

After Action Report Texas Tech Symposium

In the West Texas town of Lubbock, a chapter from the shadowed annals of Naval Intelligence came into the light, and as it did so it became a permanent part of the National Historical Record in mid-March. Written in blood and fire nearly 40 years ago, the story of Naval Intelligence Field Operations Vietnam and its NILOs was detailed at the third tri-annual Texas Tech University Vietnam Center's Symposium.

(Insert Naval Forces Vietnam Seal here)

Surrounded by luminaries like Peter Arnett of the Associated Press and the black eye-patched, Don North of ABCTV, the former NILOs stood out because they represented a small band of junior officers operating independently and doing so under some of the most adverse circumstances that members of their community have ever endured. Their presentations are now a part of the Vietnam Center's archives and will provide scholarly researchers information centuries from now. They will provide a unique insight into an aspect of the conflict that is often shrouded by its very nature or eclipsed by the commanders they were subordinated to.

Throughout the Vietnam conflict, somewhat less than 150 Officers were assigned to Naval Intelligence Field Operations Vietnam in total. Subordinated to one of four Coastal Zones, two Riverine, or one of several operational commands, the bulk of these officers served as Naval Intelligence Liaison Officers, or NILOs. It was parts of their stories that were told in Texas. For example, the annals of the Vietnam Conflict are replete with code names like Rolling Thunder, Line Backer, Game Warden, and Giant Slingshot. These are well known to military history, the NILOs spoke of other code names, critical to their story, but often viewed as unnecessary obfuscations by historians.

Former NILO Lam Som (NIPer Nick Carbone) set the stage and placed the actors upon it with his introduction of Admiral Zumwalt's SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy) campaign and code names like Fire Fly, Duffle Bag, and Black Beard. Noting that SEALORDS goal was to challenge the popular mantra that the enemy owned the night. Nick Carbone introduced the NILOs that contest that ownership within the context of those code words as well as by more traditional force employment tactics, techniques and procedures.

Former NILO Duc Hoa (NIPer Pete Decker) detailed Project Fire Fly; the employment of a Heavy Helicopter Hunter-Killer team with a co-axial mounted Zeon Searchlight and later an human ammonia detector (sniffer) as well as a mini-gun in a command ship with two to three rocket firing support ships flying in tandem. The Fire Fly flew in support of the Riverine forces operating on "Blood Alley" and as a natural extension of his Border Surveillance mission assigned to NILO Duc Hoa. Ranging over the Plain of Reeds several nights a week, Hunter-Killer Team contested the enemy ownership of the night with high level of lethality and demonstrated that low-light

level/multi-ship helicopter attack operations were not only feasible, but also very productive.

Photo courtesy of the Vietnam Center and Archive

(insert JPG picture of Presentating NILOs)

NILO's L-R Larry Serra (Ha Tien), John Vinson (Tra Cu) Pete Decker (Duc Hoa)

Former NILO Tra Cu (NIPer John Vinson) described Project Duffel Bag; the employment of unattended ground sensors (acoustic, magnetic, infrared and seismic) along infiltration routes and in concert with pre-registered artillery targets or at critical junctions/water-born ambush sites nominated for the River Division of PBRs he supported. Once again, the ability of the enemy to operate with impunity was sharply curtailed by a NILO and the lethality of the naval presence substantively increased. The unattended ground sensors extended the defense perimeter considerably and took the art of remotely targeting hostile forces to a new level.

Finally former NILO Ha Tien (Larry Serra) described Project Black Beard; that saw him responding to a flashing light message from a Khmer Navy corvette and enabling the rearming of two regiments of Khmer Marines to fight the North Vietnamese. The authorization for which, tracked all the way to the Oval Office. That an initiative of a junior officer, on the border of a "neutral" country in the middle of a war, could find its way to the White House, speaks eloquently to the initiative of these young officers. More importantly, he detailed the insights provided by agent operations in denied areas.

These were just three summaries of the almost 20 "NILO end of tour reports" that were introduced into the TTU VNC archives as an offshoot of Vadm. Rectanous' "Jack Graf" initiative. As a repository for these records, the Texas Tech University Vietnam Center's archives are significant in that they become a permanent monument to both what was done, as well as, those that did it. That monument is located in the largest Vietnam War centered archive in the country with virtual access to all and links to other archives like the Navy's Historical Center. This was part of the NILO mission in Texas.

That was not the sum of this meeting. Gathering for a special dinner, the presenting former NILOs and wives were joined by Al Grace (CTF-116 IO), Don Harrad (NILO My Tho) and NIPer Rich Gragg (NILO Bac Lieu) along with retired Army, Navy and Marine Corp officers, and Larry Berman (Admiral Zumwalt's Biographer).

(Insert picture of NILOs dinning)

In the atrium, grayed and aging former NILOs rose as a solemn toast was offered. Remembered by name at a special candle lit table were; NILO/3rd Coastal Zone IO Jack Graff, killed as he swam a canal in an abortive escape attempt, 4th Coastal Zone IO Al Hollowell who died in a mid-air collision. NILO Song On Doc Ken Tapscott who died of

wounds from heavy machinegun fire as the PBR he was riding cleared a kill zone, NILO Cau Mau, R. O. Williams who died of unknown causes, NILO Chau Duc, Giles Witcomb who succumbed to Agent Orange related cancer several years ago. 4th Riverine IO Jack Herriott who died a decade after leaving Vietnam and NIPer, and former NILO/1st Coastal Zone IO Lee Entas who succumbed to Agent Orange related cancer less than a year ago. Each had his place card at that table and was remembered by those that survived them.

(insert picture of Jack Graf place at table)

In rising to offer the solemn toast, Pete Decker named those remembered at the table of honor asserting that, within the NILO community, it could be truly said that all gave some and some gave all. He then offered the Missing Comrades toast.