



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 17, ISSUE 3 • MARCH 2026

**CATHOLIC PRIEST TENDED  
TO HIS FLOCKS IN LAOS  
WHILE WAR RAGED**

**TEXTBOOK SPECIAL OPS  
THE SON TAY RAID**

**“Another died in my place.”  
PART 2**

**SAVE the DATE:  
3rd Annual Special Forces  
Association Valor Luncheon**





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**FRONT COVER:** Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate on a trail in Laos in 1973. Known to many as “Father B,” he was in Laos from 1956 until it fell to the communists in 1975. Learn about him in Marc Yablonka’s “Catholic Priest Tended to His Flocks in Laos While War Raged” on [page 4](#) of this issue. (Photo by Steve Schofield)

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# From the President | March 2026



James McLanahan  
President SFA Ch. 78

## Better With Friends

For the last two years, every March and April, the Chapter has been going into high gear for our annual fundraiser, which we have been calling the Valor Luncheon. It started when our friend Earl Plumlee added time to a trip he was already taking to California to be our first keynote speaker. I have been told he hit it out of the park. The other thing that happened that year was our Chapter VP (me at the time) had to go to Columbia with one of Earl's friends for work. That left the chapter with one less helper, and it was the guy, yours truly, who'd had the bright idea to do the thing in the first place. Luckily for the chapter, my wife is a great organizer, motivator, salesperson, and most of all, entertainer. So, Earl, Mel, Debra Holm, Johann, and Chapter 78 (with some help from their friends at AVAG and big help from the girls at Tennis Serves Others) created something great. They raised money not just for our operating budget but for the Afghan Commandos and Sunburst Youth Academy. All while I was on a work trip out of the country. Easy.

Much to my delight, my wife had delivered, just as I had promised the Chapter leadership she would. Of course, they were a little deflated when I returned, and they were stuck with me instead of her for the rest of our meetings. They made me promise not to make her mad so she would do it again. And she did. That year, we had more friends come. More friends invited more friends. We had Navy Cross recipient Tony Viggiani as our speaker. We almost filled the venue. This year, we will fill it.

Our keynote speaker for this year is MACV-SOG legend (and Chapter 78 member) Henry "Dick" Thompson. He has been making the rounds nationally, and if you haven't seen him on the Mike Force podcast, you should. This year, we have more chapter members than ever helping out. And it's great.

Lastly, friends of Chapter 78 have been donating exciting things to auction and raffle. This year, we have a tour of Catalina Island with Catalina Horseback, a custom Beaver cowboy hat from Bowman Hat Co., a custom surfboard from Wallin Surfboards, and one-on-one training with 7-time American Thai boxing champion Bryce Krause! I am sure we will get something special, as we always do, from The Heavy Machine. We have companies returning to sponsor tables. And people bring more friends and family every year. It's outstanding. And all it took to get the ball rolling was trusting friends while I was gone. Thanks to you, the momentum is compounding. We don't deserve you, but we are glad to have you. Let's go. ❖

*De Oppresso Liber,*  
James McLanahan  
President, SFA Chapter 78



## SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

### March 21, 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

### Guest Speaker: Joseph Ivanov

10th SFG veteran, One Brief Head of Growth/SOF, he spearheaded the Normandy French Resistance Monument project, which was dedicated during D-Day week 2022 in St. Marie du Mont next door to Sainte-Mère-Église (Featured in Fall 2020 *The Drop*).

Next meeting:  
Sunday, April 19, 2026  
**Valor Luncheon**  
On The Greens Catering  
and Conference Center  
(Navy Golf Course)

## 2026 Meeting Schedule

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

# From the Editor | March 2026



How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

**Marc Yablonka** brings us a story about the fabled **Father Lucien Bouchard**, who tended to the Hmong and others in Laos for nearly two decades while there was an intense secret war raging all around him. Having faced all kinds of hardships, he is now 95 and still bringing help and peace to all in Tewksbury, MA. You can also read more about Fr. Bouchard in Marc's compelling book ***Tears Across the Mekong***.

Last month's issue included a tip of the beret to **John Gargus** for his definitive and interesting book about the planning, execution, and results of the now-textbook 1970 **Son Tay Raid** to rescue American POWs a mere 25 miles from Hanoi. This month we bring you a sample of the book, highlighting the broad spectrum of intercepts we were receiving about the NVA SAM anti-aircraft missile systems that were arrayed against us. He brings you into one of the RC-135 planes, at 35,000 feet over the Gulf of Tonkin, that were assembling a coherent picture on the activities and passing that on in real time. It was amazing what we could detect, including transmissions from identifiable individual launch sites. Next month we will have Part 2. Be sure to return for that.

"In Another Died in My Place, Part 2," Chapter 78 member **Greg Walker** shares more of his hard-hitting article about an ill-fated mission in 1991 El Salvador, analyzing decisions made and their consequences, along with efforts made to cover up the facts, which were already unpublicized due to the secret nature of the mission. Greg's efforts, along with those of many others, have led to medals being awarded to those who participated. He also brings us a clearer picture of the brave souls who perished.

At our 3rd annual **Valor Lunch** on April 19th, **Henry "Dick" (code name "Dynamite") Thompson**, whose two-volume **Dynamite** series is a riveting 'how to' book about MACV-SOG, will be the keynote speaker. His books give the whys and hows of how he organized, ran, learned, and adapted his recon teams to be eminently successful behind enemy lines. He is an entertaining and authoritative speaker.

This year's SFA National Convention will be in June at Ft. Walton Beach.

Feel free to check out pics of our January chapter meeting back at JFTB Los Alamitos.

Thanks for checking us out. Please enjoy and keep sending us stories about where and when you were combat deployed. ❖

How Miller  
Sentinel Editor



## YouTube

## Whats New On YouTube

@sfachapter78?



### Fresh Whole Blood in Afghanistan | How Special Forces Medics Rewrote Battlefield Trauma Care

Special Forces Medical Sergeant Scott McHugh walks through the hard lessons, improvised solutions, and life-or-death decisions that reshaped modern battlefield medicine during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



### Your Email Is the Weak Point: Digital Self-Defense for Everyday Life

Aaron Maben, a seasoned security professional and Green Beret, breaks down why your primary email address is the root of trust for your entire digital life, and how attackers use it to compromise identities, finances, and personal data.



### I Walked With Heroes — MACV SOG, and The Men Who Never Lost Their Cool

Vietnam veteran Jerry Guzzetta reflects on his service with MACV-SOG Command and Control Central, the men he served beside, and the heroes whose courage defined an era of Special Forces history.

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## SFA Chapter 78 January 2025 Chapter Meeting

Photos by Doreen Matsumoto, How Miller, and Debra Holm



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## Guest Speaker, Ryan Antes

**Former 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, OEF/OIF Veteran  
Participant in the Jessica Lynch rescue mission**

**1** Ryan Antes recounted his experience as the radioman on the 2003 Jessica Lynch rescue mission, the first successful rescue of an American prisoner of war since World War II, and the first ever of a woman. While he still has nightmares about the mission, he encouraged our members not to hesitate to share their stories—to be brave enough to drag them into the light, shedding that light on their demons. His presentation, “Perspective is a Super Power,” included a review of the Rogers’ Rangers Standing Orders, with advice that is as useful today as it was in 1759. If you missed his talk, be sure to watch Long Beach Post’s interview of Ryan on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co-p7wCzUoA>).

**2** Chapter President James McLanahan presents Ryan with a Chapter 78 coin.

**3** MSG Chris Lasala of C/1/19th SFG invited chapter members to attend upcoming recruiting events to be held at Camp Pendleton and to share their experiences with potential recruits.

**4** Tom Turney discusses plans and details for the upcoming Chapter 78 trip to Normandy for the 82nd anniversary of D-Day.

**5** Left to right, standing, Erik Berg, Ramon Rodriguez, and Wayne Ogelvie; seated, Travis Mayfield, and Mark Miller.

**6** Left to right, Jim Duffy, Scott Manley, guest of Steve Bric, who is seated to his right.

**7** Left to right, Martin Foley, guest of Greg Floor, seated to his right.

**8** Left to right, James Carter and Mike Jameson.

**9** Left to right, Chapter 78 Treasurer Richard Simonian, Ham Salley, and Robert Casillas.

**10** Lynn and Jerry Guzzetta

**11** Unofficial chapter historian, Art Dolick brought in an artifact from his extensive collection to share with meeting attendees.

**12** Len Fein

**13** Left to right, Chapter VP Don Deatherage and long-time Chapter Secretary Gary Macnamara.

# CATHOLIC PRIEST TENDED TO HIS FLOCKS IN LAOS WHILE WAR RAGED

By Marc Phillip Yablonka

Father Lucien Bouchard's calling was not a political one, yet politics—and war—were constantly in his path.

Father Bouchard is a legend to practically anyone who was in Laos during the years of the secret war. From the lowland Lao and Hmong hill tribes to CIA, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), and Air America personnel, everybody knew “Father B.” They ought to have. He was in Laos from 1956 until it fell to the communists in 1975.

Father's goal was to give Mass and instruct the locals in the tenets of Catholicism in as much of the country as it was safe to travel. That included two years between 1958 and 1960, when he sought to baptize and teach as many who chose to attend the Central Mission in Sam Neua.

Very often, Father B, who speaks fluent French, Lao, Hmong, in addition to English, found himself working outside the boundaries of what one would think would fit the job description for a Catholic priest.

“In 1957, ten villagers from the mountains came to me because there were no doctors around, and they'd had problems having their teeth pulled. I was afraid they might hemorrhage. I had Novocain from the hospital in Luang Prabang,” he told me in 2016 when I interviewed him for my book *Tears Across the Mekong*.



Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, with Hmong hill tribes' people in Laos. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of the US Air Force; Public Domain)



Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, with Hmong villagers in Phu He, Laos in 1971. (Photo courtesy Galen Beery Collection via Hmongstory Legacy, Fresno State University)

He used it on the villagers and they survived the ordeal. Another ordeal involved a villager who needed to give his horse a shot of penicillin but was afraid the animal would kick him. So, Father B was enlisted.

“I tried to help them as much as I could,” he said at the time.

That help also extended to the two leper colonies the Massachusetts native helped to set up with the assistance of another Laos legend whom everyone knew and revered: Edgar “Pop” Buell, a Steubenville, Indiana, farmer who worked for the International Voluntary Services, a Peace Corps-like agency that had offered him a job as agricultural adviser for Laos after his wife passed away in 1958.

Pop applied the farming skills he used on his Indiana farm and organized relief aid to villagers before being forced to flee Laos when it fell to communism in May, 1975. Pop’s extrication from Laos as the communist forces drew nearer reads like a movie script.

The U.S. Embassy in Laos learned that Pop was on a joint North Vietnamese Army/Pathet Lao hit list during the time they were beginning to overtake Laos. CASI (Continental Air Systems, Inc.) pilot Lee Strouse dressed Pop up as a pilot, took him to the airport in Vientiane, and flew him to Bangkok, where he lived until he died in 1980.

“Pop used to help giving me pots and pans. He helped with the rice drops that the Air America Helio Courier kickers carried out,” Father B said, remembering that, very often, Pop would ask him to help with much needed mosquito nets in the villages.

Thoughts of Pop drift away and are replaced by thoughts of the lepers in Laos.

“I felt bad for the lepers as individuals. They had to live by themselves a quarter mile from the village. Their relatives would bring them rice.”

Whenever Father B would tend to the lepers, it was a three-hour walk not without peril. They were close to Pathet Lao strongholds, which meant that some lepers’ family members did not want to risk bringing food and needed medicines to their relatives living there.

In one case, Father B took medicines to one of the lepers for six months straight. Others would only travel to the lepers at night.

“They never felt very secure,” said Father B, “because the Pathet Lao would come to visit their own families in [nearby] villages at night. People visiting their relatives in the leper colonies hoped to get there when there were no Pathet Lao around.”

On one such occasion, Father B’s life was in danger when, though previously warned by three women with leprosy, the Pathet Lao had stalked him as he walked along the trail to the leper village. On that occasion, they were by his side when the Pathet Lao surprised them along the trail.

All at once, the women shouted to the cadres, “Don’t shoot him. He’s a priest!” Their exclamation was apparently enough to dissuade the Pathet Lao from taking his and their lives, and the cadres marched off into the jungle.

Even in the middle of a war zone, Father Bouchard was not then and is not today above looking at the bright side of life in the leper colonies.

“Some were married and were quite happy,” he recalled.

Though a Catholic priest, Father Bouchard admits that most of the people he helped practiced Buddhism, the main religion in Laos. But his help had nothing to do with attempting to bring them to the Catholic faith.

“I would visit the hospitals at Long Tieng (headquarters of the CIA), and the hospitals for wounded soldiers. Some of the patients were Hmong, some were Khmu Lao, some were animists, and some were Christians. It made no difference to me. I would visit everyone.”

And though he was not a trained physician, he would help distribute medicines in the villages he received from Dr. Charles Weldon, who along with the Doctor’s first wife, Dr. Patricia McCreedy, were physicians in Laos employed by USAID, or from USAID medic and former Vietnam Green Beret Steve Schofield.

Father B would then help the sick and have a Sunday prayer meeting for whoever wanted to attend.

Life was pretty much cyclical for Father B. When he was up at Sam Thong, an encampment for the Hmong SGUs (Special Guerilla Units) under the command of Hmong Royal Lao Army Gen. Vang Pao, he and Pop Buell would be flown by Air America into various villages and take care of whatever needs they could.

Air America would then fly them back to Vientiane to obtain more medicine from Dr. Weldon. They’d sneak in a Mass in Laos’s capital city, and then be flown back to Sam Thong to do it all over again.

During one such stopover in Sam Neua, things quickly went from routine to extremely dangerous.

“I was painting the doors of the nuns’ convent when the Pathet Lao started attacking Sam Neua near the main mission there. On the last day of the siege, the Pathet Lao got hold of a mountain overlooking the city. They shelled it with mortars. I had to get out.”

Father B left at noon that day along with doctors from an organization based in the Philippines called Operation Brotherhood, who had a Jeep, so they were able to make a fast getaway.

However, Father B and a group of 13 Christians equipped only with blankets and rice in their backpacks walked all the way to Xieng Khouang, all the while being pursued by the Pathet Lao.

Along the way, Father B and his entourage encountered some Filipino doctors who were encamped in a village helping locals take care of health problems.

“Some people told us that the enemy was ahead of them and coming toward us. When the Filipino doctors heard that, they turned around and began going back from where they had come and, unfortunately, fell into Pathet Lao hands.”

The priest lamented, “I had told them it was best to keep on going, that when we got closer to Xieng Khouang, we would hide.”

Sadly, Father never heard what happened to the doctors, but he will never forget the fact that after he and his entourage left them, they walked for six long days and nights until reaching Xieng Khouang.

“It was a close shave, but I’m still free from the Pathet Lao,” he said happily.

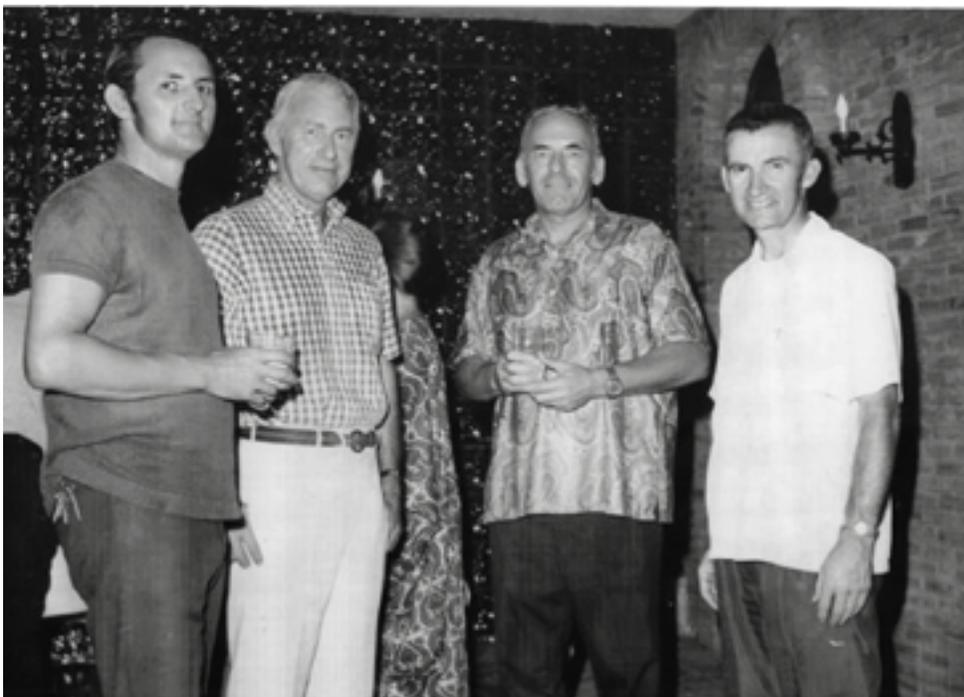
Visiting those remote outposts and SGU bases was part of Father B’s work for 14 years. He always had to be prepared for his liturgical work by night and attacks from the Pathet Lao by day, which is why he made it a practice to never say Mass in the mornings.

For his own “comfort,” his living quarters more often than not were a small four-foot-high lean-to in which he would often bivouac atop a mountain. Under it, he would dig a hole in the earth one foot deep and settle in as best he could for the night with the jungle and all that it conjured up surrounding him.

In between his hundreds of trips into the bush to minister to the health and religious needs of lowland Christians, Lao Thung and Hmong tribespeople, Father B would be invited back to Vientiane where he was afforded the chance to study the Lao language and to teach math and geography in addition to religion.

Then he would be right back where he started having to seek permission from the authorities at the American Embassy in Laos’ capital city to go to the villages again.

“Things were falling apart. I went to visit the bishop, who had previously taken stock of the villages and the safety factor in reaching them. The bishop had visited the SGU strongholds in Sam Thong and Long Tieng and determined that things were very dangerous,” Father B remembered.



The late International Voluntary Services and USAID volunteer Larry Woodson with (then) US Ambassador to Laos Charles Whitehouse, Bill Gill, and Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, at a US Embassy Party sometime between September 1973 and April 1975. (Photo courtesy Larry Woodson)



Father Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate on a trail in Laos in 1973. (Photo by Steve Schofield)



Father Lucien Bouchard, at the retirement home of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Tewksbury, Mass., blessing Xia Vue Yang, co-founder of the Lao, Hmong, American Veterans Association of Sheboygan, Wisc., and his wife Pa Vang Yang. (Photo courtesy Xia Vue Yang)

“By this time, half of the city of Vientiane had been taken over by the Pathet Lao. I went to Steve Schofield’s house, and we talked until 11:30. Steve felt that it was too dangerous for me to leave his house or even to be driven the six kilometers to where I was staying. We would have been ambushed.”

So, Father stayed overnight with Steve, and the very next day, on May 8th, 1975, got a visa to leave Laos as whatever vestige of freedom that remained in country was crumbling all around him.

He crossed the Mekong River by boat and pulled up at Nong Khai, Thailand. God’s providence must have been shining down on Father B that day because, right after he left, he later learned from fellow priests, two Pathet Lao cadres came looking for him and, undoubtedly, would have carted him away to years of servitude in one of the notorious communist re-education camps known in Laos as the “Seminar.”

As Father said, it was a close shave, but today he is still free from the Pathet Lao. Among many other liturgical opportunities throughout his life, that freedom meant that he could deliver the Mass in French to Haitian refugees at Christ the King Catholic Church in Perrine, Florida from 2005 to 2013.

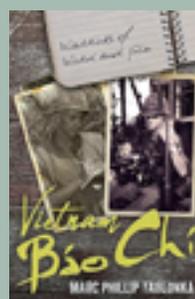
As for Father Bouchard’s future, the soon-to-be 97-year-old Catholic priest, now a resident of the Oblate Retirement Home in Tewksbury, Mass., he told me in 2016, “I’ll leave things in God’s hands. If He wants me to keep ministering, or wants to call me to Him, that’s okay, too.” ❖



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marc Yablonka is a Burbank, Calif.-based military journalist and author whose reportage has run in the US Military newspaper the *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, *Vietnam* magazine, and many other publications. In addition to being a contributing writer for the *Sentinel*, he is also the senior reporter for the Sacramento-based *Hmong Daily News*. He has written four books on the Vietnam War, the

most recent of which are [Vietnam Bao Chi: Warriors of Word and Film](#), about combat correspondents and photographers who served in the US Military during that war, and [Hot Mics and TV Lights: The American Forces Vietnam Network](#).



# TEXTBOOK SPECIAL OPS

## THE SON TAY RAID

**From the editor:** This is an excerpt from the new book by John Gargus, a planner and participant in the Son Tay Raid, and Cliff Westbrook.

The super-secret Son Tay Raid to free American POWs from a prison only 25 [miles] from the enemy's capital, Hanoi, North Vietnam is in full swing. The raiders, including 56 Green Berets and an armada of air force aircraft are sneaking in from Thailand late at night without lights and completely radio silent, following a couple of special Combat Talon C130s that have a new Forward Looking InfraRed device that can let them see in the dark and lead the convoy through valleys to avoid NVA radar detection.

The Navy has enthusiastically agreed to conduct a perfectly timed massive diversion to draw the antiaircraft SAMs and AAA crews' attention away towards the east. Hopefully, they will not discover the slow flying C130s, Jolly Green Helicopters, A-1 ground support planes and the F4 and F105 jets too early.

You are at 35,000 feet over the Gulf of Tonkin in a RC-135, listening to an enormous amount of voice and data, including often identifiable SAM crews.

Part two will be in next month's Sentinel.

By Colonel John Gargus, Son Tay Raider, with Cliff Westbrook  
An excerpt from *Textbook Special Ops: The Son Tay Raid*; published by Palmetto Publishing, 09/17/2025, pages 73-87.

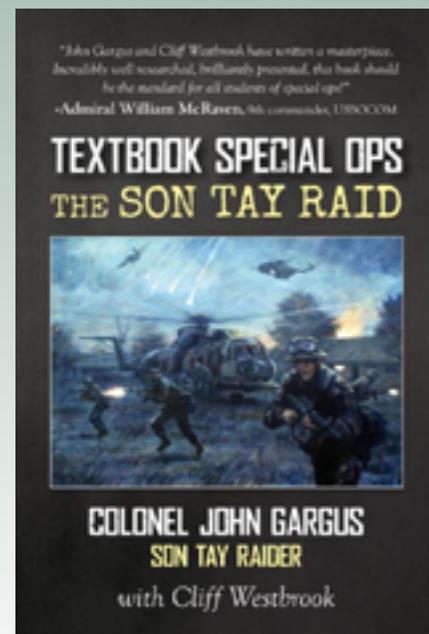
### CHAPTER 4

#### Airborne Command Post: Listening to the Enemy's Conversations

We did not know much about RC-135s (program name 'Combat Apple') from Okinawa during our air operations planning in Florida. All we were interested in knowing at that time was that they flew round-the-clock missions over the Gulf of Tonkin and Laos from where they monitored and recorded all North Vietnamese electronic transmissions and that voice transmissions were translated in real time by Vietnamese speaking interpreters.

We were well prepared to monitor the North Vietnam's reaction to the raid. Air Force Col. Norm Frisbie flew in the RC-135 over the Gulf of Tonkin as an alternate JCTG commander to Manor, who directed the raid from the USAF's Tactical Air Control Center – North Sector at Monkey Mountain near Da Nang in South Vietnam. Col. Frisbie was one of the covert operations planners from the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations along with Lt. Col. Larry Ropka (who at this moment was visiting multiple bases around Vietnam and Thailand coordinating the launch).

Accompanying Colonel Frisbie on the primary RC-135 was Lt. Col. William L. Robinson who, as the Army training officer in Florida, knew all the details of the ground assault plan. Air Force Maj. Thomas E. Macomber, operational security officer from HQ USAF Security, who knew everything about the air operations, was tasked to fly on the second RC-135. He was joined by Army Sergeant Major Donald M. Davis from Ft. Bragg. Davis served on the initial planning staff in the Pentagon and was on Colonel Simons' administrative and training staff in Florida.



Once at Takhli, Captain Tom Stiles and I briefed two RC-135 Airborne Mission Supervisors (AMS) Technical Sergeant Horas E. Haire and Captain Robert Icenogle about the air operations aspects of the raid. They were interested primarily in our activity in the objective area. On the other hand, we were interested in what they would do for us. They disappointed us by not giving us any more information about their capability than we already had. I suspect that they were more forthcoming with Col. Frisbie and Manor. However, at our operational level we didn't need to know more about RC-135 capabilities and how they operated. This secrecy was not a game of tit-for-tat we played with each other. It was a serious mission that required it. In turn, when the two AMS officers returned to Okinawa, their 6990th Electronic Security Group Commander Lt. Col. Robert W. Throckmorton, wanted to be briefed on their visit to Takhli. They informed him that he had no need to know why their unexpected presence in Thailand was required. He learned about the POW rescue mission later when Col. Frisbie and the three other JCTG staff members showed up at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa to fly in the two RC-135s with fully operational crews which were told to get ready for that night.

RC-135 capabilities remained a very tight secret for many years. I got to know several retired Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) over the years who would not speak about their in-flight work. It wasn't until one of them, Robert J. Ruseckas, joined the Son Tay Raid Association, full fifty years after the raid, when I learned how they operated from his informative article that he wrote with Cliff Westbrook for the Son Tay Raid Association. His unpublished article is called, "The Son Tay Raid in the Airborne Command Post: Listening to Every Transmission from 35,000 feet."

Bob was one of the linguists aboard that RC-135. He gives a good insight into the highly classified enemy-monitoring capabilities we possessed. Here are his exact words with very few text deletions:

## Listening to Every Transmission from 35,000 Feet

It's 8 p.m. We arrive on station above international waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. We are a 30-man team equipped with top secret technologies that allow us to see, hear and detect every transmission of voice, radio, code, and radar in North Vietnam. It's Friday night, November 20th, 1970. The sun set more than two hours ago and we welcome the protection, stealth, and clarity of this darkness. We need to focus.

We are listeners, an overwatch, sentinels spying on our enemy from a Boeing RC-135M, which resembles the Boeing 707. Our dark-lit workspace spans two-thirds of the arching width of the fuselage. The other third is a partitioned aisle way running the entire length of the port side. That allows pilots, navigators, and others without a need-to-know to pass by without disturbing our work. (All have Top Secret clearances, but not all have a need-to-know.) At two places along the fuselage, we have a doorway to that aisle. From the appearance of our battle station, long and narrow, surrounded by metal, plastic, and colored displays, one might imagine us lurking thousands of feet below Mean Sea Level rather than above.

My station desk is referred to as the '11-Op,' responsible for identifying and monitoring every SAM (Surface-to-Air Missile) site in North Vietnam. Working with a wall of electronics before me, I'm facing toward the partition and the left wing. Centrally among my array of controls arranged in modular black boxes, I have two primary screens that empower me with a sixth sense. Last year, The Who produced a song about "That deaf dumb and blind kid sure plays a mean pinball." Like Tommy, our sight is beyond the limitations of human eyes and ears. Our existence is electronic.

Unhuman oscilloscopes and tones furnish my mind with a visual that no one can ever see with eyes or make sense of with any one set of ears. We 30 are a band of brothers on a man-o-war that together can see through walls, eavesdropping into the very command centers of the enemy. We detect every signal ever used by militaries: AM, FM, LF, HF, VHF, UHF... and others. Our state-of-the-art electrical engineering has quickly cleaned up those signals. We record every signal of interest but sifting through the recordings later is not good enough—we must comprehend now. We are fluent in the Vietnamese language, so we are listening live to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Air Force (NVAF) commanders speaking with their staff as well as the controllers in their Air Defense Command throughout North Vietnam. Through our work, vapid, chaotic ether is transformed into humans conversing clearly. We know their thoughts.

Other workstations in our aircraft include '7-Op', responsible for monitoring all NVAF fighter aircraft, and '6-Op', monitoring ground vehicle movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Each operator has a chair that can be locked in any direction. For takeoff and landing we lock it facing aft. Incorporated into the seat-back is a parachute that I'm sitting against. Beneath our seat cushions—and attached to the parachute—each of us has a survival kit which includes a small, personal life raft and a weapon. (The world knows well the horrific torture of American POWs held by the vicious communists. I'm of the mind that if I'm ever shot down and in danger of imminent capture, I'll save my last bullet for myself.)

Aboard our aircraft are USAF Colonel Norman Frisbie and Lt. Col. Bill Robinson, an Army Green Beret. Both these gentlemen, we had never met before. This was most unusual. Our missions are Top Secret, Code Word. We can't even acknowledge to people what level of code word our missions are—literally, even the code word itself is classified. These guests must be special.

For this mission, we knew something was up even at Okinawa, pre-flight. Our pre-mission crew rest was not normal—it was out of synch and to me it felt like a surprise. The crews that were assembled for the pre-mission briefing were not our normal crew combinations—in fact, there were two RC-135Ms being pre-flighted and launched, a primary and a backup. This was an indication to all that something really significant was going to happen tonight.

Now, Colonel Frisbie positions himself centrally among all our battle stations, plugs in his headset, calls our attention to himself, and addresses us all on our intercom. He introduces himself and proceeds to brief us. Normally, we'll 'roll' (roll tape on our reel-to-reel to record for later analysis) on every intercept of interest, but he and our AMS (Airborne Mission Supervisor) explain that we are not to waste effort on that tonight. We shall strictly look for enemy signals that might engage any of the aircraft related to this raid. We must detect 1.) any references to low-flying aircraft/helicopters 2.) any references to Son Tay ["Sơn Tây"] and 3.) any references to POWs ["Tù binh"].

Our 6-Op, Bruce McClelland and I look at each other: ***we are supporting a first-ever POW rescue mission deep in the heart of North Vietnam, near Hanoi.*** I don't know what possibly could have been more exhilarating! We are ready to help in any way we can.

Colonel Frisbie was a planner of the raid and is the alternate commander, reporting to Manor, the commander of this mission. Manor will monitor everything, real-time, at the 'Tactical Air Control Center—North Sector' on Monkey Mountain, near Da Nang Air Base. We are the airborne command post for the Son Tay Raid.

At 8:45 p.m., Manor arrives at the Monkey Mountain Command Post and establishes secure, encrypted communications links with us. The Green Berets and their aircrews arrive at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) to board their mission helicopters and C-130s, all prepped and readied by their maintenance crews.

Also ready to launch:

F-105s and EC-121s at Korat RTAFB

F-4s at Udorn RTAFB

KC-135s at U-Tapao RTAFB

A-1Es at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB

MC-130Es at Takhli RTAFB

Manor and these soldiers and the mission commanders for these air-crews had been secretly holed up at the CIA compound at Takhli for the past few days in anticipation of President Nixon's launch order, which came through yesterday.

There is nothing unusual at this time. I focus on my two screens, black CRTs (cathode ray tubes, similar to old television screens) with green sine waves. My controls are dials, knobs, buttons, rollers, and

switches. The modular units before me are functioning well and, in case of equipment failure, they can immediately be swapped out by the AMTs (Airborne Maintenance Technicians). We are in peak condition.

At 10:25, the MC-130 Cherry Two takes off from Takhli RTAFB head-ed to rendezvous with the A-1Es from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB.

At 11:05, the Navy's EP-3 'Big Look' aircraft arrives on station over the Gulf of Tonkin for electronic warfare during the massive diversionary raid on Haiphong harbor that the Navy will be providing just prior to the Son Tay Raid.

At 11:17, a formation of two HC-130s (Lime One and Lime Two) and six helicopters (Banana and Apple One through Apple Five) are departing Udorn RTAFB with the 56 Green Berets who will actually set foot on the ground at the Son Tay POW camp. This begins the three-hour chopper flight that paces the entire mission. The timing of over one hundred aircraft is built around the smallest slowest aircraft, the crucial HH-3 Jolly Green Giant, code name Banana, which will land inside the courtyard of the prison in such a surprise that guards don't have any time to shoot prisoners. The planned H-Hour is 0215.

[NOTE: In his book *The Son Tay Raid: American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten*, John Gargus explains that RC-135 Combat Apple missions were America's means of knowing when radar sites conduct shift change. They were reliably at 2am. 2:15 was chosen as the H-Hour, when the enemy might be at a minimum level of order.]

At 11:18, the MC-130 Cherry One takes off from Takhli RTAFB. This is the special ops aircraft with unique low-level precision navigation avionics. It will take over the formation at the North Vietnam border, leading the helicopters to Son Tay and release the flares over the POW camp at the H-Hour.

Our area is kept dimly lit so we operators can optimally see our screens, a surreal green glow on our faces. Our workstations have a writing table. I write my notes on our special water-soluble paper—it easily disintegrates in an emergency so as not to compromise classified information. There are reel-to-reel tape recorders above the workstations to record intercepts of interest to be studied when back on the ground (or reviewed in flight if necessary).

On my CRTs, I clean the scratchy noise fuzz out of the signals, radio waves emanating from SAM sites in the Son Tay Area. The CRT only shows the top half of the sine wave—that's all we need. An AM (amplitude modulation) signal looks like a single vertical spike. An FM (frequency modulation) signal has a much wider and more active display with lots of spikes. Tuning for radio frequencies of interest I can tell a lot about what equipment is emitting each signal and its location. At times, monitoring the display for signal strength, we have the pilot modify our orbit (changing the heading or extending the oval) so as not to lose the signal in the middle of a relevant North Vietnamese military conversation.

At 12:35am, the first problem arises. Frog 1 has to abort due to a broken oil line. Frog 1 is an EC-121 College Eye aircraft orbiting over the Gulf of Tonkin like us. It is based on the Constellation airliner and has a role similar to today's E-3 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System). Its role is to shine a radar on all aircraft in North Vietnam—especially on our low-flying assault force tonight, which would be too low for our land- and sea-based radars to follow. In contrast, our RC-135's role is to monitor every radio wave that the enemy transmits.

As a testament to the excellence in planning, there is a backup aircraft, Frog 2, already on station nearby. Literally, within one minute, Frog 2 takes over that role.

At 12:40, at only 1,000 feet above the ground and according to plan, the six helicopters begin air refueling along their path over Laos with their HC-130 tankers Lime One and Lime Two. In this unprecedented formation are the one HH-3 Jolly Green Giant and five HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giants.

'Combat Apple' is the name for our RC-135M missions. We are the 6990th Security Squadron from Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, Japan. These reconnaissance missions were tasked with providing real time tactical and strategic intelligence to battle commanders on the ground—and back in Washington D.C., as you'll see at the end of this Son Tay Raid mission.

It's a three-hour flight from Okinawa and we need to be on station for 12 hours over the Gulf of Tonkin, so our missions are long—our shortest mission is more than 18 hours! This allows 24-hour coverage with the two 12-hour shifts in theater. Every mission has at least one or two air refuelings of 80,000 pounds or so, which I love to watch up front in the cockpit when I can. This is a mentally grueling, bumpy 30-minute period, (at moments, terrifying to me at night in monsoonal clouds, rain, and tropical lightning storms). The pilots fly two airliners in formation with 8 to 12 feet of separation nose to tail, maintaining boom contact for half an hour—twice on many missions!

Further, there are overlapping flight schedules with one Combat Apple crew on orbit in the Gulf of Tonkin (referred to as the 'Gulf bird') that focuses chiefly on air operations and threats in the Gulf as well as activities over North Vietnam. The second Combat Apple crew is orbiting over northern Laos (referred to as the 'Laos bird') where the focus is air activity over North Vietnam but closely covers ground action along the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam.

Our RC-135M is for Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and, particularly, Communications Intelligence (COMINT). It is designed to intercept virtually anything transmitted into the airwaves, from taxi cabs to tanks, walkie-talkies to facsimile, Morse code to radar signals, tactical airfield communications with aircraft (TACAIR) to Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) and SAM sites. Our linguists interpret the most urgent signals while air-borne, but the recordings are translated, decoded and analyzed later on the ground at the US Army's Torii Station on Okinawa. At Torii Station, adjacent to Kadena AB, all this transcription and analysis was done at a no- windows facility, with barbed wire and dog patrols at the perimeter.

[NOTE: Many years later, this was all consolidated onto Kadena AB with the construction of a new secure building, Larson Hall, named for our first squadron commander, Lt. Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Doyle E. Larson. Larson became the first commander of Electronic Security Command.]

Behind the 'front end' crew's cockpit is a compartment fully decked out as an electronics workshop manned by the two Airborne Maintenance Technicians.

Then comes the main compartment filled with COMINT linguistic technicians. I'm at the front, on the other side of the wall from the AMTs.

Next you come to the 7-Op, the TACAIR operator. The job here is to monitor the enemy's air activity. Each North Vietnamese airfield has its radio frequencies used by their Air Traffic Controllers to communicate with their aircraft and pilots. We are so personally familiar with these controllers and pilots that there are many of them that we recognize by their voice alone, even before anyone states the individual's call sign. Often, we know the name of the pilot, where his home station is and what type of aircraft he is qualified in, and we glean a little about his personality.

[NOTE: *Hognose Silent Warrior* by George F. Schreader, a former 6990th 7-Op, lists many of the top North Vietnamese pilots and the details we knew about them, through our Combat Apple missions. By the way, 'Hognose' is a term of endearment. See the photo at the end.]

Centrally located is the '#1' position, which is the Airborne Mission Supervisor (AMS). He has constant secure communications with battle commanders on the ground in Vietnam and elsewhere. He coordinates all the activities of our crew.

Tonight, each of us will describe what he's hearing to the AMS who, in turn, will relay warnings to the US aircraft and report the situation to Colonel Frisbie who is on an open line with Manor.

The next workstation is the 6-Op, which tracks AAA and monitors the flow of troops, vehicles and equipment (with a special focus on the Ho Chi Minh trail). There are far more AAA sites than SAM sites in the area. Generally speaking, SAM sites were surrounded by AAA sites, to protect the SAM site from enemy attack. The SAM site operated the acquisition radar and would sometimes read off their tracking of targets on the open frequency. AAA would monitor that tracking. Then as the threat attacked or came near enough, the AAA crew would use their own tracking equipment. As on any normal night, our 6-Op is hearing the North Vietnamese making regular reports about the arrivals and departures of troops and materiel at truck stops and troop stations ("binh trạm"). Our tactical aircraft planners are constantly planning the next days' interdiction strikes based on this intel from our 6-Op stations.

At the very back, at positions 15 and 16 are the two Electronic Warfare Officers (EWOs) who are responsible for defending the RC-135 itself from threats such as missiles and enemy fighters.

The RC-135 pilots, navigators and EWOs are officers, all from SAC (Strategic Air Command). The rest of us are enlisted men from the USAF Security Service (later called Electronic Security Command).

All this sensitive electronic equipment has to be kept dry and temperature-controlled to prevent overheating. My position, just aft of the maintenance compartment, is quite warm right now. Conversely, the aft end where the EWOs are typically too cold. Some of this is due to the aircraft's slightly nose up attitude in level flight. Heat rises, cold sinks. Often, I unzip my flight suit down to my waist and operate in my t-shirt. In the back, the EWOs are wearing some of their winter equipment. Coffee spilled on the floor back there sometimes freezes!

These three hours during which the helicopters are flying from Udorn to Son Tay must seem extremely long for a helicopter, but we are used to this—and we are busy this entire time.

We understand our Combat Apple missions to be the world's longest combat missions at this time. Very often our duty day is about 24 hours, arriving two and a half hours before takeoff and then post-mission



A Spoon Rest radar. (Eastfoto)



The Spoon Rest radar operator station inside the van. (Eastfoto)

briefings keep us an hour and a half after landing. Our squadron had one mission in which the flying time alone was more than 23 hours! You may be surprised to hear that there is often very little break time during the flight for certain operators. After your flight, you are scheduled for post-mission crew rest, but then it's back to work at the secure facility translating, decoding and analyzing the intel take from other crews.

We linguists specialize in a variety of COMINT tasks. Some of our guys who are newer to the mission run positions employing massive tape decks that have at least eight tracks simultaneously capturing eight different intercept signals. These recordings will be broken out as separate tracks when back on the ground and translated/decoded for future action by intel briefers.

**At 1am, the battle begins.** A swarm lights up our screens.

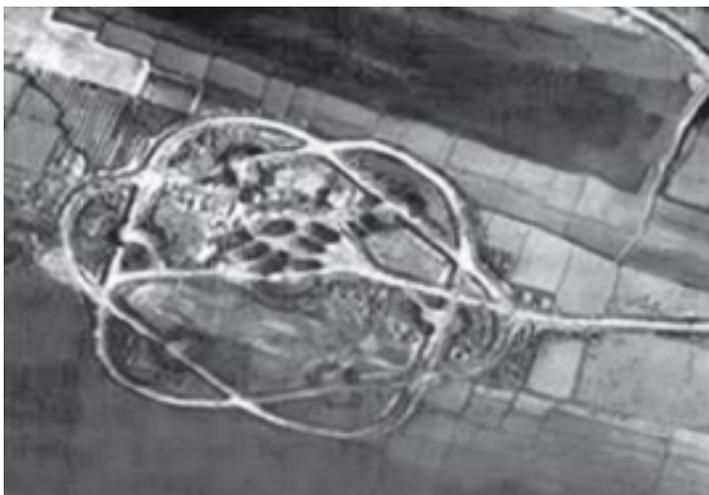
A massive, lethal armada of aircraft is launched by the Navy.

The carriers USS *Hancock*, *Ranger*, and *Oriskany* had staged seven A-3 tankers and electronic countermeasure aircraft at Da Nang AB. All seven now head up the coast to North Vietnam.

From the USS *Oriskany*: Twenty-five aircraft launch, including an E-1B, eighteen A-7s, and six F-8s.

From the USS *Ranger*: Twenty-six aircraft launch, including an E-1B, ten A-6s, nine A-7s, and six F-4s.

The NVAF Air Defense Command immediately has startled to life. They're entirely surprised, confused, and slow to comprehend the enormity.



An SA-2 SAM site. (Public Domain)

The first indication I get that a SAM site is active: I hear the enemy's long-range radar operator calling out targets in Vietnamese. These are Russian-supplied SA-2 SAMs, known as 'Guideline' in NATO's naming system. (The Soviets' name for it is the S-75 Dvina.) Its long-range radar is known by the NATO name 'Spoon Rest' and picks up targets nearly 150 miles away. That gives them the range to watch all of this US air activity in the Gulf of Tonkin—including us.

The SA-2 system has six missiles circling a command building, typically spaced about 100 yards apart. They are mobile but are often in fixed positions and we know most of their locations ahead of time. Most of them are around Hanoi and Haiphong.

[NOTE: The SA-2 SAM was developed in the 1950s, continuously improved, and is still in use today in many countries around the world. They are fast and deadly, and the North Vietnamese were proficient in their use. On quiet days, with no airstrike threats by the US Navy in the Gulf, we could see that some Spoon Rest radars would track us on orbit. The NVAF MiG pilots seldom went very far out over water. Our big, slow-moving silhouette on their radar looks tempting for a Spoon Rest operator to share with air controllers. Because of this, we sometimes have US Navy fighters on our wings. The RC-135M has very few fuselage windows so as to keep it dark in the cabin but there was one on the over-wing exit door. I remember looking out one time and waving to a US Navy F-8 Crusader MiG Combat Air Patrol (MiGCAP) pilot just off our wing tip as he waved to me. We saluted each other and I went back to work. In fact, on tonight's mission there are two F-8s from the USS Oriskany providing protection (BARCAP, Barrier CAP) for us and the five other USAF aircraft orbiting over the Gulf in support of this Raid.]

1:30am. The first flight of six Navy A-7 strike aircraft head into North Vietnam's territorial waters straight toward industrial targets in the northern parts of Haiphong. Even at this point, the NVAF Command and Control System is only just now getting their wits about them, reaching a level of organization to muster a coordinated defense.

The Spoon Rest operator, tracking them, then alerts the acquisition radar operator. This acquisition radar is referred to as 'Fan Song.' This locks on to a target, tracks it, and guides a missile. It can track a target at about 40 miles. The operators call out targets by range, azimuth, and altitude constantly, so we know everything they are doing.



A Fan Song radar (on the left). (Eastfoto)

I'm sweating a little, but tonight, it's not just because my flight suit is zipped to the top. And it's not because Colonel Frisbie is now watching my screens intently over my shoulder. It's because this is the largest, most intense mission we've had the opportunity to participate in, to this point. Colonel Frisbie plugs his headset into my station to listen in.

I roll onto a promising signal. I hear a radar operator in the SAM site van start tracking a target. ❖

**Part 2 in next month's *Sentinel*: Experience the intense action.**

**Textbook Special Ops: *The Son Tay Raid***, not available in bookstores, can be ordered online from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Walmart, ThriftBooks, and Better World Books. Copies may also be ordered directly from John Gargus at [Gartalon70@gmail.com](mailto:Gartalon70@gmail.com) or by phone at 702-787-5513.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**John Gargus, Colonel USAF (Ret.)**, was a planner of the Son Tay Raid and a navigator aboard the MC-130E(I) Cherry Two in the Son Tay Raid. He has given innumerable speeches about the raid, including many with Lt. Gen. LeRoy Manor, Colonel Bull Simons, and other luminaries of that iconic special ops

mission. Born in Czechoslovakia, he was smuggled by his parents at the age of 15 from that Soviet dominated country to live with relatives in America. He is the author of the 2007 book, *The Son Tay Raid: American POWs in Vietnam Were Not Forgotten*, the most authoritative book on the topic.



**Cliff Westbrook**, A 1988 graduate of the US Air Force Academy and a pilot of the B-1 bomber, is the son of Clyde 'Neal' Westbrook, the Aircraft Commander of Lime 2 during the Son Tay Raid. As a member of the Son Tay Raid Association, Cliff has interviewed numerous Raiders and helped gather the historical behind-the-scenes facts, including a

complete compilation of the radio channels (air & ground) recorded during the Son Tay Raid. Cliff co-authored *Who Will Go: Into the Son Tay POW Camp with Terry Buckler*. He also co-authored *Jakovenko: From the Steppes of Ukraine to the US Army Ranger Hall of Fame* with Vladimir Jakovenko.

# “Another died in my place.”

## Part 2

By Greg Walker (U.S. Army Special Forces, Ret.)

### Introduction

In the early evening hours of May 13, 1991, a MEDEVAC mission was requested by personnel at the U.S. TACAN radar and communications intercept site atop Cerro la Mole in Honduras. The patient was reported to have a presumed serious but not life-threatening medical issue with descriptions ranging from a back injury, an abdominal condition, or a ruptured hernia. By Joint Task Force – Bravo and the 4/228th Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) no nighttime aerial MEDEVAC was to take place unless the injury or wound was life-threatening or threatening to loss of vision or a limb. Per the Warrior Operations CQ log for this incident, the request from TACAN was framed as being appreciated (or better put as a favor) if approved. This is because a ground evacuation would take upwards of three hours as opposed to a short flight.

Final authorization for any MEDEVAC request lay with the 4/228th Aviation Battalion commander or his representative should he not be available. On May 13th, with the battalion commander on mid-tour leave, the approving authority was the battalion's executive officer (XO).

The first attempt authorized by the XO took place in the early evening hours and was flown VFR as the copilot, 1LT Vicki Boyd, was out of NVG currency due to poor flying weather in mid-April/early May. Because of this and by regulations no other member of the flight crew could have NVGs onboard or in use. The pilot, CPT (P) Sashai Dawn, chose to abort the mission after roughly twenty minutes as poor weather and an intense cloud cover of between 3500 to 5000 feet obscured the top of Cerro La Mole/TACAN which sits at 6, 447 feet.

Upon her return to Soto Cano, just 9.5 miles straight line distance from TACAN, the XO and other key staff concurred with her decision and a ground transport began to be arranged. Dawn and her crew (1LT Boyd, copilot, SSGT Linda Simonds, flight medic, and SPC4 William “Buddy” Jarrell, crew chief) were released for the night and returned to their quarters.

Per the official crash report not long afterward the 4/228th XO in concert with JTF-BRAVO initiated what would become a second and fatal MEDEVAC if the weather improved enough for the crew to do the mission. Buddy Jarrell today recalls and stated in the accident report his disbelief when the crew was recalled for a second attempt. Jarrell noted he could not see the lights from the TACAN site from his hootch at Soto Cano. The air traffic controller, in his interview, offered the weather was poor and below safe flying conditions for the first attempt. He, too, could not understand why the 4/228th XO was pushing for a second attempt even as ground evacuation was being authorized at JTF-BRAVO. The tower at TACAN stated in the official record that Warrior Operations was contacting them every



The helipad at the TACAN radar / communications intercept site. (Credit: AFEM for Honduras FB page)

ten to twenty minutes after the first aborted attempt and asking for weather updates. TACAN Tower reported ground fog and fifty' visibility until the last communication with Warrior Communications when they offered the ceiling was now at 1500 feet with three miles visibility.

Overlooked or ignored by the 4/228th XO when he was so advised was this. TACAN Tower was at nearly 6500 feet elevation. The tower personnel could not see what the weather was below the installation and its landing pad. In short, TACAN Tower could not accurately inform Warrior Communications or the 4/228th acting commander of what the weather was at 5000, 4000, or even three thousand feet below their line of sight.

By this time illumination from the moon that night was at 1% and TACAN, in specific, was by SOP not to be flown to or from unless night vision capability was in use by the flight crew. This was especially true if an aircraft was attempting to reach TACAN from the southern rugged, mountainous valley outside of La Paz, Honduras. When CPT Dawn arrived with her crew for the second attempt she informed the 4/228th XO that her co-pilot was out of NVG currency. She also informed him, again, that emergency check light had come on during her return from the first attempt and another helicopter would need to be provided.

The XO offered he would have one of his NVG current pilots fly in 1LT Boyd's place and they could use a UH-1H Quick Reaction Force aircraft from the 4/228th. After private discussion between the two CPT Dawn agreed to make the second attempt but using her original crew and flying VFR as they could not even have NVGs onboard per regulation.



Images of the weather challenges to include cloud cover below the line of sight at TACAN. As CPT Dawn could not see the site's lights from Soto Cano she relied on her knowledge of cloud cover obstructing a line of sight second attempt, choosing to attempt to come up a long valley to the south which offered a road from La Paz to TACAN. Although the accident report reflects the Warrior Operations Center and Soto Cano tower noting the deviation, no one in authority questioned the pilot or directed her to return to Soto Cano in the knowledge they were not NVG capable. (Credit: AFEM for Honduras Facebook page)

The XO, contrary to his unit's SOP and Army Aviation regulations, authorized her to make the flight under those circumstances.

By doing so he essentially issued the crew a death sentence as the 4/228th's own SOPs for MEDEVAC and Army aviation regulations were clear – no such mission was or could be flown under the weather conditions, crew currency shortcomings, and as “a favor” where the reported injured/ill soldier at TACAN was concerned.

By regulation and per the official accident report CPT Dawn as the pilot in command (PIC) could have and should have rejected the second mission. The PIC has the authority to do just this and the Accident Board assigned responsibility for the crash to her. Offering the reason was that she was distracted between flying the aircraft and attempting to assist 1LT Boyd with navigation as they traveled up the southern valley toward Cerro la Mole/TACAN.

A cursory caution is noted in the report stating aspects of the 4/228th MEDEVAC SOP were not followed (no names or ranks/positions given) and this inattention should be corrected regarding future operations.

Nearly six months of investigation, a dozen reviews of the crash report, photos of the crash site provided other than the few in the official report, and multiple communication and interviews with the sole survivor of the crash and the 571st Medical Company (Air Ambulance) co-located with the 126th Medical Company (Air Ambulance), CPT Dawn's unit, revealed the following. The official report is rife with inaccurate, selective interviews conducted by the accident team, subjective opinions of CPT Dawn as a person and a National Guard aviator, and clearly slanted to exonerate the 4/228th's executive officer of any command responsibility or command pressure for the second and fatal MEDEVAC attempt.

However, it was learned from then 571st flight medic Ken Kik, who was an eye-witness to that evening's events as they unfolded and who indeed joined the four-man JSOC/7th Special Forces Group QRF that finally located, secured, and identified the deceased as well as the sole survivor, a Collateral Board was held as the crash was a Class A event (fatalities). Kik was interviewed by that board and recounted what he had already shared with the Fort Rucker accident investigation team.

The 4/228th's executive officer was ultimately relieved of his command. As Major General (ret) Kenneth R. Bowra (<https://gsaf.org/kenneth-bowra-bio/>) told the author in part — *“Once the XO decided to launch a second attempt, although the wrong decision due to weather conditions, he now went down the slippery slope of high risk by pushing the pilot to fly the mission. Pressuring the pilot in command was yet again unprofessional and poor leadership. Once he was aware the co-pilot was not NVG qualified, another qualified crew should have been used if he persisted to order the mission.*

*“Again, still would have been wrong to launch. By approving a non-qualified crew, the XO made a fatal decision which was also a violation of regulations. Never let enthusiasm overcome capabilities. Never.*

*“The XO's actions resulted in the death of those brave Americans who never, ever, should have launched. He should have been severely punished and not only relieved.”*

The crew chief, William “Buddy” Jarrell, an Active-duty Army soldier deployed to Honduras from the 571st at Ft. Carson, and then assigned to the 228th AVN, survived the crash with injuries. This crash marked the first all-female helicopter crew killed since the Vietnam War. “Dawn, Simonds, and Boyd were all deployed with the 126th Medical Company, Air Ambulance (now known as C Company, 1-126th Aviation



MG (ret.) Ken Bowra (rear, second from right) served with MACV-SOG (CCN) as a One-Zero recon team leader. He is shown here with RT Idaho at CCN. He would later command the 5th Special Forces Group, SOC-SOUTH, and USASFC, as well as a tour with the CIA. GEN Bowra also served in Honduras with a JSOC SMU. The man on his right is Do Ti Quang, Vietnamese team leader, who had served with Lynne M. Black Jr. on October 5, 1968 (<https://www.specialforces78.com/9-sog-recon-men-vs-10000-man-nva-division/>). Frank Pulley is the tall SF troop on the left. (Credit: MG Bowra Collection)

Regiment, General Support Aviation Battalion) in 1991 to Fort Sam Houston in support of Operation Desert Storm. They were filling in for an active-duty company that deployed to support Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. They volunteered and were reassigned to Soto Cano Air Base, near Comayagua, Honduras in mid-April of that year.

Twenty-four days later they were dead.

The following are the interviews this author conducted with Mr. William “Buddy” Jarrell and Mr. Ken Kik. Both remained in Army Aviation after the 1991 crash. Today they are active in the civilian aviation field as respected experts/consultants. Both offer their lives were changed on May 13, 1991, and they continue to honor the sacrifices and memories of CPT Sashai Dawn, 1LT Vickie Boyd, and SSGT Linda Simonds

### William “Buddy” Jarrell – crew chief/sole survivor

“I was not scheduled to fly that day but the assigned crew chief was ill so I volunteered to take his place on CPT Dawn’s crew. I knew them and liked them. I was a flight mechanic/crew chief assigned to the 571st out of Fort Carson, Colorado. We were working with the 126th as they had just recently arrived and were trying to get up to speed on MEDEVAC operations in Honduras.

“CPT Dawn aborted the first MEDEVAC attempt to TACAN. The weather and cloud cover below the site was poor. She believed it too dangerous to try to climb any higher with little to no visibility. We had tried flying line of sight to TACAN but the weather once in the area was simply bad.

“When we returned to Soto Cano the crew was released for the night. I was in my quarters when I was notified to return to the flight line. There was going to be another attempt. I did not understand why they would want to do that. Standing outside my hootch I could not see the lights at TACAN at all.

“We had to change helicopters because a warning light had come on in the first bird on our way back to Soto Cano. CPT Dawn met with the 4/228th executive officer (name redacted for the purpose of this story). She told him Lieutenant Boyd’s NVG quals were expired and we would need another helicopter if the mission was to be attempted. The XO offered to replace Vicki with an NVG current pilot from his unit and we could take a UH-1H QRF helo from the 4/228th.

“She said she would rather fly with her own crew and he said “Okay.” We took off and instead of climbing and trying to fly line of sight to TACAN she headed for the town of La Paz, to the south of the mountain [Cerro la Mole]. She wanted to use the lights of the town as a guide as there is a small dirt road leading from La Paz up to TACAN. She hoped to find the road and then we would follow it up to the site. The terrain and vegetation is so rough and thick that you often simply lose sight of any road you may be trying to locate or follow, especially at night with no NVG capability.

“I loosened my safety strap so I could lay down and look out the open door. The belly light was on as it was pitch black after we had located the road. I was seated behind CPT Dawn; Simonds was seated behind LT Boyd. I was looking down and around as we flew up the valley. It was very dangerous. Dawn made several attempts using the clock punch technique. She would enter the start time for each attempt and fly in the direction of the mountain hoping to locate the road leading up to TACAN. Both Simonds and I offered over the internal comms this was becoming too risky and we should abort. CPT Dawn told me to shut up and that we would be making one last attempt.



William “Buddy” Jarrell – crew chief / sole survivor

“As we made the last pass I looked up and saw the mountain [Cerro la Mole] right in front of us. I yelled something and we banked hard left to avoid a collision. I pushed Simonds down into the crash position but she would not stay in the crash position.

“To summarize, we were doing circles trying to find the access road that went the back way to the TACAN site. With every circle we were moving closer to the mountain. I was on my belly looking down trying to find the road, I informed CPT Dawn there was a really big mountain just ahead of us and all I could see were trees. She told me we were going to make one more circle to keep looking for the road. I reiterated that the mountain was really close and she told me to shut up and look for the road. When I told her there was no visible road and the mountain was directly to our front she flared the aircraft but we were moving too fast toward the mountain. On a Huey the blades spin to the left(counterclockwise). CPT Dawn and Boyd started screaming and Dawn banked hard to the left so we were at about a 30-degree angle. The rotor blades spinning as they do cannot supply enough lift and she lost altitude fast. She tried to recover as we missed a second mountain but the valley was so narrow and we were going so fast we impacted a cliff face on the other mountain opposite the one we had just missed. We struck a huge boulder that was sticking out of the mountain side. The crash investigator told me later we were doing about 110 knots at the time of impact.”



Crew chief and sole survivor Buddy Jarrell in Stokes litter after spending hours alone, severely injured, and wondering if any other crew member might still be alive. (Credit: Ken Kik)

**Note:** A UH-1H helicopter in a 30-degree bank will lose its ability to sustain or gain altitude **unless the pilot takes action to increase the total lift produced by the main rotor system.**

### Aerodynamics of a Banked Turn

When a helicopter banks, the total lift force generated by the main rotor disc is tilted.

- **Vertical Component of Lift:** This component directly opposes gravity and is responsible for maintaining altitude. As the bank angle increases, the vertical component of lift decreases.
- **Horizontal Component of Lift:** This component is the force that pulls the helicopter into the turn (centripetal force).

To maintain altitude in a 30-degree bank, the pilot must increase the total amount of lift generated to compensate for the reduced vertical component. This is typically done by pulling back on the cyclic and/or increasing the collective pitch, which increases the angle of attack of the rotor blades.

### Pilot Action Required

If a pilot initiates a sharp 30-degree bank and does not simultaneously adjust the controls:

- The vertical lift component will be insufficient to counteract the helicopter’s weight, and the aircraft will start to descend.
- To sustain or gain altitude during the turn, the pilot must add power (increase collective pitch) and apply appropriate cyclic and anti-torque pedal inputs to increase total lift and remain coordinated.

In short, the helicopter won’t inherently lose the ability to sustain or gain altitude at that bank angle, but it will lose altitude if no corrective control inputs are made. A 30-degree bank is a standard maneuver and is well within the UH-1H’s operational capabilities, provided the pilot manages the power and lift demands correctly.

“I was thrown downhill about three hundred yards. When I came to I could see a river of flames flowing downhill towards me. The fuel cell had ruptured on impact. I remember thinking to myself ‘Great, you couldn’t kill me in the crash so now I’m going to burn to death.’

“I heard someone up above me crying for help. I thought it was Simonds but I was not sure. I yelled back I couldn’t move or get back up to help her but to hang on. Pretty soon I didn’t hear anything else. The fire had almost reached where I was laying. I could not stand up or crawl away. Then, suddenly, the flow of fuel on fire split in half and went around me on either side. Another miracle.

“I knew I was badly injured. I began hearing a helicopter above me flying back and forth. I turned my strobe light on but with all the flames and smoke they did not see it. After I was hoisted out hours later the crew chief who spotted my strobe told me they were on their last pass. He raised his NVGs as they were washing out with all the fire illumination and that is when he saw my strobe! It turns out he was the ill crew chief I had replaced that day. When he heard the MEDEVAC had gone down he had suited up to help with the rescue effort. Another miracle.

“It was Ken Kik, a flight medic with the 571st, who found me. He began treating me. They would not send a MEDEVAC with a hoist in until daylight as they thought it was too dangerous. When the MEDEVAC arrived and the hoist lowered the Stokes litter, I realized it was yet another miracle. I had just repaired that hoist two days earlier.

“When I was transferred to the hospital at Fort Carson the Army tried to medically discharge me before a final recovery report was completed. I told them they couldn’t do that, provided the Army regulations stated why, and I won. They also stopped my pay saying until the crash report/Line of Duty report was finished I would not be paid. My wife was furious; we had bills to pay. I fought that, too, and won.

“I recovered and was determined to be physically fit to remain in service. I retired as an E-7. Today I am living my best life.”

### **Ken Kik – flight medic, 571st Medical Company (AA)**

“One piece to this story that changed my life was that I could have been on this flight. SSGT Simmonds asked me that morning at breakfast if I would swap with her. It’s easy to look back and think what if I had been there and spoken up when they were being pressured to fly.

“I served with Linda in Honduras as a fellow flight medic. My flying background was as a crew chief but had recently transitioned over to the flight medic role due to past USAF medical and Flight Medic training. I was in country about a month before her unit arrived. I remember her as being very nice, we talked often especially during our morning crew shift changes.

“As an experienced crewmember but fairly new Army flight medic I asked her advice and I wanted to learn from those with more experience. She was always willing to help.

“The morning of May 13th I was assigned to the 1st up crew, I had breakfast with Linda and Vicki Boyd that morning. Linda asked if I would swap my 1st up shift with her and I agreed. This is something I think about often since I was supposed to be on that aircraft. What happened after I was informed of the crash, the refusal to let us launch a rescue mission, and when I eventually was able to reach the crash site was a mess, I’m frustrated and a little bitter to this day of how this all played out.

“I had no idea after the first attempt they had swapped from one of our UH-1Vs (due to a chip light activating) to the UH-1H #640 that crashed. Our UH-1Vs had radar altimeters, the UH-1Hs did not. Flying without NVGs definitely was a major contributing factor.”



Embassy of the United States of America

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

May 23, 1991

SPC William Jarrell  
951 Auau Lake Circle, No. 1  
Colorado Springs, CO 80906

Dear SPC Jarrell:

On behalf of the official U.S. Government community in Honduras, I wish to express our sorrow at the accident which you sustained while assigned to Joint Task Force Bravo. I hope you are recovering from your injuries and will be able to return to your regular activities soon.

At the same time, please accept my sympathies on the deaths of your colleagues also involved in the crash. I hope you and their families can take some comfort from knowing that the accident occurred while you were all trying to help a fellow soldier in distress. You should also know that your participation in military activities here was a major contribution to continued good relations between the United States and Honduras.

Sincerely,

Cresencio S. Arcos  
Ambassador

(Credit: SFC (ret.) William “Buddy” Jarrell)



Flight Medic Ken Kik on his PRC-90 as crew chief Buddy Jarrell is being hoisted in a Stokes litter from the crash site. (Credit: Ken Kik)

**Note:** The UH-1V is a modified version of the H-model, specifically configured for dedicated MEDEVAC and search-and-rescue operations. These conversions were performed by the US Army Electronics Command.

- **Role:** Solely used for aeromedical evacuation and rescue missions, often operating as “Dustoff” aircraft with a medical command.
- **Key Modifications:** The primary difference lies in its specialized equipment tailored for emergency response:
  - Rescue Hoist: Added for extricating individuals from difficult terrain.
  - Advanced Avionics: Upgraded with a radar altimeter, Distance Measuring Equipment (DME), and Instrument Landing System (ILS) for improved navigation and all-weather operations.
  - Cabin Configuration: Configured with racks for up to six stretchers and a medical attendant, with troop seats typically removed.
  - Wire Strike Kit: Later models were often fitted with a wire strike protection system on the nose and roof.
- The UH-1V (and other Hueys) got radar altimeters **for crucial low-altitude safety, especially for Night Vision Goggle (NVG) operations and hazardous terrain avoidance**, providing precise height above ground (AGL) for landings, nap-of-the-earth flying, and integrating with Ground Proximity Warning Systems (GPWS), making flights much safer in varied conditions where barometric altimeters fall short.

### Why Radar Altimeters Are Essential:

1. **Precise AGL Measurement:** Unlike barometric altimeters (which measure height above sea level), a radar altimeter sends a signal down and times its return, giving the pilot the exact distance to the ground or water surface (AGL).
2. **Low-Level Flight Safety:** Helicopters often fly very low (“nap-of-the-earth”), where barometric altimeters aren’t accurate enough; the radar altimeter provides critical data for safe maneuvering.
3. **Night Vision Goggle (NVG) Operations:** The FAA mandated radar altimeters for NVG flights because pilots need precise height information when visual cues are limited.
4. **Ground Proximity Warning (GPWS):** Radar altimeters feed data to GPWS, triggering alerts if the helicopter gets too close to the ground, preventing accidents.
5. **Landing & Takeoff:** They offer crucial accuracy for approaching and landing in challenging environments, from fields to ship decks

### In Simple Terms:

Think of it as the difference between knowing how high you are above the clouds (barometric) versus knowing exactly how many feet separate your skids from the treetops or water (radar). This distinction is vital for helicopters like the UH-1V, which often operate in dense terrain or at night, making the radar altimeter a critical safety upgrade.

“When we receive a request for help, we will respond to the best of our capability, we will find a way to help if at all possible. Our mission requires risk taking beyond most other aviation units. The five years I spent flying Dustoff was the most rewarding of my military career.

“I always loved working with the SF and other SOF teams. I was never “regular army” material, always bucking the bureaucracy and trying to find better ways to accomplish the mission, I guess that’s why I gravitated to units like MEDEVAC and others with real missions. I was attached to the 160th for short time before back in ‘86 before I volunteered for MFO duty in the Sinai. I had plans of going back to the 160th [SOAR] but decided on Carson because I wanted to train at the US Shooting Center in Colorado Springs to “up my game”. It’s amazing what the 160th has grown into since the mid-80’s.

**160th SOAR** - <https://www.nsa160.com/history/>

“I was attached to the D Co. 160th BN from the 229th AHB in 1986. The 160th became Regimental later in 1987 (I believe). I served with the 571st through June 1995 as a flight medic then left active duty, went back to the aviation maintenance career field, and retired from the Air National Guard in 2005

“I remember someone, I believe it was CW2 Clark Webb, one of our pilots mentioning a QRF UH-60 was going to depart and take a team in to “secure the scene” but there was no mention of medical evacuation. We were really getting frustrated at this point, especially since we knew there was a potential survivor. That’s when I decided it was time for me to get on that aircraft.

“I got on the UH-60 with the four troops already on board, as I’ve mentioned before I was told they were from 7th Grp. Only the five of us were on board as PAX. If there were any briefings before I jumped on board I missed them.

“I was asked if I could rappel by one of them and told them absolutely, I had been to Air Assault school. I remember him saying something like, “well let’s go.” As we flew I was thinking I hope I don’t screw this up, I was going to follow the lead of whatever they did. I’m glad the crew found an LZ. I plugged my helmet into the ICS box and heard the conversations between the pilots and their crew chief, discussions about the crash site area, insertion, looking for a good rappel area, and then finding the LZ. To this day I cannot believe I took my helmet off, with my NVGs attached and left them in the aircraft when we exited. I think it’s because this was just muscle memory, I always took my helmet off when exiting the aircraft on missions because I needed to perform patient care and talk with the patient or people on scene, the helmet would get in the way.

“As we flew I was thinking I hope I don’t screw this up, I was going to follow the lead of whatever they did. I’m glad the crew found an LZ. I plugged my helmet into the ICS box and heard the conversations between the pilots and their crew chief, discussions about the crash site area, insertion, looking for a good rappel area, and then finding the LZ. To this day I can’t believe I took my helmet off, with my NVGs attached and left in the aircraft when we exited. I think it’s because this was just muscle memory, I always took my helmet off when exiting the aircraft on missions because I needed to perform patient care and talk with the patient or people on scene, and the helmet would get in the way.

“We had recently installed a repaired hoist in the 2nd up MEDEVAC bird and were ready to go in but we were told to stand down multiple times by the XO, even when we were told there was a possible survivor with a strobe waving spotted by a UH-60 sent to find the crash site. The team I was now with was only to secure the site until daylight.

“The QRF planned a rappel but we were able to find a landing zone on a road nearby and uphill from the crash site. We hiked our way in, which was very comical at times. I fell and tumbled many times. I would step on what I thought was solid ground and it was a shell of burnt brush and down I would go. I’m still surprised we didn’t get hurt or break an ankle.

“I was unarmed since I was not on 1st up duty that evening and after the crash going to the arms room was the last thing on my mind. The SOF guys were armed and kitted out.

#### Note: **First Up Aircraft**

- **Primary Mission Ready:** This is the aircraft designated as the primary asset for a scheduled mission or training flight.
- **Highest Priority:** It is the top priority for maintenance, fueling, arming, and final inspections to ensure it is ready to fly at the designated time.
- **Go-to Aircraft:** If everything goes according to plan, the “first up” aircraft is the one that the crew expects to use.

#### **Second Up Aircraft**

- **Backup/Spare:** This aircraft serves as a fully prepared backup in case the “first up” aircraft experiences a maintenance issue or a last-minute problem that would prevent it from flying on time.
- **Ensures Mission Success:** The purpose of having a “second up” aircraft is to guarantee the mission or training requirement can still be met without significant delay.
- **Lower Priority (but still mission-capable):** While it is a backup, it still needs to be fully prepared and ready to fly at the same time or very shortly after the first aircraft. Maintenance and crew efforts are coordinated to ensure this readiness.

In essence, “first up” refers to the primary asset, and “second up” refers to the designated alternate, highlighting a culture of redundancy and mission assurance in aviation operations. MEDEVAC crews per SOP fly armed and in this situation the downed crew was indeed armed—this to protect if necessary themselves and/or their patients. Their weapons were kept in the BN arms room.

“Linda was the first I found and she was killed instantly. When I spoke with Buddy after I found him he thought it was Linda calling out but it had to have been Vickie.

“Vicki was the other initial survivor of the crash. When I found her she was laying next to her armored pilot’s seat, the seat belts were unbuckled, her helmet was off and laying close by, and she obviously removed herself from the seat. She was deceased when I found her. I suspect internal injuries, no major open wounds, or fractures that I recall. I remember her flight suit was torn across lower left abdomen

with large abrasions/contusions. It was evident in the report they were trying to cover up she lived through the crash. It was obvious she removed her helmet and exited her crew seat on her own. Her injuries may have been un-survivable, but at least we could have given her a chance. It is amazing anyone survived, that Huey practically disintegrated on impact.

“Had the XO let us immediately launch, hoisted me in, triaged the survivors, and hoisted either Vickie or Buddy out right away, there may have been two survivors and Buddy’s recovery might have been less challenging with immediate care/surgery. It was a quick flight back to Soto Cano, we could have had both in the hospital there in a reasonable timeframe.

“We could not locate CPT Dawn.

“I did not hoist out with Buddy. I’m glad he survived the hoist. I had him strapped in tight. The Stokes had a leg divider so I did not use a backboard as his legs would have been elevated out of the Stokes in an unsafe manner and would be difficult to secure him. I tossed the backboard down the hill. It might still be there. I caught flak for this later by one of the 126th medics but stood my ground on that decision. Once Buddy was off the scene I hiked back up the hill and found a ride back to Soto Cano, heading straight to the hospital to see Buddy.

I later spoke with the ill soldier that was at the TACAN site. He had been lifted out by Eagle 69 as the search for #640 was underway. He was very upset about the crash and blamed himself for it occurring. I explained to him repeatedly it was not his fault.

**Note:** In a sense he was another casualty of the XO’s poor decision-making process. Survivor’s Guilt is a very real thing and hopefully this young man found help to deal with this tragedy. And clearly there was a 2nd Up aircraft available and fully current crew (NVGs) - why this option wasn’t executed rather than having CPT Dawn’s crew make a second attempt remains a mystery.

“I am not sure when the SF/SOF guys departed, I’m sure they remained on scene longer. By the time I left, there were a bunch of people on the scene. It seemed like not long after sunrise there were troops everywhere including some other medical personnel. At this point we were discussing moving Buddy by ground.

“If an MD was on the scene by that time, I do not recall. I was on my PRC-90 requesting the hoist and stating Buddy was critical. An MD who would call an open head injury and a partial leg amputation plus the massive force of the impact/mechanism of those injuries as “the patient is stable” would be an idiot. Buddy was in what we call compensated shock. His blood pressure was ok but he was slightly tachycardic and very anxious which was concerning, and I did not know if he was bleeding internally. Damn, I still do not know how Buddy survived that night. I’ve worked many trauma cases over the years that even with our advanced care these days have died. Buddy is one tough MF’er.”

**Note:** According to the Warrior Operations CQ log of the incident, DUSTOFF 01 departed Soto Cano for the second attempt at 2230H. Radio and radar contact was lost with the aircraft at 2255H. At 2300H the QRF from the 2/187 INF was notified and launched. It was unable to locate or land those onboard and



# Citation

TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF THE

## Joint Service Achievement Medal

TO

KENNETH S. KIK

SPECIALIST KENNETH S. KIK, UNITED STATES ARMY, DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF BY EXCEPTIONALLY MERITORIOUS ACHIEVEMENT AS FLIGHT MEDIC, 571ST MEDICAL DETACHMENT (AIR AMBULANCE), WHILE PARTICIPATING IN THE SEARCH AND RESCUE OF FOUR AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT VICTIMS NEAR LA PAZ, HONDURAS, 13-14 MAY 1991. OPERATING UNDER SEVERE FIELD CONDITIONS WHICH INCLUDED DARKNESS, STEEP MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN, FIRE, AND SMOKE, SPECIALIST KIK PURSUED THE MISSION WITH COURAGE, DETERMINATION, SKILL, AND COMPASSION, MATERIALLY ASSISTING IN THE TREATMENT AND MEDICAL EVACUATION OF ONE SURVIVOR AND THE LOCATION, IDENTIFICATION, AND RECOVERY OF THREE OTHER CREW MEMBERS. THE DISTINCTIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SPECIALIST KIK REFLECT CREDIT UPON HIMSELF, THE UNITED STATES ARMY, AND THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.

Along with Ken Kik, those JSOC/7th Special Forces Group personnel who accomplished what two attempts by conventional forces QRF could not do the SECWAR at the time issued this impact award in July 1991. The JSAM is a Secretary of War authorized award. It overshadows individual Achievement awards from all Services and is an award commonly associated with JSOC personnel / Special Mission Units. The orders show Kik and a captain from 7th Group and three others, all apparently JSOC personnel. (Credit: Ken Kik)

returned to Soto Cano. At 2338H, a second QRF launched to locate and secure the crash site. It, too, is unsuccessful. Eagle 69 departed for TACAN at 0107H and upon picking up the ill soldier returned to Soto Cano hospital at 0125H.

At 0220H, the SF/JSOC QRF now including 571st flight medic Ken Kik, lands and begins its search and then the successful discovery of the crash site, two of three deceased crew members (CPT Dawn was at that time presumed elsewhere on the mountainside or possibly captured), and the lone survivor, Buddy Jarrell.

At 0350H, a second ground team is landed by Eagle 69 and arrives at the crash site at 0405H. At 0459H, a lone Honduran was taken into custody by MPs attempting to escape the outer perimeter.

At 0501H, the now onsite medical officer advises Soto Cano the patient appears to be stable and does not require being hoisted out until daylight. There is no mention in the log or in the interview with Ken Kik of his having been on the mountain with Jarrell since roughly 0300H nor advising Soto Cano of the seriousness of Jarrell's injuries via his PRC-90 radio, this information relayed by the overhead helicopter monitoring the team's progress. Also not mentioned is Kik's managing the hoist operation, with Jarrell finally lifted out at 0730H the morning of the 14th.

Twenty-eight witnesses were interviewed by the crash investigators. Only thirteen statements were summarized in the report. Both Buddy Jarrell and Ken Kik's statements are heavily edited. The final analysis of the crash and its causes, two and a half pages worth, is redacted in the report. Apparently the review board at Rucker didn't dig what its investigators fully uncovered

"Page 176 is the summary of my interview (spotted quickly because the aviation experience in the interview part shows my 289 hours as a Crew Chief and 70 hours as a Flight Medic, but the actual positions are redacted). It is definitely a "summary." Lot of stuff I said, like about Lt Boyd surviving, was left out. Also left out was a conversation about the culture of the 126th Med.

"Reading the accident report about the first attempt by QRF to land and then returning for a medic was puzzling. The report did fill in some gaps. It was really scrubbed of some details.

"The soldier the Medevac was initiated for, [was] definitely non-emergent and could have waited until daylight to fly or come by ground.

"In the days after the crash as everything was sinking in, and I absolutely truly mean this and have told many people, I realized how fragile life was, to never take life for granted, and I continue to live my life fully in memory of Linda. I became interested in aviation safety after this crash and worked on many initiatives to include risk assessment tools and Crew Resource Management (CRM) both in military and civilian life. I went on to retire from the Air National Guard as a Wing Safety NCO. I believe the lessons learned from this crash and others helped prevent other mishaps and saved lives.

"I have often told others that May14th, 1991 was the first day of my new life since I should have been on that aircraft and another died in my place."

## Air Medals for Heroism Discovered in 2025

During the research phase for this article the author contacted Army HRC and inquired if the Soldier's Medal, a peacetime award, might be possible for the MEDEVAC crew? Wesley Tuchtenhagen, CW5, AGWO Advisor to the Adjutant General (TAGD), who had assisted in locating the lost posthumous POW medal for SPC Ernest Dawson (crew chief, 4/228th Aviation Regiment (<https://www.specialforces78.com/el-salvador-black-aviator-is-awarded-posthumous-pow-medal/>), reviewed the crash report and additional information provided. In doing so he discovered, hidden away in 1LT Vicki Boyd's personnel file, a properly documented and signed award recommendation for all four of the air crew – three posthumous and one living Air Medal for Heroism.

Because the recommendation had never been submitted, for whatever reason, HRC was authorized by regulation to submit the 34-year-old award packet to its Awards and Decorations board.

On September 25, 2025, all four awards were authorized. The surviving sisters of those who perished have been notified as has Mr. Jarrell.

"Sir,

"All 4x Air Medals were approved by the ADB this week and going through board out-processing now...We will expect engraved medal sets to arrive in the next 3-4 weeks. After that, we can begin mailing all items out." – CW5 Tuchtenhagen, HRC



## “No Fallen Comrade Left Behind”



**Captain (P) Sashai Dawn, pilot—  
Air Medal for Heroism (posthumous) 2025**

CPT Dawn, formerly known as Dawna Jayne Meyers, entered military service on 27 January 1975, and completed 39 months as an enlisted person. Prior to her enlistment, she had graduated from high school in California. She attended Officer Candidate School at the U.S. Army Infantry Center, Fort Benning, Georgia, graduating in 1979 with class RC-79.

After graduation, CPT Dawn was assigned as a platoon leader with Headquarters and Company A, 40th Medical Company, Long Beach, California. She was later assigned as an ambulance platoon leader in the same organization. In January 1982, CPT Dawn was assigned as Chief, Company Supply Division, 49th Personal Services Company, Alameda, California. In 1983, CPT Dawn was awarded an associate of arts degrees from San Joaquin Delta College. On 29 August 1983, she reported Officers' Rotary-Wing Aviator Course (ORWAC) 83-44, Fort Rucker, Alabama, graduating from rotary-wing flight training on 16 May 1984. Her next assignment was with the 126th Medical Company (AA), Mather AFB, California, as an air ambulance platoon leader. CPT Dawn was promoted to captain on 8 October 1990, in the Army National Guard (ARNG). She remained with this unit until 21 November 1990, when the unit was ordered to active duty and attached to the 1st Support Battalion, Fort Bliss, Texas. At Fort Bliss, the 126th Medical Company was tasked to provide three helicopter crews to JTFB, Soto Cano AB, Honduras. CPT Dawn volunteered for this assignment and was selected as a detachment commander.



**1LT Vicki Boyd, copilot —  
Air Medal for Heroism (posthumous) 2025**

LT Boyd entered the U.S. Army as an enlisted service-member on 6 February 1981, and served 51 months on active duty as a member of a motor transportation unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. While on active duty, she attended a Primary Leadership Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and became airborne qualified in 1981. Upon her release from active duty on 15 March 1994, she entered service with the Alabama National Guard (ALARNG), attaining the rank of staff sergeant.

LT Boyd continued her education, receiving an associate degree from Enterprise State Junior College, Enterprise, Alabama, in 1985. In 1986, she received a bachelor of science degree from the University of Montevallo, Montevallo, Alabama. On 28 June 1986, she received her commission as a second lieutenant, ALARNG, and was assigned as the XO, HHC, 167th Support Command, Birmingham, Alabama. On 22 February 1987, she came back on active duty to attend the Medical Service Corps Officer Basic Course at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Upon graduation, she was released from active duty and returned to the same ARNG unit in Birmingham Alabama.

On 18 October 1988, she entered flight school at Fort Rucker, Alabama, as a member of Initial Entry Rotary-Wing (IERW) Course Class 89-02. Upon graduation, LT Boyd separated from ALARNG and transferred to California ARNG. On 22 November 1990, she was involuntarily ordered to return to active duty as a member of the 126th Medical Company (AA) and further attached to the 1st Support Battalion, Fort Bliss, Texas, for training. In April 1991, she volunteer for an assignment in Honduras as a member of the Medical Detachment, 4-228th Aviation Battalion, located in Soto Cano AB, Honduras.



**SSGT Linda Simonds, flight medic —  
Air Medal for Heroism (posthumous) 2025**

SSG Simonds had graduated from California State University, Sacramento, California, in 1980, with a bachelor of arts degree in communications. She received her master of communication degree from Loyola Marymount University in 1982. SSG Simonds enlisted in the California ARMG on 28 April 1983. She remained with the CAARNG and was assigned to the 126th Medical Company (AA) as a flight operations coordinator on 28 July 1987, in the rank of staff sergeant. On 27 September 1990, she was reassigned within the same unit as a flight medic, MOS 91B30F.

SSG Simonds was involuntarily ordered to active duty with the 126th Medical Company on 21 November 1990, for a period of 12 months. SSG Simonds volunteered for an assignment to Soto Cano AB, Honduras, and arrived in Honduras in April 1991.



**SPC William "Buddy" Jarrell, crew chief and sole survivor—  
Air Medal for Heroism 2025**

On July 20, 1992, CW3 Ernest McPherson, the past acting MEDEVAC detachment OIC for the 4/228th Aviation Regiment, submitted an awards packet to the Commanding General, U.S. Army Southern Command, in Miami, Florida. Chief McPherson recommended four Air Medals for Heroism, three of these posthumous, for the MEDEVAC crew that crashed on the evening of May 13, 1991, near the highly classified and secured TACAN radio / communications intercept site near La Paz, Honduras.

Never actioned by the Army, the awards packet lay tucked away for thirty-four years in the personnel file of 1LT Vicki Boyd, copilot, who had initially survived the horrific crash. Vicki Boyd died on the mountainside due to the incompetence of the acting commander of the 4/228 at Soto Cano to mount an immediate rescue effort as soon as apparent survivors were observed by an air crew searching for the crash site.

Following an inquiry from myself to Army HRC in the hopes of seeing possible Soldier's Medals considered for this crew, CW5 Wesley Tuchtenhagen requested the personnel files of each individual after reading the Army's official crash report as provided to me under FOIA. Tuchtenhagen discovered that soon after the crash an unusual number of congressional and media inquiries had been made to review these files. In an official letter to SFC (ret.) William Jarrell, the sole survivor of the crash, dated December 17, 2025, Major Francisco Bonglo II, Chief, Awards and Decorations Branch, offered the following:



*“During a recent review the Army Awards and Decorations Branch discovered an unactioned inquiry from a Member of Congress, which included a recommendation for the Air Medal for Heroism. IAW Title 10, USC 1130, when a Member of Congress inquires on behalf of a constituent, our branch is authorized to waive any timeline requirements associated with the original recommendation and continue processing the award.”*

Chief McPherson's narrative in support of the four awards was concise, specific, and countered the conclusions of the official accident report. In his narrative McPherson pointed out that in the case of crew chief William Jarrell, detached from the 571st Medical Detachment at Fort Carson, Colorado, and assigned to the 4/228th at Soto Cano, his professional aptitude and drive remedied what had been the lowest aircraft readiness rate at the 4/228th prior to the three crews from the CAL Guard 126th MEDEVAC unit who arrived in mid April 1991. This observation supported CPT Sashai Dawn's near immediate reports back to her commander in California that the crews were not receiving the support they'd been promised prior to their deployment to Honduras.

McPherson pointed out the weather that night was "...so dismal the normally visible destination could not be seen...". In fact, the weather was so poor the authorization by the 4/228 XO to accept the mission ran contrary to the unit's own SOP regarding any flights, as supported by the Soto Cano tower information and interviews in the accident report itself.

The recommendation commended Jarrell joining the MEDEVAC effort (the assigned 1st Up crew chief was ill that night) and on both the first and second attempts to reach TACAN acting as a "third navigator" to include studying map charts for a clearer route to the mountaintop when the XO insisted a second attempt be made.

The narrative makes it clear the original MEDEVAC aircraft, a UH-1V, a platform specifically designed and equipped for aerial MEDEVAC missions, had experienced a caution light activating upon return from the

first attempt. The XO offered a standard UH-1H from B Company as a replacement. McPherson states "...a less capable UH-1H was flown into the dark sky...", less capable to include not having air to ground radar instrumentation so the pilots would know their altitude exactly when flying in the mountainous terrain. McPherson points out the cloud-choked and not clear enough. Jarrell attempted to assist the pilots as they flew numerous probes toward the mountain site. At 2313 Hours, the aircraft impacted on a treacherous pinnacle several thousand feet below TACAN.

CPT Dawn and SSGT Simonds were killed instantly. 1LT Boyd survived and was heard calling for help by Jarrell from where he lay nearly 300 meters below the crash site. As McPherson wrote "Over eight hours he stoically endured...He answered the calls of a fellow survivor he couldn't aid due to his own injuries...He passed out and woke with a pain in his back. This turned out to be from a rivulet

of molten metal [flowing downhill from the crash site]. McPherson again does away with the accident report sanitizing the rescue effort to reach Jarrell. "It was a long-winded affair as it took hours before he was hoist-extracted at 0740 Hours to a MEDEVAC UH-1V."

The ill Soldier at TACAN, per flight medic Ken Kik who joined the SF/SOF QRF team and found / treated SPC Jarrell, was not suffering from a life, limb, or sight injury and could have waited until morning and better weather, or been ground-transported that night as was arranged after CPT Dawn aborted the first attempt due to weather.

Finally, as in all four narratives, McPherson concludes his recommendations with this. "While engaged in supporting an ally countering armed aggressors, he risked his life in a foreign land. With heroic fortitude and tenacity, Specialist William Lee Jarrell II, United States Army, probably came as close as possible to paying the ultimate price for his country. He accepted existing danger in aerial flight with fortitude and courage. Winged Warriors, "Born Under Fire".

As the official accident report assigned all responsibility for the crash to CPT Dawn and 1LT Boyd, summarizing interviews favorable to such a conclusion and overlooking the significant shortcomings and faults of the 4/228 acting commander that night, awards for heroism simply didn't fit the narrative presented.

Thirty-four years later this all changed. ❖

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Walker served in the 10th, 7th, and 19th Special Forces Groups. He retired in 2005. He is a veteran of the U.S. campaign in El Salvador and Operation Iraqi Freedom. From 2009 until 2013, Greg worked as a case manager and warrior care advocate for the SOCOM Care Coalition. He is a Life member of the Special Operations and Special Forces Associations and affiliated with Military Veterans in Journalism (MVJ).

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#### Monday – 8 June

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Opening Ceremony/Reunions / Fishing Rodeo / Motorcycle Ride  
Evening Social – Soundside Waterfront Bar

#### Tuesday – 9 June

Team Competition Observation & Rigdon Center Activities – Camp “Bull” Simons  
Rigdon Center – SFA Teamhouse Brief, Leader Updates, Membership Meeting & Symposium  
Optional Event – Golf Tournament  
Evening Social – The Island Resort

#### Wednesday – 10 June

Beach Day  
Optional Events – Barrancas National Cemetery / Fishing Rodeo / Motorcycle Ride / Camp Rudder  
Evening Social – Group Mixers (TBD)

#### Thursday – 11 June

Alumni Range / Family Event  
Awards Ceremony & Closing Ceremony  
Evening Event – SFA Banquet

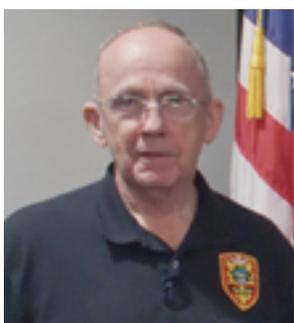


SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

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