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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**TITLE: Analysis of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation
Group (MACVSOG) Against the Special Operations Forces (SOF) Truths**

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Executive Summary

Title: Analysis of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG) Against the Special Operations Forces (SOF) Truths

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Thesis: The SOF truths could have predicted MACVSOG's component organizations successes and failures.

Discussion: The establishment of MACVSOG in 1964 was the first time the US military assumed overall responsibility for covert missions which were traditionally left to the CIA. MACVSOG then was responsible to fill four specific missions: OP 34, code named "Timberwork," responsible for agent operations and deception inside North Vietnam, OP 39, code name "Humidor," black psychological operations, OP 37, "Plowman," covert maritime operations above the 17th parallel, and, OP 35, "Shining Brass/Daniel Boone," cross border operations in Laos and Cambodia. MACVSOG and its Vietnamese counterpart organization, the Strategic Technical Directorate (STD), were jointly responsible to recruit, man, train, equip and deploy forces. MACVSOG was forced to find the right people for covert operations, produce the necessary numbers able to carry out its mission, ensure the force is competent in the necessary mission sets and create varying levels of interoperability with conventional forces. OPs 34, 39 and 37 began immediately in early 1964 executing missions which resulted in mixed failures and successes. OP 35 did not begin operations until nearly 1966, almost a full two years after its sister OPs, but were immediately successful. OP 34s agent operations continued until late 1968 but were almost completely unsuccessful, costing high attrition amongst the trained Vietnamese agents. OP 39s black psychological operations also ended late 1968 but were noted as having positive operational effects. OP 37 operated above the 17th parallel almost immediately after MACVSOG's inception but with habitually limited success. In 1966, OP 37 forces began operations in South Vietnam and by 1968, no covert maritime operations were directed against North Vietnam. OP 35 was successful throughout its existence and its operations ceased in 1972. MACVSOG relinquished control of all operations to the STD in 1972 and the command was dissolved.

Conclusion: The military was not prepared to conduct most missions of MACVSOG. It was highly successful in the operations specific to OP 35 for a myriad of reasons including highly trained and motivated personnel, a depth of experienced in the exact missions they were going to conduct, exemplary leadership at multiple levels and immeasurable amounts of trust amongst those involved. The other OPs suffered from recruiting the wrong individuals, utilizing harmful incentivization practices, insufficient training of counterpart Vietnamese personnel, and bad tactical leadership and not having sufficient amount of trained and experienced US personnel to contribute to these mission sets. MACVSOG's component organization failures fit almost perfectly into what the SOF truths indicate organizations should, or should not, do.

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Preface

The study of the Vietnam War has been of interest to me since I was young. My father, a Marine Vietnam veteran, to this day has not revealed his experiences during his time there and that has always kept me curious. I always wanted the opportunity to focus on studying the Vietnam war in professional school setting and I feel blessed with the ability to have done so. The choice to analyze MACVSOG against the SOF truths spurs from the seven years I spent working in joint and service special operations organizations. Those seven years significantly shaped my perceptions about the importance of quality people and how, in my view, they affect success more fundamentally than anything else. I believe this analysis is important because the SOF truths are both timeless and subject agnostic. War is inherently a human endeavor that requires significant preparation regardless of conventional or special operations applications. With that, the SOF truths can be applied to more than just special operations. This study shows that success depends on capable people; their training, experience, motivations – the more extraordinary the mission, the more extraordinary the people will be required to complete it.

I would like to acknowledge those who have provided me the assistance that allowed me to complete this project. I must give a great amount of credit to my mentor, Dr. Chris Stowe. Your guidance in this process has been truly enlightening. To my friends still in special operations who would rather not be named and who taught me what it was all about – this is for you. To my mother looking down from above, this would not have been possible without the lessons from long ago. I miss you. To my father, who throughout my life has always been my example to follow – you are the reason I am who and what I am today. To my namesake, my father's best friend who was killed standing next him in battle long ago, know that I have never forgotten. To my two-year-old daughter, who always snuck into my office and put a smile on my face when this task seemed too overwhelming, I will always remember those moments. Lastly, to my wife, the one woman who makes my world right. Without you this would not have been possible. I love you.

During the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy, displeased with the results of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) covert actions aimed at North Vietnam, turned to the Department of Defense for its assistance. Immediately after Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued his predecessors' approach and ordered the expansion and escalation of covert actions against North Vietnam in a top-secret plan called Operation Plan 34A (OPLAN 34A). This was the first time in US history that the DoD led covert actions over the CIA. The "Studies and Observation Group," or SOG, was established under Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in January 1964. From then until late spring 1972, SOG exploited every available opportunity to conduct actions against North Vietnam, aiming to cause the leadership in Hanoi to divert its resources away from South Vietnam and eventually stop supporting the insurgency there.¹ Despite US successes in both expanding and escalating

covert activities against North Vietnam, MACVSOG was not successful in its mission of forcing Hanoi from diverting support to the south or supporting the insurgency and disbanded in April 1972. This study will show that the SOF truths could have predicted MACVSOG's component organizations successes and failures.

The SOF Truths

The SOF truths were first written by Congressman Earl Hutto, Chairman of the Special Operations Panel, House Armed Services Committee, in the foreword of a congressional report authored by COL John Collins, USA (retired), entitled "United States and Soviet Special Operations: A Study," 1987.² United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, later adopted these truths as a means of differentiating SOF from conventional forces.

The SOF truths are as follows: one, "humans are more important than hardware. People – not equipment – make the critical difference. The right people, highly trained and working as a team, will accomplish the mission with the equipment available. On the other hand, the best equipment in the world cannot compensate for the lack of the right people."³ Two, "quality is better than quantity. A small number of people, carefully selected, well trained, and well led, are preferable to larger numbers of troops, some of whom may not be up to the task."⁴ Three, "special operations forces cannot be mass produced. It takes years to train operational units to the level of proficiency needed to accomplish difficult and specialized SOF missions. Intense training – both in SOF schools and units – is required to integrate competent individuals into fully capable units. This process cannot be hastened without degrading ultimate capability."⁵ Four, "competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur. Creation of competent, fully mission capable units takes time. Employment of fully capable special

operations capability on short notice requires highly trained and constantly available SOF units in peacetime.”⁶ Five, “most special operations require non-SOF assistance. The operational effectiveness of our deployed forces cannot be, and never has been, achieved without being enabled by our joint service partners. The support Air Force, Army, Marine and Navy engineers, technicians, intelligence analysts, and the numerous other professions that contribute to SOF, have substantially increased our capabilities and effectiveness throughout the world.”⁷

This study will analyze the operational characteristics of MACVSOG component organizations. It will begin with introducing the origins of OPLAN 34A which lead to the creation of MACVSOG. It will then introduce the four main component organizations of MACVSOG: OPs 34, 39, 37 and 35, and conduct an analysis of them against the five SOF truths. Truth one will analyze one commander per OP through the lens of training and experience. Truth two will analyze US advisors, trainers, or staff – whichever is appropriate given difference from the OPs. Three will analyze the training of the operational force. Four will analyze the competency of the operational force. Lastly, five will analyze one specific non-SOF support and their contribution to mission success. This study will end in an analysis of the operational effectiveness of the OPs, drawing assessments from the analysis.

Origins

The executive actions that created OPLAN 34A and MACVSOG in 1964 have their roots in National Security Action Memorandums (NSAM) 55, 56 and 57, all signed on June 28, 1961. NSAM 55, entitled “Relationship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to the President in Cold War Operations” effectively removed the CIA as the sole executor and custodian of covert paramilitary operations.⁸ NSAM 56, “Evaluation of Paramilitary Operations,” directed the JCS to determine potential future requirements for Unconventional Warfare (UW) and paramilitary

operations beginning with an inventory of useful assets in the armed forces.⁹ NSAM 57, “Responsibility of Paramilitary Operations” directed that the armed forces were authorized to conduct covert operations as the lead agency with the CIA in a supporting role so long as the operations in question exceeded regular CIA capacities.¹⁰ In May, 1963, at the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, the decision was made to escalate hostilities against North Vietnam and the JCS directed Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander, Pacific Command, to begin planning OPLAN 34A. NSAM 273 provided presidential approval via the National Security Council (NSC) - directed operations to result in actual damage to North Vietnam with planning to include Laos and Cambodia (not directly stated but inclusive to the Ho Chi Minh trail).¹¹

OPLAN 34A had five broad objectives: 1) collection of intelligence through the use of trained agents and other traditional collection methods, 2) psychological operations directed at Hanoi leadership and the North Vietnamese populace, 3) the increase of political pressure on Hanoi utilizing paramilitary operations including sabotage, 4) the development of resistance movements inside North Vietnam, and 5) other destruction operations via airborne and seaborne raids and clandestine reconnaissance controlled bombing.¹² To accomplish these ends, MACV issued General Order 6 on January 24, 1964, creating MACVSOG’s headquarters in Vietnam. The mission of MACVSOG was “to execute an intensified program of harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, acquisition of intelligence, generation of propaganda, and diversion of resources, against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).”¹³ MACVSOG delineated the operations in North Vietnam, code named “Footboy,” into four sub-programs: airborne operations known as “Timberwork,” psychological operations, “Humidor,” maritime operations, “Plowman,” and air operations, “Midriff.”

Operations in Laos were initially code named “Shining Brass” which was later changed to “Prairie Fire” and operations in Cambodia were known as “Daniel Boone” and later, “Salem House.”¹⁴ This compartmentalization ensured a level of operational security from personnel in the organization without a need to know. MACVSOG then task organized into four primary operational groups: OP 34, OP 39, OP 37 and OP 35.

OP 34 – Timberwork

The Airborne Studies Group, OP 34, also referred to as Timberwork, had the primary tasks of the original long-term agent operations adopted from the CIA – employment of short term reconnaissance and target acquisition (STRATA) teams, singleton agents and later what became known as the diversionary program.¹⁵ Operations lasted from 1964 to 1969 and the initial mission assigned was “to assist and supervise ARVN counterparts in the accomplishment of small demolition operations, small-scale intelligence collection, temporary interdiction of lines of communication, limited psychological operations, and creation of general harassment in DRV as set forth in OPLAN-34.”¹⁶

Only one commanding officer of OP 34 during its five years of existence had any understanding of the complexities of agent operations and tradecraft in denied areas. Agent operations refers to the selection, training, and employment of personnel conducting the assigned covert missions at the behest of the US in North Vietnam. Tradecraft, in this case, refers to the methods, techniques and procedures agents use to complete the mission while maintaining their cover. Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Robert Kingston assumed command of OP 34 in mid-1967, more than two years into active operations. Kingston was a SF officer who was also a trained case officer and had experience in agent operations. The Chief of MACVSOG, Brigadier General (BG) Jack Singlaub, specifically sought out Kingston for his expertise and reputation.

Upon assignment, Kingston immediately recognized severe deficiencies in the overall operational concept and immediately reported them. Kingston's impact was short lived as he only spent the latter half of 1967 commanding OP 34.¹⁷

Prospective agents of OP 34 trained at the MACVSOG training center located at Camp Long Thahn. A specific facility inside of the camp called the Airborne Training Center (ATC) was a part of the Strategic Technical Directorate, the South Vietnamese counterpart organization to MACVSOG. A MACVSOG support organization, OP 38, also known as the Training Studies Branch, was the counterpart to the ATC. OP 38 was responsible for administering all aspects of the MACVSOG training program including: training estimates, programs, supervision and evaluation. OP 38 was organized from the Special Forces Groups and manned with seven officers and as many as 30 enlisted personnel and were commanded by majors or lieutenant colonels. The staff of OP 38 was specifically screened and selected based upon their knowledge, experience and ability to supervise and instruct. The commander of OP 38 was not in control of the Airborne Training Center, but influenced the organization through both monetary, logistical, or denial of assistance to programs of instruction (POI) not approved by the Chief of MACVSOG.¹⁸

Prospective agents for OP 34 would be selectively recruited based upon geographic areas and ethnic backgrounds needed for specific missions. Once assessed and selected, agent trainees in the early years of the program were brought to safe houses in Saigon, and later were trained together at the ATC, but isolated from the other activities at Camp Long Thahn. Training typically lasted ten to twelve weeks, but training for radio operators could last up to twenty weeks. Agent trainees were taught ten general subjects to prepare for missions. Training included basic military skill like map reading, to highly advanced skills including methods of non-technical communications like unwitting live drops (a method of communication involving a

person who is unaware of the agents covert status who is being used unwittingly by the agent to communicate with other personnel).¹⁹ US personnel trained basic military skills, while the South Vietnamese instructors taught tradecraft with little oversight from US instructors as the military did not conduct that activity.²⁰ Most agents did not want to go to North Vietnam once training completed and in some cases had to be bribed, or forced against their will.²¹

In January 1969, the Timberwork program had five separate long-term agent teams comprised of twenty total agents in North Vietnam: Ares, Eagle, Hadley, Red Dragon and Tourbillion. By 1969, the in place teams actions and communications patterns were analysed which led MACVSOG staff to suspect that all were under enemy control. Ares, a singleton agent, was assessed to have been under enemy control as early as 1966. Analysis of teams Eagle and Hadley suggest that both came under control in 1967, Hadley believed to have been compromised on infiltration. Red Dragon is believed to have been compromised in 1968. Tourbillion, first infiltrated in 1962 as a twenty-seven-man team, was believed to have been under control since 1966, but possibly all the way back to 1962. Agents were inserted utilizing a method called “blind drop,” basically inserting personnel into North Vietnam via parachute with very little support.²² Of the two hundred and forty agents inserted by blind drop from 1964 to 1968, eight were killed on insertion, thirty three were killed in action, another thirty three died of sickness and one hundred forty-six captured or missing – leaving only twenty.²³ By the end of 1969, all long-term agent teams were either declared killed in action (KIA), or contact was terminated by the US.²⁴

Prior to 1968, Air Force assets that supported covert operations utilizing unconventional applications had to be requested through MACVSOG to the 7th Air Force. This caused consternation for both units. For MACVSOG, high levels of classification and

compartmentalization made personal interaction difficult with large numbers of people at Headquarters, 7th Air Force. Similarly, the 7th Air Force had concerns of proper utilization of assigned assets, tactics, crew safety, and protection. The result was an incompatible working relationship between the two organizations. In late 1967, the Chiefs of MACVSOG and 7th Air Force signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) that created the position of Deputy Commander of Special Air Operations under the 14th Special Operations Wing. This MOA further dedicated three special operations air units to MACVSOG operations and allowed MACVSOG to directly task two of them. This relationship continued until MACVSOG was deactivated.²⁵

Analysis of Timberwork

The US military had no understanding of agent operations – the mission set was something the military was wholly unprepared to conduct. This misallocation is attributable to CINCPAC, as he was tasked by the JCS to develop OPLAN 34A in 1963. The unfamiliarity of the military with the mission set affected the manning, training and employment of agents.

MACVSOG was at the mercy of the STD for the recruitment of the appropriate personnel. Because MACVSOG did not control the recruitment process, it had no way of verifying what the specific criteria of potential agents was. Even if MACVSOG did have the specific criteria of what the STD was doing, MACVSOG also had little comprehensive understanding agent operations, so there was little in the way of understanding if the criteria was correct in the first place; MACVSOG did not have any sort of quantifiable or qualifiable data to drive the recruitment process with a specific end in mind. However, the recruitment of specific individuals that had the matching geographical and ethnic background for a specific mission presented a glimmer of competence. Without understanding the personality characteristics and

motivations that were the most conducive to produce competent agents and being able to control the recruiting process, MACVSOG was unable to consciously create the correct foundations of OP 34.

The mass training of potential agents at the ATC was an operational mistake. Once recruited, all agents were centralized in a single location. This provided agent trainees the ability to meet other agent trainees assigned to separate missions and locations to share names, backgrounds and other specific operational details. Compartmentalization of operational information, agent information, objectives, and mission areas in any sort of espionage activity are of the highest priority. MACVSOG failed to implement appropriate isolation of teams from each other; this both for the well-being of individual team members and for the program. If a particular agent or agents were captured, MACVSOG would have a certain amount of confidence to what information the team may divulge under interrogation, as records would have existed pertaining to what information the team was made aware of prior to execution. If appropriately backstopped, MACVSOG would have had the ability to continue the mission with some certainty of what was or was not divulged and could then create operations to exploit both eventualities. MACVSOG failed to both compartmentalize and backstop agent teams. Agents had the ability to meet other agents that would be inserted later. With the entire population of agents being trained en mass, MACVSOG had no way to calculate what information could have been divulged to the enemy – meaning it could have assumed a large portion of current and future operational information was compromised.

Agent training was insufficient for the assigned mission. A training curriculum for agents to be covertly inserted into denied territory that lasts only ten to twelve weeks cannot possibly teach agents the necessary skills to positively affect the mission. The advanced skills

required for agent operations, like “unwitting live drops,” are so intricate and complex that they alone could encompass a twelve-week training curriculum.²⁶ MACVSOG, according to training documents, did not instruct agents in what is referred to today as “SERE”, survival, evasion, resistance and escape which is designed to prepare personnel for isolation scenarios.²⁷ Agent operations had a high potential for isolation and capture. MACVSOG did not train agents in the methods and techniques necessary if the mission became compromised or members were captured. This training would have supported the integrity of the overall program in the event of capture and interrogation.

The competency of the commander mattered. As a holdover from CIA operation, MACVSOG adopted the blind drop infiltration method without question. LTC Kingston in mid-1967, immediately recognized it as a continual failure for the mission objective.²⁸ Kingston, the only trained case officer of all the OP 34 commanders, was the fourth commander of OP 34, after three and a half years of conducting operations. Previous commanders did not have the specific training or competencies to understand the complexities of agent operations. The fact that it took a commander to note the issue of the blind drop is also interesting, but makes sense considering his training. By the time Kingston assumed command, and given he only spent approximately six months in command of OP 34 left little opportunity to change the operational concept.

Without 7th Air Force, OP 34 would have never been able to employ agents in North Vietnam, essentially ending agent operations. The relationship between MACVSOG and 7th Air Force has been described as incompatible, but this was the working relationship that existed for nearly four years of operations – the MOA was not signed until late 1967. Agent operations were a continual failure, but the benefit to OP 34 was that it could continue to operate. 7th Air

Force also supported other sections of MACVSOG, which was the overall beneficiary of the MOA. Without 7th Air Force OP 34 would have been an immediate mission failure.

OP 34s eventual mission failure was not novel. The mission began with a task that was unsuited and unknown to the military. The fact that it was assigned to the first DoD organization charged with covert activity in the near term likely did not promote thoughtful analysis and a cautious approach a new mission. Agent operations continued using incorrect methods that OP 34 did not recognize as damaging to the organization and people. Too much trust was placed in STD to effectively recruit the right people. The militaristic mentality of mass production was incongruent with the sensitivities of agent operations, and agent training, both in length and type, could not have produced mission success.

OP 39 – Humidor

The Psychological Studies Group, OP 39, also referred to as Humidor, had the primary tasks of black-and-white radio operations, leaflet and gift operations, black-letter operations and Paradise Island operations. Operations lasted from 1964 to 1969 and “the primary mission of Psychological Operations is to establish an attitude within North Vietnam which oppose present NVN policies: create a prevailing feeling of distrust, suspicion and uncertainty; promote war weariness; and engender the feeling that the war is futile, wasteful and contrary to the NVN national welfare. The prime target audience is the populace of NVN.”²⁹

LTC Louis Bush was the last commander of the Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Group, OP 39, assuming command in June of 1968. Bush had indirect experience with US Army PSYOPS, previously serving as a faculty member at Ft. Bragg’s Special Warfare Center (SWC). Bush also served a tour as the Executive Officer of the 7th Psychological Operation Group in Okinawa, Japan. Regardless of what good his experience could bring to OP 39, he

served only five months as the commander, because OP 39 ceased operations in November 1968.³⁰ Prior to LTC Bush assuming command of OP 39, the commander's billet was gapped from April to June of 1968. This left OP 39 without a designated commanding officer and Bush without a turnover from an outgoing commander which likely denigrated his ability to quickly gain an understanding of the organization and continue its mission.³¹

At the turnover from CIA to MACVSOG, OP 39 was left with little personnel. The first Chief of MACVSOG remained hopeful in that a crop of new officers were inbound to staff the ranks and he was informed they had been trained in psychological operations (PSYOPS) at Ft Bragg's SWC. Later it was found that these officers were junior and had no experience or knowledge of operations against denied areas – the SWC did not train the officers in the requisite skillsets of “black” psychological warfare that OP 39 needed. Additionally, MACVSOG was suffering personnel shortages, as MACV and Pacific Command cut nearly a third of the approximately 150 personnel it initially requested. Subsequently, the officers that arrived were on a temporary-duty assignment of 180 days. Concurrently, MACVSOG requested thirty-one CIA officers to augment its staff, but the CIA reduced this number to only thirteen. Like the army officers, the level of training and experience of the CIA officers was not consistent, further complicating the issues faced by OP 39.³²

In 1967, the table of organization for OP 39 was twelve officers, eleven enlisted, and nine civilians with a South Vietnamese counterpart of twenty-six officers, nineteen enlisted, and seven hundred and twenty civilians with the Vietnamese staff primarily serving and the operational element.³³ With the exception of the Radio section, no evidence was found that the remaining three sections of OP 39 created any sort of basic curriculum for the Vietnamese to be trained prior to being employed in psychological operations. However, in 1964, Radio section

received two months of training including general information and specific instruction on production, editing and writing. This was followed by a period of on-the-job training.

Radio section conducted two formal workshops in both 1968 and 1969, lasting three months and four months respectively, that provided more in-depth training for select personnel conducting black psychological radio operations. However, these workshops only trained a total of 20 people.³⁴ Printed media section provided “extensive” training to 23 of its personnel in the operation of power cutters (for print materials), basic plate making for camera operators and basic operation and maintenance of printing presses – over two and a half years.³⁵ Research and analysis section “most training of the Vietnamese personnel is informal and continuing, consisting primarily of constructive criticism and suggestions made on specific tasks.” From late-1967 to mid-1969 the section only described four training session with an element of formality, which trained 26 people in total.³⁶ In 1970, a MACV evaluation of OP 39 concluded that the activities of OP 39 were not quantifiable, but appeared to be successful.³⁷

OP 39’s distribution of printed materials habitually suffered as they were unable to be distributed deep into North Vietnam. Specific black propaganda which indicted a resistance organization was operating inside North Vietnam was hindered due to the lack of a mail operations program. MACVSOG made several attempts to directly communicate with the US Embassy in Bangkok regarding this issue, but attempts proved fruitless. The distribution of this material was vital in order to make the propaganda appear more credible and thus work in the achievement of the OP 39 mission. As of 1970, overt post offices in third countries with the ability to gain access to North Vietnam were still being set up. In mid-1970, MACVSOG formally requested to Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), for assistance, but is unknown if these overt post offices were ever fully established.³⁸

Analysis of OP – 39 Humidor

Similar to OP 34, the US military did not conduct black psychological operations. “Black” being a commonly used term to describe operations that are highly secretive of which the US would want to avoid attribution and maintain plausible deniability. The assignment of this particular mission set to the DoD is indicative that individuals in the executive level of government did not understand the capabilities and limitations of military forces, and, military planners in Pacific Command who developed the mission did not understand that Special Forces did not have background in black psyops.

MACV and Pacific Command did considerable damage to OP 39 when it cut a third of the requested personnel. MACVSOG was already operating in an unfamiliar arena of covert operations in denied areas. This unfamiliarity was further exacerbated by the assignment of a mission that few in MACVSOG had any understanding. Sweeping personnel cuts forced OP 39 into an untenable position through a manipulation of personnel management utilizing a model of 180-day temporary-duty assignments instead of one-year assignments which was the standard of the time. This process was self-defeating because it forced OP 39 into a perpetual cycle of training new people at twice the rate of other units disallowing the unit from reaching its full operational potential. With that, the ability to maintain skilled personnel and preserve best practices were likely severely inhibited.

Personnel assigned to OP 39 were unprepared for the mission. The army officers assigned to OP 39 were young with little experience. Where overt psyops in permissive areas could be correlated to undergraduate level work, black psyops in denied areas could be considered akin to graduate or post-graduate. Higher levels of scrutiny and competence were required in every task completed. The assignment of young and inexperienced army captains

who were trained but inexperienced in overt psyops is challenging enough, but assignment to black psyops without any experience could be considered near impossible for mission success. As noted, the US military did not prepare for black psyops which forced those officers into a position of conducting operations, that, if revealed, could likely have caused severe detriment to the US war effort, with the wrong training and no experience. Additionally, the assigned officers did not have the appropriate familiarity with North Vietnam. Psyops requires an in-depth understanding of the adversary's culture and history to effectively message and manipulate the appropriate population. None of the army officers assigned had the appropriate level of cultural understanding to effectively conduct psyops. Like the army officers, the CIA officers that were assigned to OP 39 provided no measurable difference in regard to training or experience. US personnel were not prepared for the task.³⁹

The on-the-job training (OJT) that the US provided to its South Vietnamese counterparts was insufficient for the task. Only the radio section created a formalized training curriculum to prepare its counterpart for the mission. The remaining sections of OP 39 appeared to train its counterpart personnel in nearly anything it saw possible but, in some cases, devoid of any appreciable value to the completion of the mission. The idea that most of the training comes from constructive criticism and suggestions is not befitting of a professional military organization. Essentially, this means that a select group of US personnel made "on-the-spot" corrections but, those corrections were never captured and compiled into a usable training document for OP 39 throughout the years of existence. This means that the Vietnamese personnel were subjected to different US personnel's version of what "right" was. This continuum had the potential to result in a counterpart force that was thoroughly confused because

of differing opinions, more competent than the US personnel due to years of operational exposure, or both simultaneously.

A large contingent of the OP 39s counterpart force migrated from North Vietnam to the south prior to the war. These personnel provided the necessary information to conduct the mission but, this is backwards.⁴⁰ The US personnel, given the lack of training, education and experience, were coupled with a counterpart force that was more informed about the target set than it was. This relationship lent more credence to ineffective vice effective operations due to the lack competent command and control.

Black mail operations were an important facet of the OP 39s psyops program. The distribution of this material was important in order to make the propaganda of a resistance appear more credible and support the achievement of the OP 39 mission. MACVSOG failed to prioritize this action in such time to make any effect it could have viable.

Lastly, MACV indicated in 1970 that OP 39s activities appeared to be successful but the fact that it could not produce any quantifiable information is questionable, given that one of its sections is Research and Analysis. If OP 39 conducted black psyops against North Vietnam successfully, then it could be assumed that OP 39 was able to observe an advantageous change in the target population. If OP 39 was able to observe a change in the target population, then it could be inferred that it had employed the appropriate information with a correspondingly correct method of delivery. If OP 39 employed the correct information and vehicle, then it could be presumed it conducted research and analysis of North Vietnam fittingly according to the OP 39 objectives. All these things are measurable by quantity and quality; to state success without justification is opinion.

OP 37 – Plowman

The Maritime Studies Group, OP 37, also referred to as Plowman, conducted three basic missions, including interdiction, intelligence collection and cross-beach operations,⁴¹ along with four specified tasks. First, small-scale demolition operations, intelligence-collection actions, capture of prisoners, and temporary interdiction of lines of communication. Second, making DRV aware of opposition by causing interruption in movement of supplies to necessitate an increased readiness posture of DRV forces. Third, small scale seaborne raids on important military and civil installations and the fourth remains classified.⁴² Operations lasted from 1964 to 1969 and met the objectives of psychological resistance, intelligence collection, political pressure, and physical destruction.⁴³

OP 37 benefitted from an early commander from the newly minted Navy SEAL community. Commander (CDR) Robert Fay took command of OP 37 in March 1965. Fay was a “frogman” from World War II (WWII) with Underwater Demolition Team (UDT) 2. His experience was key in his selection, as UDT’s in WWII conducted small-scale clandestine maritime operations similar to what OP 37 was charged to execute. When Fay was killed by an enemy mortar only six months into his command tour, OP 37 was handed over to an officer without the Fay’s unconventional warfare experience.⁴⁴ The rest of the commanders of OP 37 had only conventional “blue-water” navy experience not conducive to successful covert maritime operations.

Under OPLAN 34A, the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) fell under the operational control (OPCON) of MACVSOG⁴⁵ and was augmented with a Navy SEAL/Marine Force Reconnaissance detachment and a Mobile Support Team (MST).⁴⁶ The MST provided a Boat Team Training (BTT) that trained and qualified VNN crews and a Repair and Maintenance Team (RMT) which conducted maintenance and developed a maintenance capability. The SEAL

detachment numbered ten total, the MST detachment thirty-eight⁴⁷ and the Force Reconnaissance detachment only four.⁴⁸ Professional training manuals were written which developed the professional competence of the VNN; “SEAL training schedule for Indigenous Personnel” and “Mobile Support Team Training Manual.”⁴⁹ By 1969, many SEAL and MST personnel had as many as five rotation in Vietnam with MACVSOG, which resulted in a familiarization with the Vietnamese counterpart and language, an in-depth understanding of the operational problem and geography and high professional competence.⁵⁰ However, US personnel were not allowed on operations north of the 17th parallel, the territorial waters of North Vietnam.⁵¹

The Coastal Security Service (CSS), was the maritime division under the STD responsible with a primary responsibility of recruiting personnel for covert operations,⁵² and crew personnel specifically were not quickly responsive to training; motivation was negatively influenced by different personnel background and unequally applied pay scales and bonuses.⁵³ The differences in background influenced the time necessary to train personnel varying from six week to three months. A specific factor in crew training was that Vietnamese naval personnel had limited practical experience with sophisticated systems as seen on the craft procured by the US Navy for operational use.⁵⁴ In 1969, the Vietnamese had 314 personnel in CSS headquarters with an additional 412 in the operational units.⁵⁵

Maritime operations got off to an inauspicious start in 1964. The CSS was not providing personnel in time to begin operations which forced the US to initially rely on mercenaries to execute operations.⁵⁶ From January to August 1964, ten cross beach operations were conducted with only four considered successful, leading cross beach operations halted until June 1965.⁵⁷ In the remaining months of 1965, sixteen missions were executed with only six successful⁵⁸ and in 1966, thirty-four missions and only four successful. This led to the transition of the cross-beach

action force utilization in South Vietnam.⁵⁹ Also in 1966, maritime interdiction operations were highlighted as the most successful by sinking vessels and capturing prisoners⁶⁰ but, it was found in 1968 that interdiction operations had detained North Vietnamese fisherman of little value and destroyed small craft with no obvious military purpose.⁶¹ Overall, the VNN discipline left much to be desired, desertion was constant, the VNN was indifferent to material damage and military objectives were second to mercenary gain.⁶² On November 1, 1968, all Plowman operations north of the 17th parallel ceased.⁶³

Instituting covert maritime operations was difficult, but with non-standard vessels acquired by the US Navy, support facilities in South Vietnam were found to be completely inadequate. Accordingly, the navy provided birthing space at the naval base in Subic Bay, Philippines.⁶⁴ This space afforded the US Navy MST personnel to remove the US attributable equipment from the non-standard vessels at the onset of operations, but also as an overhaul location for the vessels to receive the necessary scheduled maintenance required by combat naval vessels.⁶⁵ Later, Subic Bay was used as a training location for select VNN personnel when the MST was building the VNN maintenance capability.⁶⁶ The US Navy base at Subic Bay served as a support element for OP 37 for the entirety of its existence.

Analysis of OP 37 – Plowman

Orders precluded US personnel from operating in North Vietnam proper; this included its territorial waters above the 17th parallel. MACVSOG was required again to work through the STD, via the CSS, to recruit the personnel that would physically conduct the operations in the north. Again, it was seen that the Vietnamese counterpart was incapable of successfully executing the mission.

The STD recruiting methods directly contributed the creation of an ineffectual operational force; it incorrectly used money as a motivator and failed to recruit individuals on a decided standard. Money can be used as incentive, especially for those conducting special or covert missions, this is common practice in the US military today. This is not to differentiate one's blood as more expensive than another, but those who have the skills desired for these missions have generally have higher personal competencies, more advanced training and are exposed to greater risk than that of conventional forces. The STD did not apply these principles when it used money to attract personnel to the CSS which indicated lack of basic conceptual understanding of an organized military. It unevenly and without regard to the end product, reinforced financial compensation without uniformity to personnel throughout the CSS. This had the potential to create further competition and secrecy among individuals charged to complete missions under high stress conditions. Uneven financial gain opened the CSS to the creation of an additional social dynamic aside from rank, skill and tasks that militaries, including the US, did not prepare. The STD created additional issues when it failed to recruit individuals for covert maritime operations based on similar backgrounds. Without a decided standard, the STD was able to meet numerical requirements, but completely failed to recruit a force of proportionate integrity. Between uneven financial compensation and backgrounds, The STD effectively created a negative command climate that which the US was forced to compensate.

The training cadre of OP 37 were the correct personnel. In the mid-1960s, the Navy SEALs and Marine Recon were the US' foremost experts on small-scale amphibious operations, their roots going back to World War II (WWII). The SEALs developed a basic training curriculum which trained the action force for cross beach operations. Similarly, the navy MST personnel instructed the boat crews on maritime operations and in lieu of a competent

maintenance capability, provided it until one could be developed internally. It also developed a professional curriculum to train the CSS. The habitual reassignment of the same personnel to the same mission, as was seen by many of the SEALs and MST personnel, created the consonance desired for a specialized mission. This allowed OP 37s inherent competence, organizational integrity and internal trust to continually elevate and develop.

The expectations of the US exceeded the capabilities of the CSS recruits. The US erroneously attempted to force a condensed package of training on potential CSS boat crew members that was beyond their ability to effectively comprehend. The fact that training time could double from six weeks to three months due to background suggested the STD could not reliably provide the quality and quantity of individuals able to absorb the training in the time defined by US trainers. The inability of OP 37 to forecast training and qualification of crew personnel had the possibility to affect the standing force strengths. Inwardly, OP 37 was in the position to constantly question the competence of given crew's, dependent on how long they took to become qualified for operations. Together, MACVSOG was able to create a standing covert maritime operational force, but its successes were limited.

US training could not overcome the issues created by the CSS to produce successful operations; cross beach operations were habitually unsuccessful, the VNN displayed consistent unprofessionalism. By 1966 the North Vietnamese had taken steps to increase their coastal defenses but a primary reason of the decline of cross beach operations was that action team leadership were unwilling to engage the enemy. This resulted in the decline of the combat bonus pay instituted by the CSS and the desertion rate of action team members increased. The US attempted to make up for this financial loss by instituting a program called Southern Training Operations (SOTROPS) in September 1966, which acted as rehearsals of operations that were

intended to be executed in the north. In 1967, this program morphed into formalized assignment of riverine operations called Dong Tam from late 1967 into early 1968. No maritime operations were conducted in North Vietnam in 1968 and operations conducted in South Vietnam beginning in 1966 to 1968 were all considered highly successful. The reason which operations in South Vietnam were so successful was that US advisers (SEALs) accompanied the action teams on operations.⁶⁷ This lack of leadership and basic professionalism is also seen in the VNN through the blatant lack of discipline, misuse and damage to equipment and the black marketing of US resources.⁶⁸

The US was able to successfully stand up a covert maritime force, but not an operationally successful one. The US failed to influence recruiting to ensure the quality of individual; so that their backgrounds, motivations and pay were commensurate with the stated mission. The US was able to successfully create a proficient training program with appropriate expertise but failed to effectively train the VNN to a level of professionalism and proficiency necessary. Lastly, the US unsuccessfully provided the required level of leadership to conduct the mission as seen in the disparity of outcome of South Vietnamese versus North Vietnamese action force operations.

OP 35 – Shining Brass / Daniel Boone

The Ground Studies Group, OP 35, was the last operational organization under MACVSOG to be created. It encompassed two programs, Laos (Shining Brass) and Cambodia (Daniel Boone). Shining Brass operations first began in mid-1964 and lasted until late 1968. The initial mission was to conduct covert intelligence collection patrols into Laos for the purpose of gathering information on Viet Cong (VC) logistic activities in the area between Route 9 and the 17th parallel adjacent to the border, and the area east of Tchepone.⁶⁹ Daniel Boone operations

were not authorized until mid-1967, with the initial mission to conduct reconnaissance and intelligence collection, primarily in the tri-border area, to provide early warning of enemy activity to isolated friendly camps for friendly troop deployment.⁷⁰ Daniel Boone operations ended in late 1971.⁷¹ Generally, Shining Brass and Daniel Boone operations were oriented on the North Vietnamese use of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Colonel (COL) Arthur “Bull” Simons was specifically recruited to be the first commander of OP 35 in 1965 for his record of unconventional warfare successes. Simons was a colonel by the end of WWII with Ranger combat experience and an extensive SF background – he held the rank for the next twenty years. He was an architect of an unconventional warfare mission in Laos from 1959 to 1962 called Operation White Star, a mission to train the Royal Laotian Military and local tribesmen to fight the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Pathet Lao communist insurgency. Simons served as the last commanding officer of White Star before the mission ended.⁷² When selected for OP 35, Simons knew exactly what needed to be done in Laos as he had done it before. The commanders of OP 35 that followed Bull Simons were, like Simons, highly qualified SF officers who were specially trained in unconventional warfare specific to conducting the operations of OP 35.

COL Simons recruited a “who’s who” list of unconventional warfare experts to form the core of leadership of OP 35. LTC Ray Call was considered an expert unconventional warfare, he joined Special Forces in 1959. In 1964, he was working with the CIDG, a CIA sponsored program already mentioned.⁷³ After that, Call worked for the future Chief of MACVSOG while stationed at the Special Warfare Branch of the Army’s Combat Development Command, who volunteered Call for assignment to OP 35.⁷⁴ Major Charlie Norton entered SF in the 1950s and his previous special operations experience includes Europe and Asia. Simons and Norton knew

each other, having worked at Ft Bragg's SWC together. Dick Meadows an NCO of legend by 1965. At age 20, Meadows was a Master Sergeant in Korea, the youngest of the conflict with distinction in combat. In 1953, he joined the 10th SFG and in 1960, was the first NCO to in an exchange program with Britain's Special Air Service (SAS). During his time, he conducted counterterrorism operations in Oman and even served as a Troop Commander. Meadows also served in White Star prior to the mission ending. These are just a few of the many men of this caliber that Bull Simons attracted and together they defined the right qualities for this mission.⁷⁵

The recruitment of indigenous personnel for the Special Commando Unit (SCU), the South Vietnamese counterpart organization of OP 35, was the responsibility of the STD. It specifically targeted Montagnards, or "mountain people," and ethnic Chinese Nungs over the age of twenty-four to avoid interference with regular army recruitment.⁷⁶ SCU personnel, like agent trainees, were trained at Camp Long Thahn by members of Training Studies Group, OP 38. SCU personnel received a five-week basic training course and then were sent to one of three command and control detachments (C&C dets) operated by OP 35. SCU personnel were assigned to a reconnaissance team (RT) or exploitation company and received unit training to integrate members as a team.⁷⁷ Advanced training was available to SCU members including: basic airborne training, communications, medical, demolitions and RT leaders course.⁷⁸ As of late 1969, nearly 2,500 trained Montagnards and Nungs were stationed at the three C&C dets, which launched operations into Laos and Cambodia.⁷⁹

Cross border operations into Laos began in late 1965, the Commander of MACV (COMUSMACV), insisted on the inclusion of US Special Forces personnel on missions. RT's were comprised of three US and six to eight Montagnard/Nungs. RT's would conduct in-country operations prior to conducting cross border operations.⁸⁰ RT's carried clandestinely acquired,

non-attributable weapons on the seven missions launched in late 1965, all of which were considered a success either by identifying targets or calling in successful air strikes.⁸¹ In 1966, OP 35s success led to an increased area of operation in Laos. A total of one hundred eleven missions were executed which resulted in significant intelligence of enemy facilities and supplies in Laos. Additionally, rescue missions called “Bright Light” were assigned to OP 35 to rescue downed pilots or Americans held in captivity.⁸² In 1967, OP 35s core mission of conducting air strikes continued, executing one hundred eighty-seven missions along with sixty-eight exploitation missions, which launched platoon to company sized elements of Montagnards/Nungs to conduct direct action on lucrative targets identified by RTs.⁸³ In response to years of success of OP 35 in Laos, operations were approved for expansion into Cambodia in June 1967. OP 35s streak of success continued into early 1972, conducting over 3,500 operations against the North Vietnamese which made significant impact against the North Vietnamese operations in Laos and Cambodia.^{84 85 86} In 1971, OP 35s RTs provided its final contribution which forecasted the coming North Vietnamese invasion in the spring of 1972. However, since MACVSOG was in the process of standing down operations, further information could not be collected. MACVSOG officially stood down on April 30, 1972.⁸⁷

OP 35 would not have had the operational success it did without the conventional close-air support to conduct the air strikes on targets identified by RTs or to support the emergency extraction of RTs decisively engaged with North Vietnamese in Laos or Cambodia. In Laos alone in 1968, conventional pilots flew two hundred and eighty-seven helicopter gunship sorties and six hundred and thirty-five tactical air sorties in support of ground forces. These sorties greatly contributed to the one hundred and fourteen structures destroyed or damaged, fifty enemy vehicles destroyed or damaged, six hundred and seventy-six secondary explosions and the

estimated 1,353 enemy killed in action. The effectiveness of close air support is also reflected in the few casualties that the US suffered in Laos of the same year; eighteen killed in action, one hundred and one wounded in action and eighteen missing in action – across three hundred and twenty-seven total missions.⁸⁸

Analysis of OP 35 – Shining Brass/Daniel Boone

OP 35 mission fit almost perfectly into the SF mission; working by, with and through indigenous forces with strong emphasis on cultural considerations in foreign territory. In addition to gaining a well-developed identity of SF, OP 35 did not begin operations until late 1965, almost a full two years from MACVSOG's launch in January 1964 which allowed to organization to mature prior to adding the OP 35 mission.

The right people were available to staff OP 35. COL Simons was the perfect leader of OP 35. Simons did not have to be concerned with the desires or pressures of the mainstream army for promotion. He was a reserve officer, the longest standing colonel in the US Army at the time at twenty years, who was not a war college graduate, with a history of conducting highly classified missions since WWII. He was a combat veteran as a Ranger and had an extensive SF background. While he may not have been known to the mainstream army, he was well known in the SF community. The synopsis of his characteristics and background gave OP 35 exactly what it needed, a commander who had all the training and experience necessary but, beyond that, he was an innovator of his field, not a practitioner. Simons was the officer that was called upon to execute dangerous and unorthodox missions. Most of all, men trusted and believed that he could get them through dangerous situations.⁸⁹

Simons surrounded himself with like-experience and highly competent professionals. Charlie Norton and Ray Call were known commodities – Norton and Simons already had worked

together and established trust and understanding of one another. When OP 35 stood up it was an easy selection of Norton as his acumen and talent was not only known to Simons, but also cultivated by Simons. Call was volunteered for OP 35 by COL Don Blackburn, the Chief of MACVSOG in 1965, because of their previous working relationship when Call worked for Blackburn at the Special Warfare Center at Ft. Bragg. Interestingly, Blackburn also recruited Simons. Master Sergeant Dick Meadows' exploits were legendary in MACVSOG. Prior to that, he spent time in an exchange program with the SAS as a Troop Commander – something that had never happened before. The small SF community was only thirteen years old in 1965, but that was sufficient time for the high performers to get the right experience and become known to one another. The SF field maintained a distinct advantage that it maintained a healthy pool of qualified candidates, at all ranks and occupations, which only needed to be called to serve when OP 35 stood up. The fact they all knew each other, heard of each other and trusted each other supported the speed by which operations commenced. But these were not their only advantages, a mission very similar to this had already been done before.

Operation White Star could nearly be considered a rehearsal for the OP 35 mission. Blackburn, Simons, Meadows and many others that served in OP 35 spent time in White Star. The mission was almost a perfect rehearsal considering that it was conducted in Laos against the same enemy. This afforded all the White Star veterans the on-the-ground experience specific to the operational area and further enhanced cultural understanding of the Laotians and knowledge of the terrain, enemy tactics, history, etc. The White Star mission afforded the opportunity of trial and error prior to the assumption of OP 35 operations, providing real-life examples of what does and does not work in the actual operational area. Like Shining Brass, White Star was classified as well, so many of the operational considerations were the same, reducing potential

operational limitations. In effect, the White Star mission “trained-the-trainers” of the OP 35 mission, and further provided nearly four years of operational lessons learned that could be applied to OP 35. This experience further added to the already immense trust because many of the OP 35 members had “done this before.” This naturally extended to Cambodia when operations were approved in mid-1967.

The training of indigenous forces is a core skillset of SF. As a force specifically manned, trained and equipped to conduct several forms of irregular warfare including Foreign Internal Defense (FID), OP 38 at Camp Long Thahn required no invention or innovation of training curriculum to provide the basic training to recruits of the SCU. The training was not at all long, but that was negated by the compilation of unit training at the C&C detachments. The performance of newly graduated members of the SCU provided the US RT leaders the ability to screen, select and train the SCU member they believed best fit for wither RTs or EFs. Once a US RT leader was satisfied, they could put their time and attention into developing that South Vietnamese RT member in the skills necessary for success across the border. This selection process supported the trust, reliance and teamwork necessary for cross border operations. Finally, advanced training was available to certain South Vietnamese personnel who became known as high performers. The final stage in training which ensured operational readiness was an in-country mission. This provided an opportunity for the RT’s to be out together without yet crossing the border. The method of training was highly conducive to building an effective operational force.

The partner force chosen to operate with OP 35 could not have been better. The US first recruited Chinese Nungs. During the first Indochina war the French recruited Nungs into counter guerrilla units because the ethnic Vietnamese treated them with disdain. The Nungs

maintained an intense animosity for the Vietnamese which provided a perfect motivation to fight the communists.⁹⁰ Later, Montagnards were recruited for the same reason; the French had used them in the past and they maintained a healthy distrust of the ethnic Vietnamese. This was not the first time the Montagnards were recruited by the US either, they had been filling the ranks of the CIDG since 1961.⁹¹ Together the Nungs and Montagnards provided the optimal partnered force. This was not the first time they had worked with a western nation, so they understood the relationship. Many of the Nung and Montagnard were combat veterans having been previously trained to fight the communists. Perhaps their most valuable contribution was that they knew the enemy better than the US. Between motivation and combat experience against the same enemy, the Nungs and Montagnards represented the ideal partner force for fighting the North Vietnamese.

US leadership and conventional air power were the vital components of success. The Nungs and Montagnards were trained and proficient to participate in missions, but senior MACV leadership was correct in their assertion to mandate US leadership for cross border missions. The two primary tasks of collecting intelligence and causing destruction to the Ho Chi Mihn trail necessitated a strong command presence to make the correct decisions on the ground. The presence of US RT leaders with their partners force likely caused a calming effect; a mutual understanding that the mission was that important to the US that it would risk the death of its people for its completion. From a Nung or Montagnard perspective, this had the potential to solidify mutual resolve and bond them together as a fighting force. Conventional air power was an essential element for ground operations but OP 35 placed it as close as possible to the core of the overall mission. This allowed it to have direct contribution to mission success instead of ancillary effect.

Final Analysis

Examining SOF truth one and two, “humans are more important than hardware,” and “quality is more important than quantity,” MACVSOG has presented examples of both best and worst to exemplify the importance of the human in the DoDs first attempt in covert operations. Starting with the selection of COL Simons to head OP 35, he was the perfect commander for such a mission and organization. He had the talent, training and experience necessary not only to undertake the mission, but to lead the people for it. He knew what the mission entailed, how it needed to be completed, and knew what kind of people he needed for it. COL Simons’ meticulous selection of an all-star cast provided the elemental level of success of OP 35. Those selected were highly trained, widely experienced, and well known. With trust firmly in place, they built the most successful and longest lasting mission set within MACVSOG. Oppositely, in the four years of OP 34 from 1964 to 1968, the success rate of inserting agents was 8%, twenty successfully inserted out of two hundred and forty.⁹² Trained agents were not sufficiently recruited for identified characteristics and were not appropriately trained to the level necessary to successfully complete the mission. The US personnel did not have the requisite training, talent and experience to consciously understand the mission they were undertaking. Together, these factors ended in catastrophic failure of the mission and almost certain death for the Vietnamese agents. OP 37s partnered force, the VNN, and its use of money highlights a key concept in special operations, money cannot be the motivation. While money can be used as incentive, it must be used evenly. Beyond that, the people that undertake these missions have to be selected based on known qualities that can produce success, money cannot be that quality.

Examining SOF truths three and four, “special operations forces cannot be mass produced” and “competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur,”

OPs saw uneven amounts of success. OP 34 was able to create the structure to continue the mission, but the US military was itself not sufficiently competent to complete the mission. Its lack of successful operational effects only further provided consistent physical proof that it was not proficient to conduct agent operations. OP 39 fared similarly to that of OP 34 primarily due to the same reason, the military did not engage in black psychological operations. It was not able to field an experienced staff with the requisite knowledge of Vietnam, its culture or language, or the skills required for the mission. The CIA was not categorically different in this respect. It did not field the number of officers MACVSOG leadership requested, and with those it did, were similar to that of the military staff with limited knowledge and experience. OP 37 fared slightly better in the respect that it was able to provide skilled US advisers, SEALs, Recon Marines, boat crews and maintainers. Training was conducted and manuals were developed but it was of no consequence. Cross beach operations were almost always unsuccessful and the VNN demonstrated habitual breaches in discipline that harmed the mission. OP 35 mostly subverted truths three and four due to the fact that the US forces were highly trained and had already demonstrated proficiency in the exact mission they were about to undertake not more than a few years prior, in the same country it had completed the previous mission in. OP 35 also benefitted from the presence of a competent partner force that was suitably motivated to fight the North Vietnamese. Many of the Nungs and Montagnards, like the SF soldiers assigned to OP 35, were combat veterans, and they had previously fought the North Vietnamese.

In exploring SOF truth five, “most special operations require non-SOF assistance,” all OPs used varying levels of conventional support. But only OP 35 was put in such a position where it had the ability to use the 7th Air Force at the core of its mission which required air infiltration, close air support, emergency extraction, targeted bombing, etc. While these

activities put US pilots in danger, it also solidified their relationship and importance to mission success – US service members conducting cross border operations could not conduct their mission without the requisite air assets, and, very likely could not survive sustained enemy contact with an ever growing, numerically superior enemy once engaged. The application of air assets gave the US a critical edge in conducting cross border operations.

In the summation of MACVSOG operations one critical factor appears as the difference between operational success and failure; those missions that were led by US personnel were generally successful and those not, were not. The successes of OP 35 are obvious as it had an unfair advantage in the mission it was assigned. But so are those of OP 37 once SOTROPS missions began. While US personnel were not allowed in the territorial waters above the 17th parallel, once SOTROPS began, those personnel restrictions were lifted. Almost immediately, those operations started seeing very high success rates.⁹³ Navy SEALs and Marine Recon were then directly involved in operations, exactly like the SF soldiers in Laos and Cambodia. The ultimate lesson learned from the experiment of MACVSOG is that there should be no expectation of operational success in covert or special operations unless the highly qualified, correctly motivated, and well-trained individual is at the leading edge of the operations.

Notes

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