



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

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## SFA Con 2021 SPECIAL EDITION

### SALUTING SF FIRST RESPONDERS

The Escape of Anh Tuan Tran: Part Two

**PART TWO: The “Double Nickel”**

Special Forces in El Salvador

**EXCLUSIVE—**

**9/11 – 20th Anniversary** with SF & FDNY

[TeamHouse.SpecialForcesAssociation.org](https://TeamHouse.SpecialForcesAssociation.org)

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**FRONT COVER:** US Air Force Special Operations Command Combat Controller Bart Decker rides an Afghan horse in Afghanistan in the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom. (Photo by ODA 595 Communications Sergeant Chris Spence, now retired)



Please visit us at [specialforces78.com](http://specialforces78.com) and [sfa78cup.com](http://sfa78cup.com)



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How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

Welcome to this special edition of the SFA Chapter 78 *Sentinel*, as we co-host SFACON 2021 in Las Vegas with Chapter 51, present home of John Joyce and Lonny Holmes, who created and nurtured the Sentinel, along with our longtime graphic artist, Chapter 78 member Debra Holm.

Marc Yablonka follows up his amazing story of the plight of a South Vietnamese Marine, as he went from serving in a distinguished unit to finding himself in a series of “re-education camps” after the fall of Saigon. Some of his relocations were due to his escaping his tormentors and being recaptured elsewhere.

In this issue he continues to tell about An Tuan’s years of relentless efforts to escape, finally succeeding, and his circuitous flight from Vietnam to Canada.

In our [September issue](#), Greg Walker tells how the SF efforts to defeat the guerrillas in El Salvador, which were constrained by the need of our politicians to keep this post-Vietnam conflict out of the public eye by limiting the size of the operation to 55 advisors (the Double Nickel).

Now in Part 2, he discusses the successful efforts of the SF and others in the decade-plus long conflict which led to the FMLN coming to the table and agreeing to a peace deal. He starts with the infamous El Mozote massacre and ends with SF getting the awards they rightly deserved for their conduct on the battlefield.

If you haven’t logged into the new SFA TeamHouse website and posted your bio, the instructions by Debra Holm, our webmaster and graphic designer, will show you how to do it. Please give it a try and join in the effort to help us all communicate better. Using her instruction, I now have a bio and picture on line.

Alex Quade participated in the NYC memorial for the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on New York, Washington, and the resting place of flight 93 in Western Pennsylvania. Being a longtime partner to SF, as a downrange SF embedded reporter and video producer, friend of numerous SF families, and diligent in promoting all things SF, Alex was invited to participate in the NYC ceremonies. Her photos and report capture the highlights.

The military on-the-ground response to the 9/11 attacks began with the insertion of the first of three teams of Green Berets on the night of 18th to 19th October, 2001. 5th SFG (A) ODA 595 and two USAF combat controllers immediately began to work with the enthusiastic and capable “warlord” General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his indigenous troops at Darya Suf Valley. On 20th October, ODA 555 would work with Fahim Khan in the Panjshir valley to take Baghrum airfield. On the 2nd of November ODA 534 with some CIA SAD members started working with Atta Mohammed, and the two rival warlords Dostum and Mohammed, worked together to capture Mazar e Sharif and its strategic airfield. When SEC/DEF Donald Rumsfeld shared pictures of unidentified troops on horseback coming over a hillside it was electrifying. It had to be Green Berets! One of those pictures is on this month’s cover.

The liberation of Afghanistan has been the subject of books, videos, a movie, and a statue near ground zero. Page 20 has links to must-see videos and more, followed by a relevant book review by SOF.NEWS editor John Friberg.

Continued on page 20

# From the President | October 2021



We had another GREAT meeting at the Fiddlers Green with the attendance of thirty-four members and guests. Our breakfast was a little on the slim side, as the cook that normally prepares our breakfast had an emergency and was unavailable. Don Gonneville, my VP, stepped up to the plate, and picked up bagels, cream cheese, and donuts. Coffee, orange juice, and fruit was provided by the Fiddlers Green facility.

Bruce Long, President SFA Chap. 78

I modified the meeting, waiving the reading of the minutes and

the treasurers report so that our guest speakers would have more time to make their presentation and to answer questions.

Our guest speakers were Michael Davis, Associate Special Agent in Charge of the Los Angeles Field Division, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Special Agent Ken Vo. As expected, their informal presentation lasted 2 ½ hours — with a lot of questions and answers!

John Joyce, the Director of the SFA Convention 2021 in Las Vegas, is now the President of SFA Chapter 51, who I have been in close contact with. John provided me with the volunteer roster for the convention.

Volunteer positions include; Registration Desk, Hospitality Room, Guest Speaker Assistant, Valley of Fire Bus CPT, Death Valley Ride, Butler Purple Heart Race, Mob Museum, the Golf Tournament, and Shopping Tours. I really want to commend Chapter members who have stepped forward to help make this Convention the BEST one yet.

There will be a special recognition for those who helped at the Convention at our upcoming Christmas party on December 4th 2021.

I'm currently working on a local vender who can supply us with SFA Chapter 78 T-Shirts, and hope to have more information at our November 20th Chapter meeting.

The Bahia Corinthian Yacht Club provided ten gift certificates which included both Sunday Brunch and Prime Rib dinners. A drawing was held and both guest speakers received certificates.

## I hope to see you all at the SFA 2021 Convention in Las Vegas!

Don't forget to RSVP Don Gonneville at [don@gonneville.com](mailto:don@gonneville.com) on your plans to attend our November 20th Chapter meeting. As usual, if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to reach out to me.

De Oppresso Liber  
Bruce D Long SGM, SF (ret)  
President, SFA Chapter 78

## November Chapter 78 Meeting SPECIAL GUEST SPEAKER

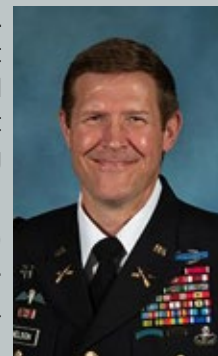
Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos • 11-20-2021

**RSVP EARLY!**

You do NOT want to miss 20 November's very special guest speaker!

War reporter Alex Quade brings her friend, COL Pat Nelson, as Chapter 78's Special Guest Speaker, 20 NOV. As a 7SFG ODA 18A, he worked for SOTF-71 CDR COL Pat Mahaney on combat ops in Afghanistan which Alex has been sharing with us — including "that Chinook shootdown op."

Most recently, COL Nelson served as 1st SFC(A) Dep.G3, then Ranger Regiment DCO, in Afghanistan before the withdrawal. This Green Beret is a great leader and "one to watch", ahead!



## INSIDE THIS ISSUE



Alex Quade with NYPD Aviation (counter-terrorism unit) training fly-over 9/11 Memorial site and Freedom Tower. (NYPD, FDNY, NCUO, etc., inter-agency efforts.)

**See Alex's Exclusive on the 9/11 – 20th Anniversary with SF and FDNY, in this Sentinel issue (page 18).**

Hachette Books is publishing Alex's first book on SF combat ops. More info at [alexquade.com](http://alexquade.com).



# TEAMHOUSE

[teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org](http://teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org)

*Be a part of the TeamHouse network.*

**TeamHouse.SpecialForcesAssociation.org** — the Special Forces Association new *members-only* website was launched in July 2021.

The new TeamHouse data system was put into place to bring SFA member records into a secure and manageable system. *The main benefit for SFA members is connectedness.* Members using the website will find the benefits experienced as a member of their local SFA Chapter now possible at a nationwide level.

For those considering whether or not to join SFA, will see how having this members-only access to a nationwide SFA brotherhood sets it apart from other groups supporting the SF community. Many other groups offer programs to assist veterans which are similar to SFA programs. But none provide the means for one-on-one networking on any level.

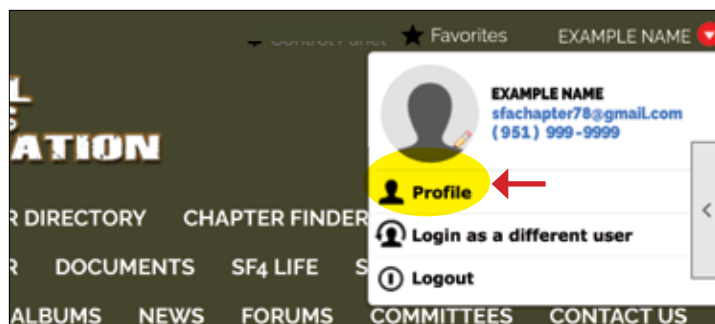
## How the TeamHouse website works for SFA members:

- ▶ Provides *safe, secure, nationwide networking* for our unique population.
- ▶ Bridges the gap between those in and out of uniform — offering opportunities for service and assistance to both active and inactive members.
- ▶ Members can list businesses and locate other SF-friendly businesses.
- ▶ Members can find mentors to help with civilian transition.
- ▶ Members exiting the military can find support the SF4Life programs.
- ▶ An ever growing list of SF Brotherhood resources

## How to participate in the TeamHouse network.

Following the steps that follow will enable you to fully participate in the TeamHouse network and will enable other SFA members to locate you.

- 1 Log into the TeamHouse website at [teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org](http://teamhouse.specialforcesassociation.org) (or scan the QR code at right to access the website)

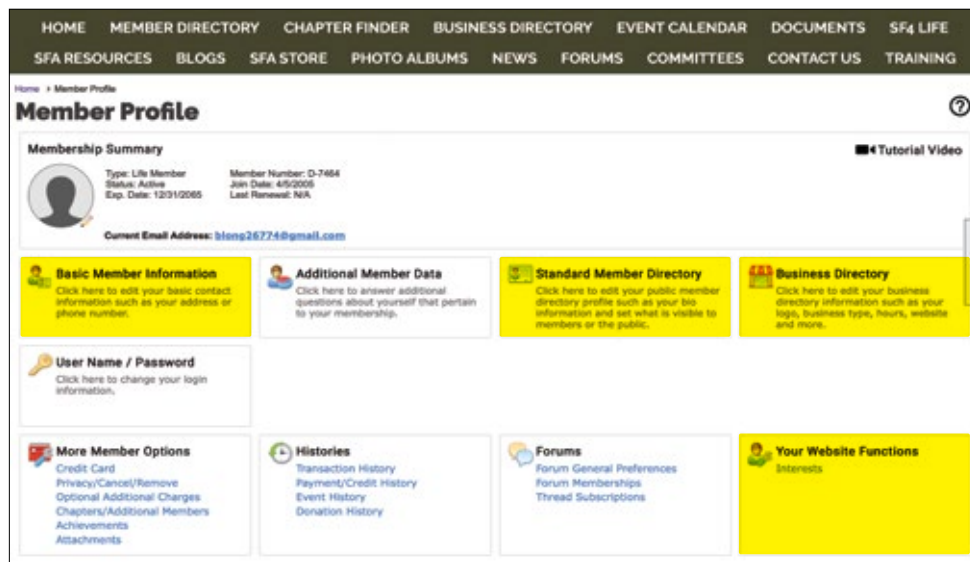


- 2 Click on "Profile."

Login information was emailed to all SFA members in July. If you missed the email, simply click the **Forgot My Username/Password** button. If you have a problem logging "Click here" for assistance.

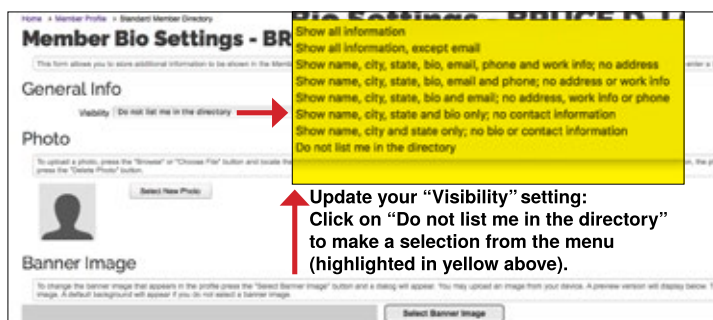
## Member Profile Dashboard:

After selecting “Profile” you will enter the “Member Profile” dashboard. This is where information critical to your participation in the SFA TeamHouse is to be entered. It is important that you check and update the sections highlighted — “Basic Member Information,” “Standard Member Directory,” “Business Directory,” and enter “Interests” in the “Your Website Functions” section.



**3 Click on “Basic Member Information”:** Verify that your name, address, phone numbers and email address are correct. In “Other Information” indicate whether you would prefer the newsletter (*The Drop*) in print or that you will download it from the website (*The Drop* is found in “Documents”).

**4 Click on “Standard Member Directory”:** In *General Info*: the “**Visibility**” setting is very important because it designates your visibility on the website directory. **The default is set to “Do not list me in the directory.” If you would like to fully participate in the SFA TeamHouse network this must be changed.** There are several options available in the dropdown menu (see illustration at right).



You may also enter add a photo and a biography to your profile. For your biography, while your military history is important, *don’t underestimate the value of your post-military life*. Share what you’ve done since you retired from the military and what you are doing now.

**5 Business Directory:** Enter up to five businesses to your profile in this section. This information will be helpful to not only TeamHouse members in your local area, but also members that may be moving or visiting your area. Since the inception of the network, *this directory has been used in many instances by members to contact businesses outside their home area*.

**6 Your Website Functions:** Click on “Interests” to enter information that will be helpful to TeamHouse members in a number of ways. The entries in this area can be helpful to those seeking out those will common backgrounds, special knowledge mentors and specific Chapter contacts (Chapter SF4Life Consultant and Officers).



Once you’ve completed these steps, you are able to participate fully as a member of SFA’s TeamHouse network.

Need help completing these steps or have questions? Contact your Chapter’s TeamHouse Consultant.

# THE ESCAPE OF ANH TUAN TRAN

## Part Two

By Marc Phillip Yablonka  
Author and Military Journalist

**Editors Note** — In the [September issue of the Sentinel](#), Anh Tuan Tran revealed how, after joining the South Vietnamese Marines as a lieutenant in 1972 he became part of a prestigious unit that would often be the first line of defense against the communist North Vietnamese Army. In early 1975, as the North increased its activities, resulting in the overthrow of the South Vietnamese Government, Anh Tuan Tran was wounded in action and ended up turning himself in, as instructed by the new Government, for a “ten day” re-education camp. That, as was typical of the communists, was a lie. After much torture and inhumane conditions and multiple escapes, his life improved dramatically when he was transferred to the Suối Máu re-education labor camp in Bien Hoà Province.

In the camp, prisoners were organized into what Tuan called “láng”, a new VC word that meant a group of 15 to 20 people living together in a kind of barracks made of concrete floors, steel rooftops, and walls with no doors.

“There were openings on both ends of the *bâtiment* [building] for entering and exiting. We made our beds next to each other on both sides along the wall, sparing the center alley to access the two entrances. After the first night on a bare cement floor, I woke up with cramps in my hands and legs. I couldn’t move for a few minutes, a sign of rheumatism from the humidity and the vapor emerging from the floor during nighttime.”

Later, while he was working on various cleaning projects around the camp, Tuan found material to make a kind of personal tarp cover to isolate himself from the cement floor. From the sand bags around an old, abandoned observation fortification post, he ripped and collected pieces of dark green nylon covers, sewing them together to make the underlying of his bed.

“You cannot believe the creativity and the patience you put into making a needle out of a small piece of copper wire. You need something sharp and thin to make the hole. You scratch it little by little, and make many attempts to succeed. It was soft, but it did the job,” he said.

This was during a time when Tuan worked inside the camp perimeter. He was able to scavenge stuff left over and make something out of it.

“I remember making a comb for my beautiful sister Cẩm Tú out of a piece of aluminum I found buried in the soil. There was one time we had to carry bags of rice from a truck into storage. Some of us punched holes into the bags and stole pockets of rice. Because of jealousy, one guy was denounced and sent to “*chuồng cọp*” (a tiger cage with no cover, out in the hot sun) until the afternoon of the next day.”

Life was a little better there than Chí Hoà prison. He had more freedom to move about after work. The prisoners had access to a well for showers. Later on, they cultivated the ingredients rau muống [amaranth], and rau dền [spinach], to make soup. They made wooden sandals and clothes out of any kind of materials they could salvage from in work sites.

“But our portion of rice remained small. We were always hungry,” Tuan added.

For some reason, the VC preferred to move prisoners at night.

“One evening, we were suddenly told to get ready with our belongings. Prisoners with good behavior were lucky to have contact with family and were allowed to receive parcels of food, medicine, and clothes.”

Then Tuan and his fellow prisoners were organized into groups and led down to the courtyard.

“It was a real military operation,” he said. “The surroundings were bright with lights. AKs were everywhere. Group by group we were loaded onto Molotov trucks. The convoy headed to a camp that later we knew as Suối Máu re-education camp. The camp used to hold VC prisoners (“*trại giam tù binh Cộng Sản*”), manned by ARVN military police. Now it was the other way around, NVA troops stayed outside the perimeter, monitoring movement from watch towers, and entering the camp every morning with armed escorts to run activities inside the camp.”

“Among us, we were always aware of ‘*ăn ten*’ (Vietnamese for antenna). Weak people, or smart ones who wanted to stay alive longer, reported to the “*cán bộ quản giáo*” (educational cadre). There were “*cán bộ quản giáo*” usually with a pistol at their sides, and “*bộ đội quản chế*” (guarding troops) with their AKs ready to shoot if any gestures were perceived as rebellion.”

Because they were inmates, prisoners had to toil very hard and study hard to become what the VC termed a “citizen.” To become a citizen, they had to prove that they were good in their re-education duties.

“They never defined the word ‘good.’ For some, ‘good’ meant to spy and report on your fellow inmates. That’s why we always had *ăn ten*, he said.

“Even among the high-ranking officers (captains, colonels and generals) sent to the north, after a few years, “*ăn ten*” existed. Survival instinct, I guess.”

The only positive thing to happen to Tuan in that re-education camp was that he was allowed to receive a visit from his mother. This happened just as he was planning a second escape by land to Thailand.

“Suddenly, I was released,” Tuan said. He went back to Saigon to live with his aunt and work in her sugar distillery for a year.

Tuan seems to slip into a stream of conscious dream at this point, worried that he might have forgotten even a portion of his tribulations.

“I think I’m in trouble. There are holes in my memory. There are things I know happened that I can’t place in any phases of my life. I was really sick one time. Almost gone and somehow came back. There was that doctor who nursed me back to life. I can still see his face with his white-rimmed glasses, but I can’t remember his name, when or where it happened.

“And there was one time I was infected by that skin disease. I got parasites that crawled under my skin all over my body, but not my face. It was very itchy. I couldn’t help but scratch and every time I did, it got infected. I scratched, and I scratched, and blood and pus came out. It hurt, and I felt dirty. It was all over my hands. I couldn’t hold anything. Every time I contracted my fingers, they burst open, spilling pus and blood. The only medicine I had was salt water. I poured and rubbed it into my wounds and, oh my God. It hurt. I lived with it, I don’t remember how long, but a very long time.

“There is that image that will haunt me forever. I walked into that first-aid room with a row of bamboo beds on each side full of people. Everyone had dysentery; there was one guy laying there with no pants. His hemorrhoid rectum was like a big flower. Flies were all over it, making a buzzing noise.”

Tuan and his fellow prisoners’ terror increased with the arrival in the re-education camp of what he called the “Bò Vàng” [Literally “Yellow Cows”, the police arm of the VC].

“We used to see the olive uniform of the NVA guarding us. The green color [uniforms] blended nicely with the environment. Then we became alarmed with the pronounced yellow uniform of the “Công An” [VC] forces around us.”

In the old days, Tuan used to call police Cảnh Sát; Công An was reserved for the secret police and it usually conjured up images of fear because the term was associated with torture.

“When we saw Công An replacing usual NVA forces, we wondered what was going to happen. Were torture chambers the next phase?”

What Tuan referred to as “Bộ Đội [infantry troops] were usually needed for combat situations, while Công An specialized in the control of civilians.

“Bộ Đội were more into external body movements. They made sure there were no revolts, no escapes, no fighting, no resistance, on the part of prisoners. While Công An were more into the mind game of the prisoners. I don’t know who invented the nickname “Bò Vàng, but it’s meaning pointed to the color frappant [striking color] of their uniforms. And the cow, which is an animal, representing stupidity and obedience,” Tuan said.

“But the name calling didn’t reflect the reality. The Bò Vàng were not stupid. They were more adept at controlling the thinking and the daily activities of the prisoners. The ‘Cán Bộ Quản Giáo’ [administrators] knew more about each prisoner than the previous one. And with the yellow bovines, we started working outside the perimeter

of the camp. We started doing hard labor jobs by clearing the forest to plant “khoai mì” [cassava]. We competed against each other for more production, there was a quota to be accomplished each day.”

The administrators used different tactics to improve productivity, according to Tuan. One used encouragement. He sent two prisoners to collect cassava, cook and distribute it to prisoners of his lán [barracks] during break time. The other punished the prisoners by cutting down their portion and making them work longer hours.

“Your life became more tolerable or more difficult, depending on each individual yellow cow’s style of supervision. One prisoner in my lán became a target of one newly appointed young cow. His physical appearance — he wore glasses and his large bald forehead announced an intellectual mind — déclenche [set off] a cruel response from the cow,” Tuan recalled.

“Maybe all of the cows suffered an ‘complexe d’infériorité’ [inferiority complex] towards people of the south. In the field, he ordered the entire lán to stop working and gather around for a lesson on how to be more productive. He singled out the old guy with the glasses and lectured him about productivity. He punished his laziness by hitting him many times with a ‘cái đòn gánh’, a bamboo pole with cradle on each side to carry two baskets of goods. One strike hit the man’s shiny bald forehead. Blood gushed out from a big hole in his head. The man crumbled to the ground.”

The interesting thing for Tuan was the reaction of people witnessing the horror, or the lack of one.

“People simply looked at it like nothing happened. No emotion. No pity. No worries for the man. ‘It’s okay if it’s not me’ was the attitude that reflected the efficacy of the control technique used by the VC.”

There were ten squatting toilets just outside the fences enveloping the camp. To get access to them, the prisoners had to report to the guard on top of his tower.

“You had to yell out loud the exact password: ‘Bảo cáo cán bộ, tôi xin đi ngoài’ [Reporting to the officer. I would like to go out], and wait for his approval. If, for some reason, he ignored our request, or we missed one word, then bad luck. Sometimes he enjoyed torturing us out of boredom from his long hours.”

Outside of the toilet’s fences lay a vast space where vegetation slowly grew over time. Grass and small bushes were knee high. There were anti-personnel landmine signs posted along the fences. People who did the cleaning were very careful not to step outside the fence, according to Tuan.

There was a road outside the perimeter of the camp, and when his cell block went out through the main gate to go to work on the fields or the forest, Tuan would sometimes see curious civilians wandering nearby.

“So, I knew there was traffic outside the camp. About half a kilometer from the camp, we could see a train passing by during the late hours of the afternoon. During my existence in the camp, I always kept a low profile. It was crucial that nobody noticed my absence for a long period of time. I usually spent my time watching the tower overlooking the mine fields, and I noticed that the guard rarely looked in that direction because of the glare of the morning sun.”

Early one morning, Tuan reported that he had diarrhea and couldn't go to work. He went to the infirmary for medicine and went back to bed.

"I rarely missed work because going to work could get you extra food for your stomach. I didn't raise any suspicion by staying in bed."

That morning, after roll call, after everybody had left for work. Tuan got out of bed, went outside in the back to get a deep end bucket and put in the bottom civilian pants and shirt that he had traded khoai mi to people who had visitations from families. He took what he called his "detection instruments" — the bucket in one hand, and in the other hand, a shovel.

"I approached the entrance of the toilets while watching the guard on top of his tower. He was distracted by something because he was looking down, maybe reading or writing. I kept quiet, advancing to the entrance. If he caught me not asking his permission, he wouldn't be alarmed because I had the cleaning bucket and shovel. I would just beg for his forgiveness and try another day, But I was lucky. He didn't see me going in the toilets."

Tuan had previously studied very well how mines were detonated. He now moved swiftly and carefully, climbing over the fence before anyone could spot him on the other side.

"I was really lucky that day. Nobody was using the toilets. The guard didn't look up. And I worked my way slowly moving from bush to bush, avoiding a direct view from the tower. It took me more than three tense hours before I could reach the outer fence of the camp. [There was] no explosion. I was still there, hiding in the tall grass, I

heard láng after láng of prisoners coming back from work heading to the main entrance. It was like living in another world for me at that moment," he recalled.

---

Once free, in the summer of 1985, Tuan discovered a smuggling ring operating from the coastal city of Bạc Liêu. His mother gave him five ounces of gold and he escaped Vietnam on a boat for a seven-day journey on the South China Sea, which landed him in Malaysia.

He recalled the days leading up to his escape.

"My Mom had given me her ring for the deposit, and I went down to Bạc Liêu to check out the info and the organization. I happened to meet one of the organizers who had served in the Airborne before. He gave me a spot on the boat with a condition to take care of his 12-year-old son and teach him English. I was supposed to reimburse him once we reached America," said Tuan.

Tuan stayed in that man's house by the river and went fishing with him for almost two weeks until the departure.

When that night arrived, a dozen people from Saigon descended upon the organizer's house and were ferried by small fishing boat to a bigger one.

"The boat looked solid, medium sized, capable of transporting 50 people or more. When around 30 people boarded, I heard the engine starting. I was still waiting for the organizer and his son to



Anh Tuan's living quarters in the UNHCR camp in Malaysia. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)





Mealtime at the Ecole Francaise in the UN camp. Tuan is first on the right in the back. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

board when the boat started moving. Something was wrong. He was one of the bosses and he was not on board yet,” Tuan recalled.

“The boat kept heading towards the Công An Biên Phòng outpost. Suddenly, I heard, ‘Plouf, plouf.’ Somebody jumped into the water. We were supposed to stop at the outpost and pay the bribe to be allowed to continue to the opening of the bay to the ocean. But the boat was not slowing down. Someone took control of the boat and sped it up. We heard many gunshots, but no boat was following us. We spent seven days traveling toward the intended destination, the Philippines, but somehow reached Malaysia instead.”

Those aboard still had water, food and the ship had fuel when we reached Pulau Bidong Island. The ocean had been calm, according to Tuan. The seas not rough. And they were often escorted by pods of dolphins.

“It looked more like a vacation trip than a life-or-death adventure,” Tuan said.

One of the reasons the boat made it to Malaysia, Tuan said, was that, among the many ex-military aboard were Vietnamese Navy mechanics.

“Our boat was in excellent shape,” he said.

Tuan’s thoughts now turn to his mother, who was a fervent Baptist.

“Mom told me she prayed day and night before my trip, and after she got news from me [from Malaysia], she believed in miracles. She told me God responded to her prayers. I don’t recall her being religious before April 30th, 1975” [the fall of Saigon].

The refugee camp at Pulau Bidong was run by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). While it wasn’t home, Tuan opined that it could have been a lot worse.

“The UN camp was not really good, but compared to VC re-education camps, it was paradise. No control over mind and body. No self-critique sessions. No attitude watching. No indoctrination. No spying on each other.”

“For those who didn’t have overseas relatives to receive parcels or money, they were a little bit hungry, but they were not starving like in



UNHCR Camp Malaysia Ecole Francaise — Tuan’s future wife Hoa, sixth from left. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)



Sungei Besi Transit Camp — Tuan is second from right. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

VC camps. In VC prisons, our daily portion was so little that, after a while, we dreamed only of food. We were obsessed with food. When we received our portion of rice, one guy swallowed it so fast he didn’t even chew. Another guy made small chopsticks and spent hours picking up each grain of rice with those chopsticks to savor the sweetness of the grain, to prolong his meal and make his hunger disappear.”

“At the UN camp you were free to do whatever you wanted. You were free to wander around the island. You were free to do any business you wanted. One guy set up a spot where he could make money cutting hair while waiting for resettlement,” Tuan said.

Tuan spent his days teaching French in the école française to the people who would settle in France, and as an interpreter for US and Canadian delegations when they came to the island to interview people for acceptance for resettlement.

“Pulau Bidong woke up to the sounds of music from the loud speakers. The familiar song was “[Biển Nhớ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CowW8pRypHc)” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CowW8pRypHc), sung by Khánh Ly in the 60s. Then came the newsletter, weather and announcements of the day. People ate their instant noodles and headed to their activities on the island.



Sungei Besi Transit Camp — Tuan is second from right. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)



Sungei Besi Transit Camp — Tuan on the far right. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

Those who had money could enjoy all sorts of breakfasts in the makeshift little market: *phở*, *xôi đậu xanh*, *xôi đậu phộng*, *bánh mì* *thịt*. All kinds of exotic foods. Somehow people managed to smuggle in materials to even build a bakery to produce fresh baguettes," Tuan remembered.

The UN supplies consisted mostly of instant noodles, rice, tuna fish cans, once in a while, fresh eggs. But people could have access to all kinds of food if they had money. Even the forbidden pork meat.

"You got into big trouble if you were caught smuggling or eating pork by Malaysian authorities [since Malaysia is chiefly a Muslim country and Muslims are forbidden to eat pork].

"Depending on their skills, people worked at various jobs on the island. There was sick bay "hospital" where you could get first aid, facilities where you could learn English, *une école française* overseen by a French adviser from the French Embassy in Malaysia.

The UN administrative building was where important events happened, according to Tuan: "Letters, money order deliveries, UN delegation interview sessions. The security was handled by ex-military volunteers. Some people built their own living places and sold them to newcomers when they were about to be resettled.



Tuan visiting a museum in Kuala Lumpur. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

"When loud speakers announced the arrival of a new boat, people poured to the beach's "Jetty Bridge" to watch newcomers with their belongings coming to the island. They would give first-hand information about themselves before being processed into the system."

"That was where VC infiltrators were denounced, and bad element factors were exposed. This provided crucial information for the delegations when they interviewed for resettlement later," Tuan said.

He remains astounded that, instead of the closest thing to paradise Pulau Bidong was after the communist re-education camps, some people still use today's social media to say negative things about the island.

"When you search Pulau Bidong on the internet, you stumble upon words like 'Evil Island.' I don't know where that comes from, but it's not the truth. Far from it. It should be called 'Rebirth Island' because it was the gateway leading to freedom where you could regain your dignity. Where you were allowed to be yourself again, and, after resettlement, you could rebuild your future, your life."

Because of his background, he was on a US bound list. However, he was told the people on the US list had just left. The next list would be processed in four to six months.



Anh Tuan somewhere in the crowd of fellow employees at Bombardier Global Express Bay 4 ,Toronto 2017. (Photo courtesy Anh Tuan Tran)

“When the Canadian delegation came a month later, and the official offered to resettle me in two months’ time, I could not say no, especially when French was one of the two official languages of Canada.”

When the boat people landed on Pulau Bidong, they were allowed to request to be interviewed by the US, Australia, Canada and France delegations. Usually, if refugees wished to be resettled in one of those countries, they had to have relatives there already. If not, they had to wait to be interviewed and accepted for resettlement.

“The problem was that those delegations only showed up once or twice a year, and if for some reason you got rejected because of discrepancies in your files, or dishonesty, you could easily spend five or ten years at the camp,” Tuan said.

“One guy made a big mistake by declaring that he killed such and such VC officials in raids he was part of. He was a frogman in the Special Forces. The interviewer was a young civilian female diplomat who didn’t think that this man was a hero because he killed many people and took pride talking about it. He was rejected by almost everybody after that. That’s why, when you have an opportunity to go, you grab it. That was the general sentiment in the camp,” he added.

Anh Tuan Tran grabbed his opportunity in January, 1986 when he was sponsored by a family in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. He soon made his way to more cosmopolitan Toronto and eventually found work in the airplane manufacturing field. First with McDonnell-Douglas, where, between 1989-1995, he worked as a Wing Tank Mechanic on the company’s MD-80 and MD-11. Four years later, he again found work as a Wing Tank Mechanic for the Canadian airplane manufacturer Bombardier Aerospace, working on the company’s business aircraft fuel and vent systems for its Global Express 5000, 6000, then the Global 5500 and 6500. He retired in 2019.

Tuan, who stresses that he was living “au jour le jour” [day to day], says, “I rarely tell people about this. Imagine you are stuck in a

desperate life that is going on forever. No ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ like you Americans say.”

Having lived through hell, today Anh Tuan Tran cherishes the freedom Canada has blessed him with, and the happiness that his family surrounds him with. ❖

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Marc Yablonka is a military journalist whose reportage has appeared in the U.S. Military’s *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, *Air Force Times*, *American Veteran*, *Vietnam* magazine, *Airways*, *Military Heritage*, *Soldier of Fortune* and many other publications.

Between 2001 and 2008, Marc served as a Public Affairs Officer, CWO-2, with the 40th Infantry Division Support Brigade and Installation Support Group, California State Military Reserve, Joint Forces Training Base, Los Alamitos, California. During that time, he wrote articles and took photographs in support of Soldiers who were mobilizing for and demobilizing from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

His work was published in *Soldiers*, official magazine of the United States Army, *Grizzly*, magazine of the California National Guard, the *Blade*, magazine of the 63rd Regional Readiness Command–U.S. Army Reserves, *Hawaii Army Weekly*, and *Army Magazine*, magazine of the Association of the U.S. Army.

Marc’s decorations include the California National Guard Medal of Merit, California National Guard Service Ribbon, and California National Guard Commendation Medal w/Oak Leaf. He also served two tours of duty with the Sar El Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces and holds the Master’s of Professional Writing degree earned from the University of Southern California.

# PART TWO: The “Double Nickel” — Special Forces in El Salvador



**Editors Note** — If you missed “Part One,” read it in the [September issue of the Sentinel](#).

By Greg Walker (ret), USA Special Forces

## The war that never should have been — Massacre at El Mozote

*“Mrs. Amaya said the first column of soldiers arrived in El Mozote on foot about 6:00 p.m. Three times during the next 24 hours, helicopters landed with more soldiers. She said soldiers told the villagers they were from the Atlacatl Battalion. ‘They said they wanted our weapons. But we said we didn’t have any. That made them angry, and they started killing us. Many of the peasants were shot while in their homes, but the soldiers dragged others from their houses and the church and put them in lines, women in one, men in another.’ It was during this confusion that she managed to escape.”*

*“She said about 25 young girls were separated from the other women and taken to the edge of the tiny village and she heard them screaming. When asked why the villagers hadn’t fled, Mrs. Amaya said, ‘We trusted the army.’ From October 1980 to August 1981, there had been a regular contingent of soldiers in El Mozote, often from the National Guard. She said they hadn’t abused the peasants, and that the villagers often fed them.”*

*“Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvadoran Village,”  
The New York Times, Raymond Bonner, January 1982*

### Why Did They Have to Kill the Children?

Maj. Natividad de Jesús Cáceres Cabrera, second in command of the Atlacatl Immediate Reaction Battalion, was frustrated. He’d just ordered the men under his command to begin killing the children of El Mozote. They’d shown little hesitation in the killing of adult and elderly men in the village, and no hesitation at all in leading away the young girls, most between 12-to-15, whom they gang-raped, then butchered.

But the children, the *niños* and *ninas*, they were now a problem. Major Cabrera was a true believer. The only good communist was a dead communist. And one dead communist child was one less future communist guerrilla the Salvadoran Army would have to fight.

El Mozote was a *limpieza* operation — a “cleaning up” of the communist guerrilla presence and control in the Department of Morazán. The Atlacatl Battalion was newly reformed and devoid of American Special Forces combat advisers. Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa, the battalion commander, was going to fight the guerrilla armies of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—one of the two primary political parties in El Salvador—his way.

Atlacatl was to be the *Einsatzgruppen*. Just like the Nazi “deployment units” raised by Heinrich Himmler — the founder and overall commander of the SS during World War II—the Atlacatl was the mobile killing unit of the Salvadoran High Command. Special tasks included the execution of communist party functionaries, FMLN and Catholic church officials, and FMLN political officers; as well as men, women, and children in those areas the military command deemed under the control of the guerrillas.

*“Everything points to the fact that if ‘civilians’ of Catholic and evangelical affiliation died in the battle that took place in the El Mozote hamlet, were they linked to the activities of the terrorist group ERP [People’s Revolutionary Army]? The answer is yes, and this is what the report from the Department of State of the United States of America explained: El Mozote is located about 25 kilometers north of San Francisco Gotera, the capital of the department of Morazán. El Mozote hamlet was in the heart of the zone under constant siege by the ERP insurgents.*

*“The investigation confirms that the settlers of the El Mozote hamlet were collaborating, voluntarily or involuntarily, with the insurgents. The report also revealed that the insurgents mobilized their supporters within the area of influence in the north of Morazán to harass the military units of the Armed Forces while they were advancing in the area. The insurgent forces had been permanently re-established in the El Mozote village since August 1981.” “Mountains of Morazán: The Muda Verdad of El Mozote,” Charly Monterrosa, <http://www.domingomonterrosa.info/2015/02/20/montanas-de-morazan-la-muda-verdad-de-el-mozote/>*

### “We Carried Out a *Limpieza* There” — Colonel Domingo Monterrosa

Major Cabrera, like his commander, believed in leading from the front. Ordering an infant to be brought to him, he held it in hand while unsheathing his bayonet with the other. Amid a cascade of gunshots, young girls’ screams, and the smoke and stench of tiny homes burning, Cabrera threw the baby skyward, and speared it as the tiny body fell back to earth.

**This wanton act of murder was attributed to U.S. Special Forces advisors over the years; a mixture of FMLN wartime propaganda and myth. It would take years to counter this allegation, an echo of North Vietnamese propaganda circulated during that war meant to discredit and diminish the presence and effectiveness of “The Green Berets” as they decimated the NVA and Viet Cong on a daily basis.**

“Fog and friction are hard truths of war. Another hard truth is that the inevitable first casualty of war is the truth itself. El Mozote was a tragic consequence of the higher purpose that America was pursuing in El Salvador *at the time...*” — Dr. Todd Greentree, former political officer, El Salvador.

“Saigon had fallen just a few years earlier, but after Nicaragua, the US was not going to lose another country to the Soviet Union and Cuba in Central America. President Carter found aiding the Salvadoran government extremely distasteful, and his ambassador, Robert White, was an emotional human rights crusader, especially after the four churchwomen were raped and murdered on his watch. Yet, it was Carter who authorized lethal assistance to the Salvadoran military in one of his last decisions before leaving office in January 1981.



(Photo courtesy the Greg Walker Collection)

“Reagan inherited El Salvador as his first foreign policy crisis. He eventually embraced counter insurgency but was initially more concerned to reassure Americans that El Salvador was not going to become another Vietnam. This was the source of the agreement with Congress to limit military trainers to 55 and to prohibit combat advisors from the field. As the first US trained and armed, equipped RRB, Atlacatl was under a microscope. Worse, shortly after they went out on their first big operation and committed El Mozote, Reagan was due to certify to Congress that the ESAF was taking measures to improve human rights. If the [U.S.] Embassy had unequivocally verified the massacre and US officials had testified that the [Salvadoran] military was responsible, *Congress would have had to cut aid, even though they knew perfectly well it would have meant game over.*” — Dr. Todd Greentree, letter to the author, May 26, 2021

Politically the war in El Salvador was never about democracy, or nation-building, or human rights. Despite public claims otherwise the Reagan Administration wanted, indeed was demanding, a full military victory over the communist insurgents. This while at the same time using El Salvador as a staging area for supporting what would become known as the Contra War in Nicaragua. For Special Forces in specific the politics were neither here nor there. Our job was to take the fight to the FMLN guerrillas and either bring them to the bargaining table in the understanding they would never win a military victory or dismantle their war-making machine to the degree the Salvadoran Military would utterly gut their ability to continue.

“The FMLN was beaten and forced to the negotiating table. It was their side that demobilized and turned themselves in to the Government Forces. We conducted the war in the way that should be recognized as a template for future conflicts. American casualties were kept to the very minimum and the GOES fought their own war. By any standard, the war was fought on a shoestring budget while the guerrillas were aided by multi-national Communist govern-

ments. The FMLN was aided by the Vietnamese, Cuban, Eastern Bloc, French, and even American Leftists.” — Leamon Ratterree, Operations & Intelligence, 3/7th Special Forces Group, note to author, September 5, 2021

In an eerie twist of irony as reported by Special Forces soldiers with access to Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, the first commander of the Atlacatl Immediate Reaction Battalion and who personally transmitted the Kill Order for the El Mozote massacre, the still popular and in fact venerated Salvadoran officer had been a paid Central Intelligence Agency asset. In his meticulous book on the El Mozote massacre, author Mark Danner wrote of the significant evidence that there were CIA assets monitoring the operation, Operation Rescate (Rescue) at the Salvadoran forward operating base camp at Osicala. A reporting cable obtained by Danner backed this up is included in the appendices of his book.

Two Special Forces mobile training teams had been involved in the training of the Atlacatl Battalion. The first led by then captain David Morris, the second follow-on mission commanded by then captain Dan Kulich. Despite early classes in the proper treatment of POWs by both teams, the Atlacatl under Monterrosa maintained “the only good guerrilla is a dead guerrilla” doctrine. During Operation Rescate no U.S. Special Forces soldiers were present in the field with the Atlacatl, nor at El Mozote when 900 men, women, the elderly, children, and infants were butchered. In the early years of the war, it was the CIA who were free to accompany Salvadoran units and to monitor their combat operations. Hence the Agency para-military Presence at Osicala on December 11th and the 12th, the two days during which the bulk of the mass killings were conducted. Knowing now that Monterrosa had been recruited early on in his career as a CIA asset the reason for the Agency presence in the field now makes reasonable sense. He was one of theirs and his success was critical to his continued value as he climbed the

ranks and became the U.S. “go to” Salvadoran officer and face of the counterinsurgency.

### Lesson learned in Vietnam — the MACV-SOG Connection

By 1981, selected Special Forces soldiers with wartime experience in Vietnam were quietly receiving assignment to the 3/7th Special Forces Group (ABN) then at Fort Gulick, and later Fort Davis, Panama. Many of the senior non-commissioned officers had served with distinction with MACV SOG’s special projects. Others with the highly successful MIKE Force project and still others with the long-range reconnaissance teams, Ranger companies and the original DELTA project. Their names read like the Who’s Who in Special Forces — “Spider” Parks...Guy Wagy...Jim French...Joe Lopez...Steve Davidson...Jim “Sky” King...Carlos Parker...Larry Maker...Don Kelly...Leroy Sena.

These veterans of the most successful and dangerous special operations of the American war in Vietnam were meant to develop the younger generation of Green Berets filling the ranks at 3/7, the only forward deployed battalion from the 7th Special Forces Group (ABN) then at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And they were purposely positioned in Latin America to take the fight to communist insurgents in El Salvador.

*“We didn’t fit the mold. We just didn’t fit in. We were renegades used to operating independently, with few people pulling our strings. We disregarded the established rules and created our own. We did whatever the situation demanded, developed our own courses of action, never questioning the morality of what we did to survive and complete the mission.”*

Franklin D. Miller, Medal of Honor, [Reflections of a Warrior](#)

Projects DELTA and B-52 became the core structure for all other special/strategic reconnaissance projects deployed during the Vietnam War. DELTA teams specialized in raids against Viet Cong bases and lines of communication, as well as conducting hunter-killer missions against selected VC/NVA targets. In addition, DELTA developed the first deception operations meant to mislead the enemy about the intentions of friendly forces, and it conducted numerous photographic reconnaissance missions for tactical and strategic commanders. B-52’s responsibilities also included Allied POW recovery operations and targeting missions for the terminal guidance of airborne munitions. The groundwork laid by DELTA and B-52 would influence special operations for the duration of the war, and directly affect future special reconnaissance projects such as those which would be mounted in El Salvador decades later. So impactful were



RT Sidewinder was a Baru Montagnard team. Commanded by One Zero, now retired Major General Ken Bowra, as USASFC commander years later, would lend his name and influence to the combat recognition effort for those who served in El Salvador. (Photo courtesy MG (ret) Kenneth R. Bowra)



Captain Jeff Nelson (Left) and author conducting airframe familiarization with PRAL students at Fort Gulick, Panama. (Photo courtesy the Greg Walker Collection)



the men of MACV-SOG that the other projects that Special Forces teams deployed to the war in Afghanistan would request to wear specific Combat & Control North/Central/South team patches during their tours of duty. One operator explained it this way. “We all knew who these guys were and what they did. Wearing one of their team patches was our way of honoring their heroics and sacrifices. It also made us fight harder. We had a standard to uphold.”

### U.S. Airpower – The AC-130 Factor

As the war began to turn against the FMLN in the field the guerrillas began to increase their operations, concentrating their attentions on American advisers because their vulnerability and high political profile made them handsome targets. As an insurgency, the war would only be brought to a successful conclusion by combining military methods with a broad array of economic, political, and diplomatic means.

A violent and massive escalation of the war by the FMLN in 1982 sent Salvadoran government forces reeling. Determined to split the country in half, guerrilla forces began battalion-size assaults on army cuartels at San Vicente, San Francisco Gotera, San Miguel, Usulután, and La Union. The two bridges across the Rio Limpá became primary FMLN targets, as well. On the ground, Special Forces advisers were working 18-hour days to improve the military capability of their assigned units, often accompanying them on limited forays “outside the wire” on patrols and company-size operations. Said one adviser “You cannot present yourself as a combat expert and then stay behind while your students take all the chances. It was no secret in country that we were in the field; they knew full well at the ambassador level what we needed to do to get the job done.”

Sergeant Joseph Viguera, an SF adviser in 1988 to El Salvador, echoed the same earlier thoughts. “The only way an SF trooper can effectively evaluate soldiers is by actually participating in the training.



Rangers from the 2/75th RGR Battalion provided extraction / recovery capability in El Salvador. (Photo courtesy Greg Walker)

Improvise, Adapt, Overcome. That was the only way to accomplish the mission.”

Between 1981 and 1984, Special Forces mobile training teams from Panama had trained and graduated the Atlacatl, Atonal, Arce, and Ramon Belloso Immediate Reaction Battalions (BIRIs) with the Belloso the only BIRI trained out-of-country (Fort Bragg, NC). An A-team from 3/7th SFG(A) stood up the Salvadoran Parachute Battalion, a unit that ultimately included HALO qualified Salvadoran paratroopers. In what was a highly classified training mission, Company A, 3/7th, trained the first Salvadoran reconnaissance capability, the PRAL, at Fort Gulick, Panama. PRAL candidates were vetted and upon their arrival at Fort Gulick subjected to testing that included reading, writing, basic math, and the ability to swim. For the next 90 days, PRAL students learned how to conduct multiple special operations missions, spending only 20 days in the formal classroom

environment with the rest of their time dedicated to navigating, living, and operating in Panama's triple-canopy jungle environment.

Upon its return to El Salvador, the PRAL was turned over to Special Forces / CIA paramilitary advisers. The PRAL would go on to conduct special reconnaissance, often directing the paratroopers into guerrilla base camps hidden high in the mountains. From forward staging areas, U.S. advisers assisted in launching six-man teams using assigned UH-1H helicopters which were part of the PRAL "air force". PRAL missions included not only battlefield intelligence gathering but surgical strike missions against targeted FMLN battlefield commanders and strategic sites controlled or occupied by the guerrillas. The PRAL would later be expanded to battalion size and retitled as the GOE, or Special Operations Group.

According to FMLN battlefield reports, the PRAL became worrisome and then feared. During one PRAL operation two recon men, dressed as civilians, infiltrated a 20-person guerrilla unit by claiming to be deserters from their army unit. For the next month they lived and traveled with the guerrillas gaining their trust. At the appointed time the two, now fully considered to be FMLN material, offered to teach a class on the M-60 light machine gun to their "compas". At the conclusion of the class the two locked, loaded, and then used the M-60 to mow down the assembled guerrillas. They collected additional intelligence information and then made their way back to the PRAL compound outside San Salvador. In 1993, during a three-day visit with former FMLN guerrillas in San Francisco, California, this author spoke with one female commander about the PRAL. Her unit had been targeted by a PRAL recon team which called in multiple air strikes against their base camp. "We hated and feared them," she told me. "They were like ghosts."

By mid-1982, the Green Berets had carried out forty-six separate MTTs with the Salvadoran military. These included counter-guerrilla operations, planning and assistance, small unit tactics, field medical skills, patrolling, harbor security, arms interdiction, advanced photography, heavy weapons employment (e.g. – 90mm recoilless rifle, mortars), dam security, SCUBA operations, and human rights considerations. Still, by March 1984, the guerrillas were taking the fight to the Americans. During that month, two-man Special Forces communication teams assigned to critical Salvadoran election points throughout the country came under fire. In Honduras, U.S. Army Ranger platoons were pre-positioned and standing by with assigned aircraft support. The Rangers were to act as an extraction/body recovery element should the Green Berets come under attack and be unable to exfiltrate on their own. "We were to get them or their bodies," remembers one former Ranger.

Harassing fire, sniper fire, and full-scale attacks against major Salvadoran military bases with Special Forces teams in place became commonplace. Such attacks occurred at El Paraiso, San Vicente, at the new Salvadoran training center in La Union, and elsewhere. Unknown to the American public at the time, Operation Bield Kirk provided for AC-130 gunships, based in Honduras, as well as AC-130 surveillance platforms, to the Green Berets under attack. The AC-130s would time and again for the course of the war respond to calls for help from the teams on the ground, devastating upwards of hundreds of guerrilla fighters who favored nighttime assaults.

One of the unintended consequences of Bield Kirk was to force the FMLN to order its field forces to cease gathering and moving in battalion size elements. Between PRAL recon teams discovering such movements and calling in Salvadoran air force assets and the Americans on the ground accessing AC-130 support from Honduras, the body counts being experienced by the guerrillas became staggering in numbers.

And the Salvadoran military, using its parachute battalion, began hitting those guerrilla columns trying to move their dead and wounded away from the killing zones. These immediate reaction efforts, as seen when the FMLN hit the training center at La Union, were deadly effective. Transported by the Salvadoran Air Force via the enhanced rotary airlift capability provided by the United States the Airborne battalion caught the attacking guerrilla force as it sought to escape, running them to ground and taking no prisoners. Former Force Recon Marine, Harry Clafin, recalls the paratroopers' locating guerrillas in ravines around the training center and shooting them down like fish in a barrel. Much later, Bronze Stars for Valor would be awarded to Special Forces soldiers at those cuartels attacked and defended, in part, by the American advisers.

After 1985, the FMLN and its five separate armies in the field could no longer move in large numbers much less attack strategic locations due to the overpowering Salvadoran and U.S. air support. In a 1995 CBS "60 Minutes" report Ed Bradley explored the use of the AC-130 "equalizer" with Special Forces veterans of the war. The Pentagon, when asked, had no comment.

In 1985, during one memorable instance, Green Beret Robert Kotin secured an M-60 light machine gun while under heavy enemy fire at San Miguel. As Salvadoran military forces abandoned the base's perimeter, falling back to the cuartel's helicopter launch site, where both Kotin and a Marine Corps captain were dug in, Kotin began firing. "Kotin asked for cover fire from the Marine officer," recalls Sergeant Major (ret) Bruce Hazelwood. "He [Kotin] then moved for-





ward under fire and secured a position from which he could cover the retreating Salvadorans. This while slowing the guerrilla advance. The “Gs” had penetrated the base and were close to overrunning it until this took place.” With the SF trooper pouring fire into the guerrilla ranks, his Marine counterpart assembled a force capable of mounting a counterattack. Using Kotin’s outgoing fire as cover, the Marine led his ESAF stragglers in an assault that threw the guerrillas back.

Both Americans would be recommended for Bronze Stars for Valor, but only the Marine chain of command went ahead at the time and approved the BSM with V device for its officer. “The Marines maintained a separate service administration even from the U.S. MilGrp,” pointed out Hazelwood (himself a former Marine). “The Army downgraded Kotin’s award for purely political reasons, but the Marine Corps acknowledged the participation of their officer in combat without any negative feedback.”

Inter-Service support in-country, often unofficial and never reported, included the U.S. Navy SEAL platoon at La Union, in 1984, providing needed munitions to their SF counterparts then building the Salvadoran national training center. The 15-man MTT under the command of Major Charlie Zimmerman was advised by a PRAL recon team that a guerrilla force of 300 fighters were preparing to attack the essentially wide-open base. “We each had an MP-5, a .45 pistol, and about 100 rounds of ammunition apiece,” recalls one adviser. “We were in a ditch all night long, just waiting for the “Gs” to attack. One hundred rounds would go through a submachine gun pretty damn fast!”

Afterward Colonel Joe Stringham, the MilGrp commander at the time, ordered the teams to arm themselves “with whatever you can get ahold of, just stay alive!”. Major Zimmerman had provided a detailed and thoughtful analysis, asking in part that his advisers be allowed to actively patrol the area around the developing base as a tripwire. Stringham, overriding the MilGrp attache’s objections, declared a zone twenty-five kilometers around the base to be a “training area”. Special Forces advisers began aggressive patrolling with their Salvadoran counterparts. The Americans drew brand new M-16s, M-79 grenade launchers, and M-60 light machine guns from the Salvadoran armory on base. In La Union, the SEAL platoon, having learned of the impending threat, unilaterally delivered Claymore mines, hand grenades, and additional rounds for the M-16s to the advisers. “Our primary concern was to be able to fight from inside the cuartel if attacked,” remembers one Green Beret. “But we had our people out in the bush conducting “training” both day and night. We went on patrols, capturing one guerrilla observer sitting in a tree observing the base.”

During one battalion-size training operation at this time, U.S. advisers with the Bracamonte BIRI already situated at the training base (CEMFA) turned the training mission into a 3-day combat op, targeting the guerrilla held town of Conchagua where the PRAL had confirmed the attacking force was assembling. Three companies of Bracamonte soldiers encircled the town and conducted a sweep. Green Beret advisers, armed with their new M-16s, accompanied them, including Major Zimmerman. “We had armed advisers in the field for over 24-hours,” says one of those Americans now long retired. “We just went with the flow.”



Master Sergeant (ret) Hubert “Blackjack” Jackson. (Photo courtesy the Greg Walker Collection)

CEMFA would not be successfully attacked by the FMLN until the next rotation of trainers/advisers replaced the original MTT. In the aftermath of that attack five Green Berets would ultimately receive Bronze Stars for Valor in holding off and then throwing back the guerrillas. The new MilGrp commander, Colonel James Steel, would visit the badly damaged base the next morning as Salvadoran paratroopers and Harry Clafin hunted down the escaping guerrillas.

In an earlier clash with guerrilla snipers in and around CEMFA, MSG (ret) Hubert “Blackjack” Jackson would display the level of calm courage expected of a Special Forces soldier when he rallied the Salvadoran troops he was working with, the snipers ultimately driven off. Jackson, today retired and completing his Ph.D., would be recommended for and ultimately receive an ARCOM with “V” Device for his actions that day. He is one of the few African American “Green Berets” to have been so recognized for his actions during the 10-year war in El Salvador.

### Job Well Done

On February 20, 1998, Colonel John P. McMullen issued a formal memorandum to the Joint Staff regarding the award of the Combat Infantryman and Combat Medic badges for those who served in El Salvador.

McMullen, a veteran of the war himself, was co-founder of the Veterans of Special Operations – El Salvador. He convened a Council

## THE JOINT STAFF



J-33, SPECIAL OPERATIONS DIVISION

20 Feb 98

TO: CG, US Army Special Operations Command  
 ATTN: DCSPER (COL Cummins/LTC Lang)  
 Fort Bragg, NC 28307-5000

SUBJ: Combat Infantryman Badge/Combat Medic Badge (CIB/CMB) -- El Salvador

Sir, enclosed under is the list of Army personnel eligible to receive the CIB/CMB for service in El Salvador. Personnel listed were advisors to Salvadoran infantry or special operations units at Brigade level or below, and served in direct ground combat with those units. All personnel meet the requirements for award of the CIB/CMB as stated in paras 8-6, 8-7 of AR 600-8-22, dated February 1995.

The enclosed list was boarded and vetted by a Council of Colonels from 14 January to 20 February 1998. Taken together, the Council Members' service in El Salvador covers the entire period of the war from 1981 to 1992. Members of the Council were:

|                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| COL Roy Trumble      | Cmdt, USASOA          |
| COL John McMullen    | J-3, SOD, Joint Staff |
| COL Hy Rothstein     | J-5, JSOC             |
| COL Chris St. John   | OASD(SO/LIC)          |
| LTC(P) Frank Pedrozo | MOSO-SOD, Army Staff  |
| LTC Bob Jarrell      | USSOCOM WO            |

Request that USASOC publish orders awarding to individual soldiers the CIB or CMB as appropriate.

JOHN P. McMULLEN  
 COL, USA  
 J-3, SOD/CP

of Colonels from January to February to board all those names at the time who "...were advisors to Salvadoran infantry or special operations units at Brigade level or below and served in direct ground combat with those units."

The process covered the entire approved years of the American involvement in the war (1981-1992). The criteria equaled the stringent considerations for the same awards for Project White Star (Laos). Over 80 recommendations were made, by name, to include the names of 11 non-SF personnel deemed eligible for the Combat Infantryman Badge.

McMullen, who the author was pleased to work for in Baghdad, Iraq, in late 2003 at the Coalition Provisional Authority, is the ultimate Quiet Professional. From 1989 until the U.S. Congress authorized full combat recognition and awards/decorations in 1996 for those who fought in El Salvador, it was John who fought the hard, lonely battles on our behalf even as he was still in uniform.

McMullen likewise located and often rewrote most of the early award recommendations for not only CIB/CMB consideration but for all those valor awards submitted to include the posthumous POW medal for Colonel David Pickett, shot down over El Salvador and then captured / executed by the FMLN.

Without now retired Colonel McMullen's guidance, direction, insights, observations, and "Never Quit" attitude, what we accomplished on behalf of our wounded, injured, or dead as well as their families — and those who answered the call in El Salvador — would not have occurred.

**"To its great credit, the Veterans of Foreign Wars voted to petition the Department of Defense to award an Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal to the veterans of Central America's longest war. Resolution 427 was unanimously approved during the VFW's 93rd National Convention in August 1992. According to Mr. Richard Kolb, executive director of the VFW magazine at the time, the matter became a priority issue for the VFW in 1993. The resolution was drafted by the author in conjunction with the VFW chapter (1643) in Bend, Oregon."**



Author (left) and Colonel (ret) John McMullen at Baghdad International Airport in late 2003. (Photo courtesy the Greg Walker Collection)

*"De Oppresso Liber!"* ❖

## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I first met Eldon Bargewell while stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was a young E5, recently reenlisted, and assigned to the 1/29th Infantry, Company B (RGR). Eldon was a captain then and working at Building 4.

Over the years we stayed in touch with Eldon providing first-hand material on MACV-SOG for my 1994 book [At the Hurricane's Eye — U.S. Special Operations Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm](#). When I deployed to Kuwait in 2002 it was now General Bargewell who I turned to for good guidance and direction while working at CFLCC Main with the Special Operations Forces Integration Detachment. One of my duties was to brief the General Officers each morning regarding the status and activities of U.S. and Coalition SOF throughout the AO to include Afghanistan. That's a tough audience. General Bargewell and I communicated via email now and then. His insights, observations, and suggestions as to what was important and what was not where a General Officer was concerned proved invaluable.

In a tragic accident in May 2019, Eldon passed away. He was 71 years young. We had been communicating regarding the status of those Special Forces soldiers who had served in El Salvador and who might wish to join the Special Operations Association (SOA). Major General Bargewell sent me the below email with his endorsement in 2013. With Eldon's endorsement my Associate Membership was upgraded to that of a General Membership (LIFE 0318).

Upon General Bargewell's review and recommendation the Special Operations Association (SOA) has opened its general membership roles to operators from the 19th and 20th Special Forces Groups and to those Special Forces and other SOF veterans of the war in El Salvador. Application information is online at the [SOA website](#) and for El Sal veterans should be accompanied with copies of assignment orders, awards and decorations orders (i.e. CIB/CMB for El Salvador), during the 1981 to 1992 timeframe covered by the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for this conflict."

*From: \*Eldon Bargewell*

*\*Date:\* September 2, 2013, 3:29:23 PM EDT*

*Ray [Calafell] and Greg, when producing the list of "authorized" SOF units I failed to add the two NG SF Groups, the 19th and 20th. My mistake. The 19th and 20th SFG have provided numerous ODA's and "B's" plus individual assignments to JSOTF's Staffs since 9/11 and should have been included — my mistake.\*\*\*\**

*3-7th SFG (Panama based) should also be automatically included because they have always been a part of 7th SFG. The fact they were assigned to Panama during the war in El Salvador and conflict in other Latin American countries, should not preclude a member from applying for general membership if they can prove deployment into El Salvador.. The 7th SFG soldiers and others that deployed there were under some very restrictive rules such as "not authorized to be involved in combat" however we all know that was political as evidenced by the death of SSG Fronius (sp?) in combat when his base camp was overrun by G's.\*\*\*\**

*Since Greg Walker deployed to OIF/OEF with his SF NG company he should meet the requirements for general membership and I support his request fully as long as he meets the validation requirements. Greg and I go back to 2nd Ranger Bn days.\*\*\*\**

*If there are questions about his request pls let me know.\*\*\*\**

*v/r Eldon\*\*\*\**

In memory of MG (ret) Eldon Bargewell — <https://eldonbargewell.org/career/>



MG Eldon Bargewell (Ret.)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Walker (ret) served with the 10th, 7th, USASFC, and 19th Special Forces Groups (Airborne). He is a veteran of the war in El Salvador and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Mr. Walker founded the Veterans of Special Operations – El Salvador, a grassroots fraternal organization that was at "the tip of the spear" in the 10-year long political campaign to see combat awards and decorations authorized for those who served, all Services, during El Salvador's civil war. He is a Life member of the Special Operations Association and Special Forces Association.

His awards and decorations include the Combat Infantryman Badge (X2), the Special Forces Tab, the Meritorious Service Medal (X3), and the Washington National Guard Legion of Merit.

A DoD trained and certified Warrior Care case manager with the U.S. SOCOM Warrior Care program (2009-2013). Walker advocated for the most seriously wounded, injured, or made ill Special Operations Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen serving during the Global War on Terrorism.

He is the author of [At the Hurricane's Eye — U.S. Special Operations Forces from Vietnam to Desert Storm](#) (Ivy Books, 1994), among other literary contributions to U.S. SOF history.

Today, Greg lives and writes from his home in Sisters, Oregon, along with his service pup, Tommy.

# 9/11 - 20th Anniversary with SF & FDNY

By Alex Quade, War Reporter,  
Honorary SFA National Lifetime Member

Honored that my friend, SOTF-71 CDR, SF COL (R) Pat Mahaney — from “that Chinook shoot-down op in Afghanistan” — invited me to join his extended SF and FDNY family at the World Trade Center Memorial for the 9/11 – 20th Anniversary ceremony (and to share with *Sentinel* magazine readers).

Our special group supported 20SFG MSG Ron Bucca and his family. His father, 11SFG WO1 Ronald Bucca — served in Vietnam, then DIA, then became FDNY Fire Marshal and sole FDNY member of the Joint Terrorism Task Force. After being only one of two firefighters to climb all the way to the 78th floor Sky Lobby, Ronald Bucca was killed in the south tower on 9/11. But, not before wrapping his firefighter turnout coat around civilian victims in the tower, later found. Camp Bucca, Iraq, is named for him — a place SF GWOT combat veterans know.

“I joined SF to follow in my dad’s footsteps. And to prevent more sons from losing their dads,” MSG Ron Bucca told me. We were part of the Honor Guard, along with his SF teammates.

President Joe Biden attended the ceremony. As Vice President, Biden dedicated the “Horse Soldier Statue”. (He sent me a challenge coin and kind note after he shared my “Horse Soldiers of 9/11” stories, while I was downrange.) Our special group included an original “Horse Soldier” — CSM Josh King — and 5SFG CDR Brent Lindeman, as MSG Ron Bucca served in 5th Group prior to 20th.

Also with us — SF COL Justin Sapp, military advisor and chief of staff to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. As a CPT, Justin Sapp was detailed to the CIA’s paramilitary component of the Special Activities Division and joined CIA Team Alpha. He was one of eight CIA officers dropped into the mountains of northern Afghanistan on 17 OCT 2021 — the very first Americans to operate inside Taliban territory. And, SF Major General (R) Robert Karmazin — former director, J-7/9, USSOCOM — who worked with COL Mahaney at Asymmetric Warfare Group.

Later, we gathered at the NYC Fire Museum for a private ceremony with dignitaries, visited the 9/11 Museum, a Firehouse, and the Horse Soldier Statue. Speaking of that statue, visited it again when I spent time with COL Pat Mahaney’s NCUO — National Center for Urban Operations’ team (more on NCUO later). SGM Joe Vega, SFOD-Delta (R) and MSG Jose Gordon (R) — who worked with COL Mahaney at AWG — loved the *Sentinel* Magazines. As did former. Ambassador Johnnie Carson, former Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen, former Dep. Cndt Installations/Logistics Lt.Gen Mark Faulkner (R), and others. ❖



FDNY and NYPD open 9/11 ceremony carrying US flag, flanked by SF Honor Guard, NYC. (Photo by: William Hauser)



MSG Ron Bucca honors his father WO1 Ron Bucca, at his engraved name at Memorial, during official ceremonial reading of names. His SF teammates and our special group in formation, have his back. (Photo by: William Hauser, Producer: Alex Quade)



MSG Ron Bucca (center) flanked by his 20th SFG teammates, former 5SFG teammates, and our special SF-FDNY family group. All wearing blue ribbons in honor of SF WO1 Ron Bucca, FDNY – KIA in towers 9/11. (Photo by: William Hauser, Producer: Alex Quade)



L-R: War Reporter Alex Quade, COL Pat Mahaney, MSG Ron Bucca, MG Robert Karmazin, COL Justin Sapp. (Photo by: William Hauser, Producer: Alex Quade)



COL Mahaney speaks at private ceremony at NYC Fire Museum. (Photo: Alex Quade)



FIRE MARSHAL  
**RONALD BUCCA**  
Sept. 11, 2001



Biden Coin

WO1 Ronald Bucca



At Statue above, NCUO & Inst. Defense & Business group. Front row (far-left) Alex Quade, (far-right) SGM Joe Vega, MSG Jose Gordon.



Above right, (L-R) NCUO Dir. COL Mahaney, Alex Quade, OPSO MSG Jose Gordon, Dep. Dir. SGM Joe Vega, SFOD-Delta (R) – with Sentinels at Ft. Hamilton.



Bottom right, NCUO COL Mahaney and SF COL Justin Sapp with Sentinels at American Legion event at historic NYAC. (Photos on this page courtesy Alex Quade)

## From the Editor continued

### 19 Oct 2001 ODA 595 and 2 Nov ODA 534 to Mazar e Sharif.

Alex's wonderful Horse Soldier video with some of the real Green Berets of the ODAs, and the "America's Response Monument" artist, Douwe Blumberg. The team discusses their experiences, while Douwe explains his sculpting and race to complete it before the NYC Veterans Day Parade. This stirring 19-minute video is narrated by Gary Sinise and produced by our Alex Quade: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7YD5KVszRY>, and Alex's video revealing many more details about the ODAs, the cunning Mullah Fazl, and the loss of Mike Spann CIA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=zAgxJijj4eY>.

### 20 Oct ODA 555 and SAD to Baghram

<https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/operation-enduring-freedom-the-first-49-days-1/>

<https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/operation-enduring-freedom-the-first-49-days-2/>

<https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/operation-enduring-freedom-the-first-49-days-3/>

### 14 Nov ODA 574 and Karzai to Kabul

<https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2017/03/22/green-berets-who-liberated-afghanistan-from-the-taliban-tell-their-stories-in-new-documentary/> and a short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQUNL1mZXQM>

This story has been told in *The Only Thing Worth Dying For*, by Eric Blehm, detailing the experiences of Operational Detachment Alpha 574.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v88e7N1ASNw> — a video interview of two "Horse Soldiers" discussing with Pat McAfee their activity and how it differed from the movie, where Bob Pennington states that the movie *12 Strong* captures the essence of an SF team, along with a bunch of Hollywood added. This is a rollicking interview that has a teamhouse flavor to it. There was even a SEAL there to add that interservice rivalry interplay. Long, but fun and informative.

Coming next month, something written by Jim Morris, author of *War Story*. ❖

How Miller, *Sentinel* Editor

## Book Review

### *Mazar-e Sharif: The First Victory of the 21st Century Against Terrorism* by Joint Special Operations University (JSOU)

By John Friberg

(2021, April 22, "JSOU Report on the Battle for Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan – 2001", SOF News, <https://sof.news/afghanistan/mazar-e-sharif-2001/>)

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) has published a report entitled *Mazar-e Sharif: The First Victory of the 21st Century Against Terrorism*. There are a lot of reports, news articles as well as a few books and movies about one of the first battles of American Special Forces against the Taliban in the fall of 2001. Not all the accounts have been accurate with some sensationalized to promote commercial activities. This report is an academic endeavor based on documentary evidence as well as interviews with those personally involved in the battle for Mazar-e Sharif – to include the events preceding and taking place after that battle.

The 'horse soldiers' of U.S. Army Special Forces, augmented with USAF combat controllers and the occasional CIA operator, linked up with Northern Alliance Forces and took the fight to the Taliban. Over the course of several months of the initial invasion a host of joint, interagency, and international actors contributed to the defeat of the Taliban regime. This report provides an excellent case study on the use of unconventional warfare by Special Forces.

#### Contents:

Chapter 1 – Preparation and Initial Contact

Chapter 2 – Infiltration

Chapter 3 – Organization and Buildup

Chapter 4 – Employment



The image above is from the cover of the JSOU report. General Abdul Rashid Dostum addresses his horsemen before battling Taliban forces in 2001. (Photo by Ak Yasin and Mark Nutsch)

Chapter 5 – Transition

Chapter 6 – Discussion: Successes, Failures, and Implications

Chapter 7 – Summary

The report concludes with an epilogue, acronyms listing, and end-notes. ❖

*Mazar-e Sharif: The First Victory of the 21st Century Against Terrorism*

By Dr. William Knarr, Maj Mark Nutsch (Ret.), and CW4 Robert Pennington (Ret.)

Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 21-2, April 2021 PDF, 154 pages

[https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=61118806](https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=61118806)

## SFA Chapter 78 September 2021 Meeting

# The DEA Visits Chapter 78

By How Miller

We were treated to a dynamic duo of DEA agents, who we could have listened to for far longer than the meeting allowed. We even ended up postponing the presentation by our Chapter's webmaster and graphic artist, Debra Holm, about how to use the new SFA TeamHouse website. We have included the instructions from her handout in this issue.

They started off with Michael A. "Mike" Davis, Associate Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Los Angeles Field Division, giving an overview of how the DEA builds cases that are capable of taking down a whole network of narcotics traffickers. He related a real case that resulted in a large takedown, some of the tools and methods they use, and how that contributed to a reduction on the supply side of the equation.

The DEA tries to work seamlessly with local agencies so that the locals get a large part of the credit and as much as 80% of any seized monies to use in local anti-narcotics efforts. They try a long game approach of coupling the reduction of supplies with a reduction in demand through many outreach programs to teens and others. Mike pointed out that the only way to make real progress is to make the market smaller, through better choices by individuals.

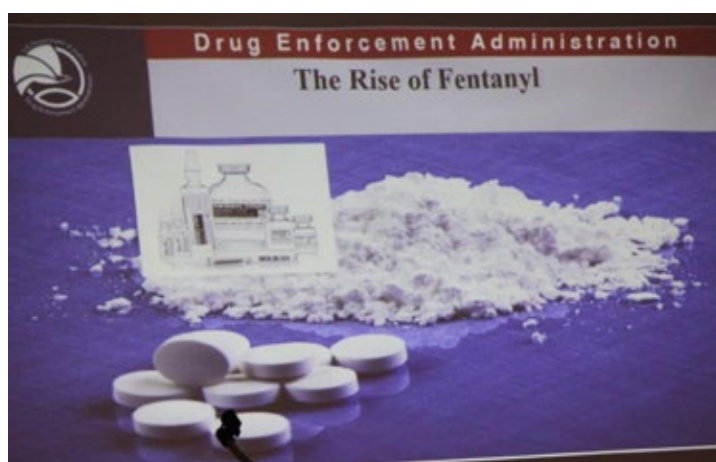
Mike described the different elements of the DEA and how they each contribute to reaching this overall goal. He also described some of the methods they use to hurt the trafficking business in the most effective ways.

Then one of Mike's agents, Ken Vo, showed us how he describes a sometimes-typical day, with its ups and downs, in his outreach presentations to teens. It is both a cautionary tale about the perils of drugs and the drug business, as well as a recruitment tool for future law enforcement candidates.

He described his own circuitous, but very deliberate path to landing and working his dream job. He put in a lot of time on stakeouts and other investigative work before he became an obviously talented candidate. One of the things in his tale was how he was ready to go home at 5pm and spend time with his family, which he is very conscientious about doing. But at 4:45 PM he needed to immediately respond with his team to a tip. That resulted in the arrest of a trafficker, and him getting home at 1am. He was informative, entertaining and believable.

Chapter 78 is on a path to build a relationship with the DEA and to do what we can to promote and aid their outreach programs. A number of ideas have been tossed around already. ❖

To learn more about the Los Angeles DEA, follow them at: Twitter: [@DEALOSANGELES](https://twitter.com/DEALOSANGELES) • Instagram: [@dealosangles](https://www.instagram.com/dealosangles)



At top, Mike Davis speaking before Chapter 78 members at their September meeting. (Photo by How Miller)

Center, Mike spoke about the growing problem of Fentanyl, and presented startling statistics about the steep rise in the numbers of overdose deaths related this substance and others. (Photo by Dennis DeRosia)

At bottom, the DEA's Diversion Control Division was discussed and how it works to accomplish its mission "to prevent, detect, and investigate the diversion of controlled pharmaceuticals and listed chemicals from legitimate sources while ensuring an adequate and uninterrupted supply for legitimate medical, commercial, and scientific needs." (Photo by Dennis DeRosia)



- ❶ Obscured for security reasons, DEA agent Ken Vo, at far left, fields questions from the audience.
- ❷ Chapter 78 Treasurer Richard Simonian, at left, with Chapter Vice President Don Gonnevill, at right, seated in the background.
- ❸ Left to right, Mark Miller, Kenn Miller, Jim Morris, Ed Barrett, Nick (guest), Bob Crebbs, Greg Horton, Thad Gembacz
- ❹ Left to right, Jim Suber, Jr, Irene Suber and Jim Suber.
- ❺ Jim Duffy, past Chapter President.

