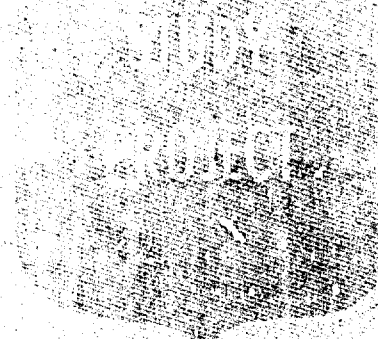


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SENIOR OFFICER ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
AN INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL
KENNETH R. BOWRA

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT
INTENDED FOR PUBLICATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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AN INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL KENNETH R. BOWRA

INTRODUCTION

The Military Assistance Command Studies and Observation Group (MACSOG) was a "joint service, unconventional warfare task force" which was created to conduct highly classified, clandestine military operations throughout Southeast Asia.¹ As such, this unit was assigned to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), on January 16, 1964, and continued to be an integral part of the parent organization until it was deactivated on April 30, 1972, and its remaining missions transferred to other military units. The organization's designation as the "Studies and Observation Group" was an intelligence cover that portrayed MACSOG as a joint staff element which conducted studies concerning planning, operations and logistics activities associated with the Military Assistance Command and its advisory role in the Republic of Vietnam.²

The Studies and Observation Group was commanded by a U.S. Army colonel, who normally had a significant background in special operations, and the Deputy Commander's position was provided by the U.S. Air Force in the person of a colonel with extensive flying experience. Although predominantly staffed by U.S. Army personnel, all branches of the Armed Forces were well represented throughout the MACSOG structure with most personnel assigned having a background in the special operations of their respective branch of the service. The MACSOG organization also

utilized South Vietnamese soldiers from both regular and special operations forces as well as irregular soldiers recruited from the various ethnic minorities in South Vietnam. At the apex of its existence (1968-1971), MACSOG had 2,000 U.S. personnel and over 8,000 indigenous troops under its control.³

While the Commander of the Studies and Observation Group reported to the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), the covert operations conducted by the unit were directly controlled by the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), and were ultimately under the supervision of the Special Assistant (to the Secretary of Defense) for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) in Washington, D.C.⁴

BACKGROUND

On November 26, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Security Memorandum #273 which authorized the conduct of clandestine military operations into North Vietnam for intelligence gathering purposes and into Laos to interdict the supply of enemy troops and equipment which traveled south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁵ Coincidentally with the issue of this memorandum, the responsibility for many of the covert activities conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency was transferred to the Department of Defense as the size of the U.S. military presence began to increase in the Republic of Vietnam. The Studies and Observation Group was formed to plan, direct and

carry out various clandestine activities to support the national military strategy for countering communist aggression in South Vietnam. These operations were conducted in conjunction with the Special Exploitation Service, South Vietnam's organization for unconventional warfare.

The Studies and Observation Group was charged with the responsibility for executing five specific missions which are detailed as follows:⁶

(1) The conduct of cross border operations into Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam in order to gather intelligence and disrupt Viet Cong, Khmer Rouge, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army activities along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

(2) The monitoring of known and suspected locations where allied prisoners of war were held and the coordination of their return to friendly control. This responsibility also included the rescue of downed U.S. airmen who were evading pursuit by enemy forces.

(3) The training and insertion of special agents into North Vietnam to operate resistance movements against the government and military forces of that country.

(4) The development and implementation of both "Black" and "Gray" psychological warfare operations against enemy military and paramilitary forces.

(5) The conduct of special missions as directed by CINCPAC or SACSA.

Throughout the eight years of its existence, the majority of MACSOG's efforts were directed at cross border operations in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam. As early as April 1964, under the code name Leeping Lena, the Studies and Observation Group directed "across-the-fence" operations into Laos to gather intelligence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. While many of the Leeping Lena teams, composed of six Vietnamese soldiers who parachuted into the objective area, encountered significant difficulty due to a strong enemy presence in the area of operations, the information that was received was considered of such importance that it proved the value of long range reconnaissance into the border areas contiguous with South Vietnam.⁷

As a result of the success of the Leeping Lena incursions, U.S. led reconnaissance teams began to penetrate Laos in September 1965, under the code name Shining Brass (changed in 1968 to Prairie Fire) and further entered enemy controlled areas in Cambodia in 1966 under the code name Daniel Boone (later changed to Salem House).⁸ The first reconnaissance teams gathered intelligence on enemy units and their operations in the border areas and further identified targets for exploitation by U.S. Air Force tactical aircraft.

ORGANIZATION

The Headquarters of the Studies and Observation Group was initially located in Cholon in 1964 and was subsequently moved to Saigon, near the center of the city, in 1966 where it was to

remain until the unit was deactivated in 1972. MACSOG was further divided into so-called "study groups" which were organized along functional lines in order to support a specific operational plan or particular type of covert action. The various locations utilized by MACSOG's subordinate headquarters and field operating forces are shown at Map 1.

The Psychological Studies Group (OPS 33) directed both gray and black psychological warfare activities such as false broadcasts into North Vietnam from radio transmitters located in South Vietnam as well as the insertion of ammunition rigged to explode when fired from weapons into enemy supply caches. The Air Studies Group (OPS 32) controlled a sizeable collection of fixed and rotary wing aircraft and participated in the aerial collection of intelligence and the insertion of agents into specific enemy held territories.⁹ The Maritime Studies Group (OPS 34A) utilized heavily armed, fast patrol boats to conduct seaborne raids against North Vietnamese coastal targets and naval raids into the Delta region of South Vietnam. It is believed that patrol boats belonging to the Maritime Studies Group returning from a mission into North Vietnam on July 31-August 1, 1964, precipitated the Gulf of Tonkin incident when pursuing North Vietnamese torpedo boats engaged U.S. naval forces operating in the area.¹⁰ The Joint Personnel Studies Group (OPS 80) monitored the location of all known allied prisoners of war and coordinated efforts for their return to friendly control. This unit also assisted in the recovery of U.S. airmen who had

been shot down and were attempting to evade enemy forces and return to friendly lines.

The Ground Studies Group (OPS 35) was the largest and most active subordinate element within MACSOG. It was responsible for planning and conducting cross border operations into Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam as well as specific geographical regions inside South Vietnam which were traditional communist strongholds.¹¹ From 1964 to 1966, cross border operations carried out by the Ground Studies Group were launched from Forward Operating Bases located at Phu Bai, Kontum, Khe Sanh and Da Nang. In late 1966, Colonel John K. Singlaub, then Commander of MACSOG, reorganized the operating forces of OPS 35 into three distinct units which were each responsible for a specific geographic region. Command and Control, South (CCS), located at Ban Me Thuot, conducted classified unconventional warfare activities in Cambodia and in Viet Cong controlled areas of South Vietnam. Command and Control, Central (CCC), located at Kontum in the central highlands, was responsible for the tri-border region where Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam joined together. Command and Control, North (CCN), the largest of the MACSOG field operating units, was located at Da Nang and operated primarily in Northern Laos and along the border areas of North Vietnam.¹² It was from Da Nang that Lieutenant Colonel (then 1st Lieutenant) Kenneth R. Bowra and his reconnaissance team launched their missions into the border regions of northern Laos to gather intelligence and attack enemy forces.

LESSONS LEARNED

A military planner who, at some future date, was considering the use of reconnaissance teams to gather intelligence and exploit that information against enemy forces would do well to read Lieutenant Colonel Bowra's commentary concerning his experiences as a Reconnaissance Team Leader in the Republic of Vietnam during the period 1971-1972. Many of the lessons learned by MACSOG reconnaissance units from 1964 to 1972 are detailed in the interview and could contribute significantly to the development of a program for training and employing reconnaissance forces in combat. The following pages provide an analysis of the key points made by LTC Bowra.

Training: Personnel participating in reconnaissance operations in enemy controlled areas should be qualified in airborne (to include HALO--High Altitude, Low Opening), air assault and Ranger procedures in addition to their basic branch orientation or military occupational specialty. Ranger training proved to be especially valuable due to the patrolling and survival skills taught during the course of instruction. The Recon Team Leader's School, located at Long Thanh in South Vietnam, proved extremely effective in preparing both reconnaissance team leaders and members of their teams for missions across the border into denied areas.¹³ This school was an intensive, two-week program taught by a dedicated cadre who were all former members of MACSOG reconnaissance teams. Former members of North Vietnamese Army units who had fled to South

Vietnam were also used to train U.S. personnel attending the school in the tactics utilized by the North Vietnamese Army to locate and neutralize reconnaissance forces operating in its territories. The course of instruction culminated with the actual insertion of the students and their instructors into War Zone D to conduct reconnaissance operations in a live fire environment--complete with Viet Cong forces.

The foundation for success in the reconnaissance operations conducted by the Studies and Observation Group was anchored in the training which was provided to each team by its leader.¹⁴ Training was conducted each day when the unit was in its compound and focused on the development of those skills needed to complete successful reconnaissance operations in enemy controlled areas. The teams under LTC Bowra's control had weapons training daily and routinely conducted live fire exercises which closely paralleled mission scenarios in an area north of Da Nang. Individual team members became proficient with a wide variety of weapons and other equipment and cross training between individual skills in each team was stressed. LTC Bowra felt that his teams were very well trained and only lacked expertise in the area of medical treatment. He felt that the assignment of a school trained medical specialist to each team would be beneficial and appropriate. On deep reconnaissance operations involving extended periods of time, it would be very advantageous to have a medical specialist on the team to monitor the health of its members.

Mission Preparation: A detailed and thorough mission analysis was the first step in preparing for any reconnaissance mission.¹⁵ All intelligence sources were queried to obtain the most current intelligence estimates for the objective area surrounding the team's target. An intensive map study of the area was conducted by the team leader and every member of the team. Air routes into and out of the area of operations were studied and discussed, primary and alternate landing zones identified, ground routes to the target examined, and key terrain features and known enemy locations identified. Extensive efforts were made to make sure that every member of the team was intimately familiar with the area of operations prior to the insertion. Rendezvous points were selected in case team members were temporarily separated from the unit and escape and evasion plans finalized in the event exfiltration by aircraft became impossible.

Team equipment received its initial pre-deployment inspection during this phase and arrangements were made to obtain any mission specific equipment not routinely used in reconnaissance operations. The team leader and his assistant would then make a visual reconnaissance of the target area using rotary wing aircraft flying offset patterns so as not to alert enemy forces of the impending mission. The location of the primary and alternate landing zones were finalized following the visual reconnaissance. LTC Bowra indicated that the visual reconnaissance worked well in a low-intensity conflict but may be

extremely difficult in mid- to high-intensity situations due to the prevalence of enemy radar, anti-aircraft weapons and rear area security forces.

The next step in the mission preparation phase was the conduct of live fire rehearsals. LTC Bowra normally inserted his team into an area north of Da Nang and conducted a field training exercise which closely paralleled the actual scenario for the upcoming mission.¹⁶ Occasionally, these field training exercises would inadvertently involve contact with hostile forces. Upon return to the compound in Da Nang, the team leader would conduct a briefing describing his concept of operation to the Camp Commander and his staff for review and approval.

Insertion: Immediately prior to insertion, the reconnaissance team was moved from its compound at Da Nang to one of the Mobile Launch Sites located at either Quang Tri or Phu Bai.¹⁷ The launch site was a secure facility located in relatively close proximity to the area of operations. It contained a dedicated staff whose sole function was the operational, logistical and administrative support of the reconnaissance teams from launch to recovery. At the launch site, the team was isolated, final plans were reviewed, equipment checked again for serviceability and aircrews linked up with the team leader.

At the launch site, the air assets which were to support the mission arrived and all aspects concerning air movement to and from the area of operations were coordinated. LTC Bowra made a

strong recommendation that both fixed and rotary wing aircraft assigned to support special operations be an internal part of the organization (either assigned or attached) and not be obtained from external sources on an "as available basis." Aviators experienced in the complexities of special operations often made the difference between success or failure of the mission. This was particularly true when personnel recovery involved the use of STABO rigs or metal ladders.

Most insertions made by rotary wing aircraft were accomplished in the late afternoon or early evening. This allowed the reconnaissance team the opportunity to assemble off the landing zone in daylight and then move out during darkness to eliminate the possibility of pursuit by enemy forces. On some occasions, false insertions were made by aircraft or explosive devices dropped on unused landing zones to deceive enemy anti-reconnaissance forces. The team would normally move to a Remain-Over-Night position and then proceed to the target the following day. If followed, the reconnaissance team would either move to elude pursuit or initiate an ambush to preclude further interference with the mission.

Throughout the initial phase of the insertion, a Forward Air Controller (FAC) in a two-placed, fixed wing aircraft, with a member of the launch site support staff in the rear seat, would remain on-station and outside the area of operations to await a prearranged radio signal from the reconnaissance team that the mission was underway. The FAC and his "covey rider" would then

return to the launch site where they would remain until the following day when this process was repeated. This system would leave the deployed reconnaissance teams without continuous radio contact with the launch site for approximately twenty-three hours each day. The technology is now available through the use of new series radios, satellite communications, burst transmission devices and electronic repeaters to maintain emergency communications between the team and its controller. LTC Bowra felt that the inability to effect emergency communications with the support facility was a major shortcoming in the system.¹⁸

On Target: The target for each mission was normally eight to twelve kilometers from the infiltration landing zone used by the reconnaissance team and well outside the noise signature of the aircraft that inserted the force. Great care was exercised in moving from the landing zone to the target with adequate security posted in the front, rear and flanks of the command element. Particular care was devoted to rear security due to the concern for anti-reconnaissance forces that were prevalent in the A Shau Valley. These forces were more aggressive than regular North Vietnamese Army units, moved more rapidly and carried a considerably heavier load of ammunition.¹⁹

LTC Bowra made a specific point of defining success in reconnaissance operations as "getting in to and out of the objective area undetected."²⁰ He felt that movement to and from the target was critical and should be carried out deliberately and with great care. Through a good map study of the target

area, observation points were selected which provided relatively secure, line-of-sight surveillance of the object of concern. Upon reaching one of these points, the team would set up security in 360 degrees and begin to observe the target. The reconnaissance team would remain at this position for a period of time and, if possible, shift to another observation point to continue surveillance. LTC Bowra emphatically stated that the commander of the team must be content with obtaining some information and not try to obtain all of it. Once that information was gathered, the team should prepare to depart the area. Generally, the reconnaissance teams that ran into trouble at the target site were those that got too close or remained too long. Enemy security forces constantly patrolled many of the targets which were assigned to MACSOG and these forces posed a considerable threat to reconnaissance elements operating in close proximity to the target.

When the reconnaissance team withdrew from the target it followed a preplanned route out of the objective area to the landing zone where exfiltration would take place. The team leaders tried to avoid the most obvious withdrawal routes to preclude the possibility of an ambush. The team again utilized great care and deliberation during withdrawal from the target and relied on in-depth security to protect the force as it moved.

Should the team leader make the decision to immediately exploit the information that had been obtained, he had to prepare for a quick, decisive strike against the target. A hasty attack

plan was prepared, briefed and then executed swiftly and violently. Direct combat action exposed the team to considerable danger and almost insured the possibility of pursuit by hostile forces during the withdrawal phase.

Exfiltration: Psychological and physiological problems were a consideration at this point as the team members were fatigued and anxious for a safe extraction and successful conclusion of the mission. LTC Bowra indicated that this phase was the most vulnerable time as there was a tendency to hurry and make mistakes.²¹ He felt that it was important not to become careless and do dangerous things like "crash" or rush up on the exfiltration landing zone. It was important that the landing zone be secured by a forward element of the team and the remaining members brought up in small groups. The exfiltration landing zone should always be treated like a target and approached in the same manner.

Upon reaching the landing zone, a short radio transmission would summon the extraction aircraft. Verification procedures between aircraft and reconnaissance team were always initiated unless the team was being heavily pursued. If the exfiltration landing zone was secure, the team was normally lifted out by the recovery aircraft. The team leader was usually the last to board the helicopter as he verified that all members of his unit were accounted for and loaded into the aircraft. In the event of pursuit, the reconnaissance team might be forced to move to a secondary or tertiary landing zone for extraction. In extreme

cases where the reconnaissance unit was heavily pursued by a larger enemy force and was "on the run," individual members were recovered utilizing STABO rigs suspended on ropes dropped by the extraction helicopters or on metal ladders secured to the inside of the aircraft. Experienced aircrews often meant the difference between life or death when reconnaissance teams were heavily pursued by enemy forces.

It is during this exfiltration phase that the reconnaissance team has the greatest possibility of being engaged by enemy forces in LTC Bowra's experience. He felt that reliance on Standard Operating Procedures and immediate action drills were the key to success in breaking contact, particularly when engaged by significantly larger forces. It is only through repeated training and practice that all members of the team know how to react when confronted with the unexpected. Once extracted from the area of operations, the reconnaissance team was returned to its home station. Wounded personnel would be immediately flown to the nearest U.S. medical treatment facility. Indigenous numbers of all MACSOG reconnaissance units were treated as employees of the U.S. government and received all required health care from U.S. medical treatment facilities.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The reconnaissance operations conducted by the Studies and Observation Group proved very successful in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The effort was less successful in North

Vietnam for both reconnaissance teams and individual agents inserted directly into the enemy's homeland. In North Vietnam, the entire population was mobilized to report any suspicious activity, and the allied teams operating there did not have the uninhabited jungles and rain forests in which to seek sanctuary as did those units performing cross border missions in Cambodia and Laos. The operating tempo of the MACSOG reconnaissance elements very closely paralleled the United States' involvement in the Vietnam conflict. The greatest number of cross border missions occurred in the period 1968 to 1970 and then began to decline as U.S. forces began to withdraw and the war drew to a close. It was the experience of this writer that very little activity of any kind occurred in the MACSOG program from February 1, 1972, until the unit was actually deactivated. Most reconnaissance operations were then transferred to U.S. Army Ranger Units and the South Vietnamese Strategic Technical Directorate (formerly called the Special Exploitation Service).

CONCLUSION

In summary, there are many tactical lessons which can be drawn from LTC Bowra's interview. However, there are four major concepts which have become very apparent from the interview and the associated readings. First, reconnaissance operations can provide the commander with information which can readily affect the tactical, operational and strategic levels of warfare. This form of intelligence gathering provides human source intelligence

which is one of the more reliable means of obtaining information about the enemy and his intentions. While reconnaissance operations are normally effective in low-intensity or revolutionary warfare, they can also be employed successfully in mid- to high-intensity conflict. For example, deep reconnaissance operations could be used in the European scenario to locate and target Soviet follow-on forces behind the first echelon attack. The Follow On Forces Attack (FOFA) is a key tenet today in the NATO strategy for defeat of the Warsaw Pact forces in the land battle for Europe.

Secondly, reconnaissance operations and other special activities conducted in denied areas should be executed by unconventional warfare organizations that have the total capability to carry out these clandestine missions. Small units operating inside enemy controlled areas require a great amount of support from their parent unit in order to become and remain effective. Support of this type, to include command and control, must come from one organization and not be spread over several units on an "ad hoc" basis. The organization of the Special Operations Command provides an example of this concept where one major organization has the total capability to direct and support those unconventional warfare activities carried out by its subordinate units. As mentioned in the interview, this is particularly true in the areas of aviation and communications.

The third lesson involves the concept that units engaged in special operations have special requirements. Not only must

there be a research and development effort to respond to these needs, there must also be a logistical organization to provide specialized supply support. During the Vietnam conflict, the 2d Logistical Command on Okinawa maintained a small staff to respond to the logistical needs of the special operations forces. This group routinely procured such items as enemy weapons and ammunition, uniforms, equipment, mini-grenades, LRRP rations and other exotic items peculiar to the MACSOG mission. Many other items were fabricated in-country by local nationals.

Lastly, individuals and small units participating in unconventional warfare activities must be well trained not only in basic combat skills but also in those special skills required of reconnaissance forces operating well forward of friendly lines. LTC Bowra felt that much of the success which he experienced was due to the training he had received in Ranger School and the Recon Team Leader's School. Throughout the interview, he routinely commented on the need to train daily those skills that were required to complete a successful reconnaissance operation. LTC Bowra's interview provides a wealth of information on those lessons learned in conducting successful reconnaissance operations during the Vietnam conflict. His support of this project and his courtesy during the interview are greatly appreciated.

ENDNOTES

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Stanton, pp. 251-252.

7. Generous, p. 460.

John Prados, Presidents' Secret Wars, pp. 258-259; 280.

8. Stanton, p. 252.

Prados, p. 300.

9. Generous, pp. 459-460.

10. O'Toole, p. 474.

Prados, pp. 248-249.

11. Prados, pp. 279-281.

12. Generous, p. 264.

Stanton, p. 252.

13. Interview with LTC Kenneth R. Bowra, Commander, 2d Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (Abn), Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 14 December 1988, p. 5 (hereafter referred to as Bowra).

14. Ibid., pp. 10-12.

15. Ibid., p. 10.

16. Bowra, p. 11.
17. Ibid., p. 16.
18. Ibid., p. 30.
19. Ibid., p. 33.
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