

**Good in the Woods:
How the Friendship of Two Warrior Cultures Led to
Successful Missions in the Clandestine Operations
of the Vietnam War**

by

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Introduction

Alongside the conventional battles of the Vietnam War was a top secret program that ran missions across the border in the neighboring countries of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. These clandestine missions were run by the Studies and Observations Group (SOG), which consisted of American Special Forces soldiers and indigenous tribesmen. This unit boasted great successes, receiving the Presidential Unit Citation and pioneering the way for the birth of the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, the U.S. 's leading anti-terrorism unit.¹ Out of all the impressive products of the Studies and Observations Group, the defining feature of the unit was the friendship that sustained it. The admiration, respect, and genuine care that developed between the U.S. Special Forces and their indigenous counterparts were not only crucial to solving the problems that the U.S. faced in East Asia during the 1960s, but surpassed its professional purpose and remains strong to this day.

The Need for Covert War

The conflict that would become popularly known as the Vietnam War was not a military conquest campaign, but rather a part of the bigger picture of the Cold War. Both the Soviet Union and the West were vying for political influence across many satellite nations in the East, with the former looking to grow the communist sphere of influence, and the latter resolute in defending democracy for South Vietnam. The United States' policy of containing communism, commonly known as the Truman Doctrine, sought to assist South Vietnam in defending itself from the unwanted advance of communism

¹ Robert Seals, "MACV-SOG History," U.S.Army.mil, January 25, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/216498/macv_sog_history. John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Dutton Caliber, 1997), 308. The Presidential Unit Citation is the highest award that a military unit can receive. SOG received theirs on April 4, 2001, more than 200 SOG veterans attended the ceremony.

spreading throughout Southeast Asia. Fighting the communist ideology created battlegrounds with complex and mixed agendas of political and military objectives, where simple military victory could result in political defeat.

As interest and influence grew in the nation of Vietnam, the US realized they were fighting a war on two fronts. Unlike the World Wars, these fronts were not two differing geographical theaters, but rather physical warfighting combined with a campaign for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.² Attempting to win the hearts and minds of any people is a challenging task for an outside nation, even more so during an armed conflict. In any scenario, wars are challenging for civilian populations; for a neutral civilian population living directly in the midst of the war, it is devastating.

Although it was a small country, South Vietnam in the 1960s was exceptionally diverse in population. Apart from its own people, the Vietnamese population contained dozens of various ethnic minorities. Among those were ethnic Chinese Nungs, who made up a small percentage of the country's overall population. The Nungs emigrated from the Guangxi province 200-250 years before the war in Vietnam.³ Many of the men had fought in the French Indochina war and had proven to be highly competent, especially in the context of operating behind enemy lines.⁴ However, once the South Vietnamese government formed, the Chinese Nungs were marginalized by the

² Charles F. Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)* (Sharon Center, OH: Alpha Publications, 1992), 26.

³ "Nùng Ethnic Group," Nhan Dan, accessed February 19, 2025, <https://special.nhandan.vn/nung-ethnic-group/index.html>. They arrived much later than the ethnic Thai Nungs, who arrived centuries earlier.

⁴ Kenneth Finlayson, "Colonel Mike" The Origins of the MIKE Force in Vietnam," U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office, November 2, 2009, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v5n2_mike_force_page_1.html. Plaster, SOG, 14.

government and were not even considered for the South Vietnamese military, despite their prowess as fighters.⁵

The South Vietnamese population also boasted a large number of indigenous tribal groups. The indigenous tribes are not a singular unified group of people, but rather encompass at least 28 distinct people groups.⁶ Each tribe has its own name that it bears proudly, along with its own unique culture and characteristics which distinguishes it from other tribes. For example, each tribe had their own unique pattern for woven sarongs and loin cloths, which would identify the tribe that the individual belonged to.⁷ Tribal ties were held in utmost importance within their culture's loyalty hierarchy.⁸ Cultural distinctions presented themselves in appearance as well. For example, the Sedang stood out with tribal face tattoos and their cultural practice of filing their teeth to sharp points.⁹ Whereas, the women of the Bru tribe filed their front two teeth down to their gums.¹⁰ There are notable biological differences amongst the tribes as well; the Bru tend to be shorter and stockier with darker brown skin, whereas the Rhade's complexion most closely resembles Polynesian.¹¹

Though each individual tribe has its own name, the collective indigenous tribes in Vietnam have been labeled with various names by other people groups. During the French occupation of Vietnam, these tribes were designated with the broad term "Montagnard" which translates to "mountain people," due to the highland region of

⁵ Plaster, *SOG*, 14.

⁶ Rong Nay, "Summary of Montagnard History," Montagnard Human Rights Organization, accessed January 5, 2025, <https://www.mhro.org/montagnards-history>. Different sources give a different total number of tribes ranging anywhere from 28-40.

⁷ Plaster, *SOG*, 27.

⁸ Nick Brokhausen, *We Few: U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishing, 2018), 61.

⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 387.

¹⁰ Thom Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG* (New York: NY, Random House Publishing, 1999), 48.

¹¹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 61.

Vietnam that many tribes occupied. This is the most common name amongst academic sources, and will be the term used throughout the paper when talking about the collection of Montagnard indigenous tribes and their people.

Unlike the French, the Vietnamese called the indigenous people “mọi,” a derogatory term that translates to “savage,” as they viewed them as inferior and subhuman.¹² The animosity that the Vietnamese held towards Montagnards was not just in their vicious use of language but through treacherous acts of violence as well. This vile sentiment was shared by both the North and the South. The northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam demonstrated their hostile resentment by using both nerve gas and, later, yellow rain against the Montagnards, in an attempt to eradicate them.¹³ They had forced many Montagnard tribes out of their native homeland, such as the Bru, who were pushed out of Northern Laos by the North Vietnamese Army.¹⁴

The South Vietnamese responded in a similar fashion to a Montagnard freedom movement in 1958.¹⁵ The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was dispatched to crush the movement, where extermination orders were given in response to the Montagnard uprising.¹⁶ The South Vietnamese government sanctioned an array of discrimination, including that Montagnards were allowed to serve in the ARVN, but were

¹² John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1995), 72-73. Translations of the derogatory term “mọi” also carry interpretations relating to uneducated, backwards, and slave. John Prados in his book *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, displays the extent of the South Vietnamese’ alienation of the Montagnards by highlighting a conversation with a Vietnamese woman who was convinced with certainty that the Montagnards had tails.

¹³ Nick Brokhausen, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, “Episode 003: We Few, Whispers in the Tall Grass,” podcast audio, June 14, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOIZaekAQGgcsl>, 9:45.

¹⁴ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 47.

¹⁵ “The BAJARAKA Movement,” Dega Nation, accessed January 5, 2025, <https://www.deganation.org/history/the-bajarakka-movement>. The BaJaRhaKo movement was named after the tribes (Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade, and Koho) who united to reobtain tribal autonomy that had been taken away by President Diem.

¹⁶ Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, 74.

not allowed to become officers.¹⁷ Furthermore, the degrading treatment of the Montagnards by the South Vietnamese government increased after Ngo Dinh Diem was elected president and subsequently abolished Montagnard autonomy.¹⁸ The government issued identification cards to Montagnards as a means to control their travel and trade within Vietnamese markets.¹⁹

Their opposition to Montagnards even extended beyond their own military. One example of this occurred when the United States employed Montagnard strikers in Special Forces A Camps along the border regions to protect against and monitor the Viet Cong. Despite being aligned against the same enemy, the South Vietnamese government continued to express disdain toward the Montagnards. U.S. government records display multiple occasions where Vietnamese government officials' scorn and ridicule of the Montagnard strikers was present within official diplomatic discourse.²⁰ This was especially evident in a conversation held on September 11, 1962, between U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and President Diem. Maxwell's debrief contained part of the conversation where he highlighted Diem's doubts about whether, "... [Montagnards] could be entrusted with defense of borders and [Diem] spoke at length of their child-like nature and lack of initiative and leadership qualities."²¹ Similar sentiments were widespread among government officials and the civilian populace alike.

¹⁷ Brokhausen, Meyer, SOGCAST, "Episode 003," 8:50- 9:33.

¹⁸ Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, 73. Prados describes how Diem encroached on much of the Montagnards' prior autonomy by emplacing Vietnamese province chiefs and district leaders within the Montagnard governing system. I'm drawing on the ways that Montagnard autonomy is described in Dega Nation, "The BAJARAKA Movement."

¹⁹ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-Nam*, 2nd ed. (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Warfare School, 1965), http://vietnamproject.archives.msu.edu/recordFiles/159-547-1807/UA17-149_000261.pdf, 106.

²⁰ John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 49.

²¹ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 51. Diem's contempt was aimed towards the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, which armed Montagnards and attached them to U.S. Special Forces units in Vietnam.

The Montagnards were subjected to a precarious position. From the South Vietnamese government, they faced an invasion in the form of a resettlement program that was set up to populate the Montagnards' mountainous homelands with a Vietnamese population.²² This suggests an attempt to eradicate the Montagnard people and culture by diluting it with a Vietnamese population, culture, and influence. Furthermore, the Southern government accused them of supporting the Viet Cong, destroying their villages and bombing their people as punishment.²³ In 1971, Montagnards were removed from their villages by ARVN forces and resettled in camps by the South Vietnamese government.²⁴

They experienced another infiltration from the North via Viet Cong agents, who would marry into tribes, thus allowing them to spread their ideological influence amongst the people.²⁵ As a result, a percentage of the indigenous people fought alongside the Viet Cong and NVA, not out of a shared belief in communism, but on the basis that Ho Chi Minh would restore autonomy to the tribes.²⁶ The Viet Cong relentlessly accused the Montagnards of supporting and spying for the U.S. military, regardless of where the tribe's loyalties stood.²⁷ The Montagnard tribes endured continuous terrorism through propaganda and violent armed attacks throughout the duration of the war, causing some to fight with the North in response. Still, a large number of tribes stood defiantly resolute against both Vietnamese aggressors.

²² Prados, *The Blood Road*, 48.

²³ Dega Nation, "The BAJARAKA Movement."

²⁴ John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2009), 390.

²⁵ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 205-206. The tribe specifically mentioned was the Sedang tribe. However, this tactic was not solely directed towards the Sedang alone, but also targeted the Jarai and Bru amongst many other tribes.

²⁶ Dega Nation, "The BAJARAKA Movement." Subsequently, many Montagnards fought on the premise of an empty promise.

²⁷ Dega Nation, "The BAJARAKA Movement."

In spite of the pervasive discrimination toward the indigenous people of Vietnam, the Studies and Observations Group called them “friend.” Whereas both of the Vietnamese governments saw the Montagnards as an inferior, subhuman race, SOG saw a competent and strategic ally. The United States had a surprisingly thorough amount of anthropologic sources on the Montagnard people, which they utilized effectively throughout the conflict. The United States, and the Studies and Observations Group specifically, understood the necessity of working within and respecting the cultural differences of the tribesmen. By doing so, the Studies and Observations Group was able to strategically leverage a group of people, as opposed to exploiting, who would become their closest brothers in arms. While the Montagnard warriors who fought alongside SOG were paid, the tribesmen’s primary motivation was responding to the ruthless treatment of their people by the Vietnamese governments.

Ho Chi Minh Trail

Before the conflict had even started, the United States became aware of a potential issue directly northwest of Southern Vietnam. The Eisenhower administration had responded by placing Special Forces groups in Laos to train the Laotian military to be prepared to fight the spread of communism. This plan was codenamed Project HOTFOOT and ran from July 1959 to October 1962, when the newly elected President Kennedy ended it.²⁸ In Project HOTFOOT’s stead, Kennedy took a diplomatic route. Under his direction, a neutralization treaty for Laos and Cambodia was drafted and signed by the two countries, the United States, Soviet Union, North Vietnam, and many

²⁸ Jared M. Tracy, “Shoot and Salute: U.S. Army Special Warfare in Laos,” U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office, 2018, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v14n1_shoot_and_salute_pt1_page_1.html.

other nations.²⁹ Despite signing it, the North Vietnamese never intended to honor it. Annie Jacobsen, author of *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*, points out that “Hanoi had already spent three long years building the clandestine transportation route and logistical system from Hanoi through Laos and into the south.”³⁰

The route expanded into Cambodia, violating yet another sovereign country’s borders. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, as the supply route would become known, allowed for the Northern communists to advance troops and supplies without resistance, creating a major issue for South Vietnam. This presented the United States with the challenging task of eradicating the NVA’s logistical efforts without violating Cambodian and Laotian sovereignty.

The North Vietnamese government denied the existence of the supply route, which took away any possibility for the US to approach solving this problem through diplomatic measures. The route was also strategically camouflaged, leaving pilots unable to determine effective bombing targets. The extent of the camouflage is emphasized best by an excerpt from Joseph D. Celeski’s report, *The Ho Chi Minh Trail*, where he explains that “truck convoys ranged from five to twenty-five vehicles in a convoy; not often, but occasionally, truck movements numbering up to 100 were detected.”³¹ The use of the word “detected” is important to draw attention to, because these convoys were not seen a significant majority of the time, but were rather detected

²⁹ Annie Jacobsen, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books/ Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 144.

³⁰ Jacobsen, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*, 145. This information was common knowledge during this time as well, as was apparent from a Memorandum of Conversation, dated 12 October, 1966 from a meeting between US ambassador-at-large for Southeast Asia W. Averell Harriman and Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna. In the memorandum, Harriman states, “Hanoi had not respected the 1962 Geneva Agreements for even one day.” “Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 12, 1966,” Office of the Historian, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d257>.

³¹ Joseph D. Celeski, “The Ho Chi Minh Trail,” in *Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos: Air Commandos 1964-1975* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2019), 303.

via technological ground sensor devices.³² If a convoy of up to 100 trucks could remain unseen from the air, a crucial amount of supplies could be transported, allowing for a continually replenished NVA forward deployed force.

The United States government could not afford to permit the unmolested NVA supply route to continue to nourish the Viet Cong and NVA forces in the South. Nor could they afford the diplomatic disaster of overtly invading a sovereign, neutral nation, such as Laos. Bombing randomly, without direction, throughout the regions would have likely resulted in a catastrophic amount of Laotian civilian casualties, and little success. The only action that was left at the disposal of the United States was covert action. However, if the Laotian government caught them conducting covert military operations within their nation's borders without consent, it would be consequential not only to the United States, but would deal a major black eye to democracy itself. Rather than risk a diplomatic nightmare on the world scale, the United States decided to form a relationship with Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, in no small part to sway his support for their covert operations in Laos. Washington DC had been in contact with Souvanna Phouma on a frequent basis, even in the years leading up to the Vietnam War, which developed a well established relationship.³³ This relationship included many meetings in both Laos as well as the United States. The meetings in the U.S. can be traced through photos from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum,

³² Celeski, "The Ho Chi Minh Trail," 303. Traffic on the trail remained unseen from the air due to the superb camouflaging technique used by the NVA of tying together the tops of living trees to form a vaulted covering of natural vegetation.

³³ "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, January 13, 1958, 2:30 p.m.," Office of the Historian, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v16/d159>. "Meeting with Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister of Laos, 5:00PM," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkwhp-1963-09-23-d#?image_identifier=JFKWHP-A-R8139-A.

documenting the Laotian Prime Minister's initial meetings in Washington, D.C., dating back to 1962.³⁴

The Studies and Observations Group ran its first operations in Laos with a strict, sterile approach.³⁵ However, in conjunction with the growing U.S.-Laotian relations, SOG loosened its previously strict, sterile methods of operating and began fielding U.S. manufactured weapons and equipment, likely suggesting Laos's knowledge and consent of these operations.³⁶ This would ultimately culminate in an agreement with Phouma in 1970, which centered around his view of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to be North Vietnamese territory, rather than that of Laotian, and thus gave the US the go-ahead to conduct operations accordingly.³⁷ On top of this agreement, Souvanna Phouma's Laotian government provided its own military actions against the communist invaders.³⁸

The situation in Cambodia could not be more different. There was a major change in leadership in 1960, when King Norodom Suramarit died, leaving his son, Prime Minister and communist sympathizer, Norodom Sihanouk, in power of the Cambodian government.³⁹ Unlike the United States' partnership with the Laotian

³⁴ "Meeting With Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister of Laos, 11:28AM," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkwhp-1962-07-27-c#?image_identifier=JFKWHP-AR7382-B.

³⁵ Gordon L. Rottman, illustrated by Brian Delf, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2011), 26-29. The term "sterile operations" in this context refers to using gear and equipment that is void of any traceable or distinguishable American features. SOG men did not carry any form of identification with them on missions, such as I.D. cards, or any name tapes on uniforms, to include the "U.S. Army" signifier above the left breast pocket. Initially, their weapons were also not of U.S. origin, until restrictions loosened a bit later on in the program.

³⁶ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 36.

³⁷ "Minutes of the National Security Council Meeting, Washington, February 27, 1970," Office of the Historian, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v06/d194>. Souvanna's go-ahead eventually resulted in Operation Lam Son 719, in 1971. However, SOG's initial operations in Laos occurred without Laotian knowledge.

³⁸ "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 18, 1965," Office of the Historian, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v28/d200>.

³⁹ Milton Osborne, "The complex legacy of Norodom Sihanouk," Lowy Institute, October 18, 2012, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/archive/complex-legacy-norodom-sihanouk>.

government, the pro-communist Cambodian government closed itself off to Western relations. As a result, SOG's eventual "Daniel Boone" operations in Cambodia carried much stricter operation restrictions than its counterpart missions in Laos.⁴⁰

A mission requiring as much delicacy as the situation in Vietnam called for, would typically be given to the Central Intelligence Agency. However, following the wake of the 1961 Bay of Pigs failure, the American Executive Branch of Government had lost faith in the CIA's ability to carry out paramilitary operations.⁴¹ Consequently, at the dawn of the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense was entrusted with planning and executing paramilitary operations.

The United States' answer to its growing need for covert action in Vietnam was the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), which was established on January 24th, 1964, and formed under the Military Advising Command- Vietnam's (MACV) purview.⁴² The official nomenclature of the group is in and of itself a covert ploy. It sounds closer to the nature of a surveying company or a group of scholars than a top secret covert action group. This added an additional security layer to help protect against compromising the nature of the missions in the case of any unintentional disclosure of information reaching beyond the program.

⁴⁰ Plaster, *SOG*, 79.

⁴¹ Jacobsen, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*, 142. Maj. Daniel J. Staheli (USMC), "Analysis of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG) Against the Special Operations Forces (SOF) Truths" (Master of Military Studies (MMS) thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College Marine Corps University, Quantico, 2020), 8, Defense Technical Information Center. NSAM 55 was signed on 28JUN1961, which removed responsibility for paramilitary operations from the CIA. NSAM 56 and 57 signed on the same day, which placed paramilitary operations into the realm of the DoD.

⁴² Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 36.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the initial plan for SOG: Operation Plan 34A.⁴³ The underlying purpose behind the multitude of different operations that were run under 34A was to pressure Hanoi into changing its choice to supply and direct troops into the South by means of violating Laotian neutrality.⁴⁴ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara represented MACV's general attitude when he commented on the aspiration of OPLAN 34A to provide "maximum pressure with minimum risk."⁴⁵ The risk that MACV wanted to minimize was the exposure of the U.S.'s operations within Laos, especially to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the outside world (including the US population), as well as the Laotian government.⁴⁶ This plan was viewed as desirable from Washington D.C.'s perspective, but lacked in a few areas.⁴⁷ There was supposed to be an additional plan, Operation Plan 34B, which was designed to run alongside 34A. OPLAN 34B put more of an emphasis on cross-border missions, which OPLAN 34A lacked. It was ultimately not approved due to a lack of support from many key figures in Washington and Saigon alike, who were not ready for the immediate directness of the plan and the risk associated with it.⁴⁸

One of the first of the initial plans for covert action against North Vietnam under OPLAN 34A materialized under a project codenamed "Footboy," which was adopted

⁴³ Staheli, "Analysis of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG) Against the Special Operations Forces (SOF) Truths," 3. Operation Plan is often shortened to "OP" or "OPLAN."

⁴⁴ "OPLAN 34A 1964," accessed October 10, 2024, <https://sogsite.com/oplan-34a-1964/>.

⁴⁵ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 79.

⁴⁶ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 78. U.S. Ambassador Leonard Unger warned that immediately asking Souvanna to agree to the cross-border program off the bat would put Souvanna in a tough place politically. The United States was able to buy itself time through OPLAN 34A before it would eventually coordinate with Souvanna.

⁴⁷ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex A, Command History, 1964*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG), pg II-2.

⁴⁸ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 79.

from the CIA when the DoD took over covert paramilitary action in Vietnam.⁴⁹ Planning for this operation centered around traditional OSS style espionage tactics of dropping trained Vietnamese agents into North Vietnam via parachute.⁵⁰ These agents were intended to be long-term covert assets to gather intelligence on the North. A total of twenty-two teams were trained in the art of espionage by the CIA from 1961 to the end of 1963.⁵¹ Of the twenty-two teams who were then dropped into the North via parachute, only four of the teams, along with a fifth single-man element, remained operational.⁵² There were concerns amongst MACVSOGHQ whether the Footboy teams could be trusted with sensitive information, or if they had been turned as double agents by the North.⁵³

This fear was confirmed by SOG closely studying one of the teams over the course of three and a half years. They finally determined in 1966, that it had in fact been under North Vietnamese control.⁵⁴ Not just one team, but all of eight of the Project Footboy teams in North Vietnam, had been under the North's command, so SOG was not able to successfully extract a single operational team.⁵⁵ The most likely reason for this failure, as Plaster points out, is that the North was receiving information from someone from MACVSOGHQ in Saigon, almost guaranteed to have been an ARVN

⁴⁹ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 53.

⁵⁰ Plaster, *SOG*, 8.

⁵¹ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 8.

⁵² Plaster, *SOG*, 52 & 195. The other 18 teams were mostly killed upon landing or were apprehended at the hands of Hanoi's ministry of security. The surviving 4 teams were later reinforced with DoD trained South Vietnamese agents.

⁵³ Plaster, *SOG*, 52.

⁵⁴ Plaster, *SOG*, 194-195. SOG studied the team with the callsign, Tourbillon, one of the surviving CIA trained teams who was inserted into North Vietnam on May 16, 1962.

⁵⁵ Plaster, *SOG*, 195. These included the four surviving CIA dropped teams and the singleton agent. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense Subject: Footboy Operational Concept Juliet*, Feb. 20, 1968, (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1968).

officer.⁵⁶ There was no way to compartmentalize both the incoming and outgoing intelligence that had to first be translated by an ARVN officer.

A covert propaganda operation thought up by SOG's Psychological Studies Branch (OPS-33) was a project codenamed "Humidor."⁵⁷ This operation sought to destroy the NVA from within by inserting false narratives into the minds of the communist North. This black operation spread its messages through radio transmissions and other forms of media such as leaflets, letters, and even humans. One of the biggest projects of Project Humidor included kidnapping North Vietnamese fishermen and other civilians and transporting them to a compound under the control of the "Sacred Sword of the Patriot League," a fabricated resistance group.⁵⁸ John L. Plaster, a former SOG recon legend and author of *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, recounts "For two weeks the fishermen did nothing but eat, talk about the old days and learn about the Patriot League's liberation program...they learned, the SSPL was organizing, recruiting and insinuating their people into positions across the country."⁵⁹ However, these and other messages, such as that the Chinese communist troops serving in Vietnam were sleeping with the wives of NVA soldiers while they were away, were fabricated in an attempt to sway the minds of the people and decrease morale.⁶⁰

While Project Humidor may have caused confusion and slight distrust toward the North's government, history provides little evidence of psychological success in the propaganda campaign. While not concrete evidence, the official Communist Party

⁵⁶ Plaster, *SOG*, 196-197.

⁵⁷ Plaster, *SOG*, 99.

⁵⁸ Plaster, *SOG*, 97-100. These fishermen were captured by members of SOG's Maritime Studies Group, MACSOG37.

⁵⁹ Plaster, *SOG*, 98.

⁶⁰ Plaster, *SOG*, 99.

newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, did reveal that Hanoi was not completely unphased by SOG's psychological efforts. There was an announcement in the 1968 March publication of *Nhan Dan* of a new security decree that held the punishment of the death penalty for any counterrevolutionary offenses.⁶¹ Whether this was done reactively or proactively to suppress Southern sympathizers remains uncertain. Nor is it definitive if this was Saigon's response specifically to Project Humidor or as a collective response to SOG's actions against the North, though the publication's date does suggest that it was a direct response to SOG, since SOG's peak activity occurred between the years of 1968 and 1969.⁶² SOG's hopes for its propaganda to spark a movement against the central government in Hanoi likely were not fulfilled, as there were not any North Vietnamese resistance groups, nor any evidence of public sentiment swaying against the communist party. It should be noted that there could have been instances, and likely were, where the communist party did not release the details of the information given the nature of totalitarian regimes. While SOG's psychological department was smartly staffed with half Vietnamese civilians and half U.S. military personnel, the results were effective but uncertain, as there is no way to measure the population's distrust in the DRV government.⁶³ The operation likely impacted morale, but Humidor did nothing to stem the continuous flow of troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The first operations that took place across the Laotian border fell under the codename "Leaping Lena."⁶⁴ ARVN and indigenous troopers were trained by SF

⁶¹ Plaster SOG 197.

⁶² U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex F, Command History, 1968*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1969), F1.

⁶³ Plaster, SOG, 99. The addition of the staffing of half Vietnamese citizens within OPS-33, provided the necessary understanding of Vietnamese culture to effectively provide plausible propaganda.

⁶⁴ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 72.

personnel and then parachute-dropped into Laos. Five eight-man teams started training for the operation in May of 1964 and were then deployed into Laos at the end of June and into the beginning of July.⁶⁵ The objective for these teams was to reconnoiter North Vietnamese presence and activities along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.⁶⁶ However, since the United States wanted to maintain the deniability of operating outside of Southern Vietnam, the Leaping Lena units lacked the presence of their American SF advisors while on the ground during the mission.⁶⁷ These operations ended in utter failure. The Leaping Lena project resulted in the majority of the operatives either being captured or killed by the NVA.⁶⁸

Leaping Lena's failure, as William Rosenau suggests, is due to the units simply being "poorly led."⁶⁹ Charles F. Reske's *MACVSOG Command History* describes the operational teams as being "...comprised of US 5th Special Forces and ARVN personnel... conducted with parachute drops of indigenous personnel only into Laos."⁷⁰ Reske's take on the main reason for the project's failure is that the mission units, while trained by American Special Forces personnel, were not employed with the American soldiers.⁷¹ While both of these conclusions are true, and likely contributed to a portion of the failure, it fails to address a consequential detail. Reske's analysis blamed the

⁶⁵ William Rosenau, "U.S. Air Ground Operations Against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1966-1972," in *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001), 9. There were a total of five eight man teams trained, the majority of whom were either captured and killed by the NVA.

⁶⁶ "Leaping Lena," History of MACV-SOG, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://sogsite.com/leaping-lena/>.

⁶⁷ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 72.

⁶⁸ Plaster, SOG, 11. Only four survivors managed to escape and return. They succeeded in finding the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but beyond that, each of their intelligence debriefs contradicted the others, and therefore, it was ineffective and unreliable intelligence.

⁶⁹ Rosenau, "U.S. Air Ground Operations Against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1966-1972," 9. Resenau was referring to the poor leadership skills of the ARVN. officers.

⁷⁰ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 72.

⁷¹ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 72.

mission failure on the use of indigenous personnel unaccompanied by American forces, but his work did not explore the complicated dynamic between the different groups of Vietnamese personnel.

Rosenau's article explained that each of the Leaping Lena teams consisted of "South Vietnamese Montagnard tribesmen led by South Vietnamese Special Forces personnel."⁷² Rosenau's detailed use of "Montagnard" verses Reske's generic use of the word "indigenous," provides a much clearer picture of the issue. It is a surprise that MACV structured these units the way they did in the first place, yet alone deployed them, given the longstanding hostility between Montagnards and the South Vietnamese government. It is possible that MACV leadership was unaware of the animosity that existed between these two groups when they first thought up the concept of Leaping Lena. The historic context of the animosity was mentioned within a US Army Special Forces School manual titled *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet Nam*, however, this manual was not published until July 1964, the same time as the operations.⁷³ If they were informed, perhaps they did not realize the severe extent of the hostility between these two cultures.

These early Operation Plans were ultimately ineffective or outright failed. More times than not, the operations failed due to an underlying misunderstanding or misuse of the human assets utilized by MACV. These projects tried too hard to isolate US and

⁷² Rosenau, "U.S. Air Ground Operations Against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1966-1972," 9.

⁷³ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 10.

The first edition of this manual was published in July 1964. The manual Acknowledgements listed the book, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, authored by Frank M. Lebar, Gerald C. Hickey, and John K. Musgrave, as one of the greatest source contributions to the manual, which was also only published in 1964. It is tough to know for sure if they would have been aware of the extent of the animosity between the Vietnamese and Montagnards because they likely would not have had the cultural understanding that this manual provided.

foreign assets from one another, when a coalition would have likely resulted in a higher rate of operational success. In the context of Leaping Lena, the misunderstanding of culture was the major undoing of the project's failure. In other instances, such as Project Humidor, the results did not have enough of a significant physical impact to make a difference on the issue of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Colonel Clyde R. Russell, SOG's first Chief SOG, frustrated about the entirety of OPLAN 34A, expressed "I don't feel that the objectives of OPLAN-34A were clearly spelled out...so we didn't know exactly what we were trying to do."⁷⁴ MACVSOG seemingly paid close attention to all of these failures, as they were careful not to repeat the previous projects' mistakes in Operation Plan 35.

The Leaping Lena project had the right tactical concepts in mind but needed a few serious changes to make the concept effective. Those changes were set into motion on March 7, 1965, when cross-border operations in Laos were transferred to SOG's newly created Operation Plan 35.⁷⁵ MACV decided to forgo its previous idea of "maximum pressure with minimum risk" for a plan that was focused solely on maximum pressure against the enemy.⁷⁶ This operation plan encompassed the fabled cross-border paramilitary operations for which SOG would earn its renown. Whereas tanks, artillery outposts, military bases, and other conventional means would be effective against Hanoi's logistical artery, it would be impossible for them to escape from the attention of the press. This was where the Studies and Observations Group's recon teams' capability shined.

Operation Plan 35

⁷⁴ Plaster, SOG, 9.

⁷⁵ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 73.

⁷⁶ OPLAN 34-A's projects (excluding Leaping Lena) continued after the creation of OPLAN 35. The two Operation Plans coexisted in their own respective genre of missions.

Codenamed “Shining Brass” and “Daniel Boone” for cross-border operations in Laos and Cambodia respectively, the operations fulfilled MACVSOG’s official strategic objective “to execute an intensified program of harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, acquisition of intelligence, generation of propaganda, and diversion of resources, against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).”⁷⁷ After a summer of preparation, the first crossborder Shining Brass operation occurred on November 2, 1965.⁷⁸ The operation codename lasted for two years before changing to “Prairie Fire.”⁷⁹ Two months after the codename was changed in 1967, separate operations under the codename “Daniel Boone” were authorized in Cambodia.⁸⁰ In accordance with the same program policies that changed Shining Brass’s codename, two and a half years after its conception, Daniel Boone too was renamed under the codename “Salem House.”⁸¹ *We Few* author, Nick Brokenhausen, along with other SOG recon members, have hinted at operations occurring in “other places” as well.⁸² It is possible, and likely, that this is a subtle nod toward operations that occurred within China that still remain classified.

⁷⁷ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex A, Command History, 1964* (Saigon: MACV-SOG), A-1.

⁷⁸ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 73.

⁷⁹ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex G, Command History, 1967*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1968), G-IV-1. The name change occurred March 1, this was to maintain operational security, an important priority to prevent codenames from becoming known outside of SOG. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1972), B-23. It would change once again in 1971 to “Phu Dung.”

⁸⁰ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex G, Command History, 1967*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1968), G-IV-2. Daniel Boone cross-border operations into Cambodia were authorized on May 22, 1967.

⁸¹ Plaster, *SOG*, 315. Plaster states that the name change occurred in 1969.

⁸² Brokenhausen, *We Few*, 10. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1972), B-2. *Annex B* mentions that Chief SOG was responsible for South Eastern Asia to include the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Kwangsi, Kwangtung, and Hainan Island, which only further supports the possibility.

SOG's existence was highly classified. Many of the Special Forces soldiers who had volunteered for it did not know what they were volunteering for. Each member who joined SOG had a similar experience to that of Henry L. Thompson, a Special Forces (SF) soldier who arrived in Vietnam in 1968.⁸³ The majority of SF men did not have orders until after they arrived in South Vietnam. Only then were they assigned their orders. When Thompson arrived, he ran into another Green Beret who warned him of the question he (and many other Special Forces soldiers) would get at the end of the processing brief asking if they would like to volunteer for a special program at one of the Command and Controls. No other information was given, except that it was a highly classified special program. Thompson recalls that his friend gave him the following advice, "Just tell them NO! If you volunteer, you WILL die. Almost all of them die!"⁸⁴ Most of the Green Berets outside of the program had little to no idea of SOG's existence or nature of operations.⁸⁵ The exceptions were the few who had a close friend who served in the unit and briefly mentioned it when they ran into each other. The men who had served in the unit honored the top secret nature of their mission and did not even divulge information to their friends. All that they would tell them is to volunteer for C&C, no mention of SOG was made.⁸⁶

⁸³ Henry L. (Dick) Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1* (Watkinsville, GA: Wormhole Publishing, 2023), 32. The terms Special Forces (SF) and Green Berets are used interchangeably with one another.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 33. Jim Shorten Jones, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, "Episode 002: Jim "Wild Carrot" Jones's SOG Recon Mission to Recover Downed Pilots," podcast audio, June 13, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOIZaekAQGgcal>, 7:30. Jim Shorten Jones, RT Delaware's 1-0, describes a similar experience in hearing about CCC.

⁸⁵ George Sternberg, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, "Episode 001: Blown off Jungle Boots: Search for SOG Recon Team Ends in Mortal Combat. w/ George 'The Troll' Sternberg," podcast audio, June 13, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOIZaekAQGgcal>, 1:17:20.

⁸⁶ John L. Plaster, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, "Episode 010: John L. Plaster: SOG/Sniper/Author Legend," podcast audio, November 1, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOIZaekAQGgcal>, 23:00-27:05.

SOG's biggest tool for preserving its secrecy was maintaining a strict compartmentalization of its existence. Their leadership understood that the more people who were allowed access to OPLAN 35 would inevitably increase the likelihood that they could be compromised from the inside. As a result, the number of people who were read into the program was strictly limited to those who had an operational relevance. Even high ranking individuals, including senators and generals, were refused clearance and were blatantly lied to about the existence of the program.⁸⁷ In order to prevent unnecessary collateral damage, teams would be put into isolation in part of the SOG compounds before being briefed on the mission they were going on. They would then remain in isolation until they either left for the launch site to go on the mission or the mission was canceled.⁸⁸ If they were captured while on missions, they would not have any knowledge of other SOG recon teams' missions, and vice versa.⁸⁹

The operators in SOG were not allowed to tell any of their families about the unit they were in, what they were doing, or where they were doing it. For all their families knew, they were stationed in Saigon, since their mail's return address was the same as MACVSOG headquarters, where only then was it dispatched out to the Command and Control detachments.⁹⁰ When SF men died, other members of the program would

⁸⁷ "About SOG," History of MACV-SOG, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://sogsite.com/about-sog/>. The Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara outright lied to Oregon Senator Wayne Morse when he had inquired about SOG's existence after accidentally discovering the existence of OPLAN 34A. Marcus Whitt, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, "Episode 004: Untold Stories. SOG Recon at CCS. With Marcus Whitt," podcast audio, June 14, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOIZaekAQQGcal>, 24:42-25:17. In another instance, a shot up SOG plane crash landed on the Ton Son Nhut Air Force Base landing strip. The Hatchet Force on board was instructed to surround the plane and guard it with force from anyone who attempted to access the plane. This order was upheld even when a three star Air Force general approached the crashed plane and was denied access by the threat of force.

⁸⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 63.

⁸⁹ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 45.

⁹⁰ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 52.

carefully go through all of their stuff and remove anything that might yield information, before returning the man's items back to his family in the United States.⁹¹

The few individuals outside of the program who merely knew of SOG's physical existence still had no idea what the program was or its mission, only possessed the same knowledge that Thompson's friend had. Even then, all that was known was the casualty percentage was high. Just how high it actually was is astounding. SOG contained the most dangerous and capable men in the United States military but still suffered a casualty rate of over one hundred percent.⁹² This statistic was possible due to the fact that the majority of SOG's members had either been shot or blown up; of the ones who survived their injuries, they would return back to their unit after receiving medical care, only to repeat the cycle. It was not uncommon for SOG SF soldiers to have 3,4,5 or even 7 purple hearts from their time in the unit. Combat wounds were so common that the people who stuck out were the ones who did not sustain any wounds.⁹³

SOG recon teams began to carry out Shining Brass cross-border operations on November 2nd, 1965.⁹⁴ For the first three years, SOG operated out of a singular Command and Control element at Da Nang and grew to 6 forward operating bases (FOBs) spread from Khe Sanh to Buon Me Thuot.⁹⁵ These were later reconfigured into 3 command and control detachments at the end of 1968.⁹⁶ Each C&C element operated

⁹¹ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 51.

⁹² Plator, *SOG*, 307. This is a frequently made statement, although the exact percentage is uncertain.

⁹³ Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 003," 1:26:30. In the interview, Brokhausen explained with uncertainty that he only "knew one guy that never got wounded."

⁹⁴ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 73. RT Alaska ran the first cross border operation (a bomb damage assessment) and was exfiltrated the following day.

⁹⁵ "Bases," History of MACV-SOG, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://sogsite.com/bases/>. Khe Sanh being the furthest North and Buon Me Thuot the furthest South

⁹⁶ Whitt, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 004," 7:28.

independently from one another, but all three reported to MACVSOG headquarters in Saigon.⁹⁷

Three forward operating bases (FOBs) collapsed into a single entity to make Command and Control North (CCN); FOB 1 at Phu Bai, FOB 3 at Khe Sanh, and FOB 4 at Da Nang.⁹⁸ Located at Da Nang, CCN was the largest of the three command and controls, which made logical sense considering that they were the closest to the DMZ.⁹⁹ FOB 2 at Kontum and FOB 5 at Buon Me Thuot became Command and Control Central (CCC) and Command and Control South (CCS) respectively.¹⁰⁰ The 30 recon teams at CCN and the 25 at CCC were first named after states.¹⁰¹ When all the states had been used up, CCN began naming its recon teams after poisonous snakes.¹⁰² CCS, the smallest of the C&Cs, used the names of weapons, tools, and weather phenomena for its 16 recon teams.¹⁰³ The C&C detachments continued to use the FOBs as launch sites where they would stage for and depart for missions. FOB 6 was initially located at Ho Ngoc Tau, but later was moved to Long Tan where SOG recon 1-0 school took place.¹⁰⁴ Recon teams varied from team to team. Even though they shared the same mission, no

⁹⁷ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 49.

⁹⁸ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex F, Command History, 1968*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1969), F-IV-2.

⁹⁹ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ History of MACV-SOG, "Bases."

¹⁰¹ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 49.

¹⁰² Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 49. Some examples of the teams named after snakes: RT Habu, RT Anaconda, RT Moccasin.

¹⁰³ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 49. There is conflicting information across a few sources. Sosite (History of MACV-SOG), a website put together by SOG men, states there were 30 RTs at CCS. My guess is that the number 16 was at one time, whereas the number 30 was every team that had been formed over the course of CCS's existence. Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 43. Thompson's memoir states that CCN was named after states, whereas CCC was named after snakes. This leads me to believe that all sources were basing their information on what was true when they were personally in country. However, there was not any team at CCC that was named after a snake according to sogsite's roster of teams, so it is possible that it was simply an error made by Thompson. A few examples of the teams named after tools and weather phenomenon: RT Hatchet, RT Pick, RT Hammer, RT Lightning.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex F, Command History, 1968*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1969), F-IV-2. History of MACV-SOG, "Bases."

one team was similar to another. Each team embodied their own unique and individual reputation that was attached to it.¹⁰⁵

The US personnel who filled the ranks of the Studies and Observations were primarily Green Berets, but members also came from the Navy SEALs, and Marine Recon teams.¹⁰⁶ From John Meyer's analysis, there were approximately 2000 men who volunteered for SOG over the duration of the war, about 400-700 of those operated across the border in the various recon teams.¹⁰⁷ Typical SOG recon teams (RT), initially called spike teams (ST), were comprised of 6-12 members.¹⁰⁸ Although, the number of men on a recon team would be largely dependent on the mission. Oftentimes, a team would only have 6-8 men on a reconnaissance mission in order to reduce the risk of detection.¹⁰⁹ In an interview in 2022, John Stryker Meyer explained that he would often try to keep his team specifically at or under six men, so that if only one helicopter was able to make it in to extract them, they would be able to fit their entire team on it.¹¹⁰ This was a frequently practiced method used by many other recon team 1-0s as well.

Within each recon team, two to three of the members would be American Special Forces members, designated by numeric callsigns beginning with the number "1." The

¹⁰⁵ Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 003," 38:53.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex A, Command History, 1964*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG), I-2.

¹⁰⁷ Sternberg, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 001," 1:40:38-1:41:20. Meyer puts these numbers into perspective, stating that about 3.2 million Americans served in Vietnam. Out of that 3.2 million soldiers, approximately 20,000 Special Forces soldiers were stationed in A Camps. This puts SOG recon team members at roughly 2-3.5% of Special Forces soldiers in Vietnam. The remaining number of the 2000 men were in the Hatchet Force companies.

¹⁰⁸ Sternberg, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 001," 4:05. Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 43. There is not any difference between spike teams and recon teams, except for the name. At some point, whether dictated by culture (likely), or by other official means, the name just seemed to change. ST and RT can be used, and often are used, interchangeably in sources.

¹⁰⁹ Plaster, *SOG*, 315.

¹¹⁰ Mike Glover, "The Secret War in Vietnam with MAC V-SOG Veteran John Stryker Meyer," YouTube, April 29, 2022, interview, 6:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee4j4nmclG0#:~:text=Comments410.family%20here%20to%20the%20states>.

team leader would be designated as the 1-0 (pronounced “One-Zero”), and the assistant team leader bore the title 1-1 (pronounced “one-one.”) The 1-0 was not necessarily the highest ranking soldier by the Army’s standard, and was sometimes even outranked by the 1-1.¹¹¹ Whereas this would have been an abomination in the eyes of the U.S. Army, it did not bother SOG in the slightest, as SOG’s idea of rank was in the form of a man’s experience and capability across the border. In fact, no man was allowed to be a 1-0, regardless of his rank, without an extensive experience as a 1-1.¹¹² The life expectancy of a SOG recon man was not counted in years, but in months or missions. Plaster elucidates this concept by stating, “Until he had three missions he shouldn’t open his mouth; after five missions, he could be relied upon to tell a war story honestly; ten made him seasoned and probably a One-Zero; fifteen and he was running out of luck; twenty and it was hard to explain why he was still alive.”¹¹³ The current teams regarded recon missions from only two years prior as the “stone ages” by comparison.¹¹⁴

There would occasionally be an additional US member on the team who was designated the 1-2 and would act as the team’s radio operator, or would just be an extra American member on the team. This was not as common but would sometimes occur when a new SF member first arrived at SOG.¹¹⁵ To evaluate the new guy’s competence and ~~overall~~ see what he is made out of, a One-Zero would have the guy carry the radio on the mission (mostly so that he did not have to), but also so that he could stay close to the team leader and copy what the seasoned veteran was doing. This was the

¹¹¹ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 54.

¹¹² Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 54.

¹¹³ Plaster, *SOG*, 116.

¹¹⁴ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 179. Anyone who was still around from those times was also seen as ancient, such as the Company Commander of CCN in 1970, Captain Larry Manes, who ran recon back in 1968.

¹¹⁵ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 54-55.

gentlest way possible to “ease” a man into recon, although it was not far from certain that his first mission could be his last. It was typical for SOG teams to conduct these initial missions within South Vietnam’s borders.¹¹⁶ There were plenty of enemies within the country, and plenty of opportunities to get killed all the same, but was considered safer for the team when bringing a new guy out for the first time. If the team liked the guy and thought he was a competent warrior, if he was “good in the woods” as they would say, they would hold on to him.¹¹⁷ This required the unanimous approval of the entire team, including each of the indigenous striker’s consent.

Indigenous Soldiers in SOG

The aspect of SOG that made it stand out from any other unit was the relationship that they had with their indigenous counterparts. Save for the 1-0, 1-1, and the rare 1-2; the majority of a SOG recon team was made up of men who were not American, but indigenous. Their numeric callsigns followed the same general pattern as the American callsigns, but were only distinguished by beginning the sequence with the number “0.” The two most eminent roles on the indigenous side of the team were the 0-1 and the 0-2. The 0-1 (Zero-One) was the indigenous team leader and the 0-2 (Zero-Two) was the interpreter.¹¹⁸ The majority of the indigenous strikers in SOG were Montagnard. The Montagnard tribes that were most prominent in the various RT’s within SOG were the Bru, Rhade, Bahnar, Jarai, and Sedang.¹¹⁹ Though all the tribes who fought in the recon teams were competent and loyal warriors, the Bru were especially renowned by the recon men for their exploits in war.

¹¹⁶ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 66 & 75.

¹¹⁷ Plaster, *SOG*, 116.

¹¹⁸ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 61. The Bru were especially popular at CCN.

Communication presented the possibility of an obstacle between the indigenous warriors and American soldiers. The barrier was overcome through the use of interpreters. Some of the interpreters displayed exceptional linguistic aptitude, as did John Meyer's interpreter on RT Idaho, who spoke 4 languages.¹²⁰ Each recon team had at least one individual who was capable of interpreting for the members on the team to effectively communicate. Montagnard language had a variety of different dialects among the different tribes, which fell under two main subgroups.¹²¹ In spite of these dialects, tribes could still communicate with other tribes who fell under the other subgroup. This was never an issue within SOG, since recon teams were divided by tribe, but what it did provide them with was the ability to more effectively speak with POWs from different regions of Vietnam. Many of the recon team members of both ethnicities learned to communicate with one another through a form of pidgin English which combined Montagnard and English phrases. Examples of common phrases include, "numbah ten" which conveyed various forms of bad or dangerous. Whereas its counterpart, "numbah one," communicated that something was either good, liked, or desired.¹²² If the state of war was what their relationship was initially built on, the ability to communicate with each other became the building block for the deep friendship that developed in SOG.

The Montagnard friendship began as a result of SOG expansion of operations in 1966.¹²³ In order for the organization to grow it needed to increase the amount of indigenous personnel that it employed. Colonel Donald Blackburn, SOG's first chief, started the program that would recruit and enlist some of SOG's fiercest fighters from

¹²⁰ Plaster, Glover, "The Secret War in Vietnam," 4:34.

¹²¹ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 2.

¹²² Brokhausen, *We Few*, 131 & 360.

¹²³ Plaster, SOG, 27.

the Montagnard tribes.¹²⁴ The combination of the discriminatory and cruel treatment they endured from the Vietnamese in tandem with the stark contrast of the genuine friendship they shared with SOG's members, led to an enduring partnership. Unlike the Americans who were in a foreign land, thick with dense jungle; the Montagnards were at home in the triple canopy jungles, naturally making them "good in the woods." The North Vietnamese Army was also not nearly as comfortable in the jungle, giving SOG an edge with the addition of the Montagnard tribesmen to their teams.¹²⁵ SOG recon men found themselves learning from their Montagnard partners as much as they were instructing them. RT Habu's 1-1, Nick Brokhausen, even went as far as to call his Bru 0-1, a mentor.¹²⁶ Generations of hunting led to a proficiency in both tracking and counter tracking. They knew how to move through the jungle's dense foliage silently to evade enemy detection, leading recon men to revere their Montagnard counterparts.¹²⁷ They were SOG's answer to prayer.

There are various sources that give differing figures for how many Montagnards served in SOG. To give a broader idea of the indigenous tribesmen's overall commitment to the fight against communism, approximately 61,000 Montagnards served alongside the American government.¹²⁸ Of that 61,000, about 43,000 were listed as a part of the CIDG, and another 18,000 were distinguished apart from the CIDG as

¹²⁴ Jacobsen, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*, 165. Plaster, *SOG*, 27. There were a total of 5 Chief SOGs throughout the program's existence from 1964-1972.

¹²⁵ Plaster, *SOG*, 28.

¹²⁶ Nick Brokhausen, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 003," 7:00-7:45. His Bru 0-1, Cuman, held the position of a war chief with the Bru people. He was the most authoritative Bru within CCN. Brokhausen remarked that he was treated with high respect by the Americans as well.

¹²⁷ In every single SOG source, the recon veteran author elaborates again and again how much they love the Montagnards.

¹²⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople of the Central Highlands of Vietnam to the United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam War, and condemning the ongoing violation of human rights by the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, S. RES. 362, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in Senate, February 4, 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-114sres362is/html/BILLS-114sres362is.htm>.

having “enlisted into mobile strike forces.”¹²⁹ There does not appear to be a specific number of those who specifically served with SOG, but to try to give a better idea, each SOG Command and Control compound had room for about 400 Montagnards, or other indigenous people who were employed by SOG.¹³⁰ Without a proper record, it is hard to say exactly how many Montagnards served with SOG, but it was definitely not an insignificant number.

Within Montagnard culture, part of the overall significance of a tribe was measured by its population.¹³¹ This rationale led one specific Montagnard tribe, the Bru who had a population of a little over 850 in 1965, to be viewed as relatively inconsequential within the region.¹³² SOG however, held considerably different values when it came to Montagnard significance, valuing the quality of the individuals over the quantity. They highly regarded the Bru tribe, having just under 300 Bru warriors employed at one time at CCN in 1969 alone.¹³³ The Bru, along with the other Montagnards who fought alongside SOG, were tremendously devoted to SOG’s mission, having served for prolonged periods of time. Some individuals even served upwards of 10 years.¹³⁴ Once the relationship was established with the Montagnards, SOG never struggled to find willing recruits. Throughout OPLAN 35’s existence, Montagnard tribesmen swarmed to volunteer whenever SOG commandos visited the village.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople*, S. RES. 362, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., February 4, 2016. There were other units, such as MIKE Forces, who employed Montagnards as strikers as well. These units conducted operations within South Vietnam to support the CIDG.

¹³⁰ Nicholson, *15 months in SOG*, 9.

¹³¹ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 3.

¹³² U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 3.

¹³³ Nicholson, *15 months in SOG*, 40.

¹³⁴ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62.

¹³⁵ Plaster, *SOG*, 304.

The individual Montagnard recruits were all younger males. Some were as young as 15-17 years old.¹³⁶ Although the Montagnards were rarely formally educated, the Americans viewed them as having a high degree of general intelligence, as highlighted specifically within a US Army Special Forces manual titled “Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Vietnam.”¹³⁷ A large portion of this successful partnership between American SOG recon men and their indigenous counterparts should be attributed to Special Forces’ cultural awareness of the Montagnard people. A manual titled, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Vietnam*, initially published in 1964 with a second edition published the year after by the United States Army Special Warfare School, provided detailed information about thirteen different tribal groups within the Montagnard people group. This information covered many facets of life from taboos, traditions, patterns, village practices and everyday life, religion, medicinal approaches, each covered in depth for the respective individual tribe. This knowledge was the foundation of a deep cultural understanding that SOG recon men had of their Montagnard counterparts.

Montagnards were not the only indigenous groups that served in SOG. Ethnic Chinese Nungs and Cambodians were two other people groups who filled the mercenary billets on SOG’s various teams within OPLAN 35. In fact, SOG initially only partnered with Nungs before they began recruiting from Montagnard tribes.¹³⁸ Chinese Nungs, many of whom were often taller than their American recon counterparts, quite literally stood out from the other indigenous troops.¹³⁹ Americans also used soldiers

¹³⁶ Nicholson, *15 months in SOG*, 50. Brokhausen, *We Few*, 108. RT Habu’s tail gunner, Xaung, is 15 and described as a seasoned fighter by Brokhausen.

¹³⁷ Plaster, *SOG*, 29. U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 199.

¹³⁸ Plaster, *SOG*, 14.

¹³⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 122.

from the South Vietnamese version of their own Special Forces, as well as employed Hmong mercenaries for SOG Hatchet Force companies.¹⁴⁰ While all of these various indigenous groups served SOG dutifully, one of the greatest examples of SOG's understanding of indigenous culture was seen in their recruitment of yet another group: NVA prisoners of war (POWs) who were recruited by SOG on occasion.¹⁴¹ This was done with confidence, but only when the individual was a Montagnard, since SOG understood that tribal loyalties ran deeper than any political ties.¹⁴² Employing NVA POW Montagnards led to goldmines of useful, and more importantly, reliable information that SOG would use both in planning missions as well as during the mission itself.

While the Studies and Observation Group was extremely diverse, the American SF men did their best to prevent intermingling from occurring between the indigenous groups. They achieved this by keeping the indigenous personnel within recon teams limited to those who were of the same ethnicity and tribe. If a recon team had a member who was Bru, the entire rest of the team would also be Bru. Hatchet companies were also centered around ethnicity. Oftentimes, as was the case in CCS, there would be one Hatchet company that was filled with Montagnards and another that was Cambodian.¹⁴³ Meal times at the indigenous mess hall were carefully planned to avoid cross-cultural run-ins between the ethnic groups.¹⁴⁴ These actions were not carried out of a racially motivated malice, but rather due to SOG's diligent cultural understanding of tribal ties

¹⁴⁰ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 57. Thompson's first team, RT Alabama, was a South Vietnamese team. For whatever reason, it appears that Hmong only served in Hatchet companies and not Recon Teams as far as I can find.

¹⁴¹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 147.

¹⁴² Brokhausen, *We Few*, 147.

¹⁴³ Whitt, Meyer, SOGCAST "Episode 004," 12:00. I am not sure if Hatchet companies were composed entirely from a singular tribe of Montagnards, or if they mixed tribes within the bigger units.

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 130-131.

and the hostilities that were present between certain groups, such as the blatant animosity between the South Vietnamese and the Montagnards.

South Vietnamese leadership in Saigon seemingly discouraged anything resembling a sympathetic sentiment to be present amongst its ARVN officers toward Montagnards. John Prados, Vietnam war historian, described in his book, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, of two ARVN officers who were transferred posts after making an effort to bridge the cultural gap with the Montagnards in their camps.¹⁴⁵ Individuals of this nature seemed to be the minority of the overall ARVN view of Montagnards. Most of the ARVN despised the Montagnards, and for this reason, were consciously segregated from the other indigenous groups.

There were occasions where a lapse of organization would transpire and recon teams would unintentionally, but consequently, pass by too closely to another unit and the results were rarely positive. One such instance happened in the late fall of 1968 at CCN, when a team with Montagnards came back to the compound after routine training on the range. The gate that they were coming in shared a fence with the ARVN compound. Yelling ensued between the two groups, followed shortly after by a Montagnard firing an M-60 into the ARVN compound.¹⁴⁶ The South Vietnamese returned fire in the general direction of the truck that was carrying the team. This short but high tension confrontation was broken up by Americans before the situation got any worse and before anyone became wounded or worse. The example of this incident reinforces the logic behind the careful consideration that SOG put into many aspects of everyday life compounds that ensured the safety of members from each group.

¹⁴⁵ Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, 80. The two South Vietnamese officers that Prados specifically mentions by name is Captain Nguyen Van Nghiem and Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen De

¹⁴⁶ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 62.

The segregation was not solely for the purpose of avoiding these near fatal incidents. In fact, many of the Montagnard tribes did not display any hostility toward other tribes, or even other ethnicities such as the Chinese Nungs and Cambodians for that matter. At the SOG compounds, Montagnards would stand watch with other Montagnards from different tribes without incident.¹⁴⁷ Other times, two teams of separate indigenous personnel would run into each other while traveling back from a launch site and pass by each other without incident.¹⁴⁸ The majority of it was simply due to their understanding of the Montagnards' and other indigenous' loyalty hierarchy. Their loyalty was first and foremost to the tribe, then to those who fought alongside them, and then to the organization who paid them.¹⁴⁹ SOG wanted to avoid any possible incidents in the field where a Montagnard disobeyed orders or jeopardized the mission out of his allegiance to his fellow tribesman. Rather than try and change the idea of tribal ties that went back centuries, SOG adapted and embraced this aspect of their counterpart's culture by carefully filling recon teams solely with members who were of the same tribe.

Brokhausen described how well the loyalty hierarchy worked out for the Montagnards' relationship with SOG, explaining, "Once they accept you, you become one of the tribe, a fellow warrior, and best of all, in this theatre we are also the ones who directly pay them." The Montagnards' loyalty never rested on the fact that SOG was their paymaster. The Montagnards were warriors who respected their fellow SOG warriors, and were themselves, from a culture that placed bravery in combat in high regard. Unlike most typical mercenaries, they fought because they had a higher desire

¹⁴⁷ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 47-48.

¹⁴⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 122-125. In this particular example, Chinese Nungs and Bru teams spend uneventful time among each other.

¹⁴⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 61.

for the opportunity to kill enemy soldiers than they did for pay. Plaster underscored their sentiment by illustrating, “They fought not for money but because they were proud of their tribe and village and detested the enemy.”¹⁵⁰

There were designated areas within the camp for the various indigenous barracks. These were also meticulously arranged, not by what team the occupants were on, but by what indigenous group they were a part of. For safety and general risk mitigation, the Montagnard barracks and South Vietnamese barracks were located on opposite sides of the camp.¹⁵¹ Unlike the American SF barracks which were usually partitioned off in rooms for 2-3 recon men, Montagnard barracks were long, one-room communal buildings, fashioned in concept after the ones back in their home village.¹⁵² The inside of the indigenous barracks looks very different from the SF barracks. In place of beds, hammocks were strung up.¹⁵³ With food playing a big role in Montagnard culture, there was often cooking occurring within the barracks.¹⁵⁴ Leisure activities, such as games were also common here, namely improvised games of poker.¹⁵⁵ Even though they had their own barracks with air conditioning, some of the SOG commandos found solace sleeping in the Montagnard barracks, amongst the comfort of their indigenous warrior brethren’s culture.¹⁵⁶

Genuine Friendship

¹⁵⁰ Plaster, *SOG*, 29. Plaster explained that the Montagnards’ disdain for both Vietnamese countries “... only had a slightly greater disdain for the northern variety.”

¹⁵¹ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 62.

¹⁵² U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 3.

¹⁵³ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 148.

¹⁵⁴ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 148.

¹⁵⁵ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 148. Brokhausen described the game with the details that the loser had to wear a helmet during the card game.

¹⁵⁶ Plaster, *SOG*, 209. Brokhausen, *We Few*, 17. Brokhausen recounts stories where he would often wander over to the Montagnard barracks at night after experiencing post traumatic stress related nightmares from combat.

One of the most heartening aspects of SOG was the relationship that the two groups shared with each other. These relationships surpassed the vast cultural barrier that existed between the two dissimilar societies. Rather than try and force change upon the other, the SF soldiers and Montagnards alike were willing to share in one another's customs and traditions for the sake of the other. This willingness created what could almost be viewed as a third culture, a SOG culture, where the two distinct cultures intertwined. Among these practices was the Montagnard practice of handholding. The indigenous tribesmen viewed the practice as a symbol of respect and friendship.¹⁵⁷ This could not have been more foreign to the minds of the American SF commandos who strictly viewed the act through the romantic lens that Western society viewed hand holding. Undoubtedly, this was uncomfortable for the SF men, but rather than insult their allies and risk the friendship—which could have jeopardized SOG's operational effectiveness—they returned the gesture to their indigenous counterparts. The depth of this relationship far surpassed professional acquaintanceship and reached deep into the realm of genuine friendship.

SOG SF men respected the many other distinctive aspects of Montagnard culture such as the heavy role that superstitious beliefs held amongst tribesmen. SOG legend, John Plaster, commented on this phenomenon in his book, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, remarking on how the Montagnards continued to hold onto their superstitions even after being submerged into SOG culture.¹⁵⁸ This displays the strength of the Montagnards' culture, but it speaks to SOG's character equally as much. SOG's SF men fostered space for the many aspects of

¹⁵⁷ Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 131.

¹⁵⁸ Plaster, *SOG*, 29.

Montagnard culture to continue through their partnership. Superstition often comes across as peculiar and even jestable within Western culture, but to the Montagnards, it was viewed very seriously.

RT Habu's 1-1, Nick Brokhausen, described a story that exhibited the extent of how far SF men would go to respect their fellow Montagnards' spooky themed beliefs. This occurred after a rare instance of a recon mission, when instead of coming into contact with the enemy, Habu came across "The Snake People." Despite being a Montagnard tribe, they were believed to be cursed by the other Montagnards. The Montagnards of Habu demanded that a cleansing was required, simply for seeing two of the individuals.¹⁵⁹ Brokhausen and the two other Americans on RT Habu succumbed to their Montagnards' requests, and opted to stay on base for a cleansing, rather than go out on the town.¹⁶⁰ This alone said a lot, since enjoying nightlife in the town was SOG's favorite pastime. Another instance, at the request of his team's Montagnards, included SOG 1-0 Ancil Franks to deal with a sick Montagnard by bringing an animal for the tribesmen to sacrifice before sending the sick man back to his village to be treated by a witch doctor.¹⁶¹ The way that SOG respected Montagnard superstitions displays the genuineness and extent of the friendship between the two groups.

Not all Southeastern Asian cultures shared the same superstitions, in fact they were quite different. SOG SF soldiers sometimes switched recon teams when they became 1-0s, where they could possibly find themselves within a different culture. That was the case for Henry L. Thompson, who was the 1-1 of RT Alabama, a South

¹⁵⁹ Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 003," 56:47.

¹⁶⁰ Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 003," 58:16. Brokhausen mentions that the other Montagnard tribes would not even trade the Snake People, they spooked the Bru Montagnards, something that very few things could do.

¹⁶¹ Plaster, *SOG*, 29-30.

Vietnamese team, and became the 1-0 for RT Michigan, a Montagnard recon team.¹⁶²

Part of integrating into RT Michigan involved learning a whole new set of superstitions from the Montagnards. An example of this is that some South Vietnamese found it extremely unlucky to have your picture taken before missions, whereas the Montagnards loved having their picture taken.¹⁶³ The extra step of learning the different aspects of indigenous culture was just par for the course for the intentionality that SOG demonstrated toward all facets of Montagnard life.

SOG did not exclusively experience their indigenous counterpart's culture within the confines of the Command and Control compounds, but also at the very heart of Montagnard culture: the village. There were a few occasions where SOG would find themselves in the primitive villages and enveloped into a culture that was increasingly becoming more and more familiar to them. One of the instances was for the professional purpose of recruitment. After the initial contact was made back in 1966, the villages and SOG developed a rhythm for this joint transaction. When SOG went to recruit new Montagnards from their villages, money would first be brought to the village's chief.¹⁶⁴ This money helped the villages immensely, who otherwise did not have many sources of income.¹⁶⁵ The indigenous personnel that supported SOG in both recon teams and Hatchet Force companies were paid exceptionally well. A new recruit's pay was equivalent to that of an ARVN Captain.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Thompson, *SOG CODENAME DYNAMITE Book 1*, 131.

¹⁶³ Plaster, Glover, "The Secret War in Vietnam," 4:00. Brokhausen, *We Few*, 302.

¹⁶⁴ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 48.

¹⁶⁵ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 48. Many Montagnard tribes were forced to relocate by the NVA to Vietnam from surrounding countries. This was the story of the Bru tribe, who originated from Northern Laos. As a result, the villages were still developing in their new area and tended to be poorer.

¹⁶⁶ Plaster, *SOG*, 15. This pay was equivalent to about \$60. This figure was for the base/lowest pay, however there has not been mention of what a more experienced indigenous member would make. Since there is no mention otherwise, SOG presumably paid the indigenous recruits a uniform amount, regardless of ethnicity.

There was an interesting dichotomy present between the sensible use of money by the villages and the frivolous squandering of paychecks by the employed individuals. Many recon 1-0s note similar stories of their individual Montagnard troops not having much concern for the cash they made. On more than one occasion, Montagnards would come back the evening of payday having spent the entirety of their paycheck on random odds and ends. Plaster compared their money management skills to that of kids, blowing their money within days of receiving it.¹⁶⁷ Although, their lack of saving was not a sign of immaturity as much as it related to a lack of cultural value surrounding the concept of saving.¹⁶⁸ The lack of financial responsibility amused many of SOG's members, but it certainly did not carry with it any less respect for their indigenous counterparts.

Apart from the official SOG payroll, individual SOG men would personally pay the indigenous members on their team at every possible opportunity. This was especially prevalent within Montagnard teams, and was even received with a much greater contentment than the official monthly pay from SOG provided. They achieved this with two crucial insights of Montagnard culture in mind. First, was the keen awareness of the Montagnards affinity for gifts. This was likely a byproduct of their ancestors' occupation of gathering, which went back for centuries. The significance of the gift lay not in its value, but in the act of giving. Western T-shirts, beer, cigarettes, care package homegoods, and even government issued items, such as ponchos, were all commonly offered goods.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Plaster, *SOG*, 29. Plaster gives a specific example where on one of the Montagnards' paydays, they went to a dentist downtown, spending their entire paycheck to have their teeth fitted with red and blue caps.

¹⁶⁸ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 180. This observation was made by anthropologists before the war even started, likely a decade or more prior.

¹⁶⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 272, 275, 284, 353.

Gift giving became fully integrated into SOG culture. It was expected for a new American who was vying for the approval of the Montagnards and a spot on the team to present them with gifts, such as watches.¹⁷⁰ This became jokingly referred to by SOG men as a “mugging,” being that the individual had little room to decline the gift requests from his Montagnard brethren before they contented themselves.¹⁷¹ The love that SOG had for the Montagnard culture was not restrained to solely within the confines of the team. Some SOG recon men, such as SOG legend Jerry “Mad Dog” Shriver, display this by taking gift giving an extra step further. Plaster recounts that “Shriver was devoted to the Montagnards,” in response to Shriver’s actions of regularly collecting food and clothes amongst other things to then hand out at the villages.¹⁷² In turn, SOG received gifts from the indigenous warriors in the form of bracelets that were held in high honor within the Montagnard culture and subsequently by SOG as well. “Yard Bracelets,” as they were called by the SOG men, were presented by their Montagnard fighters as signs of deep gratitude and profound friendship between the recipient and the bestower.¹⁷³ Bracelets held traditional significance within Montagnard culture, such as to signify marriage by wearing beaded bracelets in place of Western society’s use of rings.¹⁷⁴ Copper bracelets often implied an alliance or were a sign of loyalty amongst the people who wore them.¹⁷⁵ It seems exceptionally appropriate that the bracelets shared between SOG and the Montagnard warriors were formed out of the material from expended brass shell casings.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62, 219.

¹⁷¹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62, 118.

¹⁷² Plaster, *SOG*, 209.

¹⁷³ Jones, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, “Episode 002,” 22:35.

¹⁷⁴ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 29.

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 37.

¹⁷⁶ “Items Left at the Wall,” Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, catalog number VIVE 00712, accessed February 15, 2025,

The second insight was that they were aware of the Montagnards' fervent appreciation of food.¹⁷⁷ From time to time, this presented itself in situations where Montagnards would look to their American leader for approval to commandeer livestock while they were out and about.¹⁷⁸ The permission was in and of itself the gift, since they would rarely, if ever, act against the wishes of their respected leaders. Additionally, this meant there would be a barbecue for the Montagnards to enjoy when they eventually got back to the compound, which was supremely regarded amongst the tribesmen. It was also common for SOG 1-0s to end a day of training in the jungle with a hunting exercise.¹⁷⁹ Hunting was advantageous for the recon team with how it allowed them to practice various tactics and ambush methods on their prey. There were additional benefits that stemmed from this. The notable obvious marker was seen in the boost of morale that fresh game brought to the Montagnards.¹⁸⁰ The other, as a repercussion of the first, led to a further excitement to train. The actual willingness to train was never an issue for SOG's Montagnards, who bore pride in being warriors.

The SF men who served alongside them in SOG uniformly thought of them as such. Apart from the technicality aspect, the SF men who fought with the Montagnards did not think of them as mercenaries.¹⁸¹ Instead, they saw them as fellow SOG soldiers. On both a professional and personal level, the SOG SF men respected their indigenous

[https://www.vvmf.org/items/4794/VIVE00712/#:~:text=COMPONENT%20\(A\)%20MONTAGNARD%20FRI,ENDSHIP%20BRACELET,ENGRAVED%20LINES%20AND%20GEOMETRIC%20SHAPES](https://www.vvmf.org/items/4794/VIVE00712/#:~:text=COMPONENT%20(A)%20MONTAGNARD%20FRI,ENDSHIP%20BRACELET,ENGRAVED%20LINES%20AND%20GEOMETRIC%20SHAPES).

¹⁷⁷ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, pg 116. Nicholson stresses the extent of their love for food by noting the consequences that occurred when SF A Camps would run out of food, stating that these were often preceded by indigenous desertion.

¹⁷⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 361. In the case of RT Habu's Bru, livestock in the form of chickens and baby pigs were especially popular.

¹⁷⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 286.

¹⁸⁰ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 297. Mountain gibbons were a common "casualty of training," which the Montagnards thoroughly enjoyed.

¹⁸¹ Plaster, *SOG*, 28. This also applies to RTs and Hatchet companies whose ranks were filled with Nungs, South Vietnamese, or Cambodians.

counterparts. The name “Montagnard” was long and was consequently shortened, as is customary for the military to do with any long name. The Montagnards acquired the nicknames “Yards” or “Little People” among the SF men of SOG.¹⁸² Without context, these terms might sound belittling or derogatory to some, yet John Meyer, and many other SOG men are quick to explain the endearment behind the terms.¹⁸³ The sentiment that they expressed toward the Montagnards was indeed genuine, as their actions in the war and after have displayed. They did not call the Montagnards “Little People” from the skewed viewpoint of superiority, or paternalistic.

Instead, the relationship between the American SF men and the Montagnards paralleled closely with a big brother, little brother concept at times. In other times, it presented closer to that of a coach and player’s relationship when it was called for in the context of their work.¹⁸⁴ However, outside of missions, during times of leisure around the compound, the relationship leaned heavily into the scope of siblings, fully equal to each in status, especially when they were trying not to get caught by the military police for collaborative minor infractions while off duty. In yet other times, the relationship dynamic completely flipped, contributing the parental role to the Montagnard O-1. In light of this, it was not terribly uncommon for the SF men to be chastised by their Montagnard counterparts. Looks of disapproval, or the phrases of the same nature, such as “*Trung Si* (insert name of SF guy) *beaucoup dinky dau*,” were used when the Montagnards felt that their opinion of the soldier’s actions or the situation should be heeded.¹⁸⁵ This

¹⁸² Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, “Episode 003,” 6:53.

¹⁸³ Brokhausen, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, “Episode 003,” 6:53.

¹⁸⁴ Plaster, *SOG*, 29.

¹⁸⁵ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 132. *Trung Si* translates to “sergeant” and *beaucoup dinky dau* is a combination of the French (*beaucoup*) and Vietnamese, which translates closely to “very crazy” or “crazy in the head.” It is interesting to see the French influence remaining within the Vietnamese and Montagnard language. It did not take long for certain English words to find their way into the Montagnard vocabulary as well, courtesy of well mannered and politely spoken U.S. soldiers.

includes situations such as, but not limited to, SOG guys drinking past their limit, flying the planes while the pilots slept, or the general universal irresponsibility that inevitably presented itself when soldiers were off duty.¹⁸⁶ If there was any small hint of superiority complex or belittlement present in their view of the Montagnards, it would have shown itself in these situations. Instead, the Special Forces soldiers did not refute the Montagnard leader, but instead agreed with him, endured the chastisement through til the end, and then apologized.

This relationship was far from the United State's previous relationships with indigenous people. Historians have often described the U.S. viewing themselves as a superior parental figure 'guiding' an inferior, childlike, undeveloped group of people. Instead, the SF men respected and revered their fellow indigenous comrades, even viewing them far above many of their own countrymen in terms of skill and overall character. They viewed their "Yards" as fierce warriors, who were selfless and daring. This is what SOG's SF men valued far above race, ethnicity, nationality, or anything else. If a regular GI American trooper was caught calling a Montagnard one of the many common slurs used by the GIs in the presence of a SOG SF man, the SF man's response would be in the form of physically assaulting the perpetrator.¹⁸⁷ Brokhausen, and many other SOG men, did not distinguish themselves apart from, but viewed the Montagnards as family.¹⁸⁸ This sentiment is still alive today among the surviving American SOG men, who frequently express their persistent love for the indigenous tribesmen in interviews.

¹⁸⁶ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 76, 132-134. RT Habu 1-0, Lemuel "Mac" MacGlothren, claimed to have over 100 hours of flight time piloting the C-7 Caribou twin prop cargo planes.

¹⁸⁷ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62. Regular GI American soldiers are used as a sole example, not because SOG would hold any punches back within their own Special Forces community, but because it is highly unlikely that phrases of that nature would be heard coming from the mouth of an SF soldier.

¹⁸⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62.

This is not to say that their relationships were completely perfect. There were occasional disagreements, as there are in any relationship. Disagreements and disputes occurred on both sides of the relationship. When a Montagnard felt that he or his brethren were wronged, the Montagnard of the highest status would present his claims to his American counterparts and fine them.¹⁸⁹ This “fine” of sorts, would then require the SOG SF men involved to pay the Montagnards something usually along the lines of a pig, a few chickens, and some cash (that they would then use to buy beer and cigarettes) as a means of restitution.¹⁹⁰ Rarely did a situation or action require a SOG 1-0 to reprimand one of the Montagnards on his team.¹⁹¹ Most Montagnard infractions were handled by their own, as SOG SF men respected the tribal leadership structure that was in place, and left disciplinary actions to them.¹⁹² However, if the situation called for it, a SOG 1-0 could fire an individual, though instances of this nature were incredibly rare.¹⁹³

SOG SF men did not just care for the indigenous personnel on their team, but cared for the people as a whole. SOG’s SF medics at each Command & Control welcomed in many Montagnard women and children into sick call at the clinic to treat their ailments.¹⁹⁴ A surprisingly large number of Montagnard tribes were devout Catholics.¹⁹⁵ One particular 1-0, George Washington Bacon, had a remarkable aptitude

¹⁸⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 134.

¹⁹⁰ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 134.

¹⁹¹ Plaster, *SOG*, 29.

¹⁹² Brokhausen, *We Few*, 291.

¹⁹³ Plaster, *SOG*, 29. Due to the fact that the 1-0 would have been the person who personally selected the indigenous warrior for hire in the first place. *We Few* 90. SOGCAST 002 1:14:05 Although it did happen, as RT Delaware 1-0, Jim Shorten Jones had to fire one of his indigenous strikers.

¹⁹⁴ Gary Mike Rose, interviewed by John Stryker Meyer, *SOGCAST: Untold Stories of MAC V SOG*, “Episode 008: Saving More Than 50 Wounded Soldiers Lives. Medal of Honor Recipient, Gary Mike Rose,” podcast audio, September 21, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/show/20VPzo9YPOlZaekAQGgcal>, 1:43:25. SF medic and Medal of Honor recipient, Gary Mike Rose, recalls that it was not uncommon for them to see 300 patients, primarily indigenous women and children.

¹⁹⁵ Rose, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, “Episode 008,” 14:27. Most Montagnards were either Catholic or Buddhist.

for picking up languages. After getting a good grasp on the Bru dialect from spending a lot of time with the Bru Montagnard strikers, he helped translate the Bible into Bru, the first translation of its kind.¹⁹⁶ In another similar instance, SOG SF soldiers guarded a local Vietnamese village church near CCN while it held Christmas service because of a threat made by the Viet Cong.¹⁹⁷ The Studies and Observations Group did more than simply contribute to the war effort; it also had a significantly positive impact on the local population.

SOG's love for their counterparts led to the detest of anyone who mistreated them, which happened to be an unfortunate regular occurrence in South Vietnam. The American SF men could not bear it when they found out that Vietnamese hospitals were frequently leaving their injured indigenous warriors untreated, or even worse, mistreating them.¹⁹⁸ Casualties on missions were so common that simply hoping for the best would not have sufficiently solved the issue. As they did with many other things, SOG took the matter into their own hands and had their own care facility constructed within the compound at Da Nang.¹⁹⁹ Fully equipped with a surgeon, nursing staff, and recovery ward, it was fit to SOG's standards, as it was the best care facility in South Vietnam for their indigenous brethren.²⁰⁰ They would not have it any other way when it came to their fellow warriors. Despite the superior care that they received at the SOG hospital at Da Nang, many Montagnards still succumbed to wounds which were beyond treatable, or simply died on the battlefield.

¹⁹⁶ Plaster, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 010," 8:00.

¹⁹⁷ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 35-36.

¹⁹⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 120.

¹⁹⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 120.

²⁰⁰ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 120. The care facility was so good that most SOG guys even preferred to be treated there.

Funerals were another one of the instances where a SOG man would be fully immersed in Montagnard culture. The entire village responded with a celebration to honor the fallen member(s) and viewed the SOG men's presence as a high honor.²⁰¹ When a Montagnard soldier died in SOG, his body would be escorted back to the village by his team of both fellow Montagnards and Americans.²⁰² SOG 1-0s even went as far as to make the escort team larger if there were more Montagnards from the village of the fallen indigenous warrior, giving them a chance to visit their home.²⁰³ The team's 1-0 and 1-1 made every effort to accompany their fallen comrade back to his village. The only instances that prevented them were if they were hospitalized from wounds or deceased. In this case, another representative from SOG would escort the body back to the village to show respect.²⁰⁴ Since a Hatchet company was much larger than a recon team, typically only a few Americans, such as the company commander and a couple other members would accompany the Montagnard trooper back to his village.²⁰⁵ If able, the Americans SF members would also bring a gift in the form of an animal for the village feast. Such was the case of Thom Nicholson, the company commander of a Hatchet company at CCN in 1969, who brought in a couple of cows suspended from the helicopters they arrived on.²⁰⁶ The entire village responded with a celebration to honor the fallen member(s) and viewed the SOG men's presence as a high honor.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 49 & 43.

²⁰² Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 44.

²⁰³ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 44.

²⁰⁴ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 237.

²⁰⁵ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 43.

²⁰⁶ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 44. U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Montagnard Tribal Groups of the Republic of Viet-nam*, 180. Cows were seen as objects of wealth and prestige within Montagnard culture and were viewed as grand gifts.

²⁰⁷ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG* 49 & 43.

Additionally, the widow and the family would be personally presented with a bereavement payment by the SOG members.²⁰⁸ This was not merely a transactional function, but a deeply personal event that fortified the bonds between the two sides. The men from SOG would then tell stories of their fallen brethren, emphasizing the bravery and valor they displayed in battle.²⁰⁹ This tribute was done to both honor the deceased in front of their village, as well as comfort their grieving families.²¹⁰ There was a high value placed on warriors in the culture of many of the Montagnard tribes who fought for SOG. Perhaps this aspect was one of the areas where there was no cultural divide, but rather a natural continuity from one culture to the other. The ultimate form of respect that people can show another culture is by how they handle their dead. SOG went above and beyond to ensure that their Montagnard allies were able to receive proper burial back at their home villages by their tribe.²¹¹

SOG men relished the chance to visit Montagnard villages.²¹² Funerals were a day-long process, consisting of feasting and lots of village-brewed spirits, which were notably strong.²¹³ These spirits contributed to frequent overnight stays in the villages for the visiting American SF men.²¹⁴ Upon arrival, the Americans' U.S. Army fatigues were often exchanged for Montagnard loincloths, which were worn with great consideration

²⁰⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 62.

²⁰⁹ Plaster, *SOG*, 304.

²¹⁰ Plaster, *SOG*, 304.

²¹¹ Rose, Meyer, *SOGCAST*, "Episode 008," 13:45-14:26. There were inevitable, but unfortunate nonetheless, occasions where both Montagnard and American dead bodies were left on the battlefield when it came down to a choice between saving the living or joining the dead. These instances were rare and unforgettable for those who had to make the choice. One of SOG's Medal of Honor recipients, Gary Mike Rose, an SF medic, shared in an interview that he still thinks of those men every day.

²¹² Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 44.

²¹³ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 49-51.

²¹⁴ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 43.

for the culture, despite self-conscious discomfort.²¹⁵ The good humored humility that SOG's members graciously endured for the sake of their indigenous counterparts, displayed just one of the many examples of the good rapport that nurtured the mutual friendship between the two warriors.

SOG's daily actions reflected a continuous attentiveness toward their indigenous counterparts. They embodied the adage, "treat others the way you would want to be treated." Before going out to the town for a night of R&R, SOG 1-0s and 1-1s would bring beer over to the indigenous barracks and check in to see if there was anything else they needed.²¹⁶ After missions, the American commandos would see to their indigenous warriors by treating any wounded, help them start cleaning their gear, and get them food.²¹⁷ Taking care of the Montagnards and intelligence debriefing were the first priorities after returning to the base. Only upon the completion of those two tasks did SOG men finally take care of themselves and their own gear.²¹⁸

When they traveled to other non-SOG bases, they demanded the same quality of care be given to their indigenous allies by the staff of the base. This included the unwavering insistence that the Montagnards be able to stay in the same compound as the SOG men when they traveled.²¹⁹ This was not a common practice outside of SOG and was often detested by regular Army staff. SOG commandos thought very little of

²¹⁵ Nicholson, *15 Months in SOG*, 48. Nicholson's personal note on the loincloths, "Our white legs caused many a giggle among the brown skin locals, but we endured the embarrassment out of respect for their culture and in the cause of good relationships."

²¹⁶ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 353.

²¹⁷ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 193.

²¹⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 194-195.

²¹⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 351.

Army Staff individuals, and even less of their opinions. The Americans in SOG viewed the Montagnards just as much a part of the organization as they were.

Gordon L. Rottman is the author of *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, a short but informative book that broadly covers the different aspects of recon teams and their mission. One place that Rottman misses greatly within his book is in his description of SOG's indigenous counterparts. He claimed, "The reality was that the Americans were *the* recon men...The indigenous men were basically bodyguards to provide the necessary firepower if it came to a fight."²²⁰ Part of Rottman's logic behind his quote was presumably that the Americans were the ones who planned for the missions, of which he is fully correct in stating. However, he grossly misses on his sole accreditation to Americans leading the missions and collecting the intelligence. This statement misrepresents the relationship between SF men and their counterparts as a superior military force leading an inferior one, and this simply was not the case in SOG.

The indigenous troopers who ran missions alongside the Americans played a large role in the success of the mission, far beyond just acting as a protection force. On missions, an indigenous soldier would typically be the point man who led the rest of the team through the jungle. The point man was one of the most dangerous positions on the team and required the utmost meticulous focus.²²¹ They were in charge of spotting danger, directing the course of the team, and were often the first to receive enemy contact. The jungle was extremely thick. There would be instances where a team would be walking through the jungle and take another step forward, just to find themselves in

²²⁰ Rottman, *US MACV-SOG Reconnaissance Team in Vietnam*, 48.

²²¹ Thompson, *SOG Codename Dynamite*, 89. RTs would often either all dress up as NVA soldiers, or just have their point man dressed up in an NVA uniform. This tactic gave them an edge when they stumbled onto the enemy by causing confusion, even if it was just for a moment.

the middle of a trail that seemingly materialized out of thin air. Similar to the point man, there was also a tail gunner who was the team's rear security and prevented enemy trackers from sneaking up on the team. These two indigenous soldiers in conjunction were responsible for a substantial amount of the team's patrol security, and thus, operational success and the survival of the team.

The Montagnards especially, were often credited with having a sixth sense when it came to the jungle.²²² There had been numerous times where indigenous troopers made tactical decisions within a mission that their American SF followed, and as a result it led to the team's survival.²²³ Indigenous personnel shared many primitive techniques that American SF men received and followed with great appreciation. How to walk silently in the jungle, silent ambushes, and many other techniques crucial to the survival of SOG recon teams were the products of indigenous expertise.²²⁴ The Montagnards were heavily depended on by the American SF men in SOG. The knowledge that was passed down was not only utilized by recon teams on missions, but it played a much larger role in the overall success of the OPLAN 35 program.

Describing SOG's indigenous exclusively as bodyguards is a misrepresentation and historically inaccurate. Rottman himself was once an SF soldier assigned to an A camp in Vietnam.²²⁵ There is a chance that he made this remark based on his personal experiences working with the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG), the indigenous strikers who were assigned to assist the SF personnel at the various A camps.²²⁶ SOG

²²² Brokhausen, *We Few*, 108.

²²³ Brokhausen, Meyer, SOGCAST, "Episode 003," 47:45.

²²⁴ Plaster, SOG, 14. Brokhausen, *We Few*, 69.

²²⁵ "Gordon L. Rottman," Osprey Publishing, accessed February 25, 2025, <https://www.ospreypublishing.com/us/author/gordon-l-rottman/>. Rottman, despite being an SF soldier in Vietnam, was not a part of SOG, but served honorably at a SF A Camp.

²²⁶ Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, 77. Special Forces A Camps served as bases for soldiers to train local forces (CIDG) in order to defend regions and conduct offensive operations against

differed from its close SF A Camp relatives, not just by where the teams ran their missions, but by how they valued each individual member within the organization. The character, relationship, and capability of the partnership between SOG's indigenous and American warriors is what set it apart from any other unit in the Vietnam war.

Brokhausen boasts about the Montagnards capability, claiming that they are "the finest combat troops in the world."²²⁷ A more accurate sentence that Rottman should have made would have looked something along the lines of, "The partnership between the American Special Forces soldiers and their indigenous counterparts were what made recon SOG *recon*." The indigenous troops' involvement in SOG was paramount to much of the recon team's lethal capability across the border.

The concurrent sentiment was not only expressed by Brokhausen and a handful of other recon men, but by the SOG organization as a whole. SOG displayed this sentiment through the way they managed both the indigenous strikers and the SOG SF men in the same manner. For instance, SOG sent out rescue "Bright Light" units out for recon teams who were stranded under enemy fire. These units were manned by other SOG members who willingly risked their lives, and often died, to bring their brothers back, whether countrymen or indigenous allies. SOG still sent Bright Lights in to rescue their indigenous brothers in arms, just as they did for the SF men.²²⁸ There was no less consideration given for the indigenous Montagnard members of SOG than there was for the U.S. SF members of SOG.

the NVA and VC out of. This is by no means to say that the relations were bad between the A Camp SF men and the CIDG, but only that they had a different relationship with their indigenous soldiers. This can likely be attributed to a larger ratio of CIDG troopers to each A Camp SF soldier than there was in SOG.

²²⁷ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 108.

²²⁸ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 178.

Similarly, incentives were also comparable between the two groups. Captured NVA prisoners from the Ho Chi Minh Trail were highly sought after by SOG, and even more so lucrative for the recon teams because they promised a cash incentive and a possible rest and recuperation (R&R) trip to Thailand for American SF men.²²⁹

Indigenous members of the team were also compensated for their team's feat with a cash reward and leisurely stand down, where they could go and visit their village.²³⁰ To distinguish the Montagnards apart from SOG is to completely misunderstand SOG entirely. MACVSOG's last Chief SOG, Colonel John F. Sadler, recognized this and addressed it in the preface of the *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, dedicating the history of SOG equally as much to the Montagnards as he did to the American contribution.²³¹

The result of the Vietnam War is often difficult to come to terms with for many Americans. It was the first war since the War of 1812 that did not have a clean cut decisive outcome, yet alone a victory that Americans had become all too familiar with. With this in mind it can seem challenging to view any one program within a failed military campaign to be successful. However, that is exactly what the Studies and Observations Group proved itself to be under OPLAN-35: a successful program, which accomplished what it had set out to do against Hanoi. This is apparent when revisiting SOG's objective "to execute an intensified program of harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, acquisition of intelligence, generation of propaganda, and diversion of resources, against the Democratic Republic

²²⁹ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 165.

²³⁰ Brokhausen, *We Few*, 165 & 179.

²³¹ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1972), VII. "It is to these men that this final history is dedicated—to those courageous Montagnards, Vietnamese and Americans who gave their lives that others might live in freedom."

of Vietnam (DRV).” After all, the United States objective for its actions in Vietnam was to preserve the South’s government, not overthrow the North’s. SOG’s many contributions successfully achieved these objectives over the course of the unit’s existence, which assisted the efforts to prolong the Republic of Vietnam.

The cohesive relationship between the Montagnard tribesmen and the Special Forces soldiers of SOG largely contributed to their accomplishments in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. By the pointed direction of SOG recon teams, an estimated 2 million tons of bombs were dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail from 1964-1973.²³² It is estimated that the average ratio for the amount of NVA killed for each Green Beret death is about 150:1.²³³ The NVA troops who did make it down to the South, arrived already fatigued from the fear of being killed or kidnapped along their movement south. SOG successfully turned the Ho Chi Minh Trail from an enemy rest and recuperation area to a combat zone. None of these operations would have been possible without the coalition of shared skills and expertise among one another. SOG’s clandestine paramilitary operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail were effective in disrupting the logistical apparatus. Over the course of the OPLAN-35’s 8 year existence, Hanoi redirected tens of thousands of NVA to guard the supply lines.²³⁴ The combination of the North’s divided focus between the overall objective in the South and SOG’s actions along the trail, paired with the disrupted flow of supplies and troops into the South, saved countless lives of both American GI and ARVN troops. Their efforts

²³² Daniel Lovering, “Exploding the Past,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 56, no. 5 (Sep. 1, 2000): 28-34, <https://research-ebsco-com.pointloma.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=247295e0-4bf8-3758-91a0-d8cdc317f0ab>.

²³³ Plaster, SOG, 307. Unfortunately, as there does not seem to be any accurate record for how many Montagnards served with SOG, there does not appear to be any accurate record for how many heroically died in combat.

²³⁴ Brokhausen, Meyer, SOGCAST, “Episode 003,” 30:36-31:02.

contributed to the United States' objective in Vietnam to preserve the nation of South Vietnam, which they did throughout their operational period.²³⁵

SOG's cross-border operations began winding down in the early 1970s. They began to slowly turn operations over to be run exclusively by their ARVN counterparts. Similar to the operations that preceded SOG's OPLAN-35, these operations resulted in utter disaster, as they repeated many of the similar mistakes as before.²³⁶ SOG was no longer capable of running missions by the end of March 1972 due to a combination of restrictions and limited resources as the United States was in the process of pulling out of Vietnam.²³⁷ The Studies and Observations Group was officially deactivated the next month, on April 30, 1972.²³⁸ Exactly three years later, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army on April 30, 1975.²³⁹

Conclusion: SOG After the War

SOG's successful means of carrying out these dangerous cross-border operations stands in stark contrast to the previous and subsequent missions that surrounded OPLAN-35. SOG's relationship with the Montagnards was one of the largest contributors behind their capability of being "good in the woods," and their overall success in the surrounding countries that bordered South Vietnam. This did not come

²³⁵ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 56.

²³⁶ Reske, *MACVSOG Command History Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*, 73. LAM SON 719 was a mission that took place in Laos, which was carried out solely by ARVN forces with the objective to destroy a VC supply cache. The majority of the ARVN officers were captured or killed, and it took the unit one month to reach the VC cache. The supply cache was completely empty by the time the ARVN unit finally got to it.

²³⁷ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1972), B-1. The only exemptions for U.S. SOG personnel to step foot across the border was for personnel recovery missions and crash site investigations.

²³⁸ U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group, *Annex B, Command History, 1971-72*, (Saigon: MACV-SOG, 1972), B-1.

²³⁹ "The Fall of Saigon (1975): The Bravery of American Diplomats and Refugees," National Museum of American Diplomacy, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/stories/fall-of-saigon-1975-american-diplomats-refugees/>.

without immense sacrifice and loss, both during the conflict, as well as after. Around 300 SOG recon men were killed in action across the border, with an additional 50 men still missing in action.²⁴⁰ An estimated total of 200,000 Montagnards; warriors and innocent villagers alike, perished during the Vietnam War.²⁴¹ Montagnard casualties continued to grow even long after SOG was disbanded and the South Vietnamese government collapsed.

After the country of South Vietnam was overtaken by the NVA, Montagnards became enemies of the state in the eyes of the newly united Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The new socialist country distrusted the entire Montagnard population on behalf of the people who supported the ARVN and United States government during the war.²⁴² This resulted in extreme persecution and suffering under the newly established communist government.²⁴³ Thousands of Montagnards escaped into the neighboring country of Cambodia in order to escape persecution.²⁴⁴ However, not all were able to leave, and many thousands were killed or imprisoned by the new government.²⁴⁵

These were the consequences of the United States government abandoning their loyal allies in Vietnam. MACV made no attempts during the messy withdrawal to extract the many Montagnards who had relentlessly fought bravely alongside them. Had the Studies and Observations Group still been active and organized during this time, the

²⁴⁰ "Major John L. Plaster," History of MACV-SOG, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://sogsite.com/2022/02/02/major-john-l-plaster/>.

²⁴¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople*, S. RES. 362, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., February 4, 2016.

²⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople*, S. RES. 362, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., February 4, 2016.

²⁴³ "Bru- The Montagnards," History of MACV-SOG, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://sogsite.com/bru-the-montagnards/>.

²⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople*, S. RES. 362, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., February 4, 2016.

²⁴⁵ "Chronology for Montagnards in Vietnam," The UN Refugee Agency, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230518232424/https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f38f4c.html>.

consideration for the Montagnards would have looked significantly different. However, the lack of communication and technology left the former SOG recon men distraught over the fate of their indigenous brethren, yet powerless to do anything. Meyer spoke about this in an interview, lamenting, “On April 30th, I sat in the men’s room, where I was working, and wept...helpless completely, because there was no internet, no phones to do anything.”²⁴⁶

Their love did not end when the war ended. Unlike MACV, the men of SOG could not simply leave their Montagnard teammates behind. SOG’s members were once again at the tip of the spear. This time however, their fight was speaking out against the US abandoning its Montagnard allies who were left behind.²⁴⁷ With the same “no man left behind” spirit that was present during the organization of a Bright Light rescue operation, SOG veterans made their voices heard among Congress. As a result of their persistence, in October of 1992, the United States extracted 398 Montagnards, who were still engaged in armed conflict against the Hanoi government.²⁴⁸ This was a small fraction of the total number of Montagnards who fought alongside SOG for those 8 years, but at least it showed that their fellow recon men had not forgotten about them. Many other Montagnard refugees eventually found their way to the United States.

However, many of the indigenous warriors were left behind, forced to live low profile lives in order to remain hidden from the communist government of Vietnam.²⁴⁹ Many indigenous soldiers, including SOG’s indigenous strikers, faced internment camps that were set up by the socialist government after the war.²⁵⁰ Even decades later, as late

²⁴⁶ Plaster, Glover, “The Secret War in Vietnam,” 17:45.

²⁴⁷ The UN Refugee Agency, “Chronology for Montagnards in Vietnam.”

²⁴⁸ The UN Refugee Agency, “Chronology for Montagnards in Vietnam.” The Montagnard guerillas did not lay their weapons down until just before they boarded the MI-26 helicopters that extracted them.

²⁴⁹ Plaster, Glover, “The Secret War in Vietnam,” 15:15.

²⁵⁰ Jones, Meyer, SOGCAST, “Episode 002,” 1:05:55.

as 2002, the indigenous men who were associated with SOG still remained in fear to reveal their true identity.²⁵¹ Tragically, persecution of the Montagnard people still continues to the present day.²⁵²

SOG veterans in the United States started the Special Operations Association which was established in 1976.²⁵³ They hold a reunion each year, which has reconnected many SOG men with some of their Montagnard teammates. In total, there are an estimated 23,000 Montagnards presently in the United States, with a little over half residing in North Carolina alone.²⁵⁴ With no means of communication, many SOG veterans have had no idea which, if any, of their indigenous brethren were in the United States. The Special Operations Association Reunion (SOAR) has continued to serve as a beacon to reunite many old friendships between SOG veterans, both Montagnard and Special Forces veterans alike. The notion of 'team' has not left the hearts of SOG veterans, who continually yearn to reconnect with their indigenous counterparts.²⁵⁵

Up until SOG's declassification in the early 1990s, SOG's veterans remained sworn to secrecy.²⁵⁶ Once this period was over, many veterans began recounting their

²⁵¹ Jones, Meyer, SOGCAST, "Episode 002," 1:06:45. Jim Shorten Jones returned to Laos in 2002. This Vietnamese individual did not even serve in a combat role, but worked in a medical office at CCC in Kontum. Yet, he still feared for his life had that information gotten out.

²⁵² "Persecuting 'Evil Way' Religion: Abuses Against Montagnards in Vietnam," Human Rights Watch, June 26, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/26/persecuting-evil-way-religion/abuses-against-montagnards-vietnam>.

²⁵³ Jim Butler, "History of the Special Operations Association," Special Operations Association, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://specialoperations.org/soa/founders-message/>. Its founder, James E. Butler, passed away back in 2021.

²⁵⁴ Jaynie Dyhouse, "Montagnards Find Homes in North Carolina," Veterans of Foreign Wars, April 3, 2019, <https://www.vfw.org/media-and-events/latest-releases/archives/2019/4/montagnards-find-home-in-north-carolina>.

²⁵⁵ Rose, Meyer, SOGCAST, "Episode 008," 12:04.

²⁵⁶ History of MACV-SOG, "About SOG." Since there does not seem to be a specific date of when SOG was declassified, it appears that declassification was somewhat of a process rather than a singular event. An example of this is late military historian, John B. Dwyer, whose Freedom of Information request for the SOG Command History Annexes was granted before the 1990s, on August 14, 1989.

experiences in SOG through memoirs, interviews, and other forms of media. Their stories from the past have brought these secret warriors into the spotlight for the first time, presenting the American people with a second chance to graciously celebrate these veterans for their courage, honor, and service to their country. The love they have for their indigenous allies remains ever present in their voices, both visible in the pages of books as well as audible in interviews. As a result, Montagnards have been properly recognized by Congress, both in their service alongside American Special Forces, as well as their continued persecution by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.²⁵⁷

Between those 50 Special Forces men who remain missing in action, and the Montagnard people who were left behind, a heavy weight still weighs on the hearts of surviving SOG veterans. Many other surviving members of the unit collectively share Nick Brokhausen's sentiment toward their indigenous counterparts expressed in a statement he made near the end of an interview: "I will be Bru til the day I die."²⁵⁸ The SOG veterans have held on tightly to the memories and relationships of their Montagnard brothers. Far outlasting the professional purpose for the relationship, the 8 years of shared culture between the Montagnard tribesmen and SOG Special Forces soldiers created a life-long friendship.

²⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Recognizing the contributions of the Montagnard indigenous tribespeople of the Central Highlands of Vietnam to the United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam War, and condemning the ongoing violation of human rights by the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, S. RES 395, 118th Cong., 1st sess., October 4, 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/118/bills/sres395/BILLS-118sres395is.pdf>.

²⁵⁸ Brokhausen, Meyer, SOGCAST, "Episode 003," 1:25:50.