

# MACVSOG in Vietnam

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The Vietnam War brought millions of Americans across the ocean to fight an enemy that no one had ever heard of. A war of guerilla fighting, espionage and brutality, the Vietnam War brought forth the widespread usage of Special Forces and black operations not seen since the days of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) during World War II. This study will analyze the secret group of Americans in Vietnam called MACVSOG (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group) and their effectiveness of their operations during the war.

In 1955, President Eisenhower orders the Military Assistance Advisory Group to deploy in Vietnam to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This marks the beginning of US involvement in Vietnam as stated by the Vietnam Memorial. In May of 1961, President John F. Kennedy orders 400 United States Army Special Forces to South Vietnam to train South Vietnamese soldiers. On February 8, 1962, President Kennedy creates The Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). SOG formed in 1964 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and were placed under command of MACV. SOG was mainly an all-volunteer group consisting of Army Special Forces, Navy Seals, Air Force, CIA, and Marine Recon personnel.<sup>7</sup>

Fighting the Communists in Vietnam was a difficult task for several reasons according to the CIA in a de-classified 1964 document. The document states, “Firm information about North Vietnam is extremely sparse. Accordingly, analysis of the economic and political situation and especially of the size, structure and capabilities of the armed forces, is extremely difficult.”<sup>1</sup> Another conclusion of the document discusses North Vietnam’s success. “North Vietnam’s external success have been achieved despite important internal problems and vulnerabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> CIA (1964). The Outlook for North Vietnam. CIA.

The DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) faces severe and chronic food shortages and widespread apathy among the populace and even the lower ranks of the party.”<sup>1</sup> When discussing the possibility of a full on war with North Vietnam in 1964, the CIA stated, “The DRV probably could not sustain large-scale military involvement, such as open invasion, without a considerable increase in Chinese Communist or Soviet aid.” This prediction proved true when later in the war, American troops would find Soviet and Chinese equipment and weapons among dead NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and VC (Viet Cong). While the threat of a large war grew between the United States and North Vietnam, the question arose whether or not the loss of South Vietnam and Laos to Communist forces would create a “Domino Effect” in the Far East. In a CIA memo from 1964, this question was discussed and evaluated. “Failure would be damaging to US prestige, and would seriously debase the credibility of US will and capability to contain the spread of communism elsewhere.”<sup>1</sup>

The US Government understood that a war in Vietnam would involve guerilla warfare thus the usage of Special Forces became a concern and focus. SOG’s main tasks were capturing enemy prisoners, rescuing downed pilots, rescuing American POWs, wire taping, observation, and psychological operations. In the book *Hazardous Duty*, author Major General John Singlaub writes that the mission of SOG was “similar to that of the OSS or British SOE (Special Operations Executive) during World War II: Strategic and tactical intelligence, resistance operations, guerilla warfare, sabotage, and covert black psychological operations”<sup>2</sup>



MACVSOG Recon Team

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<sup>2</sup> Singlaub, Major General John. *Hazardous Duty*.

SOG's Operations Staff Directorate was divided into five numbered divisions called Ops, Op-31 through Op-35. Major General Singlaub writes, "Op-31 was the staff division that supervised our maritime operations conducted by the Naval Advisory Detachment (NAD) at Danang. This group ran a variety of seaborne operations, including the training and support for the Vietnamese Coastal Survey Service, which was actually a raiding, sabotage, and intelligence force. NAD had a small fleet of high speed, low slung Norwegian built wooden torpedo boats, hard to detect on radar."<sup>7</sup>

Op-32 supervised the SOG Air Force based in Nhatrang, South Vietnam along with two minor airfields in Thailand and SOG exclusively used one airfield northeast of Saigon. American pilots did not fly SOG aircraft; instead, Chinese Air Force pilots from Taiwan flew modified C-130s and C-123s for supply drops. UH-1 Huey helicopters were used to drop SOG members and a squadron of South Vietnamese Air Force CH-34s were included in SOG's helicopter force. All SOG aircraft were ordered to have no identifying markings of any kind.<sup>7</sup>

Op-33 was in charge of all psychological operations conducted by SOG. Anything from creating counterfeit North Vietnamese currency to creating a fake resistance movement known as the "Sacred Sword of the Patriot." The primary objective of Op-33 was to create discontent within the NVA and local civilian population. The use of symbols, death cards and propaganda pamphlets, which is discussed further in this study, was also the work of Op-33.<sup>7</sup>

Op-34 supervised the resistance and intelligence operations division located at Long Thanh in South Vietnam. Op-34 ran the main training site for training agents to organize anti-communist partisans in North Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

Op-35 was the division, which conducted the cross-border recon missions. Op-35 is the most well known and written about division in MACVSOG. Recon teams handpicked South Vietnamese, Chinese Nungs and Montagnards to train and fight alongside. Montagnards were native mountain tribes in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

In a podcast interview with Zero Foxtrot, MACVSOG veteran John Stryker Meyer recalls many experiences he endured during his time in Vietnam. Meyer completed three months of



Captured North Vietnamese flag.  
*Price of Freedom Military Antiques*

training in Vietnam as a green beret. After the training, a sergeant asked for volunteers for a project and no additional information was given. Meyer volunteered alongside his friend and were flown with volunteers from other units to a CIA safe house in Vietnam. Once there, a commander gave

them a contract to sign stating they would not

speak about anything to anyone from then on for at least 20 years. Meyer remembers seeing Vietnamese prostitutes snorting cocaine at the safe house. The prostitutes were for SOG members and the drugs were presumably provided to SOG members after operations for self-indulgence and pleasure.<sup>3</sup> This is presumed as a 1971 Department of Defense reported 51% of the US military had smoked marijuana.<sup>4</sup> At least 31% had used LSD and psychedelic mushrooms and 28% had used cocaine and/or heroin. Drugs use in the military had reportedly helped calm soldier's nerves and had helped some cope with the pressure and stress of the war.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zero Bunker. (2018). MACV-SOG Interview | John Stryker Meyer. [podcast] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gk5YF3MAmvQ&t=3780s> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Janos, Adam. History.com . <https://www.history.com/news/drug-use-in-vietnam>.

To understand the effectiveness of MACVSOG the following paragraphs will analyze and discuss weapons and equipment used by SOG operators. The weapons used by SOG members is an extensive list of various weapons from many countries. SOG members could use weapons not issued to general infantrymen as the government let SOG use whatever they felt was necessary to complete the mission. Some examples of guns include the British Sten, M79 grenade launcher, M3 grease Gun, AK-47, and CAR-15, which was the preferred weapon of choice. No SOG member used M16s or M14s because of their weight.<sup>3</sup>



John Stryker Meyer in Vietnam.  
*Photo from John Stryker Meyer*

SOG veteran John Stryker Meyer has provided military historians with an abundance of SOG data. Included in his data is information on the equipment and uniforms SOG recon members would carry in the field. The equipment carried was vastly different from US Army infantry or US Marines during the war. Uniforms used by SOG recon members was extensive and unique to each member. The most common of these uniforms used by recon members were regular olive drab jungle fatigues; tiger stripe camo fatigues, duck hunter camo, ERDL (Engineer Research & Development Laboratories) camo fatigues. The famous green beret famously worn during the war were kept back at camp. The most common pieces of headgear in the field were bandannas, headbands, or boonie hats. SOG members never wore any helmet or armored vest as they weighed too much. The goal of a recon member was lightweight and fast, a minimal amount of weight was worn on missions. To follow this general rule, most men didn't carry

entrenching tools, bayonets, sleeping bags, or ponchos. Meyer expanded on the equipment saying “To avoid rashes, infections, and fungus, I didn’t wear any underwear or socks.”<sup>5</sup>

Recon members took extreme measures to keep the program hidden if killed on a mission. Members had to provide deniability to the US Government in case they were killed or captured. Anything with identification was to not be carried, this included dog tags, ID cards, pictures, etc. Expanding on the above information regarding uniforms, the uniforms were always blank, there was to be no rank sewn on. No unit insignia, jump wings, or CIBs (Combat Infantry Badge) were worn either. Cigarettes were not brought on recon missions as the smell of the smoke would alert any nearby enemies.<sup>3</sup>

The Ho-Chi Minh Trail was one of the major problems facing the US military during the war. The large trail, running mainly through Laos, posed a huge problem as troops, weapons, and materials moved into Vietnam daily. The materials and men sent on the trail were heading for service with the Vietcong and NVA. The trail was effective and was the site of the most intense bombing campaign in history. It is reported that bombs were dropped along the trail every seven minutes.<sup>6</sup> John Stryker Meyer remembers operating on the Ho-Chi Minh Trail. “Our mission was to find out what the enemy was doing.” The missions carried out by SOG on the trail were not meant to engage the enemy. However, recon teams would



VC soldier walking on Ho-Chi Minh trail. A SOG member took this photo.  
**Official CIA photo**

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<sup>5</sup> Meyer, John Stryker. NewsRep - The Guns and Gear Carried by Special Ops “SOG” Recon Teams. <https://thenewsrep.com/43024/the-guns-and-gear-carried-by-special-ops-sog-recon-teams/>.

<sup>6</sup> Paterson, Cameron. 2013. TED Ed - "The Infamous and Ingenious Ho-Chi Minh Trail. <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-infamous-and-ingenious-ho-chi-minh-trail-cameron-paterson>.

almost always come in contact with the enemy. "I never left a target without being under fire."<sup>3</sup> John Meyer recalls. Meyer remembers another SOG veteran's story at a reunion. "In one four hour firefight, the recon team had killed so many NVA, the enemy began to stack bodies to get a better firing angle. Years after the war, an NVA Captain told an SOG veteran that he had ambushed a 10 man team with 10,000 soldiers. Over 90% became casualties because of the SOG team and US air power."<sup>3</sup>

The effectiveness of SOG operations on the trail is debated. Major General Singlaub stated in an interview, "I believe that our operations along the Ho-Chi Minh Trail were very important for several reasons. We learned enough about the operation of the trail (and it was a maze, a meshwork of trails and roads) that we better understood how to attack it. You just couldn't cut one road and expect it to slow down any. We had gained that knowledge not only by on the ground observation and attacking trucks to capture POW's, but also capturing a lot of documents. If we had just simply cut the trail by moving forces into that part of Laos, the war would have had to stop. They needed that trail."<sup>7</sup>

MACVSOG used a variety of psychological warfare tactics on the enemy. The use of the infamous Ace of Spades death card was used during the war along with imagery of skulls on

Death Cards used  
by MACVSOG.  
*Courtesy of SGM  
Herb Friedman*



<sup>7</sup> Kelley II, Danny M. 2005. "THE MISUSE OF THE STUDIES AND OBSERVATION GROUP AS A NATIONAL ASSET IN VIETNAM." : [http://www.macvsog.cc/the\\_misuse\\_of\\_the\\_studies\\_and\\_observation\\_group.htm](http://www.macvsog.cc/the_misuse_of_the_studies_and_observation_group.htm).

propaganda leaflets. Death cards were placed on dead Vietcong and NVA soldiers to strike fear into the next patrol to find the dead bodies. This practice was done by many Army infantry units, Special Forces and US Marines. Specialist 4<sup>th</sup> Class Dave Kolchuk, an illustrator assigned to the 246<sup>th</sup> PYSOP CO. from 1965-1999 designed many of the propaganda leaflets. Kolchuk remembers creating the propaganda, “The skull was the most popular design I created. There are several different versions of it. The spade symbol was a very bad luck omen to the Vietcong. It’s like telling them they’re going to go to Hell and burn painfully without honor for all eternity.”<sup>8</sup>

On one particular death card used by SOG recon teams, there is a drawing of a soldier aiming at a Vietcong guerilla soldier. The card reads in Vietnamese, “I saw you but let you live...next time you die.”<sup>9</sup> The skull became a symbol of MACVSOG. SOG did not have an official insignia so teams created their own, with many patches depicting a skull in some way.

In-country made  
SOG “death wings.”  
***Price of Freedom***  
***Military Antiques***



Several psychological operations were conducted throughout the war with various results. One of the most unusual operations was named Operation

Wandering Soul. The Vietnamese believe that the dead must be buried in their homeland or their soul will eternally wander in suffering.<sup>10</sup> Taking advantage of this belief, the US military ordered PSYOP members to use the idea to encourage the enemy to surrender. US Army

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<sup>8</sup> Friedman, SGM. Herb. psywarrior.com. <http://www.psywarrior.com/DeathCardsAce.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Plaster, John. 2000. SOG - A Photo History of the Secret War. Boulder, CO: Paladin Press.

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, SGM Herb. Pyswarrior - The "Wandering Soul" Tape of Vietnam. <http://www.psywarrior.com/wanderingsoul.html>.

engineers spent several weeks recording voices and sounds to create a disturbing tape to be played in the jungles. The sounds on the tape represent dead soldiers who are wandering in Hell. The purpose of the tape was to strike fear and panic into NVA and Vietcong soldiers and make them surrender or flee their position. The tape was played on loudspeakers attached to helicopters, river boats, and sometimes backpacks on soldiers.<sup>10</sup> One AC-47 pilot, First Lieutenant Jerry Valentine of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Commando Squadron was tasked with playing the tape while flying over enemy positions. He recalls, “It lasts about four minutes. It starts with Buddhist funeral music, then this spooky wailing voice. Then a little child is crying for its father. Then a Vietnamese woman comes on and tells how her husband was killed fighting for the Vietcong. And all the time, this eerie background voice, wailing about death. It’s a real beauty, guaranteed to raise ground fire anywhere. It even sends chills down my spine. It’s so effective, that even the government restricts use of it-they only let us use it on extreme occasions.”<sup>11</sup>



Loudspeakers mounted on a Huey helicopter used for playing the Wandering Soul tape.  
***Courtesy of SGM Herb Friedman***

There is no physical data regarding the success of Operation Wandering Soul, however, several accounts of NVA and Vietcong surrendering are recorded. On one occasion, a reported number of 150 NVA soldiers surrendered after the tape was played.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> (1968, April 28). "Spooky Voice Fills Vietcong with Shivers of Fear". Stars and Stripes.

The effectiveness of MACVSOG operations during the Vietnam War is a debated discussion of military historians. The CIA still holds many MACVSOG files as classified and a lack of records are factors regarding effectiveness. MACVSOG veterans have countless stories of successful missions which lead many believing SOG operations were of great success. The practices and tactics of MACVSOG have been implemented in modern Special Forces and crucial knowledge has been learned from operations conducted during the war. Whatever impact on the Vietnam War SOG had, the elite unit will always be an iconic part of US military history and will continue to be a leading example of an elite black operations unit.



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