paths several times during their respective careers.)
- And finally, as Colonel Jesse L. Johnson so precisely states: “That was Charlie Beckwith’s true legacy— not the failure of Eagle Claw, but the success of the changes that he fought for in its wake— changes that would save many American lives over the next four decades. He never got over it, though— Desert One” (*Warfighter. The Story of an American Man*, 2022, page 153).

You can see a short clip of Charlie on C-SPAN, (c-span.org), December 31, 1989, discussing the aborted mission, and listen to a 1990 online interview with Charlie at texashistory.unt.edu (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph779623/>).

Charlie is honorably mentioned in Billy Waugh and Tim Keown, *Hunting The Jackal* (2004). He was awarded the USSOCOM Bull Simons Award and inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame in 2001, into the Commando Hall of Honor in 2010, and designated a Distinguished Member of the Special Forces Regiment in 2012.

We will always remember Charlie, the man, the myth, a soldier of incredible talent, foresight, resilience, courage, leadership, and bravery, a larger-than-life American version of a British SAS operator. He was, indeed, a legend before his time. ❖

Postscript: Members of Charlie Beckwith’s family have read the draft of this article and have consented to its publication.



Delta Force: A Memoir by the Founder of the U.S. Military’s Most Secretive Special-Operations Unit

In this acclaimed memoir, Col. Charlie A. Beckwith tells the story behind the creation of Delta Force—the vision, battles, and hard-won lessons. He takes readers inside the formative years of America’s premier counterterrorism unit—from the bureaucratic fights to the high-stakes missions that shaped its legacy. It’s an unfiltered look at the man, the mission, and the elite force he built from the ground up.

Available for purchase on [Amazon](#) in hardcover, paperback, Kindle, and audiobook.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Irv Jacobs is a retired Infantry officer and Ben Rapaport is a retired Signal Corps officer.



Irv Jacobs, at right, and Ben Rapaport, at left.

SFA Chapter 78 November 2025 Chapter Meeting

Photos by How Miller and Doreen Matsumoto



1

Guest Speaker, James Stejskal Army SF Veteran, Author and Historian

1 The guest speaker for November's chapter meeting was James Stejskal, a former Special Forces and intelligence professional. Now an author of both non-fiction and historical thrillers, including *Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the U.S. Army's Elite, 1956–1990*.

Stejskal gave an overview of his background before presenting on the book's focus: the 39th Special Forces Detachment (Airborne), or Detachment "A," a clandestine Green Beret unit based in West Berlin from 1956–1984, offering a rare look into the unit's mission and legacy.



2

2 DET West, a group of ASOT instructors, made a presentation to Chapter 78's officers of a plaque thanking the chapter for its support of their critically injured teammate, John Greenbush. John was struck by a car in May 2025 while on the job and suffered severe head and bodily injuries. Though now home, he faces extensive rehabilitation. DET West has established a GoFundMe (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/assist-john-greenbushs-fight-to-recover>) to support his ongoing care and shared a touching video from John expressing his gratitude.

SFA Chapter 78 Members Attend the C Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and Special Operations Detachment North 2025 Dining Out

C Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and Special Operations Detachment North invited SFA Chapter 78 to join them for their 2025 Dining Out on November 14, 2025, at The Reef on the Water, Long Beach. Chapter Vice President James McLanahan, and chapter members How Miller and Tom Turney represented Chapter 78 at the event. C Company presented the Chapter with a plaque in appreciation of our support of the Company.



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