



THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SENTINEL

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78
NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

THE LTC FRANK J. DALLAS CHAPTER

VOLUME 7 ISSUE 10

OCTOBER 2016



Presidents Page
The Central Highlands of Viet Nam
— 48 Years Later
SFA Chapter 78 September
2016 Meeting





Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

For all Green Berets who served in the Viet Nam War in I, II, and III Corps areas working with the Montagnard People was a special relationship that proved to be a life changing event that we will never forget. The Degar (Mountain People as they call themselves) provided soldiers for the majority of the CIDG in A-Teams, soldiers of the Mike Force

assault Companies and highly trained men for the recon missions of MACV-SOG.

These special people, from such tribes as the Bahnar in the north, Jarai, Rhade, M'ning to the Koho in the Southern III Corps area, taught us the ways of the jungle and the central highlands. There are about thirty tribes of the Degar but the majority of our soldiers came from at the aforementioned tribes. They knew how to fight and survive in the jungle after more than twenty years of combat prior to our arrival. They improved our jungle fighting techniques, taught us how to obtain supplemental food items in the wild, navigate the thick habitat and mountains. The Montagnards provided their own leadership; company commanders, platoon leaders and specialized soldiers. Many also served as our interpreters, speaking the tribes many dialects, Vietnamese and English.

Unlike the current crisis in the Middle East where we face mass immigration by unknown individuals, very few Montagnards who were our trusted friends and soldiers were allowed to migrate the the U.S.A. It is my firm belief that many of our fellow Green Berets would not have returned home without the friendship and support of the Degar People. In this issue of the Sentinel, former SSG Tom Turney, a Green Beret who served in II Corps Viet Nam with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), pens a story about his return to Viet Nam to visit the Montagnards of several A-Team Camp sites where he served. Tom is also trying to help the Degar People.

Here is a sneak peek into a great story written especially for the November Sentinel: Colonel John Gargus, the Air Force lead navigator for the Ton Say Raid into North Viet Nam in 1970, has written a brief story about the organization and planning of the attack for the attempted rescue of the American prisoners of war. He was the senior navigator in the lead attack plane and was awarded a Silver Star for his participation. The Colonel's book, *The Son Tay Raid: American POWs in Viet Nam Were Not Forgotten*, published in 2007, is still available. Colonel Gargus currently has a second book in press on the Viet Nam Air War in support of MACV-SOG which will be available in 2017. ❖

Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

IN THIS ISSUE:

Presidents Page.....	1
The Central Highlands of Viet Nam - 48 Years Later.....	2
SFA Chapter 78 August 2016 Meeting.....	6

COVER: Montagnard soldiers crossing a stream in the 1960s. (Photo Credit: Captain David Moley, II Corps Mike Force, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Viet Nam 1969.)

CHAPTER OFFICERS

President Bruce Long D-7464	Coordinator of ROTC Program Ed Barrett M-11188
Vice President Don Deatherage M-13962	Chaplain Richard Simonian D-7920
Secretary Gary Macnamara M-12789	Sentinel Editor Louis (Lonny) Holmes D-6067
Treasurer Richard Simonian D-7920	Immediate Past President Louis (Lonny) Holmes D-6067
Sergeant At Arms/ Quartermaster Mark Miller D-8296	

Funding for publication and printing of the Special Forces 78 Sentinel is provided by



VETERANS AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAM

A program of American Veterans Assistance Group

888-923-VETS (8387) • VeteransAffordableHousing.org

Sentinel Graphic Design by Debra Holm/Dinwiddie Holm Graphics

The Sentinel is published monthly by Special Forces Association Chapter 78, Southern California. The views, opinions and articles printed in this issue do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Army or the United States Special Operations Command the Special Forces Association or Special Forces Association Chapter 78. Please address any comments to the editor, "Sentinel" to dhgraphics@earthlink.net.

THE PRESIDENTS PAGE



Bruce Long
President SFA 78

PRESIDENTS COLUMN OCTOBER 2016

Our September Chapter meeting was held at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club. The breakfast / business meeting started at approximately 0830 hrs.

Our Sergeant of Arms **Mark Miller** led us in the salute to the American Flag and was followed by the invocation given by **Richard Simonian**.

Treasurers Report: Richard Simonian stated that as of the

date of the meeting after expenditures the Chapter has \$2156.80. An additional \$500.00 was donated to the Chapter by **Len Fein**.

Guest speaker for the meeting was MSG Wade Scott, NCOIC Operations & Force Protection for SOD / North. Wade is Regional Volunteer for United Heros League that helps soldiers and families in obtaining sporting equipment, specifically hockey equipment. Wade also wanted to extend an invitation through his organization to one of our Viet Nam veterans for Military Appreciation Night on November 6th which will be held at the Ducks Stadium in Anaheim. As most of you remember **Kenn Miller** attended the event last year. A Company Rear Detachment personnel will again be doing the Australian repel from the rafters.

It was unanimously agreed that **Mark Miller** should attend as the representative for SFA Chapter 78.

At the conclusion of Wade's presentation, the Chapter agreed to make a small donation of \$100.00 to the UNITED HEROS LEAGUE.

Special Note: MSG Wade Scott, has deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and was seriously wounded in Afghanistan.

Gun Laws: This subject was covered by Steve Lieberman of ADI and was sent out by email to all chapter members.

Tilt Meyer made a presentation about the POW / MIA recognition Day held on September 16th, that Special Operations Association (SOA) has been very proactive in recovering more than sixteen hundred personnel still unaccounted for.

A Company's Rear Detachment will be conducting SFAS from November 18 through 20th and could use some assistance. I asked for volunteers and **Gary Macnamara, James Light** and **Len Fein** raised their hands. Yes, I will also attend.

Thad Gembacz gave us a quick update on the Air Force JROTC Detachment from La Crecenta High School who will be the Honor Guard for our upcoming Christmas Dinner / Party. They will also conduct the POW / MIA presentation.

Mike Keele and **Don Gonneville** briefed us on a Veterans Assistance program involving possible employment in sand blasting equipment. This topic was tabled for further discussion.

A Company departs soon, exact dates and times are CLASSIFIED.

2016 SFA Conference – *Unconventional Warriors, The Mission Continues*

The conference will be held at the Double Tree Inn. I highly suggest that you make early reservations if you want to stay at the Double Tree Inn even if you decide not to go, you can always cancel 24 hours before arrival. The DoubleTree's phone number is (910) 323 8282.

Our next Chapter meeting: 10/15/16 at the Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club, 1601 Bayside Drive Corona Del Mar, CA 92625. Breakfast business meeting at 0830 hrs. Chapter meeting at 1000 hrs.

As usual, please feel free to contact me. ❖

Bruce D Long
President
SGM, SF (Ret)
SFA Chapter 78



LAST REMINDER

The Orleans is proud to present

SOAR XL

40th Anniversary

October 17-21, 2016



**CALL 1-800-ORLEANS (675-3267)
AND BOOK YOUR ROOM UNDER
SPECIAL OPERATIONS**

THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIET NAM - 48 Years Later



Thomas W. Turney

By Thomas W. Turney

My wife, Jill, and I recently returned from a trip to Cambodia and Viet Nam. She had been wanting to go to Viet Nam for years as she heard good things from friends who had been and who had raved about it. I had successfully fended off her repeated desires to go for several years by suggesting other destinations, but it was clear I was at the

end of my efforts when she said she would go without me if I didn't want to go.

I had not wanted to go because I had been there under very different circumstances during the Viet Nam War as part of the 5th Special Forces Group, but agreed to go provided we included a visit to the Central Highlands as part of the trip. My accommodating wife agreed.

Our first stop in Viet Nam was Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. We found that people refer to it by both names – with those in the south more often using Saigon. I had been to Saigon on stand-downs between Mike Force operations where we had 10 days with orders that would allow us to go anywhere in country. We also visited SF friends in Can Tho and stopped in Saigon on the way. Saigon then was pretty dirty and crowded and Tu Do Street was a classic stop. Today it is much cleaner and modern. Motorbikes are everywhere. We were told that the population of Viet Nam is about 93 million and that there are 45 million motorbikes. Cambodia today seemed to me similar to the way Viet Nam was 50 years ago.

Our next stop was the Central Highlands. Our travel agent had arranged for a car and English speaking guide to pick us up from our flight into Pleiku and drive us to Kontum where we planned to rent motorcycles and head north with the goal of reaching Dak Pek and visiting with Montagnards in the area. Our English speaking guide, Lien, was very familiar with the Dak Pek area having spent quite a bit of time there. Lien spoke Vietnamese, English and various Montagnard dialects. We were really lucky to have met Lien because of her local and tribal knowledge and we asked her whether she would like to join us on our adventure. She expressed interest in going with us, but she was not going to ride a motorcycle. She said she could make arrangements to get a car and driver, and if we were willing to pay for the car as well as her time, she would join us. Given the fact that the outside temperature was close to 100 degrees with high humidity it took us about 5 nanoseconds to abandon our motorcycle idea for an air conditioned car.

As we drove from Pleiku to Kontum, I was surprised by how much things had changed. In my prior visit, the road between Pleiku and Kontum is one I drove many times as we would go to Pleiku to

pick up supplies or to drop off intelligence that we had gathered. The road was a dirt road that had been cleared of the jungle for about 100 yards on each side but beyond that the jungle was dense. Sometimes there were South Vietnamese tanks facing the jungle on either side of the road to keep the road secure and open, but often small arms fire was taken during these trips. When we drove the road we were always driving as fast as we could figuring that we were a harder target to hit the faster we were going. As we drove north towards Kontum, I was amazed by the fact that the jungle was totally gone on both sides of the road. It was replaced by miles and miles of cultivated farmland. Crops included rubber trees, cassava and other unidentified crops with rice interspersed in the areas where there was sufficient water. Lien mentioned that the Central Highlands were going through a dry spell that has been ongoing for several years. I guess they are not immune to the changing weather patterns that the rest of the world is suffering. For details, see http://english.Viet Namnet.vn/fms/Viet_Nam-in-photos/154329/Viet_Nam-s-central-highlands-struggles-with-historic-drought.html.

We arrived in Kontum and Lien showed us where the former MACV compound stood which was adjacent to B-24, the Special Forces B Team that supported the various A camps in the area. There is a radio tower that now stands at that location. The population of Kontum is now much larger than it was in the 1960s. I remember one main street in town, but now there are numerous streets and many traffic lights.

Lien told us that after the war many Vietnamese came from the north, from the south and from the coast to settle in the Central Highlands. They were attracted by the fertile soil in the area, and while it was not exactly clear how they were able to take the land from those who were there, primarily the Montagnards, they seem to have done so.



Kontum today

Lien told us that the Montagnards who had for generations had been practicing slash and burn farming would move from one section of their land after the soil had been depleted to another section. She said all the villagers knew who had what land and respected their rights to that land. After some number of years rotating through the various sections of land where they did the slash and burn, they would ultimately return to the original piece of land that they had farmed. Apparently with the large influx of outsiders into the area, the land that was out of use by the Montagnards in their slash and burn rotation was considered available and was given to the newcomers.

As a result, the Montagnards were driven from their ancestral lands and they had to move further and further away from the populated areas to be able to practice their traditional methods of sustainable farming. That farming was not only sustaining the lands by rotating its use, but it was also sustaining for them from the perspective of food and clothing. They would grow the food they needed to survive and the jungle provided them with the other necessities of life that had supported them for generations.

We drove through a Montagnard village in Kontum, but it looked nothing like the villages I remembered. In the day, all of the houses were on stilts and constructed of wood with thatched roofs. While there were a few of the traditional homes in the village, most were constructed of modern building materials including wood, block and what appeared to be stucco. I guess that is considered progress, but I viewed it more as the loss of a culture.

We stopped by to visit a friend of Lien's and we went native donning Montagnard garb and drinking rice wine!!



The Ben Het airstrip in the 1960s.

Lien picked us up at the hotel the following morning and we were on our way driving north towards Dak Pek. In the 1960s there was no road that you could drive north safely. From Kontum, the only way to reach any of the Special Forces A Camps to the north was by helicopter. Like the change in landscape between Pleiku and Kontum, the same was true along the road going north - the jungle had given way to farmland. On our way we stopped at three former Special Forces Camps, each of which is described below.

Ben Het (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Het_Camp)

The first SF Camp we visited was Ben Het which is close to the Tri-Border region where Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos come together. Back in the day, this camp seemed to be constantly under siege and good friends were wounded or killed here. Today there is nothing on the hill that was the camp other than some old trenches and foxholes. I walked the hill and took some photos. It was an eerie feeling thinking about all that had gone on here 48 years ago and now it was just a hill overgrown with weeds. Towards the airstrip about half way down was a pile of logs. Lien said they were hard wood logs, probably rosewood or teak, from Laos or Cambodia that were cut illegally and brought into Viet Nam to be labeled as being from Viet Nam to be sold to China.

Dak Seang (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dak_Seang_Camp)

We drove north and our next stop was the former site of the Dak Seang A Camp. The area where the camp was located is now all rubber trees as far as you can see.

There is a small marker on the west side of the road memorializing the site and on the east side of the road a much larger memorial and graveyard. The graveyards are quite beautiful as the Buddhist religion believes in reincarnation, and people want their graves to be monuments that will serve them in the next life. One person told us that they spend more on their memorials than they do on themselves when they are alive.



Tom walking the hill at the site of the Ben Het Camp..



Ben Het today.



The site of Dak Seang A Camp today – rubber trees as far as the eye can see.



Dak Seang in the late 1960s.



A graveyard in Dak Seang.



A memorial near the site of the Dak Seang A Camp.

Dak Pek (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dak_Pek_Camp)

From Dak Seang we headed north towards Dak Pek. We stopped in a Montagnard village and Lien had a discussion with one of the village elders. There were apparently several men from the village who had been part of the CIDG force at Dak Pek. I heard there were 39 men from the village who worked with Special Forces at Dak Pek, and 13 were still alive. It is not clear how many had been killed during the war. After some discussion, we drove to Dak Pek about 30 minutes further north. We went to a memorial honoring the NVA who had fought to take over the camp in 1973. The memorial is on a small plot of land that was surrounded by buildings, one of which is apparently a clinic. During the war there was nothing in the area but our camp. Now, with all the buildings and the people that had moved into the area, it was really hard to get oriented. According to the Lien, the airstrip is now part of the main road that runs through town.

While we were at the Dak Pek memorial, a man on a motorcycle drove up and stopped and watched us. Lien went over and spoke with him and mentioned that she was a guide taking us through the area and asked for assistance in finding one of the individuals she was trying to locate. Lien later told us this was one of the people that were “keeping an eye on us.” The powers that be apparently do not want strangers in the area who could stir up trouble with the Montagnards.

There have been a number of Montagnards who have tried to get out of Viet Nam by crossing the border into Laos or Cambodia. We had also heard this when we were in Cambodia where we were told that the Cambodian Army patrols the border area and if they catch people crossing illegally, they are returned to the Vietnamese government and “dealt with”. Not really sure what that means, but it was clear that the Vietnamese government does not want trouble in the Central Highlands. Lien told us of some uprisings a number

of years ago by the locals. We didn’t get many details of what exactly happened or when, but Lien related that, as a result, the government was paying more attention to the area. Roads have been paved, bridges built and electricity was run into the area.

I visited with these former CIDG soldiers at the home of Lien’s friend. Because I, like most in Special Forces, felt that we abandoned the Montagnards when we left, and I wanted to apologize to them. It wasn’t as if this was really going to make any difference to them, it was just something I felt I needed to do. I told them that I was very grateful to them for serving with us and that I was sorry we left them without any opportunity to leave before the war was over. Our government certainly accommodated the escape of many Vietnamese, but very few Montagnards.

I asked them what had happened to them after the war. All three had been sent to “re-education” camps for periods ranging from 3 months to 4 years. Apparently, in these camps you had to confess daily to your wrong doings on the wrong side of the war. They were able to do some subsistence farming as a group to get enough food to feed themselves. Apparently the amount of time you spent in these camps was a function of the role you played during the war. I think as CIDG soldiers, they were viewed as not particularly important “prisoners”. In Saigon, I spoke with one gentleman whose father had spent 17 years in a re-education camp, but he was a high ranking military official.

After chatting with these CIDG soldiers, we all went down the street for dinner which I hosted. I again thanked them again for serving in the CIDG.

Dak Pek was overrun in April 1970 and there is a book describing this event by the name of *Assault on Dak Pek* written by Leigh Wade.

The following morning, we went back to the Montagnard village where we had stopped the prior day south of Dak Pek. We went

into the home of the village elder and spent an hour chatting with a couple of villagers who had served at Dak Pek as CIDG Strikers – one had lost an arm. There were apparently a few others who were too ill to visit. Lien sent one of the boys down to the local market and he returned with a case of beer which we handily consumed over the next hour or two.

The village chief offered us lunch, and his son brought in a live chicken, bled it and Jill helped prepare it for lunch. I continued my discussions with the former CIDG soldiers, and after lunch we had to head back to Kontum.

While we visited other areas of Viet Nam during our trip, including Saigon, Hue and Hanoi, our time in the Central Highlands was the highlight of the trip for me. I feel a very special connection with the Montagnards for the work they did for Special Forces. They were our eyes and ears on the ground, and without them many more SF soldiers would not have returned from Viet Nam. On one Mike Force operation, the Montagnard who had been designated as my bodyguard was killed lying next to me in a firefight – I was lucky – only my rifle got hit. War is so random!

Being able to go back and spend time with the Montagnards meant a lot to me. My feelings about the situation with the Montagnards are a combination of respect and guilt. Respect for the work they did with us and guilt because we left them to suffer the consequences of remaining behind when we left. They truly are “The Forgotten Army,” and the US public should know this story. Our experience also had a major impact on Jill – she loved our time in the Central Highlands and now shares a love for the Montagnards. This video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ox_wB0MGYCI&index=1&list=PLAA52F4EE85F9E983 shows more about the plight of the Montagnards after the War.

We are both very sad to see what has happened to the Montagnards – much of their land has been confiscated and they are desperately poor – many just surviving by subsistence farming which they now have to do away from the villages in which their families live. Because they have to travel far to their farming areas, the men and boys are often away from the villages during the week. Because most children are needed to help farming or with the family, they get little or no education beyond middle school. Their traditional languages and culture are being systematically destroyed.

Upon our return to the US we found a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization that has been working in the Central Highlands for over 25 years helping the Montagnards. The fund is called the Viet Nam Fund for Education, Music and Infrastructure and their website is http://www.Viet_Namemifund.org/. I have spent considerable time talking with the director of the fund, Jane Coyle, about her efforts to help the Montagnards in the Central Highlands. Her current focus is in educating the children of the Montagnards and she has specific programs dedicated to bringing clean water to schools and to creating libraries to help with the education process.

I have teamed up with a several of my former Mike Force colleagues and we have begun to work with Jane to bring her efforts to light with former as well as current members of Special Forces who might have an interest in supporting her efforts. A write



Tom and former CIDG soldiers who served at Dak Pek.



Meeting with former CIDG Strikers in a Montagnard village south of Dak Pek.

up on this effort can be here: http://Viet_Namemifund.org/donate.html#SFlogo. I am hopeful that this article ends up in the hands of many SF soldiers who will have an interest in supporting the Montagnards – The Forgotten Army.

Tax-deductible donations can be made to the fund by sending a check payable to the Viet Nam Fund with “Special Forces Support” in the memo field of the check to: Viet Nam Fund, 130 W. 79th Street, Suite 10 D, New York, NY 10024. ❖

The SFA and Chapter 78 does not endorse or recommend any particular fund or cause. Therefore, information presented in this article regarding the Viet Nam Fund does not constitute or imply the endorsement, recommendation or approval of the SFA or Chapter 78.

About the author:

Thomas Turney served in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam as a member of as the 403rd Army Security Agency Special Operations Detachment (SOD), 5th Special Forces Group in 1968 and 1969. In Viet Nam, Tom served at A-239 Duc Lap, A-242 Dak Pek, B-24 Kontum and with B-20 Mike Force. He also served in the 401st SOD, 8th Special Forces Group in Panama for 18 months before serving in Viet Nam.

SFA CHAPTER 78 SEPTEMBER 2016 MEETING



1



2



3



4



5

1 Unk, Kenn Miller, Mike Keele, Mark Miller, John Creel and Len Fein; photo by Thad Gembacz

2 Mark Miller, Kenn Miller and Gary MacNamara in back; photo by Thad Gembacz

3 Len Fein presenting a “dream car” to John Meyer; photo by Thad Gembacz

4 SFA C-78 Guest Speaker, MSG Wade Scott from SOD/North; photo by Thad Gembacz

5 Lonny Holmes, John Joyce and Terry Cagnolatti at the unofficial monthly Chapter Annex meeting in Las Vegas.