



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 17, ISSUE 4 • APRIL 2026

## SFA Chapter 78 Valor Luncheon SPECIAL EDITION

Swift Boats  
An Excerpt from  
*MY WAR VIETNAM*  
1968–1969, 1971–1973

Inside the Quiet Profession's  
Front Door: Life as a Special  
Forces Recruiter/Liaison

TEXTBOOK SPECIAL OPS  
THE SON TAY RAID Part 2





# SENTINEL

VOLUME 17, ISSUE 4 • APRIL 2026

## From the Editor



US ARMY SPECIAL OPS COMMAND



US ARMY JFK SWCS



1ST SF COMMAND



1ST SF GROUP



3RD SF GROUP



5TH SF GROUP



7TH SF GROUP



10TH SF GROUP



19TH SF GROUP



20TH SF GROUP



8TH SF GROUP



11TH SF GROUP



12TH SF GROUP

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FRONT COVER: The U.S. Navy fast patrol craft PCF-38 of Coastal Division 11 patrols the Cai Ngay Canal in South Vietnam. PCF—Patrol Craft Fast—was the Navy's name for Swift Boats, which often worked with Special Forces teams on dangerous canal patrols like the one described in Albert Kittredge's story on [page 4](#) of this issue. (Department of the Navy photo)



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How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

I need to start with an apology. My only excuse is that I hold both of these men in such high esteem that their names have become interchangeable in my mind. In my Editor's letter in February, foreshadowing our use of the two-part Son Tay Raid article, I inadvertently attributed "high praise" for the book to General Stanley McChrystal, though it was actually written by ADM William McRaven.

Former Green Beret **Albert Kittredge** shares a short story from his book, *MY WAR VIETNAM 1968–1969 1971–1973*. It was when AI was CO of A415, adjacent to Tuyen Nhon, and they hosted a USN detachment of Swift Boats for several weeks. The story tells of an ambushed patrol that was joined by team members of the camp, including medic Dallas Padgett, who originally was borrowed from MACV.

**MSG Chris LaSala**, C/1/19 SFNG, relates how, as an **SF recruiter**, he promotes the image of the Regiment and spreads the word about the paths for both civilian and military prospects to succeed and become Green Berets. As you can imagine, he looks for quality of recruits above quantity. Excellent physical fitness is important, but expected. The successful candidate will also show character, which he explains.

Chris includes an excellent list of steps to properly prepare, and here's a partial quote: "If you are looking to test your leadership against a meaningful standard, you want to be surrounded by high performers who demand excellence, and if you want to serve in a capacity where small teams can influence strategic outcomes, then we can have a conversation."

Our graphic designer, Debra Holm, has put together a thank you to the supporters of our **3rd annual Valor Luncheon** in this special issue of the *Sentinel*.

In this issue, we conclude the two-part excerpt from *Textbook Special Ops: The Son Tay Raid* by raid planner and participant **John Gargus** and **Cliff Westbrook**. In part 1, we learned about the mission sneaking in from the west to rescue US POWs from Son Tay near Hanoi; about the massive distraction eagerly provided by the US Navy running an unexpected mock bombing campaign over Haiphong, just east of Hanoi; and our secret spying capabilities being used in the RC-135s at 35,000 feet over the Gulf of Tonkin. Join us as the action on the ground begins and the NVA SAM missile sites begin to identify targets.

Feel free to view our chapter meeting at Iron Mike's Guns, where we practiced our shooting at his high-tech, all-family shop and gun range. And please keep those stories coming about your SF experiences in the field. You can see that we regularly use them. And please join us on our social media sites for videos of speakers and more. ❖

How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

# From the President | April 2026



James McLanahan  
President SFA Ch. 78

## Moments Become Momentum, and It Grows

From the beginning, the purpose of the Valor Luncheon has been threefold: to raise money for our chapter's operating budget, to support local causes that matter to us, and to spend time with honored heroes in the company of people from our community who may not otherwise have the chance to meet them or hear their stories.

You are reading this thanks to our editor, How Miller, and our designer, Debra Holm, who produce great work. Our *Sentinel* is published monthly both in print and online, featuring stories from our Special Forces Regiment and the wider military community. They put in serious effort month after month, and the catalog of stories they have built is vast.

We also host monthly meetings where we often bring in guests who have stories to tell or causes to support. In March, we had speakers from a tech startup called One Brief that helped build a monument to the French Resistance. In May, we'll welcome an author who wrote about a legendary pilot. In June, we will hear a presentation about Lawrence of Arabia. The goal is to keep these meetings going, because they are something we all look forward to.

Our other efforts usually begin when we see a need or hear about something happening and decide we are going to help, even if only in a small way. Like a retired Green Beret injured while training this generation. We now sponsor four graduates from Sunburst Youth Academy with the Special Forces Association Outstanding Cadet Award, prepared by our Chapter Secretary, Gary Macnamara, along with gift certificates to help them start their next adventure. We also continue to partner with Afghan Commandos who now live in California. These men and their families risked so much in service to both our countries. We take great pride in gathering with members of our community to meet and have lunch with some of our nation's greatest heroes. This year's guest, Dick Thompson, is one of them.

Events like this do not happen without many people volunteering their time. Vendors work extra hours to get every detail just right, often to meet Mel's high standards. Our sponsors make the event possible. We are fortunate to have people like Debra, who produces all of the printed and digital materials. Our Chapter Vice President, Don Deatherage, always keeps his cool and is always ready to help. Even after serving several years as VP, he stepped up again when we needed him.

Our film production team Ignatius, Stefanos, Joe, and others, have been incredibly helpful in capturing these stories for our YouTube channel and helping us share them with a wider audience. My friend Reza even brought his son along to help set up and run the slide-show. And of course, we cannot forget the Saturday Tennis Girls, who together make the event happen every year.

Our master of ceremonies, Johann Hindert, hosted the first luncheon while he was a Battalion Commander. He had only one day to review the schedule and talking points, but he nailed it.

There is one person, however, who always swings for the fences and has a batting average that would make Ken Griffey Jr. jealous. My wife, Melanie. She hosted the first luncheon without me, with no warm-up, and knocked it out of the park. It was so successful that our Chapter Treasurer, Richard, insisted it become an annual event, and that I take good care of her so she would come back. I do; she's here. I'm sure you've seen her.

The mission of the Special Forces Association: to serve as the voice of the Special Forces community, to perpetuate Special Forces traditions and brotherhood, to advance the public image of Special Forces, and to promote the general welfare of the Special Forces community.

When I was a much younger man, I read several books about Green Berets in Vietnam. Those stories changed the direction of my military career. My hope for this chapter is that it continues to grow so that our nation's very best choose to serve because of the people they meet here or the stories they hear and read that come from this community. ❖

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



## SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

Sunday, April 19, 2026

Valor Luncheon

11 am – 2 pm

On The Greens Conference Center  
(Navy Golf Course)

5660 Oranewood Ave., Cypress, CA 90630

Guest Speaker:

U.S. Army LTC (Ret.) Henry "Dick" Thompson, Ph.D.1

Legendary MACV-SOG Veteran, Codename "Dynamite"

Internationally recognized consultant, educator, speaker, and author

**Next Meeting: Saturday, May 16, 2026**

**Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos**

The Pub at Fiddlers Green

4745 Yorktown Ave Bldg 19, Los Alamitos, CA 90720-5176

**2026 Meeting Schedule:** June 20, July 18, August 15,  
September 19, October 17, November 21 December (tba)



SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

# SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION VALOR LUNCHEON SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2026

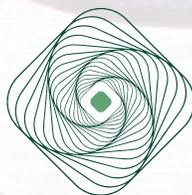
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WHO PROVIDED ESSENTIAL ASSISTANCE FOR THIS EVENT.

# Swift Boats



By Albert Kittredge

An excerpt from *MY WAR VIETNAM 1968–1969 1971–1973: Short stories about what I did and what I saw while serving with Special Forces*; Independently published May 18, 2020; Chapter 12, pages 90-99.

In late 1968 I was assigned as the team leader of Special Forces team A-415 located just outside the hamlet of Tuyen Nhon near the top of IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. Tuyen Nhon was situated along a canal just off the Van Co Dong River. The general area was often referred to as “The Plain of Reeds”. Everything north of the village of Tuyen Nhon and the canal where A-415 was located was designated a Free Fire Zone (FFZ). All friendly inhabitants had been removed from the area and relocated south of the canal.

The boundary line between South Vietnam and Cambodia in that area resembled a “Parrots Beak” or “Angels Wing” depending on how you looked at the map and was referred to as such. At that time Cambodia was off limits to any incursions by USA forces or our ARVN counterparts. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army had no such rule and took full advantage of Cambodia as their safe haven. Our mission was border surveillance, intelligence collection and interdiction of anyone traversing the FFZ.

Because Tuyen Nhon was located along a major river, the Van Co Dong, and had a PSP airstrip capable of landing C-123 aircraft we often collaborated with contingents of American units trying to take the fight to the enemy.

Shortly after I arrived at Tuyen Nhon we hosted a squadron or flotilla of USN aka “The Brown Water Navy or Swift Boats” who set up on the canal just north of the CIDG family village along the PSP airstrip.



They were accompanied by a couple of flat bottomed landing craft with drop down ramps in the front. Our part of the mission was to furnish a reinforced platoon size unit (40-50 CIDG) as a reaction force or ground assault party for each of the landing craft that would accompany 2-4 Swift Boats as they went up and down the canals and rivers.

During the month or so that they were with us we had one group out all the time and the other either getting ready to go or just getting back. These excursions took place both during the day and at all hours of the night. Sometimes we were backed up by helicopters and sometimes not.

The general concept, especially at night was to go slowly up and down the waterways hoping the VC would be foolish enough to ambush the waterborne convoy. The Swift Boats would respond with overwhelming firepower while at the same time the landing craft would nudge into the bank, offload the reaction force which in theory would circle behind the VC so they could not escape. This worked pretty well the first few times we did it but like all things if you keep following the same playbook, the other team soon figures out how to score a few points as well.

On the evening 1-6-69 our senior communications man SSG J. and our junior medic PFC Dallas Padgett accompanied a reinforced CIDG platoon onto the landing craft to act as the reaction force as the Swift Boats motored up and down the Van Co Dong River hoping to flush out a VC ambush force.

PFC Padgett was on loan to us from MACV Team 85 because we were short medics. Team 85 was just getting established and was collocated with B-41 at Moc Hoa with no clear mission until they were



fully staffed and could get their own compound built. Padgett was a good medic and we treated him just like all other members of the team to include taking his turn on patrols outside the wire.

(The next several paragraphs are as told to me by SSG J.) The Swift Boats and landing craft eased down the canal, past the CIDG village, the little hamlet of Tuyen Nhon and out into the Van Co Dong where it turned left in the direction of Moc Hoa. SSG J. and PFC Padgett were sprawled out on the upper deck of the landing craft and the CIDG were crammed in the lower deck.

The waterborne convoy had not gone far before all hell broke loose. B-40 rockets, machine guns and small arms fire erupted from the right bank. This was no small VC ambush – they obviously had been watching and had the routine figured out.

Three of the four Swift Boats were hit by B-40 rockets, two of them close enough to the waterline they had to quickly beach themselves on shore to avoid sinking. Everything, including the landing craft was raked with small arms fire.

The ambush was over almost as soon as it started. With two boats in danger of sinking and several USN and friendly indigenous wounded, there was no attempt to disembark the CIDG to encircle the enemy.

SSG J. and PFC Padgett had flattened themselves on the upper deck but were essentially unprotected from incoming fire. When the shooting subsided SSG J. turned to PFC Padgett and shouted “are you alright Dallas?” When there was no response he looked closer and saw that his companion was lying dead with lots of blood flowing from his neck.

The senior Swift Boat commander quickly took charge, off loaded the CIDG to set up a defensive perimeter around the beached boats and called for medevac to ferry the USN and CIDG wounded along with PFC Padgett’s body to the nearest hospital.

While this was taking place the Swift Boat crews made temporary repairs to the holes near the waterline.

Here is a photo taken the next day of one of the boats which almost sank—those direct hits by VC fired B-40 rockets did some serious damage.



Eventually the Swift Boats and landing craft limped back up the canal and docked along the Tuyen Nhon airstrip.

There was a requirement for positive identification of each USA KIA so the following day I sent the A-415 XO to Saigon to verify it was indeed PFC Dallas Padgett.



A few days later I wrote the dreaded letter to his mother. We followed that with a package containing another letter proclaiming him an “Honorary Green Beret” and enclosed a Green Beret and some of his personal effects.

We also make up a sign to hang over the dispensary proclaiming it to be the “Padgett Dispensary” and send her a photo.

PFC Padgett’s mother and I exchanged a couple more letters because like all parents she wanted to know more about his last few days and final hour. She also attempted to correspond with SSG J. but to the best of my knowledge he did not respond.

What about the Swift Boats—well they stayed with us for a couple more weeks. They made repairs to the damaged boats and were soon back in operation. General Abrams came to visit them and I was invited to sit in on the visit. The visit was all about the Swift Boats and he did not once acknowledge that we provided the reaction force, adjacent airstrip and general security for the USN temporary base of operations.

One thing that changed was they no longer ran up and down the canals and rivers after dark. Most of our future operations consisted of amphibious insertions of our CIDG with the landing craft with sweeps circling back to the river or eventually being picked up by helicopters the Swift Boats frequently had assigned to them. ❖



**About the Author:** *My War Vietnam* is the first hand account of Captain Al Kittredge’s experiences during two tours of service in the Vietnam war. He commanded two Special Forces “A” teams at the height of the Vietnam war and later trained Cambodian soldiers how to fight. This is a historical compilation of his contribution to the effort and events that shaped his experiences on the ground. This publication can be purchased on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com) in paperback and in Kindle format.



# Inside the Quiet Profession's Front Door: Life as a Special Forces Recruiter/Liaison

By MSG Christopher T. LaSala  
SWTD Team Sergeant

[C CO 1/19 SFG\(A\)](#)

California Special Forces Marketing and Recruitment

California Army National Guard

18 FEB 2026

By the time most people meet a Green Beret, the hard part is already done. The long rucks. The cold nights. The small-team problems with no easy answers. What they rarely see is the work that happens before a candidate ever steps foot at selection. Things like the deliberate, disciplined effort to identify, prepare, and inspire the right men and women to step forward.

That's the world of a Special Forces recruiter and liaison.

I serve with 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne), part of the 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne). My job isn't just to "recruit." It's to build a pipeline of high-caliber leaders, civilians and service members who can meet the standard and thrive in the Special Forces Regiment. It's talent identification. It's mentorship. It's standards enforcement. It's protecting the Regiment.

## The Objective: Quality Over Quantity

The objective is simple to say and hard to execute:

Find the right people. Prepare them correctly. Send them forward ready. Special Forces does not need numbers. It needs capability. Every candidate who enters the Special Forces pipeline represents an investment of time, money, and more importantly trust. If we send unprepared or unqualified candidates forward, we waste resources and erode credibility. If we send prepared, disciplined, high-executive-function performers, we strengthen the Regiment.

My responsibility is to increase the probability of success before a candidate ever attends assessment. That means screening for:

- Physical durability
- Executive function and problem-solving
- Emotional stability
- Coachability
- Initiative without ego
- The ability to follow instructions precisely

This is not about who can scream the loudest or flex the hardest on social media. It's about who can operate quietly, consistently, and intelligently in ambiguous environments.

## What I Look for in a Recruit

Physical fitness is the visible piece. Character is the decisive one. A strong 2-mile run time and a solid 12-mile ruck are baseline expectations. They're indicators of preparation and discipline. But I'm watching other things:

- Do they show up early?
- Do they read instructions fully?
- Do they ask thoughtful questions, or give constant excuses?
- Do they help others when the team is struggling?
- Do they break down when friction appears?

The Regiment doesn't need solo athletes. It needs problem-solvers who can function inside a team under stress. High executive function matters. Can they prioritize tasks under fatigue? Can they retain instructions after physical exertion? Can they manage time without supervision? In short: can they think when it's hard?

## The Liaison Side: Building Avenues and Opportunity

Recruiting for Special Forces is not a desk job. I conduct public presentations at:

- High schools and JROTC programs
- Universities
- ROTC detachments
- National Guard units
- Civic leadership organizations
- Fitness communities
- Tactical and endurance events

I speak to rooms of 15 students and auditoriums of 300. The message is consistent: leadership, standards, discipline, service.

We partner with strength coaches, endurance clubs, veteran groups, and professional organizations. We attend recruiting expos. We coordinate with unit leadership to identify talent inside the formation.

Sometimes it's a formal brief in uniform. Sometimes it's a conversation after a workout. Sometimes it's a phone call from someone who's been quietly preparing for a year. We exploit every legitimate avenue

that allows us to reach disciplined, capable individuals who might never have considered Special Forces but have the raw attributes to succeed.

## The Special Warfare Training Detachment (SWTD)

A critical part of this ecosystem is the Special Warfare Training Detachment (SWTD). The SWTD is where preparation becomes deliberate and candidates:

- Conduct structured Physical Fitness Tests
- Complete 12-mile ruck marches (45 lbs dry)
- Execute land navigation (day and night)
- Participate in team events under load and time constraints
- Receive mentorship from experienced cadre

It's not a participation trophy environment. It's a controlled exposure to standards. The SWTD does three important things:

1. Identifies who is ready.
2. Shows candidates where they are not ready.
3. Builds a culture of accountability before selection.

Some candidates realize they need more preparation others demonstrate they are ready now. Either outcome strengthens the pipeline by sending quality candidates who will come return to the company to add value.

## Civilians and Service Members: There Is a Path

One misconception is that Special Forces is only accessible to a narrow segment of the population. In reality, there are multiple entry points:

- Active Duty service members
- National Guard Soldiers
- Prior service personnel
- Qualified civilians entering through enlistment options

Across the country, there are Special Forces Groups within the Army National Guard. Many states offer accessions programs and readiness events that allow civilians to compete for the opportunity to attend SFAS. If someone is serious, there is a path. The first step is not selection. The first step is reaching out. Then comes preparation, mentorship, and exposure to standards.

## Balancing Inspiration with Reality

There is a delicate balance in this job. We must inspire but not oversell. We must motivate, but not dilute standards. Special Forces is not a brand. It's a commitment to sustain excellence in small teams under real-world consequences. When I speak to prospective candidates, I tell them plainly:

- If you are looking for comfort, this is not it.
- If you are looking for shortcuts, this is not it.
- If you are looking for status alone, this is not it.

But if you are looking to test your leadership against a meaningful standard, you want to be surrounded by high performers who demand excellence, and if you want to serve in a capacity where small teams can influence strategic outcomes, then we can have a conversation.

## A Day in the Life

A typical week might include:

- Reviewing candidate performance data
- Conducting phone screenings
- Coordinating training sites
- Syncing with cadre
- Delivering public presentations
- Answering dozens of questions about eligibility, preparation, and timelines
- Evaluating ruck times and PFT results
- Mentoring someone through setbacks

It's part talent scout, part coach, part gatekeeper. Sometimes, part counselor, because behind every candidate is a life decision, family conversations, or career change. This job carries responsibility.

## Protecting the Regiment

Ultimately, this role is about stewardship. The Regiment we serve today was built by those who came before us. It has a reputation forged over decades of operational excellence. Our task is to ensure that the next generation is worthy of inheriting it. That means being honest, enforcing standards, saying "not yet" when necessary, demanding preparation. The goal is not to make SFAS easier but to make candidates better.

## Final Thoughts for Prospective Trainees

If you're reading this and considering the path:

- Start training intelligently.
- Build endurance and durability.
- Improve your executive function.
- Learn to operate inside a team.
- Seek mentorship.
- Embrace feedback.
- Fix weaknesses before they are exposed.

And understand this:

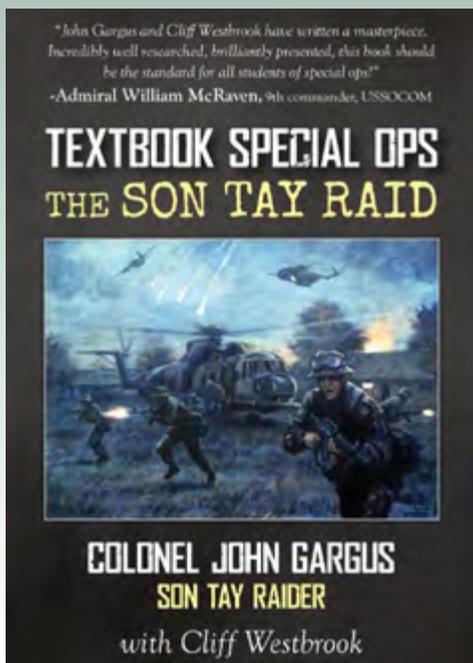
Special Forces is not about being the loudest or the strongest in the room. It's about being reliable when it matters most. The door is not closed, but it is guarded by standards, and that's exactly how it should be. For those ready to step forward, reach out, show up prepared, and be willing to be evaluated honestly. The Regiment deserves your best. And if you earn it, it will demand even more.

That's the quiet profession. The front door is open, for the those who dare. ❖



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# TEXTBOOK SPECIAL OPS THE SON TAY RAID

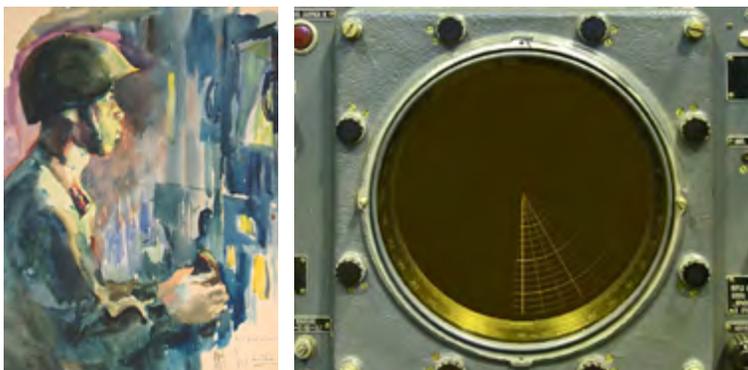
## PART 2

**From the editor:** Aboard an RC-135 over the Gulf of Tonkin, we monitor U.S. Navy diversionary strikes east of Hanoi and a raiding force slipping into Laos to the west. After months without bombing, the North Vietnamese are only now realizing renewed U.S. activity.

(The last paragraph from Part 1 printed in the March 2026 Sentinel: “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.”

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 88-100.



An SA-2 SAM operator and his scope. (1. Public Domain art by a North Vietnamese soldier; 2. Public Domain.) The labels are in Russian.



A SA-2 SAM operator station. The labels are in Russian. (Public Domain)

### A continuation of CHAPTER 4 Airborne Command Post: Listening to the Enemy's Conversations

We hear, in a clear voice, something like: “Xuất hiện tốp không một, phủng vị không chín không, cụ ly bốn mủi.”

Translation: “Bogey #1 has appeared, azimuth/bearing 090, range 40 kilometers”.

I press my microphone’s button and report this to my AMS. He reports it on the appropriate frequencies, but I’m too busy to listen to what he does with it.

This hapless NVAF controller has no idea that every word he is saying is immediately being translated and broadcast in English to his executioner, an F-105 thousands of feet over his head.

I press the RECORD button. I steal a glance up at my station’s large reel-to-reel tape, directly over my two central screens. They’re rolling, alright. I quickly refocus my eyes to determine who their bogey is—which blip on my screen. There are several of these Navy aircraft that he could be talking about. He certainly sees quite a few.



Inside the SA-2 control station. (Public Domain art by a North Vietnamese soldier.)



An SA-2 launch. (Eastfoto)

Our Navy bogeys are now over Haiphong harbor, within the Fan Song radar's range. The tempo really picks up.

I hear the SAM control officer call out “Cao độ” (altitude) and the number of feet. I can literally hear multiple voices in the van assessing the situation. Our technology is fantastic. The launch control officer is issuing commands and directing everything among his soldiers in the small control building. I picture him standing—like Colonel Frisbie—over the shoulder of his radar operator.

He loudly issues the terminal command: “Phóng!” (Launch!)

Immediately, I hear the actual sound of the SAM missile blasting off—so good is our spy technology aboard our Hognose beauty! Under these circumstances, Hognose is what sexy looks like! The command to launch was clear and then one hell of a roaring sound as the SA-2 missile ignited its huge first stage rocket and took off.

This is the first SAM launch of the night. It's 1:45am. All SAM activity is in the east, over Haiphong Harbor.

At this moment, far from this launch, the Son Tay Raid assault formation is now sneaking in from the dark western mountains undetected. They are on track to arrive at Son Tay in half an hour.

We know exactly what that NVAF commander will say if he were to actually achieve a shoot-down of an American aircraft. You would hear extremely excited voices in the SAM van declare, “Tiêu diệt mục tiêu rồi!” (Target destroyed!!) or at other times it might be, “Bắn rớt tại chỗ!” (Shot down on the spot!!)

[NOTE: In the case of shoot-downs, sometimes the only real status of a pilot is what has been gleaned by 11-Op and 7-Op intelligence. This is extremely valuable to US authorities. You can imagine that families of downed Airmen are thankful for the details we provide them. And our information greatly aids rescues.]

For my part, because I have trained on all positions, I scan all areas for indications of what's going on elsewhere, even beyond my 11-Op responsibilities.

These Navy aircraft swarm toward Haiphong harbor over the next hour and a half, a continuous beeline of America's top naval strike aircraft concentrating their menace on the enemy's most important harbor.

[NOTE: History records that this 59-aircraft diversionary strike turns out to be the largest nighttime Naval operation to this point in the war. There had not been a night carrier operation this large since June of 1944, the Battle of the Philippine Sea, 26 years prior.]

I'm constantly scanning, rolling my dial, searching. The dial is excellent for fine-tuning. It's like a miniature of one of those steering wheels that have a knob so that a city bus driver can drive with one hand. Clockwise takes me through the next few frequencies up.

2:08am. We hear the five USAF F-105 'Wild Weasel' aircraft arrive over Son Tay, each with their two SAM-site-killing Shrike missiles. This relatively small formation has snuck in from the west, while all the NVAF Air Defense Command had their focus on Haiphong in the east. The F-105s establish a taunting orbit, just daring a SAM site to

lock on to them. They are looking for the Fan Song radars. If a Fan Song shines on them, the F-105 will pounce. It's the epitome of a wild west duel: Weapons loaded and cocked, aimed right at each other. The SAMs and AAA are daring the F-105s to come in on them. The F-105s are daring the Fan Song radar to activate.

2:18am. **"Alpha, Alpha, Alpha!"** is broadcast by Cherry One, the MC-130 announcing H-Hour of the Son Tay Raid as they have just released their 2 million candlepower Mk 24 flares over the Son Tay POW camp. The helicopters then land, their 56 Green Berets storming into a massive firefight. Within minutes, they have secured the camp, neutralizing between 40 and 100 NVA soldiers. Not a single American casualty.

2:28am. "Negative items" is broadcast both over the UHF radios and the FM radios by Capt. Dick Meadows to Lt. Col. Bud Sydnor, the Ground Force Commander. The Green Berets have searched the entire Son Tay POW camp—and there are no POWs. This is immediately heard by Colonel Frisbie standing next to me. Colonel Frisbie is clearly concerned. His conversation with Manor at Monkey Mountain is grave. This Hognose is amazing as an airborne command post, making this very important conversation effortless and clear in this mentally and emotionally difficult, confusing moment. We cut through the fog of war.



A North American F-105G Thunderchief 'Wild Weasel' SAM killer with Shrike missiles at Korat RTAFB. (Public Domain)



A Shrike missile flying right down a SAM radar signal. (Public Domain)

2:30am. "Pull back by the normal plan" is broadcast by Lt. Col. Sydnor to begin withdrawing all troops from the Son Tay POW camp. The HH-53 helicopters Apple One and Apple Two are called back in to extract the Green Berets.

2:31am. The F-105s launch the first two Shrikes against the four active Fan Song sites near Son Tay. Within the next six minutes, there are seven active Fan Song radars identified: four are at the Red River and three more are slightly north of that. Four of these seven are 'hot' at any given moment.

If not for my headphones, the sound inside the RC-135M cabin is the same sound we all know from commercial flights. But when I'm tuned in to a SAM site and we've cleaned up the signals electronically strong and clear, I'm right inside the enemy's control van, even knowing the number of people by their different voices. I picture that it's probably dimmed lighting, like our cabin, with operators at their workstations. Their dark screens are lit up with bogeys, a rotating radar sweeping around their screen. The launch control officer is much like our AMS, professional, yet still having a personality, growing in excitement as their prey approached closer and closer to their claws...

Early in the war, the NVAF could shine on our aircraft and track all they want with impunity, launching their missiles at the optimum time, tracking for results and even launching again right away. Later, however, the Americans developed anti-radar missiles like the Shrike that is riding the Fan Song radar signals down to the radar itself and knocking out SAM sites right now. As a result, the NVAF are forced to turn on their radar sparingly and only at great risk to themselves.

2:35am. SAM launch! The first one in the Son Tay area tonight.

All operators on the Combat Apple mission are pumped up, coordinating with each other, critically aware of the situation and reporting the real time intelligence intended to save American lives and eliminate the enemy threat.

I cannot believe my ears. I tune in to SAM site after SAM site and hear frenzied Vietnamese commands to track an aircraft here or lock on to a threatening fighter there. I'm passing details of SAM site coordinates, operators' conversations, and potential launch preparations.

Allow me to patch in some additional details (pieced together from my conversations with friends of mine in our Son Tay Raid Association who lived it) that I was not aware of in the heat of the battle.

[NOTE: I'm inserting these verbally-told details by indenting and showing them in italics. I've used the best time estimates I have. Any errors/inaccuracies in this are purely mine (CW)—with my apologies!]



An SA-2 missile 2nd stage rocket and warhead. (Public Domain)

At this exact moment, Firebird 5, an F-105 at 20,000 feet, is on orbit about 20 miles from Hanoi. He is the backup aircraft in a flight of five. Each time he turns Southeast on the inbound leg of his orbit, he can see, more than 50 miles away, the flashes of the Navy's diversionary activity dropping flares/incendiaries on the far side of Hanoi.

Up to now, the only SAM activity has been the launching against the Navy A-6s and A-7s for 50 minutes. (Imagine the view looking over the city lights of Manhattan from the far north end of the island, while 4th of July fireworks are celebrating at the Statue of Liberty at the far south end.)

But now, the SAM battle is also right beneath you in the Son Tay area.

Firebird 1, 2, 3, and 4, using roughly perpendicular inbound tracks, take turns launching on the radar signals of live SAM sites. Multiple SAMs are launching at them. In the night, a flying SA-2 looks like a telephone pole balanced on a reddish orange fireball oscillating as its gimbals respond to the radio telemetry signals.

A little perspective: Out of the hundreds of combat missions flown by the crewmembers in tonight's mission, for almost all of them, this was the first time ever to have a SAM actually launch on them.

2:37am. Apple One begins re-boarding the first two groups of Green Berets just outside the Son Tay POW camp walls for exfiltration.

2:40am. Apple One departs the Son Tay POW camp.

Also at 2:40am: As Firebird 3 turns away from a target at 12,000 feet, a SAM launches. If the SAM is not moving in your windscreen, that's when you know it's headed for you. From Firebird 5's vantage above, the huge explosion fireball seems to engulf Firebird 3, but then he hears, "Mayday, Mayday. Firebird 3 is hit." The Firebird 3 pilot, Lt. Col. Bill Starkey, gives Firebird 1 a status.

Extremely excited voices in the SAM van declare something like, "Bắn rớt tại chỗ!" (Shot down on the spot!!) "...on the spot" is a very North Vietnamese way of speaking.

A minute later, Firebird 1 asks 3 if he needed to go home. Starkey replies "Yes, I think I better." They are out of the fight, but still flyable. They turn toward the southwest and head home high above the lethal altitude of the massive barrage that has now developed.

2:41am. Apple Two lands to pick up the last group of the ground force.

2:45am. Apple Two departs the Son Tay POW camp.

Firebird 5 is now ordered into the fight. Captain Ted Lowry (EWO) knows Major Don Kilgus (his pilot) as a man with an extremely aggressive heart. Having flown about 300 hours together, Lowry trusts him implicitly—Lowry says it works best that way, since Lowry is, by definition, 39 inches in trail at all times. Within seconds of entering the fight, Firebird 5 lines up on one of a number of SAM sites that were beginning to become very active.

The scope tells Lowry the location of a SAM site. Smart F-4 crews overhead know to put that on their 6 o'clock. Kilgus and Lowry turn to put it at their 12, straight ahead. At about 13 miles out, with the F-105's state-of-the-art avionics system for their Shrike missile, Lowry acquires the target emitter. Get within the parameters. Raise the nose 25 degrees for optimal launch. Bleed the speed to 350 knots. Ready to fire.

The Shrike launches from under the right wing of the F-105. Kilgus executes an evasive 180-degree turn.

The electronic warfare suite gives the F-105's crew a rattlesnake sound to let you know the SAM site is tracking you. When it changes, adding a steady tone, you know they've launched on you.

At that very moment, a rattlesnake and steady tone comes over the headphones: one of the SAMs has launched. Kilgus scans for it, spots it, and lets the SAM develop its flight algorithm. He verifies that it is trailing them. He dives abruptly. The SAM dives with them. Timing the pull for a moment when he knows the SAM will not turn well, Firebird 5 pulls up with four Gs. The SAM fails to make the turn. By this time, a second SAM from the same site is already airborne. Firebird 5, now with less speed, pulls aggressively within the arc of the second SAM. PULL...IT...AROUND. The M-1 'grunt' keeps the blood in your head from draining. The second SAM swings wide, impotent. A third SAM is in the air—it's getting hairy—and yes, it too is coming at them, and somehow they avoid it as well.

At that same moment, the other flight members were all dodging SAMs and keeping situationally aware of each other as well. A fourth SAM is airborne in the melee and homing in on Firebird 5. You look out your canopy at 4 o'clock low. Not moving. Not good. The Gs strain your craned neck, but you can't stop looking. A desperate hard turn is not enough.

POWW!! You've never heard such a vicious concussion. It explodes about 100 meters away. Its shrapnel hits the fuselage just aft of Lowry's seat primarily. That bomb flash off your right side totally stuns you. The aircraft is slammed toward the left. ...it is 2:46am.

2:46am. Firebird 5 is hit by a SAM! Extremely excited voices in the SAM van declare something like, "Tiêu diệt mục tiêu rồi!" (Target destroyed!!)



An amazing photo of an SA-2 damaging an F-105 over North Vietnam. (Public Domain)



Our beautiful RC-135M at home at Kadena Air Base. The 'hognose' radome housed an extraordinary array of sensors, including a particular doppler radar system needed for unparalleled precision. Our mission entailed skimming along enemy boundaries. Straying even slightly into enemy territory would make us fair game for shoot down, as is illustrated in the KAL Flight 007 tragedy of 1983. (Photo provided by Robert Ruseckas)

Aboard the F-105, the crew assesses their aircraft: The damage is aft of you, where the P2 hydraulic system and fuel tanks are. Kilgus says to Lowry, "The Stab Aug is inop." Horizontal Stabilizer Augmenter is an electro-hydraulic function that helps the jet fly smoother. As an indication of how unruly this jet can be, the F-105G is known by crews as the 'Thud.' With Stab Aug now inoperative, it's going to take more work the rest of the flight. Other than that, this Thud is still functional, as far as the crew can tell. They still have one Shrike left. (Their load was 2 Shrikes and 3 external fuel tanks.) Kilgus says to Lowry, "The airplane is still flyable and we have people down there. We need to stay."

2:47am: When the rattlesnake comes over the headphones, Lowry identifies the 'High PRF' (Pulsed Repetition Frequency) signal and Firebird 5 turns inbound again to line up on it. Pull up 25 degrees. Launch. Hard left. The Shrike hits the bullseye. At \$7,000 per Shrike, that's a great investment.

No missiles left. Damaged by an SA-2. Time to turn southwest and limp to the nearest friendly base, right? No, they remain on station in orbit.

You see, Kilgus and Lowry know they've shot all their Shrike missiles. But Charlie, sitting in a surviving SA-2 site, DOESN'T know that. Charlie sees the F-105G's radar signature, so he's going to think twice before he shines a radar on any more American aircraft tonight.

2:55am: When Brigham (the call sign of the Ground Controlled Intercept operators at Udorn RTAFB) announces that all other US aircraft have left the area, Firebird 1 tells his wingmen, "Firebirds egress," Kilgus updates his status: "Firebird 5 is hit. We're losing fuel and we need a tanker to head this way."<sup>1</sup>

We'll pause the remainder of Ruseckas' story for the moment. We'll pick up this story in Chapter 5 about the return from Son Tay.

In the meantime, we need to give the details of the NVA Air Defense response. ❖

<sup>1</sup> Ruseckas, Robert J., and Westbrook, Cliff, "The Son Tay Raid in the Airborne Command Post: Listening to Every Transmission from 35,000 feet." Internet article for the Son Tay Raid Association, 2021.

## 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.

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## SFA Chapter 78 February 2026 Chapter Meeting

Photos by How Miller



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## “Shoot Back at Cupid”—Iron Mike’s Guns, Yorba Linda, CA

SFA Chapter 78’s February meeting was held at Iron Mike’s in Yorba Linda, a modern shooting range founded by Mike Healy to serve Southern California’s firearms community with a focus on safety, training, and responsible use. Be sure to visit [iron-mikes.com](http://iron-mikes.com) to learn more.

This was our second visit to Iron Mike’s—the first was in July 2025—and we are once again grateful to Mike for his generosity and to his outstanding staff for their support in making the event a success.

**1** Mike Healy III, the owner of Iron Mike’s Guns—a full-service shooting range and training academy in Yorba Linda, CA.

**2** VP James McLanahan, at left, with Iron Mike’s videographer, Michelangelo.

**3** Left to right, How Miller with Jerry and Lynn Guzzetta.

**4** Left to right, Marla and Wayne Ogelvie, and James McLanahan.

**5** David and Mellissa Breunig

**6** Patty and Gus Populus

**7** Ham Salley

**8** Aimee and Mark Griffen

**9** On the range at Iron Mike’s.

**10** Gus Populus prepares.

**11** Jim Duffy locking on his target.

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