



ARTICLE FROM VIETNAM

PERSONALITY

Wounded four times in Vietnam and now a chronicler of that war, Jim Morris is still proud of his service there.

By Marc Phillip Yablonka

Retired U.S. Army Special Forces Major Jim Morris had been awarded three of his four Purple Hearts in Vietnam before the Marines ever hit the beach at Da Nang in March 1965, signaling the beginning of full-scale American involvement in the war. In the course of his three tours in Indochina, between 1963 and 1968, he almost lost his right arm to a Viet Cong machine-gun burst while assisting a fellow trooper in a



firefight and did lose his left testicle. In 1973 he went back to cover the war as a freelance journalist after the U.S. military had withdrawn from the region.

As the author of two factual accounts of his experiences, *War Story* (see review on P. 50) and *The Devil's Secret Name*, as well as *Fighting Men*, a collection of magazine pieces that became the pilot of a 1994 video series called *The Fighting Men Series: The Green Berets*, Morris' life will forever be entwined not only with the Green Berets but also with Vietnam.

Morris, now 58 years old, believes that the Vietnam War was the event of his generation, and because it was such a major part of his own life, he feels called upon to be a conduit between the war and those who want to know about it. "We lived through a legendary time," said Morris. "Reliving it and telling about it is an interesting chore."

F U L L T E X T

ARTICLE FROM **VIETNAM*****PERSONALITY******Wounded four times in Vietnam and now a chronicler of that war, Jim Morris is still proud of his service there.*****By Marc Phillip Yablonka**

Retired U.S. Army Special Forces Major Jim Morris had been awarded three of his four Purple Hearts in Vietnam before the Marines ever hit the beach at Da Nang in March 1965, signaling the beginning of full-scale American involvement in the war. In the course of his three tours in Indochina, between 1963 and 1968, he almost lost his right arm to a Viet Cong machine-gun burst while assisting a fellow trooper in a firefight and did lose his left testicle. In 1973 he went back to cover the war as a freelance journalist after the U.S. military had withdrawn from the region.

As the author of two factual accounts of his experiences, *War Story* (see review on P. 50) and *The Devil's Secret Name*, as well as *Fighting Men*, a collection of magazine pieces that became the pilot of a 1994 video series called *The Fighting Men Series: The Green Berets*, Morris' life will forever be entwined not only with the Green Berets but also with Vietnam.

Morris, now 58 years old, believes that the Vietnam War was the event of his generation, and because it was such a major part of his own life, he feels called upon to be a conduit between the war and those who want to know about it. "We lived through a legendary time," said Morris. "Reliving it and telling about it is an interesting chore."

Since Vietnam, Morris has covered wars in Cambodia, Thailand, El Salvador, Lebanon and Israel for *Rolling Stone*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *Esquire* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He once felt a love for the "beauty and strangeness of Vietnam." But it is not a place he wants to return to.

"Why should I go back just to get jacked around by petty officials?" he asked. "In the South, the only place I have fond memories of, that you're allowed to travel to, is Nha Trang. I live close to the beach in Southern California. Why should I travel thousands of miles just to go to the beach?" One gets the impression that Morris would go back, though, if he were permitted to travel to the Central Highlands, where he pulled most of his duty. That is where he first "rock 'n' rolled," as he put it, with the Montagnards.

Although the Green Berets were trained at Fort Bragg, N.C., and were provided intensive lessons in Indochinese history, politics, economics and language studies (Vietnamese and French) on Okinawa, their truest training, according to Morris, occurred in the field and in bull sessions with other Special Forces personnel. "We were constantly rotating in and out of Vietnam in the early days on six-month TDYs (temporary duties)," he remembered, "and, over beers at the club, all the guys who were going hung on every word of those who had come back."

Unfortunately for Morris and American vets who have chosen to revisit Vietnam, the Montagnard villages of the Rhade, Jarai and others are officially off-limits because of an ongoing battle between the current regime and hill tribe rebels. During the war, Americans moved freely in and out of the long houses attending to the tribal peoples' medical needs and occasionally drinking the ceremonial but notoriously potent rice wine known as "numpai."

To this day the rebels identify themselves by the acronym FULRO, which stands for *Le Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Opprimées*, or The United Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races. They are fighting against the threat of genocide from the Hanoi government, just as they have had to fight discrimination for at least two centuries. In recent decades that has meant Montagnards could not have passports because they were not allowed to leave Vietnam, and Montagnard teachers could not teach classes in their own language. "Today, they are being forced to speak Vietnamese, take Vietnamese names and intermarry," said Morris, a native Oklahoman. "What's happening to them is exactly what happened to American Indians in this country. Interestingly, some of the gravest concern for the 'Yards' has been registered by American Indian Vietnam vets."

Morris's area of operations for most of the time he was in Vietnam was in the Central Highlands approximately 115 kilometers southwest of Pleiku. The base camp was about four kilometers outside the village of Buon Beng, alongside the Song Ba River near Cheo Reo, "a town of one Esso station, two photo shops, two bars, three warehouses, six hardware stores, an ARVN officers club and a MACV compound," he recalled.

Most Special Forces jungle encampments were constantly under Viet Cong (VC) observation, but Morris still remembers the ease with which he and his Montagnard detachments could maneuver on patrol: "Our camp was in a pacified zone. What that meant was we had three quick roads into areas that weren't pacified. So Charlie [i.e., the VC] could sit there watching our camp, but all he knew was that we had left. We could dismount anywhere along the highway and zip into the underbrush. We had very rapid unobserved entrance into any operational area. Most teams left at 0600 hours and were tracked the whole bleeding way, whereas we couldn't be, so we kicked some serious ass."

Morris' wartime camaraderie with the hill tribes led him, along with other former Special Forces veterans and his friend Don Scott, to work for the few thousand Montagnard refugees now in the United States and to publicly express concern for those left behind in Vietnam. Scott, now a Greensboro, N.C., entrepreneur, aided them in Kontum during the war as a civilian hospital administrator for the San Diego-based

Project Concern. He and Morris pleaded the case of the Montagnards in a 1986 airing of the CBS-TV news magazine *West 57th*.

Interviewed by journalist Meredith Vieira, both emphasized the fact that the Montagnards had all been left behind and virtually forgotten after the fall of South Vietnam by an American government that, as thanks for their service, had promised their leaders safe passage out in the event of what had become by then the inevitable South Vietnamese defeat.

That promise was made to Montagnard leaders by the CIA at the American Embassy in Saigon in the waning days of the war in April 1975. One in attendance was Edmund Sprague, a former intelligence officer. "It was politick-speak," Sprague said, indicating that the promise to the hill tribes may have been slightly double-talk. "But it was my understanding that the Montagnards would be taken care of."

While Morris finds it painful to ponder the fate of those Montagnards, he does have fond memories of the beautiful countryside in Vietnam: "That first day I thought, 'Lord help me. I'm just a cornfed boy from Oklahoma. I've never seen any place like this. Mother, I've come home to die.' I loved it."

But for Morris the repeated tours could not hold a candle to the first one. The fact that Vietnam had escalated to a full-fledged war by the mid-1960s did not help. "It just became crap," Morris said. "Some things are perfect and some are magic, and you cannot re-create them by trying for the same physical environment."

With pride, though, he produces a letter written to him by the legendary Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, one of the first U.S. Army advisers to South Vietnam in 1962. Vann, who left the Army the next year in a dispute with the Pentagon over how the war was being waged, went to work as a provincial pacification representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). He was killed in a helicopter crash in the Central Highlands in 1972, 10 years after he had arrived in Vietnam (see "Troubled Apostle of Victory" in the Spring 1989 issue). Eerily, his letter to Morris arrived three days after Vann's death.

Vann was clearly a role model for the retired major, who speaks glowingly of his own training. He and fellow Green Berets were schooled in the ways of their opponents in Indochina. They were trained to beat the Viet Cong at their own game. "We read Mao [Mao Tse-tung] until we could quote him word for word," Morris remembered. "You can lay what he wrote over any revolution throughout history and it's all right there."

Morris believes that the Green Berets could not have done what they did, however, without the courage of the Montagnards who were at their side. "We planned to wage a war together and we did," he said. "It took us two months just to stop them from dragging their feet through the jungle, shuffling the leaves to frighten the VC. After a while, though, the last thing that the Montagnards needed was some junior Jesus teaching them how to run raids in the jungle." They did, however, desperately need supplies and backing, said Morris.

One particularly courageous Montagnard he remembers well was the famous Phillipe

Drouin, nicknamed "Cowboy" by those who fought by his side. "Phillipe once charged right by an ambush I was leading," recalled Morris. "Charging with rounds whizzing past you? That's courageous!" Drouin, however, developed illusions of grandeur that ultimately caused his death. He often hired himself out to as many as six different U.S. intelligence operations in South and Central Vietnam, often playing them off against one another. According to Morris, Drouin eventually was ambushed by rival rebels in the FULRO movement.

"My number one rule in Vietnam was to only trust someone who had saved my life within the preceding two weeks," said Morris. "Once, when Phillipe picked me up in a jeep, and it was just me and him driving through the jungle, I was ready just in case."

Looking back on his years with the hill tribes, Morris remembers that humor was often present along with the intrigue. One of his favorite "Yards" was a Jarai tribesman who worked for the Green Beret supply sergeant as an armorer. He had been nicknamed "Ush," their word for "ouch." "The reason that they called him that was because his face was a mass of scar tissue, which he got from trying to smoke while cleaning weapons parts in a No. 10 can of gasoline," Morris said with a laugh. "The stuff would just blow up in his face and he would go at it again."

Another Montagnard, whom the Green Berets called "Old Half Head," had gotten into a fight with a leopard. "You may win a fight with a leopard, but you're not going to walk away from it [unscathed]," Morris said.

The Special Forces were often showered with acts of kindness by the peace-loving hill tribes people, who frequently gave them engraved, polished brass friendship bracelets. From the size of the one Morris wears, it is obvious that he was held in high esteem by his Montagnard counterparts. When he returned as a correspondent in 1973, he was elevated to the rank of brigadier general in the Montagnard forces.

From Morris' experience fighting in Vietnam and reporting on other wars as a journalist, he is convinced that there is a common thread that runs through many contemporary uprisings and leads back to the former Soviet Union.

"Almost all insurgencies since World War II have been backed by a Soviet Union that wanted to gradually communize the world," he said. On a personal note, he remembered, "Every time I ever got wounded it was with Russian or Czech ammo."

Even with the apparent downfall of America's former adversary, Morris believes that we should not kid ourselves. The collapse of the Soviet Union came about, he said, because the United States won a Cold War comprised of a series of Soviet-supported "Third World wars," as he calls them.

"When the Berlin Wall caved in, I was happy," Morris said. "The world I'd grown up in was gone. I'd been training to fight communism since the age of 11 in military school. After the wall fell, I asked myself, 'What do I do now?' It felt like being out of a job."

Actually, Morris is not out of a job at all. In late July 1995, the Walt Disney Company released a cinematic take on one of his 1982 *Soldier of Fortune* pieces titled

"Operation Barroom."

The true story deals with a request made of Special Forces by Saigon USAID personnel to move four elephants by helicopter from Ban Me Thuot to a sawmill in Tra Bong and to Kham Duc to assist a group of Montagnards who had cut the lumber down in areas that were too rough and hilly for machinery to haul it out. The mission was indeed accomplished. Disney made a children's movie out of it called *Operation Dumbo Drop*. (See Morris' account of the making of this movie in the December 1995 *Vietnam*.)

Morris may not want to go back to Vietnam. But he said, "I'm proud of what I did during that part of my life. If we accept that Vietnam was one of those 'Third World wars,' then it was a valuable learning experience, the learning part of our Cold War victory."