Bright Light is the true story of the author's training as a green beret medical specialist and his service with the top secret MACV SOG. The book reveals, for the first time, firsthand accounts of dangerous black operations behind enemy lines during the peak of the Vietnam War. The author also shares the sometimes humorous happenings within the relative safety of the base camp and his warnings for our actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bright Light

Bright Light

Untold stories of the Top Secret War in Vietnam

Stephen Perry

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Second Edition

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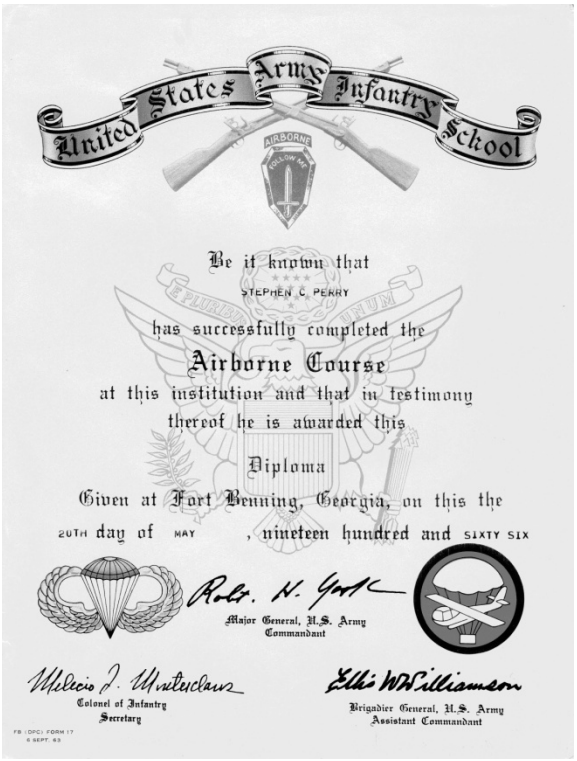
View photos of the people and places described in the book at

http://brightlight1968.com

The Boy Next Door

We all learned as children that the “Man of Steel”, Superman was not really human at all. Our super hero was actually an alien born on the planet Krypton and sent to earth via a rocket ship by his scientist father. I can still clearly hear the announcement that Superman stood for “Truth, Justice and the American Way.” This was something that I deemed important as a child and something that I would try to emulate as an adult.

What about America’s real super heroes? Were they also “Strangers in a Strange Land” like Robert Heinlein’s Michael Valentine Smith or maybe the sons of some fictional Rambo?


United States Army Infantry School

Be it known that

STEPHEN C. PERRY

has successfully completed the

Airborne Course

at this institution and that in testimony thereof he is awarded this

Diploma

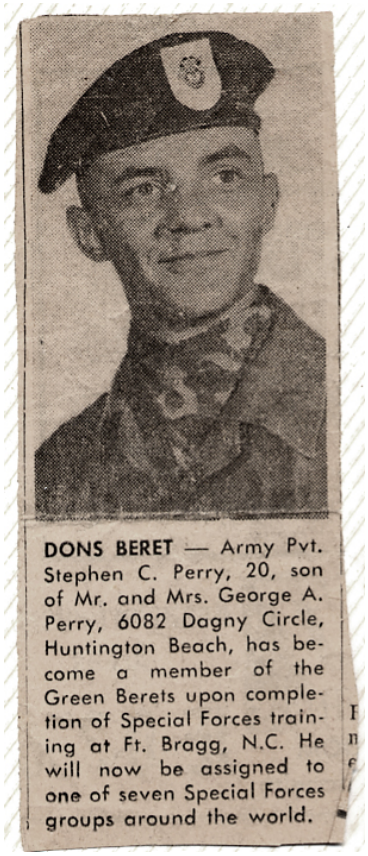
Given at Fort Benning, Georgia, on this the 20TH day of MAY, nineteen hundred and SIXTY SIX

Major General, U.S. Army
Commandant

Colonel of Infantry
Secretary

Brigadier General, U.S. Army
Assistant Commandant

During my brief tour with the US Army I had the honor of standing and fighting beside many of those American super heroes. These real heroes were lads that sat next to you in church or who lived next door and perhaps mowed your lawn. These brave men had lived in our neighborhoods, attended our schools and churches and had done all the things that American kids do. But these brave men were different in a very special way. They too had the strong moral compass of Superman and had heard the call for "Truth, Justice and the American Way." They had heard the call of their country and had stood proudly to accept their responsibility as United States citizens. They were not afraid of the talk of war or its intrinsic dangers. These men volunteered over and over again for the good of their country. These men were the Green Berets of the Studies and Observation Group (SOG).



DONS BERET — Army Pvt. Stephen C. Perry, 20, son of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Perry, 6082 Dagny Circle, Huntington Beach, has become a member of the Green Berets upon completion of Special Forces training at Ft. Bragg, N.C. He will now be assigned to one of seven Special Forces groups around the world.

Green Berets were three time volunteers. First, they had to join the military on a voluntary basis and not be drafted. Secondly, they had to volunteer for airborne training and willingly jump out of perfectly good airplanes as part of that training. Thirdly, they had to volunteer for Special Forces. The volunteering part done, there was a long period of testing, qualifying and training before these young men could wear the Green Beret. Once awarded the beret, there remained a lot more training in a job specialty and in other areas such as jungle warfare and survival training. In the end, these few, these Green Berets, were the boys next door now grown into men of honor and dignity, highly trained and motivated to go wherever their Country would send them.

Special Forces medical class 67-1, Fort Bragg NC

My story began in Los Angeles, California where I was born to wonderful parents, George and Estelle Perry. My parents had dignity and had taught their children honor and love. My parents raised me as a Catholic. After moving to a home in Whittier, California in 1952, my sister Judy and I were enrolled in a Catholic grammar school named Saint Gregory the Great School. It was in St Gregory's parish that I learned more about my God and my Country. I learned that it was honorable to serve my Country and my God. I learned that the freedom to worship God was a right unique to free societies; and a right that was indeed worth fighting for.

Growing up I was a typical lad who enjoyed hiking, camping, nature, and the outdoors. I joined the Cub Scouts and remained a member of the Boy Scouts of America until I was fifteen years old. I made a number of the long - range hikes that were popular at the time including the Silver Moccasin and Golden Arrowhead hikes in the Angeles National Forest. I was "tapped out"(selected) for the Order of the Arrow when I was thirteen years old and I remember

being taken out in the woods of the Brea Canyon by a young man dressed as an Indian brave and made to spend the night alone on the ground with no sleeping bag or tent. Little did I know at the time that I would repeat this act may times in the jungles of Vietnam.

One day at St Gregory's church I was saying the prayer that Roman Catholics say when they receive communion and I had a very special encounter with He who would remain my God and my protector to this very day. The prayer goes like this *"O Lord, I am not worthy that thou should come under my roof. Say but the word and my soul shall be healed."* I said the prayer devoutly while gazing upon the image of the crucified Christ hanging on the cross and I was overcome with a peace beyond my understanding. When the day ended, I got on with my youthful life and grew far from the God I had encountered that day.

I earned many badges and awards while I was a Boy Scout, but the best were the Ad Alteri Dei, the highest award a boy could earn from the Catholic Church, and the Rank of Eagle Scout, which is the highest rank a Boy Scout could earn. Not too many months after earning the rank of Eagle, my interest turned to hot rods, surfing and girls, and my days as a boy scout came to an end.

I graduated from St Gregory's in 1959 and attended high school at Don Bosco Technical Institute in South San Gabriel, California. I graduated from Bosco Tech in 1963 and attended my first year of college at what was then Fullerton Junior College (Now Cal State Fullerton). Since our family had grown over the years to now include my brothers David and John, and sisters Judy and Marilyn, it was time to replace our three bedroom house with one more suited to our family. A beautiful new five bedroom home was found in Huntington Beach and we moved in late in 1963. The following year I moved in with a few new friends from Orange Coast College. We shared apartments in Costa Mesa and later in Newport Beach where we lived until four of us enlisted in the Army in November of 1965. We enlisted on the buddy plan and each of us had hopes of winning the Green Beret.

I had enlisted with roommates Bert Merriman, Jim Sexton and Chris Cox. Each was just another "boy next door" until the spark of patriotism ignited a fire to serve. We all completed basic training at Fort Ord, California. We were tested and screened for Special Forces and two of us were selected to proceed to our goal. Friend Jim Sexton, the blond haired surfer I had shared many an adventure with while living on Newport Beach was found to be too young to proceed to Special Forces. At the time, a candidate had to be twenty one years old to begin training and since Jim would only be twenty, he was disqualified. Jim went on to serve out his years of enlistment somewhere in Alaska.

My friend Chris Cox was diagnosed with a severe case of asthma and was disqualified and later medically discharged from the service. Chris went on to become an entertainer. He moved to Aspen, Colorado and sang his ballads in clubs within the town over the years while he pursued his love of the mountains and skiing.

Bert Merriman and I were accepted for further qualification and training in Special Forces. We were sent to Fort Leonard wood, Missouri for training as combat engineers and from there to Jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. After completing Airborne training and receiving our "silver wings," we were bused to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and the John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare. Here we were assigned to Special Forces (SF) Training Group where we were tested, screened, interviewed, and tested some more as part of the SF qualification process. After passing all the mental, physical and psychological tests we were given more tests to best determine our academic abilities and strengths. From here we completed eight weeks of Special Forces qualification training followed by issuance of our Berets and assignment to a Special Forces specialty school. Bert was sent to engineer school and I was sent to medical training.

For the next year I was trained in all aspects of medicine. My training was conducted at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and Fort Sam Houston, Texas and Fort Rucker Alabama. Classroom training was followed by on the job training at the Army hospital at Fort Rucker, Alabama. My medical training class got smaller over time as men failed to complete sections of the training. After

completing on the job training we were returned to Ft. Bragg for another eight week class on tropical medicine and then the notorious “dog lab.”

In dog lab we were assigned a patient (a stray dog collected from a local dog pound). My patient was ironically named “Whiskey” and, like my classmates, I became attached to my pet-patient. The patients were worked up medically and then one day each was taken into a chamber and shot through the meaty part of the rear thigh with a high-powered rifle. The high velocity of a bullet tearing through flesh sends out shock waves that kill flesh. Our job was to stop the bleeding, debride (cut out the dead tissue), and battle dress the wound. Over the following days and weeks we would change the dressing and nurse our patient back to health. When recovered, it was our job to put the patient under general anesthesia and amputate the leg as though it were a human patient. The patient was then over sedated and dog lab was complete. This whole process may seem cruel, but was necessary to give the Special Forces Medic the hands on training in skills that he would be expected to perform on his comrades when the need arose. Public protests at some point after my training led to a change where goats replaced man’s best friend as the new patients of the SF medics.

After successful completion of dog lab, my surviving classmates and I stood individually before oral boards where we were tested orally on everything we had learned over our year of medical training. A team of four doctors fired difficult medical questions expecting correct and immediate responses to all. Several more of my classmates fell by the wayside as they failed to perform well under the pressure of the oral boards. By this time in the process, the men who washed out of the medical training were given the option to attend some other SF specialty training, but were not allowed to serve as Special Forces Medics.

After completing the Special Forces medical training there was another short training session of about eight weeks followed by graduation and assignments to the various Special Forces Groups around the world.

My friend Bert had graduated long before me due to the shorter nature of his training and he was already in Vietnam. Bert had been assigned to Project Delta. My classmates from my medical class (SF medical Class 67-1) were sent all over the world: Germany, Panama, Okinawa, and Vietnam; but I was left stateside, assigned to the Seventh Special Forces Group. My assigned duties for a time were to provide medical coverage for war games being conducted in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina. It was here, in the then dry counties of North Carolina that I encountered my first moonshiners and sampled their potent brew.

Not wanting to be left behind, I called Mrs. Alexander at the Pentagon and volunteered again, this time for the Fifth Special Forces Group in Vietnam. Within a month, I received orders to report for transport to the Republic of South Vietnam. And so, the boy next door had become a man wearing the Green Beret.

After returning home for a two week leave I reported to Fort Lewis, Washington to be transported to the Republic of South Vietnam. It was here in early December of 1968 that I befriended Ken Cryan, another boy next door and native son of California. Ken and I became great friends and remained very close until his death in May of 1968. We traveled to Vietnam together, arriving at Cam Ranh Bay and from there to Fifth Special Forces Headquarters at Nha Trang. All of the other Special Forces men who had arrived with Ken and I were quickly assigned and shipped to their A or B teams around Vietnam(an A team was a basic twelve man special forces team while a B team was a larger support unit). Ken and I began wondering what was wrong with us that nobody wanted us assigned to their teams. Then one day before Christmas 1967, we were called into the office. As we stood at attention before the officers desk, the stoic faced captain informed us that we had both been assigned to C and C North, and that we had been held pending approval of our Top Secret Clearances. Neither Ken nor I had any idea of what the officer was talking about or what C and C North was. We were loaded on a C 130 transport later that day (Christmas Eve 1967) headed north to Da Nang, and by Christmas day, we had learned our fate as new guys

assigned to the Special Operations Group (SOG). SOG was not officially part of the Special Forces operations in Southeast Asia, but Special Forces was used as a cover to shift highly trained insurgents into the top secret operations.

When Ken and I arrived at Phu Bai a few days after Christmas 1967, we stood formation with other newcomers and were greeted by the FOB 1 commander, Major Ira Snell. The Commanding Officer (CO) told us that the medics had a critical MOS (Military Occupation Specialty) and would be assigned to medical duties in support of the teams. He said that the FOB (Forward Occupational Base) was in dire need of volunteers to serve on the recon teams and that he would consider any of us who volunteered. After thinking about this overnight, I went to the COs office the following day and volunteered once again.

Major Snell was delighted with my choice and assigned me to ST Idaho under the command of SFC (Sergeant First Class) Glen Lane. In the following days and weeks, I would get to know the men on ST (Spike Team) Idaho during both training and leisure time.

Aerial View of SOG base FOB 1 (note zig zag trench lines)

Valley of Death

ST Idaho was called to stand formation before the team house to be inspected by the teams One Zero, SFC Glenn Lane. Lane was a weathered, lanky, six-foot two inch Texan with a long history of service with the US Special Forces. We had heard tales that he had been on a team in South America that had hunted down and killed the legendary Che'. Like our missions behind enemy lines, the US has officially denied any part in Che's death. Today, Lane was our Spike Team (ST) leader and was inspecting the team's full complement of nine indigenous mercenaries and three Americans. I was the teams second in command or One One and Tim Kirk was the One Two or radio operator. Others I remember that day were Hiep Nguyen, the team's interpreter, Ha, the fearless and stealthy point man, and Mister Tu, the older and more experienced Zero-One (indigenous team leader).

To describe ST Idaho as a scary group of men would be an understatement. The men stood in full battle dress complete with camouflaged paint on the exposed flesh of their faces and necks, blackened uniforms void of any labels or identifying marks, web gear, side arms, rucksacks and weapons. On this particular day, ten men carried Colt CAR15s. These are fully automatic 5.56mm assault rifles with identifying information such as serial numbers machined off so that the weapons could not be traced back to the US if the team was killed or captured. The weapons were carried on braided green rope slings, carefully sized so that the weapon could be carried at exactly at the right position at ones hip to be fired instantly when needed without having to shoulder the weapon. The team had spent many hours at the range practicing this firing technique until each of the team members could regularly hit an enemy target with two to three rounds in a diagonal pattern across the chest at 40-50 feet. The remaining two team members carried M79 grenade launchers and an assortment of 40mm rounds for their weapons. The weapon was usually carried loaded with a canister round. This was the equivalent of a

40mm shot gun round with large 00 pellets. This load allowed the grenadier to quickly fire on an enemy in the dense jungle, which was our area of operation.

In preparation for this day, Lane, Kirk and I had attended a briefing at S2 the previous day, where we were advised that Spike Team Idaho was to be inserted in target Tango 4, deep inside the Ashau Valley (the "Valley of Death"). For security reasons, the team was told to ready itself for a five day mission; however, no specific target information was given to the indigenous personnel. S2 informed us that there had been a major increase in reported enemy traffic and buildup along the Ho Chi Min trail near Tango 4.

After the briefings, Lane and I were driven by Jeep to the airstrip at the 1st Marine Division Base, located three kilometers south of FOB 1. There, we boarded an Air Force 02 Covey plane to fly over our target area for VR (visual recon) and to pick a LZ (landing zone). The O2 "Skymaster" was a propeller driven, four passenger plane made by Cessna and flown by an Air Force Major. The plane had propellers in front of and behind the cockpit and a split tail; and it was used for VR and FAC (forward air controller) work. The weather was clear with temperatures in the nineties, but the humidity was unbearable. It was a relief to finally take off and get out of the steam bath-like climate.

We watched in awe as the Skymaster rose above the Marine Base, the huge ammo dump, the range where we trained the team, the rice paddies, and the village of Phu Luong. Quickly, all signs of civilization faded and there were only rolling hills covered by the dense vegetation of the jungle. The target area was about 50 miles from the airbase; and as the hills disappeared behind us, the steep mountains and valleys of the border region appeared. The cool air inside the plane was refreshing and provided some sense of comfort on this day aloft.

Small clearings appeared scattered in the lush vegetation of the mountainsides. Some of the clearings were slash and burn clearings where the Montagnard people lived and raised their crops. Others were bomb craters from earlier airstrikes. Each disturbed the seemingly endless and tranquil

jungle canopy as we "floated" about two-thousand-feet above in our air-conditioned cabin. Stillness and beauty were slashed by the eruption of anti-aircraft gunfire and by tracers cutting through the air around us. There was little that we could do, but sit and hope that none of the bullets or explosions of anti-aircraft rounds found its' mark. The O2 pilot, on the other hand, took evasive action by diving down to about 500 feet above the treetops. The pilot also called in the coordinates of the anti- aircraft guns to the Navy ships offshore. Their 16-inch guns could deliver high explosive rounds on the target with pinpoint accuracy. We, on the other hand, continued on our flight to the northwest to complete our VR, which was our mission of the day. As we flew along at this low altitude, we observed brief openings in the canopy revealing dirt roads. At one point, we spotted enemy vehicles and scattered troops on the ground. Some began firing their rifles at us and the pilot climbed again to a more comfortable altitude, out of reach of the would-be assassins.

As we rose in altitude, we got our first glimpse of the Ashau Valley. It lay ahead of us along a broad ridge line. The valley floor was almost devoid of vegetation and pocked with thousands of large bomb craters where B-52s unloaded their ordinance night after night in attempts to slow the advance of North Vietnams troops and their supplies to the south. It was here that many brave men on both sides had given their lives in this war, and were I would lose many good friends, and leave a piece of myself forevermore.

As we banked toward the north, our pilot advised us that we had just crossed the border into Laos. After a few more miles, he told us that we had reached the Tango 4 target area. Lane and I scanned the steep terrain just across the ridge-line and eventually spotted what appeared to be an old clearing which was overgrown with elephant grass and other shrubs and vines. From our altitude, the area looked open enough and suitable for our insertion helicopter to hover as the team members rappelled down ropes to the ground. We did one more fly over of the area and carefully marked the LZ position on our military topo (topographic) maps. No other suitable LZs were seen in the AO(Area of Operation). Our pilot climbed to a higher altitude and headed back toward Phu Bai.

As we flew along the ridge line, the pilot pointed out the old airstrip and the remains of the Ashau Special Forces camp, which had been overrun two years before. The view of the valley and its violent past reminded me of the 23rd Psalm. "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."* I could not recall the rest as written in scripture, and rejected the local inscriptions I had seen engraved on lighters and displayed boldly on a plaque in the Gunfighter Saloon. Those quotes finished the verse, "because I am the meanest M-Fer in the valley…" and even though I had not practiced my faith in many years, I had no intentions of blaspheming God while engaged in a deadly war. One day in May of 1968, the verse and its' meaning became very clear to me as I was lying, seriously injured and surrounded by a large enemy element in that same "Valley of Death."

When we returned to FOB 1, it was "chow" time; and our team members had gathered their meals and were eating in the Team Room. Lane and I grabbed a few cold beers and joined our Vietnamese friends. Lane informed the team that we would launch on a mission at 1100hrs in the morning and instructed everyone to pack up, load magazines and clean their weapons. We were all directed to stand ready for an inspection of our gear at 1030hrs and be ready to launch at that time. The team members had been training hard for the past two weeks and were happy to be going out to "kill some VC."

Launch day arrived and the team assembled for inspection. SFC Glenn Lane inspected each mans' weapon, side arm, ammunition and other ordinance he required each man to carry. Additional ordinance consisted of Claymore mines (for perimeter defense), M-14 (toe popper) mines, hand-grenades, smoke-grenades (to mark targets), pen flares, assorted radios and listening devices, booby-trapped enemy ammunition ("Eldest Son"), and sometimes light anti-tank weapons (LAWs) to stop enemy convoys. Laws were also useful in breaking enemy contact if the team was being chased. Every man also carried his own canteens of water and a small food ration for eating over the planned five-day mission.

The Radio man carried a heavy PRC25 radio, which he could use to talk to friendly planes in the air above the team, as well as remote military and CIA

radio sites. Each of the Americans carried a small squad radio taped to their web gear for internal communications between the team members, as well as an emergency radio, called the URC 10. This was a foolproof little radio that was two pieces connected by a heavy black cable. The radio was carried in the two breast pockets of the jungle fatigue with the wire running behind the neck. In an emergency, the microphone (mike) was keyed and locked on. This little radio broadcast a constant homing signal on a frequency monitored by all friendly aircraft. If an aircraft picked up the signal, attempted contact, and the American on the ground did not key the mike to respond with appropriate code words and identifiers, the radio was assumed to be in enemy hands and the radios' position would be promptly bombed. If an American answered the aircraft, rescue operations could be arranged or airstrikes could be called in on targets of opportunity. The URC 10 helped save the lives of surviving team members when a team was split up or lost during combat operations.

Every team member carried a few battle dressings but as a trained Special Forces medic, I also carried a supply of morphine surettes, a pair of hemostats a few life saving medications,and a supply of Dexamyl. This drug is a mixture of dextroamphetamine and amobarbitals and was used to keep the entire team awake and alert through the night when we were in a particularly dangerous position behind enemy lines. Stateside, the drug became famous in 1966 when the Rolling Stones released the song "Mothers Little Helper", which told of how a variation of the pill helped mother get through her busy day.

I do not know the actual weight of all the equipment, weapons, ammunition, and explosives carried by each SOG team member, but my estimate would be between 75 and 100 pounds. To make matters worse, one must consider the steep terrain, the dense jungle, and intense heat and humidity ever present in the AO. When a hostile force was encountered, the team was forced to break contact by its initial burst of firepower. When the enemy force was not killed or repelled, the team relied on the skill of the One Zero to lead the team in escape and evasion (E&E) which many times involved running through the jungle carrying the weight of all that equipment. Today, 40 years later, I cannot fathom how we were able to carry such a load through the hostile and

steamy jungles of the Ashau. Our enemy was in his own backyard, light afoot with only an AK47, a light ammo belt, and a few grenades, yet our Spike Teams were usually able to break contact and lose themselves once again in the jungle.

As the inspection was nearly complete, three Sikorski H34 helicopters (code name "Kingbee") flew low overhead, circled the camp, and landed on the airstrip just across the road, while three Marine Huey Gunships circled overhead. Lane walked the team past the team rooms, the S2 office, and the officer's barracks out the front gate to the waiting choppers across the road. Lane and I checked each of the choppers to ensure that the OD (olive drab) nylon rappelling ropes were securely fastened with bowlines. The 120 foot ropes had to support team members and their equipment as they rappelled into the LZ. Lane instructed the team to mount up with Tim, Hiep, Ha, Lane and two other indigenous in the first chopper, while the remaining team members and I were in the second chopper. The third Kingbee carried one of the SOG medics from Phu Bai and was referred to as the "chase chopper." If one of the insertion choppers went down, the chase chopper was to swoop down, pick up the survivors, and the medic was there to treat the wounded on the flight back to the FOB. He carried a medical kit with lifesaving IVs medicines and battle dressings. After forty-years, I cannot remember the name of the medic on this particular mission, but it must have been one of my close friends: Ron Romancik, Jerry Donley, or Bruce Johnston.

The Kingbees had the doors removed and were manned by Vietnamese pilots and a crew chief/door gunner. A 30 caliber air-cooled machine gun was mounted on the Starboard (right side) side of each chopper. As I looked out of the chopper toward the road, I noticed an open Jeep with conventional uniformed U.S. soldiers peering at our "armed to the teeth" band of camouflage painted unconventional warriors mounted up in unconventional, unmarked, black and green helicopters. It is no wonder that the local conventional forces referred to us as "spooks", "sneaky Pete" or "snake eaters." We did look the part and were a truly scary lot.

As the Marine gunships passed overhead, the Kingbees revved up and lifted off in a great cloud of dust. We rose to an altitude of about 500-ft, and were relieved of the heat and humidity by the rush of air past the open sides of the chopper, as we headed northwest toward the "Valley of Death." As I sat in the open door, watching the dense jungle roll by under my feet, I was impressed with the beauty and the diversity of the jungle. I thought back to a classroom at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa where I studied Botany and the diversity of the rainforest. I thought of my family and of how they would enjoy this flight over the green carpet of Southeast Asia. These peaceful thoughts quickly vanished as tracers sliced by my open door.

The door gunner yelled, "VC", as he opened fire with his machine gun into the clearing along a roadside below. The mayhem soon ended and the serenity of the flight and the jungle carpet returned. I can honestly say that the only two times I was afraid in Vietnam was while in a chopper being fired on from the ground, and when I was near death on a Bright Light mission in target Whiskey-Five a few months later. I don't know if it was my life experiences, the intense training and confidence in my war brothers or the foolishness of youth, but I felt invincible and almost bullet-proof on most missions. It would not be long before the reality of war would sweep such thoughts from my mind. For today, I was ready to enter this foreign jungle and fight beside my team members because I trusted them with my life… and "I feared no evil."

Our helicopters flew in sort of a loose formation with Lane's chopper leading to the LZ, mine second, and the chase chopper behind. Slightly above and behind chase were the three Marine gunships loaded with rocket-launchers and miniguns. As we approached the LZ, the gunships swooped down and made a low pass to detect any enemy presence or draw fire from the ground. As the gunships climbed and circled above, the lead Kingbee moved over the LZ to a height of about 80-90 feet above the vegetation, and the six team members quickly rappelled down the 120 ft ropes to the ground. As their Kingbee pulled away, ours moved into position and we rappelled down. Our chopper was a little too high; and I went right off the end of the rope and nearly landed atop Lane. The landing was hard and racked my body with pain.

Although we wore gloves to protect our hands, my palms and fingers were blistered from the fast trip down the rope. Wasting no time, the Kingbee flew away and the gunships made another low pass over our position.

The team gathered and Ha lead us up the very steep hill through tangled brush, vines and elephant grass. As we approached the edge of the clearing, Lane motioned to Ha in well-practiced hand signs to scout ahead. The LZ was much steeper than it had appeared to us from 2,000-feet above the day before; and the tangle and thorns of the "wait a minute" vines slowed our movement significantly. The vines had long, thin branches with the strange botanical adaptation of the thorns pointing down the stems toward the roots of the plant. This configuration was perfect for hooking and holding clothing or skin, thus the name "Wait a Minute Vines." I made a mental note to take great care in choosing an LZ if I were ever called upon to do so. The thorns ripped at our clothing and flesh as the sun baked our overheated bodies. It was a real relief to see Ha at the tree-line motioning the team to advance into the shade and shelter of the jungle. As we entered the tree line, Lane had Tim call in a "team clear" to the still circling gunships, thus signaling them to return to their base.

As the sound or the rotors faded into the distance, the reality of our small team's position and vulnerability became evident. Here we were, twelve men alone on a mountainside, about 50-miles from all friendly forces, out of the protective reach of friendly artillery, and a long helicopter flight for any rescue if it became necessary. To make matters worse, we were behind enemy lines in Laos, a country that *our* country denied we ever entered until thirty-five years later. We had nothing to identify us as American citizens or soldiers. Only a handful or "spooks" knew where we were and what we were doing in the Ashau Valley. Those "in the know" were in the White House, the Pentagon, MACV SOG headquarters and back in Phu Bai. B-52 pilots flying bombing missions (sorties) over the Ashau knew that something was happening in our six-quare-kilometer target area; and that they were not to drop bombs on the target area or the one- kilometer buffer around it. It was comforting to know that the B-52s were up there somewhere, but they were so high up that they could not normally be seen or heard. Whether or not they

existed was a matter of faith…until the day they were called upon to unload their deadly cargo on an enemy target.

The Jungle in this target area looked very different on the ground than it had from O-2. There were three distinct layers of old growth trees above our heads (referred to as a triple-canopy jungle). The tallest were massive hardwoods such as teak and mahogany, some four or five-feet in diameter at the base and 100-feet or so tall. Under them was another layer, fanning out with the branches and leaves covering an area perhaps 50 to 75 feet above the ground, and then the lowest layer at 20 to 40 ft. I was awestruck by the beauty of this place. Below the canopies existed an ecosystem as diverse as any I have ever experienced. The flora was made up of all the tropical plants, treasured in the US for tropical gardens and potted plants. There were stands of bamboos, hanging vines, and many colorful bromeliads and orchids. Interesting sizes, shapes, and colors of fungi thrived here, moistened by the almost constant dripping of water droplets from the canopy above. A pungent odor like rotting organic material and damp soil filled this place, which I have only experienced in a few other places on earth. Each encounter with this musky odor in later years has immediately transported me mentally to that day, time, and place.

As we continued towards the ridgeline, a few rifle shots cracked in the jungle a distance beyond our LZ. Lane told us in a whisper that it was probably NVA trackers trying to pick up our location by drawing our return fire. This, he referred to as recon-by-fire. He told the tail gunner and I to cover any trail we were leaving and to plant a few toe poppers to give us early warning if we were followed. We each armed and planted three of the small, plastic mines along our back trail and carefully marked their position on my map. This information would be transferred to S2 and MACV at our debriefing in hopes that some future mission would not cross this area unaware of the mines we left behind.

As we finally crossed over the ridgeline, Ha motioned for all to stop, be silent and on guard. Soon, Lane motioned me forward to observe a broad trail, with the jungle soil hard packed by many feet. The trail was so well used that there

was little leaf litter on it and we discovered the remains of some light cardboard packaging on the trail. Perhaps the wrappings were the remains of some NVA soldier's lunch. The trail was marked on our maps and 35mm pictures were taken of it and the cardboard debris along it. There was a sharp bend in the trail just ahead; and Lane decided to have the team first cross the trail and then set up an ambush to attempt a prisoner snatch. The team was carefully spread out along the trail in hidden firing positions behind trees and berms. Claymore mines were set facing in both directions, both up and down the trail, and the team laid silently for more than an hour waiting for "Charlie" to appear. The snatching of a prisoner was dangerous business, indeed, and would offer both great risk and reward to the team. Colonel Warren, SOG Commander in Da Nang, had promised a little RR (rest and relaxation) trip to a remote island off the coast for any team who brought home a live prisoner. Their value was in the intelligence information which could be gleaned from them. The obvious risk was grabbing an armed enemy soldier in his own territory, surrounded by his comrades, in an area so far removed from any assistance or chance of rescue.

This time, the ambush produced nothing more than a brief rest from the torturous climb, giving time to think and listen to the jungle. We heard many sounds along the trail. An occasional bird or monkey, the constant drone of a circadid like insect, and then the high pitched sound of what we believed to be some sort of generator down in the valley. With the daylight getting short, Lane had us pack up the Claymores and start down the slope diagonally to the ridge line in search of a spot to spend the night or RON (remain over night). After walking for about another hour, we came across a piece of high ground that was flat and protected enough for the team to RON. Claymore mines were placed facing toward our back trail and also covering two other clear approaches to our position. Lane thought the RON position to be somewhat secure and put the team to bed with two men awake at all times, rotating their shifts every two hours.

The team settled down to dine on rice, raisins, and nuts. I had splurged and carried a c-ration can of sliced peaches, which really hit the spot this hot

evening. SOG teams carried no tents, or any sleeping bags and each team member simply stretched out a nylon parka on which to sleep. I was on the first watch and leaned against a tree with weapon at the ready, listening to the night as darkness fell over the team. I noticed that the leaf and branch litter glowed in the dark and lit up the jungle floor with an eerie, blue-green light. I later learned that the glow was caused by a species of fungi that helped break down the thick layer of leaf litter. It thrived in the dense shade of the jungle and the ever-damp, humid conditions.

As I rested against that tree, I thought of camping with my friends long ago in the mountains and deserts of Southern California. We also had slept without tents or bags as we hiked the Silver Moccasin and Golden Arrowhead trails. I thought of the time that I had been tapped out for the Order of the Arrow by a young man dressed as an Indian brave. I was then taken silently out in the woods and left alone for the night, far removed from the other boy scouts. I had slept that night on the pine needles without fear and now I was in this place, alone with my thoughts and my sleeping war brothers. As I sat there silently, staring into the darkness, I heard distant voices and was reminded of the many dangers that existed here in the jungles of Laos. The voices reminded me of the men we were hunting and those who hunted us, but the danger here was also in the deadly snakes and spiders that lived in the jungle. There were plenty of mosquitoes that carried a number of deadly diseases and parasites such as Malaria, Leschmaniasis, and Dengue Fever. We protected ourselves, to some degree, with medications, as well as soaking our jungle fatigues in 90% DEET (N,N-Diethyl-meta-toluamide). This method worked so well that I never had a single mosquito bite during my tour of duty in Vietnam. We also coated the tops of our jungle boots and the bottom of our trousers with leach-repellent. The jungle floor crawled with land leeches, which were attracted to the CO_2 (carbon dioxide) that we exhale. I had heard stories of them crawling into body orifices with painful results.

My two hour “guard duty” ended without incident. I woke my replacement and laid down on my rain poncho for some rest. The voices I had heard earlier must have been NVA walking along that trail we had crossed earlier since the

voices had faded into the distance. I slept most of the night with *peaceful* dreams of leeches, mosquitoes, and snakes. I awoke at first light to the sounds of movement. My team members were stirring and packing up for the day. Kirk was whispering into the mike of his PRC25. I heard from Lane later that he was talking to covey, reporting our encoded position, intended direction of travel, and the information of the trail and its night travelers. The other watches had also heard the voices passing in the night and they all seemed to be travelling toward South Vietnam in a South Easterly direction. After a few raisins and a gulp of water to wash down the daily dose of chloroquine primiquine (anti- malarial drug), the team packed up, took their positions and set off for another long hot day in the Valley.

The day dragged on as we silently and slowly moved through the jungle like a snake, twelve men weaving back and forth in line and stopping frequently to watch or listen. We travelled up and down the smaller ridges and valleys leading down into the Ashau. We crossed two trails along our way; and addressed the usual precautions of covering our tracks, planting mines in our back trail, and marking on our maps their locations. In the late afternoon we came across an open area where it appeared that many men; potentially NVA, had spent the night. The area had packed-down vegetation where they had slept, the remains of a few old campfire sites where they had cooked their rice, and other obvious signs of enemy habitation. Mr. Tu, our well seasoned tracker and survivor of the battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954), pointed out things that I would have overlooked and explained through our interpreter, Hiep, that this was an area where, perhaps, a company-sized group of NVA had spent the night recently. It was here that we carefully placed the small, cardboard box of enemy ammunition. In the box were twenty rounds of genuine AK47 ammunition in their original packing. One round had been intentionally altered by someone back in the US as a top secret war tactic to explode the breach of the enemy weapon when fired. This “altered” ammunition was code named “Eldest Son” and was intended not only to kill or maime, the enemy combatant, but to have a devastating psychological effect on the enemy troops, causing them to be wary of their own and captured weapons and

ammunition. We took several photographs of the area and moved on lower into the Valley.

As the daylight began to fade we crossed a small stream of clear water. Lane ordered a short break so that the team could fill their canteens. I preferred to nurse the purified water in my canteens before I would drink this potentially parasite infested water. We could not risk a fire to boil the water, so it was better to ration the purified water I had carried from Phu Bai.

After crossing the stream, we climbed again up the slope of the small valley. After another 30 minutes or so, we came across a piece of high ground suitable for our RON. Claymores were placed defensively around our position and the team settled down for the night. Kirk tried to raise Covey to provide our position report and a team OK as we ate our evening meal. My meal consisted of rice and, raisins along with the big treat of the day, a pair of chocolate chip cookies, hand-made for me by my mother back in Huntington Beach, California. Perimeter guards were assigned and as the light faded into our second night, we saw the twinkling of campfires both above and below us in the distance. We could smell the fires and the faint smell of food cooking, but for us, dinner was meager and cold. The enemy was around us in all directions, but so far it seemed that our presence had been undetected.

I was awakened at 0100hrs by a ground-shaking explosion. When I awoke and readied my CAR 15 for a fight, I saw that my teammates were doing the same. Peering out into the darkness, we noticed what appeared to be men carrying lanterns and heading slowly in our direction. Meanwhile, Lane had determined that one of our Claymores had exploded spontaneously either from static electricity or radio waves from some unknown source. At any rate, the explosion had comprised our position; and Lane ordered the team to saddle up and to move up the steep slope of the ridge “at the double”. As ordered, we all grabbed our gear and set off on a speedy trip up the ridgeline. We moved much more quickly that our normal pace and continued uphill through the darkness for about one hour. Our trek was slowed somewhat by the vengeful thorns of the “wait a minute vines,” but eventually we arrived at another flat area with a thin canopy overhead. Lane told us to set up a

perimeter and to rest here, but not to fall asleep. He then proceeded to plot our position and have Kirk attempt to quietly raise anyone on our emergency frequencies. Eventually, Tim made contact with someone and handed the mike over to the One Zero. In a coded message, Lane told the contact who we were, where we were, and requested the message be relayed to SOG and that our extraction be arranged at this location at first light. He also told the contact that there was no LZ, and that our extraction would require either a jungle penetrator or McGuire rigs. After closing communications, we waited in the still darkness for the first rays of light to appear.

None too soon, the first light of morning appeared through the 25' opening in the canopy above. Shortly thereafter, we heard the unmistakable sound of helicopters. Kirk contacted the rescue choppers, reconfirmed our latitude and longitude, and described the terrain and the broken canopy overhead. As the choppers got closer, we fired pen flares up through the opening until we were spotted; and the first chopper responded by dropping four McGuire Rigs down through the trees. The McGuire Rig was a 3 inch wide strap configured as a big loop at the end of a rappelling rope. The rig also had a small, self-tightening noose near the top, which tightened on the rider's wrist as a safety. The rider would stick his wrist through the noose and sit in the strap to be hauled up as the helicopter rose above. I would learn to respect this simple device as I rode it to safety on six later missions with SOG.

The choppers were not the old Kingbee that had inserted us two days earlier, but Hueys on loan with their crews from B229th Assault Helicopter Bn of the First Calvary. Our missions took top priority; and so when transportation was needed in a hurry, all we had to do was ask and MACV would provide. As Ordered by the One Zero, I got situated in one of the rigs with three of the Vietnamese; and the chopper rose, dragging me through the treetops. When we cleared the treetops, the pilot dropped right down into the barren valley floor and gently lowered us onto the long, abandoned airstrip. We hurriedly pulled up our ropes and rigs, and climbed into the helicopter just as it rose again above the bomb-cratered airstrip. As we rose and headed home, we could see the next chopper approaching with four of our teammates dangling

in their McGuire rigs about 100 feet below. Farther up the hill from where we had just been extracted, we could see the third Slick lifting Lane, Kirk, and the others to safety. There were also a few gunships circling above… just in case.

The 45-minute flight back to FOB 1 was uneventful and so my first mission "across the fence" into Laos had been completed without a scratch, except for those inflicted by the "wait a minute vines." It was truly an experience that remains vivid in my memory, even forty-years later; and with only 54-hours on the ground it remains the longest SOG mission I ever participated in.

After Action Report

Upon landing on the airstrip, we were greeted by many of the Americans assigned to FOB 1, including the camp commander, Major Snell. This was a tradition, which existed because of the close bonds of friendship between the men of SOG and everyone's knowledge of the dangerous trips across the border. The first to greet me this day was my good friend and fellow SF Medic, Ron Romancik. He shook my hand and then handed me an ice cold beer. That one lasted a matter of seconds, as I sucked it down in an attempt to rehydrate. A second followed from the camp engineer and my roommate Ken Cryan. After thanking the pilots and crew chiefs for our safe return and shaking a lot more hands of friends and war brothers, we watched as the other choppers landed and the rest of ST Idaho unloaded. With everyone back, we all started walking back toward the front gate. As I passed Major Snell, he asked how it went and said that we would talk more after the team had some special chow.

Another nice tradition at FOB 1 was that the returning team was fed a nice steak dinner in the mess hall, no matter what time of day or night the return. After a quick shower and change, we met for our steaks. What a treat after eating rice, raisins, and peanuts for a few days. The camp chef was a Vietnamese gentleman who had learned to cook while working for the French during their war in Vietnam. He was a fabulous cook and served up the best

food that I had while in the military. As we ate, we discussed the mission and the strange landing on the old Ashau airstrip.

After our meal, Tim, Glenn and I walked up to the S2 office for our de-briefing. Here we reported what we had seen and heard, turned over the film from our camera, and answered a lot of questions. Before leaving S2, we were told that something was brewing near Khe Sanh and that we should ready the team for travel to and launch from FOB 3.

After stopping at the team house and informing Mister Tu to ready the team for travel, we stopped by the Green Beret Lounge for a cold one. We were treated to a few rounds by the other One Zero's who had gathered there and answered their questions concerning our mission. Later, I retired to my "hooch" to catch up on some sleep.

Men of FOB 1 standing tall

Bright Light is the true story of the author's training as a green beret medical specialist and his service with the top secret MACV SOG. The book reveals, for the first time, firsthand accounts of dangerous black operations behind enemy lines during the peak of the Vietnam War. The author also shares the sometimes humorous happenings within the relative safety of the base camp and his warnings for our actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bright Light