

HOW A TOP-SECRET COMMANDO UNIT “SOG” TOOK ON THE MOST DANGEROUS MISSIONS IN VIETNAM

MACV’S STUDIES AND OBSERVATION GROUP WAS ONCE SO SECRET THAT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT DENIED ITS EXISTENCE

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MACV-SOG—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Special Operations Group (later renamed Studies and Observations Group)—**was the elite military unit of the Vietnam War, so secret that its existence was denied by the U.S. government.**

Reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and even at times the president, SOG left zero public footprint and performed clandestine missions that remain unknown to many today.

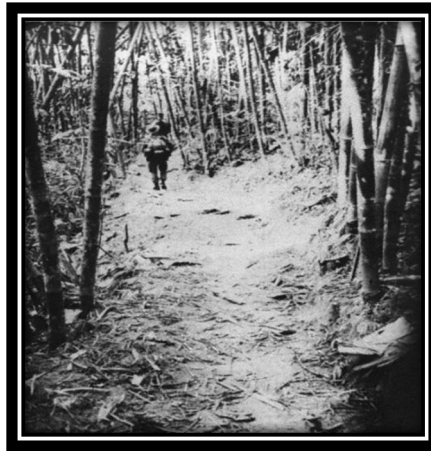
Despite the challenges of chronicling the history of this unit, Plaster’s book provides a wealth of information about the SOG experience during the Vietnam War, using more than 700 photos snapped “in wartime by the very men who performed SOG’s amazing missions.” This portfolio contains a selection of those rare images, which *Vietnam* magazine is pleased to share with readers.

John L. Plaster served three one-year tours with MACV-SOG, and his book SOG: **The Secret Wars of America’s Commandos in Vietnam** (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997, \$26) is a true insider’s account, revealing much about this top-secret commando unit and its covert missions in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.



The all-volunteer MACV-SOG (most were U.S. Army Special Forces “Green Berets”) carried out some of the most dangerous and challenging special operations of the Vietnam War. MACV-SOG made high-altitude, low-opening parachute jumps behind enemy lines, routinely carried out reconnaissance missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, penetrated deep into Laos and Cambodia, **recovered downed pilots, and attempted several POW rescues.** Ranging deep in the enemy’s rear, MACV-SOG reconnaissance teams forced Hanoi to divert 40,000 troops—about four divisions—to **rear security missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.**

From his knowledge of MACV-SOG operations and interviews with more than 100 MACV-SOG veterans, along with recently declassified documents.



MACV-SOG photo showing North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops walking along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. (Photo Credit: SOG / Joel D. Meyerson / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain)

Plaster has crafted a heavily anecdotal and riveting account. He offers tales of close, violent combat actions between MACV-SOG teams and large numbers of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops.

While some infantrymen in Vietnam despaired of ever seeing the enemy, MACV-SOG teams often found themselves fighting their way out of a hornet's nest of angry NVA battalions. Plaster recounts some of the most extraordinary tales of the Vietnam War. Some stories will lay to rest old rumors; others will just raise more questions. For example, Plaster describes how two Chinese advisers were killed when reconnaissance team (RT) Maine ambushed an NVA company command element, killing the commander, his three platoon leaders, and two Chinese advisers as they gathered for lunch. Plaster also tells about the "crazy Canadians" who served in the U.S. Army with MACV-SOG, including Robert Graham, who once carried a Simpsons (Sears) 55-pound hunting bow and shot broadhead-tipped arrows at the NVA during a firefight.

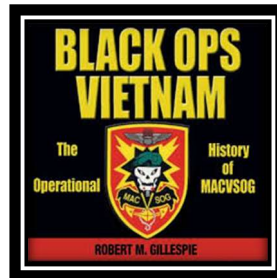
Plaster relates some of MACV-SOG's lighter moments as well. Mixed in with the pathos of combat is some great humor.



Readers will not be disappointed; the book is worth its cover price just for one very funny story about a bicycle. In another amusing anecdote, Harvey "Hippie" Saal walks buck-naked into an NCO club after he is refused entrance for wearing a dirty uniform. There are several stories about the legendary Walt Shumate, and Plaster explains why there were so many Walt Shumate stories.

Indeed, MACV-SOG is the stuff of legends. Legends such as the 14 men of RT Kansas who held off an NVA regiment; the captured NVA "Earth Angels" used against their former comrades; the combat high-altitude, low-opening jumps into NVA redoubts; and the men of RT Colorado's who faced nearly 300 NVA formed in ranks in front of the team's eight Claymore mines. Another MACV-SOG legend and one of its well-known characters, Jerry "Mad Dog" Shriver, received his sobriquet courtesy of Radio Hanoi. Resplendent when off duty in his derby hat and blue-velvet smoking jacket, his closest companion was Klaus, a German shepherd.

Shriver, who often ended up in situations where he was in danger of being overrun, once told his air cover: “No, no. I’ve got ’em right where I want ’em-surrounded from the inside.” Like many MACV-SOG recon men, Shriver’s luck ran out eventually. Last seen assaulting an NVA bunker line, he was declared missing in action.



MACV-SOG had more than its share of MIAs. One of the most well-known was Larry Thorne, a Finnish veteran of the so-called Winter War against the Soviet Union during the prelude to World War II and a recipient of the Mannerheim Cross. Thorne was carrying a bolt-action .30-06 Springfield when he became MACV-SOG’s first MIA in Laos.

Stories abound of teams that disappeared without a trace, though sometimes circumstances and evidence (such as proof that NVA concussion grenades had been used) led MACV-SOG to believe that the men were captured. **A dozen entire teams are still unaccounted for.**

Of the men known to be prisoners of war, only a few returned home alive. No MACV-SOG POWs were released from Laos. Of the 58 MACV-SOG MIAs in Laos, only one returned—Charles Wilklow. Wilklow escaped captivity after being staked out by the NVA as human bait for rescuers for several days. His captors had thought he was too close to death to need a guard, but he managed to crawl off into the jungle and evade recapture until rescued.

MACV-SOG recon casualties exceeded 100 percent, the highest sustained American loss rate since the Civil War. In 1968, every MACV-SOG recon man was wounded at least once, and about half were killed. But despite such high losses, MACV-SOG boasted the highest “kill ratio” in U.S. military history, topping out at 158-to-1 in 1970.



SOG reads like the “who’s who” of Green Berets. There are several names that many Vietnam veterans and most Special Forces veterans will recognize: Billy Waugh, Larry Thorne, Dick Meadows, Jerry “Mad Dog” Shriver, Fred Zaitosky, Walter Shumate, Jon Cavaiani, Roy Benavidez, Norm Doney, and Robert Howard. Some like Benavidez, Cavaiani, Howard, and Zaitosky, are remembered for the deeds that earned them the Medal of Honor. **The Medal of Honor was awarded to nine MACV-SOG men,** including Lieutenant Tom Morris, a sea-air-land forces (SEAL) officer, **and Lieutenant Loren Hagen, the last U.S. Army member to be awarded the Medal of Honor in Vietnam.**

With small reconnaissance teams numbering less than 10 men, MACV-SOG tied down thousands of NVA troops, provided invaluable intelligence information to the Pentagon, rescued downed pilots, and destroyed large amounts of enemy materiel while inflicting grievous losses on the NVA.

Earning their place in history with daring exploits and exemplary accomplishments, the men of MACV's Special Operations Group have been brought out of the shadows by John L. Plaster's illuminating book.

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) was a highly classified, multi-service United States special operations unit that conducted covert unconventional warfare operations before and during the Vietnam War.