

RAMPARTS

[MEMOIRS OF A SPECIAL FORCES HERO]

“The
whole thing
was a
lie!”

By Donald Duncan



HEADQUARTERS
5TH SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (AIRBORNE), 1ST SPECIAL FORCES
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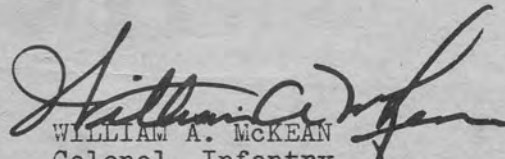
ASF

22 July 1965

SUBJECT: Letter of Appreciation

TO: Master Sergeant Donald W. Duncan
Headquarters
5th Special Forces Group (Abn)
1st Special Forces
APO US Forces, 96240

1. I wish to express my appreciation for your outstanding presentation of facts and information of Special Forces activities to the Honorable Robert S. McNamara and party on 19 July 1965.
2. Throughout the entire presentation your knowledge of Special Forces activities, lucid oral expression, and poise were exceptional.
3. The salient points which you so aptly presented to the Secretary of Defense may have significant results on future support of Special Forces in the Republic of Vietnam. You are to be congratulated for a job well done.
4. This letter will be made a permanent part of your military 201 file.


WILLIAM A. MCKEAN
Colonel, Infantry
Commanding

[MEMOIRS OF A SPECIAL FORCES HERO]

“The whole thing was a lie!”

By Donald Duncan

MASTER SERGEANT DONALD DUNCAN left the United States Army in September of 1965 after ten years of service, including six years in the Special Forces and eighteen months on active combat duty in Vietnam. While in Vietnam he received the South Vietnamese Silver Star, the Combat Infantry Badge, the Bronze Star, and the United States Army Air Medal. He was nominated for the American Silver

Star and was the first enlisted man in Vietnam to be nominated for the Legion of Merit. Both nominations are still pending. He participated in many missions behind enemy lines in War Zone D, Vung Tao and the An Khe Valley. Last March he turned down the offer of a field commission to the rank of captain. Instead he left Vietnam on September 5, 1965 and received his honorable discharge four days later.

When I was drafted into the Army, ten years ago, I was a militant anti-Communist. Like most Americans, I couldn't conceive of anybody choosing communism over democracy. The depths of my aversion to this ideology was, I suppose, due in part to my being Roman Catholic, in part to the stories in the news media about communism, and in part to the fact that my stepfather was born in Budapest, Hungary. Although he had come to the United States as a young man, most of his family had stayed in Europe. From time to time, I would be given examples of the horrors of life under communism. Shortly after Basic Training,

I was sent to Germany. I was there at the time of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolt. Everything I had heard about communism was verified. Like my fellow soldiers I felt frustrated and cheated that the United States would not go to the aid of the Hungarians. Angrily, I followed the action of the brute force being used against people who were armed with sticks, stolen weapons, and a desire for independence.

While serving in Germany, I ran across the Special Forces. I was so impressed by their dedication and élan that I decided to volunteer for duty with this group. By 1959 I had been accepted into the Special Forces and underwent training at Fort Bragg. I was soon to learn much about the outfit and the men in it. A good percentage of them were Lodge Act people — men who had come out from Iron Curtain countries. Their anti-communism bordered on fanaticism. Many of them who, like me, had joined Special Forces to do something positive, were to leave because “things” weren't happening fast enough. They were to show up later in Africa and Latin America in the employ of others or as independent agents for the CIA.

Initially, training was aimed at having United States teams organize guerrilla movements in foreign countries. Emphasis was placed on the fact that guerrillas can't take prisoners. We were continuously told “You don't have to kill them yourself — let your indigenous counterpart do that.” In a course entitled, “Countermeasures to Hostile Interrogation,” we were taught NKVD (Soviet Security) methods of torture to extract information. It became obvious that the title was only camouflage for teaching us “other” means of interrogation when time did not permit more sophisticated methods, for example, the old cold water-hot water treatment, or the delicate operation of lowering a man's testicles into a jeweler's vise. When we asked directly if we were being told to use these methods

the answer was, “We can't tell you that. The Mothers of America wouldn't approve.” This sarcastic hypocrisy was greeted with laughs. Our own military teaches these and even worse things to American soldiers. They then condemn the Viet Cong guerrillas for supposedly doing those very things. I was later to witness firsthand the practice of turning prisoners over to ARVN for “interrogation” and the atrocities which ensued.

Throughout the training there was an exciting aura of mystery. Hints were continually being dropped that “at this very moment” Special Forces men were in various Latin American and Asian countries on secret missions. The anti-Communist theme was woven throughout. Recommended reading would invariably turn out to be books on “brainwashing” and atrocity tales — life under communism. The enemy was THE ENEMY. There was no doubt that THE ENEMY was communism and Communist countries. There never was a suggestion that Special Forces would be used to set up guerrilla warfare against the government in a Fascist-controlled country.

It would be a long time before I would look back and realize that this conditioning about the Communist conspiracy and THE ENEMY was taking place. Like most of the men who volunteered for Special Forces, I wasn't hard to sell. We were ready for it. Artur Fisers, my classmate and roommate, was living for the day when he would “lead the first ‘stick’ of the first team to go into Latvia.” “How about Vietnam, Art?” “To hell with Vietnam. I wouldn't blend. There are not many blue-eyed gooks.” This was to be only the first of many contradictions of the theory that Special Forces men cannot be prejudiced about the color or religion of other people.

After graduation, I was chosen to be a Procurement NCO for Special Forces in California. The joke was made that I was now a procurer. After seeing how we were prostituted, the analogy doesn't seem a bad one. General

Yarborough's instructions were simple: "I want good, dedicated men who will graduate. If you want him, take him. Just remember, he may be on your team someday." Our final instructions from the captain directly in charge of the program had some succinct points. I stood in shocked disbelief to hear, "Don't send me any niggers. Be careful, however, not to give the impression that we are prejudiced in Special Forces. You won't find it hard to find an excuse to reject them. Most will be too dumb to pass the written test. If they luck out on that and get by the physical testing, you'll find that they have some sort of a criminal record." The third man I sent to Fort Bragg was a "nigger." And I didn't forget that someday he might be on my team.

My first impressions of Vietnam were gained from the window of the jet while flying over Saigon and its outlying areas. As I looked down I thought, "Why, those could be farms anywhere and that could be a city anywhere." The ride from Tan Son Nhut to the center of town destroyed the initial illusion.

My impressions weren't unique for a new arrival in Saigon. I was appalled by the heat and humidity which made my worsted uniform feel like a fur coat. Smells. Exhaust fumes from the hundreds of blue and white Renault taxis and military vehicles. Human excrement; the foul, stagnant, black mud and water as we passed over the river on Cong Ly Street; and, overriding all the others, the very pungent and rancid smell of what I later found out was *nuoc mam*, a sauce made much in the same manner as sauerkraut, with fish substituted for cabbage. No Vietnamese meal is complete without it. People — masses of them! The smallest children, with the dirty faces of all children of their age, standing on the sidewalk unshod and with no clothing other than a shirtwaist that never quite reached the navel on the protruding belly. Those a little older wearing overall-type trousers with the crotch seam torn out — a practical alteration that eliminates the need for diapers. Young grade school girls in their blue butterfly sun hats, and boys of the same age with hands out saying, "OK — Salem," thereby exhausting their English vocabulary. The women in *ao dais* of all colors, all looking beautiful and graceful. The slim, hipless men,

many walking hand-in-hand with other men, and so misunderstood by the newcomer. Old men with straggly Fu Man Chu beards staring impassively, wearing wide-legged, pajama-like trousers.

Bars by the hundreds — with American-style names (Playboy, Hungry i, Flamingo) and faced with grenade-proof screening. Houses made from packing cases, accommodating three or four families, stand alongside spacious villas complete with military guard. American GI's abound in sport shirts, slacks, and cameras; motorcycles, screaming to make room for a speeding official in a large, shiny sedan, pass over an intersection that has hundreds of horseshoes impressed in the soft asphalt tar. Confusion, noise, smells, people — almost overwhelming.

My initial assignment was in Saigon as an Area Specialist for III and IV Corps Tactical Zone in the Special

Forces Tactical Operations Center. And my education began here. The officers and NCOs were unanimous in their contempt of the Vietnamese.

There was a continual put-down of Saigon officials, the Saigon government, ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam), the LLDB (Luc Luong Dac Biet-Vietnamese Special Forces) and the Vietnamese man-in-the-street. The government was rotten, the officials corrupt, ARVN cowardly, the LLDB all three, and the man-in-the-street an ignorant thief. (LLDB also qualified under "thief.")

I was shocked. I was working with what were probably some of the most dedicated Americans in Vietnam. They

were supposedly in Vietnam to help "our Vietnamese friends" in their fight for a democratic way of life. Obviously, the attitude didn't fit.

It occurred to me that if the people on "our side" were all these things, why were we then supporting them and spending \$1.5 million dollars a day in their country? The answer was always the same: "They are anti-Communists," and this was supposed to explain everything.

As a result of this insulation, my initial observations of everything and everyone Vietnamese were colored. I almost fell into the habit, or mental laziness, of evaluating Vietnam not on the basis of what I saw and heard, but on what I was told by other biased Americans. When you see something contradictory, there is always a fellow countryman willing



“Negroes do not go into white bars except at the risk of being ejected.”

to interpret the significance of it, and it won't be favorable to the Vietnamese. This is due partially to the type of Vietnamese that the typical American meets, coupled with typical American prejudices. During his working hours, the American soldier deals primarily with the Vietnamese military. Many (or most) of the higher-ranking officers attained their status through family position, as a reward for political assistance, and through wealth. Most of the ranking civilians attained their positions in the same manner. They use their offices primarily as a means of adding to their personal wealth. There is hardly any social rapport between GI Joe and his Vietnamese counterpart.

Most contact between Americans and Vietnamese civilians is restricted to taxi drivers, laborers, secretaries, contractors, and bar girls. All these people have one thing in common: They are dependent on Americans for a living. The last three have something else in common. In addition to speaking varying degrees of English, they will tell Americans anything they want to hear as long as the money rolls in. Neither the civilian nor military with whom the American usually has contact is representative of the Vietnamese people.

Many of our military, officers and enlisted, have exported the color prejudice, referring to Vietnamese as “slopes” and “gooks” — two words of endearment left over from Korea. Other fine examples of American Democracy in action are the segregated bars. Although there are exceptions, in Saigon, Nha Trang, and Da Nang and some of the other larger towns, Negroes do not go into white bars except at the risk of being ejected. I have seen more than one incident where a Negro newcomer has made a “mistake” and walked into the wrong bar. If insulting catcalls weren't enough to make him leave, he was thrown out bodily. There are cases where this sort of thing has led to near-riots.

It is obvious that the Vietnamese resent us as well. We are making many of the same mistakes that the French did, and in some instances our mistakes are worse. Arrogance, disrespect, rudeness, prejudice, and our own special brand of ignorance, are not designed to win friends. This resentment runs all the way from stiff politeness to obvious hatred. It is so common that if a Vietnamese working with or for Americans is found to be sincerely

cooperative, energetic, conscientious, and honest, it automatically makes him suspect as a Viet Cong agent.

AFTER MY INITIAL ASSIGNMENT in Saigon, which lasted two and one-half months, I volunteered for a new program called Project Delta. This was a classified project wherein specially selected men in Special Forces were to train and organize small teams to be infiltrated into Laos. The primary purpose of dropping these teams into Laos was to try and find the Ho Chi Minh trail and gather information on traffic, troops, weapons, etc. This was purely a reconnaissance intelligence mission, but the possibility of forming guerrilla bases later was considered. There was some talk of going into North Vietnam, but not by Project Delta. Another outfit, Special Operations Group (SOG) was already doing just that. SOG was a combined forces effort. The CIA, Air Force (US), Navy, Army and detached Special Forces personnel were all in on the act.

Project Delta was paid for by Uncle Sam from CIDG funds. We had to feed, billet and clothe the Vietnamese. Free beer was supplied and lump sums of money were agreed on, money to be paid after completion of training and more to be paid when the teams returned.

Here we are in South Vietnam to help these people “preserve their freedom, etc.,” willing to risk our lives to that end and here we are paying them to help themselves. These were men already being paid their regular pay in the Vietnamese Army and we actually had to pay a bonus each time they went to the field on training missions or made a parachute jump, all of which was supposed to be a normal part of their duties.

Originally, it was thought that the teams would be composed of four Vietnamese and two Americans. Although many of the people we were training had natural aptitudes for the area of operations, strong and effective leadership was lacking. It was emphasized constantly to the Pentagon and to the ambassador by those intimately involved in the training program, that if any degree of success was to be realized it was imperative that Americans must accompany the teams.

When at the last minute we received a firm “No Go” for the United States personnel, we asked, “Why?” The answer was that it was an election year and it would cause great embarrassment if Americans were captured in Laos. Anything of that nature would have to wait until after the election. The reaction to this decision on the part of the Americans was one of anger, disappointment and disgust.

The one thing that made it possible to accomplish the things we did was the relationship we had established with the Vietnamese. Each man took it upon himself to establish a friendly relationship with the men on the teams. We

ate the same food, wore the same clothes, lived in the same tents, shared the same hardships. We worked more hours and carried the same loads. We made ourselves the guinea pigs in experiments. The pitch was, "We don't ask you to do anything we won't do ourselves." It worked. We had dedicated teams.

After the decision to eliminate Americans from the drops, the Vietnamese felt that they had been cheated. Petty complaints became rampant; e.g., if we do not get wool sweaters and better watches we will not go. They felt this was one more example of Americans standing back advising Vietnamese on how to get killed without risk to themselves. We started getting an increase in A.W.O.L.s. The Americans had to watch their teams board the infiltration aircraft without them. Hands were shaken but with eyes averted. "Good lucks" were said but with bent heads. We felt guilty. We had strongly advised that the teams not be sent until the Americans could go, but to no avail.

Like everyone, I was disappointed. This was the one thing, if I had to single one out, that made me really start questioning our role in Vietnam. It suddenly occurred to me that the denial of American participation was not based on whether it was right or wrong for us to be going to Laos. The primary concern was the possible embarrassment to President Johnson during an election campaign. Toward this end we sent people on a mission that had little or no chance of success. It became apparent that we were not interested in the welfare of the Vietnamese but, rather, in how we could best promote our own interests. We sent 40 men who had become our friends. These were exceptionally dedicated people, all volunteers, and their CO showed up drunk at the plane to bid the troops farewell — just all boozed up. Six returned, the rest were killed or captured.

As it turned out, the mission found damned little. Most teams didn't last long enough to report what, if anything, they saw. The six survivors came completely through the areas and observed no troop movements, no concentrations of troops, and little vehicle traffic, day or night. In the final stages, two of the project helicopters flew two missions a day for four days, looking for the teams. They

saw nothing and were not fired at. As for the highway from Tchepone to Muong Nong, one helicopter flew the highway, taking pictures with a hand-held 35mm camera. It was low enough to take straight-on shots of people standing in doorways.

To many in Vietnam this mission confirmed that the Ho Chi Minh trail, so called, and the traffic on it, was grossly exaggerated, and that the Viet Cong were getting the bulk of their weapons from ARVN and by sea. It also was one more piece of evidence that the Viet Cong were primarily South Vietnamese, not imported troops from the North. One more thing was added to my growing lists of doubts of the "official" stories about Vietnam.

When the project shifted to in-country operations Americans went on drops throughout the Viet Cong-held areas of South Vietnam. One such trip was into War Zone D north of Dong Xoi, near the Michelin plantation. There is no such thing as a typical mission. Each one is different. But this one revealed some startling things. Later I was to brief Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Westmoreland on the limited military value of the bombing, as witnessed on this mission.

As usual we went in at dusk — this time in a heavy rain squall. We moved only a nominal distance, perhaps 300 meters, through the thick, tangled growth and stopped. Without moonlight we were making too much noise. It rained all night so we had to wait until first light to move without crashing around. Moving very cautiously

for about an hour, we discovered a deserted company headquarters position, complete with crude tables, stools, and sleeping racks. After reporting this by radio, we continued on our way. The area was crisscrossed with well-traveled trails under the canopy. A few hours later we reached the edge of a large rubber plantation without incident. Keeping to the thick growth surrounding the plantation, we skirted the perimeter. We discovered that it was completely surrounded by deserted gun positions and fox holes, all with beautiful fields-of-fire down the even rows of rubber trees. None gave evidence of having been occupied for at least three or four days. We transmitted this information to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and then the team proceeded across the plantation, heading



“‘Order say we
must go, so we go.
We will die.’”

for the headquarters and housing area in the center.

When we arrived at a point 100 meters from our destination, the team leader and I went forward, leaving the team in a covering position. As we got closer, we could hear sounds from the houses, but assumed these were only workers. The briefing had neglected to tell us that the plantation was supposed to be deserted. Crawling, we stopped about 25 meters from the first line of houses. Lifting our heads, we received a rude shock. These weren't plantation workers. These were Viet Cong soldiers, complete with blue uniforms, webbing, and many with the new Soviet bloc weapons. The atmosphere seemed to be one of relaxation. We could even hear a transistor radio playing music. After 30 or 40 minutes we drew back to the team position. We reported our find to the TOC and estimated the number of Viet Cong to be at least one company. The whole team then retraced the two kilometers to the jungle and moved into it. Crawling into the thickest part, we settled down just as darkness and the rain closed in on us.

Underneath ponchos, to prevent light from our flashlights escaping, the Vietnamese team leader and I, after closely pouring over our maps, drafted a detailed message for TOC. In the morning we sent the message, which gave map coordinates of a number of small Landing Zones (LZs) around the area. We also gave them a plan for exploiting our find. It was fairly simple. Make simultaneous landings at all LZs and have the troops move quickly to the deserted Viet Cong gun positions and man them. At the sight of bombers approaching, the Viet Cong would leave the housing area for the jungle. This would involve them having to travel across two kilometers of open plantation into prepared positions. We told TOC that we were going to try and get back to the housing area so we could tell them if the Viet Cong were still there. If they didn't hear from us on the next scheduled contact, they were to assume that we had been hit and hadn't made it. If this occurred it would be verification of the Viet Cong presence and they were to follow through with the plan. We would stay in the area and join the Rangers when they came in.

This time, we were more cautious in our trip across the plantation. On the way, we found a gasoline cache of 55-gallon drums. We took pictures and proceeded. Again

the Vietnamese team leader and I crawled forward to within 25 meters of the houses. It was unbelievable. There they were and still with no perimeter security. Now, however, there was much activity and what seemed like more of them. We inched our way around the house area. This wasn't a company. There were at least 300 armed men in front of us. We had found a battalion, and all in one tight spot — unique in itself. We got back to the team, made our radio contact, and asked if the submitted plan would be implemented. We were told, yes, and that we were to move back to the edge of the jungle. There would be a small delay while coordination was made to get the troops and helicopters. At 1000 hours (10:00 a.m.) planes of all descriptions started crisscrossing this small area. I contacted one plane (there were so many I couldn't tell which one) on the Prick 10 (AN/PRC-10 transmitter-receiver for air-ground communications). I was told that they were reconning the area for an operation. What stupidity. No less than 40 overflights in 45 minutes. As usual, we were alerting the Viet Cong of impending action by letting all the armchair commandos take a look-see. For about 30 minutes all was quiet, and then we started to notice movement. The Viet Cong were moving out from the center of the plantation. Where were the troops? At 1400 hours Skyraiders showed up and started bombing the center of the plantation. Was it possible that the troops had moved in without our knowing it? TOC wouldn't tell us anything. The bombing continued throughout the afternoon with never more than a 15-minute letup. Now we had much company in the jungle with us. Everywhere we turned there were Viet Cong. I had to agree that, in spite of the rain, it was a much better place to be than in the housing center. Why didn't we hear our troops firing?

FINALLY THE BOMBING ENDED with the daylight, and we crouched in the wet darkness within hearing distance of Viet Cong elements. Darkness was our fortress. About 2030 (8:30 p.m.) we heard the drone of a heavy aircraft in the rainy sky. We paid little attention to it. Then, without warning, the whole world lit up, leaving us feeling exposed and naked. Two huge flares were swinging gently to earth on their parachutes, one on each side of us. At about the same time, our radio contact plane could be heard above the clouds. I grabbed the radio and demanded to know, “Who the hell is calling for those flares and why?”

“What flares?”

“Damn it, find *out* what flares and tell whoever is calling for them that they're putting us in bad trouble.” I could hear the operator trying to call the TOC. I figured that friendly troops in the area had called for the flares to light

their perimeter. Crack — crump. I was lifted from the ground, only to be slammed down again. I broke in on the radio. "Forget that transmission. I know why the flares are being dropped."

"Why?"

"They're being used as markers for jets dropping what sounds like 750-pounders. Tell TOC thanks for the warning. Also tell them two of the markers bracketed our position. I hope to hell they knew where we are." A long pause.

"TOC says they don't know anything about flares or jet bombers."

Another screwup. "Well how about somebody finding out something and when they find out, how about telling us unimportant folks? In the meantime, I hope that 'gooniebird' (C-47 plane) has its running lights on."

"Why?"

"Because any moment now the pilot is going to find he is dawdling around in a bomb run pattern. Come back early in the morning and give me the hot skinny."

"Roger — we're leaving — out."

I was mad, a pretty good sign that I was scared. The bombing continued through the night. Sometimes it was "crump" sometimes it was "crack," depending on how close the bombs fell. When it finally stopped sometime before dawn, I realized that it was a dazzling exhibition of flying — worthless — but impressive. The flare ship had to fly so low because of the cloud cover that its flares were burning out on the ground instead of in the air. The orbiting jets would then dive down through the clouds, break through, spot the markers, make split-second corrections, and release their bombs. However, while it was going on, considering what a small error became at jet speeds, a small error would wipe us out. Should this happen, I could see a bad case of "*C'est la guerre*" next day at air operations. I couldn't help wondering also how "Charlie" was feeling about all this — specifically the ones only 25 or 30 meters away. It didn't seem possible, but I wondered if the shrapnel tearing through the tree tops was terrifying him as much as us.

First thing in the morning, my Vietnamese counterpart made contact on the big radio (HC-162D). After some

talk into the mike, he turned to me with a helpless look: "They say we must cross plantation to housing area again."

"What? It's impossible — tell them so."

More talk. "They say we must go. They want to talk to you."

When the hollow voice came through on the side band, I couldn't believe it — it was the same order. I told them it was impossible and that we were not going to go.

"You must go. That is an order from way up."

That figures. The Saigon wheels smelling glory have taken over our TOC. "My answer is, Will Not Comply; I say again, Will Not Comply. Tell those people to stop trying to outguess the man on the ground. If they want someone to assess damage on the housing area send a plane with a camera. Better yet, have the Rangers look at it, there's more of them."

"There are no other friendly troops in the area. You are the only ones that can do it. You must go. There will be a plane in your area shortly. Out."

Up to this point we had assumed friendly troops were in the area and that if we got in trouble, maybe we could hold out until they could help us. No troops. Little wonder the Viet Cong are roaming all over the place not caring who hears them.

Soon a plane arrived and I received: "We must know how many Viet Cong are still in the housing area. You must go and look. It is imperative. The whole success of this mission depends on your report. Over."

"I say again, Will Not Comply. Over." (Hello court martial.) I looked at the Vietnamese team leader. He was tense and grim, but silently cheering me on. While waiting for the plane I asked him what he was going to do. He replied:

"We go, we die. Order say we must go, so we go. We will die."

Tell me Vietnamese have no guts. Another transmission from the plane:

"Why won't you comply? Over."

These type questions aren't normally answered. I knew, however, that the poor bastard up there had to take an answer back to the wheels. Well, he got one: "Because we can't. One step out of this jungle and it's all over. I'm



“It is recommended that special assassination teams be set up...”

not going to have this team wiped out for nothing. There are no Viet Cong in the village; not since 1400 yesterday. The mission was screwed up when you started the bombing without sending in troops yesterday. As for the mission depending on us, you should have thought of that yesterday before you scrapped the plans and didn't bother to tell us. Over.”

“Where are the Viet Cong now? Over.”

“Which ones? The ones 25 meters from us, or the ones 35 meters from us? They're in the jungle all around us. Over.”

“Roger. Understand Viet Cong have left houses — now in jungle — have information necessary — you do not have to go across plantation.”

This was unbelievable. On TV it would be a comedy — a bad one.

SHORTLY AFTER THIS UPLIFTING exchange, the bombers returned, and we spent the remainder of the day moving from one Viet Cong group to another. We would come upon them, pull back, and then an A1-E (bomber) would come whining down, machine-gunning or dropping bombs.

I discovered that the old prop fighter bombers were more terrifying than the jets. The jets came in so fast that the man on the ground couldn't hear them until the bombs were dropped and they were climbing away. The props were something else. First the droning noise while in orbit. Then they would peel off and the drone would change to a growl, increasing steadily in pitch until they were a screaming whine. Under the jungle canopy, this noise grabbed at the heart of every man. And every man knew that the plane was pointed directly at him. The crack of the bomb exploding was almost a relief. Many of these bombs landed 25 to 35 meters from where we were lying on the ground. The closest any of us came to being hurt was when a glowing piece of shrapnel lodged in the pack on my back. I couldn't help thinking, “These are our planes. They know where we are. What must it be like for a woman or child to hear that inhuman, impersonal whine directed at them in their open villages? How they must hate us!” I looked around at my team. Others were thinking. Each of us died a little that day in the jungle.

At 1730 (5:30 p.m.) the last bomb was dropped. A great

day for humanity. Almost 28 hours of bombing in this small area with barely a break.

On the next afternoon we were told by radio to quickly find an LZ and prepare to leave the area. We knew of only one within reasonable distance and headed for it. A short distance from the LZ we could hear voices. Viet Cong around the opening. We were now an equal distance between two groups of the Viet Cong.

Finally they allowed the pick-up ship to come in. Just as the plane touched down and we started toward it, two machine gun positions opened up — one from each side of the clearing. The bullets sounded like gravel hitting the aluminum skin of the chopper. My American assistant took one position under fire and I started firing at the other. Our backs were to the aircraft and our eyes on the jungle. The rest of the team started climbing aboard. The machine guns were still firing, but we had made them less accurate. I was still firing when two strong hands picked me up and plumped me on the floor of the plane. Maximum power and we still couldn't make the trees at the end of the clearing, but had to make a half-circle over the machine guns. All of a sudden something slapped me in the buttock, lifting me from the floor. A bullet had come through the bottom of the plane, through the gas tank and the floor. When it ripped through the floor it turned sideways. The slug left an eight-inch bruise but did not penetrate. Through some miracle, we were on our way to base — all of us. We would all get drunk tonight. It was the only way we would sleep without reliving the past days. It would be at least three days before anybody would unwind. That much is typical.

I had seen the effect of the bombing at close range. These bombs would land and go for about 15 yards and tear off a lot of foliage from the trees, but that was it. Unless you drop these things in somebody's hip pocket they don't do any good. For 28 hours they bombed that area. And it was rather amusing because, when I came out, it was estimated that they had killed about 250 Viet Cong in the first day. They asked me how many Viet Cong did I think they had killed and I said maybe six, and I was giving them the benefit of the doubt at that. The bombing had no real military significance. It would only work if aimed at concentrated targets such as villages.

ONE OF THE FIRST AXIOMS one learns about unconventional warfare is that no insurgent or guerrilla movement can endure without the support of the people. While doing research in my job as an Area Specialist, I found that, in province after province, the Viet Cong guerrillas had started as small teams. They were now in battalion and regimental strength. Before I left, the Viet Cong could put troops in

the field in division strength in almost any province. Such growth is not only impossible without popular support, it actually requires an overwhelming mandate.

We were still being told, both by our own government and the Saigon government, that the vast majority of the people of South Vietnam were opposed to the Viet Cong. When I questioned this contradiction, I was always told that the people only helped the Viet Cong through fear. Supposedly, the Viet Cong held the people in the grip of terror by assassination and torture. This argument was also against doctrine. Special Forces are taught that reliable support can be gained only through friendship and trust. History denied the "terror" argument. The people feared and hated the French, and they rose up against them. It became quite obvious that a minority movement could not keep tabs on a hostile majority. South Vietnam

is a relatively small country, dotted with thousands of small villages. In this very restricted area companies and battalions of Viet Cong can maneuver and live under the very noses of government troops; but the people don't betray these movements, even though it is a relatively simple thing to pass the word. On the other hand, government troop movements are always reported. In an action against the Viet Cong, the only hope for surprise is for the government to move the troops by helicopters. Even this is no guarantee. General Nguyen Khan, while still head of the Saigon government, acknowledged that Viet Cong sympathizers and agents were everywhere — even in the inner councils — when he made the statement: "Any operation that lets more than four hours elapse between conception and implementation is doomed to failure." He made these remarks in the last days of his regime, right after a personally directed operation north of Saigon ended in disaster.

To back up the terror theory, the killing of village chiefs and their families were pointed out to me. Those that were quick to point at these murders ignored certain facts. Province, district, village and hamlet chiefs are appointed, not elected. Too often petty officials are not even people from the area but outsiders being rewarded for political favors. Those that are from the area are thought of as quislings because they have gone against their own by

cooperating with Saigon. Guerrillas or partisans who killed quislings in World War II were made heroes in American movies. Those who look on the Viet Cong killings of these people with horror and use them as justification for our having to beat them, don't realize that our own military consider such actions good strategy when the tables are reversed. When teaching Special Forces how to set up guerrilla warfare in an enemy country, killing unpopular officials is pointed out as one method of gaining friends among the populace. It is recommended that special assassination teams be set up for this purpose.

I know a couple of cases where it was suggested by Special Forces officers that Viet Cong prisoners be killed. In one case in which I was involved, we had picked up prisoners in the valley around An Khe. We didn't want prisoners but they

walked into our hands. We were supposed to stay in the area four more days, and there were only eight of us and four of them, and we didn't know what the hell to do with them. You can't carry them. Food is limited, and the way the transmission went with the base camp you knew what they wanted you to do — get rid of them. I wouldn't do that, and when I got back to operation base a major told me, "You know we almost told you right over the phone to do them in." I said that I was glad he didn't, because it would have been embarrassing to refuse to do it. I knew goddamn well I wasn't going to kill them. In a fight it's one thing, but with guys

with their hands bound it's another. And I wouldn't have been able to shoot them because of the noise. It would have had to be a very personal thing, like sticking a knife into them. The major said, "Oh, you wouldn't have had to do it; all you had to do was give them over to the Vietnamese." Of course, this is supposed to absolve you of any responsibility. This is the general attitude. It's really a left-handed morality. Very few of the Special Forces guys had any qualms about this. Damn few.

Little by little, as all these facts made their impact on me, I had to accept the fact that, Communist or not, the vast majority of the people were pro-Viet Cong and anti-Saigon. I had to accept also that the position, "We are in Vietnam because we are in sympathy with the aspirations



“It’s not democracy we brought to Vietnam — it’s anti-communism.”

and desires of the Vietnamese people,” was a lie. If this is a lie, how many others are there?

I suppose that one of the things that bothered me from the very beginning in Vietnam was the condemnation of ARVN as a fighting force: “the Vietnamese are cowardly . . . the Vietnamese can’t be disciplined . . . the Vietnamese just can’t understand tactics and strategy . . . etc., etc.” But the Viet Cong are Vietnamese. United States military files in Saigon document time and again a Viet Cong company surrounding two or even three ARVN companies and annihilating them. These same files document instances of a Viet Cong company, surrounded by ARVN battalions, mounting a ferocious fight and breaking loose. I have seen evidence of the Viet Cong attacking machine-gun positions across open terrain with terrible losses. This can’t be done with undisciplined bandits. For many years now the tactics and strategy of the Viet Cong have been so successful that massive fire power and air support on our side is the only thing that has prevented a Viet Cong victory. These are all Vietnamese. What makes the difference? Major “Charging Charlie” Beckwith, the Special Forces commander at Plei Me, used the words “dedicated”, “tough”, “disciplined”, “well-trained”, and “brave” to describe the Viet Cong — and, almost in the same breath, condemned the Vietnamese on our side.

IT BECAME OBVIOUS that motivation is the prime factor in this problem. The Viet Cong soldier believes in his cause. He believes he is fighting for national independence. He has faith in his leaders, whose obvious dedication is probably greater than his own. His officers live in the same huts and eat the same food. His government counterpart knows that his leaders are in their positions because of family, money or reward for political favors. He knows his officers’ primary concern is gaining wealth and favor. Their captains and majors eat in French restaurants and pay as much for one meal as they make in a week. They sleep in guarded villas with their mistresses. They find many excuses for not being with their men in battle. They see the officers lie about their roles in battle. The soldier knows that he will be cheated out of his pay if possible. He knows equipment he may need is being sold downtown. His only motivation is the knowledge that he is fighting only to perpetuate a system that has kept him uneducated and in poverty. He has had

so many promises made to him, only to be broken, that now he believes nothing from his government.

I have seen the South Vietnamese soldier fight well, and at times ferociously, but usually only when in a position where there is no choice. At those times he is fighting for survival. On Project Delta there were many brave Vietnamese. When I knew them well enough to discuss such things, I asked them, “Why do you go on these missions time and again? You are volunteers. Why do you not quit and do less dangerous work?” The answer was always the same: “We are friends. We fight well together. If we quit, it will make the project bad.” Never, “We are fighting for democracy . . . freedom . . . the people . . .” or any cause. The “enemy” he was fighting had become an abstraction. He was fighting, and fighting well, to sustain the brotherhood of his friends. The project had created a mystique of individualism and eliteness. He felt important. Trust and faith was put in him and he returned it in kind. The Americans didn’t condescend to him. The life of every American on the team was dependent on the Vietnamese, and we let them know we were aware of it. We found out early that appealing to them on the basis of patriotism was a waste of time. They felt that they were nothing more than tools of the scheming Saigon politicians.

ARVN troops and their commanders know that if they don’t bother the Viet Cong they will be safe from Viet Cong attacks. I’ll never forget what a shock it was to find out that various troop commanders and District Chiefs were actually making personal deals with “the enemy.” The files in Saigon record instances where government troops with American advisors were told by the Viet Cong to lay down their weapons and walk away from the Americans. The troops did just that and the Viet Cong promises of safety to the troops were honored.

In an effort to show waning popularity for the Viet Cong, great emphasis was placed on figures of Viet Cong defections. Even if the unlikely possibility of the correctness of these figures is accepted, they are worthless when compared to ARVN desertions. The admitted desertion rate and incidents of draft dodging, although deflated, was staggering. Usually, only those caught are reported. Reading OPSUMS (Operational Summaries) and newspapers while in Vietnam, I repeatedly saw references made to hundreds of ARVN listed as missing after the major battles. The reader is supposed to conclude that these hundreds, which by now total thousands, are prisoners of the Viet Cong. They are definitely not listed as deserters. If this were true, half of the Viet Cong would be tied down as guards in POW compounds — which, of course, is ridiculous.

This lack of enthusiasm and reluctance to join in battle wasn’t difficult to figure. The majority of the people are

either anti-Saigon or pro-Viet Cong, or both, and ARVN is drafted from the people.

I was not unique among my contemporaries in knowing most of these things. However, whenever anybody questioned our being in Vietnam — in light of the facts — the old rationale was always presented: “We have to stop the spread of communism somewhere . . . if we don’t fight the commies here, we’ll have to fight them at home . . . if we pull out, the rest of Asia will go Red . . . these are uneducated people who have been duped; they don’t understand the difference between democracy and communism...”

Being extremely anti-Communist myself, these “arguments” satisfied me for a long time. In fact, I guess it was saying these very same things to myself over and over again that made it possible for me to participate in the things I did in Vietnam. But were we stopping communism? Even during the short period I had been in Vietnam, the Viet Cong had obviously gained in strength; the government controlled less and less of the country every day. The more troops and money we poured in, the more people hated us. Countries all over the world were losing sympathy with our stand in Vietnam. Countries which up to now had presented a neutral position were becoming vehemently anti-American. A village near Tay Ninh in which I had slept in safety six months earlier was the center of a Viet Cong operation that cost the lives of two American friends. A Special Forces team operating in the area was almost decimated over a period of four months. United States Operations Mission (USOM), civilian representatives, who had been able to travel by vehicle in relative safety throughout the countryside, were being kidnapped and killed. Like the military, they now had to travel by air.

The real question was, whether communism is spreading in spite of our involvement or because of it.

The attitude that the uneducated peasant lacked the political maturity to decide between communism and democracy and “. . . we are only doing this for your own good,” although it had a familiar colonialistic ring, at first seemed to have merit. Then I remembered that most of the villages would be under Viet Cong control for some of the time and under government control at other times.

How many Americans had such a close look at both sides of the cloth? The more often government troops passed through an area, the more surely it would become sympathetic to the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong might sleep in the houses, but the government troops ransacked them. More often than not, the Viet Cong helped plant and harvest the crops; but invariably government troops in an area razed them. Rape is severely punished among the Viet Cong. It is so common among the ARVN that it is seldom reported for fear of even worse atrocities.

I saw the Airborne Brigade come into Nha Trang. Nha Trang is a government town and the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade are government troops. They were originally, in fact, trained by Special Forces, and they actually had the town in a grip of terror for three days. Merchants

were collecting money to get them out of town; cafes and bars shut down.

The troops were accosting women on the streets. They would go into a place — a bar or cafe — and order varieties of food. When the checks came they wouldn’t pay them. Instead they would simply wreck the place, dumping over the tables and smashing dishes. While these men were accosting women, the police would just stand by, powerless or unwilling to help. In fact, the situation is so difficult that American troops, if in town at the same time as the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade, are told to stay off the streets at night to avoid coming to harm.



The whole thing was a lie. We weren’t preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve. To voice opposition to the government meant jail or death. Neutralism was forbidden and punished. Newspapers that didn’t say the right thing were closed down. People are not even free to leave and Vietnam is one of those rare countries that doesn’t fill its American visa quota. It’s all there to see once the Red film is removed from the eyes. We aren’t the freedom fighters. We are the Russian tanks blasting the hopes of an Asian Hungary.

It’s not democracy we brought to Vietnam — it’s anti-communism. This is the only choice the people in the village have. This is why most of them have embraced the Viet Cong and shunned the alternative. The people re-

“Anti-communism is a lousy substitute for democracy.”

member that when they were fighting the French for their national independence it was the Americans who helped the French. It's the American anti-Communist bombs that kill their children. It's American anti-communism that has supported one dictator after another in Saigon. When anti-Communist napalm burns their children it matters little that an anti-Communist Special Forces medic comes later to apply bandages.

One day I asked one of our Vietnamese helicopter pilots what he thought of the last bomb raid. “I think maybe today we make many Viet Cong.” In July, when Mr. McNamara asked me how effective the bombing was in War Zone D I told him, “It's an expensive defoliant. Unless dropped in a hip pocket it was only effective in housing areas.” He didn't seem surprised. In fact, his only comment after my recital of my team's experiences in War Zone D, was when he turned to General Westmoreland who was sitting on my right, “I guess we still have a small reaction problem.” Ambassador Taylor said nothing.

While I was in Vietnam the American and/or Saigon government was forever carping about North Vietnam breaking the Geneva Accords. Yet my own outfit, Special Forces, had first come to Vietnam in civilian clothes traveling on civilian passports for the specific purpose of training and arming the ethnic groups for the CIA, a violation of the Accords. The Saigon respect for the Accords was best symbolized by a political cartoon in the Saigon Post. It showed a man urinating on a scroll labeled Geneva Accords 1954. When the troops of Project Delta uncovered the arms cache at Vung Ro Bay, General Nguyen Khan pointing at the weapons, happily presented them to the three ICC men as proof to the world that Hanoi was breaking the Accords. Evidently they were too polite to point out that they had been found by men wearing American-supplied uniforms, carrying American weapons; men who had been trained by Americans and were being paid by Americans. Neither did they mention that the General flew to this spot in an American helicopter and that the weapons were being loaded onto an American-made ship manned by American-trained sailors.

It had taken a long time and a mountain of evidence but I had finally found some truths. The world is not just good guys and bad guys. Anti-communism is a lousy substitute for democracy. I know now that there are many types of communism but there are none that appeal to me.

In the long run, I don't think Vietnam will be better off under Ho's brand of communism. But it's not for me or my government to decide. That decision is for the Vietnamese. I also know that we have allowed the creation of a military monster that will lie to our elected officials; and that both of them will lie to the American people.

To those people who, while deploring the war and bombings, defend it on the basis that it is stopping communism, remember the words of the Vietnamese pilot, “I think maybe today we make many Viet Cong.” The Nazi bombing of London didn't make the Londoners quit. We have no monopoly on feelings for the underdog. People of other nations will continue to be increasingly sympathetic to this small agrarian country that is being pounded by the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

WHEN I RETURNED FROM VIETNAM I was asked, “Do you resent young people who have never been in Vietnam, or in any war, protesting it?” On the contrary, I am relieved. I think they should be commended. I had to wait until I was 35 years old, after spending 10 years in the Army and 18 months personally witnessing the stupidity of the war, before I could figure it out. That these young people were able to figure it out so quickly and so accurately is not only a credit to their intelligence but a great personal triumph over a lifetime of conditioning and indoctrination. I only hope that the picture I have tried to create will help other people come to the truth without wasting 10 years. Those people protesting the war in Vietnam are not against our boys in Vietnam. On the contrary. What they are against is our boys *being* in Vietnam. They are not unpatriotic. Again the opposite is true. They are opposed to people, our own and others, dying for a lie, thereby corrupting the very word democracy.

There are those who will believe that I only started to feel these things after I returned from Vietnam. In my final weeks in that country I was putting out a very small information paper for Special Forces. The masthead of the paper was a flaming torch. I tried in my own way to bring a little light to the men with whom I worked. On the last page of the first issue were the names of four men — all friends of mine — reported killed in action on the same day. Among them was Sgt. Horner, one of the men I “procured” for Special Forces when he was stationed at the Army Presidio in San Francisco.

To those friends I wrote this dedication:

“We can best immortalize our fallen members by striving for an enlightened future where Man has found another solution to his problems rather than resorting to the futility and stupidity of war.”



Ephemera

BOOKS ART CINEMA THEATRE MISCELLANY



Books:

THE ARMY'S
LONGEST
RECRUITING
PAMPHLET
by Don Duncan



THE GREEN BERETS by Robin Moore. New York: Avon. 334 pp. \$.95.

In collecting material for his book *The Green Berets*, Robin Moore was a willing victim of Special Forces propaganda. Impressed with the PR image of Special Forces, Moore obviously was flattered at the prospect of being associated with this organization. He has attributed characteristics, usually only found in Special Forces recruiting pamphlets, to the men with whom he actually came in contact. The author has painted a picture of Special Forces as they might once have been and as they would like to be—but not as they are. Instead of questioning what he actually saw, he perpetuated a Special Forces self-created myth.

Had the training which he went through been as physically strenuous and as complete and extensive as he describes, he could not have survived physically and six weeks or six months would not have given him even a small degree of expertise in such a wide range of subjects. He tries to leave the reader with the impression that the school which he attended at Fort Bragg trained him as an expert in the use of all foreign weapons (the crossbow, the longbow, etc.), an expert in the use of special demolitions, and an expert in karate and judo. Skyhook and Halo-Scuba infiltration are a couple of other little goodies he mastered while at Fort Bragg. Anybody familiar with any of these subjects recognizes that the time necessary to gain an expertise in even one would require the total amount of time he spent at the school. (The weapons course alone is an eight-week course and it does not even pretend to make a man an expert.) All of these courses are offered at Fort Bragg as individual subjects; what Moore received was a briefing or demonstration of most of them. He should not feel cheated, however, because only a very small percentage of Special Forces sol-

... Skyhook and Halo-Scuba infiltration ...

diers are thoroughly trained in many of these subjects.

When describing the basic unit of Special Forces—the 12-man 'A' team—the information he didn't lift from the field manual he found in Special Forces' recruiting posters and pamphlets. In some places he uses almost direct quotes from these pamphlets.

That there are men in Special Forces who, in hand-to-hand combat, "have no superiors blending judo, karate, wrestling, boxing..." is perhaps true, but they would not average out to one per team. All Special Forces men are not expert parachutists, many (like Moore) having barely graduated from jump school.

Among the men in Special Forces, especially officers, there is a conscious attempt to perpetuate the myth of Special Forces, through publicity. This is ironic in an organization which, when I first became part of it, prohibited the taking of photographs of its members and which is now second only to the U.S. Marines for grabbing journalistic space. The book is full of lean, steely-eyed men. Moore is obviously in need of male heroes to worship, and this glorification follows. A short walk around Smoke Bomb Hill at Fort Bragg shows that the main difference between men in Special Forces and men in the rest of the Army is the wearing of the green beret. Many of those joining Special Forces in the last three years have been young men looking for glamour or senior NCOs looking for promotions and extra money. They put on the beret and try to play the role. Each one sees himself as a "guerrilla" or "killer." Although Special Forces training clearly points out the importance of civic action programs in counter-insurgency, the biggest bitch of these self-styled John Waynes is the fact that they are forced to build schools and distribute food when they should be out doing their "real job"—killing Viet Cong.

Some amazing things did come out of

... All Special Forces men are not expert parachutists ...

... senior NCOs looking for promotions ...

this book, however; strictly by accident, I'm sure. To build a background for his rugged, all-man type heroes, he does portray segments of Vietnamese life and the mental attitudes of many Americans in that country. To those able to look behind the erotic, man's magazine-type sensationalism, he has inadvertently presented a good case for our getting out of Vietnam and has pointed up our mistakes in being there in the first place.

He confirms that the military in Vietnam many times did "not go strictly by State and Defense Department Policy." He talks of "snow storms"—a word to describe military brass in Saigon painting a rosy picture to United States officials in Washington.

This practice of keeping the administration optimistic allowed the military to work us into a position where we either had to withdraw from Vietnam ingloriously or escalate the war to perpetuate our mistakes. Time and again Moore points to actions of the CIA which violated international law. Moore has perfected double-think in rationalizing CIA actions. He tells of the CIA sending in United States personnel to train and arm people in Laos (a violation of the Geneva Treaty) against the day when "Hanoi and Pathet Lao Headquarters break the Geneva Treaty."

While gleefully setting down gory details of the murder of a hamlet chief, he accidentally brings to light some facts about the village chiefs who are assassinated, "the hamlet chief had been a Catholic..."—this in a Buddhist hamlet. "Her father had been loyal to the Diem regime..."—a man hated by the people. Moore tries to show this killing of village or hamlet chiefs appointed by the central government as proof that the Vietcong are little better than animals, but when he projects Special Forces in a like role in North Vietnam he rationalizes these murders with United States soldiers saying: "the great value of assassinating political chiefs... (is) that you hurt the central government without alienating the population."

Throughout the book, Moore points out that the people we are supporting are corrupt, dishonest and/or are former officials and soldiers who fought for the French against the majority of their own people. He tries to convince the reader that the only "friendlies" offering effective response to the Viet Cong are such groups as the various Montagnard tribes. But he fails to note that most Montagnards have

been at odds with the Vietnamese for many years. Their loyalty is not with the Saigon government but to the people who train, arm and pay them—the men in the green berets. For the first time they can legally kill the hated Vietnamese. The fact that they are Viet Cong or North Vietnamese is only incidental to them.

In two different places he extols the virtues of Colonel Lam Son, a commander of the LLBD (South Vietnamese Special Forces). This man did not clean up corruption in his organization as Moore implies, he only changed its form. Lam Son (a former soldier with the French) talked a good game, was very outgoing in his manner, and spoke excellent English. These seem to be his main qualifications for the position he held. On one occasion some of his officers went A.W.O.L., complete with cameras, from a maximum security area 48 hours prior to their scheduled infiltration of Laos, after they had received their final destination briefing. Did he cancel the operation? No. Did he jail the miscreants when they returned? No. Did he make an effort to find out exactly where they had been and to whom they had talked? No. All was forgiven. The men were put on the teams and sent on their way, with a drunk Colonel Lam Son to see them off. With his troops becoming more and more hated by the people (tired of seeing him blatantly living in large villas with what almost amounted to a harem on call—all at United States expense—his love for the grape, his habit of conveniently disappearing when decisions had to be made), he was finally relieved of command and sent to a minor post in Laos.

Moore has tried to present a mandate for the war in Vietnam. He has succeeded only in showing that the Saigon government, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the United States forces in South Vietnam are not close to the aspirations of the people, that each has its own ax to grind. By accidentally revealing an insight into the military mind and a display of Nazi-like admiration for violence and force, he has given the American people some very good reasons for getting out of Vietnam—the opposite of what he intended.

Don Duncan recently quit United States Special Forces in Vietnam. (See why in his story beginning on p. 12.)



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