

**MACVSOG History Project**  
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Tom Marshall  
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20 March 1996

Dear Mr. Marshall,

Please, do not consider this as a challenge. In spite of what you may believe, our letter through BTL was not an attempt to criticize your article. It was only to gain your recognition and support for historical accuracy. You may consider this letter as a cooperative effort between historians.

Mr. Marshall, several of our staff members noted a harsher than required edge to your letter. Never before required to justify our position, or existence, this project is highly credible. We have world renowned historians, and lecturers at our disposal; including special operations historians from W.W.II through the present military (debacle) action in Haiti. Ranging from the most notable SEAL historian, and the USAF special operations historian, we too are assisting the historical video production for a major television network. We are not only charitable and dedicated to American History, we have provided guidance and assisted numerous history departments of prestigious institutions; including Texas A&M, TCU, LSU, New Hampshire, Princeton, Harvard, Wisconsin, et al. Not to mention the magazine articles we review for correctness, we're responsible for discrediting the "1205 document," and are called upon to advise the White House on military matters. Our last significant White House response was advice to the President on the Oklahoma City Bombing incident; the day after the carnage.

Wishing you nothing but good luck, and not to be facetious, when you achieve the recognized status of the SOG History Project, may we call upon your expertise?

While it is not our intent, or purpose to discredit anyone, or their story, you should be aware there are purist historians who have proven the contention of "North Vietnam incursion" by US forces to be incorrect. We, in the MACV-SOG History Project, have official documentation which denies American involvement on the ground, north of the DMZ, in North Vietnam. You too must surely know, as a credible military historian, that only specific teams from SOG were ever allowed in North Vietnam, and that those programs ended "officially" by White House directive in 1968. MACSOG's North Vietnam operations do not appear in CIA/SOG documentation after 1968. If you have access to official documentation dated after 1968, we will, at your request, gladly evaluate the source for you.

While it might be romantic and adventuresome, contrary to belief, there were never any "illegal," "accidental," or "spur of the moment" rescues by any US Army/Marine aviation units/assets north of the DMZ in North Vietnam. Since no SOG USSF were there, no rescue attempts of SOG USSF were necessary. There were, however, SOG operations near the north-western end of the DMZ (in Laos), but not entering North Vietnam.

As historians, with "lessons learned" under our belts, please allow us to provide you with one forewarned precaution. By virtue of rank alone, Colonels' and Generals' verbal recollections are never considered historical, unless they substantiate archival documentation. Rank does not assure automatic validity. Many unsubstantiated claims by senior US officers from the Vietnam era have been countered with official historical documentation. It becomes a sad day when the "word of a gentleman," has to be proven false --publicly. One documented post-Vietnam problem arose, for example, during the Senate POW/MIA Hearings when one senior US officer knowingly made false statements and was exposed.

Forward, US military commanders (Army/Marine) never had "local commander" authority to give permission to enter North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. They did not have the "initiatives, or prerogatives" to over-ride COMUSMACV, or Presidential orders. While SOG had the "authorities" to operate in Laos and Cambodia, post-1968 operations in North Vietnam were strictly forbidden.

Documentation, in Presidential files, unequivocally shows that only the commander-in-chief of American Military Forces (the US President) permitted involvement in *North Vietnam* by CIA (until 1963), and MACSOG-34 (1964-1968) indigenous, and by MACSOG 35 USSF-led downed pilot recovery teams (1966-1968). These are undeniable facts, provided in official SOG documentation (±10,000 pages) during the Senate's POW/MIA Hearings. Some of the declassified records you seek are in the Legislative Archives in DC. Remember, as in cards, official documentation always beats "four Aces."

Some individuals, while they were with SOG, have claimed to have operated north of the DMZ, but were consistently wrong in their recollections. Those SOG personnel who persisted in demanding they had operated in North Vietnam, after several warnings to "cease and desist," have been publicly discredited. At least one of the seven SF names provided you (by Rick Freeman) has been discredited as a liar. Its a shame when accomplished warriors feel they have to embellish their otherwise honorable war stories, and then are willing to defend their actions in a public forum that exposes them as liars. Remember, documentation wins in court --every time. To that end, the basic correspondence is being included about a SOG Marine who insisted he had operated in North Vietnam, and then published a "history" book about his "novel" exploits.

SOG Americans did not operate in North Vietnam unless they satisfied two specific requirements. One, they were USSF, and (2) they were attempting downed pilot recovery for MACSOG 80 (Recovery). While there exists claims made by Vietnam Vets that they fought on the ground in North Vietnam, none can document their claims. Operations in North Vietnam are, by the way, verifiable through official documentation. It's not what we remember, but can prove.

To lead you up to the building crescendo when US-led recon operations were ceased in Laos and Cambodia, the following documentation is provided:

JCS message #1049, dated 272237Z MAY 70

(the Pentagon, May 27th, 1970, 10:37 p.m., Greenwich Mean (ZULU) Time Zone.)

"Subject: SALEM HOUSE Authorities(U)

American leadership, and presence in reconnaissance, and exploitation force operations in Cambodia is no longer allow after Midnight, June 30th 1970."

JCS message #3360, dated 052332Z FEB 71

(the Pentagon, February 5th, 1971, 11:32 p.m., Greenwich Mean (ZULU) Time Zone.)

"Subject: Prairie Fire Authorities (U).

Effective at one-minute after midnight, February 8th, 1971, US Special Forces are prohibited from leading further combat, or reconnaissance operations in Laos."

Two exceptions were made in JCS message #3360, however, concerning the US military presence in Laos. At the "GOLF-5" radio-relay site, on a Laotian mountain-peak at YB 604 355, Americans were allowed to remain in charge. The second exception permitted American personnel with MACSOG 80 conducting "Personnel Recovery (PR)" or "Crash Site Inspections (CSI)" to continue their operational missions in Laos and Cambodia. American-led recon missions into the demilitarized zone ("NICKEL STEEL") were allowed to continue.

Harve Saal's official assignment orders, records, and SOG documentation show he was involved in SOG recon team operations from September 1967 through September 1970. Harve, as many other soldiers, had a single tour of duty in Vietnam. What differs Harve's tour from all others was that he was voluntarily with SOG for three consecutive years. Privy to SOG rules of engagement, he learned that no US were allowed on the ground in North Vietnam, unless it was to recover downed pilots. Harve was in (1) MACSOG-34 when SOG, anticipating Johnson's Bombing Halt in North Vietnam, ceased "fruitless" indigenous operations into North Vietnam (Summer 1968), (2) worked with MACSOG-35/36 when the USSF were forbidden from leading recon operations into Cambodia, and (3) he departed five months before US-Led operations ("handwriting on the wall") were halted in Laos. While with SOG recon ('67-'70), he vividly recalls pilots being given false information, "out of necessity," by SOG's launch site officers. US-led SOG operations were very limited and never once did the pilots venture into North Vietnam. Too many heads would have rolled! Harve's was among the last recon teams in 1968, to be sent into the DMZ to witness Soviet Advisors assisting North Vietnamese gunners emplacing AAA and SAMs along the DMZ's north side. The gun-sites were described as "capable of saturating the area with impenetrable defensive fires." In short, Mr. Marshall, aircraft operating north of the Ben Hai River and DMZ in North Vietnam, were hopelessly defenseless, and shot down.

Without knowing Harve, or his personal accomplishments in SOG, your premonition that he will protect SOG and its (now unclassified) well documented history is very appropriate. Unlike some, he's lost body pieces and bled on SOG battle fields. He has committed himself to seeing that those who died for SOG, will not have died in vain. The SOG History was compiled by him, because false articles about SOG were being published, and circulated. The history, prepared over a six year period, was intended for traditionalist historians and the families of SOG volunteers. It was intended to say more about the SOG volunteer than he would ever say about himself. The first 43 pages of volume one are condensed, and edited from ±20,000 pages of research material. As you may know, the profits after publication expenses are earmarked for cancer and heart research.

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"McGuire" Rigs; to the historically pure, they differentiate the time frame these rigs were used in SOG. If you're writing specifically for other pilots, a small target audience, then call them "McGuire." A publisher, however, will press you to exacting specification, to realize the profits from a larger target audience. For SOG recon, there wasn't an "FOB" at Quang Tri for CCN, it was officially an "MLT (Mobile Launch Team)." For nearly every mission, pilots were told that they were involved with "illegal" operations. SOG commanders were ecstatic whenever the pilots incorrectly addressed the sites we used. If captured, you couldn't know the "right words" to provide the enemy.

We're sorry to say that the Vietnam Helicopter Association caused such a delay for the SOG History, in providing a list of aircrew members that flew for SOG, that the history had to be accelerated and the aircrew names omitted from the final manuscript. Contacted for several years, on several occasions, they neither responded, nor cooperated. In doing so, they had defeated the purpose of giving recognition to your brave aircrews.

While President Johnson's OPLAN 34A gave MACV permission to conduct covert, and combat activities in North Vietnam, MACV's General Order 6, 24 Jan 1964, charged SOG with the ultimate responsibility. Mr. Marshall, are you aware that SOG commandos caused the Tonkin Gulf incident, which later resulted in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the build up of US combat forces in South Vietnam, and the "Vietnam conflict."

References: Annex A (MACSOG Command History) 1964; Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E.W. Kenworthy and Fox Butterfield, The Pentagon Papers, as Published by the New York Times, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971); Joseph C. Goulden, Truth is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair - Illusion and Reality, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), and Harve Saal, MACV-Studies and Observations Group (SOG), Volumes I: Historical Evolution, Volume II Locations, Volume III, Legends, and Volume IV, Appendixes, (Behind-Enemy-Lines, A History of the men and the missions), (Milwaukee: Jones Techno-Comm, 1990).

You certainly have the God given right to disagree with official documentation, but your strong convictions, that you had flown into North Vietnam, remain incorrect. Gary Linderer, although a wonderful man, is not an historical source for SOG, and neither does he suggest he is. Editing errors are unintended, but expected. You're going to go ballistic with all the publisher's errors. There are worldly, respected historians that have been embarrassed by the final presentation of their lengthy endeavors.

The printed word alone is not necessarily historical --to say so, leaves one open to scrutiny. We're hoping, that as historians, we can encourage you to document your history, as you go. It can only make a better story when it's fully documented -- rather than containing innuendo and supposition.

As a common courtesy, please provide the necessary release forms before using any copyrighted SOG related materials, and then cite the correct source. As an example, and for your personal enlightenment, we are including the documented encapsulation of Operation Lam Son 719; as it relates to SOG.



#### **Operation Lam Son 719**

During January 1971, Operation Lam Son 719 was launched against North Vietnamese strongholds around the vicinity of Tchepone, Laos. The operation was staged to penetrate Communist sanctuaries using Vietnamese ground forces, backed by American air power. Described as "a South Vietnamese offensive drive into Laos along Route 9," it received a giant share of SOG's helicopter assets in the northern most PRAIRIE FIRE regions. Twenty miles into Laos, northwest of Khe Sanh, sat Tchepone, Laos which was the center of the North Vietnamese logistical network. The city of Tchepone was ideally suited for the storage of enemy supplies since it was strategically located on a major thoroughfare that serviced both Laos and South Vietnam. Highway 9 ran from Tchepone through Khe Sanh to near the South China Sea.

**ARVN General Lam Son** The North Vietnamese knew of the operational plans and intentions of Operation Lam Son long before the attack took place. Waiting in ambush for the South Vietnamese forces, were well placed artillery, tanks, and anti-aircraft weapons which caused havoc and devastated the advancing South Vietnamese forces. In January 1971, thirty US-led recon missions were inserted into Laos.

After February 8th, 1971, MACSOG-35's US-Led recon teams were no longer permitted in Laos. By mid-March, a heavy toll had been exacted upon the South Vietnamese forces and their American supported air elements. Highway 9 had become unusable. Two-hundred US Airforce helicopters, and 107 US Army helicopters had been shot down. Losses included 2,500 South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) soldiers killed. Orders were finally given to the South Vietnamese forces to abandon all firebases in Laos and return to South Vietnam.

References: Annex B (MACSOG Command History) 1971-1972; James William Gibson, *The Perfect War (Technowar In Vietnam)*, (Boston/NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), pp. 399-401, and Harve Saal, *MACV-Studies and Observations Group (SOG), Volumes I Historical Evolution, Volume II Locations, Volume III, Legends, and Volume IV, Appendixes, (Behind-Enemy-Lines, A History of the men and the missions)*, (Milwaukee: Jones Techno-Comm, 1990).

SOG had specific "authority" to operate in the DMZ area, code named: NICKEL STEEL.

JCS message #6319, dated 142123Z JAN 67

(the Pentagon, January 14th, 1967, 9:23 p.m., Greenwich Mean (ZULU) Time Zone.)

Subject: Nickel Steel Authorities(U)

The message designated the western end of the DMZ as "Nickel Steel," beginning at map grid zone designator XD00. It was a new area, opened for MACSOG 35 recon.

Harve's schedule doesn't permit him to "sit still," but as our mentor, he's directed us to prepare this letter and provide the basic references to the documentation. His transcribed comments and notes for you:

Tom,

Thanx for the aviator's names, especially those who died. They will certainly be given their honored place in SOG History.

Jimmy Thornburgh was incorrectly appraised of some captured and executed USSF in North Vietnam (1964-65). There are no known eye witness reports, or documentation substantiating this (1964-65) incident. Who did he say told him? There were, in-fact, other US from SOG, captured alive in good health, who disappeared and were presumed executed. They remain MIA.

The MACV-SOG History Project has no pertinent files mentioning the numerical count of Son Tay's NVA, or Chicom Forces. My friend, Dick Meadows, planned the Son Tay operation and an unclassified military video was produced. The video was watched by myself and several other SF at the DLI Language School, Presidio of Monterey, CA, in 1980. It is currently available; somewhere.

When you flew northerly from Quang Tri, did you cross north of the Ben Hai River? The DMZ was up to 6 miles deep, in places, with the Ben Hai supposedly as the separation point. There was sufficient maneuvering room on the northern side of the Bei Hai River before encroaching into NVN airspace.

When you allude to the "tri-border" area of North Vietnam, do you mean that area north-west of the DMZ? I personally know that MACSOG-35 ran a few missions, about four (1967-1969), just above the DMZ and adjacent to NVN's border, but in Laos. Personal discussions at the time, common amongst MACSOG-35 recon team members, consistently indicated these teams never intended to, or entered North Vietnam. It was very well known and agreed upon by all recon team leaders that Chief, SOG would have rolled heads if an accidental incursion into NVN had occurred; including any accidental over-flights.

Your long anticipated, well articulated, epic tale of the Vietnam era, SOG helicopter aircrew is awaited by the throngs of anxious Americans who revere your brave heroics. I wholeheartedly encourage you to publish your story. Without the need for controversy, I assure you that your work can be historically accurate, and withstand any critical scrutiny. Your acts of bravery need not be so specific, or documented as to require location. It may be historically better to be incomplete, rather than incorrect.

Don't throw away those two, dedicated years of your life by compromising your principles, or ignoring existing documentation. Nobody faults a good story for being historically precise. But, to publish a "novel," as did One Tough Marine, and hawk it as historical fact, is inexcusable, unjustifiable, and unforgivable.

I look forward to your work. Is there anything we can do, time permitting, to assist you in your worthy project?

Harve



And, forgive us our trespasses, but we would be derelict by not providing you with the opportunity to own the first edition, collector's copy of the SOG History. There are a very limited number remaining, perhaps less than 200 sets.

We, at the SOG History Project, unanimously, wish you God speed in your project.

Sincerely,



Hovey Bennett  
Senior Project Coordinator

HB/bj

Enclosed:

MACV-SOG Solicitation; and  
Correspondence concerning One Tough Marine.

