



# SENTINEL

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 5 • MAY 2024

## EXIT WOUNDS: A Vietnam Elegy

Book Review and Excerpt Inside!

AUSA-GLAC:  
Highlight on Jim Cragg

A Tribute to  
MAJ Jean Luc Nash

**Afghan Community Update**  
*Mohave Community Afghan Veteran Reclaims  
Independence with Mobility Chair Donation*

**Hair-Raising Ride:**  
*Stay Calm and You May Stay Alive*

**FIRST MISSION**



# SENTINEL

VOLUME 15, ISSUE 5 • MAY 2024

## From the Editor



How Miller  
Sentinel Editor

After President Aaron Brandenburg's praise of Tony Bell, our exciting March guest speaker, we open with several; "Letters to the Editor."

### From the Mailbag:

John Vast served with another Green Beret, attached to a contingent of 3 Aussies at the II Corps Mike Force in and around Pleiku. This story is about his experience with interpreters.

We received two items of interest from Chapter member Ham Salley:

First, he unearthed a gem—a special recording of the "Ballad of the Green Beret" by the U.S. Army Band (check it out on our YouTube channel!). Debra Holm, the digital mastermind for the chapter, provides the link to the video, and also brings us up to date on additions to our Chapter's YouTube channel.

Secondly, Ham, who served at FOB 3 right next to the Khe Sanh base treats us to some history of the Rangers from October 1943, 75th infantry Merrill's marauders to resurrection in Vietnam. Then he briefly tells the "Rest of the Story."

### Chapter Spotlight:

Our support of Afghans who fought with us continues. Debra Holm gives us an update on the community in Mojave, especially the special donation made to aid a mobility-challenged community member.

Jim Cragg, a member who tirelessly bridges the gap between veteran organizations, shares updates from other groups and provides insights into his company's cutting-edge medical advancements. No wonder AUSA recently honored Jim for his outstanding contributions!

### Bookworm Corner:

I delve into Lanny Hunter's gripping memoir, *Exit Wounds*, Hunter's account of his year as a Medical Doctor for 5th SFG (A). He touched on so many things any soldier might relate to, especially former and current SF. It's packed with history, action, and perspective, written in a concise and personally relatable style. Directly following my review is an excerpt from his book—the first three chapters—so you can see for yourself.

### Beyond the Chapter Walls:

An article from a February 1970 issue of *Stars and Stripes* puts you in the passenger seat for a hair-raising 11-mile drive during the Vietnam War.

Denis Chericone, a former SOG member, takes us back to a perilous mission in Laos in his article "First Mission." Also check out the links in his bio.

### Friendly Reminders:

There's still time to sign up for the SFACON 2024 cruise!

Please feel free to view the pictures of our March Chapter Meeting. And don't be a stranger! Submit your own stories for future publications—we'd love to hear from you!

Enjoy. ❖

How Miller, *Sentinel* Editor

## IN THIS ISSUE:

From the President .....	1
Letters to the Editor .....	2
Association of the US Army — Greater Los Angeles Chapter Highlights Jim Cragg— VP Community Partners & UCLA ROTC Liaison, American Legion Post 283 Commander .....	4
Mohave Community Afghan Veteran Reclaims Independence with Mobility Chair Donation .....	5
A Tribute to MAJ Jean-Luc Nash USA (Ret).....	6
Book Review: <i>Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy</i> by Lanny Hunter .....	7
An Excerpt from <i>Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy</i> .....	8
Hair-Raising Ride: Stay Calm and You May Stay Alive .....	14
First Mission .....	15
Global Gathering of Green Berets: SFACON 2024.....	17
SFA Chapter 78 March 2024 Meeting .....	20

**FRONT COVER:** As part of Operation "Cook," on 8 September 1967, soldiers of Company "A", 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, 101st Airborne Brigade ascend to the top of mountainous terrain in the Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam with a mission to secure an area for a landing zone. (U.S. Army photo, National Archive ID #100310306)

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# From the President | May 2024



Aaron Brandenburg  
President SFA Ch. 78

I am writing to share with you my enthusiasm and admiration for the positive impact that our recent speaker, SGM (R) Tony Bell, had on me and the entire audience. SGM Bell truly inspired and motivated us with his powerful words, insightful perspectives, and infectious energy. For those of you that missed the meeting, SGM Bell spoke about the current state of the regiment and touched on a hot topic of mine, which are the challenges that we experience with the younger generations.

Throughout the meeting, SGM Bell captivated our attention with his engaging storytelling, wisdom, and genuine passion for the subject matter. His ability to connect with the audience on a personal level, to share his own experiences and challenges, and to offer practical advice and solutions that left a lasting impression on all of us.

What stood out to me the most about SGM Bell was his unwavering optimism, resilience, and commitment to empowering others to overcome obstacles, embrace change, and strive for personal and professional growth. His message of positivity, perseverance, and self-belief resonated deeply with me and left me feeling inspired and motivated to take on new challenges and opportunities.

While SGM Bell's focus was the regiment, I found his advice to be applicable in the civilian sector too. As I reflect on the importance of understanding and appreciating different generations, I am reminded of the significance of bridging the generational gap that often exists between us. In today's fast-paced world, it is more important than ever to foster connections and build understanding between people of all ages.

Every generation carries a distinct collection of experiences, values, and perspectives that mold our identities and influence our perceptions of the world. Although these differences may occasionally result in misunderstandings or disputes, I am convinced that they offer a priceless chance for mutual learning and collective growth. It is crucial that we dedicate the time to actively listen to each other, exchange our stories and experiences, and demonstrate empathy and understanding across different generations. Through these actions, we can dismantle barriers and construct pathways of communication.

As we work towards bridging the generational gap, let us remember the importance of mutual respect, open-mindedness, and a willingness to learn from each other. Let us celebrate the diversity of perspectives and experiences that each generation brings, and let us strive to create a world where people of all ages feel valued, heard, and appreciated. In the wise words of SGM Bell, "you either embrace change or things will change and move on without you."

Warm regards,  
Aaron Brandenburg  
President

Special Forces Association Chapter 78



## SFA Chapter 78 Monthly Meeting

May 18, 2024

Breakfast – 0800 • Meeting – 0830

**Courtyard by Marriott**

5865 Katella Ave, Room A, Cypress, CA 90630

### 2024 Meeting Schedule

June 15 | July 20 | August 17  
September 21 | October 19 | November 16  
December (to be announced)



SFA 78 President Aaron Brandenburg presented a chapter coin to guest speaker Tony Bell, co-founder of Freedoms Refuge. Tony's presentation at the March chapter meeting emphasized the importance of strong connections—"associates, associations, and networks"—for veterans, Army recruiting, and the SFA itself.

Leveraging their combined 56 years of military service, Tony Bell and his wife, Babette, founded Freedoms Refuge in Ohio. This veteran-focused organization uses equine therapy and various outdoor activities on their farm to empower veterans in need.



Learn more about Freedoms Refuge at [www.freedomsrefuge.com](http://www.freedomsrefuge.com).

# Letters to the Editor

**From:** John Wast

**Sent:** Tuesday, March 5, 2024 6:18 PM

**Subject:** Service with the Aussies

Steve Pratt (USASF) sergeant/medic and I were the only two Americans in a company with three Aussies for about four months. WO Barry Tilley was the CO, and WO's Geoff Smith and Laurie Jackson were platoon leaders, as were Steve and I, along with our medic and commo duties, respectively.

*The following is a story about company interpreters. I'm guessing that the following took place in June or July of '68 at the camp of the II Corps Mike Force in Pleiku.*

Every round-eye platoon leader in the Mike Force had an interpreter. Some were good, some were shitty, most were somewhere in between. At the time, our company was short two. Laurie Jackson and I both needed new interpreters. The powers that be got a new interpreter and assigned him to our company. Barry came to me in the bar (Big Marty's Club) and made a proposal. He said that since I spoke decent Montagnard would I mind if he assigned the new interpreter to Laurie and would get the next one assigned to the company. I was fine with that. A few hours later, Barry came back to me still in the bar, imagine that, and said, "He's awful. Can't speak any English at all. We don't know how he got the job. We tried to give him back, but they say we can't, and we're stuck with him. Sooooo... How about you take this guy,

and we'll give the next one to Laurie?" I was okay with that, so Barry brought the new interpreter into the bar, sat him at my table, and left us.

He was tall for a yard, 5' 10" or 11," and a good-looking kid. I could tell that he was nervous and embarrassed, and knew that he had failed his first test. I didn't know then, but he had attended a Vietnamese English language school. This would be unusual for a Yard and could mean that his family had some pull. Very rare.

I started talking to him the way Americans speak to people who they think don't understand them—loudly and with my hands. "I will speak slowly (my hand in front of my mouth flapping like duck lips), and we (pointing back and forth between the two of us) will teach each other."

I was pretty proud of myself. Then he said, "Okay, but I don't have a very good vocabulary." I believe my head spun around at least twice as I searched the room to see if anyone had heard this. I then reached across the table, put my right hand on his shoulder and my left over his mouth, and said, "You are mine. You are not to ever talk again to anyone but me, ever."

You see, he couldn't speak Aussie; no one could the first time they heard it, but he could speak the hell out of English. He was a great companion in the field and actually used words like admirable and distinguished. Fuck Westmoreland. I think I had the best interpreter in Vietnam.

He quit the Mike Force after the Duc Lap fight, said "Life is too short."

Glad I didn't get killed,

– Wast ❖

## The United States Army Band "Pershing's Own" Honors U.S. Army Special Forces

Watch and listen to the United States Army Band "Pershing's Own," ensemble "Country Roads" perform the "Ballad of the Green Berets" on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/v2Ed6ASAI3o?si=wDAH0CaejShzbozk>.

This small, stand-out ensemble comprised of instrumentalists and vocalists from across the Army Band connect audiences of all ages and walks of life to the heartland of America with traditional bluegrass, folk, and Irish music. Based at historic Fort Myer, Virginia, the U.S. Army band is the premier musical organization of the Nation's senior armed service.

Enjoy a wide range of performances, from performances of single pieces to full concerts at their official YouTube channel @usarmyband at <https://www.youtube.com/usarmyband>.



What's new at [@sfchapter78](#) on YouTube

- **New video categories:**
  - **Chapter Meeting Presentations:** February's talk—"Performance Psychology for the Human Performance Program" by Dr. Brandon Orr
  - **Meet SFA Chapter 78:** Interviews with chapter members, starting with Ramon Rodriguez.
- **Discover more SF history & videos!**  
Explore our playlists and channel subscriptions.
- **Click the bell for notifications!**  
Get notified whenever we add something new.

**From:** Ham Salley

**Sent:** Saturday, February 3, 2024 10:21 PM

**Subject:** Little know aspect of the '75th Infantry Regiment'

The February *Sentinel* was excellent reading, as usual. I enjoyed Dr. Webb's excellent article on Ranger history. I was particularly interested in Ranger School training and his short comments regarding the 75th Ranger Regiment. Anyway, the purpose of my letter is to highlight a little known aspect of the '75th Infantry Regiment' between WWII and Vietnam.

Extracts from SOC's '75th Ranger Regiment History':

- "The 75th Infantry Regiment was first organized in the China-Burma-India Theater on Oct. 3, 1943 as Task Force Galahad. It was during the campaigns in the China-Burma-India Theater that the regiment became known as Merrill's Marauders after its commander, Maj. Gen. Frank D. Merrill."
- "Rangers were again called to serve their country during the Vietnam War. The 75th Infantry was reorganized once more on Jan. 1, 1969, as a parent regiment under the Combat Arms Regimental System. Fifteen separate Ranger companies were formed from this reorganization. Thirteen served proudly in Vietnam until inactivation on Aug. 15, 1972."

There is a gap in that history: In 1954, I was living on the island of Okinawa as an Army BRAT. The Army unit stationed there was the 29th Infantry Regimental Combat Team. By sheer coincidence, my



My father, Col. Henry Salley with my brother, Lt. Ernest Salley, on Okinawa in 1955. Col. Salley was the Ryukyus Command G-4 and my brother was a Platoon Leader in the 84th Combat Engineers. He was issued a LST (Landing Ship Tank) to take his unit and equipment to off-lying islands to build bridges and widen small harbors. Later, he constructed the first road (Pacific Side) up to the northern end of Okinawa to support target practice for the first Atomic Cannon brought to the Pacific on Okinawa. Apparently there were no existing ranges on Okinawa suitable for the weapon to practice fire with high explosive rounds. The solution was to place the cannon on the south end of the island and build a range on the north end to accommodate the required firing distance. He said that almost every General and Admiral in the Pacific visited the road construction.



A photo of my brother's name tag and cigarette lighter with the 75th RCT unit insignia is on the next page (he didn't smoke). (Photo courtesy Ham Salley)

older brother, Ernest Salley, was a new Army Engineer Lieutenant who was also stationed on Okinawa in the 84th Combat Engineer Company, 29th Infantry Regimental Combat Team.

On 20 November, 1954, the 75th Infantry Regimental Combat Team was activated on Okinawa and assimilated the equipment of the 29th Infantry Regiment.

The 75th Regimental Combat Team was comprised of the 75th Infantry Regiment, 612th Field Artillery Battalion, 84th AAA Battery and the 84th Engineer Company. Special Units were Hq and Hq Company, Medical Company, Service Company, Heavy Mortar Company, Tank Company, Band Company. The three colors of the Teams shoulder patch refer to the three elements of the combat Team: Blue for Infantry, scarlet for Artillery and scarlet and white for the Engineers. The shield shape with crossed cannon and bayonet, symbolize the combat readiness of the unit. This patch was adopted by the 75th RCT shortly after their reactivation of the unit on Okinawa. The distinctive insignia of the Infantry Regiment was blue. The two elephant tusks are to represent Burma and in forming an arch supporting the Indian Star allude to Burma being the eastern gateway to India. The red stripe leading through the gateway signifies the defense of India and Central Burma, the areas in which the Regiment was engaged. The two crossed kukris (Gurkha knives) barring the gateway are used to represent the Regiment's battle honors during World War II, and symbolize the nature of jungle combat. The Tusks and Kukris taken together simulate the letter "M" and refer to Merrill's Marauders, its famous World War II designation. The unit motto is "ATTACK DESTROY DEFEND."

- Redesignated 21 June 1954 as the 75th Infantry
- Allotted 26 October 1954 to the Regular Army
- Activated 20 November 1954 on Okinawa (From 29th Infantry RCT)
- Inactivated 21 March 1956 on Okinawa (Back to 29th Infantry RCT) ❖

# Association of the US Army — Greater Los Angeles Chapter Highlights Jim Cragg

VP Community Partners & UCLA ROTC Liaison  
American Legion Post 283 Commander

**Editors Note:** Jim Cragg, an active member of SFA Chapter 78, currently serves as a Corporate Ambassador-At-Large for the chapter.

By Patti Mente

Originally published in the Greater Los Angeles Chapter, Association of the United States Army monthly publication, February 2024 issue, used with permission.

Jim Cragg is a recognized innovator, entrepreneur, and leader. He founded S.O.Tech Inc. in his brother's dining room in 1997 and built it into a major producer of defense, medical, aviation and adventure sports equipment employing over 80 people and supplying elite agencies around the world. Several his designs have been adopted throughout the US military, rescue and law enforcement communities. In 2008 he founded Paladin Designs, an international manufacturing corporation, as well as Vets Corps USA/GreenVetsLA, a charity supporting veterans, homeless/at-risk people, and the environment. He was also a founding member of four joint military units/programs, all under US Special Operations Command and one Army program under 1st Special Forces Command. Mr. Cragg was recognized with the 2007 SBA Small Business Success Competition 2nd Place Nationally, and the 2009 SBA Veteran Small Business Champion of the Year award. Mr. Cragg was also honored as UCLA's Veteran of the Year 2020 for his work success in the field.

Passionate about social and environmental impact, he has spoken in front of the California Senate, LA City Council and LA County Board of Supervisors on Veterans, homelessness, job creation and cleaning the environment. He played a key role in passing legislation on the ban on single use plastic bags. He was recognized with the 2012 Heal the Bay — Super Healer Award. His Veterans program members sew and distribute “Challenge Bears” to children in local schools bonding them in a sense of community service. As an American Legionnaire, he rose through the ranks to become the Commander of Ronald Reagan Pacific Palisades Post 283, one of the most influential posts in the American Legion. And representing the Army in the community, he has served as the 1st Vice President of the Association of the US Army — Greater Los Angeles Chapter. ❖



American Legion Commander Jim Cragg rides in the 2021 Pacific Palisades 4th of July parade with his family. (Photo by Rich Schmitt Photography)



Shown above with a Field Aid Station invented by Jim, he is a recognized inventor, holding eleven US patents. He has created over 1600 separate product designs, some of which were significant military, law enforcement and medical game changers. (Photo courtesy Jim Cragg)



Jim Cragg, first on the left, in 2007 with his team in Afghanistan on tank. (Photo courtesy Jim Cragg)

# Mohave Community Afghan Veteran Reclaims Independence with Mobility Chair Donation

By Debra Holm

Abdul Salam, a former Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician in Afghanistan, dedicated years to clearing deadly improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for US and Afghan soldiers. Navigating treacherous landscapes, Abdul and his team braved constant threats to ensure the safety of both US and Afghan soldiers. One fateful day, a Taliban booby trap forever altered his life, leaving him with both legs amputated above the knee.

As the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in 2021, the US Army evacuated Abdul and his family to the United States for a fresh start. Since March 2023, they've been adjusting to life in Mojave, California, grappling with the challenges of a new culture and environment, especially for Abdul, who navigates in a wheelchair, hampered by rough terrain and a steep ramp to their mobile home.

A spark of hope arrived in the form of a generous local woman who donated a 2003 electric scooter to Abdul. This newfound mobility was a lifeline, granting him independence as he navigated his new community. However, a persistent obstacle emerged—the scooter struggled to climb the ramp to their mobile home. This limitation became painfully clear during a heart-stopping incident when attempting the ascent with his two-year-old son; they toppled over, highlighting the need for a more suitable solution.

It became obvious that Abdul needed a mobility aid more suitable for the local environment—one that would have the power to handle the steep climb into his home and would be stable in offroad conditions, especially common outside of the park.

Nimo, Project Manager of Refugee Housing at the park in Mohave, researched mobility devices. He specifically sought out vehicles designed for off-road use, providing Abdul with the utmost flexibility in his environment. His research led him to the "Not-a-Wheelchair."

"Not-a-Wheelchair," aka "The Rig," was designed by Zack Nelson from the YouTube channel JerryRigEverything and his wife, Cambry Kaylor, who became paralyzed at age 18 in an equestrian vaulting accident. Frustrated by the high cost and performance limitations of the off-road wheelchairs they found on the market, they worked to design an affordable off-road wheelchair that is quick, light, and has a long traveling range. The stock model comes with a 1000-watt hub motor, which enables the chair to go 12 mph. It features a reverse function, which makes maneuvering so much easier. It also includes all-around suspension shocks to make for a smooth, safe ride over bumps and even jumps. To learn more about the Not-a-Wheelchair, visit <https://notawheelchair.com/products/the-rig>.



The chair was acquired through the generous donations of Affordable Community Living (ACL), a member of SFA Chapter 78, and an anonymous benefactor. Nimo and Abdul drove out from Mojave to pick it up on March 8. Abdul expressed his gratitude, saying he was "very thankful for what you are doing."

The chair has made a real difference in Abdul's life. He is now able to travel the quarter mile to the bus stop to meet his children after school. His increased ability to navigate the community has led to his taking on the commitment to care for the community's children on the days when parents are off-property for language training.

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## Afghan Community Update—April 2024

Afghan refugees in Mohave, California, are not only rebuilding their lives, they're also becoming skilled tradespeople, with 99% of the mobile home rehabilitations at the local park completed by them. Since ACL began working on housing for these refugees in September 2021, over 20 families (more than 100 people) have been settled into the community. ACL's support goes beyond housing, offering job training, cultural awareness training, and language training for the Afghan veterans who served alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan and their families.

Building on their success in mobile home rehabilitation, ACL has recently launched a new program to train these skilled individuals in installing solar power systems. This initiative not only expands their employment opportunities but also benefits the environment. Abdul Salam, featured in the previous story, was the proud recipient of the first solar-powered mobile home thanks to this innovative program.

The community's attempt at an urban farm last year highlights their entrepreneurial spirit. While zoning regulations prevented them from raising livestock on the designated land, their enthusiasm hasn't waned. They're currently exploring alternative locations to bring their farm dream to life. ❖

# A Tribute to MAJ Jean-Luc Nash USA (Ret)

Dec 30, 1951-Mar 12, 2016

Edited by MG (Ret.) David Morris

Jean-Luc Marcel Nash entered eternal life of a Special Forces warrior on March 12, 2016 after an exciting and adventurous life that began with his birth in Nancy, France on December 30, 1951. Jean-Luc came to the United States with his parents at 5 years of age.

He spent his childhood in Virginia until receiving his congressional appointment to USMA while attending the West Point prep school at Fort Belvoir, VA. Of special note is that Jean-Luc was selected to attend the highly competitive and demanding Ranger School while a USMA cadet. This experience began his career path as a Special Forces warrior.

Subsequent assignments to the Republic of Korea; Fort Bragg, NC; and Germany led to his selection to attend the advanced school at Fort Benning, GA. This is where he met his wife of 33 years, Alexandrine (AKA Michele) Philip. She was an intern in Research Development working at the School Brigade, at Fort Benning, Georgia. She also had a French background, and Jean-Luc needed help translating and filling out some official French government documents. That initial meeting and mutual attraction, as well as a common bond of a French heritage, cemented what became a 33 year marriage.

The purpose of these French documents provided a unique insight into one of the more classic adventures of his career. Jean-Luc had recently been stationed in Germany as a Special Forces officer and was selected to join a parachute training exercise with the French army. At the French border checkpoint, the customs officer noticed that Jean-Luc's passport listed Nancy, France as his place of birth. Therefore, he checked the list of French draft dodgers in his Rolodex and, ironically, Jean-Luc's name was on it, despite having left the country as a child. He was immediately arrested for draft dodging and taken to a French jail while still in his U.S. Special Forces uniform. Jean-Luc was allowed to call the U.S. Embassy to clarify the situation, but still spent one night in a French jail awaiting completion of diplomatic procedures. He liked to joke that he was the first West Point graduate arrested for draft dodging.

Jean-Luc and Michele married in December 1982, while he was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division as a Battalion S-3 and she was pursuing her PhD as an US Army Civilian Employee intern selectee. Jean-Luc's journey also included being an 82nd Airborne Company Commander and was part of combat operations in Grenada, known as Operation Urgent Fury. He was awarded the Bronze Star for valor for saving the lives of two soldiers while under heavy fire.

His next duty assignment was to attend the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, CA, where he also attended the Defense



Language Institute to learn Arabic and complete requirements for a master's degree. This training led to his selection to attend the Sudanese Senior Service School in Khartoum and a follow-on assignment with the Sudanese Army as an advisor, due his fluency in Arabic and French.

After another assignment at Fort Bragg as a PSYOP Company Commander he completed several Special Forces operational missions during Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield as well as a tour

of duty in Kuwait as a personal bodyguard for the Emir of Kuwait. Upon his return to the CONUS he was selected to attend U.S. Defense Attaché training by the U.S. State Department in Washington, DC and the high-risk personnel training course at Quantico, VA.

The Army also allowed his wife Michele to attend this training because of the high-risk assignment. Her background, teaching Psychological Warfare classes at Fort Bragg, complimented their assignment together to Africa.

His next assignment was to Chad as the Defense Attaché because of his fluency in French and Arabic and Special Forces background. They returned to Washington, DC, after completing a 3 year tour, and he retired as a major in 1997 at Fort Meade, MD. He was awarded the Legion of Merit for his exemplary military service at his formal retirement ceremony. He was immediately hired as a security consultant by Exxon-Mobile and returned to Africa on assignments, remaining employed there as a contractor until his wife Michele retired from Civil Service.

They purchased a home in Cantonment, FL after retirement in 2004. He died of a heart attack working out in the home basement gym in March 2016.

A book has been written and was published in 2018 by his stepdaughter Brigitte Cutshall about the positive impact Jean-Luc made upon those with whom he interacted: family, friends, and community. Titled *Expecting the Good: Inspiration from a Badass with a Big Heart* (the title was chosen because one of his grandsons liked to call him "badass grandpa"), the book is available at the West Point Cadet Book Store.



Rest in peace Jean-Luc: devoted husband, proud American, warrior, grandfather, and friend. You represented the epitome of the Special Forces motto,

De Oppresso Liber. ❖



## Book Review

### *Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy* by Lanny Hunter

By How Miller

*Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy* by Lanny Hunter is a wonderfully interwoven story that occurs in two time frames. The first is during the author's tour in Vietnam as a medical doctor assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). The second time frame was decades later, when he responded to a call for help from Y Kre Mlo, his old Montagnard right-hand man.

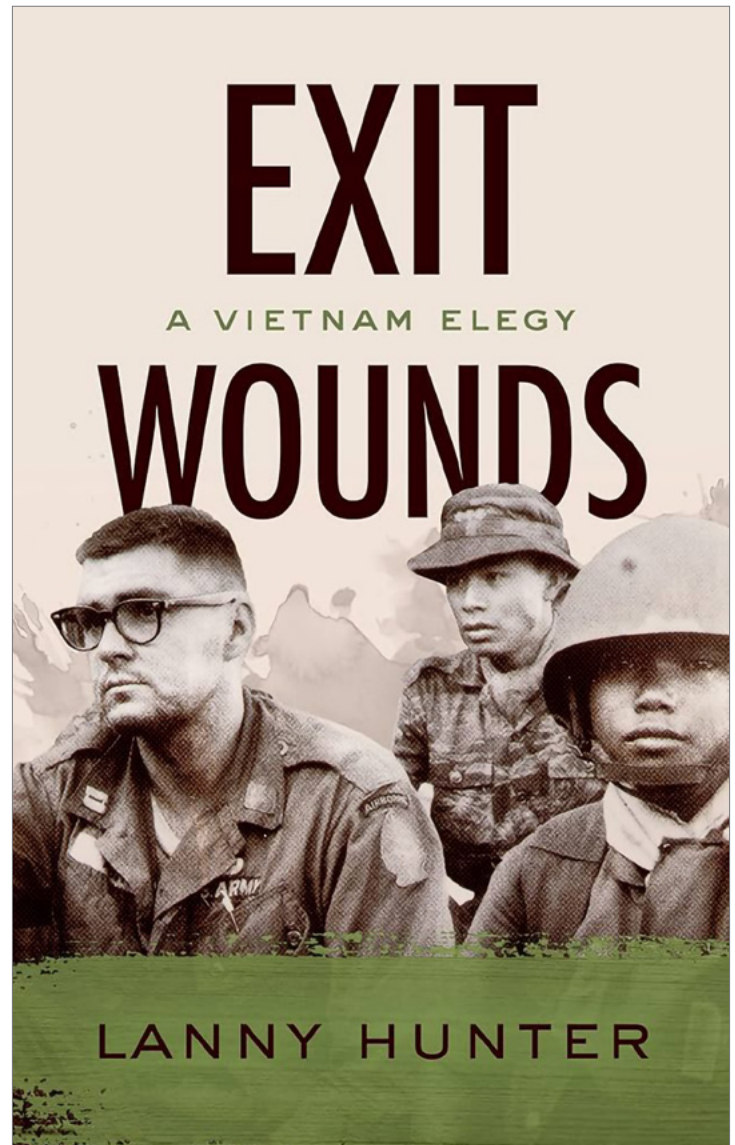
Among the many striking aspects of this tale is the eloquence with which he relates his experiences. His word choices pack a lot of precise meaning into individual sentences. In the first three short chapters, he draws you immediately into the action he experienced, tells of the 1997 letter he receives, and proceeds to layout the setting, describing Montagnard society and how he was drawn to it by their loyalty, tenacity, and courage. You can read that here beginning on page 8, but be forewarned; once you do, you will likely be hooked.

He goes on to fill in the larger picture and the many ways he looked at each part of it. He uses examples, as well as thoughts he had, to bring out the subtleties of the war. There is plenty of action, such as at Duc Co and Plei Me, as well as plenty of food for thought. Central to the story is the bond he felt with Y Kre and his many attempts to help his old friend get ahead in life with the help of his church organization.

Above all, there is a message about how the Montagnards seem to be in a never-ending role of being less than second-class citizens in their own country. When the U.S. left Vietnam, the Vietnamese communists were ultimately able to exact vengeance on their perceived enemies, especially those who worked with the Americans and the defeated South Vietnamese military. Some were killed outright; others, like Y Kre, managed to survive years of brutality in the communist "re-education" camps; and others, like the Montagnards in general, were also returned to permanent marginalization.

They are refused treatment at hospitals and cannot find employment equal to their skills, even when they are lucky and persistent enough to gain them. So, they continue to exist in their primitive agrarian lifestyle without much chance of improvement or integration into Vietnamese society. And beyond that, the communists seem determined to be rid of them by forcing them to move away to other countries, or worse. So even the status quo is less and less sustainable.

Lanny also, in very practical terms, delves into the why and how of our participation in the war, as seen in the rear-view mirror. His historical comparisons are informative, and his frank admissions of some of the things we got wrong can bring some perspective to the events we so intensely lived. His self-deprecating style and his obvious affection for and loyalty to Y Kre make this a very enjoyable and worthwhile read. ❖



*Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy*

By Lanny Hunter

Blackstone Publishing, Inc

Unabridged edition (October 10, 2023)

310 pages



AN EXCERPT FROM

# EXIT

A VIETNAM ELEGY

# WOUNDS

By Lanny Hunter

From, *Exit Wounds: A Vietnam Elegy*, published by Blackstone Publishing Inc., October 10, 2023, pages 1-20, reprinted with permission.

## ONE Night Medevac

*August, 1965, II Corps, South Vietnam*

I knelt in the chill, middle-of-the-night blackness near the chopper pad. Y-Kre, my Montagnard interpreter, knelt beside me, clutching my medical kit. The sandbagged perimeter of Detachment C-2, directly to our rear, was little more than an invisible, ominous presence. I shifted my M16 in my hands, conscious of the fact I had been flipping the safety on and off in a nervous rhythm. I hated night medevacs. I didn't feel that good about daylight runs either, but the night belonged to Mister Charles.

The request for a medevac from Duc Co created special apprehension. Situated near the Cambodian border, Duc Co was always in trouble. I had been roused from my *hootch* by the duty officer. The E-6 in the commo bunker vacated his chair. I sat at the single sideband, keyed the mike, and gave my call sign. "This is Column, over." The voice of the medic was sheathed in static. A Montagnard soldier had been shot "right between the fuckin' eyes." Incredulous, I began the military communication tango. "Please verify that transmission. Over."

The medic confirmed the location of the wound. The soldier was alive and his vital signs stable. "Can you come pick him up? Over."

I hesitated. "I'll see if the Dust Offs will fly. Out."

I called operations at Camp Holloway and explained the situation. It was only a *Yard* who was wounded, not an American. It gave everyone an out not to risk a night medevac. I hoped the pilots would decline the run. To my chagrin, they said they'd fly. I wished I had refused the medic's request. I had counted on a Dust Off pilot to refuse. He

probably didn't want to go either. It was difficult to show timidity in front of comrades. People were killed by courage, cowardice, bravado, bad luck, carelessness, and incompetence.

I strained to hear the sound of the Dust Off's approach. The first inkling was the subtle pulse of rotors against my ear drums. The increasing roar of the engine never overcame the gut-tightening *whop-whop-whop* of the rotors. Landing lights flashed on. The chopper had a white oval with a red cross emblazoned on the nose, not that the emblem prevented the Dust Offs from being fired on. The Huey touched down on the perforated-steel plate. Y-Kre tossed my medical kit through the hatch. We had barely clambered aboard when the chopper lifted off, tilted tail-up, and headed southwest toward Cambodia.

The crew chief passed me a headset. I slipped off my beret and adjusted the headphones, listening as the pilot tuned past frequencies. Armed Forces Radio gave encouragement: *Keep your weapon clean, guys*. Static interference. A snatch of some guy wailing about winners and losers and times a-changin'... Advice on foot care: *Your feet may save your life*. The pilot settled on Tony Bennett: *I left my heart in San Francisco*... It could make you weep.

I settled back against the bulkhead, cradling my M16, and marveled afresh at the skills of chopper pilots. Ignorance of another's expertise makes a mundane skill seem a marvel. The pilot flew on a specific azimuth at an airspeed calculated in knots and at an altitude intended to avoid flying into a mountain. The sky above was black. The jungle below was black. There were no landmarks. No mountain silhouettes. The pilot flew into the black abyss of Indian Country. Flying into unknown but miscellaneous, plausible catastrophes.

Unexpected weather, for starters, changed every calculus. Mechanical difficulty lurked inside the Lycoming engine. A chopper could also be downed, given the right circumstances, by anything from heavy automatic weapons to small arms. An injury to one or both pilots was very possibly an end-of-life calamity. Damage to one rotor would make the chopper uncontrollable. If the Jesus nut was shot off, both rotors would be lost and the Huey would drop like a rock. If a single round clipped the cable that drove the tail rotor, the unopposed torque of

the lift rotors caused the fuselage to spin like a top, faster and faster, and the chopper hit the ground like a carnival ride run amuck. Victor Charlie, secluded in his jungle hideaway, listened to the rotors and plotted direction and distance and kept in touch with comrades. Our chopper had been on the same azimuth for fifteen minutes. Our departure point had been C-2, Special Forces headquarters for all the teams in II Corps. The VC could lay a ruler on a map. We were either headed for Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia—out of the question—or Duc Co! The dinks weren't stupid. We were targeted. Dread was my constant companion, especially at night. Over the length of my tour, fatigue warped dread into doggedness.

The headset squawked as the pilot made contact with A-215 at Duc Co. The pilot had found these few acres of sovereign Special Forces territory. A friendly needle in a hostile haystack. It may have been routine to them, but it amazed me. *But then, he couldn't insert a chest tube.* The gunners slid open the hatches and the cold, damp wind sent a chill through me. They racked their M60s as the pilot initiated his descent. A misty rain engulfed us. My heart pounded, knowing we were corkscrewing between mountain peaks. The camp, with several generator-powered lights, became visible—a few sandbagged buildings, berms, bunkers, and trenches, all hacked out of the jungle. Even from the air it looked primitive and dangerous. Isolated. Vulnerable.

Lights flashed on to identify the LZ, and the Huey veered toward the chopper pad. The rotors whipped up muck as the pilot settled in. He shut down the engine to wait for us, and the pad went dark. Y-Kre and I dropped to the rain-soaked ground and were met by the team medic. He wore a tiger suit. No rank. No insignia. No name tag. Typical of many Special Forces troopers, in an effort to bond with the Montagnards, he had added native gear to his uniform. A strip of Montagnard loincloth was looped at his neck; a bone amulet hung at his chest. Brass bracelets dangled from his wrists. The troopers respected tribal customs, ate tribal food, studied local dialects, and participated in various Montagnard rituals. Their unique mission and isolation challenged them to live on the edge, and they developed a lifestyle that went with it.

Bill Patch, the light colonel who commanded the Special Forces detachments in II Corps, tolerated the slack comportment. He referred to his men as “the best of the best.” He understood them—individualistic, unconventional, and iconoclastic—and what happened to them in the bush. Patch also understood that regular line officers at Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (for the most part) neither understood nor supported the Special Forces mission. Beyond their congenital distaste for elite troops, the Special Forces way of life was guaranteed to annoy the most sympathetic. “Sometimes,” Patch admitted, “the guys go a little native. But they do a helluva job. It's hard, dirty, and bloody. They work their asses off. The bastards are only one, determined assault from being overrun.”

Y-Kre and I followed the medic through the camp. A-Team compounds were like nothing else on earth. Designed to be defended against overwhelming odds, the sandbagged, concertina-wired, zigzagged-trench perimeter overlooked cleared fields of fire rigged with tanglefoot barbed wire, command-detonated Claymores, trip mines, foo-gas, and detonating cord. Bunkers with interlocking machine guns anchored this killing zone. Communications trenches

connected to inner defensive positions, should the perimeter be breached. Pre-sighted mortars were dug into deep pits in the center of the compound. As many as seven or eight languages and dialects were spoken within a single camp. This polyglot mixture included not only American and Vietnamese Special Forces troopers, but also native laborers, mechanics, Bechtel civilian contractors, various Montagnard tribes, Nùngs, and Filipinos.

Nùngs were a warrior class of ethnic Chinese who had lived in Vietnam for centuries. They were hard-dying men who had a well-earned reputation as thoroughly tough killers and mercenaries. The Special Forces hired them as scouts, bodyguards, and ambushers. The Nùngs were also recruited to form a rapid reaction unit called the Mike Force, so-called for the letter “M” in the phonetic alphabet, which in this case stood for “mobile.” They were the highest-paid non-American troops in South Vietnam. Filipinos were often hired and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency and used routinely to staff its Asian operations. Their presence was a virtual declaration that if the place wasn't actually owned by the CIA, the Company was definitely involved in the action.

This motley collection of characters inevitably included VC agents and sympathizers. There were victims and victimizers of all types: criminals, pimps, whores, petty thieves, murderers, psychotics, and poltroons. All were tough. Some were vicious. Camp regulations were the only law and had to be enforced by the A-Team commander and his men. A goodly number of native women inhabited the camps. Some were spouses, some were girlfriends, some were whores, some were VC, and some were refugees from the fighting in the area. Most were on the payroll in some capacity—maids, cooks, laborers, washer women, and cleanup details. The actual number of Montagnard soldiers was never more than a couple hundred. These isolated compounds were like daggers pointed at the throat of the VC and NVA, daring them to counter the threat.

The medic had placed the wounded Montagnard in the teamhouse. My jacket was soggy, and I dropped it over a couple of jerry cans. I renewed my acquaintance with Dick Johnson, the captain who commanded A-215. I met some troopers I didn't know. One sat tilted back in a chair at a table, cigarette dangling from his mouth. “Doc, did you bring the mail?”

“No.” I reddened, realizing my blunder instantly. I should have stopped by the C-2 mail room to see if there was mail for their team. No standing order existed to get mail to isolated camps. But failure to seize any and every opportunity was inconsiderate. Careless indifference. Inexcusable. Almost unforgivable.

“Shit!” The chair dropped forward with a bang. The trooper furiously stubbed out his cigarette in the base of a hacksawed 155 shell-casing and stormed out. There was silence from the other men. No words of annoyance at my failure to pick up the mail. But no words to gloss over the rudeness of their teammate either. For that trooper—for all of them at that moment—a mailman was more important than anyone who showed up with two bars on his collar, even a doctor.

The wounded Montagnard was conscious. He had a small blue-black hole, just as the medic said, “right between the fuckin' eyes.” I rolled him to one side. There was no exit wound. He responded cogently

to my questions, as Y-Kre interpreted. I went over him quickly. He exhibited no gross neurological deficits. Vital signs were stable. What to do? Nothing, really. I started an IV and added antibiotics to the saline.

As I got the Montagnard on a stretcher, Dick Johnson told me I had a call from the C-Team. He led me to the commo bunker. The communications sergeant at C-2 reported that one of Herb Payne's Nùngs had been gutshot on patrol. "Gimme the coordinates," I said.

Johnson pushed a paper and pencil in front of me, and I jotted down the information. I pressed my lips against the mike. "Stand by. Over."

"That's a roger," came a cheery singsong reply.

I handed the coordinates to Johnson and his top sergeant. They consulted a map in the dim, yellow light of a naked bulb. "It's about twelve clicks from here," Johnson said. "Probably just inside Cambodia."

We went to the chopper, and Johnson and the pilot studied the map. After a moment, the pilot nodded.

"I'll tell the C-Team," Johnson said.

The pilot tightened his safety harness. "I'll notify Holloway."

We loaded the wounded Montagnard onto the chopper. A drizzly dawn broke as we pounded aloft. Y-Kre covered the *Yard* with an additional blanket, knelt close to his ear, and whispered in Rhade.

The Dust Off zeroed in on the coordinates. A short time later, we settled into a jungle clearing marked by yellow smoke. The wounded Nùng was piled aboard. Lifting off, a bullet beyond the clearing shattered the thigh of a door gunner. He pitched forward out of the chopper and hung suspended by his safety harness. The other gunner sprayed long deafening bursts of covering fire from his M60. Afraid the expanding catch-bag would jam his weapon, he tore it away. Smoking brass spewed into the air.

Y-Kre and I tried to haul the wounded gunner aboard by his safety harness, but he was dead weight. Perched at the open hatch, with the pitching chopper and the brass underfoot, I was afraid I would fall out. The pilot tried to set down, but every time he skimmed a clearing, we took ground fire. He set an azimuth for the C-Team.

I let the door gunner dangle and turned to the Nùng, probing his belly wound with a finger. It popped into his abdomen. Bleeding seemed minimal. Y-Kre applied a pressure dressing. The Nùng's pulse was thready and weak. I started an IV and wrung in a unit of albumin, the olive-green aluminum container collapsing in my hands like newsprint. A plasma expander, albumin was a lousy substitute for blood, but the best I could do. I tossed aside the empty albumin packet and switched to Dextran, adding antibiotics to the infusion. The Nùng was muttering in Mandarin, but Y-Kre could communicate with him in Vietnamese. I sat back and watched the leg of the door gunner's fatigues fill up with blood.

Sergeants Cope and Franklin, two of my senior medics, waited at the C-2 chopper pad. The pilot hovered as the medics, struggling against the rotor blast, cut the door gunner free from his harness. They looked at me and shook their heads. I told myself that it was a mortal wound from the instant he was hit. The pilot settled onto the perforated-steel plate. We off-loaded the Montagnard and Nùng.

I leaned back into the hatch and yelled at the pilot above the roar of the engine. "Do you want me to get your gunner to Graves'?"

"We'll do it!"

I motioned to my medics, waiting at the edge of the chopper pad. They returned with the body—a soggy mess of flak vest, jungle fatigues, and clotted blood. Y-Kre and I stretched him out on the deck of the chopper. I removed one of his dog tags, pried open his jaw, and placed the tag on his swollen tongue. I taped his mouth shut with army-green tape, and we carefully wrapped his body in an army blanket, making certain it was neat and in good order, with edges folded and tucked. I couldn't look the chopper crew in the face. Y-Kre and I dropped to the ground. We watched the Huey lift off in tender inches and gently swivel east toward Camp Holloway.

I brought my hand slowly to my forehead in salute as the chopper gained altitude.

Y-Kre studied my face. With his limited medical knowledge and his absolute faith in me, he said, "You did all."

## TWO Letter from a Ghost

*January 1997*

The letter came to my home in Flagstaff, Arizona, where my family and I had moved in 1971 after I completed a dermatology residency. I handled the slightly soiled envelope warily, noting postage from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I went upstairs for privacy, feeling the weight of the envelope. I dawdled... Finally, carefully, I opened it. The letter was in ballpoint on lined notebook paper.

January, 1997  
Boun-M'Bon  
Dac Lac Province, Vietnam

My Dear Brother Lanny Hunter,

I always remember my brother Lanny Hunter and hope that you still remember me. You brought me to the Lake Biền Hòa to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. You and I worked together at Detachment C-2 Camp in Pleiku. During that period I actively worked for the US Green Beret Commando Airborne Force. Maybe you can recall it.

During my employment with you, you did give me some good advices. I should thank you. For the present time, I am in poor miserable conditions. Thus, if you feel some sympathy for me and have a kind concern for me, please help me.

I was detained in the reeducation camp from 1975 to 1985 at Camp Number Three located in Tân Kỳ District, Nghệ Tĩnh province. My family is very poor now, brother. Lack of everythings. But my wife and eight children still steadfast trusting to our Lord. I myself still firmly believe in God by the name of Jesus Christ my Savior. Continue pray for me and my family that may God help me to have more understanding in God's word and live completely correct according to the guide of the Christians in New Testament.

The government isn't yet allow us to develop the Church of Christ and do not give us certificate. I still try my best to serve the Lord. We study Bible in the family, house to house together. I continue to preach from house to house. I spend my own money to go back and forth from my village to Buôn Mê Thuột to mobilize our Christians there.

My love to you, brother,  
Y-Kre Mlo

I clutched Y-Kre's letter in my hand, sinking into a hollow self. I went downstairs and slipped out onto the deck. Sat down. Put my head between my knees. Took deep, slow breaths. It was dry season now in Vietnam's Central Highlands. In northern Arizona, it was winter. Four inches of snow extended to a western ridge, the expanse broken by rock outcroppings and scattered ponderosa pines. The San Francisco Peaks, sacred mountains of the Navajo and Hopi, soared above the Colorado Plateau. The low-hanging sun yielded some warmth as it torched the underbellies of clouds. Reflection from the snow turned the landscape red. Vietnam, three decades before and ten thousand miles distant, but always with me in bits and pieces, came back with a vengeance.

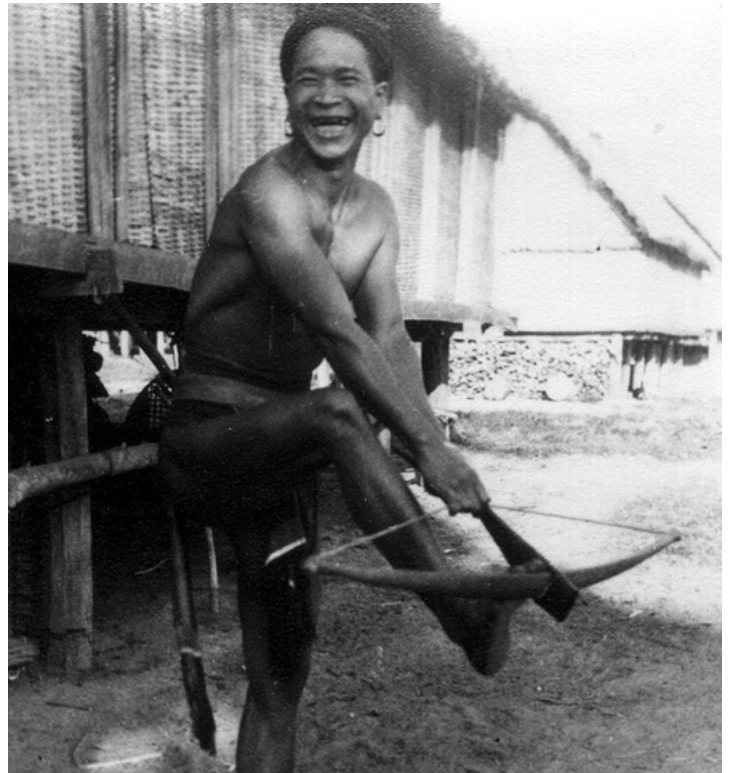
I reread Y-Kre's letter. His tortuously scrawled words, like fiery pokers, rekindled embers buried in the ash heap of my memories. The setting sun flamed out. A chill settled over the plateau, doubly penetrating because of Y-Kre's bleak letter. I shivered. A frost formed on my soul as I returned to my study and a crackling cedar fire.

## THREE

### Mqi

I tried to imagine Y-Kre, now in his midforties, after ten years in the grip of his communist captors. I met him on my first day at Detachment C-2, a relatively recent Montagnard recruit for the Strike Force. He was fifteen or sixteen years old—a man by Montagnard standards. He stood about five and a half feet tall, with skin the color of creamed coffee and thick black hair. He had a ready smile. Quiet, soft-spoken, polite, handsome, and winsome, he had acquired the habit of shaking hands and did so at every opportunity. He had been trained as a medic, but his real value lay in his language skills. He spoke not only a dozen Montagnard dialects, but also Vietnamese, French, and enough English to be better at it than anyone else around. His syntax was muddled, but he had a remarkable vocabulary. He once showed me a vocabulary list he was studying: *oppression, downtrodden, persecution, intervention, punished, hellno, fuckyes, and shitstorm*. With Y-Kre at my side, I could communicate with almost anyone who materialized out of the highland haze, although occasionally he would say, “Not understand, Doc.”

The Montagnards evolved as a distinct, ethnic culture from aboriginal, Mon-Khmer, and Malay-Polynesian peoples. They were self-sufficient, hardy, intelligent, primitive, superstitious, and fiercely proud, and had preserved their culture almost undiluted into the modern era. The millennia had passed them by, and they lived in isolated villages scattered throughout the highlands that crossed the borders between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.



Montagnard villager in the Central Highlands, 1965. Source: Author's personal file, 1965.

The word *Montagnard* is a French term meaning “people of the mountain.” There were about forty tribes; among them were the Rhade, Jarai, Bahnar, Koho, Mnong, and Stieng, speaking almost as many dialects. They inhabited thatch-roofed huts of bamboo raised on stilts. Pigs and chickens were penned beneath the huts. A communal longhouse occupied the center of each village. Larger than all other structures, its soaring, steeply pitched, thatched roof was shaped like the blade of an ax to symbolize strength. The size of the longhouse, in comparison to those in surrounding villages, demonstrated the village's prosperity. All matters of importance for village life took place there. It served as a school for teaching tribal customs. Even though Montagnard society is matriarchal, only males could enter the communal longhouse. Adolescent boys could stay there until they married, as could adult widowers.

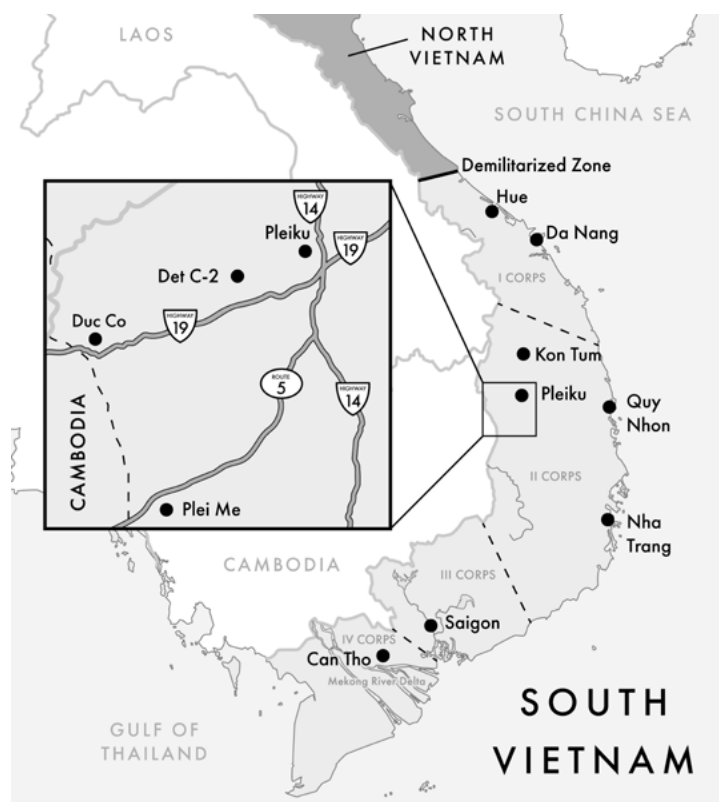
Montagnards lived by slash-and-burn farming. They augmented their diet with wild fruits, plants, roots, lizards, snakes, dogs, and rats. They raised their own tobacco. They crafted crossbows, arrows, knives, and spears. Large game was brought down with arrows tipped in poison extracted from a jungle plant. Skill with a shuttle and loom created coarse cloth for loincloths, robes, and blankets. Bracelets and other jewelry were fabricated from brass. Their brew of choice was rice wine, concocted by fermenting rice in large clay crocks. The mash was layered with bamboo leaves and topped off with water. Bamboo straws were thrust to the bottom of the crock to suck water through the mash, the leaves filtering out the largest particulate matter.

The Vietnamese regarded the Montagnards as *mqi* (savage). They had both repressed and neglected the Montagnards for twenty centuries. Discrimination was institutionalized. For their part, the Montagnards wished to be left alone. They had well-established intertribal connections, and their longing for independence was an open secret.

The CIA conceived the idea of arming the Montagnards in 1960. They hoped to persuade the tribes to join the cause of South Vietnam and provide a military threat to the VC and NVA infiltrating the Central Highlands. The effort was in full swing by 1963. In executing this program, thousands of Montagnards were catapulted into the twentieth century. Recruits were taken out of their loincloths and outfitted in tiger suits. Jungle boots were placed on thickly calloused feet. They exchanged their crossbows for carbines and their spears for grenades. They were trained in marksmanship, patrolling, squad maneuver, fire discipline, and rapid response drill. Some were trained to operate crew-served weapons. Others served as radio operators, medics, and interpreters. Montagnard units were officially designated the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG. They were placed under the command of the Special Forces.

The Special Forces referred to the tribes as *Yards*, but it was a term of affection, not a pejorative. We called the CIDG the Strike Force and referred to individual troopers as Strikers. We were a good fit. The *Yards* tended to like Caucasians, harking back to days when French colonials offered them protection from the Vietnamese. When I and my Special Forces comrades lived and worked among the Montagnards, it was clear they despised the condescending Vietnamese.

Detachment C-2, my duty assignment when I arrived in-country in July 1965, was in the middle of Pleiku province. It was some fifteen kilometers west of the province capital, Pleiku City, and thirty-five kilometers from South Vietnam's border with Cambodia and Laos. Those borders were clearly delineated on a map. For boots on the ground, there were no visible geographic distinctions. It was all a blurred, bloody battlefield. The twelve-man A-Teams under C-2 command were strategically scattered along the Cambodian and Laotian frontiers.



Tactical Map, South Vietnam, 1965/66. Map designed by Larissa Ezell.



Capt. Lanny Hunter with Y-Kre Mlo, Detachment C-2, South Vietnam, July 1965. Source: Author's personal file, 1965.

C-2 consisted of about thirty troopers garrisoned in a sandbagged, bunkered, rectangular compound about the size of a football field. I stepped off the Huey that ferried me in and eyed a hand-painted, wooden sign that arched over the gate: *Bù Lại Sự Tổn Thất Là Kiểm Soát Được Những Vùng Hẻo Lánh*. The translation underneath read, *The Risk of Loss Is Worth Control of Remote Areas*. In 1965, that didn't feel like bravado.

I walked into the compound, suitcase and M16 in hand, challenged by armed Nùngs. I met my commander, Bill Patch, and was rapidly absorbed into my duties, which included two almost incomprehensible realities: the Montagnards and the Montagnard Hospital. My personal introduction to the Montagnards and their culture was Y-Kre Mlo. He was Rhade. In the Rhade language, gender was always incorporated into the name. "Y" meant *mister* and preceded all male names. His first name was pronounced *ee-cray*. Literally translated, it was Mister Kre. It was as if I were always called Mister Lanny. Very quaint. Very useful.

Y-Kre quickly became indispensable to me in the performance of my duties. A crude hospital for wounded CIDG soldiers was established at Detachment C-2, as they were generally discriminated against at Vietnamese hospitals because of their ethnicity. Two small wood-frame, whitewashed buildings, identified with red crosses, were constructed outside the C-Team compound. This meant, of course, they were outside the perimeter and unprotected—a particular concern at night. Emergency care and procedures were done in the C-Team dispensary, which had a small surgical unit, field X-ray machine, and medical laboratory. Convalescent care was done within the hospital buildings. Each building had about twenty metal cots. Wood-fired stoves provided a source of heat and a cooking surface. Patients (and their families) cooked and cleaned.

Y-Kre essentially administered the Montagnard Hospital. He was my medical right hand and my alter ego. With my medicine and his language, the word went out that at C-2 there was medical care, food, clothing, compassion, protection, enthusiasm, and optimism. We could be trusted. The little hospital became a magnet for all Montagnards, not just battle casualties. It was a given that VC were among my patients. The wounded streamed in. Gunshot wounds, frag wounds, mines, booby traps, punji stakes, burns, and knife slashes.

I was also confronted by the sick, the weak, the maimed, the ruined, the orphaned, and the lost. I took care of abrasions, fractures, monkey bites, snake bites, and water buffalo gorings. I treated fungal infections, pneumonia, diarrheal illness, lice, liver failure, leprosy, plague, dengue fever, malaria, typhoid, encephalitis, tapeworm, hookworm, schistosomiasis, and scabies. There were illnesses whose etiology I could only guess at—or hadn't a clue—and which I had no way of properly treating. There were old women with teeth stained by betel leaves and areca nuts, commonly used as mild stimulants. There were babies, sick or defective, starting the arduous journey of their lives with little hope and even less advantage. There were big-eyed children whose stoicism in the face of the war and its ravages could tear your heart out.

Y-Kre shared my risks. He never refused to climb on a chopper or go on a mission—no matter how cockeyed. I became his mentor in the English language, Western culture, medicine, American policy, and finally religion. He informed me about the world of the Montagnards, their yearnings for independence, and his own ambitions. He was my comrade-in-arms, a passable medic, and my interpreter. Above all, Y-Kre knew the Central Highlands. If we had to go to ground, he knew where. Over time, he became a friend and protégé. He also became my Christian brother.

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The dying cedar coals in my study in Flagstaff left me lost in thought. I concluded, knowing it would quicken a troubled past, that I must help Y-Kre. Poor, brave, tragic Y-Kre. Help him? The last time I helped him I set him on the path that produced this terrible letter. Perhaps the best way to help Y-Kre was to stay out of his life. I was ignorant of the current political situation in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Perhaps even a letter from me, let alone other assistance, would place him in danger once again. But, I could only take him at his word. *Thus, if you feel some sympathy for me and have a kind concern for me, please help me.*

The United States government made policy in Vietnam, both the getting in and the getting out. America held the marker for South Vietnam. But I held the marker for Y-Kre Mlo. Maybe I could help him. Maybe not. But I knew I had to try. If he had the courage to persevere, I must at least try to meet him on his journey. I had to go back.

Ambiguity is a motherfucker. ❖



Capt. Lanny Hunter with patients and family members at Montagnard Hospital, Det. C-2, 1965. Source: Author's personal file, 1965.



Capt. Lanny Hunter at Montagnard Hospital, Det. C-2, with patients and family, 1965. Source: Author's personal file, 1965.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**—Lanny Hunter is one of the most highly decorated medical officers of the Vietnam War, having been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Bronze Star-V, the Air Medal, Purple Heart, Combat Medical Badge, and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Gold Star. He has lectured in medical, military, educational, civil, and church venues. Hunter has written several works, including *Living Dogs and Dead Lions*, *My Soul to Keep*, and *Stories of Desire and Narratives of Faith*. He lives with his wife, Carolyn, in Denver, Colorado.

In the photo at left, Capt. Lanny Hunter with Montagnard girl in spica cast for hip injury, Montagnard Hospital, Det. C-2, 1965. Source: Author's personal file, 1965.

## Hair-Raising Ride

# Stay Calm and You May Stay Alive

**Editor's Note:** The following story is being reprinted with the permission of Stars and Stripes, which retains all rights. The story was written by Spec. 4 Philip McCombs, Stars and Stripes staff correspondent and originally ran Feb. 23, 1970 in the Pacific Stars and Stripes, Three-star edition, serving forces stationed in South Vietnam, and part of the 7th Fleet. Find the original article and issue in Stars and Stripes' historic newspaper archive: <https://starsandstripes.newspaperarchive.com/>.

By Spec. 4 Philip McCombs  
Stars & Stripes Staff Correspondent

SAIGON — Stay calm. It is only a 11-mile drive north from Saigon to Long Binh. Nice big highway, plenty of room for everyone. Just stay calm. Stay calm dammit!

Lot of traffic on the road today. The highway is like two giant machine guns hurling three-ton bullets in opposite directions over a flat plain.

The key is to stay relaxed. Just plug along. Try to forget the hustle and bustle and then:

"Watch out, you fool!" Driving on this road is a very tricky business. Stirling Moss I'm not.

Self-control is the key. I had a nice, relaxing breakfast at the USO and maintained my cool on the road for all of 35 seconds before:

"Rey, what are you doing? Hey. Look out. Look out!" A very close call. Why do those big trucks always drive on the line? Maybe they can aim better that way.

What pretty countryside. Except for that dump over there, and that cluster of new factories belching smoke and the smog that keeps me from seeing more than 100 yards down the road, this would be a tropical paradise.

Hmmmm. A deuce-and-a-half seems to be closing in on me from behind. He seems to be closing fast. That's quite a feat, since I'm doing 60 miles an hour. You know, one of the most interesting things about a deuce-and-a-half is:

"Arrrrrrrrrrrrgh." — is that it has a very loud horn.

The Vietnamese are interesting people. That Oriental, patient philosophy of life. I just wonder why. Good Lord!

"Screeeeeeeeeeeech." — Why they are such, uh, aggressive drivers. Maybe they watch too many Steve McQueen movies.

A Vietnamese boy's climbing out the window of a bus. The bus is going 70 miles an hour. The boy is hanging from the side of the bus, laughing and shouting. A tanker is approaching from the other direction.

Why are we stopped? A traffic jam? It is the middle of countryside. By standing on the hood I can count 300 horn-honking vehicles. Barges carrying explosives are going under the bridge. There are five barges and it takes half an hour for them to pass.

Finally crossing the bridge:

"Bliaaaaaaaaaaapppp. Blap. Blap. Blap."

Why is that bridge guard firing his M18 into the air? Sure speeds up the traffic, but I wonder where the bullets fall? Oh well, it's a war zone.

Here we are at last. Hmmmm, there's a bullet hole in the fender? Never saw that before. ❖



The roofs of the Cao Dai church at Trang Bang are visible over the line of stalled traffic along Route 1, 25 miles NW of Saigon, South Vietnam on June 8, 1972. Two NVA battalions have invaded the suburbs of this district town and disrupted traffic on the road to Saigon. (AP Photo/Nick Ut, licensed by CC 2.0 Deed; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)



# FIRST MISSION

By Denis Chericone

I'd been watching things for about a month when Bob and Chuckles decided it was time for me to get to work. Our commanders, Pitbull and Q, were ordered to send a team to snoop out Co Roc Mountain after receiving intel that something was bubbling up in the area. The most difficult part of the operation would be approaching the massif without being detected. This meant a long walk through the bush—the enemy bush.

The approach on a SOG objective was perhaps the most intimidating aspect of the missions, the biggest gamble with the highest stakes, period. Although helos offered easier access, they weren't very stealthy, and so, for this op, the team would have to be inserted out of sight of the mountain. I'd be flying in a backup “chase” chopper in case anyone was hurt during the team's insertion, as a lot could go wrong when placing a team in the bush. There were many variables, most of which we had no control over.

SOG's long-range reconnaissance had become much more vulnerable by late 1967. Through a solid spy network, our enemy had learned of SOG's activities and was devising countermeasures to devour our missions. Casualties began increasing, and gathering information had gone from dangerous to deadly. A day earlier, with a concerned reluctance, one of the older guys told me to be on my toes. He said the operation was tempting fate. It was too obvious, he said, especially now, especially there.

As he looked out to the mountain, he speculated softly, “Co Roc's time never arrived. It should have, though. It should have been a memory by now.”

Even though I was a rookie, I understood, and the mission made me wonder. The massif was such an evident objective. Of course, we'd be sending someone in to check it out, but more than a few of the guys had reservations. It just didn't feel right. Something hung in the air, but I brushed it off as a rube's shivering jitters. Sleep was evasive that night.

We left the base early, at dawn, and headed into Laos. The morning fog hung onto both ships as we strained for altitude, and I couldn't ignore Co Roc when we flew over the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. The camp was so close that it could almost hold hands with the mountain. Co Roc was a cold presence looming in the background like a sentinel guarding the passage. Our altitude was about the same as the mountain's crest, and as we flew past, I was startled to see a large bird drop from one of the overgrown outcroppings near the summit. It plummeted, spread its wings, caught an updraft, and disappeared into the mists hanging on to the mountain. Deeply awed by the sight, both the crew chief and I shared a surprised smile as we made our way more deeply into the forbidden and lush lands of Laos. Sliding away from the door and leaning against the opposite wall of the ship, I began thinking my imagination hadn't been wrong and that the massif was, indeed, a holdover from the age of dinosaurs.

Co Roc was a brash icon of Vietnamese resistance. It held secrets and represented their version of “Fuck you!” for those who believed the country was simply there for the taking. It had endured and served as a headquarters and artillery bastion in the war against the French. Shaped like an inverted bread pan, it was a mile-long massif, a little less than a mile high, and heavily overgrown with flora and laced with tunnels and caves. A nightmare for those unfamiliar with its tangled web of passageways, dead ends, and paths to nowhere, French commanders had wisely avoided contesting its presence. And now, twenty years later, not much had changed since the French had come and gone. It was still an artillery stronghold and supply headquarters, and the various attempts made by SOG to penetrate the austere defiance of the mountain hadn't made much progress. It was all just too costly to pursue in the long run. So, Co Roc remained a mystery, impervious, and aloof to the intentions of the Americans. It wasn't until the stomp of the siege overwhelmed us that we understood how vital the mountain was to our enemy's intentions and how we had squandered an opportunity to reduce its impact.

We were about ten miles over the Laotian border and swinging into a wide arc so we could approach the mountain from its blind side. The team stood a better chance of remaining undetected this way. I slid over to the door and began scanning the bush below. Our ship was maybe thirty-five hundred feet up, where the air was very cool, and we had a clear view of the lead ship.

As we dropped lower and slowed, I heard loud metallic thuds banging hollowly against the sides of our helo. The crew chief immediately brought his weapon to bear, and I instinctively grabbed my rifle. The insert ship began swerving to avoid the ribbon-like streams of red and green tracers trying to bring it down. We were in the middle of nowhere, a nowhere filled with anti-aircraft weapons, and I was amazed that the wilderness was so loaded with peril. I slid back to the wall aft of the door and saw the lead ship leaking brown smoke from its engine compartment. Definitely not good.

As both ships began to climb again in an effort to reach the protection of the clouds close above us, the smoke turned black, with flames slapping the fuselage. The tracer streams were thicker and edging closer in their attempts to bring us down. We were almost there when a bright flash followed by a concussion wave rocked us loopy. We were shuddering as I grabbed a steel rib of the ship wall and pulled myself to where I could peer out at the stricken insert ship, now slowly beginning to spin out of control. Men in flames were being tossed from the pinwheeling craft as it spun its way down.

Struck dumb, I froze in place, watching the dying helo explode against a ridge in a frightening blast of flames and smoke just as we banked into a patch of clouds. The crew chief grabbed me, yanked me back from the door, and returned to his place behind the machine gun. We broke through the clouds in a steep descent, making for the crash site as the chief opened up on something below. Our ship was now violently shuddering from our evasive maneuvering and the impact of ground fire as the thuds began sounding like popcorn.

An icy claw of certainty slithered up my spine like a hungry snake, whispering doggedly, *This is it. You're dead, boy. Just fucking forget about it.*

For some goddam cloudy reason, I started getting really pissed off. I don't know why, and at that moment I really wasn't giving it much thought; yet, when I look at it now, maybe anger was all there was for the entire piece of shit. I began screaming at the ground. It fit the sudden emptiness, the now barren meaning of everything. *Goddam! They were gone!*

Just before we banked again and leveled off a few hundred feet above the bush, I saw the crash site bleeding black smoke. Then our ship turned abruptly. We tried approaching from another perspective. Nothing doing. Not today. Not here. Usually SOG pilots were sorcerers; get outta here good. Flying down the enemy's throat being their main mojo, their old reliable, the premier move in their airborne bag of tricks, but not today, not on the dark side of Co Roc. Death had been waiting. It took what it wanted and left us raddled and bewildered over how we'd survived.

We broke off, turned sharply, and a mile further along, we made another freezing rush towards cloud cover, this time turning towards home. I was covered in numb with cold sweat blowing across my

eyes, and was just grasping the significance of what had happened. By the time we reached the FOB, I was breathing hard, trying to catch up to my breath. The shock of the explosion and our subsequent escape had amplified my vital functions. It felt like I wanted to piss, shit, chuck, scream, and cry all at once. Later, in the med tent, I tried to explain what happened, but I kept stumbling over my words, unable to make any sense even to myself. The men understood and were patient. They knew where I'd been and that I was trying to come back to myself. No one else was doing too well, either. We'd just lost part of the family. When I looked, there was a pint of whiskey in my hand. I immediately drank deeply, and it leveled me out some.

Everybody in camp was completely stunned by this event. Losing them rippled through our small compliment like a quake. It was the first time in my life I felt the expanse of vulnerability. I knew, at least now I did, I knew about something that no one wanted to know about. SOG and its operations existed in a tough-shit world, a world where a simple roll of the dice decided whether you made the next sunrise. You only had so much control, and it was elusive. Eventually, I discovered this was the root of my fear. Our lives were up for grabs, and wading through the unknowns of survival accomplished nothing more than blurring the focus necessary to outlive the theology of probability. That's the hard take, but SOG was even much more than that. It taunted the odds, goaded them, teased them, and sometimes they bit back—deeply.

The FOB responded quickly. Two helos were in the air within an hour to return to the impact site and search for survivors. Crisscrossing the crash area over and over, the searchers finally gave in to the obvious and headed home. It was all no dice, with more men for the MIA lists. There was nothing more anyone could do to alter the outcome. Not today. Not tomorrow, and at least, never.

While everybody was out searching, I kept running through the whole thing again and again. I couldn't shut it off. It was like I was in a theater I couldn't get out of. It kept happening again and again, more and more.

Before getting on a search helo, Bob sat me down, got up in my face, and looked me over, his eyes blazing straight through the moment as if eternity were floating somewhere behind my face. "You'll be all right. Let it go. There's nothing else. Let-it-go." It had the blunt impact of an order, but its essence and intention were something else. He grabbed my shoulder, and then he was gone. I followed him outside and watched him roll aboard.

After reaching altitude, the two helos turned towards Co Roc. I felt myself getting lost in the idea that our enemy had been waiting for us. It was like they'd jumped out of a cloud or something, like they'd been tipped off, in detail. Years later, as the war lay smoldering in our memories, I was told by an old FOB friend that during the war, SOG had been infiltrated by North Vietnamese agents and that some of the people we believed to be loyal employees had been feeding critical operations information to field units of the NVA. He also told me that our enemy had been training anti-SOG squads to erase us before we could accomplish our mission. It explained a lot, and it all made sense.

I went back inside and sat on a bunk. I let myself drift back to the day when I'd first arrived at the FOB and reported to the med tent. Bob had been gearing up for an operation and prepping mission

stuff on his bunk. He didn't know me, my name, or the reason I was there, but he did know I was a rube. He looked at me with a casual smile and mentioned that second-guessing the NVA always made for bad outcomes. It was then that I noticed how meticulous, almost reverent, he was in handling his gear. He suddenly began laughing and then looked off for a bit, his smile growing more buoyant.

"You know, kid, It's truly fucking amazing what you learn when people really want to kill you." When he looked around with radiant contentment the wind kicked up outside, brushed aside the tent flap and blew a rescue panel off his bunk and onto my boots. When I handed it to him he took a good look at me and said "Welcome to the hardest school in the world." and he laughed some more.

Of course, I hadn't understood it then. Hell, I had never even considered understanding anything like that before, but now as the helos faded into Laos I knew, knew that in the course of things, deadly things, there's a moment, a point, a place where your life winds up trying to escape you, trying to flee the vast unknown you'd just discovered laying all around you, an unknown you were now getting ready to explore. ❖

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From Denis Chericone's LinkedIn biography: "While in the military I was posted to a remote and very isolated US Army Special Forces A camp, An Loc. While there I was in charge of a twelve bed jungle hospital where I treated everything from amputations to leprosy. I lived amongst the people of the area, the Gerai and Rhade Montagnards. This was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. They were Vietnam's equivalent to the First Nations people of the Americas. Sociologically light years more sophisticated than the people of the industrialized west, the Montagnards exposed me to me a deeper understanding of the qualities that comprise the essence of being human."

Denis is a writer, both of poetry and prose. You can hear Denis reading his poetry at the Oregon Poets Satyricon Poetry Series. (<https://oregonpoeticvoices.org/poet/425/>)

Denis is also a talented pianist. In 2021 he placed first in the music division of the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival (NVCAF), which resulted in an invitation to perform at the 41st NVCAF in 2022. You can hear Denis' 2021 winning performances, which included one original composition, on our YouTube channel (<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLj2W9J4Jh-DpEg5JtDDgOekagTNIcZ02D&si=insziM-mZoiZO8YKd>).



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## SFA Chapter 78 March 2024 Chapter Meeting

Photos by Rick Carter

## Guest Speaker, Tony Bell

**1** Left to right, LTC Johann Hindert of the Los Angeles Army Recruiting Battalion, SFA Chapter 78 President Aaron Brandenburg, SFA Chapter 78 Vice President James McLanahan, SFA Chapter 78 Treasurer Richard Simonian, SGM (R) Tony Bell.

**2** SGM (R) Tony Bell emphasizes a point during his inspirational presentation to the chapter members

**3** LTC Johann Hindert, commander of the Los Angeles Recruiting Battalion

**4** James McLanahan recording the meeting to be posted on the Chapter's YouTube Channel.

**5** Left to right: American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG) Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto, Jim Duffy, Len Fein, and AVAG member Mary Cruz. Once again AVAG provided free goodies for chapter members to select from.

**6** Chapter member Rick Carter was presented with a Quilt of Valor. AVAG Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto contacted SoCal Quilts of Valor (<https://www.socalqov.org>) and arranged for a quilt to be made especially for him. She is shown here presenting the quilt to Rick at the meeting.

**7** Thomas Golden

**8** Jack Blau, front left, shares a laugh with Don Gonneville, right. How Miller smiles in the background at left.

**9** Mike Pagliano, left, met up with long-time friend Art Dolick, at right.

**10** Robert Casillas



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