A helicopter is silhouetted against a bright orange sunset sky, flying over a dense tropical jungle. In the foreground, a large, rectangular wooden cage or structure is visible, partially obscured by the foliage. The overall scene is atmospheric and suggests a military or survival theme.

*“It’s no surprise that Kent White weaves a tight tale of military suspense and intrigue: he writes what he knows. FORGOTTEN is written with passion and sharp observation, but it’s more than a good story. It’s an important one with a big and worthy goal: to keep alive the stories and legacies of a group of men who deserved to be remembered.”*

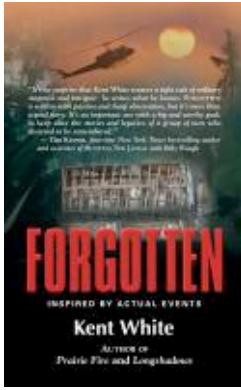
*— Tim Keown, four-time New York Times best-selling author and co-writer of HUNTING THE JACKAL with Billy Waugh*

# FORGOTTEN

INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS

**Kent White**

AUTHOR OF  
*Prairie Fire and Longshadows*



*Inspired by actual events, **Forgotten** is the story of Kevin Slade, a Green Beret sergeant who vanished while on a covert, top-secret mission into Laos during the Vietnam War. Listed as MIA for over two decades, he is discovered alive in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Fraught with unknown dangers, Sergeant Steve McShane pits his courage and strength against an unfamiliar and brutal enemy he never imagined existed to rescue his friend and colleague.*

# Forgotten

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*Kent White*

# Forgotten

**Kent White**

*Kent White*

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ISBN 978-1-63263-291-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

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2015

Second Edition

*FORGOTTEN*

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY of the eighty SOG reconnaissance team members who are still listed as MIA, including ten entire recon teams who vanished while on top-secret missions deep inside the jungles of South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam between 1965 and 1972. You are not forgotten.



**- AUTHOR'S NOTE -**

DURING THE VIETNAM CONFLICT, communist North Vietnam used Laos and Cambodia, bordering South Vietnam to the west, as sanctuaries to harbor their troops and stockpile supplies for later attacks against US forces in the South. By late 1965, the US Air Force estimated some 30,000 North Vietnam Army troops were stationed throughout the region. Each month, an additional forty-five hundred NVA soldiers navigated the elaborate network of roads and trails located only miles from the South Vietnamese border.

As both Laos and Cambodia were declared “neutral” by the United Nations, the US military was forbidden to send in troops. While the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division waged the first major battle of the war in October, 1965, in the Ia Drang Valley, a top secret Studies and Observation Group, or SOG, team comprised of two US Special Forces commandos and seven Nung hill tribe mercenaries infiltrated behind enemy lines into Laos to gather invaluable intelligence on North Vietnam’s build-up. Thus began the first of hundreds of secret forays into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. These continued until early 1972 and were credited with saving thousands of American soldiers’ lives.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 1969, B-52 bombers on a top-secret mission flew undetected over the mountains of southeastern Cambodia. Just before dawn, they unleashed their devastating payloads on a densely

forested area of Cambodia, known as The Fishhook, where thousands of North Vietnamese Army troops were believed to be located.

Shortly after the bombing, a twelve-man SOG reconnaissance team took off in two 195<sup>th</sup> Aviation Huey helicopters from Quan Loi Airfield, a secret SOG launch site in South Vietnam, and infiltrated the area to make a BDA (Bomb Damage Assessment).

Comprised of five U.S. Army Special Forces' commandos and seven Montagnard hill tribe mercenaries, the recon team was accompanied by one of SOG's most notorious figures, Sergeant First Class Jerry Shriver. After more than three continuous years with SOG, Shriver's heroic and sometimes seemingly reckless exploits were known throughout the Special Forces' community, as well as the North Vietnamese Army. North Vietnam's Radio Hanoi honored him with the name "Mad Dog" and offered a ten thousand dollar reward for his capture, dead or alive.

Spotting a shell crater from the air, the Huey pilots believed they were in the correct target area. It was unknown to the men that the landing zone they were about to set down on had not received a B-52 strike and was surrounded by enemy soldiers. The instant the helicopters dropped off the team, a machine gun emplaced in a log-and-earth bunker raked the grassy LZ with a horrific maelstrom of automatic weapons fire, bringing down anyone who didn't find cover in the shell crater, or behind a charred tree trunk.

Shriver and another American, Walter Mercantel, leaped to the ground from the lead chopper as it



hovered several feet above the LZ. Bullets snapped terrifyingly overhead. Instantly they fell to their bellies in the low grass. The withering fire tore away Marcantel's pack and canteen. Realizing there was little else they could do, Shriver led the mercenaries on a daring assault toward the tree line in an effort to silence the gun.

The other three Americans were in the second chopper and took refuge in the single shell crater. From his vantage point in the crater, Captain Paul Cahill watched in horror as he witnessed Shriver take several hits, then fall to the ground "like a sack of potatoes". A while later, the team's medic, Sergeant Ernest Jamison, sprang from the crater to aid a fallen Montagnard and was struck by a flurry of bullets and was killed.

Of the five Americans on the ill-fated BDA that spring morning, only two survived. Cahill, who was severely wounded and lost an eye, and Marcantel, who six months later died in a parachute jump at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. In one of their broadcasts, Radio Hanoi stated that Shriver had been captured. However, he has never been seen or heard from again and is still listed as MIA.

Whether he was captured and later killed, or died in captivity, no one knows, except perhaps the Vietnamese government. Some would like to believe he somehow escaped into the mountains and carried on his own private war with his beloved Montagnards, whom he was said to care more about than his American comrades.

There are ten cases of SOG recon teams, including twenty-five Americans, who went missing while on top-secret operations during the course of America's secret war in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. Their remains have never been found. A total of eighty SOG team members were lost. Their fate, too, remains unknown and many are still listed as MIA. They have largely been forgotten. This novel is about one such man.

I would like to thank Paul Cahill for assisting me in sorting fact from fiction about the events on that Cambodian hillside over forty-five years ago. I also want to thank Jim Morris and Write Monterey for ironing out the bumps.

Kent White

**- P R O L O G U E -**

Fort Bragg, North Carolina  
May, 1992

AT 0750, MASTER-SERGEANT Steven McShane, team sergeant for Operational Detachment A-115, ushered his team past a dour Military Policeman standing at parade rest by the compound gate. A persistent, icy wind clawed at McShane's exposed cheeks. He turned the collar of his field jacket up, to little effect. The cold numbed his skin. There was a half foot of snow beneath the pine trees from a freak, swift-moving Arctic snowstorm two days before. McShane hated the cold, and looked forward to the heated brick building.

The early morning briefing was held in 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group's pre-deployment isolation center on Smoke Bomb Hill. The single-story isolation center was designed specifically as a secure site where operational detachments could plan top-secret missions. The center wasn't new to McShane: twice during the early days of the Gulf War, he and his detachment had spent several days planning covert operations into Iraq.

Surrounded by a ten-foot high chain link fence topped with coils of concertina wire, the structure had two stories. Only the upper story, which housed the administrative offices and classrooms, was visible. The lower story, where the mission briefings and

operational planning took place, was located fifteen feet below the red-clay soil.

The nine other enlisted men and one officer assigned to the A-team filed hurriedly through the isolation center's steel door. They waited patiently inside the reception area, while another grim-faced MP checked their IDs, comparing the picture on the card to the holder's face. McShane quickly flashed his card, not caring if the ten-year-old picture looked like him or not, and went over to the window. He placed his hands palm down on the knee-high wall heater, and sat on them.

When the last ID was checked, the team filed down the formed concrete stairs and entered the sterile white cinder block briefing room. The rows of combination desks and chairs facing a large blackboard reminded McShane of a grade school classroom. The team sat in the first two rows.

The team members spoke quietly among themselves, speculating on the subject matter of the 0800 briefing. Hypotheses ranged from infiltrating the women's dorm at Chapel Hill to a HALO jump from 30,000 feet into Yugoslavia to train the Croatian militia. McShane didn't really care what the briefing was about. He was down to sixty days and a wake-up and he was finally warm.

Sitting in the front row next to First Lieutenant Alex Hansen, the team's acting commanding officer while Captain Briggs, their usual C.O., was on leave, McShane was about to ask Hansen if he'd scored with the nurse at the Officers Club the night before, when Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Shupp, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion

commander, and his staff, entered the room. The team immediately stood to attention.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Shupp commanded.

In unison, McShane and his team sat down. Suddenly, as he settled into the hard metal chair, the room seemed hot and stuffy: he opened up his field jacket. Even Shupp seemed to notice the heat, dabbing his forehead with an OD handkerchief as he stepped toward the podium. His staff, including a civilian McShane didn’t know, took their places on a row of folding chairs facing the team.

McShane tried to recall the number of briefings he had attended. It was impossible, but knowing that he was a week away from celebrating his twenty-seventh year in the Army, and guessing that he averaged one a month, he figured he’d sat in on at least three hundred, a nauseating thought.

Shupp stood behind the oak veneer podium with his hands locked behind his back. His intense blue eyes swept over the passive faces of the young team members. Except for McShane and Hansen, he suspected there wasn’t a man over thirty. He wasn’t misled by their ages, however. ODA-115 was the best operational detachment in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, perhaps in all of 7<sup>th</sup> Group. He was proud of their accomplishments during his two years as battalion commander, including their work in Iraq before, during, and after the Persian Gulf War. Now he was about to assign them to another important mission.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “you are, no doubt, aware of the recent rash of photographs appearing in various

newspapers depicting alleged MIAs. While the majority of these photographs have proven to be clever forgeries, a few remain a mystery and are under intense investigation. Some photos received recently were kept out of the media's greedy liberal hands, and it is one such photo that prompted this briefing."

Shupp studied the young faces staring up at him. Their attention was riveted on his every word and he loved it. The power and control he had as battalion commander was invigorating. He was eager to see their expressions when they learned their assignment.

"At this point, I am going to turn the briefing over to Mr. Rayburn, a civilian asset, who will be your liaison throughout this operation."

McShane squirmed in his chair. Spook, he thought. The only civilians ever allowed at a classified briefing were with the CIA or DIA, or some other secret agency. He forgot about the heat. This was becoming interesting.

Rayburn was tall and athletically built. Sandy haired, tan, and dressed in L.L. Bean slacks and a blue Polo shirt, he looked more preppy than the slickly-dressed James Bond image of a secret agent. A graduate of Georgetown University, McShane thought, the college of choice for CIA recruiters.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Rayburn smiled warmly at the team. His teeth were white and even. McShane visualized him on a tennis court with a flaxen-haired beauty from Brown University, her well-rounded chest heaving from exertion. He didn't know whether to like this guy or not.

“Good morning, sir.” The team retorted.

“Up until a few years ago, the Golden Triangle, specifically the remote jungle region of northern Thailand, southern Burma, and northeastern Laos, was the prime opium-producing area in southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War, the CIA used profits from the sale of the opium to finance covert operations throughout Southeast Asia.”

McShane was surprised by Rayburn’s revelation. He didn’t think the CIA liked to discuss their drug-dealing days. But then, perhaps Rayburn had nothing to do with The Agency.

Rayburn moved from behind the podium and slowly paced the floor. “The Shan United Army, or SUA, is a private army originally formed in the mid-sixties by Khun Sa, an opium warlord. The SUA bought raw opium from hill tribe cultivators and sold it to Chinese syndicates in Bangkok. The syndicates, in turn, transformed the raw opium into heroin and sold it around the world.

“A lot of heat was placed on the SUA by Drug Enforcement Agency-financed Thai Border Police attacks in northern Thailand. The Border Police destroyed millions of dollars worth of poppy fields. Crop substitution, backed by the Thai government, replaced many of these former poppy fields with coffee, tea, and corn. Khun Sa and his army were driven into the mountains of the Kok River Valley in Burma. He still maintains a large army, for the protection of the Shan State, or so he says. More accurately, he still cultivates opium, but is less of a threat.”

Rayburn paused and returned to the podium and consulted an open file. For a moment, he appeared deep in thought. He closed the file, rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand, and then turned back toward the team.

“With the SUA more or less out of the picture, the Laotians now run the smuggling operations. Backed by the Laotian People’s Revolutionary Party, or the LPRP, Lao hill tribes are doubling their efforts to corner the market on opium poppies. It is still smuggled across the border into Thailand and sold to the same crime syndicates in Bangkok.” Rayburn stepped from the podium and positioned himself directly in front of Hansen.

“For some time now, field operatives working inside Laos have known from their contacts with hill tribe growers, of armed Caucasians accompanying anti-communist rebels fighting LPRP forces. Our field operatives tracked some of these units and managed to take several photographs, confirming the existence of at least half-a-dozen Caucasians fighting with the rebel forces.”

McShane was not aware that any of the sightings were actually confirmed.

“These rebels, interestingly, are remnants of the Special Forces trained FULRO, the Fronte Unife de Lutte des Races Opprimes. For those of you who have trouble with French, that translates into United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races. The FULRO are comprised of several ethnic hill tribes, including the Mnongs, who were so loyal to SF during the Vietnam conflict.”



And who we deserted in 1975, McShane thought bitterly, and who've fought every day since then to survive the oppressive Hanoi government.

"Through exhaustive background investigations, we discovered the identity of all these men. Two are former French Legionnaires, one is an ex-mercenary from South Africa, two are paroled Australian convicts, and one is a former Special Forces sergeant listed as MIA since July 1970."

A hush fell over the briefing room. McShane squirmed uneasily in his chair. This was all too familiar.

"We managed to keep close tabs on these men, particularly the American up until six months ago, when the sergeant vanished. Our contacts did a thorough search, and asked discrete questions of villagers, but nothing came of it.

"Last month, however, a story appeared in the Bangkok Post on the war between the KNU, the Karen hill tribe army, and the Burmese Army. Accompanying the article was a photograph taken near the northwestern Thai village of Naisoi. The photo shows a group of armed KNU guerillas filling their canteens at a stream. In the background, looking like a Western tourist with a camera slung around his neck, was our boy. This only came to our attention because one of our contacts, a hill tribe trekking guide, noticed the picture while waiting for a tour group to arrive at his hotel in Bangkok. He got a copy of the photo from the newspaper and turned it over to us."

Us who, McShane wondered? And what was the American now doing with the KNU, several hundred miles from the Golden Triangle?

“Frankly, we’re baffled by his actions. Nobody knows why or what the sergeant was doing with FULRO or what the hell he is doing now with the KNU, some 300 kilometers from Laos. It seems he’s helping the Karen, who have taken on the Burmese army in hope of creating their own state in southern Burma.

“So why does the sergeant care? Is he working as a mercenary, looking after his drug interests, sightseeing, what? More importantly, what has he been up to for the last twenty-two years? These are questions that need immediate answers. He needs to be found and brought out before somebody else recognizes him in the photo and starts blabbing to the press about him being an American MIA.”

Rayburn returned to the podium and sipped water from a tall glass. “At this moment, political factions within the President’s Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs are holding closed-door circle jerks, trying to decide what to do with stacks of reports on live sightings, and albums of photographs of purported MIAs. What we don’t need, gentlemen, is the President’s select few screwing this one up. Our man could die of old age by the time the committee members get their hands out of their crotches.”

Rayburn focused his attention on McShane: “It is no coincidence that ODA-115 was chosen for this operation. Besides being the best team in the 7<sup>th</sup>, one of

you here worked with the man in Vietnam, and hopefully will be able to positively identify him.”

Before Rayburn even finished his sentence, the team guessed he was referring to their team sergeant, their only Vietnam vet. They studied him intently for a reaction. McShane remained poker faced, despite the stares.

“In every possible way, the man in the photo resembles existing military, private, and family photographs of Staff Sergeant Kevin Slade. Slade was the leader of Recon Team Utah, and a friend of Sergeant McShane, who led the Bright Light team into Laos to rescue Slade’s team in July, 1970.

“As Sergeant McShane can attest, not one body was recovered from Slade’s team. Four Americans and their indigenous interpreter simply vanished.”

Rayburn held up the inch-thick manila folder he’d referred to earlier. Stamped across the front in red block letters were the words “TOP SECRET.”

He crossed over to Hansen and handed him the file. “Lieutenant Hansen, your team will enter isolation at 1800 hours tomorrow, the 12<sup>th</sup>. This file is very thorough. There are maps, photographs, area assessments, intelligence data, politics of the region, known enemy strength, friendly assets, absolutely everything you need to prepare a successful operation.

“On the 16<sup>th</sup>, you will fly to Bangkok by military transport. From there, you will be flown by chartered aircraft to Chiang Mai in northwestern Thailand. There you will be met by your local contact, who will accompany you into the mountains. He knows the area,

the hill tribes, and their dialects. He will assist you in final operational planning. The means of infiltration will be his responsibility also.”

Rayburn paused to catch his breath. “I don’t have to remind you how sensitive this mission is. Everyone out there, from the simple dirt farmer in Nebraska to the President of the United States, wants an accounting of the MIAs. Once you locate the man in the photo and verify his identity, you will hopefully learn the answer to our questions, and what happened to his team members. Were they killed, or captured and died during their captivity, or freed and simply chose to remain behind? If they chose to stay behind, we need to know why. Was it out of humiliation for what they revealed under interrogation, or because they felt a sense of duty to carry on the fight, or perhaps they wanted to make a buck with their former captors by dealing drugs?”

Rayburn suddenly glanced down at his watch and sighed. “Gentlemen, I’m out of time. Good luck.” He turned abruptly on his heels and walked to the stairwell. One of Shupp’s staff accompanied him out of the room.

Shupp rose quickly and went to the podium. “That concludes this briefing. Lieutenant Hansen, by 1730 hours tomorrow, your team will have all their detachment combat equipment packed. At 1800, you will be transported to this isolation facility, where you will begin planning your mission. Mr. Rayburn briefed my staff and they are available to answer any of your questions. Please let me remind you again of the sensitivity of this operation. Once you leave this building, you are not to discuss what was said today

with anyone outside the team.” Shupp extended his hand to Hansen, who stood and shook it.

“Good luck, Lieutenant Hansen.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

The battalion commander shook hands with the entire team before leaving the room, his staff on his heels.

Team members turned toward one another and began to whisper among themselves. McShane sat motionless. He was stunned that Slade might still be alive and fighting in Burma. What had become of him all these years? Were other Special Forces MIAs alive, choosing to remain behind rather than return to an uncaring society? There were too many unanswered questions. He needed a beer to help him sort things out.

McShane stepped behind the podium. “Okay, One-Five, let’s cut the bullshit.” He glanced at the wall clock across the room. It was 0830. “Team meeting at ten. We have a lot to go over before tomorrow.”

Several of the team members groaned.

“At ease, girls,” McShane said. “There will be plenty of time to wrap up last minute personal matters. When you explain where you’ll be to wives, girlfriends, and boyfriends, use the same cover story we used when we deployed to Iraq.”

The team hissed at McShane’s boyfriend remark and began filing quietly out of the briefing room.



**- CHAPTER ONE -**

Southeastern Laos  
July 1970

BREATHING HARD, SLADE DUG his boot heels solidly into the mud bank. The earth was damp and slick, and his feet began to give way. He slung his CAR-15 automatic carbine over his shoulder and grabbed a low, overhanging branch jutting from a gnarled, silk cotton tree. With a swift yanking motion, he pulled himself up and out of the narrow ravine.

As he crested the slope, the branch snapped and Slade lost his footing, slipping in a pocket of mud left by the morning's monsoon deluge. His weapon slammed into his side as he fell to one knee. A jolt of pain tore through his rib cage. He barely managed to stifle a cry. Quickly recovering his balance, he brought his lanky six-one frame to an upright position. His blue-gray eyes took in the unfamiliar jungle, searching the dank depths for intruders.

Staff Sergeant Kevin Slade, Recon Team Utah's One-Zero, or team leader, had no idea how far they had traveled through the dense Laotian jungle. Often, they were only a few hundred meters in front of North Vietnamese Army trackers. They had already suffered one casualty, Cao, his point man, shot by an NVA soldier. His remaining four men were exhausted from

being constantly on the move. Their water supply was at a crucially low point. If the team couldn't find a suitable site to take refuge and replace depleted body fluids, they would likely not survive the mission.

The thought of becoming added nutrients to the already rich, black jungle soil forced him to remain focused, and direct his energy on helping the remainder of his team negotiate the slippery hillside.

Sergeant Austin Broderick's legs pumped furiously as he tried to gain a foothold in the slick mud. At six-three and two hundred fifteen pounds, he was Utah's radio operator and One-One, and the largest team member. With the added weight of the PRC-25 radio riding high in his rucksack, he found the mushy bank a bitch to climb. His face twisted grimly as he struggled up the hillside.

Kneeling, Slade reached for Broderick's mud-caked hand, clawing frantically at the bank. "Grab my hand, Austin."

Broderick gripped the outstretched right hand and allowed Slade to half-drag him up the hill, while his feet churned in the quagmire, searching for a foothold.

"Fuckin' rain," Broderick muttered when he reached the top. He arched his back, then shrugged his shoulders to redistribute the awkward load in his rucksack.

"Quit whining," Slade commanded in a hushed tone. "There are people out there who want to screw up your day worse than a few raindrops. Give me a hand with the others."



Broderick's mud-smeared brow crinkled into a frown. For two-and-a-half hours, they had been dodging North Vietnamese Army patrols. So far, they had kept the NVA confused and at a distance, but all it took was one little screw-up to add the team to the ever-growing list of MIAs.

The embankment had become even more treacherous after Slade's and Broderick's knobby-soled jungle boots churned up the soil. Billy Mullins surveyed the bank for a handhold, a root, a rock, anything. He was a medic, not a mountain goat. Why had he let Slade lure him away from his regular job in the FOB dispensary?

"I'm short. Twenty-nine days and a wake-up," he'd told Slade three days ago when he visited him at the dispensary.

Slade had insisted. "One of my indig is sick and the other is at his dad's funeral and I don't have time to find replacements. Just this one mission."

Mullins had been content with his job, visiting local Montagnard villages, handing out malaria pills, performing physicals, giving inoculations, teaching villagers proper sanitation, and training the young 'yard nurses to care for their own people. Now he was wet and muddy, scared shitless, trying to climb what might as well have been Mount Everest.

Three feet up, Mullins discovered a thick, dinner-plate-sized rock uncovered by Broderick's boots. He brought his left leg up to the narrow stone ledge and carefully stood, testing the foothold. The granite chunk stayed securely embedded, and he brought the full

weight of his body onto it. From this perch he gazed upwards. The distance had narrowed significantly, but he still remained out of reach.

Suddenly he felt his feet lifted from the rock surface. Glancing between his legs, he saw the top of Mark Lofton's red hair, wet and matted. Lofton, the team's One-Two, was nearly as large as Broderick and just as strong. His powerful arms gripped Mullins's thighs tightly as he pushed him up the embankment.

"Come on, you fat fucker," Lofton grunted. "Get your lard-ass up this hill before the NVA shoot it off." He gave Mullins a final shove then added, "and mine, too."

Billy Mullins and Mark Lofton had joined the Army on the buddy system out of Le Grand, a restless, run-down farming community in California's Central Valley. They had been friends since kindergarten, when Billy's parents moved from Carrollton, Alabama and bought a house next to Mark's on Jefferson Street.

Throughout high school, they were active in sports, co-captaining the football team in their junior and senior years. Their friendship strengthened during those years, and when an Army recruiter visited their senior class, and suggested they enlist on the buddy system, they jumped at the opportunity.

It was rare that the so-called buddy system kept a pair together much longer than Advanced Individual Training. But they remained together through Basic, AIT, Jump School, Special Forces Training Group, a brief stint as KPs with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces, and finally with the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces in Nha Trang, South

Vietnam. Eventually they were assigned to the same SOG FOB.

With the boost from Lofton, Slade and Broderick easily managed to drag Mullins to the crest of the embankment. When he reached the top, Mullins lost his footing and fell face first into a pool of brackish water. He jumped up instantly, choking and spitting. Despite their dire situation, it was difficult for them not to chuckle.

Mullins wasn't amused and swore to himself, wiping dark water from his face with his cravat. His stomach suddenly growled and he realized that a half-dozen bites of thawed, freeze-dried beef hash rations at daybreak was the last time he had eaten. When the others reached the top, perhaps they would have a chance to eat.

Lofton managed to scale the mud bank on his own, using the rock and some exposed roots uncovered by the others. Lap, their interpreter who was carrying the team's M-79 40mm grenade launcher, scampered easily up the muddy slope, following the precise route Lofton had taken. When they reached the top, Slade motioned them into a grove of Banyan trees.

The team hunkered down in the center of the trees and listened. Except for the thunderous pounding of Slade's heart and Broderick's labored breathing, it was quiet. For now, at least, it appeared they had eluded their trackers.

This was Slade's second tour with the covert, top-secret, Studies and Operations Group that operated deep in enemy denied territory. His first tour with SOG had

been out of the FOB in Ban Me Thuot where he'd been a One-One, or assistant team leader, with Recon Team Beta, a nine-man team that generally operated in an area of Cambodia known as the Wastelands. When he was transferred to the FOB in Kontum after his 30-day extension leave, he was promoted to staff sergeant and given his own team.

He was now on the eighth month of his second tour, including two months recuperating in a hospital in Japan from a gunshot wound he received above his right knee while on an operation in southeastern Laos.

Slade blinked sweat from his eyes. He removed the coiled cravat tied around his head and wiped the mixture of water and perspiration from his face. He sat quietly against one of the trees, reflecting on the days' events. He was stinging from the loss of his point man, Cao, killed earlier in the day. He felt responsible for Cao's death.

Throughout his last tour in 1969, Cao had been on his old team, RT Beta, retiring when the team was disbanded. For the past year, Cao had been content puttering around the dilapidated stucco French Colonial house inherited from his father after the repatriation of Vietnam in 1954. Slade had worked hard to persuade Cao out of retirement. Finally, he relented, and agreed to join Slade's new team, RT Utah.

Cao had been walking point when the team entered what the SOG briefing officer, Captain Moses, had referred to as "strictly a deserted NVA bivouac camp." Moses was correct in calling it a "bivouac site", but deadly incorrect in the use of the word "deserted."

From the instant he and Cao set foot in the camp, Slade knew the intelligence was outdated. Signs of life were everywhere: an open cook fire boiling rancid water for drinking, tattered khaki uniforms hanging out to dry, and a sleeping soldier stretched out beneath a tree less than twenty meters from Cao.

Cao had responded instantly. With the muzzle of his M-16 trained on the slumbering soldier, he cautiously retraced his steps back into the dense jungle foliage, keeping the NVA keenly within the front sights of his weapon.

Cao's attention had been so riveted on the snoozing soldier that he failed to notice another NVA emerge from a nearby log-and-earthen bunker. Cao was within two steps of disappearing into the dull-green jungle when the soldier stopped abruptly, turned toward Cao, and knelt, bringing his AK-47 to his shoulder.

Slade had already stepped back into the foliage when he saw the NVA kneel and aim at Cao. He reached to grab Cao. But before he could grab his collar, there were two quick shots. Cao's head jerked back. A spray of dark red blood and jagged skull fragments erupted from the back of his head. He watched helplessly as Cao's body collapsed, an arm's reach away. There was no choice but to abandon Cao where he fell, with only half a head.

They'd made a hasty retreat toward their alternate LZ, taking only a brief rest for Broderick to radio the Covey pilot, Captain Jeffrey, who had been flying his single-engine Cessna 150 Birdog in their sector since shortly after dawn. He informed Jeffrey of their

situation and requested immediate extraction. Jeffrey reluctantly replied that the gunships and extraction chopper were on a Bright Light rescue mission elsewhere.

That had been three hours before and Slade was worried there wouldn't be enough daylight for an extraction. He pulled out an acetate-covered map of their Area of Operations and spread it out before the team.

"We've got half the NVA in Laos looking for us," Slade began. "Fortunately, they don't have a clue where we are or where we're headed. Before they catch on, we need to get extracted." He turned toward Broderick. "Austin, get hold of Covey again. Forcefully explain the situation we're in, and that we need a ride out of here, ASAP."

With "Vietnamization" in full swing, support duties had been turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force. While their pilots were excellent, internal bickering among their commanders made them far from reliable. If their superiors felt their pilots had flown enough hours for the day, then they very well might decide to cancel their extraction. Slade worried that their air assets wouldn't arrive in time to get them out before dark, and he didn't relish the thought of spending another night in the Laotian jungle.

Broderick nodded, stood erect, and shrugged off his rucksack. Methodically, as he had on countless occasions, he unfastened the straps on the top of the pack, flipped the top flap out of the way, and turned the PRC-25 power switch to the "ON" position. The long

antenna was broken down into a half-dozen lengths and stored in a two-foot-long canvas case. He pulled the sections out of the case, stuck them together, and screwed the end to the antenna mount on top of the radio. Lastly, he turned the knurled tuning knob until it clicked to the day's frequency.

"Billy, Mark," Slade continued, "I want you to set up a few meters out and make sure we aren't being tracked. Lap and I will plot out a course to the alternate LZ."

Mullins and Lofton nodded and moved to a low hedgerow ten meters to the south of the trees. Mullins settled in behind a tangle of deadfall and focused his attention toward the mud embankment. Lofton found a log partially hidden by swirling green vines, and took cover behind it. He rested his CAR on the log and scanned the dank jungle in the opposite direction.

Once Mullins and Lofton were in position, Slade returned to the map. It was an inaccurate rendering, compiled from maps drawn by the French in the 1940s and '50s. He studied the squiggly contour lines intently, attempting to get a fix on their precise location. He wondered just how inaccurate the map was. Their fate might well be decided by a French cartographer.

Slade tilted the map toward Lap. Lap knew the Laotian jungle better than anyone. He'd served with the French during the '40s and '50s as an interpreter and was familiar with their maps. If there were anyone in Southeast Asia who could direct them to the LZ, it was Lap.

“Say again, Desert Sun,” Broderick said into the radio’s handset.

“Repeat, Blackjack,” Captain Jeffrey replied. “Lone Ranger is still down and won’t be able to ride for twenty-four hours. Proceed to RON and continue with mission at first light. Out.”

Broderick frowned, displeased with Jeffrey’s message. He slowly re-fastened the radio handset to his web gear suspender, his team leader studying him. He hated to break the news to Slade.

“What, Austin?”

“Choppers are down for twenty-four hours. We’re supposed to RON, then continue the mission. They’ll try to extract us tomorrow.”

Slade closed his eyes and sighed heavily. So much had changed since his last tour, when they still had the support of American pilots who would do whatever it took to extract a team. With the VNAF, there was always uncertainty. Good men would lose their lives from the VNAFs reluctance to fly. Well, before he would further endanger his men, he would lead them first to Thailand, two hundred kilometers due west, then to the nearest bar.

“Ain’t this a batch of shit!” Slade muttered to himself, struggling to control his anger.

“What do you want to do?” Broderick asked.

“Bout the only thing we can do. Find a place to hide out for the night. I doubt if the NVA have given up on us yet. They expect an exfil, and when they don’t hear the Hueys, they’ll know for sure we’re still here.



And that will just intensify their search efforts. Get Mullins and Lofton over here.”

He worried about the teams’ chances of survival. In the last year, the NVA had become better armed. With their new man-portable SA-7 Grail anti-aircraft missiles, capable of bringing down a slow-moving Huey from ten kilometers out, teams were finding it nearly impossible to get in and out of AOs. Slade imagined an NVA weapons team lying in wait with dozens of Grails at the alternate LZ.

His dread was not unfounded. Last month, Eric Beck, his radio operator on several operations during his last tour, was killed along with his team when their Huey was hit on insertion by a Grail.

As a countermeasure, Slade had his team inserted several clicks from their destination, into an area not previously known for enemy activity. From the LZ, he had directed the team northwest, hacking through thick, nearly-impenetrable jungle in withering heat to reach their AO and the “deserted” camp. It had taken them two days.

His team had been assigned the mission of investigating the camp because of its close proximity to the village of Muong May, eight kilometers to the east of the village. Hypothesizing the camp had been abandoned, MACVSOG headquarters in Saigon hoped to use it as a staging point for a reconnaissance-in-force operation, code-named SLAM IX.

Muong May was a suspected NVA logistics complex, supplying enemy troops with weapons and food. Thirteen recon teams, each comprised of three

Special Forces men and nine hill tribe mercenaries, along with four companies of tribal guerrillas trained by U.S. Special Forces, were to take part.

The idea was nothing new. A bold plan by MACVSOG in March of 1967 had proposed that the hill tribes of the Annamite Mountains in southern Laos be organized into a guerrilla unit. They were to be outfitted and trained by Special Forces in Vietnam and then returned to Laos with SF advisors to fight against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.

In January, 1968, the plan was abandoned because of Embassy restrictions that forbade U.S. involvement in guerrilla operations within Laos. It was decided, instead, to recruit natives, train them in intelligence gathering in South Vietnam, and then return them to their homes in Laos to establish a network.

These agents reported that enemy activity in Muong May had increased dramatically and that the village was likely a major supply-and-staging point for NVA crossing into Vietnam. Now, nearly three years later, SOG decided to implement the plan once again. Muong May was to be the target of a massive B-52 bombing raid, immediately followed by an all-out assault by a recent, secretly CIA-trained force of hill tribesmen.

In addition to checking out the camp, RT Utah's mission was to recon the village of Muong May. Slade was to move his team into position near the village and place it under surveillance. They were to use whatever means possible to get in close enough to take pictures of any enemy build-up: stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, Grails, tanks, and soldiers with their

personal equipment. In addition, they were to emplace electronic sensor devices to monitor troop movement on trails around the village. And, if the opportunity arose, they were to grab a prisoner. But, after the incident at the “deserted” camp, and with what seemed like every available NVA soldier in the area searching for them, Slade felt their mission had little chance for success.

When he got the team assembled, Slade reached for a foot-long twig to use as a pointer, slapping a thumbnail size mosquito on his left forearm. Flicking it into the brush, he pointed to the map.

“The choppers are down. Covey says they’ll be out for twenty-four hours. However, since we’re dealing with the VNAF, it could be longer.” The faces around him tensed.

“It’s too dangerous to hang out here, so I’ve decided we’ll go ahead with the original mission.” Lofton and Mullins’s frowns deepened. “We’ll proceed northeast toward the village of Muong May.” He traced the approximate route with the twig. “That’s about four clicks from here and will take us several hours. We’ll RON somewhere en route.

“At first light, we’ll proceed to the village and set up a staging point a couple hundred meters out. Lap and I will move to the village, check it out, take pictures, place some sensors, and return after an hour or so. At that time, I’ll make a decision on how feasible a prisoner snatch is.”

Slade surveyed his team members’ distraught expressions. He gave them a wide, reassuring smile.

“Relax, I’m not about to place this team in any compromising situation. No dink prisoner is worth another team member’s life. If it doesn’t look good, we’ll leave and wait for an extraction. Alright, let’s go. We have a lot of ground to cover.”

The team was up instantly. Slade rose slowly. The shoulder strap on his rucksack had worn his skin raw, causing him to wince as he stood. At twenty-eight, he often felt he was getting too old to be playing army, carrying a third of his body weight on his back like a pack mule, in an obscure country that nobody gave a shit about, and in a war that the people back home were fighting over more violently than the soldiers sent to fight in it. At the moment, none of it made any sense at all.

He held out his hand to Broderick, who was having a hard time standing up. The radio operator grasped it eagerly and with some effort, Slade pulled him upright. Again, a quick shrug of his shoulders shifted the bulky load on his back to a more comfortable position. Broderick managed a weak smile and gave his team leader a thumbs up.

Suddenly Slade’s neck muscles tensed. He glanced back at Broderick. Broderick heard it too - a scampering noise from beyond the hedgerow. Slade motioned Mullins and Lofton to get down. They returned to their original positions near the hedgerow. At a crouch, Lap moved in the direction of the sounds to investigate, with Slade right behind him.

Slade heard the NVA clearly now. They were only a few dozen meters away, just on the other side of the

hedgerow. Mullins and Lofton, their eyes wide and alert, shifted their bodies on the damp, musty earth, adjusting the aim of their CAR-15s toward the hedgerow.

Slade and Lap edged forward. They entered the thick knot of undergrowth, wriggling their way cautiously through the tangles of scrub brush. Slade parted some wait-a-minute vines and was startled by what he saw.

Less than an arm's reach away was a thin, well-worn trail. Slade inched forward to get a better look. He glanced first up the length of trail then down the twisting ribbon of brown muck. The trail was so enveloped in dense jungle vegetation that it was difficult to see where it began and where it ended. To his relief, the trail was clear of NVA. Apparently the soldiers they heard had already passed.

As he drew his head back, his attention was drawn to the center of the trail, and a small pocket notebook lying half-covered by jungle duff. Thinking the book might yield some valuable intelligence, he reached to pick it up. Abruptly, Lap grabbed his wrist and yanked his arm back just as a pair of tattered bata boots came into view. Slade watched helplessly as scores of NVA boots trampled the notebook into oblivion. Slade's heart sank as he grappled with the sobering realization of just how vulnerable his team was.

After the last of the soldiers passed, he motioned to Lap to move back. With the NVA trackers actively searching the immediate area, he knew they had to move quickly. Fortunately, the trail wandered off to the

northwest. Muong May lay to the southeast. With any luck at all, their paths would never converge.

When they were out of the undergrowth, Slade pulled out his compass and checked their position. He pointed Lap to the southeast and moved in behind him. Broderick and Mullins followed Slade, and Lofton brought up the rear.

For the next forty-five minutes, they followed a narrow animal track that meandered along the military crest of a steep and rugged mountain slope. The sun began to drop behind the ridge. The mountain air turned cooler and less humid. Slade relished the change. In addition, the jungle had thinned, making their movement less restrictive and quieter. They were making excellent time now. It would be dark soon and he still needed to locate a suitable RON site.

Gradually, the track became uneven and slick. The team's progress slowed to avoid slipping. Even though Slade stopped them often to rest, the team grew weary with the slow, exhausting advance. Slade kept to the track, however, figuring the NVA were searching miles away.

As the track swung upward toward the crest of the ridge, the terrain changed abruptly. Before them lay an area unlike any they had covered the last few days. Tall, stout evergreen trees, like the forests of Oregon and Washington, covered the mountain slope. Lap, a half-dozen meters ahead of Slade, stopped.

When Slade caught up to Lap, he said matter-of-factly, "Looks like the Uwharrie." Lap looked at him curiously, not understanding Slade's reference to the

Uwharrie Forest in North Carolina, where Special Forces performed much of their local training.

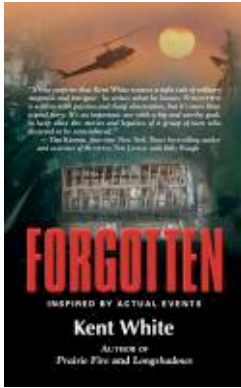
“Maybe stay in trees?” Lap asked expectantly.

“Maybe.” Slade motioned Lap ahead. There was little doubt the forest would be ideal for their purposes as long as it wasn’t already occupied.

Lap stopped just inside the trees, moved off the track and knelt down. Slade signaled the others to take up a defensive posture off the path. They took cover behind some trees and trained their CARs on the wood line. Weapons poised, Lap and Slade cautiously entered the forest.

The thick evergreen forest made travel difficult. Slade and Lap squatted low to maneuver beneath some matted undergrowth clinging to the tree limbs. The air was still and cool. He felt as though he were discovering the forest for the first time. He slapped at a mosquito on the back of his neck. Apparently the forest had also been discovered by the Laotian bloodsuckers he’d come to detest long before.

They wandered deeper and deeper into the dark forest. Lap followed his instincts rather than any sort of path. With each step, Slade felt the strongest desire to turn back, yet he knew the forest was their only alternative. His men were exhausted and nearly out of water. The NVA were on to them and seemed to be everywhere, and this eerie haven offered the team immediate sanctuary.



*Inspired by actual events, **Forgotten** is the story of Kevin Slade, a Green Beret sergeant who vanished while on a covert, top-secret mission into Laos during the Vietnam War. Listed as MIA for over two decades, he is discovered alive in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Fraught with unknown dangers, Sergeant Steve McShane pits his courage and strength against an unfamiliar and brutal enemy he never imagined existed to rescue his friend and colleague.*

# Forgotten

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